

Myth and Origins: Men Want to Know

José Manuel Losada

Universit  Complutense, Madrid, Spain

Starting with a personal definition of “myth”, this paper seeks to substantiate the claim that every myth is essentially etiological, in the sense that myths somehow express a cosmogony or an eschatology, whether particular or universal. In order to do that, this study reassesses Classical and Judeo-Christian mythologies to revisit and contrast the narratives of origin—of the cosmos, of the gods and of men—found in ancient polytheism and in Judeo-Christian monotheism. Taking into consideration how these general and particular cosmogonies convey a specific understanding of the passage of time, this article does not merely recount the cosmogonies, theogonies, and anthropogonies found in the *Bible* and in the works of authors from Classical Antiquity, but it also incorporates a critical commentary on pieces of art and literature that have reinterpreted such mythical tales in more recent times. The result of the research is the disclosure of a sort of universal etiology that may be found in mythology which, as argued, explains the origins of the world, of the gods, and of men so as to satisfy humankind’s ambition to unveil the mysteries of the cosmos. Myth thus functions in these cases as a vehicle that makes it possible for man to return the fullness of a primordial age, abandoning the fleeting time that entraps him and entering a time still absolute.

Keywords: mythology, myth criticism, cosmogony, theogony, anthropogony, *Bible*, *Genesis*, Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, *The Saga/Fugue of J. B.* (G. Torrente Ballester), Michel Tournier, *The Erl-King* (Michel Tournier)

Introduction

I will begin with a personal definition: Myth is an oral story, symbolic, dynamic, and apparently simple, of an extraordinary event with transcendent and personal referents, which accounts for a social stratification, initially lacks any historical testimonial, is composed of a series of constant or invariable cultural semantic elements, reducible to themes; and of a nature that is conflictive (requiring a test), functional (transmitting common values and beliefs, providing factual schemas, rites, and actions), and etiological (expressing in some fashion a cosmogony or eschatology, either particular or universal).

Myth seeks out the original meaning of the world; it wants to know. A stone in the middle of the desert, the reproduction of a rare species, or human life, require an explanation that can satisfy the thirst for knowledge. Myth considers and interprets events in space and time, especially those that are furthest-removed. Paradoxically, only in this way does myth also comprehend the present. Like empirical science, but in a different way, myth gives sense to the world through causes and effects. All myth is an etiology.

When myth explains origins or a new beginning, it expounds a cosmogony; when it explains an ending, it expounds an eschatology. Both can be either universal or particular.

Each cosmogony, in turn, can be more or less general: It can explain the origins of the universe, of the gods, or of men.

My talk will follow similar lines, discussing the beginning of the cosmos (cosmogony in the strict sense), of the gods (theogonies in the broad sense), and of men (in ancient polytheism as well as in Judeo-Christian monotheism).

To this interpretation of events in time, one should add the concept of time itself according to each culture. The Greeks conceived of time as a cyclical process. There is no lack of examples in Heraclites, Empedocles, Hesiod, Plato, Aristotle... On this point the ancient Greek and Eastern cultures coincide: The ancient cosmogonic systems of Egypt, Babylon, and India also sustain the reversibility of time and the immanence of the gods in the world. The case of Judeo-Christian culture is quite different; it stipulates a successive time in accordance with a divine process of creation, maturation, and the establishment of a kingdom of a sole God transcendent to the world. For this reason, it seems logical to dissociate the polytheistic from the monotheistic religions in the following analysis.

Cosmogony

The basic origin of the world is a phenomenon that exceeds all our intelligence and imagination. To explore historical events in the world differs from exploring its origins. Cosmogonic myths can end up disappointing, if analyzed from a rationalist perspective. Nevertheless, cosmogonies have enjoyed an important position since the most ancient times. We should not, then, use cold reason to stress their deficiencies, but rather should appreciate their truths and suggestions.

The Makeup of the Cosmos in Polytheistic Religions

All polytheistic cosmogonies essentially coincide in the beginning: the passing from chaos to the cosmos, from disorder to order.

This passing is a gestation that occurs in a time different from our own: sacred time. Primitive cultures remember, through regular representations, the cosmogonic act *par excellence*, creation. But these accounts always begin from chaos; the sacredness of what precedes, and the impotence of human imagination, do not allow them to go back any further in time.

Creation, for these cultures, does not mean a production from nothing, a radical idea unique to monotheism. When myth speaks of the genesis of things or the birth of the cosmos, it is speaking of a metamorphosis (Cassirer, 1972). All polytheistic cosmogony presupposes a substratum which is more or less determined and generally perceptible, in which the mythical change intervenes.

I will now look at various representative examples of this cosmogonic typology, founded on the passing from chaos to cosmos.

Firstly, according to the Hindu story *Vayu Purana*, due to a severe heat, water, a hitherto unformed and limitless wave, feels the desire to reproduce and produces a golden egg from which emerges the Purusa or supreme male, in the form of Brahma. His awakening, now as an adult creator, marks the disappearance of that chaos or primordial material (Biardeau, 1969; Dauphiné, 1988). This is very similar to the birth of the Egyptian god Râ who emerged from an egg which had been spawned from primordial water (Cassirer, 1972). In the *Rig Veda*, *Another Story from India*, the greatest artisan ritually drives into the ground the head of the serpent Vrtra

who symbolizes chaos, the obscure and amorphous. Decapitating Vrtra is equivalent to a creation which puts an end to the time of chaos (Eliade, 1969).

