

## BETWEEN MYTH AND HISTORY

### OR THE WEAKNESSES OF GREEK REASON

Did the Greeks believe in their mythology? The answer is difficult, for “believe” means so many things... Not everyone believed that Minos continued to be a judge in Hell or that Theseus defeated the Minotaur, and they knew that poets “lie.” Nevertheless, their manner of not believing gave reason for concern, for Theseus was no less real in their eyes. It is simply necessary to “purify myth with reason”<sup>1</sup> and to reduce the biography of the companion of Hercules to its historic kernel. As for Minos, after a prodigious mental effort, Thucydides extracts the same kernel from his subject: “Of all those whom we know only by hearsay, Minos was the first to have a fleet.” The father of Phaedra, the husband of Pasiphaë is nothing more than a king who was master of the sea. The purification of the mythical by the *logos* is not an episode in the eternal struggle, from the beginning to Voltaire and Renan, between superstition and reason, a struggle which was the glory of Greek genius. The myth and the *logos*, despite Nestle,

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Theseus*, I, 5.

## *Between Myth and History*

are not simple opposites like truth and error.<sup>2</sup> Myth was a subject of serious reflections, and the Greeks had not yet finished with it six centuries after the Sophist movement which has been called their *Aufklärung*. Far from being a triumph of reason, the purging of myth by *logos* is a very dated program whose absurdity is surprising. Why did the Greeks make themselves unhappy for nothing by seeking to separate the wheat from the chaff instead of rejecting in one gesture the fantasy of both Theseus and the Minotaur, the very existence of a fabulous Minos as well as the implausible qualities with which the myth endows this Minos?

It is like our ethnographers or folklorists before the treasury of myths or tales, or Freud before the proliferation of the dream or the *logorrhœa* of President Scheber: what is to be done with this enormous mass of nonsense? How can all this not have a hidden meaning or perhaps a structure? The question of knowing if there is truth in a statement always follows that of knowing what is the content of the statement. One can maintain that the existence at least of Minos is historic if one believes that myth is history only covered with implausibility which must be swept away. "Reason" has a history; it did not come out of natural light. No positivist or rationalist critique can reach the heart of fantasy or the supernatural.

How then did belief in legends cease? How, for example, did belief cease in Theseus founder of Athens, in the legendary origins of Rome or the Trojan origins of the Frankish monarchy? We begin to understand a bit better for the modern era thanks to the fine book by George Huppert on the *Idea of Perfect History* in the sixteenth century<sup>3</sup> and on Etienne Pasquier. Scientific history was not born when critique was invented, for that had existed for a long time, but rather on the day when it became necessary that the profession of historian and that of critic be one. "Historical research was practised for centuries without having any serious

<sup>2</sup> W. Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos*, 1940. This wonderful book is worthy of praise; it appeared in 1940 and is full of allusions (see, for example, p. 432, the praise of Anonymous of Jamblik) which attest to the intellectual courage of the author.

<sup>3</sup> G. Huppert, *L'idée de l'histoire parfaite*, tr. Braudel, Nouvelle Bibliothèque scientifique, 1973; below we cite page 7.

effect on the manner of writing history, the two activities remaining foreign to one another, sometimes even in the mind of the same person. What changes at the end of the eighteenth century is a certain intellectual climate; history ceases being literature and becomes a science.”

But in antiquity? We shall adapt as *leit-motif* an idea of A.D. Momigliano: “The modern method of historical research is entirely based on the distinction between primary and secondary sources.”<sup>4</sup> It is not certain that this idea of a great scholar is correct; for me it seems even irrelevant. But it has the advantage of setting out a problem of method, even if we must oppose it; and it has appearances in its favor. We can think of Beaufort or Niebuhr whose scepticism relative to the first centuries of Roman history was based on the absence of sources and documents contemporary with those distant times, or at least justified itself by this lack.<sup>5</sup>

The history of the sciences is not the history of the progressive discovery of good methods and objective truth. The Greeks had a way, their own, of either believing in their mythology or being sceptical; and their way only falsely resembles our own. They also had their way of writing history which is not our own; for their way is based on an implicit presupposition that the distinction between original and secondary sources, far from being overlooked because of a procedural flaw, is simply irrelevant to the question. We shall see, as a matter of fact, that an ancient

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Huppert, p. 7, n. 1. The different essays of Momigliano relative to these problems of history and the method of historiography can now be found conveniently in his two collections, *Studies in Historiography*, New York 1966, and *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, Oxford, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> To see how “rigor,” “method,” “critical use of sources” are really of little use in these areas, it is sufficient to cite these lines where, in 1838, V. Leclerc attempts to refute Niebuhr: “To proscribe the history of a century because there are fables mixed in with it is to proscribe the history of all centuries. The first centuries of Rome seem suspect to us because of the she-wolf of Romulus, the shields of Numa, the apparition of Castor and Pollux. Efface afterwards from Roman history the entire history of Caesar because of the star which appeared at his death, and the history of Augustus since he was said to be the son of Apollo disguised as a serpent” (*Des journaux chez les Romains*, p. 166). From this we see that the scepticism of Beaufort and Niebuhr was not based on the distinction between primary and secondary sources, but on the biblical criticism of thinkers of the eighteenth century.

## *Between Myth and History*

historian deals with his sources not like a modern historian deals with his, but more like a journalist deals with his sources of information.

\* \* \*

There is a good reason that an ancient historian rarely gives us the occasion to know if he distinguishes between primary and secondary sources of information: an ancient historian never cites his sources, or at least he rarely cites them and not for the same reason as we do. He does not use footnotes; in his original research he wants to be believed on his word unless he is proud of having discovered a little-known author or he wants to show off a rare and precious text which is for him alone a kind of monument rather than a source. Generally Pausanias limits himself to saying, "I learned that..." or "according to my informers...", these informers or exegetes being written sources as well as information given orally by priests or local sages whom he had encountered during his travels.

Let us come back to Etienne Pasquier whose *Recherches de la France* appeared in 1560. Before publication, G. Huppert tells us, Pasquier had circulated his manuscript among his friends. The most frequent reproach they made to him concerned his habit of quite frequently furnishing the references to the sources he cited. This procedure, it was noted, was too reminiscent of the "shadow of the schools" and was hardly appropriate to a work of history. Was it really necessary that each time he confirm "his statement by some ancient author?" If it was in order to give authority and credibility to his account, time alone would arrange that. After all, the works of the ancients were not cluttered with references, and their authority had been affirmed by time. Pasquier had only to let time approve his book!

This discourse, amazing as it seems to us, could have been directed in the same terms to a Greek or Roman historian. But we should note that this discourse would surprise us less if it were directed to a reporter, a journalist or even to the author of a scholastic manual.<sup>6</sup> A reporter would add nothing to his

<sup>6</sup> Truth is anonymous, only error is personal. In certain societies this principle is pushed quite far. Cf. Renan on the formation of the Pentateuch (*Oeuvres*

credibility if he uselessly noted his sources; we judge his worth on internal criteria. It is enough for us to read his report to know if he is intelligent, impartial, precise, possesses a well-rounded education. A good historian, says Thucydides, does not accept blindly all traditions which are given to him; he should know how to verify his information, as our reporters say.

