

ON THE CONCEPT OF “MYTHICAL THINKING”

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The concept of “mythical thinking” has already existed for more than a hundred years. A very compact survey that includes only the most important points and representative names¹ seems to be both interesting and instructive.

Already at the beginning of the 19th century the studies of Creuzer,² and later the work of his opponents, especially that of Lobeck,³ set forth one of the most important problems in the investigation of myth: how did the people among whom myths existed, treat all the strange and even savage things — from the point of view of an educated European — which those myths talked about? Did they take them seriously? Did they believe in their literal meanings? If not, then a myth is to be understood as a sort of allegory. That was the path that Creuzer followed. He considered the ancient myths to contain religious-philosophical teachings in allegorical form. In spite of Lobeck’s convincing criticism, the “mythological school” (Max Mueller, A. Kuhn and others) which dominated the scene in the middle of the 19th century, continued to interpret myth as allegory.⁴

Notwithstanding the sophisticated philological technique of this school, it is easy to see the principal proximity of its position to the allegorical interpretations of myth which originated in early antiquity. The treatment of Greek gods as allegories of natural forces appeared already with Theagenes of Rhegium (6th century BC);⁵ in the 5th century BC it was developed by Anaxagoras, Diogenes of Apollonia, Metrodorus of Lampsacus. Later on, moralistic allegories appeared, but the principle itself remained unchanged from antiquity up to the 19th century. Max Mueller added to the naturalistic allegory one more explanation: a language disease, because of which the original metaphorical meaning of expressions like “the sun sets”, “the moon rises”, etc. was somehow lost and these things were understood literally. Only thus, suggested Max Mueller, can the “ridiculous, savage and senseless element” in myths be explained, which constituted then one of the main mysteries for science.

Since the 1860’s such explanations have become less and less convincing. Their criticism was supported by the growing evidence that in preliterate cultures people believe precisely in

¹ The vast philosophical tradition from Schelling to Cassirer is not examined in this paper.

² G.F. Creuzer, *Symbolik and Mythologie der alten Volker hauptsächlich der Griechen*, 2. Aufl. Bd. 1–2. Leipzig 1820–1823.

³ Ch. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus*. Bd. 1-2. Königsberg 1825.

⁴ As the critics of this school later noted, it had considered that mankind, even in its childhood, could not take rain for the milk of heavenly cows.

the *literal* meaning of what the myths say, i.e., they take myth for reality. Why then could not the Greeks of Homer's time or the Indians of the Vedas epoch have had similar ideas? Thus, in the course of criticizing allegorical interpretations, an idea was conceived that there had once been a special stage in the development of thinking — primitive or mythical, which could explain all the absurdities and peculiarities of a myth. A whole complex of reasons and circumstances promoted the spreading of these views; I shall try to clarify only the main points.

In the 1830's Auguste Comte propounded his doctrine of the three-stage development in thinking. The first one, connected with the "infantile condition of mind", he called theological and considered its main forms to be fetishism, polytheism and monotheism — fetishism being characterized by an extremely low level of knowledge and vividly expressed passions.⁶ Comte himself was hardly interested in myths, but his theory influenced not only Taylor, the founder of a new anthropological school, but also all the subsequent theories, which postulate any form of the development of thinking in stages.

This evolutionary attitude concerns specifically one of the central ideas of 19th-century positivism (based also on the Haeckel-Mueller biogenetic law), according to which every individual in his development passes through all the same stages as mankind does as a whole, i.e., ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The psychology of the primitive man was regarded as that of a child,⁷ and societies with developed cultures as being at the level of the adult man. The sociology of that time contended that a primitive man or a savage should not be approached by the same means as one's contemporaries or compatriots, because the level of development of thinking corresponds to the level of the development of civilization. So Spencer, for instance, regarded a primitive man as unable to foresee some remote results, to doubt, criticize, have abstract ideas or such notions as reason, law, uniformity, and truth.⁸ It is not surprising that such views (though not completely shared by all scholars) seemed to be satisfactory explanations for the origin and existence of myths.

