Universal Root Myths

Introduction to Universal Root Myths

Since ancient times there has been a powerful desire to define myth, legend, and fable, to separate the apocryphal story and unlikely tale from true description. Enormous effort has gone into demonstrating that myths are the symbolic cloaking of fundamental truths, and, just as forcefully, that myths are the transposition of cosmic forces into beings possessed of intention. It has also been claimed that myths are based on transformations in which vaguely historical characters are elevated to the status of heroes or gods. Much theoretical work has gone into uncovering the objective realities underlying these distortions of reason, as much as into research to discover the profound psychological conflict assumed to be embedded in those projections. All of this labor has turned out to be useful, at least insofar as it has helped us to understand, as if *in vitro,* how new myths struggle to gain space, taking the place of old ones.

It is even possible for scientific theories to become detached from the ambit of science and, though stripped of any proof, gain wide acceptance. When this happens, it is because this theory has become established at the level of social belief. It has acquired the plastic force of the image—a characteristic of paramount importance in allowing it to act as a reference and to orient behavior. And in this new image that bursts onto the scene we can see the avatars of old myths rejuvenated by the changes in the social landscape—a landscape to which people respond according to the demands of the times.

Saying that the system of vital tensions to which a people is subjected is translated as an image is not enough to provide a full explanation unless we are thinking only in simplistic terms of challenge and response. It is necessary to comprehend that in every culture, group, and individual there lives a memory, a historical accumulation on the basis of which the world in which they live is interpreted. This interpretation is what configures for us the landscape that, in perceiving, we take as external. We grasp this landscape according to the vital tensions that correspond to this historical moment or, although they arose long ago, residually form part of our interpretive scheme of present-day reality.

It is only when we discover in a given people their fundamental historical tensions that we come close to an understanding of their ideals, of their apprehensions and hopes. These do not exist within their horizon as cold ideas, but rather as dynamic images that impel behavior in a particular direction. Of course, to the degree that ideas are more closely related to the landscape in question, those ideas will be accepted with greater ease. As much as love or hate, these ideas will be experienced with the full flavor of commitment and truth, their internal

register unquestionable for one who lives that experience—even when, objectively, it is not justified.

For example, consider how the fears of certain peoples have been translated into images of a mythical future in which everything will collapse: the gods will fall; the heavens, the rainbow, and all that has been built will collapse; the air will become unbreathable and the waters poisonous; the great tree of the world, responsible for universal equilibrium, will die, and with it the animals and human beings. In critical moments, these peoples have translated their tensions into troubling images of contamination and a world that is being undermined. Yet this is the very thing that has impelled them, in their best moments, to *build* so solidly in so many fields. Other peoples have been formed in the painful register of abandonment and exclusion from lost paradises—and that is the very thing that has propelled them tirelessly to improve and to learn in the attempt to reach the center of knowledge. There are peoples who seem marked by the guilt of having killed their gods, and others who feel affected by a multifaceted and changing vision. This has led one to seek redemption through action, and the other to a reflective search for a permanent and transcendental truth.

Certainly these fragmentary observations do not explain the extraordinary richness of human behavior, and in proposing them we do not wish to propagate stereotypes. We simply want to broaden the vision that is normally held of myths and the psychosocial function that they serve.

Today the isolation of cultures is disappearing, and with it their mythic heritage. Profound changes can be observed in the members of all communities of the Earth under the impact not only of information and technology but also of social usage, customs, values, images, and behaviors that reach them from all over the planet. This displacement will not diminish the proposals for solutions that find expression in more or less scientific theories or formulations, nor will it lessen the anguish or the hope—all of which still carry at their core ancient myths unknown to the citizens of today's world.

For us, approaching the great myths has meant once again revaluing all peoples, but from the optic of trying to comprehend their basic beliefs. In this work we have not touched upon the beautiful stories and legends that describe the deeds of the demigods and extraordinary mortals. Instead, we have circumscribed our work, limiting it to the myths in which the nucleus is occupied by the gods, even when humankind may play an important role in the plot. Moreover, as far as possible we have not dealt with questions of particular religious cults, considering that practical and daily religion should not be confused with the plastic images of poetic mythology.

In this work we have tried to take as our reference the original texts of each mythos, an approach that has left us facing a number of problems. For example, we might note how the mythological richness of the Cretan and Mycenaean civilizations has been subsumed in one generic chapter—Greco-Roman myths—precisely because we did not have access to the original texts of those other cultures. The same occurred with the myths of Africa, Oceania, and, to some degree, the Americas. In any case, the continuing advances of anthropologists and specialists in comparative mythology encourage us to consider a future work based on developments in these fields.

The title of this work, *Universal Root Myths,* demands some clarification. We have considered as a "root" myth every myth that, in passing from people to people, has preserved in its central argument a certain timelessness. That is, it has a core that has been maintained, even when over time changes have occurred in the names and attributes of the characters and even the landscape in which the action takes place. While the central plotline, which we also call

the “nucleus of ideation,” also undergoes changes, it does so at a pace that is relatively slow in relation to what may be thought of as secondary elements.

So it is that, just as we have not concerned ourselves with the variations in the secondary system of representation, neither have we attempted to determine the precise moment at which the myth arose. It is not viable to proceed otherwise, because clearly the origin of a given myth cannot be traced to one particular moment.

In any event, it is the documents and other vestiges of history that give evidence of the existence of a myth, at least those that fall within a certain historical range. By the same token, the construction of a myth is not something that appears to belong to any single author, but rather belongs to successive generations of authors and commentators who rely on material that is itself unstable and dynamic. Discoveries in archeology, anthropology, and philology that support comparative mythology demonstrate how certain myths that had been considered original to a particular culture may often turn out to pertain to earlier cultures, or to contemporary cultures that influenced them.

For this reason we have not focused on arranging the myths in chronological order, but have instead arranged them according to the importance they seem to have acquired for a particular culture, even when this culture may have come after another in which the same nucleus of ideation was already acting.

It should also be noted that the present work is in no way an attempt to be a comprehensive compilation or comparison, or to reflect a classification based on predetermined categories. Rather, our interest has been to put into evidence the enduring nuclei of ideation that have been active in different latitudes and historical moments. To this one could object that the transformation of cultural context must cause a myth’s core expressions and meanings to vary as well. And it is precisely for this reason that we have dealt here with myths that have gained a greater importance in a particular culture and moment, even when they have existed in other cultures, but without fulfilling a significant psychosocial function.

As for those myths that occur in apparently disconnected geographic points, yet display important similarities, only by thorough investigation can it be determined whether in fact such a historical disconnection really existed. In this field, research is advancing rapidly, and today it can no longer be claimed, for example, that the cultures of the Americas are totally alien to those of Asia. It could be said that the Bering Strait migrations occurred at a time, more than 20,000 years ago, before the peoples of Asia had yet developed myths, and that these took shape only after the tribes had settled. But even if that is the case, certainly the pre-mythic situation was similar for both these peoples, and perhaps in this situation models can be found that contain some common patterns, even if they developed unequally in their respective cultural contexts. Whatever the case may be, this is a discussion that is far from finished, and it would be premature to adopt any of the hypotheses that can be found in contention today. As for what concerns us here, the originality of the myth is of little consequence—what is central, as previously mentioned, is the importance that the myth has in a given culture.

This is the rapture of those beings not understood in their deepest nature, great powers who made all that is known and even all that which is still unknown.

This is the rhapsody of the external nature of the gods, of action seen and sung by human beings who could place themselves in the watchtower of the sacred.

This is what appeared as a sign fixed in eternal time, capable of disrupting the laws and order, and feeble reason. That which mortals desired, this the gods made—that which the gods spoke through human beings.

I. Sumerian-Akkadian Myths

Gilgamesh

(The Poem of Lord Kullab)

Gilgamesh and the Creation of His Double

He who knew all and who understood the root of things. He who saw everything and learned everything. He who knew the countries of the world—great was Gilgamesh!

He who built the walls of Uruk. He who undertook a long voyage and who knew all that occurred before the flood. Upon returning, he recorded his feats on a great stele. Because the great gods created him, two-thirds of his body was divine and one-third human.

When he had battled against every country, he returned to Uruk, his homeland. But the people murmured with hate because Gilgamesh claimed the flower of youth for his exploits and ruled with an iron fist. So the people took their complaints to the gods, and the gods took them to Anu. Anu carried them to Aruru, and said these words:[1]

"You, Aruru, who created humanity, create now a copy of Gilgamesh, so that when these two meet they will fight between themselves and leave our city in peace." The goddess Aruru, hearing this request, concentrated within herself, moistened her hands, and, taking some clay, formed the valiant Enkidu. The hero was born with his body covered with hair as thick as the barley of the fields.[2] He knew nothing of men or their countries; his mind was closed. Like a wild beast he lived on the plants of the field and drank at the watering holes with the herds.

In time, a hunter came upon Enkidu, and his face contorted in fear. He went to his father and told him of the prowess of this wild man. And so the old man sent his son to Uruk to beseech Gilgamesh for help.

When Gilgamesh heard the story from the lips of the hunter he recommended that he take a beautiful temple-girl with him, a daughter of pleasure, and leave her within reach of the intruder. "In that way, when he sees the young woman, he will be taken with her and he will forget his animals, and his animals will not recognize him." So the king spoke, and so the hunter did. After three days he arrived at the meeting place, and there he waited. One day and then a second passed, until the animals came to the spring to drink. Among them was the intruder, and the intruder saw the temple-girl reclining there. And when she stood up and approached him, Enkidu was trapped by her beauty. Seven days he spent with her, until he decided to return to

his beasts—but the gazelles and the herds of the desert fled from him. Enkidu had lost his strength and could not run, but his intelligence opened and he began to think and feel as a man does.

He sat down again beside the woman and she said to him: “Why do you live among the animals like a wild thing? Come, I will take you to Uruk, to the sanctuary of Anu and the goddess Ishtar, to Gilgamesh whom no one can defeat.” This pleased Enkidu because his heart yearned for a friend, and so he let the young woman lead him to the fertile fields, to the place of stables and shepherds.

Suckled on the milk of animals, he knew neither bread nor wine until the girl gave them to him. The sacred slave anointed him with oil, a barber shaved his body, and he was dressed like a young king. Taking up his lance to fight the wild animals, he freed the shepherds from their fears, allowing them to sleep undisturbed. It happened, then, that an emissary arrived, requesting Enkidu’s help in ending the injustices of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk. Filled with fury, Enkidu promised to change the order of things.

But Gilgamesh had seen the savage in his dreams, and comprehended that it was through combat that they would come to understand each other. So it was that when his opponent blocked his path, Gilgamesh rushed upon him with the force of a charging bull. The people gathered round, watching the ferocious battle and praising Enkidu, who so resembled the king. Before the house of the Assembly they fought. They shattered the doors into splinters, they demolished the walls. But when the king managed to throw Enkidu to the ground, Enkidu was appeased, and began to praise Gilgamesh. So the two embraced, and their friendship was sealed.

