

## The Recovery of Myth and the *Sensus Communis*

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Myths are revealed truth. The makers of myths did not make them up, they heard them or saw them. Philosophy, if it is to say anything true or profound, must have an intimate relation with myth. Philosophy cannot stand alone and generate truth. It must look backward to the source of the first truths of humanity. In myth we find primordial truths (*archai*) revealed in a form that is “naive” in the sense of being un-self-conscious or pre-reflective.

But exactly how do we achieve this intimate relation to myth? The major part of this paper is devoted to examining the answers Donald Phillip Verene gives to this issue, and responding to them. Before I go into this, however, I shall present a brief account of what I take to be the tenets of Verene’s philosophy relevant to my case.

Most philosophers believe that they are using reason or rational thought to make progress toward better and better answers to questions about the nature of reality and the nature of man. They believe that they are progressing away from religion, myth, superstition, and popular opinion. Verene believes that reason in the sense of reflective understanding is limited. Reason employed in this way analyzes. To analyze something means to break it apart or break it down. Reason can be used to tear apart bad arguments and it can be used to apply universal principles to particular cases. But reason as an instrument of analysis on its own is uncreative. It is not an instrument of creativity or discovery. Reason can apply universal principles but it cannot discover them.

There are, of course, different kinds of principles. Some might be arrived at through induction, but others seem so fundamental that they

could not have been got through experience. Not all the principles we think of as fundamental can be called originary principles. These are the ultimate ideas or truths underlying the human experience of the real.

If one asks what is wrong with our world, Verene's answer, essentially, is that we have forgotten these originary principles. Verene calls them *archai*. He calls Vico's philosophy a "science of recollective universals," and he sees the principle task of true philosophy as getting us back to the *archai*. Vico's *New Science*, according to Verene, is a theatre of memory. Renaissance theatres of memory, such as that of Giulio Camillo, were intended to give one a synoptic vision of the whole. Within Camillo's theatre of memory one found, arrayed on all sides, images and symbols designed to remind one of the *archai*, of the basic human truths. Verene also interprets Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as theatres of memory presented in literary form.

The rationalist will ask, inevitably, "where do *archai* come from?" Verene's answer will not satisfy him. Verene states in *Hegel's Recollection*: "*Archai* come from nowhere. They come when needed and they come from nowhere. They are drawn forth from consciousness suddenly and without method. . . . This drawing forth of *archai* is . . . recollecting in its primordial sense."<sup>1</sup> *Archai* just are. There just are certain truths that have been revealed to human beings. Verene is essentially a Platonist: truth is objective and we all have it, but in a dim, forgotten way. We have truth only, as Jakob Böhme says, as a "dark and veiled story held in memory [*eine dunkele und verdeckte Geschichte im Gedächtnis behalten*]."

All our efforts to know the world—whether in philosophy, science, religion, art, or poetry—are efforts to recall this truth, in our own imperfect, human way. They are aiming at wisdom, at knowledge of the whole. Only philosophy is the deliberate, self-conscious effort to achieve this perspective. But philosophy cannot stand alone. From pure reason comes nothing. Philosophy must draw from the perennial resource of *archai*. It is our dim recollection of the *archai* that makes possible the inspirations that move our philosophical speculations. In the joints of our dialectic, in the transitions from category to category, or premise to premise, or premise to conclusion, the *archai* lie hidden. Because we have this resource within us, inchoate, each person must go inside himself in order to get it. As Verene points out, Hegel's *Er-Innerung* or "recollection" is a going deeply inside one's self.

The rationalist will ask if it is rational to think that these truths, these *archai* “just are” and that there is no explanation for them, no reasoning why. The answer is yes. It is rational to think that there is no why or wherefore, if, in fact, there is no why or wherefore.