The problem of a myth's origin was further aggravated by the remoteness of the epochs when myths come into being and by the cultural isolation of the preliterate people. All the qualities of so-called primitive thinking could be easily found in the mentality of the average

⁵ J. Tate, "On the History of Allegorism", *Classical Quarterly*, 28 (1934), 105–114.

⁶ A. Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*. Vol. 1. Paris, 1830, 6 f.; Vol. 5. Paris 1841, lff. (Reimp. anast. 1969).

⁷ See, i.e.: J. Sully, *Studies of Childhood*. London 1895; G.S. Hall, *Adolescence*. Vol. 1. New York 1904.

⁸ H. Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*. London 1870, 3rd ed. 1885, 79-92.

Europeans, especially uneducated ones.⁹ It is hard to believe that the science of that time did not know about it. Yet the lack of the features of scientific thinking in the mentality of Europeans did not lead Spencer and his contemporary scholars to the notion that their compatriots had some specially constructed “thinking apparatus”. It seems to me that the practice of constant intercourse between these two groups prevented this conclusion, obviously showing its absurdity. On the other hand, the majority of those who wrote about primitive thinking had never seen its presumed exponents. As a rule, they chose suitable facts from the descriptions of travellers and missionaries, and to find them was all the easier because descriptions of savages naturally concentrated on differences rather than on similarities with Europeans.

The specific features of the material used also played their role here: myths, folklore and religious ideas can in themselves least of all testify whether their exponents have logical and critical thinking. The products of art and religious emotions have never submitted and cannot in principle completely submit to the norms of scientific thinking. The religion, especially popular religion, and folklore of the Europeans were hardly different from analogous phenomena in traditional societies, but the former seemed to be habitual and therefore understandable, while the latter seemed unusual and odd.

A characteristic feature of the 19th-century theories was a peculiar intellectualism (coming probably from 18th-century philosophy) with which many scholars approached myth. So Tylor, for instance, who considered the study of myth to be based on the investigation of primitive thinking, saw in myth a kind of primitive science or philosophy.¹⁰ Such an approach promoted the development of intellectualistic theories of myth, which are quite widespread up to the present, though they are not necessarily connected with the acceptance of mythical thinking.

The psychology of the mid-19th century was in a rudimentary state and had no advantage over the other sciences in explaining myth and the mechanisms of its genesis. That is why ideas of mythical thinking were from the very beginning based on a confusion of quite different notions: *how* a man thinks, i.e. the character of his cognitive processes, and *what* he thinks and in what he believes, i.e., the sphere of his ideas and *Weltanschauung*. The intellectualization of a myth and its transference into the sphere of cognitive processes led to a situation where thinking and faith in mythological fictions were equated with one another. Strictly

⁹ “Anthropologists interested in thought may have mistaken a difference in the content of thought for a difference in mode of thought. Magical thinking does not distinguish one culture from another. Resemblance, not co-occurrence likelihood, is a fundamental tool of the everyday (‘savage’) mind. Most of us have a ‘savage’ mentality much of the time” (R. Shweder, “Likeness and Likelihood in Everyday Thought: Magical Thinking in Judgments About Personality”, *Current Anthropology*, 18 (1973) 638).

¹⁰ E. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, Vol. 1. London, 1871, 284 ff.

speaking, the whole complex of ideas connected with mythological thinking has been based on this confusion up to the present.

What did this concept designate in the second half of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries? As a rule, it was something deprived of the principal features of scientific thinking (critical, abstract and logical), a form of child-like thinking. But a qualitatively different type of thinking was not yet in question, rather its early stage, something backward and possessing very limited knowledge. At the same time, one would look in vain for any terminological definiteness in this concept, or for some correspondence to what modern psychology understands by thinking. Tylor himself probably wrote more often about imagination, fantasy and faith in the universally animated nature, than about mythological thinking.¹¹ Lang reduced mythical thinking to animism and totemism, i.e., to forms of religion and not of thinking.¹² The Russian scholar Potebnja called mythical that type of thinking which does not distinguish image from meaning.¹³