Only the historian will not drag out all the dirty details of his work before his readers; and the more demanding he is of himself, the less he will do so. Herodotus enjoys reporting all the different contradictory traditions which he can assemble.... Thucydides rarely does so, giving only the one which he thinks is correct. He accepts his responsibilities. When he categorically affirms that the Athenians are wrong about the murder of the Pisistratids and gives the version which he holds to be true, he limits himself to an affirmation. Moreover it is hard to see how he could have offered his readers the means of verifying his statement.

Modern historians offer an interpretation of facts and give their readers the means to verify the information and to make another formulation of it. Ancient historians, on the other hand, verified their sources themselves and did not leave this task to their reader; this was their role. They distinguished quite well, whatever might be said, between the primary source (eye witness testimony or, lacking this, tradition) and secondary sources; but they kept these details to themselves. For their reader was not himself an historian, any more than readers of newspapers are journalists; both kinds of readers place their trust in the professional.

When and why did the relation between the historian and

*complètes*, vol. VI, p. 520): "High antiquity did not have the idea of the authenticity of a book; everyone wanted his copy to be complete and so made whatever additions were necessary to keep it up-to-date. At this time a text was not recopied, it was redone in combination with other documents. Every book was composed with an absolute objectivity, without a title, without the name of the author, constantly transformed, subject to endless additions." Today, in India, popular editions of the Upanishads are published, texts which are one or two thousand years old but naively adjusted in order to be true; the discovery of electricity is mentioned. It is not a matter of falsification; if one completes or corrects a book which is simply true like a telephone directory, there is no falsification. In other words, at stake here is not the notion of truth, but the notion of author.

## *Between Myth and History*

his readers change? When and why did the practice of giving references begin? I am not an expert in modern history, but two details strike me. Gassendi does not give references in his *Syntagma philosophiae Epicureae*; he paraphrases or elaborates Cicero, Hermarchus, Origen, and the reader cannot know if he is being given the ideas of Epicurus himself or those of Gassendi. He is not creating a scholarly work but attempting to resurrect Epicureanism in its eternal truth and the Epicurean sect with it. On the other hand, in his *Histoire des variations des Églises protestantes*, Bossuet cites references, and Jurieu does as well in his responses. But these are polemical works. And here is the key. The citing of sources, scholarly annotation, we might even say all “scientific” history, if we judge science by its method, came from religious or juridical controversy (the latter when the historians of two rival princes quoted authentic acts which established the rights of their master over some province). Scholarly annotation had its origin in polemic quibbling; people beat each other over the head with proofs before sharing them with the other members of the “scientific community”. The major reason is the university with its increasingly exclusive monopoly on intellectual activity. The cause of this is economic and social; there is no more landed gentry who live in leisure like Montaigne or Montesquieu, nor is it still honorable to live dependent on some great person instead of working.

However, in the University a historian no longer writes for ordinary readers, as do journalists or “writers”, but for other historians, his colleagues. This was not the case for historians in antiquity. Thus these have such an apparently laxist attitude toward scientific rigor that we are surprised or shocked. Coming to the eighth of the ten books which comprise his great work Pausanias can write, “At the beginning of my research, I saw only foolish credulity in our myths; but now that my research is directed toward Arcady, I have become more prudent. In the archaic period, in fact, those we call the Sages expressed themselves in enigmas rather than openly, and I suppose that the legends relative to Cronos reflect a little of this wisdom.” This late avowal, then, apprises us retrospectively that Pausanias had not believed one word of the numerous implausible legends which he had imperturbably recounted in the preceding six hundred pages.

If a modern historian were to give the scientific community facts or legends to read in which he himself did not believe at all, he would call into question scientific probity. Ancient historians had, if not a different idea of probity, at least different readers who were not professionals and who composed an audience as heterogeneous as that of a newspaper. Thus they had a right and even a duty to their reserve, and they disposed of a margin to manoeuvre. The truth itself is not expressed by them; it is the reader's task to form some idea of the truth. This is one of the numerous barely visible particularities which show that, despite great similarities, history as a genre was quite different for the ancients from what it is for moderns. The audience of ancient historians was composite; some readers sought entertainment, others read history with a more critical eye. Some were even professionals in politics or strategy. Each historian made his choice: to write for everyone, accomodating himself to all the different types of readers, or to specialize, like Thucydides and Polybius, in technically certain information which yielded data always useful to politicians and military men. But the choice was there. Moreover, the heterogeneity of the reading public left the historian a certain margin; he could present the truth in its most vibrant or its softest colors at his will without betraying it. And so we should be neither surprised nor shocked by the letter, often noted by the moderns, where Cicero asks Luceius "to enhance the deeds of his consulship" more perhaps than he would have otherwise and "not to be too encumbered by the law of the historic genre". This was a simple affair between cronies which is no more than what might be asked without too much dishonesty of a journalist who always has a part of the public in his favor.

Behind these apparent questions of scientific method or of probity there arises another: the relation between the historian and his readers. Before the age of controversy, in fact, and before the age of Nietzsche and of Max Weber, the facts simply existed. The historian did not have to interpret (for the facts exist) nor to prove (since the facts are not part of a controversy). He only had to enumerate the facts as a reporter or a compiler. For this he did not need dizzying intellectual powers. He needed only the three virtues which are those of every good journalist: diligence,

## *Between Myth and History*

competence and impartiality. He had to be well-informed either through books or by eye witnesses, if these still existed, or by collecting traditions, “myths”. His competence in political matters such as strategy or geography would enable him to understand the actions of public men and to evaluate his information. His impartiality would ensure that he did not lie either by omission or by commission. His labor and his virtues were such that the historian finally knew the truth about the past unlike the masses. For, says Pausanias, “lots of untrue things are said by the masses who understand nothing of history and who believe everything they have heard since childhood in the choruses and the dramas. Many things are told about Theseus, for example; but in reality Theseus was a king who ascended the throne at the death of Menestheus, and whose descendents retained power up to the fourth generation”.

As we see, Pausanias has separated the wheat from the chaff; he extracted the authentic kernel from the legend of Theseus. How did he proceed? By means of what we shall call the doctrine of present things; the past resembles the present, or, if we prefer, miracles do not exist. Today we do not see men with bull’s heads, and kings exist. And so the Minotaur never existed, and Theseus was, quite simply, a king. For Pausanias does not doubt the historicity of Theseus, and Aristotle, five centuries earlier, had been equally believing.<sup>7</sup>

The critic of mythic traditions thus asks the wrong question. A Pausanias bears little resemblance to our Fontenelle, who, far from separating the wheat from the chaff, judged all to be false in legends. And despite appearances, ancient evaluation of myths also bears little resemblance to our own. We hail in legend a story enhanced by “popular genius”; for us such a myth is the epic enlargement of a great event such as the “Doric invasion”. But for a Greek the same myth is truth altered by popular naïveté; as authentic kernel it possesses certain details which are true because they are not miraculous such as the name of the heroes

<sup>7</sup> No more so than Thucydides (II, 15), in fact, does Aristotle doubt the historicity of Theseus; he sees in him the founder of Athenian democracy (*Politics*, XLI, 2) and makes believable the myth of the Athenian children carried off to Crete and given to the Minotaur (*Const. of the Bottians*, cited by Plutarch, *Theseus*, 16, 2).



and their genealogy. Questions of evaluation and of method<sup>8</sup> suppose a basic question: what is myth? Altered history? Collective mythomania? An allegory? Expanded history? And this allows us to note that one can believe at the same time in irreconcilable things and also that the notion of truth is neither simple nor eternal.

