



IN THE BEGINNING WAS THAUMA.
ON THE COMMON ORIGIN OF MYTHOS AND LOGOS*

by
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1. *Introduction*

the man who made Iris the offspring
of Thaumas wasn't far off
with his genalogy.
Plato, *Theaetetus*

This contribution is not intended to be a further analysis of the classical myth in its phenomenal forms or even of its various interpretations, since it would require a much broader treatment than that of a simple essay. On the other hand, scholars more authoritative than me have produced ponderous and excellent works on myth and on its function for human culture¹, so here we want to address an aspect decidedly circumscribed but at the same time more radical. I followed two ways, from one side the phenomenological method of *epoché* and from the other the Kantian one. In fact, I aim to develop an analysis on the origin of myth or, in Kantian terms, on its condition of possibility. In short, to use the Husserlian programmatic formula, it is a matter of going to the

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¹ See for instance: E. Cassirer, *Filosofia delle forme simboliche*, II: *Il pensiero mitico*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1964; M. Untersteiner, *La fisiologia del mito*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1972; M. Eliade, *Mito e realtà*, trad. it., Torino, Boria Editore, 1966; F. Graf, *Il mito in Grecia*, trad. it., Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1997; H. Blumenberg, *Elaborazione del mito*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1991; F.S. Cornford, *Dalla religione alla filosofia. Uno studio sulle origini della speculazione occidentale*, trad. it., Lecce, Argo, 2002; J.-P. Vernant, *Mito e pensiero presso i Greci. Studi di psicologia storica*, trad. it., Torino, Einaudi, 1978; E. Rohde, *Psiche. Culto delle anime e fede nell'immortalità presso i Greci*, 2 voll., trad. it., Bari, Laterza, 1970; K. Hübner, *Die Wahrheit des Mythos*, Freiburg-München, Verlag Karl Albert, 2013 and *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, cur. R.G.A. Buxton, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

thing itself (*zur Sache selbst*), but in order to succeed in this intention we must necessarily ask ourselves the following question: why myth? That is, what makes myth come to light? A philosophical investigation concerning myth cannot but take its cue from a radical question, in the sense of going to the root of what is being problematized. But the investigation of myth is necessarily related to its relationship with *logos*, usually considered as the opposite or as a higher moment of it that, translated into Hegelian terms, consists in being the result of a process of overcoming-conservation (*Aufhebung*). In this sense myth is not simply denied, but rather it is preserved and relocated to a higher level. If, as we think, this conception is correct, then it follows that myth never completely disappears, but instead passes – albeit in gradually more rational forms – into theoretical thought (*logos*). Therefore, from the evident relationship of filiation existing between *mythos* and *logos*, it is natural to ask what their common origin and their common principle (in a logical sense and not simply chronological) are. In our opinion, this is to be found in the Greek word *thauma* which, in most cases, is usually translated as “wonder” and which will be the subject of the next paragraph.

2. *Thauma as Arché of Myth and Philosophy*

Someone who puzzles or wonders, however, thinks
himself ignorant (it is because of this, indeed,
that the philosopher is in a way a mythlover,
since myth is composed of wonders.
Aristotle, *Metaphysics*)

If on the one hand the idea that philosophy is born from wonder is a sort of philosophical mantra now well established, on the other hand it has been neglected as the myth is born from the same wonder that, according to the well-known Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, is the source of philosophical reflection. This allows us to better understand the relationship – historically problematic and complex – between *mythos* and *logos*, even if we must first try to understand the meaning of the term “wonder”. A classical place from which to start is provided by Plato’s *Theaetetus*, where the Athenian philosopher clearly states that «This wondering of yours is very much the mark of a philosopher – philosophy starts nowhere else but with wondering, and the man who made Iris the offspring of Thaumatas wasn’t far off with his genealogy»². In a not very dissimilar way, Aristotle, in a famous quotation taken from *Metaphysics*, follows

² Plato, *Theaetetus*, in Id., *Theaetetus and Sophist*, ed. C. Rowe, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 155D.

the Platonic point of view³: «it is because of wondering at things that humans, both now and at first, began to do philosophy». Immediately afterwards Aristotle adds that: «Someone who puzzles or wonders, however, thinks himself ignorant (it is because of this, indeed, that the philosopher is in a way a mythlover, since myth is composed of wonders)»⁴. Let us now analyse the content of these two very important quotations.