The Cedar Forest

Gilgamesh had a dream, and Enkidu said: “Here is the meaning of your dream: It is your fate to be king, but not to be immortal. So deal justly with your servants, deal justly before the eyes of the god Shamash. Use your power to liberate and not to oppress.” Gilgamesh thought about his life and realized that he had not fulfilled his destiny. So he said to Enkidu: “I should go to the country of Life where the cedars grow and inscribe my name there on a stele where is written the names of those who are worthy of glory.”

Enkidu was saddened, because as a child of the mountain he knew the roads that led to the cedar forest. He thought: “It is ten thousand leagues in any direction from the gates of the forest to its center. In the heart of the forest lives Humbaba (whose name means ‘Enormity’). His breath is fire, and when he roars it is like a tempest.” But Gilgamesh had already made up his mind to go to the forest to end the evil of the world, the evil of Humbaba. And because Gilgamesh was decided, Enkidu prepared to guide him, but not before first explaining the dangers. “A great warrior who never sleeps guards the entrance,” said Enkidu. “Only the gods are immortal, and man cannot achieve immortality—he cannot battle against Humbaba.”

Gilgamesh commended himself to Shamash, the sun-god, asking him for help in his undertaking. And Gilgamesh remembered all the bodies of the men he had seen floating in the river as he gazed down from the walls of Uruk—the bodies of enemies and friends, of acquaintances and strangers. And so he thought upon his own end and, taking two goats to the temple, a white one with no marks and a brown one, he said to Shamash:

“Without hope, a man dies, and I have my task to accomplish. It is a long road to the closed realm of Humbaba. Why, Shamash, did you fill my heart with the hope of this undertaking if it

could not be realized?" And Shamash the compassionate accepted Gilgamesh's offerings and his tears, and celebrated a solemn pact with him.

Then Gilgamesh and Enkidu gave orders to the artisans to forge their weapons, and the masters brought javelins, swords, bows, and axes. The weapons of each one weighed ten times thirty shekels, and the armor another ninety. Then the heroes set out, and in one day they walked fifty leagues. In three days they covered as much terrain as travelers do in a month and three weeks. Even before they reached the gates of the forest they had to cross seven mountains. At the end of the journey they came to the gates—they were seventy cubits high and forty-two wide. So beautiful, so dazzling was this entrance that they did not destroy it. Instead, Enkidu rushed upon it, pushing with only his bare hands until it opened wide. Then they descended until they reached the foot of the green-covered mountain.

Awestruck, they stood motionless, contemplating the mountain of cedars, the verdant slopes where the mansion of the gods stood. Forty hours they spent in ecstasy, gazing upon the forest and the magnificent path that Humbaba traveled to reach his dwelling.

Before nightfall, Gilgamesh dug a well and scattered fine meal, asking the mountain for auspicious dreams. Squatting down, his head on his knees, Gilgamesh dreamed, and Enkidu interpreted the auspicious dreams. The following night Gilgamesh asked that Enkidu in turn might have auspicious dreams, but the dreams the mountain delivered were ominous. Then Gilgamesh did not awake, and with effort Enkidu managed to raise him to his feet. Mounting their horses, they rode across the terrain, wearing their armor as if it were the lightest of garments. They reached the immense cedar, and Gilgamesh, seizing an axe in his hands, felled the great tree.

Humbaba left his mansion and cast the eye of death upon Gilgamesh. But the sun-god Shamash raised terrible hurricanes against Humbaba—the cyclone and the whirlwind. Eight tempests he hurled against Humbaba, so that he could neither advance nor retreat, while Gilgamesh and Enkidu cut the cedars to enter his dominion. And so Humbaba, now meek and fearful, presented himself before the heroes, promising them great honors. Gilgamesh put aside his weapons and was about to assent when Enkidu interrupted: "Do not listen to him! No, my friend, evil speaks through his mouth. He must die by our hands!" And thanks to the warning of his friend, Gilgamesh recovered. Taking up the axe and unsheathing his sword, he wounded Humbaba in the neck. Enkidu also fell upon Humbaba and struck the second blow. On the third blow Humbaba fell over, silent and dead. And so they took his head from his body.

At that moment chaos was unleashed, for he who lay dead was the Guardian of the Cedar Forest. And so Enkidu felled the trees of the forest—all the way to the banks of the Euphrates he pulled them up by their roots.

Then, removing the head from a shroud, they showed it to the gods. But when Enlil, god of the storms, saw the lifeless body of Humbaba, he was filled with rage, and he took from these profaners the power and the glory that had been Humbaba's and gave them to the lion, the barbarian, and the desert. Then the two friends left the forest of cedars.

Gilgamesh washed his body, casting his bloodied clothes far away and even burning those that were unstained. The royal crown shone upon his head, and the goddess Ishtar looked upon him with desire. But Gilgamesh spurned her because she had lost all of her husbands, and had, through love, reduced them to the most abject servitude. And so Gilgamesh said: "You are a ruin that offers no shelter from the storm, you are the palace jewels that have been plundered by thieves, you are the poison hidden in the meal. You are a foundation made of soft stone, you

are an amulet incapable of warding off danger, you are a sandal that trips its owner in the midst of the race."

The Celestial Bull, the Death of Enkidu and the Descent to the Hells

Furious, the princess Ishtar went to her father, Anu, and threatened to break open the doors of Hell and unleash an army of the dead more numerous than that of the living. She cried: "If you do not set the Celestial Bull upon Gilgamesh, I will do so." And in exchange for seven years of fertile fields, Anu agreed. At once he created the Celestial Bull, which fell to Earth. In the first attack the beast killed three hundred men. In the second, hundreds more fell. In the third it charged Enkidu but, grasping the horns and leaping astride it, he knocked the Celestial Bull to the ground.

While the beast spewed bloody foam from its mouth, Enkidu managed to hold on and, almost fainting from the struggle, cried out: "Gilgamesh, we have promised the gods that we will leave enduring names—sink your sword into the body of our enemy!" Then Gilgamesh attacked and killed the Celestial Bull, driving his sharp sword between the horns and nape of its neck. Immediately, the friends removed the still-beating heart and offered it up to Shamash. But from the highest wall of Uruk, the goddess Ishtar put a curse on Gilgamesh. Hearing the princess, Enkidu could not control his fury, and sealed his fate by ripping out the genitals of the Celestial Bull and hurling them at the divine face.

When the new day arrived, Enkidu awoke from a dream that had troubled his sleep. In this dream the gods Anu, Enlil, Shamash, and Ea held council together. The gods argued about the death of Humbaba and the Celestial Bull, and in the end they decreed that of the two friends, it was Enkidu who must die. After the dream, he awoke and recounted what he had seen. He went back to dreaming, and this is what he related:

"The musical instruments of Gilgamesh fell into a great pit. Gilgamesh searched for them, but could not reach the depths where they had fallen. With his hands he sought the harp and the flute; with his feet he tried to reach them. Seated before the entrance to the subterranean worlds, Gilgamesh cried bitterly, pleading for someone to return the instruments from the depths of the hells. Then Enkidu said: 'I will go down and seek your flute.' At once the pit leading to the hells opened, and Enkidu descended. Time passed, and a saddened Gilgamesh implored: 'Let Enkidu return and speak with me!' The spirit of Enkidu flew from the depths like an arrow, and the two brothers spoke: 'You who know the subterranean world, tell me: Have you seen those who died in the fury of battle and those who died abandoned in the fields?' Enkidu answered: 'Those who have died in battle are sustained by their parents, but those whose bodies are abandoned in the fields find no peace in the underworld. I have also seen those who wander, whose spirit is not remembered—they are always restless, prowling around and feeding on the refuse that people have left behind.' Then the two brothers fell silent.[3]

Enkidu fell ill and died. Then Gilgamesh said: "To suffer and die—life has no other meaning! Will I also die like Enkidu? I must seek Utnapishtim, he whom they call 'The Distant,' so that he may explain how he came to be immortal. First I will play my lute, and then I will dress in the skin of a lion, and, invoking Sin, I will go on my way."

Gilgamesh walked all the roads until he arrived at the mountains, at the very gateway of the Sun. There he stopped before the scorpion-men, the terrible guardians of the gateway of the Sun. Asking to speak to Utnapishtim, he said: "I wish to question him about death and about

life.” But the scorpion-men tried to dissuade him from his enterprise. They said: “None who enter the mountain ever return to the light of day.” Still, Gilgamesh persisted in his request that they open the door of the mountain, until finally it was done. He walked in utter darkness for many hours, until at last he saw in the distance a light dawning. Upon reaching it, he found himself standing before the Sun. Though almost blinded by its splendor, he could still make out a vast garden. He took the paths that the gods travel until finally he came upon a tree with branches of lapis lazuli, and from the branches hung fruit of rubies.

Dressed in the skin of a lion and eating the flesh of animals, Gilgamesh wandered through the garden, not knowing which way to turn. And when Shamash saw Gilgamesh he took pity on him and said: “When the gods made man, they reserved immortality for themselves. The life that you are searching for, you will never find.”[4] But Gilgamesh followed the path until he reached the shore, where he encountered the ferryman of The Distant. They sailed on until they saw land—but Utnapishtim, seeing them arrive, met them and asked for explanations from the one who accompanied his ferryman. Gilgamesh gave his name and explained the meaning of the crossing.

The Universal Flood

Utnapishtim said: “I will tell you a great secret. Once, on the banks of the Euphrates stood an ancient city, sovereign and wealthy, called Shurrupak. The people multiplied and everything could be found in abundance. But Enlil, disturbed by the endless clamor, called to the other gods, saying that it was no longer possible to sleep, and demanding that a great flood be unleashed to put an end to such excess. Then in a dream Ea revealed Enlil’s plan to me. ‘Tear down your house and save your life—build a covered boat, it must be of equal length and width. Onto the vessel you will take the seed of every living thing. If others ask about your labors, tell them that you have decided to go live in the gulf.’ My younger children brought pitch and the older ones everything else that was needed.

“I built the deck of the vessel, and below the upper deck I built seven decks, dividing each into nine parts. Finally, I rolled the heavy construction over thick logs until it entered the water, floating with two-thirds submerged. On the seventh day, the vessel was completed and loaded with all that was needed. My family, relatives, and artisans boarded the vessel, and later were loaded the animals, both domestic and wild. When that evening the hour came, Enlil sent the Rider on the Storm.

“Boarding the vessel, I sealed it with pitch and tar and, as everything was in readiness, I gave the tiller to Puzur-Amurri, the helmsman. Then Nergal loosed the floodgates of the waters below, and in a thundering torrent the gods razed fields and mountains. The judges of the hells, the Annunaki, cast away their torches, and day was made night. Day after day the tempest grew worse, and seemed to gather fury as it went. On the seventh day the flood stopped and the sea grew calm. As I opened the hatchway, the light of the sun fell full on my face. But I searched in vain—all was sea. I cried for the men and the living beings newly turned to clay.