Secondly, the Phoenicians also begin from primeval indistinctness, as Hegel remembers:

Los principios de las cosas son un caos, en el que los elementos aparecían revueltos y sin desarrollar, y un espíritu del aire. Este embarazó al caos y engendró de él una materia viscosa, que llevaba en su seno las fuerzas vivas y las semillas de los animales. Mediante la mezcla de esta materia viscosa con la materia del caos y en la fermentación provocada por ella, se separaron los elementos. (1955, pp. 83-84)

Thirdly, Hesiod's *Theogony* explicitly mentions Chaos as a beginning:

Verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundations of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of the snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros, fairest among the deathless gods. (2007, verses 116-120, p. 4)

Before chaos, there was nothing; after, everything arises. There is no conceptualization regarding about the origins of this chaos, nor any clarification about how the earth arose from the chaos. These problems are relegated to silence.

Some Reflections on Chaos are thus needed. The etymology of the word "chaos" is linked to the Greek root "χα" (to be open), and it designates, "simply put, empty space, an opening, or abyss of undefined wandering". Over time, and as a consequence of a false derivation from the verb "χ'εω" (to turn), chaos designates "the confused and disorganized mass of elements in space". Even then, chaos continues to be purely a cosmic principle, without any divine quality. The passage from chaos to cosmos indicates the passing from the incomprehensible to the comprehensible, from the unimaginable to the imaginable.

We do not know what chaos is. A primitive state of the universe, the preexisting universe... Any definition is unsatisfactory. We do know, however, what chaos is not. Neither an undifferentiated material, nor even a reality... chaos is a symbolic denomination; it is what human intelligence and imagination find when they seek to explain the origin of the universe (Diel, 1966, p. 110). What was there before? An unformed magma or mass? That limitless water of the Vedic cosmogony? But that undifferentiated material is still a reality. Our differentiating nature aspires to distinguish, and it comes across a symbol that has as much of the special as the temporal in negative: Chaos symbolizes what there was, in the absence of differentiable real material, before the ordered world existed. Properly said, chaos is the obscure. Just like creation, chaos is a mystery.

Like imaginative reason, myth offers a palpable representation of the possible. For this reason, cosmogonies make special emphasis on exposing the movement from the unimaginable and inconceivable universe to the formed and intelligible universe. In fact, this is what the term "cosmogony" means in the majority of cultures: the passing from the obscure to the manifest, namely, from chaos to cosmos.

Yet interestingly in Greek mythology, chaos lives alongside other beings. According to the Hesiodic text, the Earth and Love (*Gaia* and *Eros*) emerge from Chaos as the principal structuring elements of the cosmos: From Chaos are born Erebus and Night, the parents of Aether and Day. The Earth, in turn, gives birth to Uranus, the great mountains, and Pontus with his waves. The birth of Uranus means that the Earth has caused, unfolding herself, her male partner, the starry sky. Because he corresponds to Gaea-Earth, Uranus-Sky completely and closely covers her when he extends and envelops her. After the primitive tension, Chaos-Earth, follows the

equilibrium of Earth-Sky, whose symmetry transforms the world into a whole, a whole that is organized and closed unto itself, a cosmos (Vernant, 2007). Zoroaster places Mithra between two fundamental principles: He separates Ahriman (evil) from Ormuzd (good). These are indicators that creation has overcome its most critical period. In the break made by the Greek gods, as well as in the Persian separation of principles, one observes the end of the foundational activity of the cosmos, the beginning of its definitive stability. The cosmos is now organized.

The Makeup of the Cosmos in the Judeo-Christian Religious Tradition

This time I will begin with the first five verses of the first chapter of *Genesis*:

¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. ³And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. (*Genesis* 1: 1-5)

The second verse, just as in other cosmogonies, also mentions chaos (litterally "without form and void" and "darkness"), but it does not say that chaos was itself the beginning: Before that obscure and confused chaos God was—but concretely: God existed. Centuries-long reflection has deduced that this God does not create out of chaos, but out of nothing: *ex nihilo*. Differently from nihilism, where the idea of Nothing has its own essence, here, Nothing is "not to be", it is not anything positive or real, but pure negativity. To create in the proper sense means to make something have existence, to make it pass from non-being to being.

An apocryphal text, the *Syrian Apocalypse of Baruch*, delves into the details of this creation:

O thou who hast made the earth, hear me, thou who hast fixed the vault of heaven by thy word and hast made fast the height of it by thy spirit, thou who hast called into being from the beginning of the world things which did not previously exist... (Sparks, 1984, p. 852)

The divine word and spirit have the power to create from nothing. Creation *ex nihilo* excludes the possibility of either a spontaneous flow like the accumulation of creative forces—nor semi-creative forces, such as a demiurge—which produce the world from a primordial substratum (water, an egg). This type of creation adopts the idea of a pure act of creation by a personal subject:

...the mythical and religious conscience henceforth passed from the idea of a jumble of individual creative forces, infinite in number, to the idea of the pure act of creating itself which, to the degree by which it is grasped in its unity, makes the religious conscience push more and more towards the idea of one *subject* of creation.¹ (Cassirer, 1972, p. 243)

Biblical creation presupposes a divinity which is radically different from other divinities: The Judeo-Christian God is transcendent to the world—not a "part" thereof, like the Aristotelian unmoved mover—and the sole creator—not sharing creation, like in dualist or Manichean thought.

Directly opposed to creation *ex nihilo*, emanationism sustains the necessary and spontaneous origin from an infinite and immutable first substance. For Plotinus (c. 204-270), there emanates from the first principle or highest Good—the One—in virtue of its perfection and in a series of descending hypostases, the *Nous* (divine intelligence), *logos* (reason), from which in turn come forth the Soul of the world, which subdivides into higher

¹ The citation is translated by the author.

and lower. From the lower, there come Nature and the material universe, the origin of physical evil, the last trait in the scale of hypostasis but different on every point from the evil of the Gnostics or Manicheans: Physical evil has a positive aspect since it comes from the highest Good (Abrams, 1971). The divergence from creation *ex nihilo* is evident. Even while the One in Plotinus is also transcendent to the world, the concept of creation as a voluntary act coming from nothing disappears.