In both the Greek term used is θαῦμα (*thauma*), generally translated as “wonder”, although the linguistic output certainly does not reflect the much more complex concept expressed in it and therefore its precise semantic value. The word *thauma* – note the similarity with the word “trauma” – indicates not so much a generic wonder in front of the happening of things, but rather a real shaking. The tremor resulting from the *thauma* in the Greek sense of the term causes an emotional instability, so to speak, which translates into a loss of ground under the feet, in an anguish of unbearable weight that leads man to turn the *thauma* into a problem. On the other hand, also the word “problem” comes from the Greek word πρόβλημα (*problēma*), which in turn refers to the verb “pro-ballein”, which indicates not only something in front of us, but that is thrown and then affects us. The one who, according to Plato, has traced a genealogy that is not at all bad is the poet Hesiod who, in his *Theogony*, affirms that Iris was born from Thaumata⁵. It is now a question of dissolving the allusive character of Hesiod’s verses since, as Giorgio Colli wrote, as a rule «myths give us appearances, surfaces»⁶ that require a considerable hermeneutic effort. The intentional play on words used by Plato, fortunately for us, is evident yet serious and philosophically pregnant, since Thaumata in Greek is written Θαύμας, whose affinity with the verb θαυμάζειν (awakening wonder) expresses precisely the relationship of filiation between *mythos* and *logos*, because from wonder (*Thaumata*) comes philosophy, that is to say Iris who, in

³ «[...] in Aristotle philosophy begins in wonder; when the philosopher is able to “see” or “theorize” the causes, the wonder comes to an end. Plato articulated a similar idea in the *Theaetetus*, of course, claiming that wonder and perplexity are the origin of philosophy. (Aristotle no doubt got this idea from Plato)», A.W. Nightingale, *On Wandering and Wondering: Theōria in Greek Philosophy and Culture*, in «Arion», 9, 2 (2001), p. 46.

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis-Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2016, I, 2, 982, b12. The translation of this famous Aristotelian passage is nevertheless misleading, as Emanuele Severino has sharply pointed out, since the myth is not really “made up” of things that produce wonder; rather, the myth “forms” from things that, precisely, produce wonder. See E. Severino, *Dispute sulla verità e la morte*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2008.

⁵ See Hesiod, *Theogony*, in Id., *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. G.W. Most, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2006, 265.

⁶ G. Colli, *La sapienza greca, I: Dioniso-Apollo-Eleusi-Orfeo-Museo-Iperborei-Enigma*, Milano, Adelphi, 1990, p. 40.

Hesiod's mythology, represents the one who acts as a channel of communication between heaven and earth (in Plato's language: world of ideas and sensible world). Aristotle's quotation is also of paramount importance, marked by the fact that he has not so much reiterated the Platonic point of view, but rather that he has strongly highlighted the close relationship between *philómythos* and *philósophos*, that is, between the one who loves myths and the philosopher. The reason for this relationship can be explained precisely in the light of the *thauma* from which flows myth which, although characterized by clearly imaginative elements, still expresses the need to give meaning to the flow of the event (whether it is characterized by natural phenomena or not); in this regard, Luc Ferry is not wrong when he states that «mythology is also and above all a philosophy still “in the form of a story”, a majestic attempt that aims to respond in a secular way to the question of good life, giving lessons of wisdom alive and concrete, covered with literature, poetry and epics and not formulated with abstract arguments»⁷.

The relationship established by Aristotle between myth and philosophy is of the greatest importance, since in doing so the Stagirite affirms that both myth and philosophy – albeit in their respective differences – find in the *thauma* their *ἀρχή*. Man creates myths precisely because he is struck by the *thauma*, for having experienced that *venerable* but at the same time *terrible* wonder that pushes him to cling to something that can allow him to overcome his finitude and his mortality. But not only that. Myths, in fact, are not only a remedy to deal with death but also – more generally – to escape that anguish that is felt in the presence of the unknown, in the face of what escapes human understanding. But the condition of possibility of myth is still the *thauma* that generates it, now as always. For this reason, man originally thinks mythically and poetically, being the substratum that supports its thoughts of *mytho-poietic* type. It is no coincidence that Aristotle, in his *Poetics* – in a passage complementary, for the purposes of our discourse, to that of *Metaphysics* – states that «poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history; poetry utters universal truths, history particular statements»⁸. In dealing with the tragedy the Stagirite assigns to myth a role not at all marginal, because only by virtue of it the *τραγωδία* is able to provoke the *thauma* in the spectators, to which is added also the process of *κάθαρσις* brought to completion just by means of pity and fear⁹. In this

⁷ L. Ferry, *La saggezza dei miti*, trad. it., Milano, Garzanti, 2012, p. 22.

⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. A. Kenny, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 9, 51b 5.

⁹ In this sense we can only agree with the following statements of Massimo Cacciari who, with regard to Aristotle's *Poetics*, writes: «Capital in tragedy is not the imitation of men, the psychological analysis of their *éthos*, but the *mýthos*», M. Cacciari, *Dell'inizio*, Milano, Adelphi, 2001, p. 414.

sense, Ernesto Grassi's judgement on Aristotelian aesthetics appears to be difficult to share, according to which it is precisely in it that «myth itself loses its religious meaning and is broken up into “fables”, “fictions”»¹⁰.