“At last the vessel came to rest on the summit of Mount Nisir. I loosed a dove and a swallow, and finding no resting place on the Earth, they returned. After many days I freed a crow, which, cawing, did not return. Later the gods met in council and reproached Enlil for having meted out so heavy a punishment on the creatures of the Earth. And so Enlil came to our vessel, and, making my wife and me kneel, he touched our foreheads as he said: ‘You were mortal, but now

you and your wife shall live forever, here at the mouth of the rivers, and you shall be known as The Distant. As for you, Gilgamesh, why should the gods grant you immortality?'"

The Return

Utnapishtim set a test for Gilgamesh. For six days and seven nights he was to go without sleep. But as soon as the hero lay back, the mist of sleep like soft wool fell upon him. "Look at him—look at the one who seeks immortality!" said The Distant to his wife. Awakening, Gilgamesh complained bitterly about his failure: "Where will I go? For death lies on all roads." Disappointed, Utnapishtim ordered the ferryman to return the man. But he was not without pity, for he decreed that the clothing Gilgamesh wore would never become old, so that once he was back in his own country the garments would shine resplendently for mortal eyes.

As he was leaving, The Distant whispered: "At the bottom of the waters is a thorny plant that can wound your hands, but if you are able to take hold of it and keep it with you, you will be immortal!"

Gilgamesh tied heavy rocks to his legs and plunged into the water. He grasped the plant, and while returning to the surface said to himself: "With this I will give my people to eat and I will also regain my youth." Then he walked hour after hour in the darkness of the mountain until he again passed through the gateway to the world. He saw a fountain, and after all his labors he began to bathe—but a serpent coming from the depths of the pool snatched the plant away, and submerged once again beyond the reach of Gilgamesh.

And so the mortal returned with empty hands and an empty heart. Thus it was that he returned to strong-walled Uruk. And so the decree of the gods was fulfilled. With the bread of tribute for the Guardian of the Gateway, with the bread we asked of the serpent-god, Lord of the Tree of Life—with this bread we give thanks to Dumuzi the shepherd, who makes the Earth fertile![5]

He who knew all and who understood the root of things. He who saw everything and learned everything. He who knew the countries of the world—great was Gilgamesh!

He who built the walls of Uruk. He who undertook a long voyage and who knew all that occurred before the flood. Upon returning, he recorded his feats on a great stele.

II. Assyro-Babylonian Myths

Enuma Elish (*Poem of Creation*)[1]

The Original Chaos

When neither the heavens above nor the Earth below had yet been named, from the Abyss and Impetuosity the waters mingled. Neither gods nor marshes nor rushes existed. In that chaos, two serpents were begotten that for a long time grew in size, making room for the horizon of the sea and the Earth. They divided the spaces, forming the limits of the heavens and the Earth. The great gods were born from those limits and were grouped together in different parts of what was the world. And these divinities continued to multiply, and in this way disturbed the great ones who shaped the original chaos.

So Apsu of the abyss went to his wife, Tiamat, mother of the oceanic waters, and said: “I cannot abide the goings-on of the gods. Their revelry will not let me sleep; they stir things up by themselves, since we have not established any destiny.”

The Gods and Marduk

Thus spoke Apsu to Tiamat the resplendent. He spoke in such a way that Tiamat, furious, began to shout: “We shall destroy those rebellious ones, and then at last we will be able to sleep.” So she screamed as she shook with rage. And so it was that one of the gods, Ea, came to know of their destructive designs, and he laid a spell upon the waters. With that, Apsu (as was his wish) fell into a deep sleep, and was enchained. Finally Ea killed him, tore apart his body, and built his dwelling upon it. There he lived with his wife Damkina, and from their union was born Marduk.

Ea’s heart was exalted upon seeing the perfection of his son, completed by his twin heads divine. The child’s fiery voice rang out, his four eyes seeing all and his four ears hearing all. His enormous body and his incomprehensible limbs were bathed in a radiance that was strongest when the lightning swirled around him.

The War of the Gods

While Marduk grew and gave order to the world, some of the gods approached Tiamat and made recriminations about her lack of valor, saying: “They killed your consort and you did nothing, and now we also can find no rest. Become our avenging force and we will march at your side and we will go into battle.” In this way they grumbled and gathered around Tiamat, until after long consideration she resolved to make arms for her gods. In her fury she created serpent-monsters with poisonous claws, storm-monsters, scorpion-men, demon-lions, centaurs, and flying dragons. Eleven invincible monsters Tiamat created, and then from among her gods she elevated Kingu and made him chief of her army.[2]

She entrusted Kingu with command over her troops and their arms and raised him to a seat in the assembly: “I have cast a spell in your favor, giving you power to command the gods. You are now my spouse, and the Anunnaki shall exalt your name. I give you now the tablets of Fate and I fasten them around your neck. Nothing will change in this mandate, and your word shall prevail.”[3]

Ea, upon discovering their perverse designs, again sought help from the other gods, proclaiming: “Tiamat, who begat us, now abhors us. She has gathered the terrible Anunnaki around her and set them against us. She has pitted one-half of the gods against the other. How can we make her desist? I ask that the Igigi gather in council to resolve this.” And so the many generations of the Igigi gathered together, but none among them could resolve the matter. When, after a time, neither emissaries nor valiant heroes could change Tiamat’s designs, Anshar the elder stood up and called for Marduk. And so Ea went to his son and requested that he aid the gods. But Marduk answered that if he did as they asked he must be made chief among them. Thus spoke Marduk, and he went before the council.

The gods filled their bellies with sweet wine and ceremonial bread. Impassioned, they began to shout for Marduk. They decreed his fate, naming him their avenger. With rites and incantations they erected a throne and sat him upon it, making him preside over them. They placed a garment before Marduk and said: “Whether to create or destroy, your word will be supreme. You have but to open your mouth and it shall be done.” Before the eyes of the assembly Marduk spoke, and the garment vanished. Again he spoke some words, and the radiant garment reappeared. Having tested his power, the gods said: “You are king. Take the scepter and the palu, take up the incomparable weapon and destroy our enemies with it. Take the blood of Tiamat and spill it in hidden places.”[4]

The Lord made a bow and hung it with his quiver at his side. He made a net to trap Tiamat. He raised the mace and placed the lightning bolt before him, and his body was filled with flames. Then he set the winds so that not even the least piece of Tiamat could escape, and, raising the hurricane and torrential storms, he mounted the storm-chariot. He yoked his chariot to the four horses of terrible names, and like a lightning bolt flew straight to Tiamat. In her hand she held a plant that gave forth poison, but the Lord drew near so as to search within her and perceive the intentions of the Anunnaki and of Kingu.[5]

“Is it because you think yourself so important that you elevate yourself above me like the supreme god?” roared Tiamat, furious.

“It is you who have elevated yourself so high and you who have elevated Kingu and given him rank that is not his by right—you who hate your children and wish evil upon them. Stand up now and let us meet in combat!” So responded Marduk, while the gods sharpened their weapons.

Tiamat conjured and recited her spells, and the gods went forth into battle. Then the Lord threw his net, and the terrible Tiamat opened her enormous mouth. At that moment, he unleashed the hurricanes that penetrated into her, and he released the arrow that pierced her belly. Then he took her dark entrails, leaving her without life. The horrible army disbanded, and in the confusion the sharp weapons were destroyed. Caught fast in the net, the prisoners were cast down into subterranean cells. The Tablets of Destiny, to which the arrogant Kingu held no rightful claim, Marduk stripped from him, and Kingu was imprisoned with the Anunnaki. In this way the eleven creatures that Tiamat had created were transformed into statues so that the triumph of Marduk would never be forgotten.

The Creation of the World

Reinforcing the prison that held his enemies, Marduk took the Tablets of Destiny, and marking them with his seal he placed them upon his chest. Then the Lord turned again to the body of Tiamat, and with his merciless mace he crushed her skull. He divided the channels of

her blood so that the hurricane might carry it to secret places. Seeing the monstrous flesh, he conceived artistic thoughts. He cut her cadaver lengthwise as if it were a fish, raising one of its pieces up to the sky. He placed it under lock and key with a guard over it to prevent the waters it held from escaping. Then, crossing through the spaces, he inspected the regions thereof, and, measuring the abyss, he established his dwelling upon it. In this way Marduk created the heavens and the Earth and established their limits. And then he built dwellings for the gods, and lit them with stars.

He created the Year, and set the figures that designated its twelve months.[6] These he divided into the days. On the left side and on the right side he strengthened the bolts, placing the zenith between them. He gave Shamash[7] the job of dividing the day and the night, and set the brilliant star of his bow[8] for all to see. Nebiru[9] he charged with dividing the celestial sections into north and south. He entrusted Sin to illuminate the darkness, giving order to the days and the nights. Thus spoke the Lord: “Each and every month you must take up your crown. For six days you will wear the horns, and on the seventh the half-crown. After fourteen days, when Shamash reaches you on the horizon, you will diminish the crown, reducing its light. In this way you will keep approaching and moving away from the sun, but the twenty-ninth day will once again place him in opposition.”[10]

Later, turning again to Tiamat, Marduk took her saliva, and with it formed the clouds. With her head he created the hills and with her eyes he made the Tigris and the Euphrates flow. Finally, from her paps he created the great mountains and dug deep holes so that the wells might give water. Finally, Marduk made the ground solid, raising a luxurious dwelling and a temple, offering them to the gods so that they might lodge there when they gathered in the assemblies in which they set the destinies of the world. Then he said that these buildings should be called Babylon, meaning “the dwelling of the great gods.”[11]

The Creation of the Human Being

Upon finishing his work, the Lord was exalted by the gods, and in acknowledgment he said to them: “Although all the gods are to be revered equally, I will divide them into two groups so that they may govern the upper and lower regions.[12] With my blood I will knead and form man so that he will keep alive our worship and cult. In this way shall the gods be satisfied.” But impartial Ea responded: “Let only one of the two siblings perish in order to give his blood to humanity. The assembly of gods must decide who is responsible for all these misfortunes.”[13]

Marduk had the captive Anunnaki brought forth, and asked them under oath who was responsible for the insurrection, promising life to whoever told the truth. And so the gods accused Kingu. Immediately, they brought forth the prisoner. Reproaching him, they bound him and proceeded to take his blood, from which they would form mankind. Ea had them set free all the other captive gods, and imposed service and devotion to the gods on humanity. It was an incomprehensible act.[14] And in this way the Lord freed the gods and divided them—three hundred above and three hundred below—making them the guardians of the world. Grateful, the Anunnaki built a sanctuary and raised the apex of the Esagila. Then they erected a stepped tower, and within it they established a new dwelling for Marduk.[15]

When the assembly of the great gods had gathered, they praised Marduk, and bowing to the ground they spoke an incantation that put the life of humanity in peril. They swore by water and oil to make dangerous the life of man.[16] Then they said: “Let the ‘black heads’ expect salvation from us, for though Marduk can be called by fifty names, he is the Lord.”[17]

And the stars shone and all the beings created by the gods were filled with joy. Humanity also recognized itself in the Lord. For that, let there be a remembering of all that occurred. May the children learn this teaching from their parents. May the wise study the meaning of the Song of Marduk, who vanquished Tiamat and achieved kingship.[18]

III. Egyptian Myths

Ptah and Creation[1]

There was only an endless sea, lifeless and absolutely silent. Then Ptah arrived with the forms of the abyss—depths and distances, solitudes and forces. Through them Ptah saw and heard, smelled and perceived, existence in his heart. But what he perceived, he had previously thought within himself. In this way he took the form of Atum, and, devouring his own seed, gave birth to wind and moisture, which he expelled from his mouth, creating Nut, the sky, and Geb, the Earth. Atum, the nonexistent, was a manifestation of Ptah. And so, the nine fundamental forms and the universe with all the beings were inexistent before he conceived them within himself and brought them into being with a single word. After having created everything from his mouth, he rested.