The third verse of *Genesis* contains a fundamental aspect for this creation: the word. The creator speaks: "And God said." Unlike the demiurge, an artisan who models a preexisting material, God pronounces his word and everything begins to exist.

It would be useful to explore further the simultaneity of the word and creation. In the text, we find a way of speaking applied to divine nature, as distinct from that applied to human nature. In divine creation, there is no series of events. The ordering of the days of the Biblical story ("the first day", "the second day") should not deceive us. This serialization is an anthropomorphism which imitates our way of speaking, and is utterly dependent on the temporary unfolding of our linguistic articulation: "The divine word creates the world, but it does not do it in a temporal order of creative thoughts and of days of the creation" (Gadamer, 1977). On the contrary, when the divine Logos speaks, it creates in a completely immediate way. In our temporal perception of the word, there are two successive events, one preceding and the other following; in divine reality, however, both are simultaneous. The main reason for this is that divine creation is pure, absolutely unconditioned, not even by time; potential and realization converge in a unique fashion in the same being.

One psalm, among so many, proclaims creation through the *logos*: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made" (Psalm 33:6).

We can find the most illuminating texts about the intimate relation between word and creation, in the book of *Proverbs* and in the first chapter of *The Gospel of John*.

We read in chapter eight of *Proverbs*:

²²The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. ²³Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. ²⁴When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. ²⁵Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth; ²⁶before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. ²⁷When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, ²⁸when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, ²⁹when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, ³⁰then I was beside him, like a master workman.

The speaker is Wisdom, who only a little before is personified ("I, wisdom," verse 12). Wisdom is prior to all creation, to the "earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world"; indeed, verses 27-30 attribute a power of creation to this divine wisdom which speaks.

The text from *The Gospel of John* begins thus:

¹In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
²He was in the beginning with God;
³all things were made through him,
and without him was not anything made that was made.

Again, any possible existence before God is completely excluded. Just as Wisdom in *Proverbs*, in *The Gospel of John* the Word (capitalized as in the text) acquires a personal nature and is identified with God (“was God”) by means of the incarnation of the Word. Furthermore, just as in *Genesis*, creation is the fruit of the Word (“all things were made through him”). In accordance with the text, Christian exegesis has later identified the Wisdom from the text of *Proverbs* with the person of Christ. Cosmogony is the creation of the *Logos*.

These personifications are not trivial. They confirm a central part of our definition of myth: the personal referent. Every mythical story introduces, sooner or later, a divine, angelic or human character. In this case, this does not imply that Christ is a myth, but that the stories are perfectly adapted to the mythical consciousness, less interested in the making *in abstracto* of the cosmos than for who made it or controlled it in the first place.

Verses 3-5 of *Genesis* hold a second fundamental aspect of creation: light.

The apocryphal *Book of Jubilees* also notes the creation of light at the very beginning:

For on the first day he created the heavens which are above and the earth [...], and the deep darkness and the light and the dawn and the morning and the evening. (Sparks, 1984, p. 14)

It seems logical that the light, with its consequent separation from the darkness, would be created before anything else: The order of days and nights corresponds to the frame in which the rest of creation can be included. Light is the condition that differentiates between things and it confirms the creation of space (the heavens and the earth): Only by means of light could we differentiate between created beings.

Light is in fact so important in this biblical context that later, again in *The Gospel of John*, it is identified with the divine Word (“the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world” (1:9), “I am the light of the world” (8:12)).

Torrente Ballester: Nothing and the Word

Later literature has frequently taken up these ancient texts, and has adapted them as needed. The origins of the ordered universe, in keeping with the above-mentioned various sources, have been an object of particular interest.

Accordingly, the cosmic egg, an illustration of the origins of the universe for the Egyptians and the Hindus, appears in the dialogue *Placides et Timeo*, but with a different angle. This encyclopedia from the second half of the 13th century comments on the possible analogies between the structure of the cosmos and an egg: Shell, membrane, white, and yolk can be assimilated to the firmament, the earth, the water, and living creatures. In the 16th century, a sonnet from the *Amours Diverses* by Ronsard compares the parts of an egg with those of the universe (“Je vous donne des œufs...”; “I give you some eggs”). But the medieval dialogue and the Renaissance poem reduce this myth to a *topos*, a literary motif. The enlightenment of the ancients is relegated to their ingenuity which sought to show the metaphorical analogy between the cosmos and an object. There is not a trace of the myth.

Even more noteworthy is Torrente Ballester’s modern way of subverting these myths and religious beliefs. Of particular interest are two texts from the fantasy novel *La saga/fuga de J. B. (The Saga/Fugue of J. B.)* which revisit the first chapter of *Genesis*. The first text explains the first proposition of the *Theocosmogony*, a work by the character Ignacio Castiñeira, in this way:

In the beginning was the Nothing. The Nothing will be in the end. Nothing would also be the means if nothing hadn't doubled over itself, thus engendering the gleaming proto-atom from which the Gods came.² (Torrente Ballester, 2010, pp. 167-168)

This invention of Castiñeira subverts two major texts from the Bible which have been discussed above: the first verse of *Genesis* ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth") and the first verse of *The Gospel of John* ("In the beginning was the Word"). Paradoxically, this Castiñeira's "nothing" is different from non-being. In the first place, it is without beginning or end, like God; and in the second place, its hermaphrodite aspect ("doubled over itself") transforms it into a maker of the classical *apeiron* from which the gods emerge. This "nothing" is an immanent god which is everything. *La saga/fuga* thereby launches cosmogonic pantheism founded on Nothing.