If tragedy is able to generate *thauma* and therefore to cause wonder, then it also has the capacity to produce in the spectators that shaking that will constitute a fertile *bathos* for philosophical reflection. The sphere of *ποίησις* is not only closely connected to knowledge but also – rather than representing a separate sphere from what Aristotle calls the apophantic *logos* – it reveals itself to be complementary to it so as to enrich it. On the other hand, it is precisely with the forms of mythical representation that the long, complex and stratified march towards more abstract forms of representation begins. Initially, as we know, *mythos* and *logos* went hand in hand, as in the case of the famous Pythagoras, who did not fail to give his thoughts now a symbolic-mystical appearance, now a mathematical-ideal one. About Pythagoras Carl A. Huffman stated that: «classical studies have been torn between scholars who still uphold the Greeks as models of rational inquiry and those who emphasize the irrational in Greek culture. Pythagoras duly becomes either the first to recognize the role of mathematics in describing the order of nature, or a wonder-working shaman»¹¹.

At this juncture, Roberto Radice asks himself «how is it possible that myth and *logos*, superstitious belief and mathematical science could coexist in the mind of one man? Was Pythagoras a mathematician or shaman, guru or scientist? In truth, it would seem that the two alternatives in the sixth century BC were not as incompatible as they are today, but in some respects complementary because at that time the perspective was not that of pure theoretical reason but of practical reason. Both mathematics with its infallible and abstract nature, as well as rituals and faith in the afterlife with their involving fantasy, had a single goal in common: the overcoming of the corporeal and sensitive sphere, producing the same thaumaturgical effects on human life and distracting it from what is mortal and precarious»¹².

But the first big step, as thinkers such as Vico and Cassirer have pointed out, is taken precisely with mythical thought which, by its very nature, shows its non-passiveness in the face of perceptions deriving from external reality, thus going in search of both meaning and truth¹³ – albeit in different ways from

¹⁰ E. Grassi, *Arte e mito*, trad. it., Napoli, La Città del Sole, 1996, p. 168.

¹¹ C.A. Huffman, *The Pythagorean tradition*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, cur. A.A. Long, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 67.

¹² R. Radice, *Magica filosofia. Sapere occulto e sapere illuminato nel pensiero antico e arcaico*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2018, p. 70.

¹³ Cfr. M. Detienne, *I maestri di verità nella Grecia arcaica*, trad. it., Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2008.

those of the logos¹⁴. In fact, as Garin says about Vico, «myth replaces concept, the fantastic universal stands in place of the logical universal»¹⁵. Since the need for explanation is innate in man, it follows that the latter – certainly not rational when he appears – first thinks precisely in images. This ability is undoubtedly positive and not due to a simple whim or arbitrariness, for which myth arises from the emotions that are later transformed into images, into symbols. In fact, man reacted to the vision of a lightning bolt not in purely sensory terms, but in symbolic terms, thus impressing his seal on reality and investing the latter with meaning. This is a characteristic that can be found in all ancient civilizations, so that Jung was able to talk about universal archetypes, even if their phenomenal manifestations are different: «The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. Mythological research calls them “motifs”; in the psychology of primitives they correspond to Lévy-Bruhl’s concept of “représentations collectives”, and in the field of comparative religion they have been defined by Hubert and Mauss as “categories of the imagination”. Adolf Bastian long ago called them “elementary” or “primordial thoughts”. From these references it should be clear enough that my idea of the archetype – literally a pre-existent form – does not stand alone but is something that is recognized and named in other field of knowledge»¹⁶. It is precisely in myth that we find what Martin Heidegger called – with a beautiful expression – *fragwürdig*, or «what is worthy of being questioned»¹⁷. This point of view was reiterated by Heidegger at the 1952 conference entitled *Was heißt Denken?*: «This is what the myth tells us, that is, the original Saying (*die Sage*). His saying (*Sagen*) is considered the oldest, not only because, according to the calculation of the chronology, it is the most primitive, but because in its essence it remains, in the past and in the future, what is most worthy of being thought»¹⁸. From the Heideggerian text

¹⁴ As Vico wrote: «I am not [...] of the opinion that poets delight above all in the false; on the contrary, I dare say that these, like philosophers, follow in principle the true», G. Vico, *Metafisica e metodo*, cur. C. Faschilli, C. Greco, A. Murari, Milano, Bompiani, 2008, p. 109.

¹⁵ E. Garin, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, II, Torino, Einaudi, 1966, p. 948.

¹⁶ C.G. Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, in Id., *Collected Works*, IX, 1, cur. G. Adler, R.F.C. Hull, New York, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 42.

¹⁷ «Das Fragwürdige dagegen, das Wort jetzt streng genommen, öffnet sich uns in seiner Würde, die von uns verlangt, daß wir ihr entsprechen, d. h. sie würdigen im Fragen», M. Heidegger, *Einleitung in die Philosophie. Denken und Dichten*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, L, 2, Abteilung: *Vorlesungen 1919-1944*, cur. P. Jaeger, Frankfurt a.M., Klostermann, 1990, p. 143.