Philosophy is an inward journey that follows the pattern of all mythic adventures: first a separation from the familiar (Plato’s emergence from the cave, Descartes’ methodical doubt, Hegel’s science that starts with nothing, Husserl’s *epoche*, etc.), then a journey off into uncharted territory to acquire some treasure (in this case, wisdom) involving many trials and tribulations (Hegel’s *Via Dolorosa*), and finally a return. In the case of true philosophy, the return is not a return to the society of ordinary human beings, but a return to humanity itself, a peering into the primordial human truths within what Verene, following Vico, calls *sensus communis*. Philosophy is not just reading about this process in a book, philosophy is doing it. Verene agrees with Vico’s view that each reader must “make the science for himself.” He also connects this to Stephen Dedalus’s intention “to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.”<sup>22</sup>

The above omits many important details of Verene’s Vichian philosophy, such as his theory of rhetoric, the theory of the imaginative universal, and his analysis of modern “barbarism.” But I have presented the essentials relevant to the case I shall make. I differ specifically with Verene in how he proposes to recover the *archai*. His conception of a theatre of memory is brilliant, but does not go far enough. I have been inside the theatres of Vico, Hegel, and Joyce, and I came out as the same modern person I was when I went in. What, then, is to be done?

#### OPENNESS TO THE GODS

First, we must radically reconsider our conception of myth. The first book to have a major intellectual influence on Verene was Ernst Cassirer’s *Language and Myth*. He later studied Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*—the second volume of which is titled *Mythical Thought*—and wrote a dissertation on Cassirer. But this is an aspect of Verene’s philosophy that puzzles me, for Cassirer’s approach to myth, while it contains many profundities, is essentially condescending. Cassirer basically treats myth as a primitive form of thought. Like Vico, he thinks that myth springs from a mentality

held in common by ancient primitives, contemporary savages, peasants, and children, a view developed in the eighteenth century.

A far better understanding of myth—and of the men who made myth—is to be found in the works of Julius Evola (1898–1974), especially his *Revolt Against the Modern World* (*Rivolta contra il mondo moderno*).<sup>3</sup> Evola’s approach, in brief, is to suggest that the men who made myth were not primitives, but more advanced *in every significant* way, than ourselves. History is a history not of evolution or progress but of devolution. The ways in which we are more advanced than our forebears are purely material: we are materially better off than they were; our ability to manipulate matter (to create technology, “improve” upon nature, cure disease, etc.) is superior. But that is all. Spiritually and intellectually we are savages compared to the ancients.

At least some of the time both Vico and Verene seem to agree that we are spiritually and intellectually inferior to the ancients. One of Vico’s most widely known teachings is his doctrine of three ages: the age of gods, heroes, and men. History exhibits this cyclical pattern. Vico’s three ages can be compared to the four ages of Hinduism, which was Evola’s *idée fixe*. One could also draw a comparison to Hesiod’s ages. We can map Vico’s ages onto those of Hesiod and the *Vedas*, as follows:

<u>Vico</u>	<u>Hesiod</u>	<u>Vedism</u>
Gods	Gold	Satya-Yuga
	Silver	Treta-Yuga
	Bronze	Dvapara-Yuga
Heroes	Heroes	
Men	Iron	Kali-Yuga

In all, there is the idea that, to quote Yeats, “things fall apart”; there is devolution. In the Kali Yuga, to quote Yeats further,

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.

I don’t know if anyone has pointed this out before, but Vico’s ages are parallel also to the three “soul types” of Plato (which are also his parts of the *Kallipolis*). The Age of Gods is an age ruled by *logos*, by

the mind of the universe. The Age of Heroes is an age ruled by the Spirit (*Thumos*) of the Warriors. The Age of Men is an age of Appetite. It is not as if *Logos* and Spirit disappear in the Age of Men (our present age); it is that they are deposed from their rightful place: they become devalued and, to some extent, cheapened, corrupted, and debased. Our historical devolution is specifically one of Mind and Spirit. As appetite evolves—as we become more and more efficient at satisfying and creating appetite—everything else decays. Reason, at one time in tune with the transcendent and perennial, becomes “the barbarism of reflection.” Spirit, at one time in the service of transcendent ideals, now finds itself in the service of technology, business, and managerial procedures.

Perhaps I have misunderstood something in the attitudes of Vico, Cassirer, and Verene toward myth, but I do not see how we square such a historical conception with the condescension implied in the idea that myth springs from a mentality held in common by ancient primitives, savages, peasants, and children. What Vico and others do not seem to realize is that their conception of myth is itself a product of modern “barbaric” reflection.

Our ancestors knew the *archai*. They *received* the *archai*. Yet instead of trying in some way to recover something of this original mentality, so that we may also know these primal truths, Vico and Cassirer analyze the mythic experience (the experience of the gods), theorize it, and thus cut us off from it. If modern rationalism has separated us from truth, how do Vico and Cassirer think that their analytical approach to myth can bring us back to it?

