

MODERN MYTHS

I

The time is past when “myth” could be considered serenely, when *μυθος* could be translated as “legend,” or when Littré could define it as follows: “A story pertaining to time or facts that history does not clarify and embracing either a real fact transformed into a religious notion or the invention of a fact with the help of an idea.” It was calmly asserted that the myth concerned formal divinities, that it was the means of expressing the relationship between these divinities and men—hence the historical form it most frequently assumed. But, in any case, it was a matter of the past. The gods were indeed dead, and the stories regarding them no longer concerned us. The nineteenth century, the century of reason, was devoid of myths, and only the “poets” (falsifiers!) regretted this. But along came the psychology of the unconscious, then sociology and history, to give a fresh meaning, and thereby vigor, to these dusty tales incorporated in Greco-Latin mythology. No longer were they a childish invention to lend color to a naïve religion. We perceived instead subtle expressions of the profound and complicated tendencies of man, and the divinities involved in these myths were no longer the simple gods of thunder and of time. Complex characteristics enriched their personalities. They assumed unprece-

Translated by Elaine Halperin.

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dented dimensions. Cronus and Zeus were cloaked in mystery—the mystery of man. And by a strange reversal, what seemed childish then was not the imaginary myth but the rationalist philosophy that had contested it because of its failure to understand.

Cicero appeared to be far more naïve than Homer. And analysis of the myths themselves led to a far deeper understanding of something permanent in man, of a certain relation with the universe and a certain structural pattern within his soul. We are familiar with the researches of Jung, Caillois, Mircea Eliade, and Dumézil;¹ although diversified in subject matter, they all possess a common core. At the same time we perceived that these myths fulfilled diverse functions. Thus a distinction was made between explicative, etiological myths that shed light on the name of a place or a people, on the origins of a custom or an institution, and ontological myths that express some profound and permanent truth about man, revealing him as mirroring himself. And it seemed that perhaps this self-revelation became possible only in the remote past, when man discovered a language suitable for the expression of what was deepest in him and could not be articulated by direct means. But this discovery led to speculation about the absence of myths in our modern world. If it is true that this image expresses man's permanent drives, can it be that those drives no longer exist today? Yet there are some who believe that the myth has ceased to be dominant in the essential sectors of life. But is it conceivable that twentieth-century man exists without reference to the sacred and the mysterious? Obviously, we today have exorcized these qualities only nominally and superficially and at precisely those points where they were actually non-existent. If, however, myth is not connected with belief in formal divinities that have been recognized as such, and if these divinities are merely an outward disguise, a rhetorical device—an arrow pointing to something else—then the fact that they have become outmoded does not explain why myth no longer exists. Actually, however, it was speedily realized that it did continue to exist, although it was difficult to grasp, and even more difficult to analyze. Its domain is poorly marked out, its nature fleeting, and writers on the subject have piled up definitions that do not agree.

One of the difficulties certainly stemmed from the desire to give myth a general definition, one that would be valid for Hindu as well as for

1. See, e.g., C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1933); Roger Caillois, *Le Mythe et l'homme*; Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot, 1949), English trans.: *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958); Georges Dumézil, *Les Mythes romains* (Paris: Gallimard).

Greco-Roman, for Semitic as well as for Western, myths of the twentieth century. The temptation to do this was great, for, if myth is the expression of profound, permanent tendencies, then it should be possible to define it in universal terms. But wanting too much led to excessive abstraction, and thus myth itself lost what seems to be essential—its vitality, its evolutive capacity, its dynamism. A unique definition of myth robs it of the very thing that makes it myth: the interpretation of a very direct relation between man and the temporal structure of his life. Apart from this relationship there is nothing but dust and absurdity. It seems to me to be impossible to formulate a common definition for our twentieth-century myths and those of three thousand years ago because I am not in the same situation as the man of that era. And if myth is the mirror of reflective man, if it explains man as action, if it is the justification and execution of his *hic et nunc* situation, if, finally, it is the image, deep within his mysterious self, of his confrontation with a given reality, then it cannot be, by its very nature, identical today and at other times. In its manifestation myth is necessarily specific. But, on the other hand, its characteristics and its reasons are constant and general. Directly related to a given civilization, this mode of expression will obviously assume a form that is most suitable for the man of that civilization. And to the very extent that our civilization is atheist (not a-religious, but simply refusing to recognize a formal divinity worshiped as such), myth nowadays will not take on the guise of a few active gods to be addressed collectively or individually and around whom the traditional patterns of relationship with divinity are organized. But myth always includes an element of belief, of religious adherence, of the irrational, without which it could never express on behalf of man what it was supposed to convey. Religious sentiment can apparently center in everything other than a formal divinity. And doubtless we find ourselves here in the presence of a clarifying process. However things may be today, man indicates that he is more religious than ever, while remaining at the same time skeptical toward institutionalized religions. He worships the Christian God no longer but other secret divinities. Although he is not yet aware that they are, for him, divinities, he clings to them even more vigorously than to life itself because they represent his *raison d'être*. They are simultaneously the object and the vivifying emotional element of myths. Moreover, if myth, linked as it is to a civilization, expresses its profound meaning, if it enables man to become an integral part of his civilization and possibly also to reduce the tensions between himself and his milieu, then obviously it can relate only to the nerve center of this