Another text from the same novel revisits *Genesis* 1, verses 3-5. When the protagonist asks "Do you seek the Philosopher's Stone?" Don Perfecto responds:

I seek the word that destroys what the *fiat* created, and the word that later allows for reconstructing it, organized in another fashion.³ (Torrente Ballester, 2010, p. 304)

Don Perfecto has shown his friend, the protagonist, the secret cellar where he hides piles of knick-knacks which have great symbolic meaning for his purpose. In explaining his motives for this storage, he alludes to the third verse of *Genesis* 1: "*fiat lux*". The alchemist, helped by his reading of "the signs of the Universe and the hieroglyphics of the cathedrals", aspires to the "*word*" that could burn and rejoin what the light fused at the beginning of time.

It has to be a hot, burning word, so that the Cosmos, transformed into light, might exceed through the power of heat that moment at which everything becomes light, that speed of vibration which, once overcome, inverts the whole process and *reintegrates everything*. (Torrente Ballester, 2010, p. 304)

A subsequent allusion to "Einstein's affirmations" shows that Don Perfecto researches the manner to fuse the universe that the divine word ("*fiat*") fissured. Of course, this is not a new theory of physics, nor even a material reintegration, but a spiritual one:

For this reason I need the second word, the one that starts up the reintegration, not of a boringly erotic Universe, as is the current one, but another, in which the sun moves thanks to a deliberate and rational, conscious act, and, with the sun, all other beings. (Torrente Ballester, 2010, pp. 304-305)

The two texts of Torrente Ballester are intimately related. The first, which refers to the first two verses of *Genesis* 1, concedes that Nothing has the divine capacity to found a new world; the second, which refers to verses 3-5, assigns this role to a word. In both cases, Torrente Ballester questions the canonic text: the first gives the creative ability to the pure negativity of Nothing; the second seeks a word which undoes what the first word did. In the first text, Nothing creates, in the second, a word un-creates creation. Both are subversive and complementary.

Theogony

Whether from chaos, from a primary material, or from nothing, cosmogony is an ordering of the world

² The citation is translated by the author.

³ The citation is translated by the author.

which turns into cosmos.

Greek Theogony

Let us begin with a text from Herodotus:

Of the origin of each deity, whether they have all of them always existed, as also of their form, their knowledge is very recent indeed. The invention of the Grecian theogony, the names, the honours, the forms, and the functions of the deities, may with propriety be ascribed to Hesiod and to Homer, who I believe lived four hundred years, and not more before myself. (Herodotus, 1836, p. 210)

We should not take these words literally. Neither Hesiod nor Homer has invented the gods: Greece had them since prehistoric times. To understand the text, it would be useful to stress the word “Theogony”, a concept which signals the “forms” and the “functions” of the gods. Hesiod represents the gods in an epic style precisely because their story was already previously developed. Similarly, Homer simply refers to the names of the gods as if they existed from days gone by. The story of the gods does not come, however, from the poems of Hesiod and Homer, but rather, thanks to these two poets, we know these gods and their qualities. Before them, the Greeks had an awareness of their gods, but it was obscure, chaotic, and intangible; thanks to them, they have a clear, effective, and poetic awareness. This reminds us that, in accordance with this definition, every myth is, by nature, an “oral story”:

The dark forge, the first place of production of mythology is located beyond all poetry, and the *foundation* of the history of the gods is not posed by poetry.⁴ (Schelling, 1998, p. 38)

Let us take the theogonic text *par excellence*: Hesiod’s *Theogony*. Through his cosmogony, where he narrates, as we have seen above, the apparition of the founding forces or elements of nature (Chaos, Gaea, Eros) and their descendents (Erebus and the Night, Aether and the Day, Uranus, the mountains and Pontus later on), the Greek poet proceeds to an extensive theogony, whose protagonists are three successive series of the offspring of Gaea-Uranus: the Titans Oceanus, Coeus, Crius, Hyperion, Iapetus, Theia, Rhea, Themis, Mnemosyne, Phoebe, Thetis, and Cronos; the Cyclops, Brontes, Steropes, and Arges; and the Hecatonchires, Cottus, Briareus, and Gyges (Hesiod, 1914, verses 132-153).

But this is still the first phase of this theogony. Before the Olympian gods appear, a first horrific event occurs. The simple-minded Uranus hardly knows anything but sexual activity. In fact, procreation matters little or not at all to him: As fast as his children are born, he hides them “in Gaea’s womb”. Every offspring of Uranus is immediately rejected. Indignant, Gaea produces from brilliant iron an enormous sickle and urges her children to insurrection. Panic takes hold of the young Titans, except for Cronos, the youngest and most astute, who is ready to take up the mission his mother imagined. No sooner said than done:

And Heaven came, bringing on night and longing for love, and he lay about Earth spreading himself full upon her. Then the son from his ambush stretched forth his left hand and in his right took the great long sickle with jagged teeth, and swiftly looped off his own father’s members and cast them away to fall behind him. (Hesiod, 1914, verses 176-182)

This feat by Cronos, the new sovereign, has cosmic consequences which are instructive about the etiology of cosmogonic myth. The Sky (Uranus) and the Earth (Gaea) are separated, the space is opened, new beings can be

⁴ The citation is translated by the author.

born and continue their natural course. Now that the impediment to all development is cleared away, the world can be populated and begin to be organized: This is the second phase of theogony.

