

Raymond Van Orer,
Sun Songs: Creation Myths
from Around the World.
New York: Meridian Books,
1980.

INTRODUCTION

The Meaning of Myths

MYTH HAS BEEN described as being basically visionary, an expansion of awareness into alternative realities. The symbols that carry the myth into completion may then be considered evocative signs leading toward a sense of wholeness, a fullness of being. If this is so, then Heraclitus was right when he wrote that "the unlike is joined together, and from the differences results the most beautiful harmony." For ancient mankind was undoubtedly puzzled by the great paradoxes, by life and death, the altering seasons, the apparent death when asleep and the peculiar sense of self-awareness when awake. Obvious questions such as how did life begin? What is death? What are stars, and the black canopy of the night sky? What lay beyond these enormous enigmas? Their myths attempted to resolve such profound and confusing questions, and therefore when reading myths we experience not so much an emotional insight as a sensation of watching something marvelous grow in the mind of early mankind.

The renowned mythologist Claude Lévi-Strauss suggests that mythical thought derives from the awareness that oppositions progress toward a natural mediation. That is, mythology provides a logical model that overcomes contradictions in a people's world view. On a personal level it reduces the anxiety one feels during conflicting or paradoxical life experiences. Thus, the myth resolves fundamental paradoxes. How, for example, can anyone accept that something is created from nothing? It seems an impossible contradiction, and yet if the logic of ancient man needed reassurance and resolution of this confusion, he could create a god who ruled the void, had the power to alter it, and thereby begin to fill it with "something."

For early man, there was no science of astronomy to explain the movement of the sun, moon, and stars. There was nothing to explain a sunrise; no science to explore the physics of an echo, or the reason for a rainbow. Without objective

science, early man used his imagination, his intuition, and his feelings to mold the fearsome world of nature into a meaningful and acceptable home.

But the ancient mythmaker, while untutored in a modern scientific sense, must have made astute observations regarding nature. The laws and phenomena of nature were vital for early man's survival, so it is natural that his observations would spill over into his theology and philosophy. Objective observation could have given rise to deductive insights. For example, two of the most frequent themes in creation myths are the sun and water, which are also two of the most important elements in the life of early man. It is not hard to imagine that as the sun scorched the earth and dried up crops, as it disappeared at night and was replaced by cold and dampness, as it rose in startling splendor and nourished the plants and life around them, it would become more than simply a bright, warm object illuminating the world. Its powers were obviously awesome. It had to possess characteristics larger than the common forms of nature such as trees, grass, and flowers, all of which seemed to gain life from its presence. Since the sun dominated other natural forces, it was greater than nature and therefore divine in its power.

Water possessed the same pervasive impact. It is reasonable that the Babylonian and Egyptian priest-scientists would observe the relationship between floodtides and fertile land. As plants blossomed on river-borne silt, it was logical to cultivate the nearby desert with irrigation. Water would obviously seem to be a primary and necessary ingredient for life. Perhaps from this came the idea that water was the source of all life. Like the sun, its presence meant life or death, whether crops flourished or failed. Thus both the sun and water became major powers that gave life and sustained all things. It is not surprising, therefore, that they were clothed, along with other natural powers that sustained life, in a cloak of divinity.

Myths also often tried to explain natural phenomena through personification of nature's powers. Thus, myth in a very broad sense is a symbolic narrative representing a cosmic process that carries necessary messages between the individual and the surrounding world. Creation myths, therefore, express our origins analogically and myth becomes a metaphor for our beginning.

With few exceptions, creation myths describe the origins of life—both cosmic and earthly—as emanating from a “beginningless god.” Myths from a number of different cul-

tures describe how this unborn, eternally existing god created the world. Rarely are there questions about the origin of this first divine being. It is simply accepted that “It” has existed since the beginning of time, or infinity. Regardless of the god's name, he has eternally ruled the void before creation and generally brooded over his own existence until creation commenced.