We see the modern in ourselves whenever—with all good intentions—we attempt to explain myth, or to explain what the gods are, or to explain the experience of the gods. Such efforts at explanation are bound up with the modern tendency to insist that everything be explainable. But the gods and the myths which tell of them are precisely that outer edge of the real beyond which explanation cannot go. They define the boundaries of the real, only *within which* is explanation possible. Our ancestors who believed in the gods had no explanation for their experience of them. *To think in terms of explaining the experience of the gods is to have already adopted a critical distance from that experience.*

Vico treats Jove as the first *universale fantastico* (imaginative universal). The first men heard the sound of thunder and scattered,

crying “Jove!” and the first god was born. This theory is implicitly atheistic. Vico has simply assumed in advance that there are no such things as gods, and, anticipating the great (but extremely wrong-headed) nineteenth-century Indologist Max Mueller, he reads the gods as an anthropomorphization of nature. Vico believes that his standpoint is superior to that of his distant ancestors. He believes that he has seen through their superstitious devotion to Jove. This is a thoroughly modern attitude, which makes recovery of primal openness to truth impossible.

To transcend modern barbarism and recover the standpoint from which we may again see originary truth unveiled, we must abandon all attempts to explain what the gods of the myths are. All such attempts are implicitly atheistic. They assume that the gods must really be something else. Via analysis or reduction or dream interpretation, the gods are explained as being something other than the gods, as what they are not. The direction we must go in is not just to recollect myth but to recover the intellectual standpoint necessary to *receive* myth in the first place.

I believe that wisdom was literally revealed to our ancestors in the distant past. We do not know or understand the mechanism of this revelation, nor could we, since modern rationalism and its attendant corruptions make this mechanism almost impossible to understand. This wisdom was a knowledge of the whole, of the fundamental nature of reality. It was the sum total of Verene’s *archai*. I am saying, further, that we have forgotten these truths, and that the *doxa* of the present age seems akin to a diabolical creation designed to insure that they remain forgotten. No amount of academic analysis of myth and religion will help us remember. This is part of the diabolical creation, it seems: the more we study myth the farther we remove ourselves from it. The only hope, therefore, is somehow to devise a way to slip out from under modern categories and prejudices, and recover the primal mindset which allowed wisdom to be heard. I shall call this primal mindset “openness.” I believe that this primal openness is the natural standpoint of mankind, and thus latent in all of us, ready to be awakened.

The openness I have described must be an openness to a universe in which such things as the gods may exist as a brute fact, inexplicable to the analytical mind. This is not irrationalism. As mentioned above, it is not irrational to believe that some things cannot be analyzed,

reduced, or explained, if, indeed, they cannot. True rationality and enlightenment must consist not only in recognizing facts as facts, but in recognizing that ultimately there may be no answer to why they are, or why they are the way they are.

Does this mean that we should try believing in the gods or the myths on a naive literal level? For instance, should we believe that Valhalla is an actual, physical place, or that Thor's hammer is an actual, physical object? Not exactly. I do not mean to deny that there are levels of understanding in religion. But we must realize that if we are to come again into possession of what Evola calls Tradition, of the mindset of our ancestors, we cannot begin at the highest level. This is not what our ancestors did. They began their individual lives as children, believing in the literal reality of the gods, and then they penetrated deeper into this reality. In other words, you cannot begin with the *Upanishads*. You must begin with the *Vedas*. We do this first through achieving an openness to the divine as such, eschewing all preconceived notions or theories about what the gods really are. We must reconnect with Tradition in the same way a child learns its native language: not through conscious intention or rote memorization, but through a kind of naive and non-reflective openness, and through total immersion.

But openness to the divine begins with a much more fundamental openness: an openness simply to the being of things. To be open to the being of beings means "to let beings be," as Heidegger put it. It is to let beings show us what they are, instead of forcing some being or some meaning onto them. This openness is fundamentally at odds with modernity. There is no magic formula for reactivating this opening. Openness to the being of things is not an achievement, per se, but the natural standpoint of mankind. Closedness is what has been achieved. The way may be cleared for re-opening by unlearning closedness. This unlearning must begin with a ruthless critique of the ideology and standpoint of post-Christian modernity. Verene has in large measure carried this out in his *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge* and other works. The works of Julius Evola, and Evola's mentor Rene Guenon, are also very helpful here, as are the writings of such thinkers as Nietzsche, Spengler, D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, and Heidegger.