But this organization is very tense. On the one hand, there are violence and fraud, the discord symbolized by the Erinyes and the Meliae who come forth from the “drops of blood” of the wound. On the other hand, there are sweetness and love, the concord symbolized by Aphrodite, born from the “white foam” of the remains of Uranus’s sexual organs. The mutilation of a god thus inaugurates an era which, although not utterly different from the previous, is more paradisiacal. When Uranus was united to Gaea, their amorous embrace, continuous and immediate, produced confusion between the two even as it condemned generation. Now, through the birth of Aphrodite, the amorous embrace means a union of lovers who are completely distinct from each other and who struggle between concord and discord.

This phase of the cosmos is still provisional. For the etiological purpose of this talk, a second horrific event is key. Facing the simplicity of Uranus, the Titans are always living in a state of alert: They fear that their control might be taken away and they intimidate Cronos into checking any possible uprising. Here one can see a major move from cosmogony to theogony. The cosmogonic myths show the relations between order and disorder. With the installation of the first king and the consequent battles for hegemony, the problem shifts towards the relations between order and power (Vernant, 2007). While the coarse Uranus impedes generation due to sexual inertia, Cronos and his brothers fear it due to political reasons: to avoid that any of the Uranus’ descendants may have a dignity amongst the immortals. This approaches the last phase of theogony: the epiphany of the Olympians.

There are six children of Rhea and Cronos: Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, Poseidon, and Zeus. As soon as they are born, their father devours them. Their mother thereafter concocts a plan to save their youngest. She gives birth to Zeus in secret, hides him in Crete, instead wrapping a stone in cloths, which the glutton Cronos gorges, confusing it with his son. Meanwhile, Zeus grows and becomes stronger. He will not only be called “great” and “powerful”, but also “prudent” and “observant”: His astuteness gives his victory over the power of his father.

Only two battles remain. The first is Titanomachy. Zeus, knowing he has inferior powers and allies, astutely earns the support of the Cyclops and the Hecatonchires: He frees the former from their chains, and promises nectar and ambrosia to the latter. Without the power of these new followers, the Olympians would have certainly succumbed to the assault of the Titans.

The second is Typhonomachy. Typhon, a dragon with 100 heads, embodies ancient disorder and, if he wins, reinstates primal chaos. Armed with thunder and lightning bolts, Zeus strikes him and drives him into Tartarus. In Hesiod, the defeat of Typhon marks the end of the works for sovereignty and the beginning of a new cosmos:

But when the blessed gods had finished their toil, and settled by force their struggle for honours with the Titans, they pressed far-seeing Olympian Zeus to reign and to rule over them, by Earth’s prompting. So he divided their dignities amongst them. (Hesiod, 1914, verses 881-885)

This is not the story of tyranny. To the contrary, Zeus’s supremacy is not at odds with justice. His gesture of distributing dignities dignifies himself: The kingdom of this god rests on the law.

This gesture also marks history. From the moment of Zeus’s rule over the other gods, the Titans disappear, and the history of the Greek gods commences, as Hesiod describes it until the end of his text. Yet of course, as Schelling says, with Zeus, Hellenic life begins and thereby Herodotus’ story as it described the beginning of

theogony, above.

Following this interpretation, then, it seems logical that Zeus and his allies won the day. The Titans symbolize the absence of progress: With them, there is no effort that makes the world turn. Zeus, on the contrary, with the wise advice of Gaea, makes possible both agriculture and navigation. *Works and Days*, a text that cannot be separated from the *Theogony*, adopts a hymn to the work of ploughing the earth, clearing the woods, and crossing the seas (Martín García, 2004).

We have thus passed through various phases; all of them are tragic but increasingly positive. In cosmogony, disorder has been substituted by order. In theogony, order is replaced by power and the rule of law.

Judeo-Christian “Theogony”

The texts from *Genesis*, *Proverbs*, and *The Gospel of John* mentioned above exclude all Judeo-Christian theogony: If God were created, he would not be God. Another text confirms the attribute of eternity which is characteristic of God. When Moses is guiding his sheep on Horeb, on Sinai, God calls him from the middle of a bush and says,

“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (*Exodus* 3: 6).

For Moses it is enough to trace his ancestral line, from his father to Abraham, to conclude that no one has created nor engendered God.

Directly God sends Moses to free the Israelites from Egyptian oppression. When Moses asks God the name he should give of who sent him, should he be asked, God responds:

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”. And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’”. (*Exodus* 3: 15)

The non-predicate usage of the verb to be (“I am”) is extremely significant. God defines himself as the necessary being, who owes to nobody and to nothing the being which is absolutely present in him and relatively present in all others.

Both this relationship with the patriarchs and this same absolute definition appear in *The Gospel of John*. At one point, Jesus affirms that Abraham had enjoyed seeing his glory, which provokes the incredulity of the Jews:

“You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”

Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” (*The Gospel of John* 8: 57-58).

In using precisely the same expression as the voice coming from the burning bush, Jesus asserts that he shares a divine nature with God the Father, the same one who addressed himself to Moses on Sinai.

Jewish culture and, in turn, Christian, mark a major milestone in thought about the origins of God. They propose an innovative concept to those pairs that provided explanations for previous generations (Gaea-Uranus, Rhea-Cronos): That theogonic myth has been struck down by monotheism (Riccœur, 2009).

Goya’s Saturn

Greco-Roman theogony has been adapted by art numerous times. My talk will focus now on Goya’s famed painting *Saturn Devouring His Children* (146 × 83 cm, 1820-1823, Prado Museum).

This title is just one among many which the painting has been given, after a much earlier engraving on the

same subject (20.2 × 14.7 cm, 1797-1798), and recovered from an oil on plaster.

Cronos, the Titan, whom the Greeks had inherited from the Eastern religions, is passed to the Romans under the name of Saturn. Among his many values—god of agriculture and of the Golden Age, of “black bile” or melancholia—the Saturn which Goya portrays is the infanticidal god whom Hesiod describes (1914, verses 454-468).