Most myths are quite specific about how things came into being. This specificity can be seen throughout the myths in this anthology. However, there are some exceptions. The Chinese mystic-philosopher Lao Tzu, for example, conceived an unnameable “Tao” that activates all life.¹ But the Tao (which means “way”) is also an absolute rest, a formless quiescence before it again moves back into activity and creates form. The movement between these extremes of void and fullness, between activity and rest, between being and non-being is accomplished by what Lao Tzu called *wu wei*, or spontaneous action, which is the inexhaustible essence of all things. This complex and unique view of creation is set forth in Lao Tzu's single book, the *Tao Teh Ching*:

There is a thing inherent and natural
Which existed before heaven and earth,
Motionless and fathomless,
It stands alone and never changes;
It pervades everything and is illimitable.
It may be regarded as the source of the Universe.
I do not know what it is . . .
I call it Tao and name it as Supreme.

In some of the Hindu Vedas, there can be found a sophisticated metaphysical vision similar to that of Lao Tzu. In the *Rig Veda* we read:

Who truly knows, and who can here declare it,
Whence it was born and whence comes this creation?
The gods are later than this world's beginning.
Who knows then how it first came into being?

He, the very origin of this creation,
Whether He formed it all or did not form it,

¹For a more complete description of Taoism, see Raymond Van Over, *Taoist Tales* (New York: The New American Library, 1973).

Whose gaze controls this world from highest heaven,
He knows it, or perhaps He knows not.

The greater number of myths in Hindu cosmology, however, are more specific than this almost Taoist view. Sometimes the traditional myths show glimmerings of metaphysics, of a clear philosophical inclination within the minds of the mythmakers.

"Mind" as the Metaphysics of Creation

Intriguing ideas thread their way through the tapestry of creation myths. The idea that thought is equivalent, or at least a powerful and necessary prerequisite to creation, occurs in many myths. In the Zuni Indian myth (two versions of which are included in this anthology; see pp. 23-26) the creator Awonawilona was self-conceived; he created himself from the black void surrounding him by *thinking* the world into existence. Awonawilona created first the "thought" within himself, which then took shape in his mind. When it moved into space, it became full of power and began to grow, expanding and filling out its initial conception. The Persian creator, Zurvan, also conceived a thought and gave birth to Ahura Mazda, the god of light and goodness. This was Zurvan's initial creation, but then, in a moment of doubt—and Zurvan's awareness of the existence of doubt—Ahriman, the god of darkness and malevolence, was brought into creation.

In the Hindu Vedanta, thought and self-awareness are the key to human enlightenment as well as creation. In the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, everything in existence is attributed to thought, which is the source of creation. Buddha said: "All that is, is the result of thought, it is found on thought, it is made of thought."² For Buddha, clarity of right thought is the fundamental requirement for enlightenment (which is equivalent to divinity), for salvation from the darkness and confusion that reigns on earth. For the Sufi 'Abd al-Karim Jili, "thought is the basis of existence and the Essence which is in

² For a more thorough presentation of Buddhism, and the complete translation of the *Dhammapada* and other Buddhist texts, see Raymond Van Over, *Eastern Mysticism*, vol. 1 (New York: The New American Library, 1977).

it, and it is a perfect manifestation of God, for Thought is the life of the spirit of the universe. It is the foundation of that life and its basis is man. Do not despise the power of thought, for by it is realized the nature of the Supreme Reality."³ The same emphasis on thought occurs in Biblical verse and various apocryphal texts. In the apocryphal "Poem of the Gospel of St. John," there is written:

In the Beginning was Mind: and Mind was with God.
So Mind was God. This was in the Beginning with God.
All kept coming into existence through it; and
Apart from it came into existence not a single (thing).
What had come into existence in it was Life; and
Life was the Light on the (true) Man.
And the Light shineth in the darkness; and the
Darkness did not imprison it. . . .
It was the True Light, which enlighteneth every Man
Who cometh into the world.
It was in the world; and the world kept coming into
Existence through it.⁴

Obviously thought, or self-consciousness, and hence self-awareness, takes on a very real meaning early in mankind's history. For me, these ideas are more than just a learning experience, they create a sense of heritage, a continuum between our present hunger for understanding and our ancestors' questing minds.

