

Correspondence Between Myth and Knowledge: Ernst Cassirer's Cultural Philosophy and Its Legacy

Branka Vujanovic

Abstract:

The Persistence of Myth as Symbolic Form collects papers from an international conference organised by the Centre for Intercultural Studies at the University of Glasgow (16-18.9.2005). The volume, edited by Paul Bishop and Roger H. Stephenson, explores the potential of Ernst Cassirer's concept of myth for contemporary issues in cultural theory and investigates the scope of influences essential to his thinking. Drawing from philosophical, historical, anthropological, literary, aesthetic, scientific and political perspectives, the authors home in on the central question: in what ways can knowledge productively address the irrefutable power of myth?

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"Knowledge does not master myth by banishing it from its confines. Rather, knowledge can truly conquer only what it has previously understood in its own specific meaning and essence. Until this task has been completed, the battle which theoretical knowledge thinks it has won for good will keep breaking out afresh. The foe which knowledge has seemingly defeated forever crops up again in its own midst." This quote from Cassirer (Ernst Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical thought.* New Haven 1955, p. xvii Cassirer) has a notable presence in the proceedings of the conference *The Persistence of Myth as Symbolic Form*. It can be regarded as the guiding principle of this project that continues Cassirer's attempt to understand the mythical dimension of life in apparently post-mythical levels of consciousness. The volume consists of fifteen papers which explore Cassirer's concept of myth in light of his own cultural environment and intellectual background as well as within the broader framework of the philosophy and theory of myth.

In a keynote lecture titled "The Pathos Formulae of Mythic Thought", noted Cassirer scholar John Michael Krois describes the approach to cultural morphology and cultural symbolism elaborated by Cassirer and Aby Warburg. Central to this is a discussion of the link between Aby Warburg's notion of pathos formulae and Cassirer's concept of mythic thought. Cassirer's concept of myth as *Lebensform* calls for focusing not on the explanatory function of myth (which Cassirer regarded as a secondary phenomenon), but rather on the symbolic transformation of our basic, emotion-laden experience of the world. Pathos formulae of mythic thought are recurrent visual forms of gesture, physiognomic expression and ritual actions which can signify emotions common across cultures. Ancient cultural forms reappear in ever-new guises through pathos formulae, and "it is the task of cultural morphology to trace the persistent influence of such age-old forms on subsequent, emergent, sensibilities". As editors Paul Bishop and Roger H. Stephenson emphasise in the volume's foreword, "myth is seen by Cassirer, not merely as a 'stage' of cultural development, but as a constituent feature of all human culture, past, present, and future" (p. xiii). Through empirical research with a focus on the problem of symbolism, Warburg and Cassirer strove to develop a *Kulturwissenschaft* capable of encompassing 'primitive' societies, classical antiquity and the modern world. Their interdisciplinary work, Krois concludes, presents a model for cultural research today.

Approaching myth philosophically, as Cassirer has done, offers an alternative to regarding myth as intellectually inexplicable. According to Cassirer myth is a form of knowledge and can therefore be the subject of philosophical investigation. Jonathan Westwood explains Cassirer's philosophical interest in mythical consciousness by placing his thought in Hegelian rather than Kantian intellectual lineage (although the latter is not negated). Edward Skidelsky also draws attention to the difference between Cassirer and his Kantian predecessors in the understanding of symbol and, subsequently, in the understanding of myth and religion as symbolic forms. From the perspective of literary criticism Cyrus Hamlin explores Cassirer's relation to the legacy of German Romantic philosophy on the one side, and to modern myth-criticism on the other. In Cassirer's thought he detects the German Romantics' programme for a 'new mythology' (elaborated especially by Schelling, Hölderlin, Schiller, Schlegel and Hegel). This programme, according to Hamlin, had a widespread influence on 20th century literary theory and its relevance should not be underestimated amongst thinkers seemingly opposed to Romantic myth (such as Lukacs, Walter Benjamin, Northrop Frye and Martin Heidegger).

Within this volume's interdisciplinary and multi-perspective scope special attention is drawn to the relatedness of historical and philosophical analyses of mythic thought. From a historical perspective Dina Gusejnova investigates Cassirer's relation to the work of Friedrich Gundolf and the problem of hero-worship. The mythic function of hero-worship (or the 'special God of the moment') is notable within the Romantic appraisal of radical individualism as well as within the National-Socialistic concept of totalitarian leadership. "Every hero-myth bore a Janus face between radical individualism and radical authoritarianism" (p. 122). In his last book *The Myth of the State* (1946), Cassirer's critique of mythic thought in modern politics, Gusejnova argues, is not directed against the Romantic belief in the primacy of individualism but against the mythic forces that overrule any individual impact on social and cultural life, namely those of race, the state and fate.

From a political perspective myth is usually considered an aspect of reactionary thinking, but Paul Bishop's survey of Bachofen and Cassirer's approaches to myth and symbol, and of Georg Sorel's political analysis, reveals another perspective. In this assessment, which takes into account recent works on Cassirer by David A. Wisner and Markus Weidler, Cassirer's philosophy indicates the possibility of a politically progressive use of myth, understood as "the art of expressing, and that means of organizing, most deeply rooted instincts, hopes and fears" (Ernst Cassirer: *The Myth of the State*. New Haven 1946, pp. 47-48).

The validity of the concept of myth as symbolic form can best be evaluated on the example of major works of art and literature. Three papers are particularly telling in this regard. Barbara Naumann uses the example of tableaux vivants in Goethe's novel *Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) to show how myth persists in the transfer from medium to medium. Roger H. Stephenson gives a detailed account of Cassirer's reading of the Goethe poem "Urworte. Orphisch" as a clear illustration of what Cassirer meant by symbol, myth and art. Myth, art, science and philosophy are mutually related symbolic forms and "each has its place within a

dynamic, pluralist, balance, in the interest of civilized vitality" (p. 249). According to Stephenson the most valuable facet of Cassirer's efforts is this interconnectedness between different levels and modes of symbolism. In addressing the question "Why Do We Need Myth?", Martine Prange gives an interpretation of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey based on an analysis of the functions that Helen and Odysseus have in Homeric tales. By disclosing the philosophical significance of Helen's weaving (as well as that of Penelope and Andromache) and Odysseus' "transformation from vagrant to king and far-famed hero", Prange arrives at the conclusion that: "Like Odysseus, humanity drifts between its factual presence in the world and its possible absence. Odysseus attempts to escape this by exploiting every danger as a chance of fixing his name" (p. 28). Story-telling and myth-making, Prange argues, are not just means of overcoming human suffering, but of "gain[ing] the existence at all" (p. 18).

Devoted to the preservation of Cassirer's legacy in current interdisciplinary research, *The Persistence of Myth as Symbolic Form* answers in the affirmative the challenging question of whether knowledge can relate productively with the power of myth. The problem of the existence of mythic thought in the contemporary world necessitates this kind of philosophical and historico-cultural analysis which takes into account the affective aspects of cultural processes.