\* \* \*

Greek mythology, whose relation with religion<sup>9</sup> was one of the loosest, thus had hardly ever been anything but a very popular literary genre, a vast spectrum of literature, mostly oral, if the word literature is already applicable prior to the distinction between reality and fiction when legendary elements are calmly admitted.

Reading Pausanias we understand what mythology was: the tiniest village described by our author had its legend relative to some natural curiosity or cultural site. This legend was invented by an unknown storyteller and, later, by one of the numerous local scholars whom Pausanias had read and

<sup>8</sup> Here is an example. Newton said that the seven kings of Rome ruled altogether for 244 years and realized that such longevity is without parallel in all history where the average length of a reign is 17 years. He could have thus concluded that the chronology of royal Rome was legendary; instead he merely concludes that it was false, adjusts it to seven times 17 years and thereby fixes the date of the foundation of Rome at 630 B.C. See Isaac Newton, *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms*, 1728.

<sup>9</sup> M. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griech. Religion*, Second edition, Vol. I, pp. 14 and 371; A.D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, Oxford, 1972, Vol. I, p. 261. I am not even sure that aetiological myths should be set apart; very few Greek myths explain rituals, and those that do are less the invention of priests who seek to found a rite than the imagination of ingenious local minds who have invented a romantic explanation for such and such cultic particularity which intrigued the people of the area and travelers. The ritual is explained by a myth, but in the same way as any other local curiosity such as a strange rock formation which would lead a local story-teller to invent an explanation. It is also useless to seek to distinguish between the myth, the tale and the legend according to the degree of truth which is accorded to these different genres or according to their respective relationship to religion. See F. Hampl, *Geschichte als kritische Wissenschaft*, Darmstadt, 1975, Vol. II, pp. 1-50: *Mythos; Sage, Märchen*. For Greek myths everything was renewed by the works of J. P. Vernand, *Les origines de la pensée grecque*, 1962; *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, 1965; of M. I. Finley "Myth, Memory and History" in the review *History and Theory*, IV, 1965, P. 281; of M. Detienne, *Les maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque*, 1967. Here I treat very superficially this mythic thinking since my subject is its transformation in the last centuries before Christ.

## *Between Myth and History*

whom he calls exegetes. Each of these authors or storytellers knew the works of his colleagues since the different legends have the same hero, take up the same themes, and because the divine or heroic genealogies agree in general or at least have no too apparent contradictions. All this literature, which was such in spite of its not being aware of the fact, recalls another: the lives of local martyrs or saints from the Merovingian era to the *Golden Legend*. A. van Gennep<sup>10</sup> has shown that these apocryphal hagiographies, which the Bollandists had difficulty in controlling, were in reality a literature of a very popular flavor. These are only kidnapped princesses, horribly tortured or saved by the holy knights: snobbery, sex, sadism, adventure. The people were enchanted with these stories, art illustrated them and a vast literature took them up in both prose and poetry.

These worlds of legend were believed true in the sense that they were not doubted, but they were not believed in the same way we believe in the realities which surround us. For the faithful, the lives of martyrs, filled with miracles, were situated in an ageless past about which is known only that it was anterior, exterior and heterogeneous to the present time. It was the "time of the pagans". It was the same for Greek myths; they took place "before", during the heroic generations when the gods still associated with humans. The time and place of mythology were mysteriously heterogeneous to our own.<sup>11</sup> A Greek placed the gods "in heaven", but he would have been astonished to see them in the heavens. He would have been no less astonished if he had been taken literally with regard to time, and someone had told him that Hephaistos had just remarried or that Athena had aged a great deal lately. Of what value is a belief which is not active, for it does not involve the criteria and interests of daily life and of contemporary history. There is no sense of the real, and it is not self-evident that one imagines the past as similar to the present. Nor is it any more self-evident that one presumes that humanity has a past, known or unknown. We can no more

<sup>10</sup> A. van Gennep, *Religions, moeurs et légendes*, III, p. 150; Emile Male, *L'art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France*, p. 269; *L'art religieux de la fin du XVIe siècle... étude sur l'iconographie après le Concile de Trente*, p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Veyne, *Pain et Cirque*, p. 589.

perceive the limits of the centuries whose memory we preserve than we can discern the line which marks the edge of our visual field. Beyond this horizon we do not see the expanse of dark centuries; we cease seeing, and that is all. Heroic generations are on the other side of this temporal horizon, in another world. This is the mythic world in whose existence thinkers from Thucydides or Hecateus to Pausanias or St. Augustine continued to believe.<sup>12</sup> Except that they ceased seeing it as another world and wanted to reduce it to the things of the present world. They acted as if myth functioned at the same level of belief as history.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine, for example, does not doubt the historicity of Aeneas, but he reduces the myth to historic verisimilitude: Aeneas was no more son of Venus than Romulus was son of Mars (*City of God*, I, 4 and III, 2-6).

<sup>13</sup> The plurality of modes of belief is a fact too well-known to insist on it here; see J. Piaget, *La formation du symbole chez l'enfant*, p. 177. Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers*, Vol. I, p. 232, "On Multiple Realities"; cf. Vol. II, p. 135, "Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality"; Pierre Janet, *De l'angoisse à l'extase*, Vol. I, p. 244. It is no less true that we can believe different things about the same object at the same time; children know that toys are brought by Santa Claus and at the same time that they are given by their parents. J. Piaget, *Le jugement et le raisonnement chez l'enfant*, p. 217, cf. p. 325: "In children there are several heterogeneous realities: play, the observable reality, the world of things heard and told, etc.; these realities are more or less incoherent and independent of one another. When the child passes from the state of work to the state of play or from the state of submission to the adult world to the state of a personal examination, his opinions can vary significantly." M. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griech. Religion*, Vol. I, p. 50: "A child of thirteen years who is splashing in a brook with thousands of tiny waves says, 'The brook is wrinkling his brows.' If such an expression was taken literally, this would be a myth. But the child still knew that the brook was water that it could be drunk, etc. In the same way a primitive person can see souls everywhere in nature, he can situate in a tree a sentient and acting force which he must please or honor. But again, he will still cut down the tree to use its wood for building or for burning"; cf. also Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Vol I, p. 245. Wolfgang Leonard, *Die Revolution entlässt ihre Kinder*, Ullstein Bücher, 1955, p. 58 (the author is 19 years old and was *komsomol* at the time of the Great Purge of 1937): "My mother had been arrested, I had assisted at the arrest of my professor and my friends and I had of course noted for a long time that the Soviet reality bore no resemblance whatsoever to the manner in which it was described in *Pravda*. But in a certain way I separated these things, *i.e.* my personal expressions and experiences from my political convictions of principle. It was a little as if there had been two levels: the one of daily events or of my own experience (where it was not rare that I manifested a critical spirit) and another level which was that of the general Party line which I continued to hold as correct despite a certain feeling of unease. I think many *komsomols* knew a similar division." It seems that in no way was myth taken for history, that the difference was abolished between legend and history, despite E. Köhler, *L'aventure chevale-*

## *Between Myth and History*

Those who were not thinkers, on the other hand, perceived, beyond the horizon of collective memory, a world still more beautiful than the good old days, too beautiful to be empirical. This mythic world was not empirical, it was noble. This is not to say that it incarnated or symbolized “values”; it is hard to see that heroic generations cultivated virtue any more than men today. But they had more “value” than the latter. A hero is more than a man just as in the eyes of Proust a Duchess had more value than a bourgeois lady.