Some of these myths also contain intriguing psychological ideas. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (included in *Sun Songs* on page 000) the primal cosmic being looks around and perceives itself. This initial awareness of a "self" separate from the witness creates the ego. At the exact instant when this sense of separateness occurs, the cosmic creator experiences *fear*. But in this parable that symbolizes the Eastern evolutionary quest for total consciousness (the "pure thought" or "divine mind" just discussed), the cosmic being reasons that "as there is no one here but myself, what is there to fear."⁵ As the cosmic being realizes this, the experience of

³ For a complete reading of this and other Eastern ideas of divine "Mind," see Van Over, *Eastern Mysticism*, vol. 1.

⁴ Margaret Smith, *Readings from the Mystics of Islam* (London: Luzac & Co., 1972), p. 117.

⁵ See Van Over, *Eastern Mysticism*, vol. 1, for this and other Upanishads.

fear disappears. A peculiar mind-expanding myth! I read it as ~~an expression of the provocative Indian idea that consciousness evolves toward a complete awareness of self, which involves transcending the ego, and is even able to achieve greater awareness as it moves toward enlightenment—that is, the disappearance of anxiety and confusion, because there is nothing to fear.~~ This concept is reminiscent of a Zen koan on enlightenment where a disciple asks a master how he can free himself from bondage and achieve nirvana. The Zen master's reply is tantamount to saying there is no fear: "Who," he inquires, "has put you in bondage?"

Creation in this Upanishad, and the other myths in this anthology, involves a continual reaching out, an exuberant expanding. In fact, creation in Hinduism is defined as "what is poured forth." Hindus believe anyone understanding this becomes truly himself a creator in the continuing process of creation, a central actor in the drama of a universe in dynamic activity. Nothing in the act of creation can exist on its own; by definition, creation involves something "other." Creation myths frequently begin, therefore, with an undivided something separating into two from which creation then begins. It is this spasm of integration and disintegration that makes creation appear to be a pulsing, alive thing, a continual expansion and contraction.

Theories and Interpretations of Myths

There are many different definitions of myths:

- One interpretation of myths and their meaning argues that myths were invented by wise men to clarify and point toward a truth, but after a time they were taken literally. For example, this interpretation of myth would use the Greek god of time, Cronus, allegorically, because he devoured his children and time also devours that which it brings into existence. Such parallels can, of course, be easily made with many myths and mythic personalities.

- Some theologians believe that myths, because of their close association with ritual and religious beliefs, are only corruptions of scripture or early religious truths. This is in contrast to social myths that attempt to teach moral or ethical beliefs in accordance with the accepted religious dogma. But purely religious myths tend to embody (not necessarily ex-

plain) something of the nature of mankind's relation to nature and the transcendent or powerful. In fact, some argue that without the visual and metaphoric power of myth, the religious view of god becomes abstract and nonspecific; an intangible first cause and close to being a scientific principle. Thus, the world becomes real and the divine abstract. But myth defines and makes manageable the awesome powers of the universe.

- At one time a group of German scholars believed that myths were entirely personifications of nature. Thus, many of the mythic beings who create are associated with light, the sun, or the moon. The Greek Apollo would therefore be a personification of the sun, just as is the Egyptian Ra.

- In the early days of psychology, Freudians explained myths as a mechanism of wish-fulfillment, while the Jungians considered them expressions of unconscious dreams. But Freud also described myths as primitive man's attempt to give meaning to his incoherent and intense dreams. Freud and his followers pointed to the body of myths that incorporated what are now popularly called Freudian "symbols." The heroes of myth often battled monsters that seemed straight from our dreams: Marduk and Cadmus (whose stories are included in this anthology), for example, Perseus and Jonah, and the Eskimo's Raven (also included in *Sun Songs*) find themselves in the bellies of a fish. Or a hero often commits incest and other sexual transgressions. He steals fire, travels over water, and suffers numerous trials, most of which can be interpreted by Freudians symbolically. In short, Freud asserted that mankind's myths are expressions of the persistent dreams of the human race and most often express the repressed desires of primitive people. Otto Rank also contended that "myth is the collective dream of the people." The psychologist Erich Fromm argues that dreams and myths are similar in that they constitute "the oldest creations of man." Fromm contends that both dreams and myth utilize the same arcane ancient language of symbols. Joseph Campbell goes even further, for he considers myths have a central role in human history. "Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished. . . . It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams

that blister sleep, boil up from the basic magic ring of myth."⁶

But the early psychological theories, especially of Freudians, have been harshly questioned by scholars of myth. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the most renowned students of myths, asked: "What did Freud really know about savages? He never lived with them." But by this caustic comment, Bronowski was perhaps unaware of how he characterized his own ideas by his facile use of "savages."

• Sir James Frazer, whose monumental book *The Golden Bough* dominated the study of myths for years, believed that all myths dealt with themes of death, birth, and resurrection. To a large extent, Frazer's syncretism has been replaced by the ideas of modern scholars who tend to see the myths of a single people as unique to their lives and environment. This results in the specific interpretation of one particular group's myths rather than a single general explanation for the myths of all people. Some theorists argue that such interpretations are the result of overspecialization, and therefore fail to see the "mythic" forest because of "specialist" trees.

• Another theory considers myth simply a traditional or fabulous story that concerns supernatural events or gods.⁷ But myths have to be distinguished here from legends or folktales, which are about human events and often used to amuse or teach a lesson. "Legend," while often wrongly used as synonymous with myth, is generally defined as an unverifiable story handed down by tradition from earlier times.

• Sir Maurice Bowra defines a myth as a story which aims not at giving pleasure for its own sake, but rather at alleviating the perplexities of prescientific man because his reason was not ready to grasp them.⁸ In Bowra's definition the mythic explanation of life's perplexities is more emotional than rational and works by suggesting a connection or similarity between the conflicting facts of life, and does not attempt to explain them by cause and effect. Thus, myths bring the unknown into relation with the known and break down the barriers between man and the "untractable mass of phenomena" that surrounds him.

⁶ See Joseph Campbell, *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York: Meridian Books, 1970), p. 3.

⁷ See H. S. Robinson and Knox Wilson, *Myths and Legends of All Nations* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961).

⁸ Sir Maurice Bowra, *The Greek Experience* (New York: The New American Library, 1959), p. 115.

• Another profound student of myth is Ernst Cassirer, who has developed the theory that myths of primitive peoples contain the purest form of a unique symbolic way of perceiving the world. Cassirer argues that there is no sharp distinction in the primitive mind between the objective and subjective way of perceiving the world, and the myths it created expressed its religious (or subjective) perceptions. For this form of "mythical consciousness," there is no clear separation between the symbol and object, between fantasy and reality, between wish and fulfillment.

If Cassirer's theory is right, then it explains why our traditional standards for truth or objectivity do not work when applied to the mythical consciousness. What is most real is that which is most intense, that which evokes the deepest and most provocative feeling. Myths thus carry the force of a primary happening, an event uncompromised by logical or rational qualifiers. Judged by purely rationalistic standards the mythical perception of the world is meaningless; but confusion develops when it becomes clear that mankind rose up from this cauldron of his mythical consciousness. And if it worked for ancient man, if it allowed him to make accommodation with a hostile world, if it allowed him to identify with the powerful and often overwhelming forces of nature and thereby survive, how can it be accurately called "meaningless?" If nothing else, it was a survival mechanism in the sense that it allowed preverbal and prerational man to adapt psychologically to an alien and hostile world.