Paraphrasing Potebnja, we could say that these views on the origins of myth were not totally false simply because they were extremely inconsistent. Even one of the founders of experimental psychology, W. Wundt, wrote about mythical thinking without drawing clear distinctions between consciousness, notion and apperception;¹⁴ he eventually reduced mythical thinking to an imagination based on emotions, affects and aspirations, which is in essence near to the truth, if we speak of myth and not of thinking. At the same time Wundt, who was already rejecting the preceding intellectualistic theories, managed to formulate their common defect: “sie fassen das mythologische Denken als ein Gewebe intellektueller Vorgänge auf, die entweder eine Deutung der Erscheinungen versuchen oder aber auf den Erfolg in Unternehmungen... gerichtet sind.”¹⁵ Similarly the Russian scholar Lange suggested that the mistake of these theories, including that of Wundt, is the following: “they look for the psychological route of animism in a man’s cognitive functions, whereas it is in his actions, feelings and will.”¹⁶

On the whole the development of psychology was accompanied by a deviation from intellectualistic interpretations and by a concentration on the emotional, the volitional and the unconscious sphere of the human mind. Already at the very beginning of the 20th century one of the founders of French psychology, Ribot, strongly emphasized that myth is a product of pure imagination, not controlled by reason, and that its creation is often unconscious and

¹¹ Ibid., 314 f., 417 ff.

¹² A. Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*. London 1887.

¹³ А.А. Потебня, *Из записок по теории словесности*. Харьков 1905, 406.

¹⁴ W. Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie*, Bd. 4: *Mythus und Religion*. Leipzig, 1905, 55 ff.

¹⁵ Ibid, 57.

¹⁶ Н.Н. Ланге, *Теория Вундта о начале мифа*. Одесса 1912, 6.

strongly influenced by the affective elements of the psyche.¹⁷ Thus myth was steadily losing its right to be a kind of primitive science or even cognitive process.

The old views on the “savage’s mind”, dominant (though not totally) in anthropology and ethnography, were also undergoing essential changes. Here one should specially mention the book of Fr. Boas, who had wide experience through contacts with representatives of preliterate cultures. With a number of other scholars, Boas considered that the ability to think logically was shared by all the members of the human race: “the functions of the human mind are common to the whole of humanity”.¹⁸ Sternberg, who spent many years among the people of Siberia, puts it similarly: “the thinking apparatus of a ‘savage’ is arranged in the same way as our own and his process of thinking follows the same laws as that of civilised man.”¹⁹

Yet at that very time, while the ideas of mythical thinking seemed to be fading away, a book by the French philosopher Lévy-Bruhl appeared, where he, more systematically than anybody before him, tries to prove the thesis of a qualitative difference between primitive and modern thinking.²⁰ A number of works devoted to these questions appeared later,²¹ and their translation into many European languages promoted his ideas and attracted interest to these problems.²²

Lévy-Bruhl drew on material which was not exclusively mythological, but rather so-called collective notions (Durkheim’s term), i.e. religious beliefs; he and his adherents thought however that a study of myths would lead to the same results. The main features of primitive thinking according to Lévy-Bruhl are the following: it does not distinguish between an object and a subject; it does not submit to the law of contradiction (the principal law of logic); it acts according to a law of mystical participation, i.e. any reason can lead here to any consequence. Well acquainted with anthropological and psychological literature, Lévy-Bruhl of course did not confine himself to repeating the old theses; he contributed a number of new ideas and thereby gave grounds for most of the arguments against his conception.

First, Lévy-Bruhl attributed the above-mentioned features of primitive thinking only to collective notions, and not to the individual human psychology and its manifestations, for example, in practical activity. This activity he considered to correspond to modern patterns. But if a primitive man could in principle think rationally, would it not be natural for him to display this ability just where it was necessary, i.e. in economic activity, and not where it was quite unnecessary and often even impossible, i.e. in the creation of myths?

¹⁷ T. Ribot, *Essai sur l’imagination créatrice*. Paris 1900, 99 ff.

¹⁸ Fr. Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man*. New York 1911, 2nd ed. 1938, 135.

¹⁹ Л. Штернберг, *Первобытная религия в свете этнографии*. Ленинград 1936, 2.

²⁰ L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*. Paris 1910.

²¹ L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La Mentalité primitive*. Paris 1922; *L’Ame primitive*, Paris 1927.