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natural and social structure, this compound of artifice and the primordial, in which he is called upon to live.

Although formerly determined by awareness of the passage of time and of the threatening character of nature, the confrontation expressed in these terms is no longer the one which in actuality haunts the man of the twentieth century, because he has become too much the master of things. He is now solitary, and what haunts him is his lack of virtue, of certainty regarding himself. Who will be his guarantors, now that nature's obstacles have been swept away and there is no longer any counterweight to his sovereign action? It is fine to possess atomic power. But to find one's self alone in the possession of this power, to know that one is responsible for every decision and that one's own strength is all that can be relied upon, amounts to an intolerable situation. Regardless of whether myths reconstruct an environment in which man will feel reassured because he is no longer solitary, or whether they redefine the meaning of this adventure in which the past guarantees the future, they are necessarily common to all who constitute a part of this civilization. We might be able to say that, since all men are placed in a common situation, before an identical question, it will be possible, with respect to this civilization, in the same degree in which the image will be common to all, for it to reveal itself as a myth.

II

Correlative to a given civilization, myth expresses its profound tendencies. It is not superstructure in that it does not confine itself to being a translation of material structures; neither is it an ideological veil for something that exists but which one would prefer not to see, nor a vulgar justification of an actuality that is felt to be unjust. It is far more than that and, in certain respects, more essential than the material structure itself. Indeed, this structure is nothing in itself; it becomes important only insofar as it is reflected in the conscience of man, who takes a stand in relation to this economic life, this technological development, this expansion of the state. He interprets them and thus gives them meaning. Moreover, through a reaction of his entire being, he perceives perhaps unconsciously the direction of their evolution, which he both fears and desires. All this he expresses in myth, which thereafter appears simultaneously as mankind's stand in relation to these structures and as the meaning which it attributes to them. Inasmuch as this economic or political life greatly depends on the actions of man, the image he creates of it and, even more, the picture

he forms of the direction taken by evolution have a decisive importance for evolution itself. Myth appears as the condition governing the adherence of the masses of men to a certain civilization and to its processes of development or of crisis. At the same time myth explains man's continuity within this civilization. To be sure, because they express in the form of a psychological image the reality of these structures, myths are themselves influenced by this material framework which they in turn are destined to influence. This explains why these myths, although all grafted upon the deepest layers of the individual psyche, can be very diverse and basically different according to the varying contexts of civilization.

New myths appear whenever man is confronted with a radically new situation, one that has nothing in common with its predecessor—as if a fresh “beginning” were taking place, which is actually the case today. A society may have mainly regressive and explanatory myths even when ours are progressive and active, yet both express the same fundamental tendencies of the individual. But this individual is not situated in the same economic and political context. However that may be, it is quite certain that in our Western civilization myths are connected with action and impel toward it. As regards action, the definition of myth as the “motivating global image” is certainly the most exact. It is indeed a vigorous and strongly colored representation, irrational and imbued with the individual's total capacity for belief. Most often it is an unconscious image, for the religious charge which informs it gives it an aspect of obviousness and certitude so fundamental that to become aware of it is dangerous. Awareness might risk the weakening of certitude, and he who vaguely senses this eludes the lucidity of conceiving myth as it really is, to take refuge in certitude. It is always easy to discern the myths of others—accompanied by astonishment that someone else can succumb to such absurd images. But what reluctance to embark on an analysis of one's own myths!