So it is that until the end of time you will be invoked thus: “Immense being, creator of worlds. You who call to life those who are unborn but who are within you. You who call to life those who have died but are within you.”[2]

All the forms of the gods are but forms of Ptah, and is it only because of their own limitations that humans adore him under many names. His names change and are forgotten; new gods follow the old ones, but beyond all of this Ptah remains. He created the heavens as a guide, he surrounded the Earth with the sea. To pacify the dead he created Tartarus. He fixed Ra’s course through the skies from horizon to horizon, and set it so that man would have his time and his dominion. He did the same for each pharaoh and each kingdom.

Ra, on his way through the skies, reshaped what had been established and calmed the discontented gods. He loved creation and gave love to the animals so that they would be happy battling against the chaos that imperiled their lives. He determined the seasons and set limits to the night and to the day. He gave the Nile a rhythm, making it flood the land and then recede, so that all might live from the fruit of its waters. He vanquished the forces of darkness, and, being the one who brought the light, he was called Amon-Ra by those who believed that Amon was born from an egg that, breaking with a flash, gave rise to the stars and other celestial lights.

But the genealogy of the gods begins with Atum, who is the father-mother of the gods. Atum begat Shu, the wind, and Tefnut, moisture; and from these, Nut, the sky, and Geb, the Earth, were born. These brothers united and begat Osiris, Seth, Neftis, and Isis. This is the divine Ennead from which everything derives.

The Death and Resurrection of Osiris

The parents of Osiris saw that he was strong and kind, and so they entrusted him with governing the fertile territories and caring for the life of the plants, the animals, and human beings. To his brother, Seth, they gave the vast desert and foreign lands. Everything wild and strong—the herds and wild beasts—was under his care.

Osiris and Isis together were resplendent lovers. But the fog of envy disturbed Seth, and having devised a plot to kill his brother, with the help of seventy-two members of his retinue he

invited everyone to a feast. That night, Osiris and the conspirators arrived. Seth displayed a magnificent sarcophagus, promising to give it to the one whom it fit best. And so the guests each tried out the sarcophagus, until it was Osiris's turn. As soon as he had entered it they quickly lowered the lid and nailed it shut. Having trapped Osiris, they took him to the Nile and threw him into its waters, intending that he should sink into its depths. But instead, the sarcophagus floated, drifting downstream away from Egypt until it reached the sea.

A long time then passed, until one day the coffin reached Phoenicia,[3] where the waves deposited it at the foot of a tree. The tree grew to an enormous height, enveloping the sarcophagus in its trunk. The king of this place, admiring the incredible specimen, called for the tree to be felled and the great trunk brought to his palace, where it might serve as a central column. Meanwhile, Isis had a revelation of what had happened, and so she traveled to Phoenicia. There, she entered the service of the queen so that she might be near the body of her husband. But the queen, realizing that her servant was in reality Isis, gave her the trunk to do with as she wished. Isis, splitting open the wooden covering, pulled the coffin out, and returned to Egypt bearing her cargo. By this time, however, Seth was aware of what had happened, and, fearing that Isis would revive her husband, he stole the body. Quickly Seth set himself to cutting the body into fourteen parts, and scattered them far and wide. But upon hearing what had occurred, Isis undertook a pilgrimage to recover the pieces of the cadaver.

Following the death of Osiris, darkness reigned for a long time. No one took care of the animals, the plants, or the human beings. Endless strife and death replaced harmony.

When Isis had recovered the different parts of the body, she bound them tightly together with bandages and began her incantations.[4] She then built an enormous furnace, a sacred pyramid,[5] and placed the mummy in its depths. Drawing the mummy to her, she breathed into it as a potter does, to increase the heat of the fire of life.

Osiris awoke, knew the mortal dream, and wished to keep his green face of the plant world.[6] He wished to keep the white crown and his plumage in order to remember clearly which lands of the Nile were his.[7] He also took the whip and the crook to separate and reconcile, as shepherds do with their curved staff.[8] Standing erect, Osiris saw death around him, and so he left his double, his Ka,[9] entrusting it with the care of his own body so that no one would again desecrate it. He took the cross of life, the Ankh[10] of the resurrection, and with it in his Ba[11] he went to save and protect all those who, alone and terrified, enter Amenti.[12] For them he went to live in the west, awaiting the helpless exiles from the kingdom of life. Thanks to his sacrifice, nature always flowers again, and human beings, created by the divine potter,[13] are more than just animated clay. From this time forth, god is invoked in many ways. From this time forth, the last breath is a song of hope:

"Good Osiris! Send Thoth[14] so that he may guide us to the sacred sycamore,[15] to the Tree of Life, to the door of the Lady of the West;[16] let him lead us away from the fourteen mansions surrounded by stupor and anguish, where the perverse suffer terrible punishments. Send Thoth, the wise ibis, the infallible scribe of human deeds recorded on the papyrus of indelible memory. Good Osiris! In you the victorious awaits his resurrection, after the judgment in which his actions are weighed by Anubis, the just jackal.[17] Good Osiris! Let our Ba board the celestial ship, separated from the Ka, and let the Ka remain as custodian of the amulets[18] in our tomb. And then we shall sail toward the splendorous regions of the new day."

Horus the Divine Avenger[19]

After Isis helped resurrect Osiris, she gave birth to their son. Taking the newborn, she hid him in the reedbeds of the Nile to protect him from the fury of Seth, Min,[20] and the attackers from the desert. He was the radiant child in the lotus flower who was revered as a falcon, with his eyes on every corner of the Earth. As Horus Harendotes, he would be the avenger of his father when the time came. He is Horus, god of all the lands, son of love and of resurrection.

The child grew and his mother prepared him to reclaim the territories that Seth had usurped in venturing to the land of the Nile, when he had a right only to the deserts and foreign lands. When Osiris made his journey to the West, to the lands of Amenti over which he now reigned, he left Isis with the mandate to regain all of the Nile for his son. And so the adversaries met before the assembly of the Ennead. Horus declared: “A despicable fratricide, relying on blind force unconsecrated by the gods, usurped the rights bequeathed to me by my father…” But his speech was cut short by Seth’s irate cries, scorning the request as that of a child incapable of exercising such demands. And so, drawing their weapons, they fought in single combat—one against the other they rolled over mountains and shook the waters from their riverbeds. The dispute lasted eighty long years, until Seth tore out Horus’s eyes and Horus crushed the vital organs of Seth. The great fury only came to an end when they both fainted and fell to the ground. Thoth then healed their wounds and reestablished the fragile peace that the neglected world demanded.

They stood before the gods and sought a verdict. Ra, who had always been steadfastly aided by Seth in his struggle against the deadly Apophis,[21] tipped the balance against Horus. But Isis bravely defended her son. In the end, the gods restored the child’s rights, but Ra stormed out of the assembly, muttering angrily. And thus the gods were divided in number and power, and there was no end in sight for the dispute. Then Isis, using her wiles, caused Seth to give a speech in which he undermined his own claim to the throne, and through that error Seth was removed from the lands to which he had laid claim. Ra, however, demanded a new trial in which all these issues could finally be decided.

Each one now transformed into a mighty hippopotamus and began to fight anew. From the water’s edge, Isis loosed a harpoon that by mistake hit Horus, who, crying out and throwing himself upon his mother, tore off her head.[22] As a replacement, the gods gave Isis the head of a cow, and she again entered the fray, her harpoon finally striking Seth. Roaring, he left the waters. So a new trial was devised, one that would keep the other gods out of the conflict. Both would have to sail ships made of stone. Seth carved his ship of stone, and it sank, while Horus simply displayed the appearance of a stone ship. Everyone agreed that it conformed to the agreement, for he had ingeniously made his ship of wood and covered it in plaster. Horus sailed on and claimed victory, but Seth, transforming once again into a hippopotamus, sank Horus’s ship. It was then, alone on the beach, that Horus was overcome by his righteous anger. He struck Seth with his mace and bound him hand and foot. Then he dragged Seth to the tribunal and the waiting gods. And it was only when faced with the threat of Seth’s impending execution before the entire assembly that Ra finally agreed that Horus was right. Delighted, the gods crowned the child-falcon supreme lord. As Horus stepped on the neck of the vanquished one, Seth swore solemn obedience, and proclaimed the battle ended. Then Seth withdrew to his desert kingdom to live forever among foreigners. Thoth wisely organized the new responsibilities, and Horus helped Ra to destroy the treacherous serpent Apophis, who had until then menaced Ra’s radiant ship. At times the blood of that ancient beast colored the skies red, and sailing in his celestial ship Ra calms the waves that travel to the West.

The Antimyth of Amenophis IV[23]

There was a kind and wise pharaoh who understood the origin of Ptah and the changing of his names. He reestablished principles when he saw how certain men, pretending to be the voice of the gods, oppressed other men. One morning, he saw how a vassal was being tried in the temple for not paying tribute to the gods—that is, for not paying the priests. And so he left Thebes for On,[24] and there he asked the wisest theologians what true justice consisted of. This was their answer: “Amenhotep, your liver is good, as are the intentions that arise from it. But the most kindhearted truth will bring misfortune upon you and upon our people. As a man you will be the most just. As king you will bring only ruin—but your example will not be forgotten, and many centuries after you are gone, what is seen today as madness will gain renown.”

Returning to Thebes, the pharaoh looked at his wife as one studies the dawn, he saw her beauty, and for her and for his people he sang a beautiful hymn. The poet’s piety made Nefertiti weep; she knew his glory and his tragic future. In a faltering voice she proclaimed him the true son of the Sun. “Akhenaton!” she said, and then fell silent. In that moment, accepting the just but impossible, his destiny came into play. And so for a moment a world bearing the weight of millennia tottered; such was the rebellion of Akhenaton and the brief respite of the children of the Nile. Thus was overturned the power of those who made the gods speak, not with the gods’ intentions but with their own.