In 1636, Rubens had painted *Saturn Devouring His Son* for the Torre de la Parada, Phillip IV of Spain’s hunting-lodge in El Pardo palace. This oil recounts the moment in which the Titan, old and greying, tears out with his teeth the chest of one of his children, whose fragile look translates his agony just before his death.

Yet the similarity of the Rubens with Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Children* does not go beyond their mythological theme. There are four primary points of difference, two relating to characters, and two relating to structure and design:

(1) The Titan represented. More than a drawing, it is a series of ocher and gray colors in energetic, staccato brush-strokes, similar to saturated stains which emerge from the dark nothing. Saturn is a strong monster, with wild, disjointed eyes, white and tormented, with a prominent nose and enormous mouth, thin and decayed legs, distorted in his convoluted, imbalanced position, his hands tense.

(2) The child being devoured and who occupies the center of the composition. The fleshy fingers of the Titan seize him with force and lay into his flesh. He does not have the form of a child, but of an adult. Dead, he is an inert body, in contrast with the activity of his father. The blood is particularly noticeable—a simple red stain which surrounds his living flesh until it fills the Titan’s hands.

(3) Mutilation. The teeth of the cannibal have already mutilated a good portion of his victim’s body. Because of the framing and the lighting of the chiaroscuro, the Titan’s legs, submerged in darkness from the knee down, also seem mutilated. It helps to remember that the painting is found situated, in the Quinta del Sordo hall, alongside another oil on plaster, *Judith and Holofernes*, which also abounds in the theme of mutilation.

(4) The design. The figure of the Titan seizing his child emerges from a deep darkness. This dark background is echoed in the blackness of his mouth, an abyss to which the flesh of his child is doomed. Both bodies are lit by a blind light.

Rubens’ work excelled because of the precision of old Saturn’s features, the anguish of the child, the anatomic perfection of the bodies and the Venetian luminosity. The Flemish painter tells a mythological anecdote. Goya, nonetheless, with an incisive expressionism, transmits a sinister sensation of anguish less through what his energetic marks let us see, than through the suggestions made by the blood of a mutilated human body and the abysmal black of the background, of the monster’s mouth and eyes.

Anthropogony

We have seen how myths relate the birth of the cosmos, the Titans, and the gods. But the transcendence of these births and the developments that follow them would be limited, if the myths did not also relate the birth of man. In truth, every myth returns to one interest, man himself:

But myth is something beyond an explanation of the world, of history, and of destiny; it expresses, in terms of the world, seeing the otherworldly or the “second world”, the understanding that man has of himself with respect to the foundation and at the limits of his existence (Ricoeur, 2009).

The mythic man is “selfish” without shame.

The Creation of Man in Polytheistic Religions

Every religion, every mythology has produced, inherited, or adapted an anthropogonic tale.

An example. Berosus, a Babylonian priest of the 3rd century B.C., compiled, among the archives of the Esagila temple dedicated to the god Marduk, a curious anthropogony which we have received, in fragments, thanks to the compilation by Julius Caesar Scaliger, thereafter published in Fabricius’s *Bibliotheca Graeca*. There is the story of how the god Bel cuts off his own head, then the other gods unite his divided body and from this are men born, and for this reason do they have an intellect and divine mind:

The God removed his head, then the other gods of the earth joined the divided body, which had fallen onto the earth, and thence were men formed, from which cause they are furnished with an intellect and a divine mind.⁵ (Berosi, 1728, p. 189)

From among the classics, there is the case of Prometheus to bring for comparison. The son of Iapetus is famed for stealing fire from the prudent Zeus and mocking him in a sacrificial offering (Hesiod, *Works and Days* and *Theogony* respectively). Human beings benefit from both of these feats—they receive fire, hope, the sciences, and the arts—as Plato notes in his dialogue *Protagoras*, but they also gave rise to his martyrdom on a peak of the Caucasus (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*).

Prometheus also is important for being the creator of the human species; so says Horace in his *Odes* (1994, I, 16, verses. 13-16). The *Erotes* by the Pseudo-Lucian, which cites Menander, assure us that Prometheus created women (XXXVIII, 43, p. 558).

The evolution from the first writings (Hesiod, Plato, Aeschylus) and these later ones is significant. In the former, Prometheus mocks the gods and makes civilization possible. In the latter, the Titan appears as the material creator of man, the one who models the clay with his hands, before breathing life into it.

There is something interesting in this chronological order. The logical order would have been the reverse: first, life, then spiritual gifts. For commenters like Trousson, this is a gradual realization, a sort of materialization of Prometheus’s gift. I do not share this opinion. Whoever can do great feats, can do little ones too; and so logically to animate to a bit of clay, to give life, seems greater—*conditio sine que non*—than giving fire, or reserving for man the meat from sacrifices. In this way, Greco-Roman mythology is acting like Jesus in the wedding at Cana, who saves the best wine for the end, when the guests are already drunk.

The Creation of Man in the Bible

The creation story comes from the combination of two stories. The first last from *Genesis* 1:1 to *Genesis* 2:3. Although it comes first, it is written chronologically after the second. It uses the word “Elohim” to refer to God and was redacted by scribes from the priestly class, and so it is called the Elohist (E) or Priestly (P) story. After the creation of the cosmos, animal, and plant life, God creates human life:

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

⁵ The citation is translated by the author.

²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.⁶ (*Genesis*, 2007-2009, ch. 1.)

Three aspects of God characterize this passage: (1) one sole “God”; (2) a God who is Lord of all nature; and (3) a creator God.

Another three aspects of man also characterize it: (1) He is directly created by God; (2) he is created in God’s image; and (3) “man” comprises two genders of human beings, male, and female.