In short, it seems myths are meaningful precisely because of their continuing impact throughout mankind's history. As Gaston Bachelard pointedly asks in his *La Psychanalyse du Feu*,⁹ "how could a [myth] be kept alive and perpetuated if each generation had not 'intimate reasons' for believing in it." In the early part of his career, Lévi-Strauss also felt that the significance of myths could be proven by their continued importance throughout history. Myths, after all, were "the principle way of literary expression for many peoples from prehistoric to modern times; I could not conceive that the men who told these myths were spending their time recounting absurdities."

Ultimately, defining myths or symbols is one of the most difficult and baffling undertakings. Psychology, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and literary criticism have all at-

⁹ (Paris, 1938).

tempted at one time or another to explore the elusive subject of myths. Because there are so many ingredients in myths, and they have such a broad application, it is perhaps best to view them and their influence with caution, yet with full respect for their power over the human psyche. For myths do seem to suggest an elaborate order that reflects both the internal world of mind and the external world of harsh physical realities.

Some Basic Themes of Creation Myths

While many incidental parallels can be found in the creation myths in this anthology, the surprising and perplexing fact is that the *basic* themes for myths in widely different geographical areas are strikingly similar. Some of the basic themes, and the area in which they appear, are:

(1) The idea of a primeval abyss (which is sometimes simply space, but often is an infinite watery deep) is common to India, Scandinavia, Egypt, Babylonia, Celtic Britain, and some North American Indians. (2) The originating god (or gods) is frequently awakened or eternally existing in this abyss, as in the myths of the Egyptians, Babylonians, the Hindus of India, Hebrews, and Quiché Maya. (3) Also in the myths of these cultures (including Polynesia), the originating god broods over the water. (4) Another common theme is the cosmic egg or embryo, which appears in the myths of Egypt, India, Japan, and Peru. From this ubiquitous germ emerged the Chinese P'an Ku, the Indian Brahma, the Egyptian Ra or Horus, and the Polynesian god-creator. (5) Life was also created through sound, or a sacred word spoken by the original god in the myths of the Egyptians, the Hebrews, the Celts, and the Quiché Maya. (6) A peculiar theme, but quite common, is the creation of life from the corpse or parts of the primeval god's body, as in the myths of Babylon, China, the Hindus of India, and Scandinavia. In Egypt and China, for example, the eyes of a god become the sun and moon. Mankind itself emerges from the tears of a god in Egypt, from the sweat of a god or giant in Scandinavia, from the blood and bones of a Babylonian god. In the myths of the Babylonians, the Hebrews, and some North American Indians, human beings are also created from clay mixed with various substances, such as blood. In Scandinavian and Quiché Maya myths, humanity is also created from wooden images or trees.

In China, there is the unique myth of mankind formed from worms and insects. Thus the themes of how the world and life were created are varied, and yet one can find numerous parallels. One scholar, Professor A. G. Rooth, analyzed three hundred creation myths of the North American Indians and found that most of them fit into eight types; and seven of these appear throughout the myths of people in the distant continent of Eurasia.

The obvious question arises: Why such similarity of mythic ideas and images throughout these distant cultures? Many scholars have puzzled over this phenomena, among them the renowned Claude Lévi-Strauss, who, after years of studying myths, came to the conclusion that "throughout, myths resemble one another to an extraordinary degree." Another scholar, Clyde Kluckhohn, argues that "there is an astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions." The scholarly argument has raged for decades and it continues to this day. No definitive answer seems yet to have developed, but theories abound.

There is, of course, no mystery when an individual culture creates a specific vision peculiar to itself and its own unique cultural and psychological requirements. What is puzzling is when one comes across the identical themes from different cultures. Some suggest that these symbols and images appear throughout myths from distant ages and cultures because there exists an affinity between them and the human mind. It is an intriguing question: Are there themes common to the inner processes of the human psyche, an ocean of experience that expresses itself in repeating images and symbols? Many contemporary analysts of myths do believe that there is a common internal psychical structure which produces these visions. But even without being able to resolve the question of a myth's origin, the great value of myths is precisely that they display important, perhaps even fundamental, visions on an historical blackboard for our study and pleasure.

