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MYTH, MIND AND METAPHOR

On the Relation of Mythology and Psychoanalysis

1. Mythology and Psychoanalysis: Uncanny Doubles

It may perhaps seem to you as though our theories are a kind of mythology and, in the present case, not even an agreeable one. But does not every science come in the end to a kind of mythology?"[1] These words, addressed to Albert Einstein,[2] were written by Sigmund Freud in 1932, seven years before his death. In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, published in the same year, the comparison with mythology pops up once more: "The theory of the instincts is so to say our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities magnificent in their indefiniteness".[3] These statements, made by Freud near the end of his life, seem to be his final word on a problem that had occupied him at several instances of his career: the relationship of psychoanalysis and mythology. Both fields have always shared a special connection and not only because the myths of Oedipus and Narcissus proved so useful to Freudian theory.[4] Like literature and art, mythology was one of the first cultural fields to be explored by applied psychoanalysis. But what sets mythology apart from other fields is the fact that it in many ways re-

1. Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers, Vol 5*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1950) 283.
2. It is no coincidence that the addressee here is Einstein. As Jean-Paul Valabrega points out in *Les mythes, conteurs de l'inconscient* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2001) 13 and 37, Freud and Einstein were kindred spirits in as far as both of their theories dealt with the relativity of (systems of) knowledge.
3. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 22,* ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964) 95.
4. Freud's use of mythical stock characters has eagerly been copied by his followers. Ewald Rumpf, for example, managed to come up with a Medea, Phaeton, Tantalos and Niobe Complex. See Ewald Rumpf, *Eltem Kind-Beziehungen in der griechischen Mythologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985).

sembles psychoanalysis itself: both disciplines deal with the irrational, both work with stories, and both have to do with interpreting metaphorical language. When Lionel Trilling claimed that psychoanalysis was "a science of tropes, of metaphor and its variants,"[5] he was comparing psychoanalysis to the science of Giambattista Vico, the founding father of the modern study of myth.

It is because of these resemblances that psychoanalysis's dialogue with mythology has often resulted in a kind of self-exploration, in psychoanalysis rethinking its own project. With this paper I aim to retrace their shared trajectory and to point out why and how psychoanalysis can still be of great use to the study of mythology. This, however, also implies a reflection on psychoanalysis's status as a system of knowledge. Two models will present themselves: a) psychoanalytic theory as an allegorical interpretation of myth, functioning as a master discourse, and b) psychoanalysis as a discourse analogical to mythology, operating on the same level. In a time where Freud's statement is so often echoed as a reproach, it may be worth reconsidering psychoanalysis's relatedness to myth as something to embrace.

2. Just "Another Metaphorical Language"? Freud and Jung on Myth

First, the short history of Freud's own dealings with mythology.[6] In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, dated December 1897, Freud tries out a personal theory on the matter for the first time : "Can you imagine what "endopsychic myths" are? The latest product of my mental labor. The dim inner perception of one's own psychic apparatus stimulates thought illusions, which of course are projected onto the outside and, characteristically, into the future and the beyond."[7] Myths, in other words, are the psyche's symbolic renderings of its own working and can be translated as such by the analyst. When in 1900 Freud gives his famous analysis of the Oedipus-myth in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, he specifies why this projection takes place: myth gives vent to the repressed longings and fears of humankind. We revel in Oedipus's crimes, because they represent our own unconscious desires, and we feel relief when he is punished, because this alleviates our own feelings of guilt. In *Creative Writers and Day-dreaming* (1907) he once more describes myths as "the distorted

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5. Lionel Trilling, "Freud and Literature", in Lionel Trilling ed., *The Liberal Imagination* (London, Heinemann, 1964) 34-57 (52-53).

6. For a more elaborate survey, see Dan Merkur, *Psychoanalytic Approaches to Myth. Freud and the Freudians* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005); Graziella Nicolaïdis and Nicolas Nicolaïdis, *Mythologie grecque et Psychanalyse* (Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1994); Christine Downing, "Sigmund Freud and the Greek Mythological Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 43 (1975): 3-14. A select bibliography on the Jungian approach would include Robert Segal ed., *Jung On Mythology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Michael Vannoy Adams, *The Mythological Unconscious* (New York & London: Other Press/Karnac, 2001).

7. Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Mousaieff Masson (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985) 286.

vestiges of the wish fantasies of whole nations — the age-long dreams of young humanity."[8]

It has to be said, of course, that it was not Freud's main intention to develop a psychoanalytic theory of mythology. On the few occasions he really gives an elaborate interpretation of myth,[9] he is chiefly concerned with illustrating his theories.[10] For many of his followers (Abraham, Rank, Róheim,…), however, the interpretation of myths *did* become an end in itself. And they had been given a very clear example of how it had to be done: the mythic imagery, that was assumed to metaphorically represent psychological processes, had to be converted into the familiar language of Freudian theory. Some of these analyses — Rank's *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden* (1922), for example — are still very much worth reading. But the Freudian analyses of myth that are mostly remembered nowadays are unfortunately the caricatures, in which flying is always a metaphor for sex, aggression is always oedipal, and trees or spears are bound to represent phalluses. The problem with these readings, though, is not the focus on sex: Greek myths often explicitly deal with "Freudian" themes such as castration, incest and parricide, and even many interpretations that may seem far-fetched at first can actually be underpinned with textual and archaeological evidence — Freud's link between Medusa's head and female genitalia, for instance. The real problem is the one-sidedness of these interpretations. Many of Freud's epigones have followed his example in using myth merely as an excuse to once more illustrate the Freudian tenets. Basically, this meant that nothing new could be learned from mythology. This approach on the contrary consisted in transposing the exotic imagery of myth into the safe register of an already familiar truth.

The first person to notice this missed opportunity was Freud's would-be heir Carl Gustav Jung, who soon developed a special interest in mythology. "It has become quite clear to me," he writes to Freud in 1909, "that we shall not solve the secrets of neurosis and psychosis without mythology and the history of civilisation."[11] As Kris Pint argues in this same issue, Jung's divergent attitude towards mythology would finally drive both men apart. At first, Freud was happy to encourage Jung to dabble in mythology, as long as the final aim would be to "plant the flag of libido

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8. Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, *Vol 4*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1925) 182.

9. Besides from his analysis of the Oedipus myth, the only elaborate cases from Greek mythology are the myth of Perseus and Medusa, and the myth of Prometheus. For a discussion, see Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007) 91-131.

10. Freud of course also used Greek mythology to prop up the status of psychoanalysis. He was well aware of the fact that references to Antiquity would reflect prestige on his new discipline. See Richard Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity. Freud and the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

11. Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters. The Correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung*, ed. William McGuire, trans. Ralph Manheim and Richard Francis Carrington Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 279.

and repression in that field and return as a victorious conqueror to our medical motherland." (*The Freud/Jung Letters*, 213) Jung, however, would become more and more inclined to reverse the manifest hierarchy that is implied by Freud's exhortation. Instead of seeing psychoanalysis as the one and ultimate key to the question of mythology, Jung came to see psychoanalysis as the youngest branch of the old mythological tree, as just one more way of telling stories about the images that had occupied humanity. With his theory of the archetypes, he adopted Freud's idea that mythical imagery should be approached as a kind of rebus: "An archetypal content expresses itself, first and foremost, in metaphors." [12] But he explicitly distanced himself from the idea that psychoanalysis could provide a metalanguage for mythology, that the archetypal metaphors could be reduced to one true referent:

> [T]here is no longer any question whether a myth refers to the sun or the moon, the father or the mother, sexuality or fire or water. All it does is to circumscribe and give an approximate description of an *unconscious core of meaning*. [...] Not for a moment dare we to succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained and disposed of. Even the best attempts at explanation are only more or less successful translations into another metaphorical language (Indeed, language itself is only an image). The most we can do is to *dream the myth onwards* and to give it a modern dress. (Jung 90 and 94, italics in original)

Freud could not forgive this defection, which he saw as a betrayal of his theories of psychosexuality; he interpreted Jung's attitude as yielding to repression.[13] For Jung, however, it was Freudian theory itself that was repressive in its unilateral approach. After they went their separate ways, the history of their controversy on myth would have an ironic ending. Freud, as we have seen, would in his later years become more and more sympathetic to the idea that psychoanalysis itself was on a par with mythology. This is not only made clear by the statements mentioned above, but also by the overtly mythic character of some of his (later) writings, such as *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1937). Apparently, Freud gradually came to accept that at certain liminal points, the quest for knowledge could not but mitigate its demands, and that a self-conscious fiction, a myth, was sometimes as close as one could get to the truth. With the same resignation, Freud in 1937 accepted the concept of "construction": the idea that when a psychoanalyst was not able to break down infantile amnesia, he was allowed to create a fiction, a mere hypothesis about the patient's past that would hopefully be accepted as the truth.[14]

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12. Carl Gustav Jung, "The psychology of the child archetype," in Carl Gustav Jung and Károly Kerényi, *Jung and Kerenyi. The Science of Mythology*, trans. Richard Francis Carrington Hull (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 83-118 (90).
13. On Freud's sensitiveness at this point, see Merkur 92.
14. On Freud's acceptance of the uses of myth, see Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990) 57 and 94.