Amenhotep IV (Akhenaton) launched the struggle against the functionaries and priests who dominated the empire, and the lords of the Upper Nile allied themselves with the ranks of the persecuted. The people began to fill positions that had previously been forbidden to them, reclaiming the power that had been stripped from them. The granaries were opened and goods were distributed.

But the enemies of the new world took up arms and raised the specter of hunger. With the death of Akhenaton, they scattered all his deeds to the wind—wishing to wipe out his memory forever. Aton, however, preserved his word.

This was the poem that started the fire:[25]

“The whole Earth surrenders to your work—so, too, do all roads open at your rising. In woman you make the egg fertile and create the seed in man. You make the child live in the womb of the mother, soothing the child so that it does not cry; nourishing the child in the womb, you give the breath of life to what you have created. When the child bursts from the womb on the day of its birth, you open its mouth so that it may cry out, and later speak. You give breath to the young bird in the egg. You help it to crack the shell, and, newborn, to chirp and walk on its feet. Your face is unknown, O only god! You created the Earth as you desired, with men and beasts and every forest animal, and all that is on the Earth and all that walk upon their feet, and all that are in the sky, and all that fly on their wings. And you have formed the foreign lands, and Syria and Nubia, and the lands of Egypt. You have set each man in his place, providing his necessities—affording all with bread and measuring the span of their lives. You have made us different from the foreign peoples. Their tongues are different in the words they speak, and so, too, are their characters and their skins; you have set apart the foreign peoples. And you have made the Nile in the Tuat, leading it where you will, to give life to the people, to your creation. O you, lord of all, you toil for them, O Aten of the day, great in dignity! And all the foreign and distant countries, you also help them, bringing them life. You have set a Nile in the heavens, which descends for them, and like a sea brings waves to the mountains and bathes their lands and their fields. Perfect are your designs, O lord of eternity. The Nile of the heavens is your gift

to us, to those who dwell in foreign lands, and to all the animals great and small, to all the creatures of the desert that go upon their feet. Your rays nourish all the plants, and they live and grow for you. You make the seasons so that everything you have created may develop—the winter so that they may refresh themselves, the summer because it pleases you. You have made the distant sky so that there you might shine and gaze down upon all. You alone, resplendent in your form of living Aten, rising, shining, departing, and returning. You alone take on countless forms: cities, towns, fields, roads, and rivers—every eye sees you before it. You are Aten of the day. Even when you depart and every eye you have created sleeps and can no longer see you or what you have created—still you are in my heart. Your creation, the Earth, lies in your hand. If you shine, she lives, and if you disappear, she dies. You are the very span of life!”

IV. Hebrew Myths

The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life

"…Out of the ground the Lord God made grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. And in the midst of the garden, he set the tree of life and also the tree of knowledge of good and evil.… And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die.'"[1]

And so it was that Adam and Eve lived in Eden, where a river flowed out to water the garden, and from there it divided into four streams. The name of the stream that flowed around the land of Havila, where there is gold, was Pishon. The second one, which encircled the land of Cush, was Gihon. The name of the third, hidden and shaded, which flowed to the east of Assyria, was Hiddekel, and the fourth, of good and murmuring words, was Euphrates. And Eden overflowed with plants and animals, and our parents were the namers of all the living things there. But how could they give a name to the tree of life or that of the knowledge of good and evil if they did not know them, if they did not even approach them? So it was that they yearned for the knowledge that they did not have and did not even know how to attain.

One night, troubled by this question, Eve fell asleep, and, sleeping, she dreamed. In her dream, she saw the tree of knowledge shining in the darkness. As she approached the tree, there suddenly appeared before her a disquieting winged figure. Although beautiful to look upon, in the darkness she could not see its face—perhaps it was that of Adam. Its dew-dampened hair exhaled a fragrance that filled her with feelings of love. And Eve wished to see more. The figure, gesturing toward the tree, said: "O beautiful plant, heavy with fruit! Is there no one who will lighten your burden and taste your sweetness? Is knowledge so scorned? Is it only envy or an unjust prohibition that forbids your being touched? Let him forbid it who will! No longer will anyone deprive me of what you offer. If not for this, why are you here?" Having spoken, the figure hesitated no longer, but with trembling hand plucked the fruit and tasted of it.

In her dream, the audacity of the winged figure left Eve frozen in glacial horror, but immediately it exclaimed: "O divine fruit, you alone are sweet, and so much sweeter plucked in this way—forbidden, apparently set aside for the gods alone, and yet capable of converting men into gods! And why should they not be so? Good is increased the more it is shared, and in this its author, far from losing, only acquires more praise. Approach, fortunate creature, beautiful and angelic Eve—share this fruit with me!"[2]

Eve awoke with a start and recounted her dream to her companion. Adam then asked himself: "Does not God speak through dreams? If during the day he prohibits and by night he invites, how, with my meager knowledge, shall I know to which incitement I should respond? We should acquire this knowledge so as to direct our destinies, since God Jehovah created us but did not say how we should make our own selves." Then he told Eve his plan to take the fruit and run with it to the tree of life in order to become immune to the poison of knowledge. So it was that they waited, until the God Jehovah strolled through the garden in the cool of the afternoon, and when he had passed by they went to the tree. Seeing a serpent gliding among the branches toward the fruit, they thought its venom must derive from that food. And because of this they doubted, and while they doubted time passed, and the God Jehovah began his return to the garden.

Then they thought they heard the serpent whisper: “You shall not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”[3] The snake was not lying, but wanted to stop them from eating from the other tree, the tree of life.[4] As it was already very late, Adam and Eve tasted the fruit, and the eyes of both of them were opened. But when they wanted to reach the tree of immortality, the God Jehovah blocked their way, keeping them from fulfilling their plan.

Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and what if he now reaches out his hand and takes also from the tree of life, eats, and lives forever?” Therefore, the Lord God drove him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he came. He cast out the man, and to the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword of flame that turned in all directions so as to guard the way to the tree of life.[5]

And so Adam and Eve went out from Eden, but their gaze was always turned toward Paradise, whose presence was revealed only by the smoke of the sword of fire during the day and its radiance during the night. And they did not return because they could not, but since they believed it pleased him they began to offer the God Jehovah sacrifices of fire and smoke. And with time, many peoples came to think that the gods preferred the high mountains and the volcanoes because these are the bridges between the Earth and the heavens. And so when the time came, it was from the fire, from the mountain, that the God Jehovah delivered the Law for which humankind searched so that they might make straight their Destiny.[6]

Abraham and Obedience

Many generations passed from the time of the patriarchs to that of the Flood. And it was after the deluge that Jehovah set the rainbow in the sky to seal his pact with men that all seed would continue to multiply. And still later, Terah took his son Abram and his daughter-in-law Sarai from Ur of the Chaldees to the land of Canaan. Then Abram and Sarai went down to Egypt, but after a time they returned to Hebron. The livestock and goods of Abram had grown, but his heart was filled with sadness because at his age he still had no offspring.

Abram was already old when he conceived a child with his servant Hagar. But his wife Sarai and Hagar had a falling out, and Hagar departed for the desert, taking with her the cause of her affliction. Then an angel appeared and told her: “You have conceived, and upon giving birth you will name your son Ishmael, because Jehovah has heard your prayers. Ishmael, therefore, will mean ‘God hears,’ and his descendants will be many and his people will live in the deserts, worshipping God not by what the eye sees but by what the ear hears. And thus they will pray to God and God will hear them.” Much later, Sarai in her old age at last became pregnant, and although Abram was father of all of them and cared for them all as his own children, Sarai’s descendants and those of Hagar continued the dispute that had begun with their mothers.

Then God said: “From now on your name will not be Abram but Abraham, because you will be the father of a multitude, and Sarai will be named Sarah, like a princess of nations. As for your son with Sarah, you will name him Isaac.” There came a time when God put Abraham to a test. “Abraham!” he called. And Abraham replied, “Here I am.” God said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering on one of the hills that I shall show you.”

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took with him two of his men and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the sacrifice and set out for the place God had spoken of.

On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. Then Abraham said to his men, “Stay here with the ass, while I and the boy go over there to worship, and then we will return to you.” Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on the shoulder of his son Isaac; he himself carried the fire and the knife, and then the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father, Abraham, “Father!” And Abraham said, “What is it, my son?” His son said, “We have both the fire and the wood, but where is the young animal for the sacrifice?” Abraham said, “God will provide a young creature for the burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He then bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son, but the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, saying, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.” The Lord said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld you son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught by its horns in a thicket. Abraham took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And so it was that Abraham called that place “The Lord Will Provide.”[7]

Perhaps the anguish of this terrible test remained in Abraham’s heart until his death. And thus, again and again he told himself: “Jehovah repudiates human sacrifice and, even more, the sacrifice of one’s own son. If he orders a sacrifice, I must not obey it because it would mean disobeying his prohibition. But to reject what he commands is also to sin against him. Must I obey something that my god rejects? Yes, if he demands it. But my dull-witted reason struggles, moreover, with the heart of an old man who loves the impossible gift that Jehovah gave him so late in life. Is this test the consequence of the laughter that filled me when I was told that my son would be born?[8] Is it not the laughter that Sarah stifled when she heard that prophecy?[9] For some reason Jehovah gave him the name ‘Isaac,’ which means ‘laughter.’ My wife and I were already old when we were told that we would have this child, and we could not believe that such a thing was possible. Does Jehovah play with his creatures as a child plays with sand? Or is it that, knowing his anger and his punishment, we overlook the fact that he also tests and teaches us with divine mockery?”[10]

The Man Who Fought Against a God[11]

It was night, and Jacob arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven sons, and crossed the ford of Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream and with them all that he had. Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him in the hollow of his thigh as he wrestled with him, so that Jacob’s hip was dislocated. Then the man said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So the man said to Jacob, “What is your name?” And he answered, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,[12] for you have striven with God and with humans, and you have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Pray tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there the man blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel,[13] saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is spared.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.[14] Thus, to this day the Israelites do not eat the sinew that runs in the hollow of the thigh, because the man had struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.[15]

Moses and the Divine Law[16]

And so it happened that long ago the children of Israel settled in Egypt, and there they grew in number and power. Joyfully they celebrated the changes introduced by a wise pharaoh who wanted equality for all peoples. But the good king died in the midst of a great uproar that his enemies had unleashed. Now, instead of their peaceful existence, the Israelites found persecution and humiliation. When the children of Israel decided to leave those lands, the new pharaoh would not permit it. In those dark years, many Egyptians who were loyal to the just king were assassinated, and others were imprisoned or condemned to a life of labor in the quarries. It so happened that among these was a youth who, as a child, had been rescued from the waters of the Nile by the women of the good pharaoh. He had been educated in the court, and although he learned the language of Israel, he always spoke it with difficulty.