¹⁸ Id., *Was heißt Denken?*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, VII: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, I. Abteilung: *Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910-1976*, cur. F.-W. von Hermann, Frankfurt a.M., Klostermann, 2000, p. 136.

emerges a fundamental aspect of myth, namely the fact of being the repository of great questions such as those concerning origin, limit, justice, soul, generation, death, self-determination, technique, which without a shadow of a doubt «attest the sticking out of philosophy from the womb of myth»¹⁹.

How can we fail to remember – to give some famous examples – Prometheus, punished for sharing with mortals a gift from the Gods? As Prometheus says: «The gift I gave to mortals has yoked me in these sad necessities»²⁰. There is no doubt that, in this case, the symbol of fire²¹ is the expression of the technical dominion over nature by man. Or think of Sophocles' *Antigone*, where the Choir thus paints man and his being responsible for the products of his intelligence-*techne*:

At many things—wonders,
Terrors—we feel awe,
But at nothing more Than at man.
This Being sails the gray-
White sea running before Winter storm-winds, he
Scuds beneath high Waves surging over him
On each side;
And Gaia, the Earth,
Forever undestroyed and
Unwearying, highest of
All the gods, he
Wears away, year
After year as his plows
Cross ceaselessly
Back and forth, turning
Her soil with the
Offspring of horses.
[...]
He has taught himself
Speech and thoughts
Swift as the wind;
And a temperament for
The laws of towns;
And how to escape

¹⁹ G. Camuri, v. *Mito*, in AA.VV., *Enciclopedia filosofica*, Milano, Bompiani, 2010, p. 7488.

²⁰ Aeschylus, *Prometheus bound*, ed. D.H. Roberts, Indianapolis-Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2012, p. 7.

²¹ On “fire” as a keyword in classical mythology, see chapter 23 of *Gilgameš e Prometeo*, in G. de Santillana, H. von Dechend, *Il mulino di Amleto. Saggio sul mito e sulla struttura del tempo*, trad. it., Milano, Adelphi, 1983, pp. 367-377.

Frost-hardened bedding
 Under the open
 Sky and the arrows
 Of harsh rain—inventive
 In everything, this
 Man. Without invention he
 Meets nothing that
 Might come. Only from
 Hades will he not
 Procure some means of
 Escape. Yet he has
 Cunningly escaped from
 Sicknesses that had
 Seemed beyond his devices.
 Full of skills and
 Devising, even beyond
 Hope, is the intelligent
 Art that leads him
 Both to evil and
 To good²².

Think also of Icarus, who to escape from the labyrinth in which Minos had trapped him with his father Daedalus, got up in flight with wax wings but, in contravention of his father's expert advice to fly in mid-air, began to taste the daring flight and after getting too close to the sun melted his wings²³; to Odysseus, who cleverly tricked the deadly sirens into tying himself to a pole and gave proof of his self-control and therefore self-determination²⁴. In short, to ironically use a famous metaphor by Hegel, philosophy, like Minerva's owl, begins its flight over the twilight, when myth has already marked themes and problems that the philosopher will be preparing to rationalize and place on the plane of the *lógos apophantikós*²⁵.

²² Sophocles, *Antigone*, edd. R. Gibbons, C. Segal, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, 332-368.

²³ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. W.S. Anderson, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1997.

²⁴ As it is well-known, Horkheimer and Adorno do not agree with this interpretation and, in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, consider the composition of Odysseus' Self still «labile and ephemeral», M. Horkheimer-Th. Adorno, *Dialettica dell'illuminismo*, trad. it., Torino, Einaudi, 1997, p. 56 n. 2.

²⁵ In fact, the philosopher, in the face of the mythos, «acknowledges that he is 'late' and that he has no power over the energy that his own language has produced [...] – but it is with the 'language' of *mýthos*, at the same time, that he indicates the aim of his own research: to arrive at the idea of ideas, at the general law of the connection between subject and object, sighted and

The interesting aspect of this brief historical-conceptual reconnaissance lies in the constant interweaving of *mythos* and *logos* in Greek culture, which much of the literature on the subject has instead underestimated or vehemently denied, to the point of creating a real hiatus between myth and philosophy proper. On the other hand, only millennia after the birth of myths has man been able to develop forms of deductive or scientific reasoning in the Aristotelian sense of the term, given and considered that science is a knowledge that proceeds by demonstration²⁶. The latter aspect is in fact absent from myth, which historically appears in the form of narration and not as a discourse subjected to strict inferential structures so that, to put it in the words of the Schopenhauer of the *Parerga and paralipomena*, «we must consider most myths as an expression of truth intuited rather than thought clearly»²⁷. As Vernant states, memory, orality and tradition are the «conditions of existence and survival of the myth»²⁸; moreover, the authentic being that philosophy wants to reach «is not the mythical supernatural, but a reality of a completely different order: pure abstraction, identity, the very principle of rational thought, objectified in the form of the *lógos*»²⁹. In this sense, Cassirer is right when, in his posthumous *The Myth of the State* (1946), he affirmed that modern civilization does not rest on solid foundations at all, but is instead «built on volcanic soil. For its first origin and basis was not rational, but mythical»³⁰.