Second, in line with many psychologists Lévy-Bruhl noted the important role of emotional and affective moments in the formation of religious notions. So it would be natural to expect them to be very illogical. He was however very much surprised that the myths and beliefs of Indians did not correspond to the rules of the Aristotelian syllogism!

Third, Lévy-Bruhl himself specified several times that some notions subordinated to the law of participation also exist in our culture, and that our mental activity is both rational and irrational. His opponents emphasised the same point and adduced a number of examples from European cultures, demonstrating the same lack of logic as in the views of primitive peoples. Thus what seemed to Lévy-Bruhl to be just a detail which by no means moderated the opposition between two types of thinking turned out in reality to be a universal component of the human mind.

Anthropologists in general received Lévy-Bruhl's ideas rather critically. One of the leading American anthropologists, P. Radin, expressed his opinion very definitely. Presenting a wealth of material in his book, which refutes the main ideas of Lévy-Bruhl, he concluded that only much more complete study of primitive culture would show clearly "how erroneous has been the older contention so unfortunately revived by Professor Lévy-Bruhl's well known but completely misleading work, that the mentality of primitive man differs intrinsically from our own, and only then will we fully understand that what differentiates us from him is the written word and the technique of thinking elaborated on its basis."²³

Under the influence of criticism, Lévy-Bruhl modified his theory more and more and eventually rejected it, emphasising in his posthumously published notebooks the unity of the main features of human thinking.²⁴ But ideas connected with mythical thinking continued to develop, displaying a growing tendency to expand and the ability to coexist with the most diverse streams of thought. Since the 1930's, these ideas have become especially popular in the Soviet scholarship, so the main part of the following material deals with the works of Soviet scholars.

Special interest in the theory of primitive mentality was connected at this time with the figure of N. Marr, the official head of Soviet linguistics during the 20's and 30's. A gifted linguist and philologist, Marr tried to combine his (wholly fantastic) theory on the origin and development of language with Marxist doctrine, according to which human history is divided into socio-economic formations: primitive-communistic, slave-owning, feudal, etc. Seeing in the theory of primitive mentality a support for his own views on the phasic development of language and thought, he promoted the translation of Lévy-Bruhl's books into Russian, and

²² On the influence of Lévy-Bruhl's ideas on classical scholars see: G. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy*. Cambridge 1966, 3 ff.

²³ P. Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*. New York, 1926, 387.

his monopolistic position in scholarship made the study of them almost obligatory. Further steps were taken by his students and followers, who tried to find some specific mode of thought in the cultures they studied. These modes were not necessarily called mythical or primitive, but rather according to the epoch they could be called oriental,²⁵ ancient²⁶ etc. Their characteristics, however, on the whole concur with the main features of mythical thinking in the old theories: each time a special mode of thought was postulated, qualitatively different from the modern one.

At the beginning of the 1950's Marr's totally dominant theory was subjected to unexpected and ceaseless criticism by Stalin and proclaimed to be false. But in spite of the unscientific methods and consequences of this so-called "discussion of language", like all Stalinistic campaigns, Soviet linguistics had the chance to go back to Indo-European studies, which Marr had not admitted as scientific theory at all. It could have been expected that together with Marrism the ideas of the phasic development of human thinking would also disappear into oblivion. But the subsequent era in Soviet humanities showed that the short-lived alliance with Marxism and Marrism did not at all discredit the theory of mythical thinking. In the 1960's, when G. Lloyd wrote that this hypothesis had long been discredited,²⁷ it began in fact to develop with new strength, although in a modified form. As mythical thinking is found not only in oriental and ancient, but also in medieval,²⁸ and eventually in modern culture,²⁹ the ideas of its phasic character are gradually moved aside, and the belief in the universality of this phenomenon is expressed more and more often.

The development of these views seems to be rather consistent. If the specific features of primitive culture were explained as a special way of thinking, what is to prevent the extrapolation of this principle to other epochs and the acknowledgement of the existence of oriental, ancient or medieval thinking? Such a way of reasoning should logically lead to explaining different facts of culture through special types of thinking: Gothic, romantic, expressionist, etc. Works on alchemic, anagrammatic and cosmogonic thinking have already appeared,³⁰ and this list could be continued.

²⁴ L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Carnets*. Paris 1949, 129–132.