It is through being awestruck by the power and sublimity of nature that man was forced into openness to the being of that which he

did not create. In this regard, Vico, with his thunderclap, is correct. This openness to the being of the natural world facilitates openness to the supernatural world, the world of spirits and of Ideas, which also precedes and surpasses the being of man. In closing oneself to the first, one gradually becomes closed to the second. Post-Christian man has shut himself to the natural world, and this has led to his being shut off from his own nature—for the uniqueness of man among the animals consists precisely in his openness to the higher. It has also led to his becoming shut off from other men—as city life makes so plain. Without an openness to the trans-human, beginning in an openness to nature, we are shut off from a knowledge of the good. Hence the notorious inhumanity of civilized, urban humans.

When modern man looks at nature only as matter onto which he can impose a form of his devising, then he declares, in effect, that nature has no form, no being of its own. To cancel the otherness of nature is to abolish the distinction between us and it. The modern accepts no limitations on his ability to penetrate and control. His is simultaneously a Titanic will toward divine omnipotence and a will toward a state of infantile autism in which there is no boundary between subject and object.

This dual will of modern man was perfectly expressed by another of Verene's four thinkers: Hegel. Hegel wrote that the aim of his lectures on the *Philosophy of Nature* was "to convey an image of nature, in order to subdue this Proteus: to find in this externality only the mirror of ourselves, to see in nature a free reflection of spirit."<sup>4</sup> "An out-and-out other simply does not exist for Spirit [i.e., for mankind]," Hegel says. And "what seems to happen outside of [the self], to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and substance shows itself to be essentially subject."<sup>5</sup> Hegel argues that when modern man transforms the world according to his will, when he seeks to cancel the otherness of the other, he is moved by a desire to absolutize himself, to remove that which resists and frustrates his will or his mind, in other words, a desire *to be left totally alone*. Thus, we can see that humanism is equal to nihilism, a conclusion Hegel himself did not draw.

This mentality not only cuts us off from the being of beings, and from the gods, but from ourselves. As Jakob Böhme put it: "Nothing can be revealed to itself without opposition: For if there is nothing

that opposes it, then it always goes out of itself and never returns to itself again. If it does not return into itself, as into that from which it originated, then it knows nothing of its origin.”<sup>6</sup> Without an other that opposes and resists the self, against which the self discovers its boundaries, no self-knowledge is possible. Is it any surprise, then, that so many modern people need to “find themselves?” When we take the world of human ideas, constructions, aspirations, projects, prejudices, contrivances, and conveniences as the only world, and cut ourselves off from the being of the world we did not create, should it surprise us if we find ourselves experiencing a feeling of unreality? When everything is open to our will, open to change and revision and fine-tuning, when everything can be “new and improved” including ourselves, is it any wonder that modern people seem simply to drift?

As soon as man admits that there are limits to his powers to penetrate and transform, a space is made for the gods in human life. However, the whole drift of modern thought is toward the cancellation of all limits on man, and thus the exaltation of man to the status of Supreme Being. But as soon as it is admitted that there are limits to what we may change and, especially, that there is an ineluctable hiddenness to things, then human will is checked, and openness opens again, at least to some extent.

To admit limits is to grant the world being. It is to admit that there are certain inescapable and unchangeable *eidetic* realities—the natures of things, the patterns and principles of order—which are brute, unalterable facts. The recognition that the world is simply one way and not another is the recognition of a brute facticity that must be, to all reflective persons, an inexplicable mystery.

It is not monotheism that is suggested here, but polytheism. The world is a Bacchanalian revel of forms, a multiverse of beings and powers. It is the gods who account for and embody the chief features of this world. And the gods are, at least in some sense, *in the world*, like the things or powers they govern.

Openness may be achieved only by the cancellation of what closes us. Thus we must critique all of our modern ideas, intellectual tendencies, and ways of living in the world, and thoroughly know their lineage. Such a radical critique is itself a feature of modernity, but here we may be able to use one of the weapons of modernity against it. We must begin by recognizing that no matter how critical we may

be of modernity, we ourselves are products of it. It is useless to rail against “people today” if our goal is a recovery of a more authentic way of being. Our critique must begin with ourselves.