The Jungian school, on the other hand, has tended to evolve towards the kind of restrictive dogmatism for which Jung had originally reproached Freud. As Robert Segal has pointed out, Jung's warnings about interpreting the archetypes were not only directed against the Freudian approach, but in the first place against would-be definitive *Jungian* interpretations of myth.[15] And indeed, Jungian psychoanalysis — Jung himself included— has not always escaped the seduction of the master discourse. Joseph Campbell's Jungian inspired writings are a case in point. Following Jung's example, he praises myth as a boundless matrix of signification: "It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation."[16] But what he actually does with his concept of the "monomyth", quite literally contradicts this idea of myth as an inexhaustible source of new meanings: all myths can actually be reduced to one and the same story of individuation, a story told by Campbell himself. His exuberant praise of myth is thus conveniently reflected back to him.

3. An Entangled History: the Allegorical Approach

To further understand what was at stake in these first psychoanalytic approaches to myth, it is necessary to situate them in the history of myth study itself; it then becomes apparent how much Freud's theory on myth was a child of its time. Although "mythology" is often mistakenly treated as a universal and timeless category, the concept as we use it today is actually, like psychoanalysis, a creation of the nineteenth century. In *L'invention de la mythologie* (1981), Marcel Detienne describes the ideological context that gave birth to this field of research.[17] For ages, the stories of the Greek gods and heroes had simply been called *fabulae*, "fables", and did not arouse any special intellectual curiosity. The old term *mythos* only came to denote a special category when these same stories started to pose a problem.[18] In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europe had for the first time come to systematically compare the roots of its own culture — more particularly, the legacy of Antiquity

15. Robert Segal, *Theorizing About Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 71.

16. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968 [1949]) 3.

17. Marcel Detienne, *L'invention de la mythologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981).

18. Detienne of course acknowledges that *mythos* and *logos* were already used as oppositional terms in ancient Greece, albeit unsystematically. But he stresses that "myth" for the Greeks never denoted a special category or genre. The opposition was primarily used by the philosophers and historiographers of the fifth and fourth century, who started to use "myth" as a pejorative term for the very heterogeneous discourses of the oral tradition against which they wished to oppose their newly rising discourses. In this context, the word *mythos* was simply used as a "mot-geste, toujours mobilisable, disponible pour chaque procédure d'exclusion." (Detienne, 104) See also Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth. Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 43.

— to the so-called "savage" cultures. Due to the successes of comparative linguistics, it had suddenly become painfully apparent that the stories of the Greeks in many ways resembled the "barbaric", "irrational" and "immoral" imagination of the "inferior" races. With the words of Max Müller, the Greek "would relate of their gods what would make the most savage of the Red Indians creep and shudder."[19] *Mythos* became the opposite of *logos*, of the moral and intellectual standard the West identified itself with. Between 1850 and 1890, new academic chairs of mythology were established throughout Europe and the explicit purpose of this new field of research was to explain away this stain of irrationality (Detienne, 16). Andrew Lang, for example, defines mythology as "the quest for an historical condition of the human intellect to which the element in myths, regarded by us as irrational, shall seem rational enough."[20]

So the study of mythology— not unlike psychoanalysis— was called into being by the emergence of the Other in the Self. And just as with psychoanalysis, its original project was to force back this unwelcome intrusion: from *id* to *ego*, from *mythos* to *logos*. Both disciplines are also alike in the fact that they have at some point left this path and, ironically, have led to theorisation of why the irrational *can* never fully be overcome. Nineteenth-century mythologists, however, still had high hopes that myth could be explained away as an aberration of the primitive mind. Various schools all claimed to have the one key by which all myths could be interpreted: for Max Müller, all myths were distorted forms of solar and lunar theories; for Edward Tylor mythology was primitive science, talking of natural phenomena in anthropomorphic terms; for James Frazer, all of myth's metaphors referred to the cycle of nature and agriculture. What all these explanations have in common is that they basically come down to an allegoric interpretation. Myth's enigmatic language supposedly hides a deeper meaning that can be uncovered if only its symbols are correctly interpreted. Freudian "theory of myth" of course perfectly fits this model. And its problems and limitations are also those of the other nineteenth-century theories of myth. Not exactly wrong, the least one can say is that they were reductive and unilateral. The very multiplicity of theories illustrates how myth's polysemy easily escapes every single attempt to once and for all explain its meaning. The fact that so many scholars nevertheless stubbornly kept looking for the one true key, the one true meaning behind the mythical metaphor, has everything to do with the struggle between Self and Other, the battle for control that is always part of the mechanism of allegory.