²⁵ Первобытное мышление в свете яфетической теории и философии. *Язык и литература*, 3 (1929).

²⁶ О.М.Фрейденберг, *Поэтика сюжета и жанра. Период античной литературы*. Ленинград.

²⁷ Lloyd, *Op.cit.*, 5.

²⁸ A. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, London, 1977 (Russ. ed. 1972); М.И.Стеблин-Каменский. *Миф*. Ленинград 1976.

²⁹ В.В.Иванов, Об одной параллели к гоголевскому Вию, *Труды по знаковым системам* 5, Тарту 1971; В.Н.Топоров, Поэтика Достоевского и архаические системы мифологического мышления, *Проблемы поэтики и истории литературы*, Саранск 1973.

³⁰ See, for instance: В.Л.Рабинович. *Алхимия как феномен средневековой культуры*. Москва, 1976).

The paradox of this new stage is that the adherents of these ideas became a liberal and Western-oriented part of Soviet humanities, who did not share the official Soviet ideology and even rejected it. Nevertheless, they inherited one characteristic Marxist feature (which in this respect was a typical 19th-century system), that is, a predisposition to total and mono-causal explanations. If Marxism claimed to explain the culture of any epoch by means of the respective mode of production, now this culture was explained with respective mode of thinking: primitive, oriental, mythical, or medieval.

Modern protagonists of mythical thinking, developing the old theory to a state of *nec plus ultra*, have hardly contributed anything new to it. More than a hundred years ago Potebnja wrote that myth and metaphor are quite different things: a metaphor implies the understanding of difference between image and meaning, and “for a man, for whom a myth ‘cloud-cow’ is actual, the simultaneous calling of a cloud ‘a cow’ is the most exact description that can ever exist... The appearance of a metaphor in a sense which implies the realisation of a difference between image and meaning is the disappearance of myth.”³¹ We find the same idea in Lotman and Uspensky, who considered that when a myth says “the world is a horse”, then the people who created it really believed the world was a horse. “One should emphasize the principal difference between myth and metaphor... in the mythological text itself a metaphor as such is, strictly speaking, impossible.”³²

In spite of an apparent closeness of views, Potebnja’s position seems to be more consistent. A hypothetical example adduced by him concerns a very ancient time, when the level of knowledge was so low that a man could not think in any other way but identifying a cloud with a cow. Lotman and Uspensky quote a definite text: the Upanishads, the most ancient of them going back to the 8th-6th centuries BC. Are we supposed to believe that on the eve of the appearance of Indian philosophy the authors of the Upanishads still saw no difference between a cloud and a cow, the world and a horse? Calling the Upanishads an *a priori* mythological text, the authors most probably suppose that there are no metaphors in it, only identifications. Then what about the Homeric epic, contemporary with the Upanishads — does it also not contain any metaphors yet or has it already no myths?

On such a question Potebnja, who studied the poetics of the “Iliad”, would answer definitely that there were metaphors in Homer, because according to his view the period of mythical thinking was over by that time (though its traces still existed). The conception of Lotman and Uspensky implies that this period is in fact the whole history of mankind. It remains unclear, how poetry could coexist in the same texts with mythical thinking, which in principle does not allow it, and on the ruins of which it had to be born. Finally, when was

³¹ Потебня. *Op. cit.*, 590.

poetry born? When did it become clear that a cloud and a cow are to some extent different things? I cannot imagine the cognitive level of a man who has not yet understood this.

It seems strange now that Lévy-Bruhl attached such great importance to the views of the Bororo Indians who identified themselves with parrots, asserting this seriously. But what does “seriously” mean here? Such statements are not logical identities (not even primitive logical), but a belief which defies any logic. Best of all, the sense of these words can be estimated according to the conclusions the Bororo drew from them, or better still, conclusions they did *not* draw. It is difficult to suppose that an Indian would consider quite natural a situation in which his wife became covered with parti-coloured feathers, lived on a tree and laid eggs.³³ It is quite obvious that such statements do not burden a man with such obligations and restrictions as logical identities do, and therefore are not the same. Self-identification of the Bororo with parrots has appeared not as a result of a cognitive act, but under the influence of value orientation; this means that mythical signs uniting them are acknowledged in some sense as more essential than the “external” distinctions, which are clear to everybody. This, however, as A. Saicev has noted, is the fundamental difference between thinking and even very staunch religious notions: the first must be consistent (even if people are not very eager to use it consistently), the second, even in principle, cannot be consistent.³⁴