Finally, myth must be global. It embraces all the elements of a situation or action, providing at one and the same time an explanation and synthesis of them, an indication of their future and of their necessity. It is this totality of the myth that matters, not some particular fleeting aspect which, on the morrow, may be gainsaid without injury to the image as a whole. It is also global in the sense that it leaves no part of the individual unaffected, wielding complete mastery. It is addressed to reason quite as much as to feeling or will. Nothing subsists outside its domain—not a single point that might serve as the springboard for criticism. It gives to man in his totality a satisfactory image, constituting the kind of pattern

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that permits but one interpretation to whoever is permeated by it. No decisive divergence exists between those who are imbued with the same myth.

Nevertheless, we must distinguish here between the several layers of the myth. The deepest, broadest, and most decisive, which underlies the entire edifice, is perhaps also and at the same time the most passive. More than others, it is impregnated with the communal belief in the values of the group. It likewise calls less directly for action. If it did not exist, the remainder of the myth could not be constructed. It is also the most widely shared; everyone is imbued with it. In addition, it is the most lasting; it evolves simultaneously with the structures of the civilization, is coextensive with the civilization, and disappears only with the civilization itself. To illustrate, we might say that today the two fundamental myths of modern man are history and science. We need not analyze at length here either their origins or their characteristics, which has been done often enough. Let us consider only the bases of all the beliefs, ideologies, actions, and sentiments of twentieth-century man. We find the transmutation of history into a value, which leads to the view that history is the judge of good and evil. Marshal Pétain invoked the maxim, "History will judge." Khrushchev does the same thing when he declares that history will decide between the U.S.S.R. and the United States; this will be a judgment pronounced by God.

Here we are confronted with a significant change. As everyone knows, history has traditionally possessed a sacred meaning. The concern has been not to describe the facts but to extract an instructive, portentous lesson. History was thus one of the myth's instruments. Traditionally, its value was inseparable from its incorporation in a myth. We have changed all that by secularizing history. It now consists in relating events without reference to the eternal, in following their sequence without seeking their meaning—in desanctifying it. But, at the very moment that history is being stripped of its sanctity, we witness the creation of the myth of history as a consequence of a prodigious reversal. It is no longer an integral part of the myth; it has ceased to serve the sacred. It has itself and in itself become a myth. No longer does history possess meaning. Rather, it is now "meaning" in itself and by itself. It is no longer considered associated with the eternal because it contains within itself the quality of the eternal. This, the process by which desanctified man becomes by the same token sacred, is perhaps one of the most remarkable general phenomena of our era.

Belief in the universal capacity of science causes our contemporaries to

plunge into the maddest extrapolations. No one is surprised by Sputnik. We expect much more than that from science. However, we must not dwell merely on the infrastructures, on the foundations of "image-beliefs." At a higher layer of the myth of science, we see, above all, the growth of image-beliefs of work, of technology, of happiness, and of progress. These are certitudes common to all, which the bourgeois and the proletarian share as brothers. The myth of work was undoubtedly of bourgeois origin as we moved on from the notion that work is the punishment and proof of wrongdoing to the conviction that work is virtue and the sign of redemption. This mental mutation between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries is probably even more fundamental than the industrial revolution which accompanied it. Having achieved power by means of work, the bourgeoisie could hardly regard it as anything but virtue. Because its own further development required an incessantly increasing labor on the part of the proletariat, it was impossible for the bourgeoisie to think of work as anything other than duty and accomplishment. To be sure, this was in no way arbitrary calculation and systematic theorizing but genuine and profound belief. It is myth which confers value, color, and life on that which without it might seem absurd and damnable. "He who works prays." "Idleness is the source of all the vices." These are eminently bourgeois formulas which date from the epoch when work actually became the keystone of society. Thereafter the main concern of the bourgeois family was to choose the occupation that the son would follow. The kind of work to be done decided the course of his early years.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the wage-earners by no means shared this enthusiasm for work. Karl Marx is actually a bourgeois thinker who explains all of history in terms of work, identifying work with well-being in such a way that the latter as a consequence becomes useless. He was an extremely coherent interpreter of the bourgeois myth of work and because he was a socialist, became one of the most active agents in disseminating this myth among the working classes. It was bourgeois spokesmen who talked about the eminent dignity of the worker, but it was Marx who inculcated in the proletariat this henceforth ineradicable conviction. Whereas work became more and more demanding, all the resources of society had to be put at the disposal of "science on the march," which was destined sooner or later to liberate man. Simultaneously, the myth of work spread among the laboring classes. Naturally, this work to which all energies had to be dedicated needed to be just and good, for otherwise life itself, thus completely absorbed by work, would

