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The Reality of Myth and the Myth of Reality in Russian Philosophy**

Abstract: The issue of myth has enjoyed a special attention in the twentieth century. In the vision of the new researchers, the myth ceases to be a simple fiction, invention or fable characteristic for primitive nations. There is a reconsideration of the signification that the myth has. It is no longer seen as an invented reality that doubles the real world. Myth does not open towards a new world, but towards a new way of being into world. The human being relates to its fellows and reacts to the circumstances of life by virtue of some common beliefs of its time. Our myths are the premises of our actions to the extent that they are not subjected to some critical exams on behalf of our conscience. The myths of our ancestors are no longer valid for us. However, they were seen as undeniable realities. Thus, our time has its own myths, which work for us in the same way. The possibility of talking about the myths of each age appears. By means of re-understanding myth in its living aspect, it justifies and fundamentals the human behavior and activity. It is enough to ask ourselves which are the criteria according to which we make the decisions and the preconceived ideas that guide our thinking in order to reach the issue of our myths.

In this respect have the western researchers guided themselves in anthropology (Cl. Levi-Strauss, L. Levy-Bruhl, E.B. Tylor, Mircea Eliade), but also the followers of Russian symbolism (V. Ivanov, N. Berdiaev, V. Solovyov, A. Belyi, P. Florensky, A.F. Losev). Influenced by the Christian tradition, Russian thinkers will state the necessity to see the world by means of symbols. Following this branch, their studies on myth will develop in a different horizon from the Occidental one. Thus, for most of them, the world brings to the forefront symbols, and the myth is their living form becoming attitude and way of seeing the world. How they have tried to accomplish a perspective on myth to the extent that it works in our conscience as a reality or as a law is the stake of this study. The starting point of this demarche will be to resume the conversations on language and symbol from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Myth, Reality, Mythical Perception, Symbolism, Consciousness, Language

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1. The context of a research on myth

What do we think about when we speak in the 21st century about myth? Can a discussion that has myth as subject be taken seriously? Can the mythical discourse be considered a scientific one? Myths from two thousand years ago are no longer valid for us, but does this mean that we do not have ours? The reality from two thousand years ago was different from the contemporary one, does this mean that it has changed or that our instruments of perception have changed? If there is a reality per se that cannot be known by man and yet he manifests and lives in a reality that he considers true, we can state that man develops his existence at the crossing of at least two worlds: of the possible and of the impossible, of credibility and of improbability, finally, of appearance, of occurrence and of imaginary?

Before becoming a history, a cosmogony, the myth is preceded by a perception of reality. The perception is not a simple data reception, but, in man's case, it is doubled by an act of understanding. The man wants to understand the world. By means of this fact, man not only perceives reality, but he also makes it. He gives meaning to reality. But does this observation offer us enough justification to speak of a mythical thinking not just with reference to archaic societies, but also to the essential human constitution?

Myth has been treated from the beginning as something personal of archaic societies – stories, histories, beliefs of ancient times which, for a contemporary society, are nothing but fictions and legends. In the 20th century takes place, however, a change of perspective. Myth becomes a form of perception and even a form of thinking. It is tried to research myth from the perspective of mythical individual, of the one who lives inside myth and who builds his existence according to myth. Thus seen, myth becomes a true reality. This observation is mentioned by Mircea Eliade as well, but only in the second half of the 20th century. Myth is no longer researched as in the normal acceptance as fable or legend, but “as it was understood in archaic societies, where myth designates, on the contrary, a true history and, even more, very precious since it is sacred, exemplary and significant” (Eliade 1998, 1). Although researches in this direction produced certain ambiguities regarding the use of the notion of myth, they brought interesting contributions by means of opening new approaches in the field of anthropology and history of religion. Until then, myth has been analyzed from the point of view of its content, as founding history by means of which the appearance of something is explained. The new perspectives insist more on the functional aspect of myth, explaining its role and opens towards a formal analysis, after which one could research the conditions of possibility of myth.