3. *Mythos and Logos. Antinomic polarity or complementarity?*

The common origin of *mythos* and *logos*, as already mentioned, allows us to better understand the relationship, the weaving and, therefore, their constant mixing. This – almost paradoxical – dependence/independence reflects the much richer image of Greek rationality, which certainly cannot be reduced to a pure *logos*, formal and therefore free from any mixture with the aspects linked to the colourful world of life. If this aspect is not adequately understood, it

seen, at the perfectly luminous expression [...] of ‘what’ makes it possible», M. Cacciari, *Labyrintho filosofico*, Milano, Adelphi, 2014, p. 131.

²⁶ See Aristotelis, *Analytica posteriora*, in Id., *Analytica Priora et Posteriora*, ed. W.D. Ross, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, I, 2, 71b17-18.

²⁷ A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga e paralipomena*, ed. M. Carpitella, II, Milano, Adelphi, 1998, p. 540.

²⁸ J.-P. Vernant, *L'universo, gli dèi, gli uomini. Il racconto del mito*, trad. it., Torino, Einaudi, 2000, p. 6.

²⁹ Id., *Mito e pensiero presso i Greci* cit., pp. 394-395.

³⁰ E. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1946, p. 278.

would be even more bizarre to establish some form of communication between *mythos* and *logos*. We are referring to the famous thesis of the so-called “Greek miracle”, supported by scholars such as Eduard Zeller or John Burnet, in whose opinion it would be completely wrong to find in the Greece of the 5th century B.C. the presence of oriental sapiential themes³¹. Giovanni Reale, in his monumental *History of Greek and Roman Philosophy*, disputes – without examining them, however – the arguments against the theses of Zeller and Burnet, considering the latter as «objectively incontrovertible»³². To give just one example, the deciphering of the cuneiform writing of the theogony of the Mesopotamian people of the Hurrians has made it possible to dismantle the historiographic prejudice that Greek speculation arose as a result of a miraculous event due solely to the philosophical genius of its representatives. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, had already questioned a similar historiographical-conceptual operation: «Nothing would be sillier than to claim an autochthonous development of the Greeks. On the contrary, they invariably absorbed other living cultures. The very reason they got so far is that they knew how to pick up the spear and throw it onward from the point where others had left it»³³. On the literary side, however, a writer like Percy Bysshe Shelley, in the preface to his poem *Hellas*, stated instead – with tones that almost touched on racism – that «We are all Greeks. Or laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their root in Greece. But for Greece – Rome, the instructor, the conqueror, or the metropolis of our ancestors, would have spread no illumination with her arms, and we might still have been savages and idolaters; or, what is worse, might have arrived at such a stagnant and miserable state of social institution as China and Japan possess»³⁴.

In open contrast to Zeller and Burnet’s thesis, Francis Macdonald Cornford argued that the «modes of thought that in philosophy obtain clear definition and explicit formulation were already implicit in the unreflected insights of mythology»³⁵. On the other hand, the analogy between the *Chaos* of which Hesiod speaks about and the *Apeiron* of Anaximander is evident but, as Vernant points out, not only does the overall scheme remain, since even in the de-

³¹ See E. Zeller, *La filosofia dei greci nel suo sviluppo storico (1856)*, trad. it., I, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1932, pp. 50-51; J. Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, London, A. & C. Black Ltd., 1920, p. 13.

³² G. Reale, *Storia della filosofia greca e romana*, I: *Orfismo e presocratici naturalisti*, Milano, Bompiani, 2004, p. 26.

³³ F. Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, cur. M. Cowan, Gateway Washington, Edition, 1998, p. 30.

³⁴ P.B. Shelley, *Preface to Hellas*, London, C. and J. Ollier, 1822, p. IX.

³⁵ F.S. Cornford, *Dalla religione alla filosofia* cit., p. 43.

tails «the symmetry of developments, the concordance of certain themes indicate the persistence, in physical thought, of mythical representations that have lost nothing of their force of suggestion»³⁶. It is sufficient to take as an example the already mentioned Anaximander, who in one of his fragments states as follows: «a germ, pregnant with hot and cold, was separated off from the eternal, whereupon out of this germ a sphere of fire grew around the vapor that surrounds the earth, like a bark round a tree»³⁷. So, in this anaximandean fragment one cannot fail to notice a glimpse of that symbolism also present in the Indo-European world, since the symbol of the tree to which Anaximander refers «brings us back [...] to one of the most known and ancient symbols of humanity, to the tree conceived as axis mundi that, from India to China, from Siberia to Northern Europe, indicates the “pillar” around which the different planes of the cosmos unfold»³⁸.