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cease to have value or rationale. In the process the myth of work became the property of the left. Idleness was the enemy, the outlaw. Only he who worked deserved to live; he alone shared in the building of society. At the end of the nineteenth century the trade unions seriously debated the following question: Was the intellectual a worker, or did that designation properly belong only to whoever toiled with his hands? Today only the worker is deemed to have a sense of responsibility; he alone is worthy and great in our society. And the bourgeoisie, endeavoring to vindicate itself, attempts to show to all the world that it works harder than anyone else. In the people's republics, the idle are condemned and possess neither food cards nor civic rights. Myth compensates for sacrifices and labor demanded by intensive work. It appeases the individual by giving meaning to his life and incites him to put forth more and more effort at all times. Ultimately, it rests on the conviction that, by partaking of science, work is not merely a means of surviving but also a means of existing and of attaining happiness. The need for happiness today permeates man with unprecedented force and preciseness.

This "image-belief" of happiness likewise builds on science. Heretofore blueprints for happiness were invariably based upon individual experience involving the exercise of mind or body and almost always, even in the case of Epicurus, on some sort of discipline. These blueprints have now been replaced by a vision of collective material well-being: happiness assured by the progress of science. Everyone is entitled to it; everyone has been in effect promised it. There is no need for anyone to make sacrifices, acquire an education, reach decisions, or assume responsibility. Happiness is owed to all and consists in a collective increase of wealth, because it is exclusively material in nature. Hence something that had been only a vague dream for the masses and a frantic quest on the part of intellectuals has undergone a complete transformation in our society. It is now a precisely delineated image that can be achieved and that ordains a share for everyone. The myth of happiness is all that enables man to regard life as worth living. Justice, truth, and virtue are swallowed up in the shadow of vanities, effaced by the triumphant conviction that this attainment of happiness is all that matters.

All activity must be subordinated to this exclusive aim: life and the future are envisaged solely from the standpoint of happiness. This myth, we repeat, is exultantly shared by all and universally linked with the development of science. The only difference between Communists and the bourgeoisie lies in the choice of means best suited to confer upon mankind

this plenitude of happiness. The strength of the myth is great enough to legitimize automatically every crime as well as every sacrifice. According to the Communists, if only the bourgeoisie are eliminated, all men will obtain happiness. Similarly, the Nazi officers who entered France in 1940 could say: "We come to bring you happiness." Anyone who challenges this myth, no matter how slightly, is at once looked upon by all his fellows as an enemy of mankind. Do you for a moment doubt that American civilization, which is oriented toward the attainment of happiness, is amply justified for that reason alone? If you do, you are promptly labeled "un-American." Do you doubt that the world's number-one problem is hunger? Do you believe that bliss of eating their fill, conferred upon the masses of India or South America, might very well be purchased at a cost higher than life itself? If you do, you are an enemy of mankind. And if you talk in this vein, the explanation lies in the fact that you are an overfed bourgeois. Here is evidence of the existence of a myth which is invoked to classify as evil anyone who refuses to subscribe to it. These powerful images are obviously associated with the myth of technology, which we shall not discuss here because we have already analyzed it elsewhere.²

This, however, brings us to one of the major myths of our era: the "image-force" of progress. It lies at the junction of the two fundamental beliefs (science and history) and shares equally in both. Science is regarded as necessarily leading us from one advance to another; the rise of this myth coincided in time with the eruption of marvelous inventions that dazzled the men of the nineteenth century. History is viewed as disclosing to us the slow, muffled, mysterious progress of man who, ever since his advent on earth, has been impelled, despite vacillations and even retreats, toward an ever more fully realized and better understood consummation. Liberty and democracy are looked upon as being on the move from the very dawn of history and as reaching their culmination in the nineteenth century. Reason is regarded as being on the march and as triumphant over obscurantism. This victory, embodied in science, was hailed by Auguste Comte. Finally, labor is seen as forging ahead in its incessant struggle against exploitation and as achieving its triumph at the moment of its accord with reality. These are three examples of an identical belief in progress to which, however, different symbols are attached. Should the diversity of these symbols perhaps have awakened some doubt in the minds of the believers? But doubt cannot arise precisely because a myth

2. *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1954).

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is involved; if the myth were challenged, it would cease to exist, and man, with his blinders removed, would have to face an excruciating reality.