We must also abandon all efforts to explain what might be called “the place of religion in human life.” In other words, we must banish from our thinking all propositions which begin: “Religion is important because”; or, “For our ancestors, religion served to”; or, “the function of religion is.” Such an attitude is not religious, it is a reflective, critical attitude toward religion.

But how else, it might be asked, can we moderns find a way back into primal religious openness to the gods and the *archai*, except by discovering what religion does, or what it provided our ancestors? The problem with this approach is that it assumes that religion is merely one of the many things human beings do or engage in, along with, for example, making war, writing poetry, building dwellings, and starting a family. In short, it assumes that religion is an attribute of human beings. In fact, it is their essence.

Religion—by which I mean simply openness to divine or transcendent being—*is* human nature. I do not mean by this that it is natural for human beings to be religious. I mean that human nature *just is* religion. What distinguishes human beings from other creatures is that they are more than just will to self-aggrandizement, they are also openness—openness to that which is higher. If this state of openness or living in openness is religion, then human nature is religion. In short, the being of man is constituted in and through his relation to the divine. There is no such thing as “human nature” to which religion must be related. There is no such thing as a human being who can be human with or without religion. One is only truly human through openness, through relatedness to the transcendent. This is the ultimate reason why modernity, the age of men, the age of human will, cuts us off not only from nature but from our own nature. Modernity is the willful destruction of human nature. Modern man, Nietzsche’s “Last Man,” is no man at all, but wholly inhuman.

Human nature is openness toward being, and toward divine being. But to be open is possible only if there is, in effect, a space within the human being; only if the human being is not, in some sense, whole or complete. Human nature is a vector, a towardness, a relationship. A relationship requires two terms, which must ever remain distinct from

one another if the relationship is to persist. The directedness of the human being toward the divine can never be satisfied, in the sense that one can never have or reach or comprehend the divine. But some objects, in the yearning for them, can improve and elevate one. Man's incompleteness is never overcome, but through it he is raised up. Other objects, of course, only make the incompleteness and emptiness intolerable. The tragedy of modern man is that he has become turned away from his proper object. He is still incomplete, but his yearnings, his needs, have become turned toward objects which can never improve or satisfy him.

In sum, the recovery of openness to the divine must begin with an unlearning of closedness. It must begin with a thoroughgoing, radical critique of the modern way of being, especially as it shows up in oneself. Openness to the gods presupposes a more basic openness simply to the being of things, and principally to the being of things humans did not create. It is through this openness that openness to the gods happened for our ancestors. Thus, it is through such an openness that we might know the gods again, and may again achieve the standpoint through which the *archai* may be known.

#### THE PARTICULARITY OF MYTH

Where do we go from here? How do we achieve this openness that has been lost? Some suggestions are implicit in Verene, in Vico, and in Joyce.

In Vico's *Science of Imagination*, Verene defines *sensus communis* as "the sensibilities, feelings, metaphors, and memories upon which human culture rests."<sup>7</sup> And "the ultimate context within which any piece of conceptual reasoning is meaningful."<sup>8</sup> Verene, following Vico, believes that the beginning of philosophical thought originates from the *sensus communis*. He writes, further: "The *sensus communis* is created not by logic but by original, archaic human speech which bursts forth from the human condition itself."<sup>9</sup> We may ask whether *sensus communis* is something universal, or whether it is specific to a certain people. The answer is that it is both. Each people has its *sensus communis*, but the *sensus communis* differs from group to group. This is my position, but I think it is also Vico's. Verene writes that *sensus communis* is "the common way of experiencing

the world present in the life of a people. . . . The *sensus communis* of a people is rooted in a common way of feeling, speaking, and symbolizing meaning in the world.”<sup>10</sup>

“People” means an ethnically distinct group. It means “nation” only where there is ethnic homogeneity. Americans, for example, are neither a true nation nor a true people. Consider again the words from Joyce’s *A Portrait*: “I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. 27 April: Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.”<sup>11</sup> “Old father, old artificer” refers to the artificer-artist hero Daedalus, but it may also refer to Woden (Odin, Wotan), among whose many names was “Alfather.” Joyce does not mean that he is immediately recollecting the “collective unconscious” of the entire human race. Recapturing primal openness in this fashion would be like trying to love all of humanity before one has learned to love one’s own family. We must begin with familiar. When Joyce the Irishman goes into himself, there is Woden, whom his ancestors worshipped.<sup>12</sup>

To each people there is a *sensus communis*. Authors like Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade are correct to see universal, cross-cultural mythic thought patterns. But we lose a lot when we abstract away all difference to get to identity. The myths and traditions of each people represents its attempt to express the truth about man and the cosmos. But some peoples have achieved this expression more adequately than others; some traditions are richer and more powerful than others.