Moses, “He Who Was Rescued from the Waters,” fled from the quarry and took refuge in the countryside, in the house of a priest in the land of Midian. The priest was also one of those persecuted because of his loyalty to the just king, and so he received Moses, who had sought refuge there. When Moses told him the story of his rescue from the waters, the priest reflected that it very much resembled the legends of Osiris and Sargon (who also was thus saved in Babylon, as related by those who came with Abraham from Ur of Chaldea). It was here that Moses took as his wife the daughter of the priest. And one day, while herding the sheep of his father-in-law, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in the flames of a burning bush. Moses looked and the bush was blazing, and yet was not consumed by the fire. Then Moses said to himself, “I must go to look at this wondrous sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the Lord saw that Moses had come to look, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And Moses answered, “Here I am.” Then God said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for you are standing on holy ground.” And he said, “I am the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the Lord said, “I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their outcry against their slave-masters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the hand of Egypt, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your forefathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “I am that I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, *‘I am* has sent me to you.’” And God said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations.”[17]

When Moses returned to Egypt he was met by Aaron of the priestly tribe of Levi, who had already been visited by dreams in which Moses received the divine mandate. Aaron helped Moses to spread the word among the Israelites, and, on reaching the pharaoh, he ordered him, saying: “Let my people go forth from Egypt.” But this the pharaoh was reluctant to do, and so the priest Aaron performed great wonders with his staff before the eyes of all those assembled there. In reply, Pharaoh called on his sages and priests, and they also showed their power, and Pharaoh hardened his heart. Then Jehovah, through Moses and Aaron, changed the water of the river to blood, and the fish died and the frogs also left the river and infested everything. But Pharaoh did not heed these signs. And so, plagues of lice and flies, cattle plagues and plagues

of ulcers, plagues of hail and locusts—all these afflicted both man and beast. But Pharaoh did not want to free the children of Israel, saying that it was not unknown for the river to unleash disasters of this kind, as from time to time torrential floods carried down red mud from the Upper Nile. Then a great darkness descended and remained for three days. And the sages of the pharaoh explained that it was but clouds of water rising from the flooded river that were darkening the sky.

So it was that Jehovah ordered Moses to warn Pharaoh that if he did not free the people of Israel, the firstborn of Egypt would die. But Pharaoh still did not listen, and that night the angel of the Lord brought death to the children of the Egyptians. The Israelites had marked their doors with the blood of the Paschal lamb as a sign to protect them from the angel of death, and from then on they called that month the first month of the year. Only then did Pharaoh allow the people of Israel, and all the persecuted Egyptians, to leave. The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot, besides their dependants. And with them also went a large company of every kind of people.[18]

The people were able to cross the Red Sea untouched by the waters, since these were held back both to the right and the left in canals that Amenophis IV had ordered built. Pharaoh dispatched soldiers to destroy those who had fled, but when his men reached this place their heavy chariots fell, and with this the army was drowned by the waters that covered them. Once more Jehovah had saved Moses from the waters, and with him the multitude that had gone out from Egypt.[19]

And a plant that Moses put in them sweetened the bitter waters.[20] And Jehovah gave the people What-Is-This to eat.[21] Sustained in this way, the people did not die in the desert, and made their way to the sacred Mount Sinai.

Mount Sinai was now wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain shook with a great quaking. As the blast of the trumpet grew ever louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in a peal of thunder. Then the Lord descended upon the top of Mount Sinai, and the Lord summoned Moses to the mountaintop, and Moses went up.[22]

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance.[23]

And so, God Jehovah gave men the Law that they had sought since the time of their first fathers. On two stone tablets God engraved the Ten Commandments that men had to observe in order to draw near to him. And he also gave them laws that would serve to shape them over the course of their history. Thus did Moses guide Israel to the land promised by the Lord. And from the fields of Moab he climbed Mount Nebo to the summit of Pisga, opposite Jericho. And then Moses saw. And the Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over into it.” Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but to this day no one knows his burial place.[24]

And never since has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face-to-face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to work in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying deeds that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.[25]

V. Chinese Myths

The Central Void…[1]

Emptiness always was, an emptiness that can never be filled. Emptiness that was previous to the world. The Tao is the emptiness that existed before the gods.[2]

Thirty spokes converge toward the hub of one wheel, but it is the void in the center that makes the wheel useful.[3] Clay is molded to make a pot, but it is the space that does not contain clay that makes it useful. We make doors and windows in a house, but it is the empty space that makes the room useful. And so things come from existence, but their utility comes from nonexistence.

All was void, and Pangu slept within that which was united, that which was called “infinite depth.”[4] And then he awoke. Immediately, he took his axe and broke the egg that enclosed him, shattering it into myriad pieces. The lightest pieces and the heaviest pieces flew off in different directions. To impede their rejoining, Pangu placed himself in the empty center. Like a column that gives balance to all creation, he made solid the Earth and the sky. Later he rested, and once again fell asleep, until his body had given forth numerous beings.[5] From one eye came the sun and from the other the moon. From his blood, rivers and lakes were formed, and animals from his skin, while his hair became the plants and his bones the minerals.

In those earliest times, gigantic and monstrous gods lived upon the Earth. The upper half of the god mother Nüwa was very beautiful, but her lower half was like that of a dragon. After traveling and visiting every place, at length she discovered that there were no beings more beautiful or intelligent than the giants. And so she went to the Yellow River, where she molded the first human beings out of clay. She made them similar to herself, but instead of the tail of a dragon she gave them legs so that they would walk erect. Finding them amusing, she decided to make many. To do this she took a bulrush and let drops of mud fall from it. Upon reaching the ground these drops became women and men, and when they began to reproduce on their own the celestial mother turned to creating other beings.

When Fu Shi, the companion to the goddess, saw that humans could learn, he taught them to make fire by rubbing sticks together. Then he gave them rope and showed them how to protect themselves from hunger and harsh weather. Finally, he gave them the art of the hexagrams, which he called I Ching. In time, this became known as the *Book of Transformations* and a means of divination.

One day it happened that the immortals began to argue among themselves, until they began a war that put the whole Universe in danger. Floods and catastrophes ravaged the Earth, until at last the god of fire prevailed over the waters. Still, the giants wished to fight against the power of the eternals, but the gods in their unspeakable anger cut off the heads of the giants and cast them into the dark abysses.

The Dragon and the Phoenix[6]

When the waters were not yet under control and the overflowing rivers inundated the fields, the mother goddess gave birth to beneficent offspring, who began to give order to the chaos of the times. The brilliant dragons sailed through the waters and the sky as they brought under control the rivers and lakes, the sea and the clouds. On high they roared, as with tiger paw and eagle talon they rent the curtains snapping in the great gusts of wind, unleashing the rains. They

gave the rivers their courses, contained the lakes, and gave depth to the seas. They made the caverns from which water gushes forth, and they made the subterranean channels through which the water flows great distances, to later spring suddenly to the surface, untouched by the scorching sun. They traced the lines that run through the mountains and allow the energy of the Earth to flow, balancing the health of that gigantic body. And more often than not they had to struggle with problems provoked by gods and men, busy with their irresponsible strivings. Smoke would pour out from between their jaws, a life-giving and humid mist, a creator of unreal worlds. With their scaly, serpentine bodies they would cut through the storms and cleave the typhoons. Against their powerful horns and sharp teeth no obstacle could endure, no entanglement could stand. And they were much given to appearing to the mortals. Sometimes they would appear in dreams, sometimes in grottoes, sometimes along the shores of lakes—particularly those places where it was their custom to hide their crystalline dwellings, whose beautiful gardens were adorned with sparkling fruits and the most precious stones.

Immortal Long, the celestial dragon, always placed his activity (his Yang) at the service of the Tao, and the Tao recognized this, allowing him to be in all things, from the largest to the smallest, from the great Universe to the least particle. Everything that has lived has lived thanks to Long. Nothing has remained immutable save the unnamable Tao; even the silently nameable Tao is transformed, thanks to the activity of Long. And not even those who believe in Heaven and Hell can ensure their permanence.[7]

But Long loves Feng, the Phoenix bird who concentrates the seed of things, who contracts that which Long extends. And when Long and Feng are balanced, the Tao shines like a pearl bathed in the purest light. Long does not struggle against Feng—because they love each other, they search for each other, making the pearl shine. Because of this, the wise arrange their lives according to the balance between the Dragon and the Phoenix—the images of the sacred principles of the Yang and the Yin. The sages position themselves in the empty place, searching for equilibrium. The wise understand that non-action generates action and that action generates non-action. May the beating hearts of all living things and the waters of the sea, the day and the night, the winter and the summer, follow the rhythm marked for them by the Tao.

At the end of this age, when the Universe will have reached its greatest extension, it will contract once again like a falling stone. Everything, even time, will invert, returning to the beginning. The Dragon and the Phoenix will meet again. The Yang and the Yin will interpenetrate; so great will be their attraction that they will absorb everything into the empty seed of the Tao. The sky above, the Earth below—with this the creative and the receptive are determined, with this the changes and transformations are revealed.[8]

But no one can really know how things have been or how they will be, and if someone did know they would not be able to explain it.

So it is that: To know that you do not know is best; he who pretends to know when he does not, has an infirm mind. He who recognizes an infirm mind as infirm does not have an infirm mind. The mind of the wise is not an infirm mind, because the wise recognize the infirm mind as infirm.[9]

VI. Indian Myths

Fire, Torment, and Exaltation[1]

These are the gods who took so many unrecognizable forms. The Fire[2] and the Storm[3] gave rise to the creation, but they are nothing without the Exaltation[4] that inspires the words of the poet.

O Agni, you who gather the gods together,[5] son of two mothers—you who present your many forms to humankind,[6] protect us from those who would kill us. O you, youngest of the gods,[7] receive our praise, you whose words are honey for us.[8] Even Gotama exalts you,[9] who are the fire that illuminates the forests and gives light in the night, you who roam like a free creature that knows no herder. You of the blackened face who gives savor to the earth.[10]

I proclaim the feats of Indra, lord of the lightning. Slaying the first of the serpents, you annihilated the actions of the demons and gave birth to the sun, to the sky, to the dawn. Slaying Vrta, hurling your thunderbolt into his back, Vrta fell like a slaughtered ox; he went bellowing to the ocean, and from his orifices was liberated the waters that they held, because their original lord and guardian the serpent was no more.[11] I invoke Indra, you who drink of Soma, I invoke you so that I may prosper in combat, so that I may destroy my enemy and take his goods as booty.[12] I invoke Indra—the storm is the sign of your fury.