Reference is sometimes made to a belief in progress. This term is inadequate. Although this belief exists, it is accompanied by an exact and rational image which evokes faith and provokes action. The rationality of this attitude consists in the notion that the past as a whole insures progress and that man's recollection of his experience in life demonstrates clearly our ever growing means of action. Such simple experiences, common to everyone and shared by all, must find expression in a single word and must lead toward the future: the past guarantees continuation of this movement, and here the element of belief appears. Teilhard de Chardin typifies this creation of the myth of progress by which he was completely enslaved. But, if we are thus armed with both reason and faith, is it possible for us to remain aloof? Can we refuse to take hold of and be possessed by this movement which seems to be irreversible, this definition of history in terms of ourselves? Such aloofness is all the more impossible because of the growing rapidity of the movement. Progress is not envisioned in terms of millenniums; it is expected to occur within the lifetime of contemporary man. How then can we escape the obligations of taking sides? And how can we take a negative position if this progress is inevitable? Here lies the third component of myth: the impulse toward action. However, myth is likewise characterized by extension from what is to what should be. The kind of progress we can clearly demonstrate is that of machines, of technology, and of the totality of material means. Palpably less certain is the progress of institutions. As for the progress of man within himself, it is probably non-existent. His intelligence and his virtue do not seem much greater today than they were four or five thousand years ago. The most we can say is that we know nothing about it. Yet man, precisely because he is permeated by the myth of progress, thinks he knows. He knows with complete certainty that the progress of man accompanies material progress and that inventions attest his increased intelligence and his greater conformity to objective reality. He has to feel this way. Otherwise, he might fall victim to total catastrophe.

Everyone believes that contemporary man is better, more intelligent, more capable of effective behavior, than the Athenian of the fifth century. And, if we extend our gaze into the future, we feel sure that the man of tomorrow will be endowed with everything he may need in order to resolve problems which we today are incapable of doing. Thus progress not only exists but is inflexibly good; it has improved man and will con-

tinue to do so. What madness it would be, then, to consider judging or opposing it! Myth always enables those who are imbued with it to judge from their arrogant heights whoever remains outside, looking on. Nowadays anyone who entertains doubts on the subject of progress is subjected to the most fierce and contemptuous condemnation by all political groups, of the right as well as of the left. It is important to remember in this connection that only by virtue of an outmoded tradition is the term “reactionary” still applied to the right wing. The latter, like everyone else, believes in progress, but under somewhat different labels—progress toward the spiritual, toward individualism, toward what is human. After all, it should not be forgotten that the bourgeoisie started the myth of progress. And so, if left-wingers, invoking one of the embodiments of the myth of progress, can accuse their adversaries of wanting to return to the liberal nineteenth century, the right can, by the same token, accuse the Communists of wanting to bring about a far worse regression: a return to the totally integrated society of primitive times. Consequently, these are family quarrels. Both sides invoke history to which they give the same name: progress. This concrete act of faith obliterates all problems except those of means. This decisive myth is flanked by others which likewise rest on the foundation of history. Of these we can discern two that are particularly obvious and active: the nation and youth.

We might perhaps deal briefly with the myth of the nation—it has been so often analyzed, denounced, and criticized. Unfortunately, this provides us with proof that denunciation of the myth does not suffice to exorcize it. And, within a country which seemed to have eradicated it, we see it re-surg-ing with considerable vigor. We should note only that this myth of the nation (which transforms the phenomenon of nationalism into a value) appeared at the very moment when awareness of history arose, when, in fact, history became reason, justice, truth, the high judge, and the source of emancipation. It was then that the nation, the instrument of history, found itself clothed with a dignity which served to crystallize political sentiment, emptied by the crises of the eighteenth century, into religious fervor. The nation thus became an object of faith, the prerequisite of action, the criterion of good and evil. Everything that benefited the nation was good. In addition, the nation was an expression of progress. There was exultation in having left behind that vain epoch when there were no nations, those dark eras that could be designated only as intermediate ones, as so many lost centuries, as a middle period: the Middle

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Ages. The left invented the national myth. It had to offset the plethora of myths such as order and monarchy possessed by the right.

The nation, as the very image of progress, presented a challenge to the men of the right. Once triumphant, and enthroned in society, it became an agent of order, of European as well as domestic stability. At that point the right wing annexed this myth. Here we have an amusing oscillation which soon led the defenders of the myth to oppose its creators, who in the meanwhile had become not antinationalists but internationalists, thereby in the last analysis consecrating the unimpeachable nation. Such oscillation has often been discussed. An example of it occurred in France in 1943, when nationalism again became the appanage of the left. In actuality, however, like every good and genuine myth, the nation had never quartered itself exclusively in one particular camp. The only exception was in 1793, in its embryonic stage. Thereafter, we observe the development of parallel myths, and in 1943 Pétain was no less nationalist than Thorez. Each merely claimed to represent the authentic expression of the myth.