In the societies where myth is lived, it does not designate just a sacred history that took place in a primordial time, but offers real models of

behavior. Myth is the one that offers meaning and value to human existence. “The dominant function of myth is that of presenting exemplary models of all rites and of all significant human activities: both nourishment or marriage, as well as labor, education, art or wisdom” (Eliade 1978, 8). It is useless to notice here that all human activities, always, have been and are made by virtue of some models, of some purposes that have become purposes precisely because of models that work in its times, even when this is not acknowledged. The intention that is intended to be followed hereinafter is the argumentation of the idea that myth is far from being removed by the contemporary society. The relation that myth has with reality implies a distance, of course flexible, at the same time, myth is a reality with a degree of value permanently active and with nothing inferior to other realities (ex. scientific). Myth represents a form of thinking and, at the same time, a way of exposure of reality, because myth is possible through man in the same way man is updated, is defined, by means of myth.

2. Mythical thinking in E. Cassirer’s vision

Researches on myth have known several directions. In Occident, they have oriented more towards contents, based on data collection and classifications. In this respect, ethnology and history of religions have developed. The few archaic societies that survived until the 20th century have been followed, supervised, analyzed with the purpose of being able to define a pre-logical or pre-historical state of man. The archaic societies were seen as a historical confession of a phase through which man has passed in his progressing development. Thus, by means of their research, of life, beliefs, myths, it was believed that it can be reestablished a forgotten step from the history of human development. Their contemporary existence was seen as accidental and the ethnologists seen in the characteristics of tribal life some archeological traces and through their interpretation it was tried to reestablish an archaic past. Their realities, myths, represented for the contemporary man only some invented stories by the naivety specific for a pre-scientific stage of man, comparable to the one of the child.

The issue of myth also enters in the cultural space from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, then in the territory of Russian Empire. The reception of ethnological researches in a different context, with different problems led also to a specific interpretation of these realities. Influenced by a strong feeling of religiosity, a part of the social and human sciences (one must take into consideration a Christian philosophy) from this cultural space was developed on the branch of a symbolism more or less poetic. This is due, on the one hand, to a great philosophical and religious personality Vladimir Soloviov, whose influence is at the base of a religious revival right in the first years of the past century, and on the other hand, of

a reception sensible enough of the German philosophy, most of the professors from the Academy from Kiev or from Moscow being intellectually formed at the universities from Germany. In what concerns me, I will highlight the receiving of E. Cassirer's works.

If Cassirer's studies from the field of the theory of knowledge or of scientific methodology do not interest much, instead those that deal with the problems of religion and of myth cause numerous echoes. The publication of the second volume from *Philosophie der Symbolischer Formen* gave birth also to some reviews, some favorable, other critical. The critical reviews come especially from religious thinkers. E. Cassirer remained for them a Neo-Kantian, which meant the follower of a formal thinking or, to talk about the essence of religion in the terms of some categories, trying to fit religion between the limits of reason, as S. Frank said, reflects, first of all, an act without faith and, secondly, a methodological error, because the world of faith is different from the one of knowledge. The world of absolute truth cannot be explained by means of scientific relativism. In the same context, S. Frank argues that exactly as "a blind man cannot know painting and a deaf man or one lacking musical hearing – the music, the same way the man who does not have openness towards religious life cannot surprise the essence of this world" (Фрэнк 1926, 190).

The main assumption from which E. Cassirer starts defines man as being a symbolic being. Man does not simply live in a physical universe. He gives meaning to it. The things around him are bearers of meaning. In this way, he lives in a symbolic universe where myth, language, religion and even art form reality. On the one hand, they are realities, and on the other hand, they are means through which reality reveals itself to man.

"Thus the objectivity of myth consists primarily in that wherein it seems farthest removed from the reality of things – from the reality of naive realism and dogmatism – this objectivity is not the reproduction of a material datum but is a specific and typical mode of formation, in which consciousness disengages itself from and confronts the mere receptivity of the sensory impression" (Cassirer 1955, 15).

Mythical perception materializes through a creative act. The mythical subject does not receive in a passive way the sensations, but it takes part at their arrangement. For this reason, one cannot claim that myth simply represents a product of imagination, it contains in native mode also an intuition of reality. It is being configured at the crossroad of these two dimensions. At this level, however, it confronts "the force of the impression with an active force of expression" (Cassirer 1955, 23), says E. Cassirer, we do not deal yet with a free and conscious process, but determined in a psychological manner. The person is not self-conscious and free in his

actions. Facing the delimitation between I and world, reality reveals itself to conscience by means of the objective force of sign. The distinction between significance and thing is not valid, it presents itself to conscience in an absolute unit. Thus, even if in a first phase, the mythical conscience goes through a differentiation in comparison with reality, i.e. through distancing, it falls back in a unique plan of existence once it places instead of reality the mythical images and signs. E. Cassirer's main thesis is built on this idea that the mythical subject lives only in one plan of existence.