If it is permitted to have recourse to humor in order to be more brief, Pindar will be a good example of this snobbery. We know the problem: what is there that creates unity (if there is unity) in the poems of Pindar? Why does the poet relate to the conqueror such and such a myth whose relation to the subject is not apparent? The best explanation was given by H. Fränkel: Pindar elevates the conqueror and his victory to the higher world which is that of the poet.<sup>14</sup> For Pindar as poet has access to the world of gods and heroes, and he raises the conqueror, this

*resque: idéal et réalité dans le monde courtois*, p. 8. Let us say rather that they can believe in it as much as in history, but not in the place of history nor under the same conditions as history. Children do not require of their parents powers of levitation, ubiquity and invisibility which they attribute to Santa Claus. Children, primitives and believers of all kinds are not naive. “Even primitives do not confuse an imaginary relation with a real relation” (Evans Pritchard, *La religion des Primitifs*, p. 49); “The symbolism of the Huichol allows an identity between wheat and a stag; M. Lévy-Brühl prefers not to call this symbolism but rather prelogical thinking. But the logic of the Huichol would only be prelogical on the day when they baked bread thinking they were making a venison stew” (Olivier Leroy, *La raison primitive*, Paris, 1927, p. 70); “The Sedang Moi of Indochina, who have instituted means by which a man can renounce his status of human being and become a wild boar, still react differently depending on whether they are dealing with a real boar or a nominal boar” (G. Deveureux, *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, 1972, p. 101); “For the Dorze, the leopard is a Christian animal which respects the fasts of the Coptic Church. A Dorze, however, is no less careful to protect his animals on Wednesday and Friday, fast days, than the other days of the week. He holds as true that leopards fast, and that they are dangerous every day. These two propositions have never been challenged: leopards are dangerous every day as we know from experience. They are Christian and fast since tradition guarantees it.” (Dan Sperber, *Le symbolisme en général*, 1974, pp. 105 and 112); “Despite verbal traditions, we rarely accept a myth in the same way we accept empirical truth. All the doctrines which have grown up around the subject of the immortality of the soul have hardly affected man’s natural feeling in the face of death” (G. Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, III, *Reason in Religion*, 1905, p. 52).

<sup>14</sup> Hermann Fränkel, *Wege und Formen frühgriech. Denkens*, p. 366.

valiant commoner, up to his level by treating him as an equal and speaking to him of the mythical world which will be, from now on, his own, thanks to Pindar who introduces him to it. There is not necessarily a close relation between the personality of the conqueror and the matters with which the poet deals. Pindar does not try to assure that the myth always contains a discrete allusion to the person of the conqueror. The important thing is that he treats the conqueror as a peer by speaking to him familiarly of this mythical world.

This is literature of a pre-literary nature, neither true nor fictive, because it is exterior to, but nobler than, the empirical world. Myth has another particularity: as its name indicates, it is a story, but anonymous, which can be collected and repeated but which cannot have an author. In what can a myth be recognized formally? In the fact that the exegete spoke of this higher world by transposing his own discourse into indirect discourse: "It is said that...; the Muses say that...; a *logos* says that...". The direct speaker never appears, for the Muse herself only "resays", recalls the discourse which is its own father. When it is a matter of gods and heroes, the only source of knowledge is "it is said", and this source has a mysterious authority. Not that there were not imposters, for the Muses know how to speak the truth and to lie.

This is the mythology which every historian will criticize without abandoning himself to the taste for the marvelous, on the contrary, but without recognizing its character either. He will mistake it for a historiography. He will mistake *mythos*, this word which possesses its own authority, for a simple "tradition". He will treat mythic temporality as if it were historic time. And that is not all. The historian also has to deal with a second kind of mythological literature in epic verse or in prose, that of local histories or epics. For example, let us consider our own legend of the Trojan origins of the Frankish monarchy, from Fredegar to Ronsard; since the Trojans founded all kingdoms worthy of the name they thus founded the kingdom of the Franks. And since the onomastics of places derives from that of men, the Trojan in question could only be named Francion.

This genealogical literature recounted the *aitiae*, the origins,

## *Between Myth and History*

i.e., the setting in place of world order. The implicit idea (still present in Book V of the poet Lucretius) is that our world is finished, constituted, complete. (A child said to me in this respect, not without astonishment, upon seeing brick-layers at work: "Aren't all houses built yet?")<sup>15</sup> This setting in place is situated by definition before the beginning of history, in the mythic time of heroes: everything is reduced to explaining from where a man, a custom or a city has its existence. Once born, the city has only to live its historic existence which has nothing more to do with a regime and which does not belong any longer to etiology.

History is a study into what is; etiology figures out what is hidden. What happened before the historic period whose memory we preserve? Its explicative method consists in explaining a thing by its beginnings: a city by its founder; a ritual by an incident which served as precedent because it is repeated; a people by a first individual born of the earth or a first king. Between this initial fact and our historic period, which begins with the Trojan War, extends the succession of mythic generations. The mythographer reconstitutes or rather imagines a royal genealogy without lacunae which traverses the entire mythic age, and, when he has invented it, he experiences the satisfaction of complete knowledge. Where does he find all the proper names which he attaches to each phase of his genealogy? From his imagination, sometimes from allegory and, most frequently, from place names. The rivers, mountains and cities of a country come from the names of the original individuals who inhabited it and who are thought to have been the kings of the land rather than its only residents. The ageless human trace which

<sup>15</sup> The most current idea of historic time is not at all that of cyclical time nor rectilinear time nor progressive time, but the idea that world is completed and finished and that consequently it can only grow older. We are living the period of old age of the world. See references in Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, p. 91 (pocket edition, p. 57). This idea gives us the key to a phrase discussed in the *Laws* of Plato, 677 C. The world, says Plato, is periodically destroyed by cataclysms which annihilate all civilization and almost all of humanity. "Otherwise, if we suppose that there is truly a constant permanence of all human acquisitions in the world, how could there still be discoveries?" For Plato, discovery, or rather invention, is not infinite. If we are still discovering it is because the stock of discoveries has been partially destroyed and there is need to reconstitute it.

are toponyms derives from the human onomastics of mythical times. When the name of a river derives from the name of a man, we are brought back to the original human presence which transformed the region into a territory of men.

But following what event was the name of a certain king of long ago passed on or given to the river? This is what the genealogist does not even ask. Verbal analogy is sufficient for him and his favorite means of explanation is the archetype. One might as well ask what concrete relation there is between Faun and fauna, between Hellen and the Hellenes, between Pelasgos and the Pelasgians. Or between the Elephant and elephants in the following etiological *pastiche*. "In the beginning elephants had no trunk (*trompe*), but a god pulled on the nose of Elephant to punish him for his misbehavior (*tromperies*), and since that day, all elephants have a trunk." Pausanias no longer understands this kind of archetypical logic and he takes the archetype who, like Adam, was the only one there could be, for the first king of the land. "The Arcadians say that Pelasgos was the first inhabitant of their country, but it would be logically more plausible to think that he was not alone and that there were other men with him. Otherwise, over what subjects would this king have ruled? It was his size, his force, his beauty which distinguished him as well as his intelligence; and this is why, I imagine, he was chosen to rule over them. For his part, Asios wrote a verse about him: "Pelasgos, equal to the gods, was produced by the black earth in the wooded mountains so that the human race might be."