The most recent embodiment of this myth is to be found in the contention, frequently reiterated in connection with the Indochinese, Moroccan, and Algerian crises, that the nation is a necessary stage through which peoples must go in order to attain their majority. Here is a delectable prostitution of thought, a curious need, in an era when intellectuals are despised, to advance in all seriousness, under cover of sociology and political science, theories designed to justify passionate opinions. Where, in what way, and when has it been necessary for civilizations to go through the "national stage"? How has the nation ever played a formative, educative, maturing role, conducive in any way to the emancipation of mankind? Everything we know demonstrates the opposite. But passion would have been unable to assert itself to any great degree without experiencing the need for parascientific justification were it not for the fact that its object was a myth which, even within its own religious domain, invariably seeks to don a rational garb.

As myth of history, the nation is always accompanied by the myth of youth. Civilizations turned toward the past have boasted the myth of the old man. We have changed a good deal, and this change is in itself fraught with profound meaning. But the identity of this universally similar youth strips of all savor the discourse which eulogizes it. Resting on a rational basis, because this youth represents the maximum of working strength, of capacity for growth, and of fighting prowess, the myth cannot stop there. To be sure, young people are needed in a period of exuberant technologi-

cal progress, for they alone can adapt themselves to this incessant process of innovation. It is likewise true that scientific research requires an always newly recruited—hence youthful—personnel and that the necessity of increasing production demands an increasing number of young people. But from this obvious truth the argument moves in all seriousness to that familiar tautologism: youth commands the future, which involves automatically a reference to the myths of progress and happiness. I wish it were realized how closely knit our mythology shows itself to be. Actually, this is a characteristic of every mythology; myths reinforce, explain, and supplement each other. The nation is created by and for youth, and youth is the motive power of progress.

The only true countenance that can be shown to the world is that of youth. It alone inspires confidence and friendliness. A political regime which displays such prepossessing young people simply must be good. The countenance of youth is identical on the cover of *Life*, *Match*, and the R.D.A. magazine, just as it was the same on the cover of Communist and Nazi reviews, and on the Fascist and American magazines of twenty years ago. Everywhere youth is the same; everywhere it is photographed in the same way and exploited for the same causes. Everywhere and always it corresponds to the same myth. We ourselves were this youth. Absolutely nothing has happened during the past two generations that can be adduced to justify the myth, but it does not need material proofs to keep on growing. Despite the contradiction supplied by the facts of the case, the myth of youth possesses more vitality today than it had previously. The yesterdays that gladden us are obviously those of youth. Whenever one of civilization's problems seems insoluble, someone proceeds to tell us: "Yes, but youth is on the way." Youth will do whatever we are incapable of doing. Poor youth! All this adds up to a convenient way of getting free from these young people by nailing them to a myth from which they no longer have the right to separate themselves. They must without fail perform their role by assuming the burden of our hopes—fitting themselves, therefore, into the prearranged mold. At the very instant when youth becomes the servant of all sociopolitical structures, it is raised either jestingly or by way of compensation to the level of a myth, and the old men proclaim that they believe in it. As a matter of fact, they do.

III

The myths we have just described are definitively the real motivating and psychological foundations of our civilization. They are obviously not to

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be confused with ideologies, because they are not primarily or basically political or politicized. They express the very existence of the collective and universal civilization in which we live. In them we contemplate our own image—our future. We will ourselves, we mirror ourselves, in this way. And, if we confine ourselves to our own epoch, it seems that there are definitely no other myths than these. Apart from the important themes, there is little or no value in what we have called “myths.” However, the term is applied to almost everything either because it is sufficiently vague and pretentious to accord with journalistic style or because it represents an inexact analysis of contemporary civilization that leads one to speak of the Marxist myth or the liberal, nationalist, or imperial myth. In any case, we have indicated that different levels of analysis do exist. To be more precise, the essential myths we have briefly described condition, in turn, the lesser images; these are composed of secondary myths (as are all the religious myths of antiquity), which possess their own individuality but exist only in terms of the essential myth. The secondary myths are definitely mere facets of the major image; they cause it to shine, lend it color, and give it actuality and a renewed vitality without which it would have no power. Thus we could enumerate (and each one would require an explanation) the myth of the dam and the machine, or hygiene and health, the myth of the bourgeois, of revolution, myths of justice and peace, of the actor, star, or hero, and the myth of gasoline as well as the myth of productivity. There are many others. Marxism, for instance, belongs with these examples, these actualizations. It is not one of the essential myths of our times but a secondary and far more superficial and temporary image. It exists only to the extent that modern man is radically imbued with the image-beliefs of work, progress, technology, and so forth. These image-beliefs assure its spread, and, at the same time—this is the distinctive role of secondary myths—it lends them warmth and passion. Marxism constitutes nothing but a manifestation of these profound forces. To be sure, it expresses them only in part; however, if it seems to be more satisfactory than any other ideology, the reason is to be found in the fact that despite everything it expresses them better than any other current formulation. Besides, it would be idle to try to ascertain how these secondary myths spring up or spread. Their creational mechanism in no way explains their appearance. Their cause, and likewise the source of their strength, is precisely the need to express, in the realm of actuality, basic myths which, instead of emerging as they really are, must (the very nature of myth requires this) constantly disguise themselves. The reason for this lies in the fact that the