In you we place our hope, O juice of Soma. The daughter of the sun purifies the Soma that flows through the filters of sheep's hair, and then the cows whose milk prepares him so that Indra may be intoxicated and strike his enemies, so that he may dispense his generosity.[13] Soma, lord of the gods, who leaps into the vessels through the filters of sheep's hair, and whose friends jump and shout joyfully in their exaltation.[14] O red god, we sweeten you, mixing you with milk. The eagle imbibes of you and attains to the power of Indra. You are our support; you are most active[15] when your forces awaken like the roaring river.[16] Bestow upon us the gifts of heaven and of the Earth, O juice of Soma.[17]

Time and the Gods

And so the Canticle of Creation tells us: Then there was neither existence nor nonexistence, and that Unfathomable breathed by its own nature. Previous to the gods, he formed everything, or perhaps not; perhaps he knows everything, or perhaps not.[18] But gods and men have been created and they have their time. Yes, they have their time.

One day of the gods is equal to one year of the mortals. And so one year of the gods is the same as 360 mortal years. Now then, there exist four Ages (Yugas) that form one Great Age (Mahayuga) of 12,000 divine years, corresponding to 4,320,000 mortal years. And so, 1,000 of these Great Ages (Kalpa) last 4,320,000 ordinary years, or simply one day of Brahma. But at the end of the day the god sleeps, and the Universe collapses.

Brahma sleeps upon his great serpent, and everything is absorbed back into him. Worlds fall out of orbit and crash into each other; all land liquefies, all liquid evaporates, all vapor is converted to energy, and this energy falls within the power of the night of Brahma. And when the god awakens, the great lotus opens, the light escapes from it, and a new day begins. On that day, fourteen beats (Manvantaras) follow one another, and in them the gods and worlds are created: fish, birds, insects, animals, and men. Some seventy-one series of Great Ages follow one another for every fourteen beats. Each beat, then, comprises 852,000 divine years, or 306,720,000 mortal years in which divine energy spreads out from its center. And so, the history of humanity today finds itself in one beat, and within this beat in one of the seventy-one series of Great Ages. As each Great Age is divided into four unequal Ages, it happens that in the first (Krita Yuga), 4,800 divine years or 1,728,000 ordinary years pass; in the second (Treta Yuga),

3,600 or 1,296,000; in the third (Dvapara Yuga), 2,400 or 864,000; and in the fourth (Kali Yuga), 1,200 or 432,000. Consequently, in this entire cycle the human being must be 4,320,000 years old. But since human beings already find themselves in the Fourth Age, at least 3,888,000 of its years must already have passed since its creation. All beings decay as they move further from the original creation, and doubtless the human being, too, follows this tendency.

In the Age of Krita, justice is eternal. In that age, the most excellent of the Yugas, everything has already been done (Krita) and nothing is left undone. Duty is not neglected and morality does not decline. Later, with the passage of time, this Yuga falls to a lesser state. In that Age there were no gods; there was no buying or selling; no effort needed to be made. The fruit of the Earth was obtained simply by desiring it, and both justice and detachment from the world prevailed. Illness did not exist, nor did a diminishing of the sensory organs with the passing of years; malice did not exist, nor weeping nor pride nor deceit; neither arguments nor hatred, cruelty, fear, affliction, jealousy, nor envy existed. In this way, the supreme Brahma was the transcendental support for these perfect beings. In that era, all humans were alike in the object of their faith and in their knowledge. Only one formula (mantra) was used and only one rite. There was only one Veda.

In the following age, in the Treta Yuga, sacrifices began. Justice decreased by one-quarter. Men adhered to the truth and were dedicated to a righteous dependence on ceremonies. Sacrifices prevailed, along with the sacred arts and a wide array of rites. Peoples' actions came to depend upon tangible ends, and they sought recompense for the rites and their charity. No longer were they concerned with austerity and simple generosity.

Still later, in the Dvapara Yuga, justice diminished by two quarters. The Vedas quadrupled. Some studied four Vedas, others three, others two, and others none at all. The writings having been divided in this way, the ceremonies were celebrated in the most varied ways. Even those who practiced austerity and charity became filled with passion. Due to the ignorance of the one Veda, the Vedas multiplied. And with the decline of good, only a few remained loyal to the truth. When mankind fell away from the truth, destiny brought them under attack from all manner of illnesses, desires, and calamities, and because of this they suffered many afflictions and were motivated to practice austerity. Others offered sacrifices, pursuing heaven's blessings and their own pleasures. In this way, through its own iniquity, mankind declined.

In the Kali Yuga, only one-quarter part of justice remained. In this dark age, rituals and sacrifices ceased. Many calamities prevailed—illnesses, hardships, and sins such as anger, want, anxiety, hunger, and fear spread. The practices generated by the degradation of the Yugas frustrated the intentions of humankind. This is the Kali Yuga, which has been in existence lo these many centuries.[19]

The trifle that is human history would have no meaning if Brahma were not in it. What are the seventy-one series of Mahayugas in which the human being is created and destroyed but just one of the fourteen Manvantaras, and what are all these but one Kalpa—just one day of Brahma? In countless reincarnations, human essence continues becoming purified. Responding to the universal law of Karma, regressing and advancing according to its actions, it continues preparing its next life. But in the most profound depths of all human beings lies Atman. And so, when they reach this Atman, they discover that they are Brahma. However, this disconcerting equivalence will only become clear on the day in which, renouncing happy contemplation, the compassion of the liberated living-being—known through the centuries as the *enlightened one*—reaches men.[20]

The word Om calls to the glory of Brahma,[21] cause of limitless time and space, variable in form and invariable in substance. May Brahma be eternally adored.[22]

The Forms of Beauty and Horror[23]

Why should the gods bestow their gifts upon the supplications of insignificant mortals? Why could these great beings take an interest in the outcome of such small matters—in quarrels and tribulations, in hopes and devotions? Could it be that these enormous powers are assigned to a small region of the unfathomable Universe; could it be that at every point where a star shines, there dance other gods of whose destinies we have never known? Be that as it may, the nearest gods walk among us, transformed so that we may see them. Incarnated as mortals, in a thousand avatars they traverse existence. The ancient fathers said that thanks to the oblations and our right actions, the gods increase their power. This explains how it is that often we receive favors from them, and that every so often they take part in a just cause as compensation for the power that we give them. Yet the dark demons wish to grow by feeding on the twisted nature of things, and, growing, they hope to darken the heavens themselves. The great powers also help the smallest, created luminously, because their very essence exists even in the infinitesimal. It is not surprising that the least amount of a potion, almost unseen by the eye, can cause us to collapse if there is poison in it, or lift us up if there is healing in it. And the same happens with the potion of human actions offered to the kindly gods.

But there have been times when the eyes have been able to see—if such a thing can truly be seen with the eyes of the body—the great god of All. This is how he appeared before Arjuna[24] in his august and supreme form.

Then appeared the Divinity with infinite heads, swarming with eyes and mouths, covered in resplendent vestments and armed with all of the divine weapons. For a moment Arjuna was lost in contemplation of the numerous limbs of the Cosmos. The Lord was like an explosion of colors so brilliant they were painful, or an immense roar that thundered through space. But in that brief instant the Lord was shown in his infinite diversity, a diversity that extended even to the most inconceivable and monstrous forms. All the powers of the world were crushed in his ferocious jaws, as with inconceivable speed all existence separated from itself and was dissolved. Finally, the frightened Arjuna succeeded in thinking—for his words and muscles had been slow to respond to his will—and he began to call out: “Lord, show yourself in a more familiar form. Let me see you crowned, holding your mace and discus. Once again assume your four-armed form and come, my lord Krishna with the attractive human figure, allow my heart to beat again and my reason to return.”[25]

The ancient book *Skanda Purana* tells of a demon named Durg who, having made sacrifices to appease Brahma, received his blessing. With this power, Durg ousted the gods from the heavens, and, exiling them to the forests, obliged them to revere him and bow their heads in his presence. Then he abolished the religious ceremonies, and the gods, weakened by this, met to find a way out of this crisis in which they were trapped. Ganesha (son of Shiva and Parvati), the wise protector of human undertakings, shaking his elephant head, waved his four arms and suggested that it was absolutely necessary to reach his parents. Hanuman the monkey king, astute and quick, conqueror of territories, was at once given the task of traveling to the Himalayas to beseech the help of the celestial couple.

There in the heights they meditated in loving embrace, in harmony and peace. Hanuman explained why he had come, and Shiva, moved to pity by the difficulties that beset the young gods, asked the delicate Parvati to deal with the problem.

Parvati calmed Hanuman, and only then did she send Night to demand that the demon reestablish order in the worlds in her name. Overcome with fury, Durg gave orders that Night was to be seized. But when he shouted the order, his fiery breath incinerated his own soldiers. Recovering, he dispatched his minions, but not before Night escaped and found refuge with her protector. In the deepest darkness, Durg, burning with anger, mounted his war chariot. Ruddy and radiant, his army of giants, winged horses, elephants, and men stood out against the eternal snows of the Himalayas. With a horrendous clamor, the impudent invaders set foot upon the sacred domain of Parvati, who with graceful movements brandished in her four arms the deadly weapons of the gods.

The troops of the arrogant Durg let loose their arrows against the imperturbable figure, who could be seen standing far off in the Himalayas. So dense was the rain of darts that it seemed like a sheet of raindrops in the great storm. But she deflected the attack with her invisible shields. Splitting trees and mountains, the aggressors threw them at the goddess—until at last she responded! A terrifying whistle was heard as she threw her first weapon; the winged horses neighed as they were carried away by the hurricane that accompanied Parvati's lance. Almost immediately her spear tore off the arms of thousands of giants, while various quadrupeds and their riders cracked into pieces with the terrible impact. Not only did the goddess repel all the arrows, stakes, maces, and pikes that Durg threw, but now their broken fragments also destroyed the nearest invaders.

Then Durg took on the form of an enormous elephant and charged Parvati, but she caught the feet of the beast in her lasso, and then with her scimitar-like nails cut him to pieces. From the spilled blood, a monstrous buffalo arose that immediately attacked her. But he ended up impaled on Parvati's trident. Badly wounded, he reverted to his true form and tried to flee, but the goddess lifted him into the air, and when she hurled him to the ground the Earth rumbled with the sound of thunder. Without hesitating, Parvati thrust her arm into the demon's jaws and pulled out his steaming viscera. Implacable, she crushed him in an embrace that made his blood gush forth, and this she drank until not a drop was left. Finally, so that Durg would not be reborn, she devoured his remains and, taking his bones in one hand, she squeezed them with such force that they were reduced to a powder that burst into flame. As she opened her fingers, the cold wind of the summits flew down and carried off a minuscule speck of ash as a memento. She received the offerings of the gods, and hastened back to her beloved Shiva. Most tender and beautiful, she took shelter with him in the softest music and the most delicate radiance of immortality.