The faith which Pausanias placed in myths had nothing more to do with a taste for the marvelous. He believed in them as one believes in that history where everything is known by tradition. He believed in them too because he distinguished with difficulty historic reality from the traditions which made it known and for which he had the respect which one has for a beautiful antique. We can understand this better and we can see the extent of the problem when we realize that this attitude toward myth lasted another fifteen centuries. For in the *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, Bossuet in turn took up mythical chronology which he harmonized with biblical chronology. He was thus able to date to "a little after Abimelech" the "famous labors

*Between Myth and History*

of Hercules, son of Amphitryon". Did Bossuet really believe in Hercules? Did he not rather believe the classical authors?

\* \* \*

Oral literature and iconography acquainted everyone with the existence and the modality of fiction of a mythological world whose aura could be sensed even without knowing its details. These details were known only by those who had attended school. Do we really believe that classical Athens was a large civic collective where minds were in total accord, where the theater sealed a union of hearts and where the average citizen knew every tidbit about Jocasta or the return of the Heraclides? The essence of a myth is not that it is known to all, but that it is thought to be known to all and worthy to be so. Generally it is not so well known. In the *Poetics* there are a few phrases which say much on this matter. Aristotle says that it is not necessary to restrict oneself to the sacred myths when writing a tragedy. "This would be quite zealous, because even the best known subjects are known only to a few people. They are even so a pleasure to all." The Athenian public knew globally the existence of a mythic world in which the tragedies took place, but it did not know the details of these stories. And so it was not necessary to know every minute element of the Oedipus legend to follow *Antigone* or the *Phoenician Women*; the tragic poet took care to explain everything to his audience as if he had invented the plot. But the poet did not place himself above his audience since the myth was supposedly known. He did not know any more than the others; he was not writing a learned literature.

In the Hellenistic era everything changes. Literature takes on an erudite air. Not that it is reserved for the first time to an élite (Pindar or Aeschylus were hardly popular authors), but it demands of its audiences a cultural effort which sets amateurs apart. Myths then gave way to what we still call mythology and which survived into the eighteenth century. The people continued to have its tales and superstitions, but mythology became esoteric and distant from the masses. Mythology to them had the prestige of knowledge reserved for an élite which categorized



its adherents. Other more learned readers were above all avid seekers of the marvellous; for their use a new kind of marvellous was born which is frequently and wrongly taken to be a rationalism and of which Diodorus, among others, is a representative.

It is difficult, said this historian, to recount the history of mythical times if only because of the imprecision of the chronology. This imprecision causes many readers not to take mythic history seriously. Moreover, events of this far-away era are too distant and too improbable to be believed in easily. What can be done? The deeds of Heracles are as glorious as they are superhuman. "Either we omit certain of these great deeds and the glory of the god will be lessened, or else we speak of them all and then we lose all credibility. For certain readers unjustly require the same rigor in the old legends as in events of our own period; they judge the exploits which are contested according to physical strength such as it is at present, and they imagine the strength of Heracles along the model of the weakness of men today." The readers who apply to Heracles the false principle of present reality are also wrong in wanting things to happen on the stage as in the city, which is to lack respect for the hero. "In the area of legendary history, one cannot forcefully demand the truth, for everything happens as in the theater. There we do not believe in the existence of Centaurs who are half-human, half-animal, nor in the existence of Geryon with three bodies, but we do not accept any less the fables of this kind and, applauding them, we render homage to the god. For Heracles spent his life making the earth habitable; it would be shocking if men lost the memory of their common *évergète* and cheated him of his share of praise."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Toward 1873 the young philologist Nietzsche wrote, "With what poetic liberty the Greeks treated their gods! We have too much taken on the habit of opposing in history truth and non-truth. If we imagine that it is absolutely necessary that the Christian myths appear historically authentic! ... Man demands truth and manifests it in ethical commerce with other men. All collective life rests on that; the evil effects of reciprocal lies are anticipated. It is there that the obligation to speak truly is born. But untruth is permitted the epic narrator because there is no harmful consequence to fear there. The lie is thus permitted where it provides charm: as long as it does not harm the beauty and grace of the lie! This is how the priest invents the myths of the gods; untruth serves to prove that the gods are sublime. We have a very great difficulty in revivifying the mythical idea of the freedom to lie. The great Greek philosophers still lived

## *Between Myth and History*

When it comes to gods, Diodorus confuses respect and truth, just as in politics we arrive only with difficulty at distinguishing a scandalous or dangerous idea from a false one. Moreover, truth lacks charm. For Diodorus is writing for readers who do not believe perhaps in the existence of the Lernean Hydra but who do not wish for that reason to deprive themselves of the story. But we should not underestimate how frail was the barrier which separated charm from belief. From time to time a sensational incident showed that the masses were ready to believe in the legends which enchanted them.<sup>17</sup>

And the second type of readers who took pleasure in historic truth such as they imagined it? We have seen that they reproached legends for their incertitude, their improbability and their lack of chronological precision. Now we shall see that it would be wrong to take them for sceptics and that their attitude was nothing less than simple.

Cicero, for example. In politics and in ethics Cicero was quite capable of believing and adoring whatever served his interests. But he had a temperament which was religiously cold, and he was incapable of professing something in which he hardly believed. Every reader of *De natura deorum* will agree that the least we can say is that he did not much believe in the gods, that he did not even try to disguise the fact out of political prudence and that he showed that in his era people were divided over religious questions just as they are today. They were also divided over the matter of miracles. Did the Dioscuri really appear to a certain Vatiens on the Salarian Way? This was discussed by the devout of the old school and the sceptics. But this same Cicero, who believes neither in the apparition nor, no doubt, in the Dioscuri themselves, and who does not hide the fact, accepts

completely in the era of the right to lie (*Berechtigung zur Lüge*). The search for truth is an acquisition which mankind made very slowly" (*Philosophenbuch*, 44 and 70, in Vol. X of the Kröner edition).

<sup>17</sup> Dion Cassius, LXXIX, 18, in 221 was the witness in Asia to the following incident in which he believed fully: "A *daimon* who called himself the famous Alexander of Macedonia and who resembled him physically and was armed like him as well, arose in the Danube regions. Where he appeared exactly, I do not know. He crossed (Mesia?) and Thrace acting like Dionysius, with 400 men carrying *thyrsus* and a *nebris* who harmed no one." The crowds thronged, led by the governors and procurators.

completely the historicity of Romulus. Just as it was accepted up to the nineteenth century.

Here, then, is how the problem was defined: there were two very different questions, that of the gods and that of mythic human generations. A general mythic form or a general story function was not known, but the content was judged by whether it spoke of the gods or of humans of long ago. There were three attitudes toward what was said of humans: pure and simple credulity like that of the readers of Diodorus; refusal to concern oneself with a problem about which there were doubts, but which one could not dismiss brazenly with a single word because the problem had an eminent social and cultural dignity. So much so as to be smothered with respect: to avoid taking a stand one writes, "The myth says that...". This expression has changed meaning. It no longer signifies, "Here are the truths which have been handed down to us", but has become, "This is what is said which I refuse either to approve or to deny". The third attitude is the one which we will study: when the savants are obliged by reason of their research to take a position with regard to a historic myth, they try to purify it and to come up with a version which conforms to their conception of historic rationality. In the same way either we have a total and simple faith in psychoanalysis; or else we speak of its doctrine, which is not our affair, without taking a position (for we cannot condemn outright an established doctrine); or else we speak of it in a watered-down version in keeping with our personal rationalism. It sometimes happens that we adopt these different attitudes in succession.