My personal view after studying myths for many years is that creation myths seem to rise from the depths of the human psyche, but for what purpose no one seems to know. They clearly carry the intense human desire to shape and structure a confusing and troublesome reality, to give meaning and insight where before only shadows reigned. This seems an impulse that guided the makers of myths, and thus they become a necessary human function; for as they give shape and meaning to our lives, they also serve the needs of our age and

our personal spirits. Perhaps a myth should not be analyzed as the repository of esoteric, or even exoteric, knowledge, but rather be seen as religious allegory meant to awaken consciousness, to expand awareness and insight, to offer alternative ways of viewing the world. The relationship between symbol, myth, and the religious impulse has perhaps been best caught by the monk Thomas Merton: "The true symbol does not merely point to something else. It contains in itself a structure which awakens our consciousness to a new awareness of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself."¹⁰

The force that underlies mythic structures is its power to evoke resonances from within, just as great art sets a reverberation resounding deep within those who come upon it. In this sense, myths continue to have a role in our lives—and in the modern age. They remain an important adjunct to our rational and scientific methods.

Myths and Modern Life

What we today consider "myths" once supported the moral order, vitalized secular and religious institutions, and stimulated the creative arts in ancient civilizations. As myths developed depth and complexity, it seems they incorporated many ancient, supportive symbols. Such myths and symbols gave life a cohesive meaning, and, as the German philosopher-poet Friedrich Nietzsche perceived, human beings need life-supporting myths. It has been conclusively shown that as these supporting systems break down, a culture can come apart at the seams. There are many examples where primitive societies disintegrated as contemporary white man's civilization intruded. Destruction begins as soon as the old beliefs are discredited. In fact, many observers of modern society are now saying that with the decline of ancient myths and other traditional beliefs there is a parallel disequilibrium in our own culture. Science has accurately "factualized" nature, but can offer no psychically satisfying symbols or myths as a replacement.¹¹

¹⁰ "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" in *New Directions* 20 (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 1-2.

¹¹ See Joseph Campbell, *The Meaning of Myths* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977).

RATIONALISM AND THE POETRY OF MYTH

One of the more obvious interrelationships between myths and modern life is the transference of ritual into the scientific description of cycles and patterns. In ancient days, rituals symbolically represented recurrent acts of nature. It was reasonable that they were incorporated into social and religious rituals. A rain dance, for example, represented the need for rain (fertility) and hence, rebirth from the death of winter, drought, and barrenness. The cycles of nature thus possessed ritual and religious significance. Rituals suggesting rebirth can be found throughout the creation myths in *Sun Songs*. In applying the idea of patterns to modern life, mathematicians quantify cycles and measure them by probability theory and statistical rhythms. While more objectively structured, the idea of cycles actually performs the same service for modern as for ancient man: It allows us to identify and work within the boundaries and rhythms of the natural world.

Throughout history, knowledge has been equivalent to power; and power carries the necessity (or likelihood) of its use. Modern man uses knowledge and its power in an attempt to manipulate and control nature as did ancient man, but with different methods. Today, the ancient rituals of nature are replaced by rituals of science. Our tools are mechanical while ancient man's were poetic and symbolic. We have developed complicated and sophisticated techniques to identify the powers of nature while ancient man possessed only his imagination, his capacity for intuitive identification, and some small deductive powers. But the basic need to secure our place in what we feel is an alien world is the same, and the myths in this anthology continuously display these fundamental needs. In fact, the ability of technological man to identify the forces of nature without recourse to his technology has so atrophied that a return to mythic and intuitive awareness seems a necessary rebalancing.

At one time, ritual expressed preverbal realities—but in contemporary life we factualize and are far more prone to use language or scientific symbols to describe our relationship to nature. Whether we verbalize correctly or not is something else—but the fact remains that modern science is constantly quantifying, describing, and labeling. Often it seems our security depends upon our ability to describe, which ultimately becomes a preference even over judgment or wisdom. We have little patience for preverbal representations of the natural

world. Except in the poetry of the unconscious mind—dreams and the arts—we are uncomfortable with the potent ancient symbols present in myths and legends. But precisely because we are becoming alienated from this vivid inner world, we have a need to refamiliarize ourselves with the preverbal symbols of nature. For the great distance between our inner lives and the factualized modern description of nature is diminished as we read myths and come to identify with our origins. In this sense, ancient myths are a means of finding our way home again.