The text’s goal is clear: It seeks to preserve the unique belief of the Jewish religion from the contamination of other neighboring religions, in a moment critical to its development. In the face of the polytheism surrounding it, Judaism proposes the existence of one sole God, transcendent to the world, who establishes close bonds with his creation, since he has made it in his own likeness.

The second story is found from *Genesis* 2: 5-25, and is known as the Jahwist (J) text, because of the name it applies to God: “Yahweh Elohim”, Lord God. It brings to light the formation of man, first among all the rest of creation, even more than the E/P text. God fashions the man from soil (*adâmah*) like an artisan fashions a clay figure:

⁴In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens,

⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; [...]

⁷then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.⁷ (*Genesis*, 2007-2009, ch. II.)

Thereafter, God entrusts the man to Eden, forms the animals, also from soil, and creates the woman from a rib (or from the side) of the man. It is especially significant that God directly and transcendently (without division or emanation) creates man, who becomes a “living being” (*nefesh*), that is to say, a being given life by the divine breath of life.

From this second text and through a harmonization with Platonic doctrine, Christian doctrine decides on the composition of each man by a body, material and mortal, and a soul, of divine origin, spiritual, and immortal. Yahweh’s breath signals a relationship with the creator.

Michel Tournier: Restoring the Original Adam

The Erl-King, also known as *The Ogre (Le Roi des aulnes)*, shows an interesting individual reception of the Biblical creation story. This novel, which won the Prix Goncourt for Michael Tournier, reclaims the title of the famous eponymous poem by Goethe about a malevolent figure who takes a young boy to death. Abel Tiffauges, a Parisian mechanic, feels an ambiguous attraction to children; he is an ogre. He is also a good reader of the Bible:

Reading the beginning of the Book of Genesis, one is struck by a flagrant inconsistency that disfigures the venerable text. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he *him*; male and female created he *them*. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it...” This sudden transition from the singular to the plural is downright unintelligible, especially as the creation of the woman out of Adam’s rib does not occur till much later, in the second chapter of Genesis. (Tournier, 1972, p. 16)

⁶ See from <http://digitalcatholicbible.com>.

⁷ See from <http://digitalcatholicbible.com>.

This quotation is correct. The movement from the singular to the plural occurs when God speaks to the man and the woman to communicate his will. This transpires in the first Creation story, cited above (*Genesis* 1: 28).

By contrast, the appreciation of the woman and Adam's rib, is not correct. The creation of the woman occurs in the second story (*Genesis* 2: 22) which, as has been said, should be combined simultaneously with the first story—yet Abel Tiffauges seems to think it is all one continuous story. Because of this, he does not understand how the woman, whose creation appears later, could intervene from the beginning.

From this comes the protagonist's proposal for understanding the text:

But all is clear if one retains the singular throughout my quotation. "So God created man in his own image, that is, at once male and female... And God said to him, Be fruitful, multiply..." etc. Later he sees that the solitude implied by hermaphroditism is undesirable, so he puts Adam to sleep and takes from him not merely a rib, but all his feminine sexual parts, and makes these into an independent being. (Tournier, 1972, p. 30-31)

In order to preserve this one continuous story that he imagines, Abel Tiffauges suggests changing the Biblical text. The objective of this manipulation of language is to understand that the woman "lacks" certain sexual organs ("she *is* herself a sexual part"), to explain the rejection of marriage ("What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder"), and to revisit the myth of the androgynous Adam at the beginning ("turn the clock back and restore the original Adam"), and an argument which will be mixed with the protagonist's ravings in Nazi Germany.

Abel Tiffauges is not wholly incorrect in his personal research on androgyneity: A male body can only exist in the presence of another female one, and so the original Adam, before the creation of Eve, could only be androgynous, or be made in a different way, from a sexual point of view. The story makes no sense whatsoever if understood in any other way (Frye, 1990; Dubois, 2007).

The myth comes from ancient times. Mentioned by Plato in the *Symposium* and by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, it acquires a considerable significance for the Gnostics in the second century A.D. and in Kabalistic medieval Jewish teachings. In our era, Jung interprets it as the union of psychological and intellectual qualities—the *animus* and *anima*—which constitute complete individuality. This myth, present in all cultures, involves a sinister aspect, because we have no objective or material experience of an absolute and natural hermaphroditism: It comes to our minds by a path of mysterious duality (Campbell, 1993).

Therefore, when Abel Tiffauges considers the question of the first man's hermaphroditism, right after he is abandoned by Rachel, questions his own identity. The war takes no time to reveal itself. Abel (a telling name) is the ogre in search of children for a Napola (National Political Institutes of Education). Every morning, holding official letters of introduction, he rides his black horse around Masuria, searching for youths to be groomed as officers in the army. It is significant that he considers the acquisition of two identical twins. His minute examination of them in the laboratory shows the extent of his fascination with the phenomenon of perfectly identical twins. After several observations, he savors his discovery with delight:

And now for the marvel that will make this a red-letter day forever: there is absolutely no doubt that Haro's left half corresponds to the right half of Hajo, and Haro's right to Hajo's left. They are *mirror twins* who can be superimposed on one another face to face, not one on top of the other like the others. (Tournier, 1972, p. 289)

On this point, Abel Tiffauges's research agrees with his interrogation of the Biblical passage. The tricks of inversion, permutation, superposition, etc., which he executes with gusto thanks to, for example, photography, will always remain in the domain of the purely imaginary. Now, instead, he has in front of himself his own obsession made flesh: Even their moles, their freckles, the curls of their hair are exactly inverted between the two brothers.