“Here there are no different degrees of reality, no contrasting degrees of objective certainty. The resultant picture of reality lacks the dimension of depth – the differentiation of foreground and background so characteristically effected in the scientific concept with its distinction between ”the ground” and that which is founded on it” (Cassirer 1955, 36).

From this point of view, mythical conscience, at this level, is deprived from the critical faculty. It does not have the possibility to judge what has been given to it to establish the boundaries such as those of objectivity, reality, falsity. The myth, from the perspective of the contemporary researcher, does not know and does not work with the distinction between ideal and real, between image and thing. To the extent that myth contains a certain dose of fiction, the fictional quality remains unknown to mythical subject, it is unconscious of its own creations. In this respect, characteristic for myth is always an act of faith. I wonder to what extent the contemporary man analyzes, critically or at least logically, the quality of his knowledge, the more so as to a very large percentage what we know is established by the information that we are told, that intervene through different mass-media ways. The role of mass-media in the life of contemporary man is, probably, greater than the one of reality as such. It became a virtual space, of images and information, which, practically, interferes between us and reality. Is there such a great difference between myth and mass-media, seeing things from the perspective of the accomplished function?

Another point upon which E. Cassirer insists is represented by the difference and even opposition between scientific thinking and mythical thinking. Following the issue through the light of the notion of causality, one can notice an inability from the mythical subject to conceive something as contingent. The mythical conception on world does not accept any event that is under the sign of accident. Each particular case is seen in the light of a cause as particular. The way in which the causal influence is explained, although the concept of causality is a modern one, forms the difference between scientific and mythical thinking. For the first one, it is enough arranging the singular event on the base of a universal law. Contingent is not something that escapes the universality of law, but something that does

not obey the inference at that time. “For scientific thought, to „understand” an event means nothing else than to reduce it to certain universal conditions, to subordinate it to that universal complex of conditions which we call nature” (Cassirer 1955, 49).

In E. Cassirer’s point of view, mythical thinking represents a precursory stage to the scientific-empirical one. Empirical conscience is compared to the naive stage of the child through which one goes in a necessary manner in order to access maturity. In mythical world, each concept achieves a personal customization, the mythical perception is directed towards individual objects, without dividing them into species and genders. The laws and formal relations lack in mythical thinking, which turns out to be a concrete one and which refers directly to each object.

3. Ernst Cassirer and the philosophy of myth in Russian thinking

Olga Freidenberg, one of the pioneers of symbolic anthropology and of cultural studies in Russia, believes that we owe Cassirer the identification of the specific character of pre-logical thinking. She considers that, before Levy-Bruhl, Cassirer gets closer to the particularities of mythical thinking as to a form of conscience with specific characteristics. Kantian as training, Cassirer aims to prove the a priori existence of certain categories of intellect. This intention is justified also through the new discoveries of anthropology and ethnology in what regards the primitive people.

Kant differentiated between the origin of the logical sense and the psychological one. He was interested in forming the logical categories, which had to be a priori, while the premises of psychologism are obtained after experience. Cassirer’s error consists, however, according to Olga Freidenberg, in the distinction that he enforces between the logical and the pre-logical thinking, refusing by means of it to understand the unity of the logical process. “Cassirer’s conclusion ends in the idea that the mythical world is an unique world, accessible to pre-historical conscience, and the creation of language or of myth represents only a part of the common process of awareness of the world” (Фрейденберг 1997, 31).

Cassirer has been read in a careful and creative manner by A. Losev. The latter one came close to the thinking of the German philosopher, trying to understand it and even to continue it in an original form. The intuitions of the Russian philosopher seem to surpass the intentions presumed in Cassirer’s writings. For example, sending to the way in which time is analyzed in the perception of mythical conscience in the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, A. Losev observes that

“the object of study of Cassirer’s Neo-Kantian philosophy is not reality in itself, which cannot be known, but the ways through which is revealed to us –

thinking by means of language, mythical-religious thinking – the artistic perspective does not just reflect the world, but it forms it, by means of a sensitive relation and an objective overview” (Лоцев 1977, 216).