Some of the more uncompromising and harsh modern rationalists argue that myths are merely false beliefs. They thrive only on ignorance, and disappear as soon as reason and science explore them. It is no secret that modern society is dominated by this type of rationalism. There is no area of our culture that is not heavily influenced by the spirit of rationalism and its impact through technology. Some ardent devotees of myths argue that modern man is incapable of preverbal awareness and is therefore doomed to live in an amythical world. Wherever the truth may lie between these conflicting claims, they all stress the incompatibility of myth and rationalism.

It is clear that science does not seem to touch human emotions; science expands our intellectual knowledge while the rest of the ingredients that compose the whole human being are displaced or ignored. It seems the true genius of mankind comes from the whole entity, from a synthesizing of mind and spirit—not a single accretion of fact as developed by analysis. The greatest scientific geniuses were those who accompanied their rational pursuits with poetic inspiration and a personal, transcending passion. And the great poetic geniuses are those who do not concern themselves with rationalism or scientific logic; rather, they labor to touch creative energies in their mythic unconscious. In this sense, myths provide a more
→ complete picture of the human potential—for understanding of any absolute (such as creation) can only come as the result of a total commitment to synthesis, whether it be of a mythic or scientific nature.

The reason this is important is that the ineffable will always remain unnamed—if only because language is a poor tool to describe the mysterious and shrouded majesty of the universe. Scientific labels will not help. As Thomas Mann has observed, no matter how far we extend our inquiry, how far we let out our line, the ultimate foundations we seek withdraw still fur-

ther into the depths. Many specialists in mythology become overly analytic and miss the point that myths contain the "ultimate mystery" that Mann talks about. For regardless of all the contemporary scholarly analysis and quantification, myths cannot be broken down into parts and retain their full significance. Mythic form dictates that each person delve into its source and discover its meaning on a personal level. This is one of the greatest values in an anthology of traditional creation myths. It is psychologically significant, for in our personal growth we often find that "under each deep another deep opens" to reveal ever-expanding, new dimensions. But this should not be a reason for despair or frustration, because to seek is a vital part of human nature; and while we may never reach the ultimate horizon we are nourished by the search itself. This is the peculiar heritage of humanity that we can identify in creation myths—a constant seeking to understand and find meaning. We must seek the delights of myth and mystery, or succumb to an ashen ennui that drains us of vitality.

No matter how hard we try to be the compleat rationalist, the fact remains that human beings are *ikonists*, imagemakers, visionaries. When we sacrifice our visions, as we have in the modern age, we close off our heritage, and we warp ourselves into floundering creatures struggling to survive in an unnatural environment. This does not mean that we must sacrifice our reason, but merely that we give more careful and respectful scrutiny to our subjective visions. Without such affectionate attention, our mythic inclinations wither, and we become disjointed and separate from our inner selves.

The human being seems an unformed, uncertain animal who often lives his time pendulum-like, swaying between certainty and confusion, arrogance and submissiveness, calm and terror. He seems to create life through vision, and so perhaps myth ultimately is the visionary screen upon which the human spirit projects its destiny.

EDITORIAL NOTES

Some may question a title like *Sun Songs* for a book on creation myths, especially since all the myths are not solar. The title is justified, however, by the enormous number of creation myths that involve the sun, and the life-giving, re-

generative properties of light, throughout ancient cultures. The sun, or light, is almost universally identified with primal creative forces. Everywhere the sun plays an important, if not a central, role. Even the constantly recurring theme of the cosmic egg is associated with light, for it is like the Sanskrit *Hiranyagarbha*, the golden egg, an illumination brightening the dark cosmic chaos that exists before creation. The myths in this collection express the first yearnings of the waking human spirit, which can take the form of a bright dawning, of birth, the shape of a song, of sound that is exuberant and outreaching. They all, in every guise, convey both the image of a bright luminescence like the sun, and rhythmic pulse like a song.