The first step toward cancelling modern barbarism and recovering primal openness is to begin with one’s own *sensus communis*. What we must do is immerse ourselves in the *sensus communis* of our people by internalizing their myths and traditions, by practicing their customs and rituals, and, in general, trying to live as much as possible as they did. The chief obstacles to this are the modern ways of thought and being that have already been imprinted on us. As a first step toward overcoming this obstacle we may ask how we recognize our people’s *sensus communis* in ourselves. It is through what I shall call the particularity of myth, that we may find a way into the *sensus communis*.

There is an Irish myth that Dermot of the Fianna and three comrades, after an all-day hunt, sought refuge one night in a hut. Occupying

the hut were an old man, a girl, a sheep, and a cat. As they sat down to dinner, the sheep kept hopping up on the table. Try as they might, the warriors, to their shame, could not remove it. Finally, the cat led it off the table and fastened it up. The old man then revealed to them that the sheep was the World, and the cat was Death, the only power that could destroy the world.<sup>13</sup>

This myth requires no interpretation, for it includes an interpretation within itself. (The myth goes on to explain what the girl represents as well.) Other myths do not actually provide an interpretation, but might as well. For instance, anyone can see that the myth of Icarus and Daedalus is intended to warn of the consequences of hubris.

This has led some to believe that myth is an earlier form of philosophy, and that different sorts of myth perform the functions of the different parts of philosophy. Some myths perform a metaphysical or cosmological function, telling us where we came from and what the primal things are. Some perform an ethical function, telling us how we should behave, and warning us away from vice. Others perform a political function, telling us how society should be structured or governed.

One can believe that myth actually does perform these functions without necessarily believing that it does so only because a culture has not yet “progressed” to philosophy! In fact, one can take the position that myth is superior to philosophy at performing these functions. Finally, one can believe that myth does all these things, without being committed to the position that human beings simply “made up” the myths with these functions in mind.

Other myths, however, do not lend themselves so readily to interpretation. In another Irish legend, the hero Oisín is borne off to the Land of Youth by the fairy maiden Niam. Entering this enchanted land, Oisín sees three images: a doe without horns being chased by a white hound with one red ear, a young girl riding on a brown horse holding a golden apple, and a young man on a white horse wearing a purple robe and carrying a gold-hilted sword.<sup>14</sup> One gets the same feeling here that comes from reading alchemical literature: these images have probably been carefully chosen and are intended to convey a precise meaning.

However, there are still other myths which defy interpretation, but which do not strike us as being deliberately “symbolic.” Consider the imagery of Norse mythology. Why, for example, is Yggdrasil

an ash tree? Why is it Tyr's *right* hand that is bitten off by the Fenris wolf? Why is it specifically *eleven* rivers that flow from the spring in Niflheimr? Why are the first man and woman born from Ymir's armpit, rather than some other part of his body? And why his *left* armpit? Why is a hawk perched on the brow of the eagle perched at the top of Ygdrassil? Why is red the color of Thor? Why is everything in threes: three wells, three roots, three Norns, three brothers (Odin, Vili, and Ve), three regions, etc.? One could multiply such examples endlessly, and find them in Greek and Roman mythology, Indian myth, Celtic myth, etc.

But what are they examples of? I could be wrong, of course, in thinking that there is no deliberate, conscious symbolism here. This is not the same thing as claiming that these images or ideas have no meaning. I am simply saying that one gets a strong intuition from certain myths, or mythological elements, that no meaning is consciously calculated. That is why philosophical interpretation cannot exhaust myth. There are myths which have a readily apparent meaning-content, which philosophers can skim off and state baldly. But there is another element to myth, a "sensuous component." This is the situatedness or groundedness of myth in the particular, and in the individual, the unique. It is an element of seemingly arbitrary particularity, which arrests us just in and by means of its particularity.

