

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

DUNDES, ALAN, editor. *Sacred Narrative. Readings in the Theory of Myth.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985. Ix+352 pages. Bibliographies, index. Cloth US\$38.50, ISBN 0-520-05156-4. Paper US\$10.95, ISBN 0-520-05192-0.

Until fairly recently the study of such 'romantic' topics like fairy tale, legend or myth was widely regarded as obscure, a mere expression of an idealistic escape from the world, a refusal of the necessarily rational analysis of historical and social data and structures.

But the spirit of the times seems to have changed drastically. In tandem with the present popularity of genres like fantasy and spiritualism in literature as well as in film or other media, interest in the fantastic world of myth has increased. The symbolism of mythical events is now regarded as being the key to a new and deeper way of intuitive and emotional thinking.

In practice, however, enthusiasm for these ideas supposedly both archaic and yet new often leads to a purely emotional view of the world wherein any rational or logical idea is suspect. After the dominance of 'cold' rationalism in the sixties and early seventies, we now face a triumph of irrationalism, and a return to our allegedly archaic roots.

In academic research of myth and related thought forms, this comes to mean that the different categories (as myth, legend, fairy tale and so on) may become confused with each other, finally becoming impervious to any analysis. Thus the immense differences in form and function between modern fantasy stories, on one hand (which are purely entertainment) and, on the other hand archaic myth (which is nothing less than sacred) disappear—all becoming subsumed under the rubric of naive realism.

One therefore owes thanks to Alan Dundes, the editor of the present volume, for his having clearly emphasized the serious nature of myth as a "sacred narrative" through compiling an anthology of twenty-two texts on the theory of myth. Some of them are milestones in modern academic debate.

Most of these texts demonstrate a high standard of scientific analysis in this field of study, more philosophical approaches to the problem generally having been omitted. It is also soon apparent that they represent a multitude of different, heterogeneous standpoints and answers in the discussion concerning myth.

As an anthology of already elsewhere published articles, the present volume is very useful as a *reader*, for it gives an inside view into the complexity of the subject. But the work is *not* a unique or new approach to the phenomenon 'myth' by itself, nor is it a systematical description of methodological pluralism.

In his introduction, the editor gives a short statement of his own understanding of the problem. We find the most precise and impressive formulation in his introductory definition of myth, which he says is "a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form" (1).

A deep respect for their subject is common to all of the essays. They show a wide range of methods and academic standpoints so that Dundes can rightly state in his introduction that "this remarkable variety of approaches is represented by the essays in this volume" (2).

In fact we find many of the modern classics united here, such as Jan DeVries, James G. Frazer, Raffaele Pettazzoni, Mircea Eliade, Åke Hulkrantz, Bronislaw Malinowski, C. G. Jung, Claude Lévi-Strauss etc.

The editing of the texts was generally done with great care, although in some cases the translations into English may not be entirely satisfactory. For instance, one of the key sentences in the work of Raffaele Pettazzoni, very famous in the academic debate, is translated in two different ways in two of the essays. That changes the meaning dramatically—viz., "Myth is true *history* because it is sacred *history*" (102) versus "myth is true *story* because it is sacred *story*" (132).

Worthy of special mention is the essay by Dorothea Wender, "The Myth of Washington" (336–342), a learned and satirical parody on the claim of methodological absoluteness.

The heterogeneous content of the anthology shows that the editor did not intend to compile a systematical analysis or history of the theory of myth. Such an enterprise was undertaken some years ago by Jan DeVries, in his large scale work "Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie" (1961). DeVries' work, which is characterized by Dundes as being "one of the most comprehensive historical surveys of myth-theory scholarship" (347), ends at almost exactly the thematical and historical point where Dundes starts. It should be noted though, that DeVries also discusses the theories of our century, and even quotes some of the most important modern authors, such as Paul Radin, Ernst Cassirer, Georges Dumézil and others, who are *not* included in the present work. In fact these two works are too different in nature to be compared. Where DeVries gives a *historical* analysis, the work of Alan Dundes first of all is a *collection of material*, linked through comments by the editor himself. Thus a methodological review of the content of the Dundes volume as a whole is impossible, because it would involve an evaluation of all the modern theories of myth.

Yet, some of the presuppositions concerning the value of certain methodological approaches, which are found in the short introduction by Alan Dundes and in the author's own essay "Earth-Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male" (270–294), call for discussion. In particular, the statements concerning the methodological antagonism between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an antagonism described as a shift from diachronical to synchronical methods, seem to be questionable in some respects. Is it really true, the reader might ask, that diachronic analysis only means "speculating about possible origins" (3)?

In the last few years the social sciences have reevaluated the elements "development" and "time," formerly thought to operate within a fixed, historical determination. It was realized that culture is not only a system of once set structures and functions, unchangeable and fixed for all times, but rather in permanent change. As an important expression of culture, myth then cannot be placed outside the changes of culture and society themselves. One needs not only a comparative method, but a method that takes the historical, diachronical dimensions of the problem into consideration. A careful comparative-historical analysis of a given myth may indeed lead to exactly that cultural and historical stratum where the myth is seen as being a 'sacred narrative' in the sense defined by Pettazzoni and others. yet societal change will bring changes of philosophy, so that the once holy story will become an untrue story, just a relic.

Of course such diachronic investigations cannot be done seriously, as Dundes states correctly, by pure speculation. But to call diachronic methods generally obsolete, while the synchronic patterns of structuralism and/or functionalism are regarded as the only legitimate methods of our modern times seems at least questionable to me.

The continuation of this discussion would lead to exactly that kind of general debate about the theory of myth which cannot be carried out in this context. But it can already be said that the anthology compiled by Alan Dundes raises issues and compels deeper thinking about myth. So the present book can be said valuable in two respects: it presents a great amount of primary and basic material, and it provokes controversial discussion, always fruitful for our knowledge of the subject.

REFERENCES CITED:

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GOLDBERG, BENJAMIN. *The Mirror and Man*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985. Xii+260 pages. Illustrations and index. Hardcover US\$20.00, ISBN 0-8139-1064-1

Benjamin Goldberg, a retired Director of the US Army Night Vision Laboratory at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, has not only compiled a history of the mirror from ancient polished metals to modern plane glass, but has also described a superb vision of its future. In the final chapter a vision is conjured up of huge photon-propelled reflecting sails which will sweep through space, tacking with or against the solar photon stream. Orbiting mirrors are foreseen which will reflect the sun's energy onto terrestrial conversion sites, providing mankind with all the electrical power it may need. To top it all, above the first colony in space, which has been programmed under the name of "Stanford Torus," a hovering half-mile wide mirror will reflect enough solar photon power not only to enable the "colonists" to grow their own food, but also to smelt and refine lunar minerals.

The mirror, which is about to become the essential element of technical civilization, was originally conceived as a magic gateway leading into the spirit world. The archaic sayer fixed his gaze upon burnished metal surfaces and let their hazy images stimulate his subconscious in the manner of Rorschach blots. He tapped his inner resources of subliminal perceptiveness and foreboding by allowing the mirror's sparkle to mesmerize him. The mirror was not only a source of revelation and prophecy, a window opening onto the world of doubles and essences, but also a receptacle of magic and divine power. From it there originated an invisible fire which burnt objects from afar. In ancient Mexico the name of the god of the North and of sorcery was "Smoking Mirror." In China mirrors attracted the very essence of yin and yang from their heavenly abodes. The latter was manifested in the reflection of the sun's rays, while the former descended from the moon in the form of the slight film of dew which collected upon a mirror after it had been exposed to the moon's rays during the night.

Goldberg has gathered a conspicuous amount of diverse materials concerning mir-