Explaining the ubiquitous character of mythical thinking and its ability to transfer across the centuries the archaic world-view models of ancient hunters and shepherds, Lotman and Uspensky write: “In spite of all the variety of concrete manifestations, mythologism to a certain extent can be observed in very different cultures... The corresponding forms can represent a relic phenomenon or a result of regeneration.”³⁵ If this is a psychological explanation, what is meant by “relic phenomenon” or the “result of regeneration”? If a “cultural mechanism” is in question, then such an explanation does not clarify anything either.

It is interesting that the very aspiration to localise mythical thinking must meet Lotman and Uspensky's principal objections: “One can note that from the formal point of view (digressing from the essence of the problem), the very principle of spatial or temporal localisation of mythical thinking corresponds to that same mythological space concept which was mentioned above. And *vice versa* the admission of mythologism as a typologically universal phenomenon would completely correspond to a conventionally logical picture of the

³² Ю.М.Лотман. Миф – имя – культура, *Труды по знаковым системам* 6, Тарту 1973), 293.

³³ Cf.: “The natives’ own statements of literal belief in totemic myths, while important, must not be taken too seriously by investigators... No contemporary native would treat totemic animals as clan relatives in all respects” (J.L. Fischer, “The sociopsychologic analysis of folktales”, *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963) 244).

³⁴ А.И.Зайцев, Миф: религия и поэтический вымысел, *Жизнь мифа в античности*, Москва, 1988, 280.

³⁵ Лотман, Успенский, *Op. cit.*, 292.

world”.³⁶ The authors themselves are probably drawn to such a picture, but we are not going to digress from the essence of the problem and will conclude: if Tylor and Lévy-Bruhl supposed that the notions of Australian aborigines imply some special type of thinking, then according to the new evidence, they themselves were not free from the “relics of mythologism”, because they tended to localise it spatially and temporally!

Almost all the modern works devoted to mythical or other type of thinking are characterised by one specific feature. The psychologisation of history is undertaken in these works practically without any appeal either to the evidence that is considered to be generally acknowledged in modern psychology, or to what it says about thinking in general and specifically about primitive or mythical thinking.³⁷ Though there is no generally accepted definition of thinking among psychologists, cognitive psychology understands it as “the usage of information on something given in order to obtain something new” or in other words “going beyond the information given”.³⁸ Information is understood here as something that reduces uncertainty in the cognitive process and helps to choose the most viable alternatives in solving problems.

One can therefore conclude that the creation of a myth is not a process of thinking, and mythological images and notions do not contain any information which could even to some extent reduce the uncertainty in our knowledge of the objects they are connected with — if any real objects at all are in question. It does not make any difference whether the Earth is lying on three elephants, or on a whale, or on a turtle; whether the sun is a boat, a chariot or a heavenly eye: any of these images is equally suitable for a myth and equally unsuitable for a real cognition. If a myth contains some information about real objects, for instance, the myth about the Argonauts, it is obvious, that it appeared as a result of direct acquaintance with the object, and not as a result of myth-making.

Myth-making has quite a different purpose than the cognitive process and it functions according to quite different laws. The classical study of myth, which did not try to support popular theories, traditionally regarded myth as a result of imagination, departing from the facts of everyday experience and acquiring a form of narration.³⁹ A myth, which as such is close to artistic creation, should be fascinating and interesting; as a work of art, it can be

³⁶ Ibid., 295.

³⁷ Sporadic references to Vygotsky and Piaget can be rather confusing, since both of them did not accept the Lévy-Bruhl’s concept of “primitive mentality”. A. Luria, the pupil and follower of Vygotsky, noted that if primitive man had thought according to Lévy-Bruhl, he would not have lived longer than a day. See: A.R. Luria. *The Making of Mind*. Cambridge (Mass.) 1979, 58–80.