external trappings of the myth rapidly wear away and consequently have to be renewed and refreshed.

This explains why a description of those embellishments—brilliant today, tarnished and forsaken tomorrow—is disappointing; for, if the permanent significance which they possess is not perceived, sooner or later it must be admitted that what one mistook for myth is merely a ridiculous story which nobody believes any more. Reality provides us with endless examples because the detail is constantly renewed. The myth of hygiene, based on those of youth and happiness, finds ulterior expression in soap powders and detergents. The myth of the hero, which rests on those of progress and fatherland, takes shape in James Dean or the abbé Pierris. Here we have merely the result of accidents and coincidences. But one must pass on quickly to the next thing, because myth cannot remain for long fixed within its formal, reinvigorating embodiment, only to become, in the end, disappointing and commonplace.

We might, of course, be assailed by misgivings, asking ourselves if the collective image-beliefs which we have attempted to define are really myths in, let us say, the technical sense of the term. This question is not entirely devoid of interest, given the deep-rootedness of myths and their essential role in the life of man. If we visualize the manner in which image-beliefs are formed, we can indeed affirm that from this point of view they are closely akin to the myth. But we have demonstrated precisely that this phenomenon cannot be characterized by the way it comes into being. Nor does the fact that an idea is shared by a large number of people suffice to make it a myth. Rather, the determinant is a certain structure, a certain function, a certain meaning. Can we, by comparing image-belief to ancient myths, and after noting, to begin with, the vital difference, discover some kinship between them? One thing is certain from the start: myth cannot be individual or personal. Rather, it must describe an instructive and universal action. Face to face with myth, man has no choice but to acknowledge a truth that determines a structure of the real and, at the same time, one form of human conduct. Action as expressed in myth, reality as revealed by it and transported to the level of truth, must be reiterated, just as it is embodied in the hero of the myth.

Actually, this first ensemble of characteristics is exactly reproduced by the image-beliefs we have described. All of them disclose essential structures of the real as revealed to man not as such but as truth and considered as truth. They describe actions that are rigorously exemplary—work, nation, the quest for happiness, progress. These are precisely the only ones

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which, in these times, inspire “histories” (the detailed myths we have just mentioned), and which are incarnated in heroes. As a matter of fact, all myth is embodied in heroes who have appeal for everyone, whose history is meaningful and symbolic, universal and instructive. But, in order to ascertain the extent to which these image-beliefs are myths, we must remember who the heroes (using the oldest connotation of the term) are of our own era: the hero of work (the Stakhanovist—or the worker), the hero of the nation (the warrior, the Unknown Soldier), the hero of the cinema (the eternal juvenile lead, the ever-new conqueror of love), the hero of science (the unknown scholar, the human guinea-pig-man, humanity’s benefactor). These heroes, who inflexibly demand imitation, determine our myths with exactitude. And we recognize in them still another characteristic of the traditional myth: they address themselves to the whole man, who takes on the appearance of myth. Indeed, these heroes are simultaneously vision, image, representation—then belief, the adherence of heart and soul to this certitude regarding our progress or our work—and next, idea, thought, and even doctrine. For is not all this based upon reason? And, finally, they debouch into action, inciting men to an active imitation of the hero.