As to the religious problem, it was expressed in other terms. Either one was a religious person, in which case one attempted to find for the religious myths a version which was not unworthy of the divine majesty, or else one was religiously cold and, therefore, one undertook to eliminate the divine presence and action in the historic myths. Since the gods are hidden in our own times, they must have been formerly no less invisible and inactive if we want mythic history to be history.

How complicated! Why criticize the myths? Because nothing is believable which does not exist at present. But then why not challenge them as a group? Why respect in them a socially

## *Between Myth and History*

recognized doctrine? And how could this doctrine be thus recognized and not be caught in a credibility gap? Because the Greeks never believed it possible to lie completely. The ancient problem of the myth lies precisely there, as we are going to see.

\* \* \*

To criticize the myths was not to accuse them of falsehood but rather to point out their basis of truth. For this truth had been covered with lies. "From the beginning, by building a fictional structure on a truthful foundation, we have impeded most people from believing the facts which occurred in the past or even which still occur. Those who like to hear mythicisms are also prone to adding to them their own nonsense. They achieve thereby only the destruction of truth which they mix up with lies."<sup>18</sup> But where do these lies come from and what purpose do they serve? The Greeks rarely asked themselves this since a lie has nothing positive about it; it is a non-being, period. They did not ask themselves why certain ones had lied but why others had believed. It is among modern authors from Fontenelle to Cassirer, Bergson and Lévi-Strauss that the problem of the myth is that of its origin. For the Greeks this genesis posed no difficulty. Ultimately the myths are authentic historic traditions, for how could one speak of that which is not? One can alter the truth, but one cannot speak of nothing. On this point modern authors ask instead if one can speak for no reason without having some interest. Even Bergson, who fully developed the idea of gratuitous fantasy,<sup>19</sup> posits first that fantasy initially has a vital function, only that this function is pushed off course and often becomes non-apparent. Fontenelle<sup>20</sup> was no doubt the first to

<sup>18</sup> Pausanias, VII, 2, 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> The admirable second chapter of *Deux sources de la morale et de la religion* remains one of the great texts of human sciences on the function of fantasy. See pp. 111-114, 124-134, 204-212.

<sup>20</sup> Fontenelle, *De l'origine des fables* in *Oeuvres diverses*, Amsterdam, 1742, Vol. I, p. 481-500. For Fontenelle, myth contains no truth, but fantasy does not exist either. All is explained by the fateful encounter of a number of innocent threads: ignorance, enthusiasm, the pleasure of weaving an anecdote, the vanity of an author, normal curiosity, etc. There are not two camps, the deceivers and the naive; all men are their own dupes. All is made up of tiny threads and not of large channels.

say that fables have no kernel of truth and are not even allegories. "We should look for nothing in fables except for the history of the errors of the human mind."

The Greeks sought a truth through the lies. They asked where the fault lay: it was the fault of candor, *naïveté*, *eutheia* which was the key word. Through candor one believes that "which is falsely mixed with the historic foundation", and the falsehoods which are part of myth are called the *mythôdes*. Candor is the true cause of lies; there would be fewer fantasists if there were fewer naive people.

For modern authors, on the contrary, myth represents rather the narration of a great event whence comes its legendary aspect. This event is less altered by adventitious elements than enhanced in an epic fashion. For the popular mind blows up great national deeds; legend has as its origin the genius of peoples who tell stories to recount that which is really true. The truest part of legends is, precisely, the marvellous. There the emotion of the national soul is given form. Rightly or wrongly the ancients and moderns believe in the historicity of the Trojan War, but for opposite reasons. We believe in it because of its marvellous quality; they believed in it despite this quality. For the Greeks the Trojan War existed because a war has no marvellous quality; if we remove all that is marvellous from Homer there remains this war. For the moderns the historicity of the Trojan War emerges from the marvellous epic with which Homer has surrounded it; only an authentic event which has moved the national soul can give birth to epic and to legend.

But then if myth has truth alongside its falsities, the most important step is not to seek the psychology of the story-teller, but to learn to be on guard against the false. The victim is more interesting than the guilty party. The Greeks always thought that the human sciences were normative rather than descriptive, or rather they never thought to make such a distinction. A science of myth, in their eyes, would not seek to explain error but to learn to be on guard against it.<sup>21</sup> Instead of asking if myth explains ritual, reveals by its structure the structure of the human spirit, is a functional fantasy or one gone crazy, etc.,

<sup>21</sup> G. Granger, *La théorie aristotélicienne de la science*, Paris, 1976, p. 374.

## *Between Myth and History*

it is more useful to control one's thinking, to denounce human *naïveté* and to separate the wheat from the chaff.

And since there is a control, it is less urgent to understand the motives of the forger than to identify him: who is the author of mythology? Who invented this mass of improbable and, even worse, indecent legends where little children acquire a false idea of the gods? Who gave the gods a conduct unworthy of their holiness? Well, it is hard to say. The name of the inventor of mythology was unknown; nevertheless, since a guilty party was necessary, he was found in Homer, Hesiod and other poets, "For it is they, no doubt, who gave men these untrue tales."<sup>22</sup> They created at least certain myths. And then, who invented lies if not the professionals of lying invention? Even if these inventions had an elevated allegorical meaning, they would be no less dangerous pedagogically. This is why Homer, through the efforts of Plato, was expelled from the city.<sup>23</sup> Here, it is clear, Homer is not the poet we know. He is not the author of the *Iliad*, but the supposed author of all mythology. Plato is not regulating relations between the State and literature, but those between the State and the collective conscience. His position is not explained by the Greek idea that each poet creates myths, but by the other idea that all myths were created by the poets.

For a rationalist, a rationalist and a half: can we seriously believe that poets created mythology for the fun of it? Can imagination be so futile? It is too little to say with Plato that myths can be educational if they are well chosen. Strabo thinks every myth has an instructive intention and that the poet did not write the *Odyssey* to entertain but to teach geography. To the rationalist condemnation of the imaginary as false, there is the explanation of the imaginary as conforming to a hidden reason.

It is, then, impossible that a myth be entirely mythic. The Greeks were able to criticize the fables in their details, but not to challenge their foundation, whence their embarrassment. This is why so often they seem to believe only half-way in their legends, or think they believe... But do there exist partial modes of belief? Were they not rather hesitating between two

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 377 D.

<sup>23</sup> *Republic*, 378 D and 382 D.

programs of truth? It was not their faith which was divided but the myth which was corrupt in their eyes for it was split between two truths: a critique of the improbable or the unworthy which influenced the content, and a rationalization of the imagination by which it was impossible for the container to contain nothing and for it to seem empty. The myth thus always mixed together the true and the false: the lie served to adorn the truth to make it acceptable; or it told the truth by enigma and allegory, or it had crystallized around it a kernel of truth. But initially there was no lie.