³⁸ J.S. Bruner, *Beyond the Information Given. Studies in the Psychology of Knowing*. New York 1973, 218 ff.

³⁹ H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*. New York 1959, 10 f.

beautiful and horrible, but it must not and cannot be rational and logical, and that is why it is senseless to compare it with the results of scientific thinking.

The hypothesis of a special primitive mentality is also not supported by modern psychology. The American psychologists Cole and Scribner, who experimentally verified the hypothesis that different ways of thinking are inherent to different cultures, formulate their conclusions in the following way: “thus far there is no evidence for different *kinds* of reasoning processes such as the old classic theories alleged — we have no evidence for a ‘primitive logic’... *We are unlikely to find cultural differences in basic components of cognitive processes.* While we cannot completely rule out this possibility, there is no evidence, in any line of investigation that we have reviewed, that any cultural group wholly lacks a basic process such as abstraction, or inferential reasoning, or categorisation”.⁴⁰ Bruner concludes the same: “In short, some environments push cognitive growth better, earlier, and longer than others. What does not seem to happen is that different cultures produce completely divergent and unrelated modes of thought. The reason for that must be the constraint of our biological heritage”.⁴¹

The reason for intercultural differences in the mode of reasoning obviously lies far beyond the limits of mythology. The results of cross-cultural studies carried out in this field bring us to the conclusion, which Radin had already reached in the 1920’s: *the decisive factor, changing the character of cognitive process, is school education, based on the written language.* Even the shortest period of school education (not more than a year) is enough to enable a grown-up, who experienced beforehand significant difficulties in solving formal logical problems and in distinct verbalisation of his knowledge, to make serious progress in this direction.⁴²

Concerning classical antiquity, the hypothesis of another mode of thought looks very unconvincing and even paradoxical. Is it worth remembering that Greek culture was already literate in the 8th century BC, and that Zeno of Elea, Aristotle and Euclid wrote their works not for us, but for their contemporaries? These examples are of course trivial, but one can find thousands of other examples which demonstrate the existence in Greek culture of generally accepted authorities, whose thinking conforms to the strictest standards of rational reasoning. To be sure, the prevalence of written culture, development of philosophy and science, almost universal literacy of the free male population — all this did not bring about the disappearance of mythology, though it strongly reduced its cultural significance. After the 5th century BC the normal meaning of the word *μῦθος* became “an unreliable story about some-

⁴⁰ M. Cole, S. Scribner, *Culture and Thought: A Psychological Introduction*. New York 1974, 170, 193.

⁴¹ Bruner, *Op. cit.*, 391.

thing". The appearance of allegorical interpretations of myths in the 6th century BC means that many people already did not believe in their literal meaning.

Though in a wide strata of society this faith has never completely disappeared, there is no reason to assert that all the Greeks reverently believed in everything the myths said. As evidence examined by Huizinga shows, it is not true even for much more primitive cultures.⁴³ But the most important point is that Greek mythology did not play any decisive role in the life of society and was never used as a guide to action. It is difficult to find even one sphere of human activity, vitally important for the normal functioning of society, which would find itself under the prevailing influence of mythology.⁴⁴ Mythology was expressed most vividly in the Greek theatre and fine arts, but here also one can speak only of the themes, plots and images of traditional myths, and not about the problems, set or solved by the Greek playwrights, sculptors and artists.

Mythological narrations in ancient Rome, owing to the specific features of Roman religion,⁴⁵ were so few and poor that they could not play any significant role in culture. Such a situation is, by the way, not uncommon: we should remember the Slavs or certain Baltic peoples, whose culture not only had not created any developed mythological systems, but were also very poor in myths in the proper sense of the word.⁴⁶

There were, undoubtedly, some cultures where mythological notions, supported by the authority of religion, played a great role in world-view, but it is quite obvious that the empirical mode of comprehension of the world, adequate to everyday situations, had to dominate, otherwise man would never have survived. The majority of people were occupied not with magic rites or myth-making, but with economic activity, where rational perception is a hard necessity, because logic is imposed here by the situation itself. Though everyday life leaves enough room for a lot of irrational actions, they can dominate neither the life of an individual (if he is not insane), nor the life of any society, without leading to disastrous consequences.