Since the ‘20 of the past century, A. Losev’s philosophical conception is formed under the influence of ancient philosophy and of Platonism. In that time, concerned also with the issue of myth, in *The Dialectics of Artistic Form*, he speaks about three types in which myth has been systematized, by: Proclus, Schelling and Cassirer (Лоцев 1995, 184-185). Cassirer, in agreement with Husserl, A. Losev considers, tries to offer myth a meaning starting from its function and logic.

One of the subtle observations of A. Losev highlights the fact that realism and objectivism followed by science does not represent the results of an accurate description of nature, but after establishing a correspondence between formulas and abstract laws and the course of empirical occurrences. Scientific thinking wants to be indifferent to any emotion and feeling, personal and essential qualities of mythical subject. The relation between world and mythical subject is always full of sensibility, feeling and sentiment. As a matter of fact, this is reported also by E. Cassirer: “Here we cannot speak of things as a dead or indifferent staff. All objects are benignant or malignant, friendly or inimical, familiar or uncanny, alluring and fascinating or repellent and threatening” (Cassirer 1944, 103).

However, while E. Cassirer gives a hint that there is a continuity between the mythical thinking and the scientific one, as it is between two stages of human development, A. Losev tries to avoid such an idea. For the latter one, one cannot claim that myth is previous to science and, as previous stage, it makes possible scientific thinking, which, subsequently, enforces its perspectives. Scientific knowledge, after all, does not stand against the direct character of mythical perception. One does not either look for arguments against the fact that myth offers raw matter from which scientific thinking develops its reflections and obtains its abstraction. A. Losev is against the idea that science comes after mythology in the sense that it is built on its ruins. He considers that myth is always present in scientific thinking, it is next to this, and contributes to its development. He offers the example of Descartes, which can be placed at the base of European rationalism, of mechanism and even of positivism:

“Descartes begins his philosophy by means of radical doubt. Even in what God is concerned, he wonders whether He is a manipulator or not. And where does he find support in his philosophy, his indubitable base? He finds it in *I*, in subject, in thinking, in conscience, in *ego*, in *cogito*. Why? Why are things less real? Why is God less real, about who Descartes states that is the clearest evidence and simplest idea? Why not something else as well? Because this is his

unconscious faith, this is his mythology and thus, in general, appears the mythology of individuality and subjectivity, which is at the base of the new European culture and philosophy” (Лосев 2001, 34).

The relation between scientific and mythical knowledge, in conclusion, cannot be characterized as a diachronic one, in the sense that the first one continues the second one in a progressive manner. The two forms of knowledge not only they do not exclude each other, as A. Losev also tries to tell us, but, on the contrary, they intertwine and determine each other. Moreover, often, at the base of a scientific discovery we find a myth. Through this, science does not surpass or replace the myth. We speak of two different dimensions of reality, where the scientific truth forms its value in its field of operation, and the mythical truth remains truthful in its own, thus one does not diminish with anything the other one’s character.

Taken in its pure form, A. Losev considers, science is formed only from logical and numerical systems. It has an abstract form; it does not operate with objects, but with laws. Therefore, science in its pure state would not have any point of intersection with mythology, but, when it starts to be applied, becomes mythical. “Euclid’s geometry in itself is not mythological, but when it becomes certainty that there are no other dimensions but the one of Euclidean geometry, then it becomes mythical, because the position of this type of geometry does not tell us anything about the possibility of other forms of spatiality” (Лосев 2001, 40-41). The mythical vision is totalizing, and any kind of knowledge, which tends to generalize itself and to offer a fundamental truth, in virtue of this character of generalization becomes mythical.

Losev is not against the character of demystification that the scientific knowledge has. Indeed, science has disassembled many prejudgments, beliefs and myths, for A. Losev, but that does not mean that a truth has replaced a lie or that a reality took the place of a fiction. “When science tends to expose myth, enforcing its own truth, this means, states A. Losev, that a mythology is fighting against another one” (Лосев 2001, 41). The example offered by the Russian philosopher is the following: archaic people believed that man can take the form of other animals; science has fought and has “proven” the impossibility of this. Modern physics and mechanics do not have such categories that would explain a transformation of this type. Newton’s theory of unilateral and three-dimensional space excludes this possibility. Subsequently, for example through the formulas of the mathematician Lorenz, who precedes Einstein, it is noticed that a body can be thought in a change of shape if it is put in correlation with the volume and speed of its movement. If we assume that a thing could move with the speed of light, then it would not only change its shape, but its weight would become equal with zero. It follows after these ideas the theory on space

relativity of Einstein, which tends to replace the Newtonian perspective, and, to these, one could also add the new studies from the field of quantum physics that are about to change, again, our perception on time and space.