We come to the second point of the matter, namely the reception by Greek philosophy of myths and tales from Indo-European and Semitic populations. In fact, comparing the theogony of the Mesopotamian people of the Hurrians with the most famous work of Hesiod, we discover surprising similarities. According to the theogony of the population of the Hurrians – the so-called *Kingship in Heaven* – the god of heaven Anu was dethroned and castrated by his son Kumarbi. A perfectly similar event can be found in the Theogony of Hesiod, where Uranus – also god of heaven – is castrated with a scythe by his son Chronos³⁹. Certainly it is difficult to think of a simple coincidence, especially if we keep in mind not only the formidable volume of 1947 by Santo Mazzari-

³⁶ J.-P. Vernant, *Le origini del pensiero greco*, trad. it., Milano, Feltrinelli, 2007, p. 103. On the same wavelength we find Luc Brisson: «We must never forget that Greek science and philosophy developed in a world in which the reflections of traditional thought had not completely disappeared», L. Brisson, *Mito e sapere*, in *Il sapere Greco. Dizionario critico*, cur. J. Brunschwig, G.E.R. Lloyd, I, Torino, Einaudi, 2005, p. 57.

³⁷ Anassimandro, in *I presocratici. Testimonianze e frammenti*, ed. G. Giannantoni, I, Milano, Mondadori, 2009, fr. 10.

³⁸ N. D'Anna, *Il gioco cosmico. Tempo ed eternità nell'antica Grecia*, Milano, Rusconi, 1999, p. 114.

³⁹ Not without reasons Untersteiner called Kumarbi the «hurrian Kronos», M. Untersteiner, *La fisiologia del mito* cit., p. 124. On these themes, see the now classic and provocative work of M.G. Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1987; E. van Dongen, *The “Kingship in Heaven”-Theme of the Hesiodic Teogony: Origin, Function, Composition*, in «Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies», 51 (2011), pp. 180-201; C. Corti, *The So-called ‘Theogony’ or ‘Kingship in Heaven’: The Name of the Song*, in «Studi Mincenci ed Egeo-Anatolici», 49 (2007), pp. 109-121 and E. Cantarella, *Non sei più mio padre. Il conflitto tra genitori e figli nel mondo antico*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2018. On the Gods and Heroes of the Greeks see also M. Nichols, *Götter und Helden der Griechen. Mythos und historische Wirklichkeit*, Bern-München, Gondrom, 1975.

no⁴⁰ on the ways East and West met each other, but also what E.O. James writes in *Gli eroi del mito*, according to which the Hurrian theogonic tale «comes from Mesopotamia, and it is not improbable that it passed in Greece through Phoenicia and Cyprus towards the middle of the second millennium B.C., and that there it was finally transformed into theogony by Hesiod who had penetrated into Boeotia from north-western Asia Minor»⁴¹. In the light of what has just been said, it seems evident, therefore, that «behind the Theogony of Hesiod is hidden as a model the epic of Kumarbi (hinter der *Theogonie* Hesiods steckt als Vorlage das *Kumarbi-Epos*)»⁴². So, what is it that makes myths perpetually present in culture? What is it that drives people to constantly resort to it? In the first place, as we have already mentioned, *mythos* shares with philosophy the same *arché*, that is, the *thauma*; this means that there is nothing pathological in the language of myth (as Max Müller and Herbert Spencer used to up-hold); nor is it licit to consider myths – as Voltaire wanted instead – «absurd fairy tales that still continue to infect youth»⁴³. Rather, they constitute an inexhaustible reserve of spiritual deposits and problems of a universal nature. As Ernst Cassirer writes – with his usual expository clarity – myth «is the first answer given to the riddles of the universe. It attempts, albeit incompletely and inadequately, to discover the principle and the cause of things. From this point of view, myth appears to be the product not so much of the imagination, but of the first intellectual curiosity of the man. Myth does not content itself with describing what things are, but follows their origins; it wants to know why»⁴⁴.

In this sense, myths, in their phenomenal manifestation, are nothing more than symbolic expressions or images of dreams, anxieties and fears that have always stirred man up. Secondly, another element that makes myth something not to be renounced is its multiformity and plasticity, so that we could rightly talk about the different functions performed by mythology within the cultural tradition of the West.

⁴⁰ Cfr. S. Mazzarino, *Fra Oriente e Occidente: ricerche di storia greca arcaica*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1947. Also read Nestle's following statement: «Today there is no doubt that the primitive form of the myth came from the East», W. Nestle, *Storia della religiosità greca*, trad. it., Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1973, p. 47.

⁴¹ E.O. James, *Gli eroi del mito*, trad. it., Milano, il Saggiatore, 1961, p. 243.

⁴² F. Jürß, *Vom Mythos der alten Griechen. Deutungen und Erzählungen*, Leipzig, Reclam, 1988, p. 59.

⁴³ «fables absurdes dont on continue encore d'infecter la jeunesse», Voltaire, *Essai sur le moeurs*, in Id., *Oeuvres complètes*, XIII, Paris, Charez Thomine et Fortic, 1820, t. I, p. 2.

⁴⁴ E. Cassirer, *Linguaggio e arte II*, in Id., *Simbolo, mito e cultura*, trad. it., Bari, Laterza, 1985, p. 191.