Legends, in fact, tell us anecdotes or tales relative to great characters of heroic times. There are so many sources to history. And what is history? It is the politics of long ago. Myth can thus be seen in a political sense. The Greeks were not the last ones to act this way, and Machiavelli did likewise. According to him, Moses was a prince who had to win the throne, which gives him a much higher merit than those who had merely to go to the trouble of inheriting it.<sup>24</sup> This merit, however, is shared with Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus who also seized power and, “although one should hardly speak of Moses since he was only executing the will of God, nevertheless” it is evident that his methods, “do not seem to be too different” from those of other princes. “He who reads the Bible with attention will see that, in order to assure the observance of the tables of the law, Moses was constrained to put to death an infinity of people.” It is hardly necessary to read the Bible. For this political version of Moses, Machiavelli had only to read the *Antiquitates Judaicae* of Flavius Josephus who inflicted on Moses the treatment that Thucydides or Aristotle inflicted on Theseus or Minos. And probably with the same secret feeling that one should not have a childish idea of princes. The great and sublime thing called politics is not made for the naive. But nothing is more naive than legend which sees princes with the eyes of children. These are only love stories of the gods, extravagant exploits, miracles done to dazzle little old ladies. How can one restore to the text of the

<sup>24</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter VI; *Discourses on Titus-Livius*, III, 30. See also the *Contra Apionem* of Josephus, 157, *et seq.* (note in chapter 160 the idea that religion helped Moses make the people docile).

## *Between Myth and History*

oldest story its political seriousness? By chance this is possible; for if the improbable elements are evidently false, the falsity is nothing but the truth which has been deformed. It is thus possible to reconstitute the true text of the story. This was the task accomplished by Palaiphatos. In his eyes it was enough to rectify the errors which are frequently simple confusion of words. The Centaurs of which the poets speak are impossible, for, if hybrid beings had existed then, they would still exist today. An instant of reflection allows us to see from where the legend came: to kill wild bulls someone discovered how to mount a horse and to pierce them with a spear (*kentô*). Apollo really loved Hyacinth, but it would be childish to believe that this god wrote the name of his beloved on the petals of a flower. The truth is that Apollo gave this flower the name of the beautiful adolescent.

We see just how far the rationalist optimism of Palaiphatos can go; the text of the truth is not irremediably ruined and with good reason. One cannot lie *ex nihilo*, one can only deform the truth. Moreover, the problem of finding the original text is very narrowly defined, for error is multiple and the correct meaning is one. Behind all kinds of wild imaginings, we must find the one acceptable meaning: the good one.

Myth is a copy of the past but, altered in the course of its transmission by too much *naïveté*, it is not a pure invention. Myth offers a second particularity which is no less curious and which explains the first: the Greeks were not surprised that these reflections of the past were there. They collected bits from everywhere, so to speak, but how did these aeroliths arrive all the way to them? They did not dream of them; it is evident that each thing has its reflection just as bodies have shadows. The explanation of a myth is the history which it reflects just as a copy is explained by its model. They do not ask how these reflections were able to come down through so many centuries, by what means the generations handed them on, or with what intentions. They are not surprised that these phantoms of the past are, in the present, a shadow sometimes of great events, sometimes of simple incidents, not to mention ordinary gossip. Palaiphatos reduces the myth of Pandora (it is unimportant how he does so) to an anecdote of a rich woman who loves to make herself up, and he does not ask why she is remembered. Certainly



*naïveté* has added marvellous traits to these memories, but it does not seem that they are remembered because they are marvellous. The Greeks did not think or even dream of the reasons for transmission. In the *Cratyle*, words are explained by the things they describe, not by the history of the language which is limited to altering them. These alterations have a purely negative and uncertain character. One does not look for positive reasons nor laws; nor does one think that myth is an epic enlarged under the influence of marvel or of emotion. The explanation for myth being found only in its model, myth cannot not have a basis in reality. If it reflected nothing it would not exist. The basis of truth can be found by rectifying some alterations.

\* \* \*

“It is said that heroes were six cubits high; it is a charming myth, but untrue and unbelievable if we consider nature for which present individuals are the measure.” The reductions of myth to history will require two operations: to purify traditions of that which was physically unbelievable; to remove that which is historically impossible. That is the coexistence of the gods and the mortals. For in our historic era, the gods have withdrawn from men.

Nature has, say the Epicureans, if not laws which oblige it to do such and such a thing, at least pacts or *foedora* which forbid it to do certain things and, among others, not to blur the boundaries between living species. There cannot then be metamorphoses. It is said that along the Po a musician became king of the land and that at his death he was transformed into a swan by the will of Apollo. “For my part,” writes Pausanias, “I think the truth is that a musician was king in this land; but that a man became a bird is not, in my opinion, worthy of belief”.

The criterion of present things as measure of all things is a healthy principle but a delicate one to control. But we must not measure present things only by what we know. A certain Cleon of Magnesia ad Sipylum, author of *Paradoxae*, noted that those who had not seen much wrongly denied certain strange things. Must we believe that Aristomenes after his death took part in the battle of Leuctra? If the Chaldeans, the Indians and Plato

## *Between Myth and History*

are correct in affirming that the soul is immortal, it becomes difficult to challenge the myth. It is no answer to say that the soul can be immortal and the myth in question still be an invention; every myth is presumed true and it is the critic's obligation to prove its falsity since the truth is more natural than a lie.

And so it is not an edifying story which we tell here, that of reason against myth. For we shall see that reason has not won (the problem of the myth was forgotten rather than resolved); it was not for a good cause that it was struggling (the principle of present things and of plain good sense is the refuge of all prejudices: Epicurus denied the antipodes in its name); and finally it was not reason which struggled, but only a program of truth, whose presuppositions surprise us just as our own, of which we are not conscious, will surely surprise our grand-nephews. Of the true, the false, myth, superstition, we never have a complete view, a proof, an *indev sui*. Thucydides believed in oracles, Aristotle in divination by dreams; Pausanias obeyed his dreams.

Once the errors of tradition have been corrected, we obtain authentic facts. Mythological literature, oral or written, with its numerous authors, known or unknown, and its multiple variants will from now on have to be comparable to a civil document: it must have the chronological prosopographical and biographical coherence of history.

Mythic time had neither depth nor measure; one might as well ask if the adventures of Tom Thumb happened before or after those of Cinderella. Nevertheless the heroes, those noble figures, had a genealogical tree. Sometimes a prophecy announced to a hero that the misfortunes of his family would end five or ten generations after him. Mythographers quite early were able to establish a chronology of mythic generations. No longer was one reduced to saying, "Once upon a time there was a king and a nymph". One could triumph over those who doubted the legends because they had no chronology, and, thanks to synchronizations, it was possible to distinguish true legends from false ones.

It is true this obsession with rigorous chronology is significant. The law of the historic genre required and requires still that one relate events by giving their dates, to the day if possible.

Why this often useless precision? Because chronology is the eye of history and it allows us to control or to refute hypotheses? It is true that it permits this, but it is not for this reason that such value is placed in it. Chronology, like geography and prosopography, is sufficient unto itself, first of all, in a program of truth when time and space are known and when all they contain can be situated: people, events, places. This is the most candid of the conceptions of history. If one can appreciate a painting, one is an aesthete; but if one knows its date, one is an art historian. One knows of what the past of the painting is composed. The Greeks thus drew up a historic chronology of heroic genealogies; and the mythical times, approximated to our own, preceded them from the fateful date of about 1200, which is the time of the Trojan War.