4. Final considerations

The conclusion that can be inferred here is that in the history of the development of human conscience it would be wrong to assume that there has been a period of *pre-logical* thinking, where people lived the reality of myth and that has been surpassed by a logical conscience that provides through arguments only truths. What we could claim, however, consists of the idea that myth, as any truth, represents an instrument of knowledge of the world. In time, some instruments wear out, become no longer productive, then appear the periods of transition, of crises and revolutions, when some myths are replaced by others, and the new ones declare the old ones not valid anymore and fake. After all, the issue is not at all in the terms of truth and falsity. As a historic event must be researched in the context in which it developed, the same way mythical reality can and must be analyzed through mythical thinking, internal coherence and the influence that it has upon human behavior.

This discussion about myth, as it has received form from the beginning of the 20th century and, moreover, as it has been confirmed by the ethnological discoveries throughout the entire century, it opens towards new philosophical interrogations and questioning. First of all, urging towards a critical analyses of contemporary perspectives. Myths are not only of archaic societies. Each period of time and culture have their own myths. The mythological analysis implies an archeological research that, however, does not take place in ancient times, but in the depths of the categories through which we receive the world nowadays. As modernity created a myth of progress and of evolution, and postmodernism of deterritorialization and of difference, the same way the present times create their own myths (of the virtual world, for example). Man is a mythical subject and a creator of myths. Myth is a form by means of which he gets closer to reality.

One cannot deny a certain distance that is imposed in the perceptive relation with reality. Myth interferes between man and world, and its position in this interval is flexible. Thus, together with Gilbert Durand we can claim that there is a “parameter of distance” (Durand 2004, 160) in regards to the real one, which is calculated according to the characteristics of each period of time and each culture.

Another observation for this idea is that time is not necessarily a guarantor of the removal from fiction. The fact that a myth has been annihilated through the journey to the Moon does not lead to a complete

demythisation, but it causes the creation of new myths (about spacemen and about the Moon itself). Therefore, by means of the evolution in time, even if it seems that some myths become realities and by means of this the distance to real is suppressed, in fact each period of time is also creator of myths through the removal of older ones, in compensation for or recovering that difference. It would be difficult to support the fact that man imagines or feels less in the contemporary world than in the traditional one.

Finally, in order to make some conclusive statements, I consider that, generally, myth can be subjected to analysis of two forms: 1. as object or 2. as method. The first one is personal more to the history of religions and to the ethnologist, the second one serves both to the anthropologist as well as to the phenomenologist and philosophy in general.

If one starts from the idea that myth represents a way of reference to the world, even a cognitive act, then mythology can claim a certain scientific strictness. To the extent that mythology wants to take into account the irrational acts of human conscience, which is made through the faculty of imagination in the process of interaction with the world, it can lay the foundation of a field of research at least as truthful as the one of the anthropology, phenomenology (which through Husserl wanted to be of a scientific strictness) and even of science itself.

Unlike science, that wants an objective and complete access to the world, without involving the subject, that would like to be (in a naive way) a simple impartial coordinator of the researches (an establisher of discourse as M. Foucault claimed at a certain point), mythological research not only ignores human conscience, but wants to understand what is going on with it and how does it behave in the process of interaction with the object; a process that, as a matter of fact, is creator. The myth aims at an act of creation. Thus, while scientific research follows the removal of the distance between subject and object, between human conscience and reality, for the mythological research precisely this distance is indispensable.

From this point of view, for myth it is absolutely inconceivable the elimination of one of the two elements. The mythical subject gets reality closer, on the one hand due to the object's donation, and on the other hand to the perception of subject. We are talking of an act that takes place simultaneously from two different parts. The human subject does not passively receive the way in which object gives itself to us, but it perceives accompanied by his states of mind, feelings and images. Under this aspect, mythical thinking cannot be suppressed but together with human emotions, and the reality of myth is indubitable (one can be uncertain of a thing, but you cannot be uncertain of your own uncertainty). On the other hand, reality, to the extent that it implies the characteristic of exteriority, transcendent or immanent, reveals to us in myth (as symbol, image, discourse or history).

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