Of course at the base of these coincidences is, as they tell Abel in the Institute of Anthropology of Königsberg, a unique biological phenomenon: a separation of the embryos at a very late stage. But even more important for him, and for us, is the reflection, tending towards complementarity, of the twins. By extension, this phenomenon does not only speak of the twin character of human beings, but of their primordial lack of differentiation: This would be a current extension of the myth of the androgynous which so fascinated the protagonist in Paris. The novel is an exploration of the indices, brought to us by a strange phenomenon, of a myth directly related to our origins.

Conclusion

In this universal etiology, we have been able to substantiate how cosmogonies, theogonies, and anthropogonies talk about and explain origins, each in its own way. Mythology translates human ambition to unveil the mysteries, the curtains, and the minutiae of the rise and development of the world, life, and human beings: Mythical etiology is one kind of *making of*. Man wants to understand the makeup of a cosmic order, a hierarchy between gods and man in the world.

In this return, whether imaginary or real—various primitive tribes still revive it through rites of initiation and healing—, human beings look to access the fullness of the primordial age. Exhaled by a force of frenzy, he leaves the fleeting time which surrounds him, and enters into a time which is still and absolute. This collective or individual primordial time—cosmic, theogonic, or anthropogonic—comprehends a dose of wellbeing insofar as it requires him to break beforehand with the frustrations of relative time. This time coincides with a place, also original, far from ordinary physical coercions. A new time and place is different and closed to the person who remains alienated, in the space-time coordinates of everyday life.

Because of this, these worldviews are marked by utopia and uchronia, maybe even more so than other utopias considered “nearer” to us, like those of Thomas More or Eldorado. They are a Golden Age. Adam and Eve exercise a beneficent rule over a harmonious creation. Saturn continues in Italy, since the reign of Janus, the benefits of a golden age.

But these utopias are not without dystopias. Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise. Cronos goes to Italy after he is exiled from Olympus in Greece. From the beginning of this talk, we have cautioned that there is no myth without conflict. There is, then, nothing more appropriate than exile to emphasize the unique and mysterious, mythical, phase of this golden age.

References

- Abrams, M. H. (1971). *Natural supernaturalism: Tradition and revolution in romantic literature*. New York (NY): W.W. Norton & Company, “Norton Library”.
- Berosi. (1728). *Chaldei fragmenta*. In J. Alberti Fabricii (Ed.), *Bibliotheca Graeca*. Hamburgi: Sumtu Viduae Felgineriae, t. XIV.

- Biardeau, M. (1969). Études de mythologie hindoue (II) (Studies on Hindu mythology). *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 55, 59-105.
- Campbell, J. (1993). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Hammersmith: Fontana Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1972). *La Philosophie des formes symboliques. 2. La pensée mythique* (The philosophy of symbolic forms: Mythical thought). (J. Lacoste, Trans.). Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Dauphiné, J. (1988). Des mythes cosmogoniques (Cosmogonic myths). In P. Brunel (Ed.), *Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires* (Companion to literary myths, heroes and archetypes) (pp. 374-383). Paris: Éditions du Rocher.
- Diel, P. (1966). *Le Symbolisme dans la mythologie grecque*. Paris: Payot, "Petite Bibliothèque Payot".
- Dubois, C. G. (2007). *Mythologies de l'Occident. Les bases religieuses de la culture occidentale* (Western mythologies. The religious foundations of the Western culture). Paris: Ellipses.
- Eliade, M. (1969). *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour* (The myth of the eternal return). In *Archétypes et répétition* (Archetypes and repetition). Paris: Gallimard, "Idées".
- Frye, N. (1990). *Words with power. Being a second study of "The Bible and Literature"*. New York (NY): Harvest/HBJ.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1977). *Verdad y método* (Truth and method). (A. A. Aparicio & R. De Agapito, Trans.). Salamanca: Sígueme, "Hermeneia".
- Hegel. (1955). *Lecciones sobre historia de la filosofía, I*. (W. Roces, Trans.). México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Herodotus. (1836). *History*. (W. Beloe, Trans.). New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Hesiod. (1914). *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*. (H. G. Evelyn-White, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press & London, William Heinemann. Retrieved from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>
- Horace. (1994) *Odes and Epodes*. (D. Mulroy, Trans.). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Martín García, J. A. (2004). Evolución de la cosmogonía mítica griega: el calendario (The Evolution of the Greek cosmogony: The calendar). In I. J. García Pinilla and S. Talavera Cuesta (coords.), *Charisteion. Francisco Martín García oblatum* (pp. 251-287). Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.
- Ricœur, P. (2009). *Philosophie de la volonté. II. Finitude et culpabilité* (Philosophy of the will: II. finitude and guilt). Paris: Points, "Essais".
- Pseudo-Lucian. (1866). *Œuvres complètes de Lucien de Samosate* (2nd ed.). (E. Talbot, Trans.). Paris: L. Hachette.
- Schelling. (1998). *Introduction à la philosophie de la mythologie* (Introduction to the philosophy of mythology). (GDR Schellingiana (CNRS), Trans.). Paris: Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de Philosophie".
- Sparks, H. F. D. (1984). (Ed.). *The apocryphal old testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Torrente Ballester, G. (2010). *La saga/fuga de J. B.* (The Saga/Fugue of J. B.). C. Becerra & A. J. Gil González, (Eds.). Madrid: Castalia, "Clásicos Castalia".
- Tournier, M. (1975). *Le Roi des Aulnes* (The Erl-King). Paris: Gallimard, "Folio".
- Trousseau, R. (2001). *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne* (The theme of Prometheus in the European literature). Ginebra: Droz, "Titre courant".
- Vernant, J. P. (2007). *Œuvres. Religions, rationalités, politique* (Works. Religions, rationalities, politics). Paris: Éditions du Seuil, "Opus".