The allegorical tradition reaches back to Antiquity itself, and even then allegory was a weapon in a discursive battle. When in the sixth century the old religious tradition with its amoral and anthropomorphic divinities became unacceptable to the rising discourse of the "Ionic Enlightenment", allegory (in Greek *huponoia*, "to

19. F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1868) 385.
20. Andrew Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion, Vol. 1* (Guernsey: The Guernsey Press, 1995 [1913]) 8.

understand what is underneath") arose as a way of neutralising the scandalous elements of the stories by explaining them symbolically as cosmological, psychological or philosophical messages.[21] In the same way, Christianity would later on recuperate the pagan myths by interpreting them as symbolic prefigurations of the Christian doctrine; Odysseus tied to the mast, sailing away from the Sirens, could only refer to Christ on the cross and his victory over all worldly seductions. In all these cases, allegory follows the same logic: a discourse that is threatening by its heterogeneity is incorporated back into the discourse of the interpreter and by this a hierarchy is established. The allegory propagates its own master discourse as the one truth that is always hidden under a multiformity of semblance. With the words of Laurence Coupe: "The narrative is not allowed to exceed the argument, the medium is not allowed to exceed the message. Allegory is domesticated myth."[22]

4. Metaphors Groping for Meaning: Cassirer and Blumenberg

Both the study of mythology and psychoanalysis have at a certain point outgrown the allegorical model, simply because the medium proved too recalcitrant. Just like Freud's hysterics, myth seems to ply itself to the master discourse of theory up to a certain point where it breaks free from whatever allegorical interpretation theory had to offer. The "personifications" in Greek mythology are a fine example. Zeus and Hera, for instance, are obviously weather gods, which to a certain point confirms the ancient and early modern meteorological allegories of the Olympic pantheon. But their marriage was also a paradigm for the battle of the sexes as well as a symbol of kingly authority. Aphrodite, on the one hand, is obviously a personification of love and desire — her name was commonly used by the Greek to metaphorically refer to the pleasures of love and sex. But on the other hand she is also an anthropomorphic character that talks, loves, cries, bleeds... So when mythology tells us that it was Aphrodite who helped Paris to abduct Helen, it is implied that Helen simply fell in love with him and followed her own desires. On the other hand, the mythical imagery of the story at the same time problematizes her personal choice. If Aphrodite is Helen's own desire, this desire is still depicted as an external force with godlike power, a power that cannot possibly be resisted.

What it comes down to is that the mythical metaphor always only goes halfway in suggesting a certain meaning and that this vagueness and ambiguity is as much part of myth's functioning as the various meanings that present themselves. It is pointless to ask whether the Greeks really "believed" that Zeus was the ruler of the skies, or to what extent they read their own myths symbolically: the exact boundary between the literal and the symbolic, the one meaning and the other, was always conditional, always under negotiation. To elaborate upon the example

21. On the allegoric tradition in Antiquity, see Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths. Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
22. Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997) 105.

of Helen: the ambivalent and provisional character of the mythic imagery allows for an expression of an ambivalence that is part of reality itself, namely the fact that we are always free and externally determined at the same time. Myth allows for an exploration of this ambivalence, and this is exactly what is lost in allegorical interpretation. The question posed by myth is reduced to a positive truth. By saying it all, allegory says too little.

Allegory sees myth as a kind of secondary language, always subservient to the true message hidden underneath. The alternative is to read myth as a language in its own right and this is exactly what many twentieth-century theorists on myth have attempted. In the context of myth's relation to psychoanalysis, Ernst Cassirer is an example worth mentioning. Cassirer has been one of the first theorists to grant myth its own legitimacy. Up until then, myth had mostly been seen as an aberration of the mind, as the absolute opposite of *logos*. Cassirer, however, claimed that the stage of *logos* could only have been achieved through the preliminary work of *mythos*. In his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-1929), he describes how myth provided man with his first means of structuring the world. As a Neo-Kantian, Cassirer believed that reality could never be experienced as such; to be processed by the human mind, it always had to be mediated by what he called "symbolic forms". *Mythos* was the most primeval of symbolic forms; it not only structured the world, but it structured the self as well:

> [A] glance at the development of the various symbolic forms shows us that their essential achievement is not that they copy the outward world in the inward world or that they simply project a finished inner world outward, but rather that the two factors of 'inside' and 'outside,' of 'I' and 'reality' are *determined* and delimited from one another only in these symbolic forms and through their mediation. If each of these forms embraces a spiritual coming-to-grips of the I with reality, it does not imply that the two, the I and reality, are to be taken as given quantities, as finished, self-enclosed halves of being, which are only subsequently composed into a whole. On the contrary, the crucial achievement of every symbolic form lies precisely in the fact that it does not *have* the limit between I and reality as pre-existent and established for all time but I must itself create this limit—and that each fundamental form creates it *in a different way*.[23]

With numerous mythological examples, Cassirer illustrates how the line between inside and outside is drawn differently in different mythologies, and how the self is thus differently constructed— created, even. This means that mythical imagery can have no further allegorical explanation: mythology does not refer to any external reality, because it itself *constructs* reality. Cassirer would thus agree with Jung that psychoanalysis, when it interprets certain mythical images in its own

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23. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume II: Mythical Thought,* trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977 [1955]) 155-174 (156).

terms, can only give "more or less successful translations into another metaphorical language". Jung's statement that "language itself is only an image" is actually Cassirer's theory in a nutshell. Cassirer, however, is more cautious in talking of something like an impenetrable "unconscious core of meaning," an expression by which Jung leaves the door open for an esoteric essentialism. The metaphor of myth cannot have a real referent, not even an unutterable one. Cassirer did, however, believe in a kind of rise from *mythos* to *logos*. Because myth constantly provokes new "translations", its language is optimized up until the point that it can almost perfectly deal with the world; this is what we call rational thinking.

Hans Blumenberg, a contemporary philosopher and myth theorist, has taken Cassirer's theory one step further. For him, *mythos* can never fully dissolve into *logos*, because man's symbolic mediation of the universe always implies a certain imperfection. Language can never fully mirror reality— in fact, it serves to keep the overwhelming complexity of reality at bay. This is why even the most scientific language will always to a certain extent keep a mythic, metaphorical character: just as a metaphor always partially resembles its referent but at the same time adds a deforming element, language always both reflects and deforms. Every worldview ultimately rests on metaphor, but the inherent imperfection of each metaphor will soon or later force us to reconsider and adapt our imagery. The history of thought, for Blumenberg, is therefore the history of the grafting of one metaphor upon another. Blumenberg borrows an image from Neurath, who compares language to a holed ship at full sea: "We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the high seas, without ever being able to take it apart in a dock and reconstruct it out of the best parts."[24] Every new organisation of our symbolic material inevitably brings with it its own problems, but the constant shifting keeps the ship afloat despite of its incurable flaws. This is why myth, for Blumenberg, is never a stable product but always an ongoing process, a constant, tentative groping for significance. There is no "myth" as such, there is only "work on myth". (Blumenberg, 1990) Within this context, allegory receives a new function. Although it can no longer take the place of a master discourse, it can play its part in the ongoing "work on myth" by providing new analogies, new translations that may in some ways be more effective than the old ones.

5. New Forms of Impossibility: Lacan and Lévi-Strauss

The theories of Cassirer and Blumenberg are a very suitable prelude to the last psychoanalytic approach to myth I would like to discuss here, that of Jacques Lacan. The obvious parallels between his work and that of Cassirer and Blumenberg once again illustrate the affinity between the project of psychoanalysis and the study of mythology. Like Cassirer, Lacan has built his theory around the idea that language (the Symbolic) constructs both reality and the self by separating the two. And like Blumenberg, he stresses the inescapable and agonizing imperfection of language,

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24. Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1997 [1979]) 76-77.

and the impossibility of it ever coinciding with the Real. For Lacan, however, the emphasis lies on the fact that this lack in the Symbolic also entails a structural rupture in the subject. For him, the damaged ship that can never be fully repaired is both language and the subject itself. [25]

While Freud and Jung figure in almost any general introduction to the theory of myth, Lacan is hardly ever mentioned. Nevertheless, he showed an equally great interest in the subject: he constantly refers to Greek mythology to illustrate his theories and concepts.[26] But what is more important: Lacan's psychoanalytic theories were fundamentally inspired and shaped by the structuralist myth theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss—a fact that is thoroughly documented by Marcos Zafiropoulos.[27] Lévi-Strauss himself compares in his article "L'efficacité symbolique"[28] (1949), often quoted by Lacan, the mythical healing method of the shaman to the workings of psychoanalysis. The curious effectiveness of the shaman's mythical narratives has led Lévi-Straus to the conclusion that the illness was of the same symbolic nature as the cure: if symbols and stories could suffice to heal a patient, this meant that the illness had been a matter of symbols and stories in the first place.[29] He suggested that the unconscious should therefore be seen as an organ that simply imposed structural laws upon the pulsions, and also compared it to a kind of individual lexicon. Lacan's pivotal idea of the unconscious as the "discourse of the Other" and as "structured like a language" was thus handed to him by Lévi-Strauss. (Zafiropoulos, 60-61)