Joseph Campbell, in his numerous works, lists four of them: that which he defined as a mystical function, having to do mainly with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, that is qualities that man perceives as sacred and mysterious such as to arouse wonder in him; the cosmological one, with which science also has to do, but which in myth refers, however, to something mysterious; the sociological one, where myth, incorporating the principal values of reference of a given historical society, favoured its social cohesion⁴⁵ and, finally, the pedagogical function of mythology, consisting in favouring the development of the individual in integrity and in agreement with d) himself (microcosm), c) with his culture (mesocosm), b) with the universe (macrocosm) and a) with that marvellous last mystery which is both beyond and within itself and of all things⁴⁶.

Briefly, myth operates – as Spinoza would say – *sub specie aeternitatis*, being it out of time and therefore always actual and never actualizable. Paraphrasing Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, myth «occasions much thought (die viel zu denken veranlaßt)»⁴⁷ since, by virtue of an elaborate process of archetyping, it has been able to universalize not only models and types of behavior, but also genuine philosophical-physical problems – albeit expressed in the form of poetic language that take nothing away from their intrinsically theoretical significance. Therefore, philosophy, rather than implementing a real process of de-mythification, has rather logicized or “secularized” myths, taking on the great questions they pose and placing them on the plane of the apophantic logo. But myth does not disappear for this reason, as it is – as already mentioned – a-temporal and therefore a constant trait of human culture, inexhaustible source of reflection.

It is no coincidence that in Greece *mythos* and *logos* walked side by side, in continuous dialogue in the absence of extreme prevarications. In Walter Friedrich Otto's words, *logos* indicates «the word from the subjective side of thinking and speaking», whereas *mythos* indicates not so much something calculated, pondered, but «the actual, the real (*das Wirkliche und Tatsächliche*)»⁴⁸. In Greek culture – despite the evident and marked attempts by philoso-

⁴⁵ On the other hand, as Giulio Guidorizzi points out, «a myth transmits a shared belief system and expresses cultural models that find their reflection in society», G. Guidorizzi, *Ai confini dell'anima. I Greci e la follia*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2010, p. 41.

⁴⁶ See J. Campbell, *The Masks of God, IV: Creative Mythology*, New York, Penguin Compass, 1993, p. 6. See also Id., *The Power of Myth*, New York, Anchor Books, 1991, p. 39.

⁴⁷ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. J.H. Bernhard, Mineola-New York, Dover, 2005, p. 117.

⁴⁸ W.F. Otto, *Die Gestalt und das Sein*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1955, p. 66.

phy to emancipate itself from mythical thought – there is no antinomic polarity between *mythos* and *logos*, there is no prevarication between them as much as a fruitful and never interrupted dialogue. Although it was the Greek philosophers themselves who forcefully claimed the superiority of *logos*, it is certainly not possible to blot out the entire structure of the great questions raised through myths. The philosophers were well aware of the enormous debt that *logos* owed to the myth, but by now they considered their work of emancipation a necessary step to satisfy the human need for understanding and to make natural reality free from any reference to divine forces. This process of rationalization of myth, as already mentioned, has not consisted in making a *tabula rasa* of the forms of mythical representation, rather it has preserved the philosophically pregnant aspects transferring them to the level of the apophantic logo and using them as authoritative sources of a cultural past to be recovered continuously. On the other hand, it is precisely in myth that we can find the essential themes developed later with the help of *logos*; for this reason we can only subscribe to the following statements by Heidegger, taken from a university course held in Fribourg in the winter semester of 1942-1943 and published under the title *Parmenides*, in which we read: «“Myth” and *logos* appear in an erroneously much-discussed opposition only because they are the same in Greek poetry and thought. In the ambiguous and confusing title “mythology”, the words *μύθος* and *λόγος* are connected in such a way that both forfeit their primordial essence. To try to understand *μύθος* with the help of “mythology” is a procedure equivalent to drawing water with the aid of a sieve»⁴⁹.

From these passages of the Heideggerian *Parmenides* emerges the need to overcome the opposition between *mythos* and *logos*, which in fact proves to be more apparent than real – at least in Greek philosophy. Starting from a common origin, *mythos* and *logos* then developed following two different but complementary “logics”. The first, as Cassirer argued in his unpublished lectures on ancient philosophy, is that of imagination and emotion, while the second one is the so-called logic of judgment. Myth is not the expression of a theoretical conception, but rather of a dramatic conception of life; therefore, writes Cassirer, «we cannot explain myth as a mere intellectual representation or conception; we must study it in its actions. Mythical life is always closely connected with ritual life and it is the study of primitive rites which gives us the real clue to the interpretation of mythical thought»⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ M. Heidegger, *Parmenides*, edd. A. Schuwer, R. Rojocewicz, Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 70.

⁵⁰ E. Cassirer, *The Ionian School* (Yale 1942), Box 48, Folder 680, p. 22. (Unpublished manuscript – Yale Beinecke Library).