Thus was formed, in the course of the Hellenistic and Roman period, this enormous local historiography which gave each city its origins and its ancestors. This allowed political figures when founding an alliance or demanding services large or small to invoke legendary relations among cities, relations which were sometimes unexpected: between Sparta and Jerusalem, Rome and Ilium. It is, perhaps, a historiography of forgers where all is invented on the basis of minute hints or the author's imagination. Modern times, up to a very recent period, had a dynastic or regional historiography which was no less imaginary. The joy of knowing who were one's ancestors sufficed; no one was concerned to know if, in addition, it were true.

\* \* \*

This joy sufficed so much to a Pausanias, more philosopher than historian, that he distinguishes with difficulty that which occurred from that which one writes about it. The real problem of the birth of modern historic science is not the destructive distinction between primary and secondary sources; this had always been done, and it is not a panacea. It is the distinction between sources and reality, between historians and history. Pausanias, however, lived in an era when these elements were increasingly confused, and they were confused for a long time still, up until after the era of that same Bossuet who once more established

## *Between Myth and History*

a synchronism between Abimelech and Hercules because he repeated what the *Chronicle* of Eusebius had said. We shall conclude on this other manner of believing in myth.

Relations between history and what was called grammar or philology have never been simple. The former had to know "what really happened", *was eigentlich geschehen ist* (said Ranke); the latter is knowledge of what is known, *Erkenntnis des Erkannten* (said Boeckh). Often "that which happened" is used to explain a text,<sup>25</sup> which remains the objective and for which the historic reality is only the reference. This is the case when the *Bucolics* or Cicero are explained by Virgil's biography or the political history of the end of the Republic.

But there is also another widely accepted attitude in which there is no distinction at all between reality and the text which speaks of it. This is the attitude of Eusebius through whom mythical history as found in Pausanias is passed all the way down to Bossuet. Not that Eusebius was incapable of distinguishing between the event and the text! But for him the sources themselves were part of history;<sup>26</sup> to be a historian meant to recount history but also to recount historians. Are the majority of our philosophers and psychoanalysts any different in their respective areas? To be a philosopher, most frequently, means to be a historian of philosophy; to know philosophy means to know what the different philosophers believed they knew. To know what the Oedipus complex is means above all knowing or commenting on what Freud said about it.

This attitude is different from that of the myth where a word can stand on its own authority. Different too from the attitude of a Thucydides, a Polybius, a Pausanias. Like our reporters, they do not cite their sources and seem to desire to be taken at their word because they write for the public rather than for

<sup>25</sup> M. Riffaterre, *La production du texte*, Paris, 1979, p. 176: "All the efforts of philology were directed toward the reconstruction of realities which had disappeared for fear that the poem die with its references."

<sup>26</sup> M. Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, p. 55 and 141 on the sciences of the sixteenth century: "The great partition, apparently so simple, between observation, testimony and fable did not exist... To write the story of an animal, it was useless and impossible to choose between the profession of naturalist and that of the compiler. It was necessary to collect in one and the same form of knowledge all that had been seen and heard, all that had been told."

their colleagues. Eusebius does not cite his sources, he transcribes them. This does not mean that he takes them at their word and even less that he is recounting “truly scientific” history, but simply that the written word is a part of the things one should know. Eusebius does not distinguish between knowing things and knowing what is in books. His *Chronological Tables or Summary of All History* recapitulates nine centuries of thinking on myths and served as the basis for historic knowledge up to and including Dom Calmet.<sup>27</sup> There we find the genealogies: of the kings of Sicyon and of the kings of Argos, the first of whom was Inachus, the source being the historian Castor; of the Myceneans with Attreus, Thyestes, Orestes; of Athens with Cecrops and Pandion. There are all the synchronisms: at the time Abimelech ruled the Hebrews the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs occurred “which Papaiphatos, in his *Things not to Believe*, said were famous Thessalian horsemen”. There are dates: Medea followed Jason and left her father Aeetes 780 years after Abraham and, consequently, 1235 years before the birth of the Saviour. Eusebius is a rationalist: in the year 650 of Abraham’s era, it is by a neighboring prince that Ganymede was kidnapped; Zeus with his bird of prey is thus nothing but a “vain fable”. The Gorgon whose head Perseus cut off in 670 of Abraham’s era was simply a courtesan of fascinating beauty. Let us finish by citing once again the *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* by the bishop of Meaux: the Trojan War, “the fifth age of the world”, is an “apt era for assembling all that is most certain, most beautiful, from those fabulous times” in which the truth is “enveloped” with falsehoods. In fact, “there we have the Achilles, the Agamemnon, the Menelaus, the Ulysses, Sarpedon son of Jupiter, Aeneas son of Venus”.

<sup>27</sup> The reader who enjoys these things should read Yves-Paul Pezron, *L’antiquité des temps rétablie et défenduë contre les Juifs et les nouveaux chronologistes*, Paris, 1687, where he will learn that in 2538 from the creation of the world, Jupiter had three children by Europa. For Dom Calmet, his universal history appeared in 1735, to the great joy of Voltaire. I was referred to Pezron by G. Couton’s very good article, as hard on the Pascalian hagiography and on Pascal the apologist as Koyre was on Pascal the physician: “Libertinage et apologétique: les ‘Pensées de Pascal’ contre la thèse des Trois Imposteurs”, in *Dix-septième siècle*, XXXII, 1980, p. 181.

## *Between Myth and History*

From Herodotus to Pausanias and Eusebius (I almost said to Bossuet), the Greeks never ceased believing in their myths and making a problem of them, and their thinking hardly advanced in the development of the facts of this problem or even in its solutions. For half a millennium there were many minds, such as Carneades, Cicero or Ovid, who did not believe in the gods, but no one doubted Hercules or Aeolus, even if this meant using rationalizations. The Christians assailed the gods of mythology in whom no one believed, but they said nothing about the mythological heroes. For they believed in them like everyone else, Aristotle, Polybius, and Lucretius included.

How did belief in the historicity of Aeolus, Hercules or Perseus finally cease? Neither healthy scientific method nor dialectics, materialist or otherwise, are at all responsible. It is rare that major political or intellectual problems find a solution, are resolved, settled and forgotten. More often they are lost in the sand where they are forgotten or effaced. Christianization effaced a problem for which the Greeks had not found the key and for which they were also unable to diminish their affection. We can suppose that they were fond of this subject for no less accidental reasons.

For centuries, then, nurses had ceased telling children of the heroes and the gods, but the scholars still believed in them in their own manner. They ceased for two reasons. Born of research and reporting, with Eusebius history had become history mixed with philology. With the moderns came something very different but which also bears the name of history. This resulted from the controversy with and the divorce from philology. Ended was the confusion between historic reality and the texts which relate it, while the Quarrel between Ancients and Moderns stripped these texts of their sacred aura. Then came Fontenelle who thought it possible that there was not one word of truth in fantasy. This did not make the problem of myth disappear, however, but instead aggravated it. No longer do we ask, "What truth is there in this fable, since it must contain some truth; for it is impossible to speak of nothing." Instead we ask, "What meaning or what function does this myth have? For no one can speak without a purpose."

Paul Veyne  
(*Collège de France.*)