But there were other ways in which Lévi-Strauss "*mythanalyse*" functioned as an example. The very core of Lévi-Strauss's approach was his refusal to "interpret" myth in the traditional, sc. allegorical way: while the allegorical approach departed from the idea that an underlying meaning had shaped the form of myth, the

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25. For a comparison of Blumenberg's and Lacan's views on metaphoric language, see Anselm Haverkamp, *Metapher. Die Ästhetik in der Rhetorik: Bilanz eines exemplarischen Begriffs* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2007).
26. To give a few examples of myths he discusses: Actaeon (S4, S13), Amphitryo (S2, S8), the dynastic battle between Uranus, Cronus and Jupiter (S4, S22), Pan and Syrinx (S4), Philomela and Procne (although he confuses them with Philemon and Baucis) (S4), Eros and Psyche (S4), Daphne (S6, S8), Tiresias (S10, S13, S15, S19), Niobe (S10), Orpheus (S11), Narcissus (S12), the Cyclops (S12), the Sirens (S24), and of course the omnipresent Oedipus. The story of Antigone serves as leitmotiv in *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (1986), and the figure of Eros as it is discussed in Plato's Symposium plays a leading role in *Le transfert* (1991a).
27. Marcos Zafiropoulos, *Lacan et Lévi-Strauss ou le retour à Freud* (1951-1957) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003).
28. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "L'efficacité symbolique," *Revue d'histoire des religions*, 135.1 (1949): 5-27.
29. The works of Tobie Nathan (e.g. *Du commerce avec les diables* (Paris: Le Seuil/Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004); *Psychanalyse païenne* (Paris: Dunod, 1988)) and Michael Taussig (e.g. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987)) exemplify the ongoing cross-fertilization of psychoanalysis and anthropology.

structuralist approach asserted that it was the form, the structure that determined myth's signifying function. As Zafiropoulos reminds us, it was Lévi-Strauss, and not Lacan, who converted the Saussurian algorithm s/S into S/s (Zafiropoulos 189). "The symbols are more real than what they symbolize, the signifier precedes and determines the signified," Lévi-Strauss proclaims.[30] Lacan follows him: "It is the world of words that creates the world of things."[31] The way Lévi-Strauss approaches myth provides Lacan with a model to approach the stories of his analysands: for Lévi-Strauss, myth is a structured system of signifiers that functioned to mediated irresolvable cultural oppositions. It all but proclaims a positive truth; on the contrary, it signals a permanent conflict within the cultural texture, mostly dealing with problems like birth, death and sexuality. Myth cannot resolve this conflict, but it can provide a certain symbolic grip on the problem by comparing one irresolvable opposition to another one: "The impossibility of putting in connection groups of relations is surmounted [...] by the affirmation that two contradictory relations between them are identical to the extent where each one is, as the other, contradictory with itself."[32] Darian Leader puts it in a formula: "myth takes an initial contradiction between A and B and shows that a further contradiction between C and D is contradictory in a similar way"[33]

Lacan sees the resemblance with the histories of individual neurotics: in the same way as myth, their stories revolve around an initial contradiction that cannot be solved. A simultaneous desire for and fear of the mother, for example, that repeats itself in every new relationship with a woman. In itself, this problem would not seem insurmountable, were it not that it ultimately reflects a more fundamental predicament: the split nature of the subject. Though the neurotic may suffer deeply from the problem he claims he wants to get rid of, he will at the same time cling to it, and stage it time and again because this phantasmatic scenario anchors his very subjectivity. This is why Lacan can no longer, like the early Freud, believe that it suffices to simply unearth some kind of hidden truth in the patient's discourse. The problem cannot be *solved*, because it is the subject itself. But just as with Lévi-Strauss myth, a certain 'mediation' of the problem can be achieved by telling the story over and over again, by reshuffling and reorganising its elements.

Lacan integrates Lévi-Strauss's model of mythanalysis into his own writings on psychoanalysis for the first time in his paper "Le mythe individuel du névrosé ou Poésie et vérité dans la névrose." (1953, "The Individual Myth of the Neurotic or Poetry and Truth in Neurosis")[34] With two examples, Freud's clinical case of the Rat Man and a biographical anecdote on Goethe, he illustrates how a phantasmatic

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30 Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Zafiropoulos, 189. My trans.