In order to better understand the complementary relationship between *mythos* and *logos*, it is useful to use a well-known passage from Plato's *Protagoras* where the latter – in strange contrast with his aversion to Homeric poetry – shows the identity and at the same time the difference between a mythical and a properly logical explanation. In fact, in the dialogue in question, as is well known, Socrates and Protagoras discuss about the theme of virtue and the question of whether it can be taught or not; at that point Socrates – addressing Protagoras – affirms: «So if you can show us more clearly that excellence can be taught, please don't grudge us your proof, but proceed». Protagoras answers in the following way: «Certainly I shall not grudge it you, Socrates – he said. But would you rather that I showed you by telling a story (as an older man speaking to his juniors) or by going through a systematic exposition?». Most of the listeners asked him to respond in the way he considered most appropriate and at that point Protagoras concludes as follows: «Well, he said, I think that it will be more enjoyable to tell you a story»⁵¹.

Firstly, for Protagoras the demonstration can take its cue from both the mythical and the rational side, thus highlighting the true content of myth; secondly, the preference given to the mythical explanation is not linked to a self-referential aesthetic question, since it is a matter of exposing the truths on the basis of a mythical narrative but that unlike a “cold” inferential reasoning is also capable of arousing pleasure in the listener⁵². In this sense, as Konrad Gaiser has well expressed, through this claim to truth myths «complete the Logos of the investigation that proceeds through analysis and arguments»⁵³.

4. *Concluding remarks*

The analysis of the common origin of *mythos* and *logos* brings to light, according to a homonymous Heidegger's paper, their *identity* and *difference*, since the same is the source from which spring, but different ways of approaching the real. While myth, through ritual forms, gives meaning to reality, merging entirely with it and identifying in divinities the “ultimate” causes of reality, theoretical thought no longer tolerates such forms of explanation, thus claiming its autonomy, its ability to grasp by itself the aspects of reality. But *logos*, let's remember, often draws on myth – now as always – since it is in it that the hu-

⁵¹ Plato, *Protagoras*, ed. C.C.W. Taylor, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, 320 B-C.

⁵² K. Morgan disagrees with this interpretation: see K. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 133.

⁵³ K. Gaiser, *Platone come scrittore filosofico. Saggi sull'ermeneutica dei dialoghi platonici*, trad. it., Napoli, Bibliopolis, 1984, p. 128.

man need for understanding and donation of meaning manifests itself for the first time; it is precisely the truthful content of myth that provides theoretical thought with themes and problems that it is preparing to place on the level of apophantic *logos*. Perhaps all this is equivalent to an evolutionary conception whereby one passes from the irrationality of myth, from the fables of the ancients to the much more solid theoretical thought? This is not the image of myth that we have tried to paint here, for myth is not at all an *Urdummheit des Menschen*, that is, a primordial human stupidity, but rather the first and great attempt of man to explain the happening of things, to question himself as much on the external world as on the internal one, that is to say on himself. Myth is narration, a provider of meaning and therefore a real way of being in the world, but in the long run one could no longer appeal to Zeus or Athena. The process, albeit gradual, of emancipation of *logos* from mythical thought does not mean a “death sentence” of the latter and not even a rejection of its content. *Logos* – which never stops dialoguing with myth – has simply chosen a different path, has chosen its autonomy, has chosen to ask and respond in its own way without denying *mythos* its right to exist.

ABSTRACT

Questo contributo non vuole essere una ulteriore analisi del mito classico nelle sue forme fenomeniche e nemmeno delle sue varie interpretazioni, giacché si renderebbe necessaria una trattazione ben più vasta di quella di un semplice saggio. D'altra parte, studiosi più autorevoli di chi scrive hanno prodotto ponderose ed eccellenti opere sul mito e sulla funzione da esso svolta per la cultura umana, per cui qui si vuole affrontare un aspetto decisamente circoscritto ma al tempo stesso più radicale. Intendiamo infatti sviluppare un'analisi sull'origine del mito o, detto kantianamente, sulla sua condizione di possibilità. Si tratta insomma, per usare la formula programmatica husserliana, di andare alla cosa stessa (*zur Sache selbst*), ma per riuscire in questo intento bisogna necessariamente porsi la seguente domanda: perché il mito? Ovvero, cosa fa sì che il mito venga alla luce?

This contribution is not intended to be a further analysis of classical myth in its phenomenal forms, nor of its various interpretations, since it would require a much broader treatment than that of a simple essay. On the other hand, more authoritative scholars than the writer have produced ponderous and excellent works on myth and its function for human culture, so that here we want to deal with a decidedly circumscribed but at the same time more radical aspect. In fact, we intend to develop an analysis on the origin of the myth or, kantianamente, on its condition of possibility. In short, to use the Husserlian programmatic formula, to go to the thing itself (*zur Sache selbst*), but to succeed in this intent we must necessarily ask ourselves the following question: why the myth? That is, what causes the myth to come to light?