No part of modern man remains neutral or indifferent in these myths—even as in the commencement of history by the great religious myths. Why religious? It seems accurate to say that one of the principal functions of myth was to permit the abolition of time and space. To be more exact, man, gripped by the anguish of the times, adhered to a myth that enabled him to master time and to share in a “glorious period.” At first glance, our image-beliefs do not seem to be of this type, and yet they conform to the same role. More than in any previous epoch, Western man is now excruciatingly aware of the passage of time and of the irreversibility of history. Long before Valéry, and without the necessity of intervention by a great thinker, nineteenth-century man came to realize that all fate was historical. But modern myths answer to that particular anxiety (and not to the perhaps different one of the Greek or Semite); it is precisely that era whose mastery and, in a certain sense, whose abolition they make possible.

The fact that the myth of progress represents precisely the appropriation of history by man for the service of man is probably the greatest success ever scored by a myth. The myth of nation (which cannot help but be necessary and eternal) and the myth of happiness properly constitute the roads to participation in a glorious destiny which lies beyond time and in which we share inasmuch as it is both reality and promise. Thus every-

thing seems to find its locus exactly at the very center of these creations of the modern mentality. Actually, all this is merely the response in mythical terms to the new situation which has been thrust upon man. But this launches us into a complicated discussion.

It is customary to think that, because man's essential situation has always been identical ever since his remote beginnings, his reactions should be similar and the myths created five, six, or ten thousand years ago, which are inscribed in the profoundest depths of our being, should remain within us immutable archetypes incapable of renovation. At the most they might assume some new form, provided that they contained mythical precedents. To us, on the contrary, it seems that during the past one hundred and fifty years, the alteration of milieu in which man is called upon to live is such that, for the first time since the beginning of the historical era, the situation has changed. And just as the great mutation ushered in by fire and iron produced its myths, so the change we know today is destined to be inscribed in the most profound recesses of man in the guise of myths, apparently both defensive and explanatory. Thus these myths exhibit characteristics identical with those of the origins of humanity or civilization; but, of necessity, they also present new ones. Like all myths, they show us that something has completely revealed itself, that an event which is decisive for each and all of us has really occurred. Like all myths, they explain how it happened. This is enough. It takes the place of a fully satisfactory analysis and replaces the "why." Myths of work, of progress, and of nation have no other rationale and are in some manner revealers of a mystery. But the origin to which these myths allude is no longer the same, and this is likewise true of the event which they interpret. For us it is no longer the origin of the world and man, for that has ceased to be a real question for the man of today. Nor is it the origin of the gods: the traditional gods are definitely dead. It is no longer the phenomenon of fire or of the city. The origin, the advent, which haunts men, which enchants and obsesses them at the same time, is that of the machine. It is electricity, the mastery of nature, abundance.

It can certainly be said that, if the myth is invariably a return to the zero point, that point is not always the same. Today our zero point in the Western world is to be found in the period around 1780, that marvelous era when all the latent forces of nature were to be unleashed by a sort of magic for the benefit of man. The myths of work, progress, and nation repeatedly reiterate to us "how" this happened. They make us relive this innovation and enable us to share in its efflorescence. And this takes the

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place of “why” and of every justification. But at the same time they show us that this was really an inception and not the consummation. Here we have the difference, which is perhaps unique, between these myths and those of tradition. The former involve exclusively a return to the past: perfection is always to be found in a previous era, with decline having occurred in the interim. On the other hand, our myths place perfection in the future, as the certain consummation of the past. The modern myth is one which permits the simultaneity of inception and consummation. It guarantees the latter by means of the former and presupposes, more pronouncedly today than in the past, the total participation of the individual. For this no longer involves us in a simple recommencement but rather in a plenitude superior to that of the beginning, for which everyone is, in some degree, responsible. Projection into the future renders the myth still more active, constraining, and satisfactory than the primitive myth, while assuring it a still greater mastery over time.

To be sure, when we speak of a zero point, we do not intend to convey that these modern myths are completely new and severed from traditional, mythical elements. We could easily find mythical precedence for these resurrected images. The myth of Paradise Lost, which we will rediscover at the end of time, is directly related with the myths of progress and happiness. The myth of youth derives some of its roots from the myth of the young god, the bearer of hope, who is always sacrificed. The myth of the nation is related to the myths of the founders of cities and of power. But this is not particularly enlightening for us, since the real question is not what elements of the traditional myths have been able to survive. It is, rather, what has replaced them in our world, what image-forces today serve man as a means of seeking to explain himself and in virtue of which he acts. The quest merely outlined here reveals to us, at the same time, what it is that conditions the actions of man today and what it is that may take hold of him. It also reveals to us the future which he visualizes and which may well become our future because our myths oblige us to build it in this fashion.