31. Jacques Lacan, Écrits (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 276. My trans.

32. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958) 239. My trans.

33. Darian Leader, "Lacan's myths," in Jean-Michel Rabaté ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 35-49 (p. 39).

34 Jacques Lacan, "Le mythe individuel du névrosé ou 'Poésie et vérité'," *Ornicar?* 17-18 (1979): 289-307.

scenario—the 'individual myth'—can be repeated in different forms to cope with an original, mythical problem. The Rat Man, for example, feels neurotically compelled to put up a complex and absurd scenario in which he has to pay off a certain debt through all kinds of unnecessary intermediaries. Freud had already connected this strange behaviour to two stories from the Rat Man's personal prehistory: his father had married his mother because of her wealth, and this same father had once been saved by a friend from a gambling debt, but had not been able to repay his benefactor. Lacan points out, using Lévi-Strauss's model, how the Rat Man's scenario serves to bring into relation these two unthinkable debts. In 1956 Lacan once again uses this kind of analysis on the case study of Little Hans and shows how Hans in the same way symbolically structures his world by developing complex forms of mythic activity: dreams, fantasies, phobia… In each of these symbolic creations, the original elements of his family situation are reshuffled and reconfigured, and this ultimately brings about a certain grip on the problem. Lacan explains the functioning of this mythical activity as follows:

> [t]his foundational character of the mythical development […] ultimately consists of facing an impossible situation through the successive articulation of all the forms of the impossibility of the solution. In this sense, mythic creation responds to a question. It runs through the complete circle of what presents itself at the same time as a possible opening and as an opening that is impossible to take. The circuit thus accomplished, something is realized, which means that the subject has put itself on the level of the question. [35]

Lacan's approach obviously differs widely from the hermeneutic method Freud started out with. Lacan, it is true, has not fully abandoned the project of (allegorical) interpretation. For him just as for Freud, the neurotic problems of Hans and the Rat Man are to be traced back to issues concerning the father and the mother, and the problem of sexuality. But the difference lies in the fact that Lacan does not expect any healing from the power of this truth. On the contrary, what allows Hans and the Rat Man to surmount their problems is the successive translation of the original problem into ever new metaphors, all equally problematic and imperfect, that repeat the original conflict in a slightly different configuration. Up to a certain extent, we could even say that Lacan treats his own psychoanalytic reading as one of the many possible metaphors. Of course, there is the firm belief that the neurotic "myths" of Hans and the Rat Man genealogically originated in a certain familial situation. But what Lacan is saying is that we can only grasp the meaning of this familial situation retroactively by looking at the metaphors in which the original problem finds its expression. The actual significance of words like "father", "mother" and "sexuality" is only actualised in these mythic articulations. And as there was no symbolisation before these primary articulations, every other wording of what came before will be equally "mythical" and deforming.

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35. Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre IV: La relation d'objet (1956-1957),* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1994) 330. My trans.

It is therefore no coincidence that Lacan started his paper on the neurotic's individual myth by a reflection on the inevitably "mythical" status of psychoanalysis itself. Psychoanalysis, proclaims Lacan,

> ... always implies at the heart of itself the emergence of a truth that cannot be spoken, because what constitutes it is the spoken word (parole) itself, and one ought in a way to speak the spoken word itself, which is to put it properly that which cannot be said as spoken word as such. [...] [T]his is why there is at the heart of the analytic experience something which is properly speaking *a myth.* [...] The spoken word cannot seize itself, nor seize the movement of access to the truth, as an objective truth. It cannot but express it - and this *in a mythic way.*[36]

What Lacan is saying comes down to what Neurath expresses with his metaphor of the ship: we cannot step out of language. Both psychoanalysis and mythology explore the point where language, where thinking is founded (together with the subject). But in describing these foundations, they cannot but make use of the very instrument they are trying to describe. At this point, they cannot but be aware of the fact that the models they use are no more than tentative metaphors, "mythical" images. If psychoanalysis can be called a mythology, this does not have to mean that it is more mythical than any other discipline. What it does mean is that it operates at the point where every language is confronted with its own inevitably metaphorical character.