The sensuous component of myth is striking to us. It would be wrong to say that it seems inevitable. When a twist in a story or a conclusion to a musical theme is called inevitable that usually means that it seems somehow logically necessary. There is nothing logically necessary about Ymir's left armpit.

At the same time, if we approach myth with an attitude of respect and openness, we do not respond to this sensuous component as merely arbitrary. Indeed, we may feel stirring within us some deeply buried response, some intuition that there is a revelation here. By revelation I mean simply a revealing: a revealing of the being of things. One might be tempted to speak instead of a revealing of the truth of things, but truth is just precisely this revealing or uncovering of the being of things. True words are words that show things as they are.

Modern people have the philosophical tendency to think of truth as a statement, formula, or idea. Thus, when one speaks of the sensuous component in myth as a truth, the tendency is to think that it must be a symbol which we could dispense with once we put the

meaning of the symbol into words. Instead, I have in mind a truth which is irreducibly sensuous and can never be exhausted by words.

“Weird” seems an appropriate term to use to describe this sensuous component. “Weird” is a word we use to describe not just the different, but the disturbingly different, the uncanny. The weird is the arrestingly different for which we have no other adequate name. The word weird ultimately derives from the Old Norse verb *vertha*. In Norse myth, Verthandi is one of the three Norns, and she is generally understood to represent “becoming” or “coming to be” (in the sense of the now, the happening now). Verthandi cannot be understood in isolation, but only in relationship to her two sisters, Urth and Skuld. *Urth-* derives from *vertha*, and figures in both the preterite plural and the past participle. Urth thus somehow governs or embodies pastness, a pastness that has been derived from (or tied to) a becoming. *Skuld* is the past participle of *skula*, which is perhaps best rendered as “shall.” But “shall” here connotes not so much futurity as binding necessity or duty, as in “thou shalt” or “so it shall be done.”

What comes to be in the hands of Verthandi passes away and into the hands of Urth, and ultimately into her well. The well of Urth contains all that was, as well as what “was” in the sense of being the first and most primal of things: the *örlog*. The *örlog* is the pattern or law of all. The *örlog*, and the events of the past, govern what comes to be in the present. But no man may fathom the depths of Urth’s well. (Odin gave up an eye to drink from Mimir’s well of wisdom—and some have argued that this well is equivalent to that of Urth.)<sup>15</sup> This means that although we may have understood something of how the world works, of why and from where things come to be, the why and wherefore of things is never fully transparent to us. The world remains a mystery, and will continually face us with the uncanny and the weird. The weird is what has come from the Norn sisters and their unfathomable well.

In later times it seems that “weird” comes to stand for all three of the Norns, and the Norns themselves become witches. In one of the Irish legends, Finn and his men, out hunting one day as usual, come upon the mouth of a cavern where three hideous hags are spinning yarn. The men become entangled in this enchanted yarn and are almost killed by the witches before being saved by Goll mac Morna.<sup>16</sup> In *Macbeth* the three witches are described by Shakespeare as the “three weird sisters.”<sup>17</sup>

When myth strikes us as weird it shows itself as something from out of the depths. It comes from some hidden source and its very weirdness is a clue to its truth. When myth makes us shudder, or invades our dreams, or causes the hair to stand up on the back of our necks, we see the truth of it. It is a feeling of recognition.

The experience of the weird is more than just the sense of a myth's strangeness. Many myths, particularly those of alien cultures, will strike one as strange. Take, for example, the Akkadian creation myth. Out of the primordial waters comes the first couple, Apsu and Tiamat. They give birth to Anu, God of the Sky, and Ea. Apsu decides to kill these young gods because they disturb his sleep. Ea, however, uses his magic powers to put Apsu to sleep, steals his "brightness," and then kills him. Having become God of the Waters, Ea retires to the depths of the ocean where, in the Sanctuary of the Archetypes, his wife Damkina gives birth to Marduk. Anu meanwhile attacks Tiamat, who retaliates by sending a monster called Kingu to make war on him. Tiamat affixes to Kingu's chest the Tablet of Destinies, and so on.