M. Steblin-Kamensky, admitting the existence of mythical thinking, considered faith in the reality of one's own fantasies to be its main feature.⁴⁷ Yet there is no necessity to postulate on this ground a different mode of reasoning, since this feature is to some extent characteristic of the people of any culture. Half a century ago Rose wrote that the more civilised a man is, the more apt he is either to reason, or, if not, at least to realise when he is not reason-

⁴² Luria, *Making the Mind*, 63 ff.

⁴³ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. London 1971, chapter 1.

⁴⁴ Зайцев, *Op. cit.*, 282–293.

⁴⁵ H. Usener, *Götternamen*. Bonn 1896, 73 ff.

⁴⁶ A. Bruckner, *Starożytna Litwa. Ludy i bogi*. 2nd ed. Olsztyn 1979; H. Lowmianski, *Religia słowian i jej upadek (w. VI–XII)*, Warszawa 1979.

⁴⁷ Стеблин-Каменский, *Op. cit.*, 4 f., 29 f., 64.

ing but imagining.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, it is difficult to agree now with his thought, observing the great popularity of mysticism, magic, astrology, different “oriental teachings”, etc. in modern culture. The mass suicide of almost one thousand Americans in the jungles of Guyana shows that in the modern forms of religiosity there is much more irrationality than in Greek religion, at least in its classical period.

The theory of mythical thinking has already been many times proclaimed to be dead. As G. Kirk put it in the 1970’s, “deprived of support from dreams (not a form of thought) and primitive mentality (a chimera) ‘mythical thinking’ can be clearly seen for what it is: the unnatural offering of a psychological anachronism, an epistemological confusion and a historical red herring”.⁴⁹ But again and again we see attempts to explain the variety of culture forms with the help of different modes of reasoning,⁵⁰ and Soviet (now already former Soviet) scholarship is not at all an exception here nor a kind of fossil.⁵¹ Not only does the falsely interpreted principle of historicism, which degenerated into the relativisation of everything except its own slogan πάντα ῥεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει, leads in this direction. The temptation to take the difference in content of thought as a difference in mode of thought is, so it seems, so strong, that we should not expect a complete disappearance of such views in the near future.

I suppose, moreover, that these attempts are also connected with a now rather fashionable now kind of relativism, which seems to take its origin in the polemic against the Eurocentrist contempt towards alien cultures. At that time a conviction was born that these cultures were not to be judged on the basis of our criteria. In order to understand some other culture, one should get used to it, get the feel of it, or as Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky put it, “one should enter the soul of primitive peoples and begin to think and to believe as they did.”⁵²

This relativism calls us to follow a Papuan and not to distinguish the natural from the supernatural, if we want to understand anything in Papuan culture. The same relativism together with an attachment to picturesque archaism convinces us that the Greeks also did not distinguish it, although the Greek terms themselves, τὰ θεῖα καὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα (respectively *res divinae* and *res humanae* in Latin) demonstrate the opposite. However, the more the studied culture differs from ours, the less chance we have of carrying out this psychological operation of getting a feel of it, remaining at the same time within our scientific position. In this case all our humanities appear to be helpless and useless outside the European culture of the last two

⁴⁸ Rose, Op. cit., 10 f.

⁴⁹ G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*. New York 1975, 286.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, the recent book of a prominent Russian orientalist: И.М.Дьяконов, *Архаические мифы Востока и Запада*. Москва 1990.

⁵¹ It should be taken into account also that the works of such adherents to this stream as Gurevich, Lotman, V. Ivanov, or Toporov are quite popular among their Western colleagues.

⁵² Д.И.Овсяннико-Куликовский, *Психология мифа и первобытных верований*. С.–Петербург 1908, 41, 44.

or three centuries. But is this really so? Is autobiography the best sort of historical description? Are “understanding” and “getting a feel of something” the same thing? And is it really necessary to believe in Zeus and Athena in order to study the Greek religion? The understanding of foreign culture has really nothing to do with rejection of one’s own scientific criteria. A return to the Presocratic principle “like cognizes like” would actually throw us back to the 6th century BC.⁵³

⁵³ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Mr. A.H. Thompson for his generous help in improving my English.