I have limited the myths in this collection to a very special sort—myths that deal with the creation of the cosmos and myths that create earthly life. Many other myths, including those of death and resurrection, flood legends, and even well-known stories like the Narcissus myth can be interpreted as creation myths, for they all deal with transformation, with the dynamic process of life that is ever growing, ever moving on toward its mysterious conclusion.

And finally, no other justification for a thematic collection of creation myths is necessary beyond that it offers the reader an opportunity to see, in Joseph Campbell's words, the "cultural history of mankind as a unity," for this is what the comparative study of world mythologies compels.¹² Because I accept this principle wholeheartedly, the basic goal of this anthology is simply to introduce creation myths to the general reader and nonspecialist. Even though a great many books have been published on classical myths of the Western world, few books have dealt with the specific theme of creation, or have collected material from the more exotic corners of the world as I have tried to do with this anthology. The true value of any anthology is that it brings the reader into touch with original material that he may not otherwise have access to. This book then has the modest hope of offering a broad selection of creation myths so the reader may introduce himself to material that he may never otherwise find gathered together in his casual reading.

Some may find the lack of myths from specific countries strange. There are several reasons for this. First, no single

¹² See Joseph Campbell, *op. cit.*, for his argument on the value of myths for modern man.

volume can be definitive when dealing with a subject as large and varied as creation myths. At best, one can offer a stimulating first reading that may urge the reader on to other books and a deeper understanding. Also, the economics of publishing dictates limitations of space. Further, in many cases a particular culture would have no extant material to draw on. It is very common for the more powerful ancient nations to strongly influence the smaller surrounding cultures. This was true, for example, with the cultures of Burma, Siam, and Indo-China generally, where the mythology was borrowed almost entirely from India and China.

For any anthologist, some things are beyond control. Opposing views of scholars regarding which translation of a particular text is best are quite common. Mythology also lends itself to secondary interpretations by scholars, who often make many inferences from partial texts and develop elaborate theories and hypotheses. Another problem peculiar to mythology is the frequent "reinterpretation" or paraphrased rendering of a myth for modern readers. If the translator is a poet, or particularly attuned to the culture whose myths he is "interpreting" for the modern reader—Sir Edwin Arnold's translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* are an example—then we are given a superior translation. But in all too many cases the "paraphraser" lacks poetic sensitivity or adequate knowledge of the original language he is rendering. I have tried to avoid this problem by choosing generally accepted translations, but without succumbing to using only scholarly "approved" renderings. This sounds easier than it is, for some of the myths are told in folktale form, while others are in traditional poetic verse. Also, each selection could be chosen for other specific reasons, sometimes having little to do with the translation. The gentle-harsh poetic verse style of the *Poetic Edda* and the Finnish *Kalevala*, for example, best represent those cultures and the themes of their myths. So I chose a verse translation over a storytelling narrative style. The simplicity and directness of the folktale style, however, seemed more appropriate to other cultures such as the North American Indian and African, so the selections were made accordingly. This technique I believe gives the reader a better opportunity to experience the culture whose myth he is reading about.

Because much early storytelling, including myths, used mnemonic devices that often included chanting and repetition, most early myths were musical in their telling. This is why many myths are in verse or song form, and why a poetic or

verse translation is closer to the original storyteller's presentation. For this reason, I have preferred verse translations to a modern writer's retelling of an ancient tale in modern syntax. In effect, one sacrifices ease of reading for authenticity with this method of selection.

Mythology is on the order of poetry—and the translator of ancient myths who retains his sensitivity to the poetic dimension is the person who renders ancient visions most accurately for the modern reader. So what I looked for in these selections were translations that fulfilled several different criteria, but most importantly, the rendition chosen had to possess this sensitive identification with the poetic spirit of myths.