There are several elements here that are strange and that fire the imagination, such as the primordial waters (a perennial theme), the disturbance of Apsu's sleep, the theft of Apsu's brightness, the Sanctuary of the Archetypes, and the Tablet of Destinies. But it is an alien strangeness. There is no sense of an uncanny recognition, no sense of a connection to the time and place of the myth. My suggestion is that this is due to the fact that the time and place, and especially, the people this myth belonged to, are so remote from us. When a mythic tradition is the tradition of one's own people (or near to it), then the encounter with mythic strangeness is experienced as a weird familiarity. It is recollective. It is a cousin to the "divine pleasure" that Vico claims we will experience when we have found wisdom.

C. S. Lewis describes in his autobiography the kind of experience I am talking about:

I had become fond of Longfellow's *Saga of King Olaf*: fond of it in a casual, shallow way for its story and its vigorous rhythm. But then, and quite different from such pleasures, and like a voice from far more different regions, there came a moment when I idly turned the pages of the book and found the unrhymed translation of *Tegner's Drapa* and read

I heard a voice that cried  
Balder the beautiful  
Is dead, is dead—

I knew nothing about Balder; but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote).<sup>18</sup>

As a way into the topic of the ethnic and regional character of myth, let us examine the adjectives Lewis uses to describe his experience. At least four of Lewis's adjectives could also refer to the people who inhabit his landscape: cold, severe, pale, and remote. What he depicts is a space. He gives a description, in its essentials, of Northern space. It is a space without human beings, and with few features. It is like a stage without props, actors, or scenery; a setting for some action. Within this landscape Lewis's ancestors first encountered the gods. Lewis, and everyone of Northern European descent, carry this landscape around with them. When he reads stories of Northern gods and heroes they enter this landscape and play out the stories like actors on a stage. The gods appear only where there is openness, in a space uncluttered by human things, i.e., not in cities, and they appear only to an open mind, uncluttered by human contrivance and arrogance. This landscape is the open space in which the Northern gods first appeared; it is carried around in Northern souls as the open channel through which they may again encounter the gods.

The Egyptian gods, with their dog heads and hawk heads, and the Sumerian images of bug-eyed, wooly-bearded gods strike me, as someone of Northern European descent, as strange. They do not have the pull of the familiar or produce in me a shock of recognition because I do not carry inside myself the Near-Eastern space within which such gods could be reanimated.

The gods are always gods of a land. People either take in on themselves, or are told by their gods to make their space sacred and declare it the center of the world. Myth or experience of the gods occurs in a land, to the people of that land. The people and the land belong together in a mysterious bond. Different cultures require different gods and different lands.

#### CONCLUSION

I have argued that myth is in part characterized by a sensuous component, the meaning of which exhausts all philosophic attempts to express it. I have characterized this sensuous component as weird,

and the weird as the uncanny familiar, which disturbs us with the sense of a recognition of some primal truth. This experience of weirdness is a function of our blood ties to the people who have expressed a mythic tradition. Through the experience of the weird we are transported to the mythic space and time of our ancestors. This is a “race memory” of the original land in which our ancestors first had an experience of the gods, and in which the myths “happened.” I have argued that the mythic world is opened only to a people who have a land.

I have said that what we must do is immerse ourselves in the *sensus communis* of our people by internalizing their myths and traditions, and, in general, trying as much as possible to live as they did. In this way, we make our entire lives a theatre of memory. We create a situation which makes it more likely that we will recollect the *archai*, if we are open in the way I have described.

#### NOTES

1. Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 24.

2. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1960), 243–53.

3. Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 1995). See my review of this book in *New Vico Studies* 16 (1998): 115–17.

4. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. J. M. Petry, 3 vols. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), vol. 3, 213.

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 28.

6. Jakob Böhme, *Der Weg zu Christo*, Sixth Book, “Von Göttlicher Beschaulichkeit,” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 4, ch. 1, sec. 8.

7. Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 40.

8. *Ibid.*, 41.

9. *Ibid.*, 52–53.

10. *Ibid.*, 53.

11. Joyce, 243–53.

12. Woden is Anglo-Saxon. The Celtic equivalent of Woden may have been Lugh.

13. T. W. Rolleston, *Celtic Myths and Legends* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1990; 1917), 291–92.
14. *Ibid.*, 272.
15. Paul C. Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 21–23.
16. Rolleston, 276–78.
17. In *Throne of Blood* (1957), Akira Kurosawa's film version of *Macbeth*, he reduces the three witches to one and sets her at a spinning wheel rather than a cauldron.
18. Quoted in Colin Wilson, *Mysteries* (New York: Putnam, 1978), 591–92.