6. Applied Psychoanalysis, Applied Mythology

Lacan is a fine example of how psychoanalysis can be inspired by the study of mythology: because of their kindred projects they can learn from each other. But what about the possibilities of applying psychoanalysis to the study of myth? It is clear that the old allegorical model, in which myth was reduced to merely an illustration of the psychoanalytic truth, is no longer an option. But the 'analogical' model, in which both discourses are treated as overlapping metaphorical fields, can definitely still offer wonderful perspectives. To conclude, an example: C. Fred Alford's *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy* (1994)[37] starts out from a rhetorical question: "What if the insights into the human psyche contained in Greek tragedy were somehow more profound than the psychoanalytic theories often used to explain them? The answer, of course, is that we should never know this, as our theories would reduce these insights to the terms of psychoanalytic theory." (Alford ix) He acknowledges that every kind of interpretation involves a certain translation into another register, and that translation is always in some way a violation of the

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36. *Le mythe individuel*, 291-292 (My trans. and italics).
37. C. Fred Alford, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

original meaning. But, as he claims, some translations are more violent and blunt than other. He reproaches psychoanalysis its lack of sophistication:

> [T]heir studies are overly reductive not because they impose categories, for they must, but because they impose the wrong categories—categories insufficiently rich and profound to capture the great themes of the tragic poets. Their readings [...] reduce something important to something less important. To correct this it is neither necessary nor possible to go to the "texts themselves." Rather, we must find better psychoanalytic categories. (Alford 5)

"Finding better categories" also implies being prepared to acknowledge the differences. Alford makes it clear that tragedy itself had a "fairly consistent perspective on issues which we today call psychoanalytic", though it sometimes does not concur with any modern psychoanalytic theory. But it is exactly at these points that psychoanalysis can enrich itself. Alford for example points out how the mythic imagery of the tragic poets expresses some insights that we now think of as very progressive. The Lacanian "otherness of desire", for instance: many tragedies give their very own expression of this problem by using an explicitly contradictory mythical imagery. Clytaemnestra, for example, self-consciously claims full responsibility for the murder of her husband and at the same time depicts herself as the instrument of an *alastor*, a divine spirit of vengeance. Phaedra is overcome by desire by the power of Aphrodite but at the same time she is held personally accountable for her disastrous choices. And Oedipus's fate is at the same time determined by his character and by his *daemon*. The only real difference with the postmodern view on the subject, as Alford states, was the fact that the Greeks were not faced with the "sovereignty of the subject" in the first place. "The tragic poets did not need to take the subject apart, as they never assumed that any sane person might believe man to be an autonomous." (Alford 23) Ironically, psychological readings would traditionally have called instances like the *daemon* or *alastor* "external projections", while we could now say that exactly their ambiguous positioning on the cusp of inside and outside is what makes them phenomenologically accurate. The very ambivalence and fragmentation of the mythic imagery, that was traditionally seen as a trait of a primitive and undeveloped spirit, now seems particularly apt for the problem it wants to express.

Ultimately the dialogue Alford sets up between Greek tragedy and different psychoanalytic currents develops into a rich and personal reflection on the problem of autonomy. Surprisingly enough, studies like Alford's are still scarce. At this point, psychoanalysis seems reluctant to once more engage in the study of mythology, maybe because it is too scared to repeat the mistakes of the past. Vice versa, scholars of myth often look at psychoanalysis as a historically important approach that nowadays however is a spent force.[38] Nevertheless, works like these show how

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38. This tendency is more or less common to classical studies as a whole. Although psychoanalysis certainly is still applied for the reading of classical texts (e.g. Paul Allen

the concept of the Lacanian/Lévi-Straussian "mythanalysis" could also provide a paradigm for the relation of both disciplines: as different, analogous metaphors circling around the same impossibility. As Lacan stresses, the ultimate expression of the problem can never be given, nevertheless there is a freedom to be found in the continuous creative reformulation of the problem. This is what both mythology and psychoanalysis still have to offer to each other.

Miller, *Subjecting Verses: Latin Love Elegy and the Emergence of the Real* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), Michaela Janan, *The Politics of Desire: Propertius IV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), James Porter and Marc Buchan eds., *Before Subjectivity? Lacan and the Classics. Helios*, 31.1-2 (2004)), it remains a peripheral phenomenon that is regarded with suspicion. Ellen Oliensis gives a good description of this uneasy alliance between psychoanalysis and contemporary classical studies in the introduction to *Freud's Rome. Psychoanalysis and Latin Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), in which she provokingly and wittily defends the old-fashioned Freudian reading. Much more generally accepted than these active applications of psychoanalytic theory are studies that chiefly turn to psychoanalysis to historically map its relation with antiquity, such as Armstrong's *A Compulsion for Antiquity*, Rachel Bowlby's *Freudian mythologies. Greek Tragedy and Modern Identities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), or Cathy Gere's chapter on Freud in *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 141-176. The historicizing tendency of such works is telling for status of psychoanalysis in classical studies as something that mostly belongs to the past.