VII. Persian Myths

The Clamor of Zarathustra[1]

Upon turning thirty, Zarathustra abandoned his land and took himself to a faraway place.[2] There he lived in his cave for a long time. He ate only from a wheel of cheese that never grew smaller, and he drank the pure waters of the mountain. At night the fire spoke to him, and so he came to understand the course of the stars. During the day the sun spoke to him, and so he came to understand the meaning of the light.[3] Very early one morning the clamor of the beasts of the field reached his cave—and, since the cows and the herd animals have a soul, Zarathustra listened to that great soul, Kine, asking God for his blessings. Kine, raising his lament, which was like a great lowing, said, “My soul suffers, Ahura Mazda.[4] Whom did you create me for? In whose image was I modeled? Grant me the good, save us from the assaults of the tribes that drag cattle to the slaughter. I feel surrounded by anger, violence, the scourge of desolation, an audacious insolence, and a furious pressure. Save my animals, O Ahura Mazda, you who provide us with green pastures!”

And so, Zarathustra, from the mouth of his cave, looked out on the day and entreated Ahura Mazda in this manner: “Let the Good Mind of Zarathustra guide those who till the Earth so that it may produce good pastures and strengthen the herds, so that the cows may give milk, and the milk cheese, and the cheese nourish the men who labor; so that the plunderer may never again bring ruin to the people, and instead become the friend who learns to work and share with them. So I give thanks for your teachings and for the nourishment you have provided. I remember my first questions, which I formulated with complete candor long ago, and which you, in turn, answered in your benevolence. And so it was that I asked you: Who gave birth to all and set the paths of the Sun, the Moon, and the stars?[5] Who maintains the Earth from below and the clouds from above so that they do not fall? Who made the waters, the winds, and the plants; who inspires our good thoughts;[6] who has created both dream and delight? Who gave birth to the dawn, to the day and the night, so that they might stand witness to our duty;[7] who was it who created Kine, without whom our lives would be a misery?[8]

“With infinite patience, Lord of the Light, you told me of Yima, the first father.[9] So it was that you said: ‘I, Ahura Mazda, ask you to meditate and to take up my law.’ But Yima responded that he could not meditate, teach, or take up my law. Then I entrusted him with looking after my worlds so that they would remain fertile. I brought him the weapons of victory and made straight the path toward Mother Earth, who carries both animals and men at her breast. In that new world, livestock, animals, and men multiplied because Yima with his golden lance had made fertile Spenta Amaiti, the Mother Earth.[10] And the people celebrated the vast empire of Mithra,[11] they fought with Indra,[12] they did not give the purified Haoma to the impure,[13] and they understood that to speak scornful words to a pure man is the first sin.[14]

“I asked you, and you have answered all of my questions,” said Zarathustra. “Since father Yima did not want to give wisdom, but rather to care for and extend your dominions, it is time that I did what befits your teaching.”

Light and Darkness

Each of the two primordial spirits is independent in thought, word, and deed.[15] In the beginning, they met so as to order the world, designating the worst life, Hell, for the wicked, and

Heaven for those in the best of mental states.[16] Each of the two spirits made its own Kingdom, one giving form to the dwelling place of error and the other to the dwelling of justice. Ahura Mazda[17] chose all those who, because of their kindness, pleased him, while the Spirit of Evil personified chose the demon-gods and all those who helped to sully human life.[18] When the Deavas ally themselves with the Demon and the final battle is unleashed,[19] the Holy Mind will have won the Kingdom.[20] Of the first two spirits of the world, the kind one said to the wicked: "Neither our thoughts nor our commandments, neither our intelligence nor our beliefs, neither our works nor our conscience nor our souls agree on anything!"[21]

The Angels and the Savior: The End of the World, Resurrection, and Judgment

But now, in all things the Light of Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) and the Darkness of the Spirit of the Lie (Ahriman) are locked in struggle. And so, all beings have their good part as well as their impure part. Hence, it is the duty of the saint (in whom light predominates) to illuminate men, making darkness retreat. But at the end of the world, evil will feign triumph to bring confusion to the minds. Good people will be persecuted and the faults of the wicked attributed to them, and the wicked will feign righteousness. But this will be the time when Ohrmazd will send his son Saoshyant to save the world.[22] He will be aided by the allied spirits of the Light—the angels and archangels—as the Darkness will be aided by the hierarchies of demons. Each one will choose a side in the final battle, and then, in a universal cataclysm, Ohrmazd will destroy Ahriman, and, thanks to the empire of Ohrmazd, a new, pure world will arise. The dead will be resurrected, arrayed in glorious bodies. The angels and the archangels will build the Bridge of Judgment on which the just will cross over.[23] But the firm and splendid bridge will begin to close at the first steps of the reprobates, who will fall. The souls of all those who died in sin will join those who served the rule of evil and those who spoke falsehoods and those of bad conscience. All the unjust souls will be welcome in the Mansion of the Lie,[24] even as the souls of the just will come to dwell in the Mansion of Songs.

Zarathustra announced the reward of those who are apt for the cause, for those who can receive the gifts of the Good Mind that is within each human being.[25]

VIII. Greco-Roman Myths[1]

The Struggle Between the Generations of Immortals

From the union of eternal Uranus (Sky) and mother Gaia (Earth) were born the six Titans who, with their sister Titans, gave birth to a generation of gods. But it is with great Cronus (Time), the youngest Titan, that everything began to move in that flow in which the following succeeds the previous. Before Cronus, time ran in fits and starts in all directions: The past followed the future, and at times the moments passed in a concentrated jumble. In reality, mortals can say nothing of what was before the beginning of things (and, for this reason, some make Cronus the source of all that is thinkable).

The children grew angry with their parents, because every time a new brother was born, Uranus forced it to remain at Gaia's breast. And so it came about that Gaia fashioned a sharp sickle and, showing it to her children, she explained her scheme. It was her son Cronus who accepted the instrument that his mother proffered, and together they prepared an ambush. When Uranus, desirous of love, came to lie with Gaia, their resolute son came forth from the darkness, and, taking the genitals of his father, cut them off and threw them behind him.[2]

Having replaced his father as lord of the Universe, Cronus united with his sister Rhea, and they began to have offspring. But as soon as she would give birth to a son, Cronus would immediately devour the infant. In this way he hoped to ensure that none of his descendants would ever reach royal rank and force him from his place among the immortals. Rhea, unable to prevent the slaughter, pleaded for help from their parents, who knew that it was the destiny of Cronus to be replaced in power by one of his sons. In this way, the Erinyes, devoured[3] by monstrous Cronus, would be avenged, and the chain of murders plotted by keen-minded Cronus would be broken.[4]

When Rhea was about to deliver her next child, her parents sent her to Crete, and there in a cave on a secret mount she gave birth to great Zeus. Wrapping him in swaddling cloths, she presented him to his father, Cronus, to be devoured. But in reality she had taken a rock and disguised it to resemble the infant. The result was that Cronus vomited up the rock, along with the children he had previously swallowed. Eventually, Zeus had grown sufficiently to overthrow his father and take on his attributes. In this way, the glorious Zeus began to follow his Destiny—a destiny that would make him lord among the immortals. And so that they would remember the vicissitudes of their birth, he mounted the rock used in this deceit in a cleft below Parnassus.[5]

Eventually, the fated war arose between Zeus, his brothers, and their allies on one side, and Cronus and the Titans on the other. Zeus demonstrated his power, descending from sacred Mount Olympus with lightning bolts flashing, while the skies resounded with thunder and the swirling lightning made the sacred flame dance all around.[6] The Earth crackled with fire, the ocean waters boiled, and a burning cloud of smoke enveloped the Titans, while the brilliance of the lightning stole whatever vision they had left.[7] The great war continued until the gods, seizing the Titans with their bare hands,[8] bound them with chains and cast them into a dark and dank place in the depths of the mountain, there to be confined in the great Earth.[9]

Prometheus and the Awakening of the Mortals

I, Prometheus, saved the mortals from the Flood when I ordered Deucalion and Pyrrha to construct a boat. When the vessel at last gently came to rest in the mountains of Thessaly, I taught them how what had been devastated could be rebuilt. Friend of knowledge and peace, I am on the verge of achieving my objective, and for this reason I have gifted mortals with wisdom. Often, however, this knowledge is veiled by the dreams of domination that the gods inspire in men, so that they lose themselves and are returned to the dark times from which I rescued them. But have faith in the advance! And when the various sides face each other, repeat with me these bitter words that are no less true for their vulgar nature: “Idiot mortal, go forth and make war, destroy the fields and the cities. Violate the temples and the tombs, torture the vanquished—in this way you only prepare your own destruction!”[10] May this warning serve for something.

Like Zeus, I, Prometheus, am a son of Titans. He has never looked favorably on me, since I refused to take sides in the war between the Titans and the gods. And so it was. The gods won out, not because the Titans were evil but because Zeus was both prouder and more cunning than they. When the Olympians had finally become lords of the world, they were unwilling to abandon their tyrannical power and, seeing future enemies in the fragile humans, they cruelly attacked both their bodies and their minds. They smothered the mortals with superstition and shame, so that even today the lies of that tribe of immortal oppressors are respected still.

Who but I gave knowledge to the humans—these creatures who, century after century, looked but did not see, just as they listened but did not hear? They were like ghosts in a dream. Everything about them was muddled. Fearing the light, they lived in deep caverns. They knew nothing of how to make shelter from brick or wood, nor did they understand the succession of the seasons or the rising and setting of the stars. Everything they did was done without reason until I taught them how to yoke the beasts, to cultivate and harvest, to write numbers and letters, and to build the chariots that plow the waters.[11]

Having no knowledge, human beings could not make choices. Until I taught them, they had neither medicine nor metals. It was from me that they gained all the arts.[12] No doubt there are some who yet pay homage to the Olympians, still believing their false history—a history that goes like this:

“While the gods and mortals were locked in struggle, Prometheus tricked Zeus into accepting the bones and fat of the sacrifice, leaving the best parts for the people. In the face of this the Olympians said: ‘Prometheus, son of Iapetus,[13] how unequally you have distributed the portions!’ The tribes of man commemorate that fact every time they burn offerings of animal bones covered in smoking fat for the gods. To avoid similar deceptions that might benefit Prometheus’s friends and harm the Olympians, Zeus declared that kindling would no longer have the power to produce fire.

“Offending once again, clever Prometheus mocked the sacred plan. He stole the eternal flame and, hiding it inside a hollow branch, gave it to humankind. Seeing the flames in the distance and understanding their origin, thundering Zeus was filled with wrath. For this, and so that all might know it is impossible to transgress the divine will, he chained defiant Prometheus to a column set in stone. Thus, in spite of all his wisdom, the punishment that the son of Iapetus[14] earned was to be chained to the column, and every day an eagle would come and devour his liver, and every night his liver would grow back.”[15]

Whatever the false histories may say, the fact is that it was a human, Heracles, whose arrow dispatched the ravenous eagle. When Zeus came to know this fact, he resigned himself to my being burdened with a piece of the chain and the rock that I pulled up with the help of the hero.

Foolishly, Zeus did not care to listen to the plan I had in mind for our mutual benefit. Only when I warned him of the danger that lay in the future did he reluctantly trade my liberty for the advice he needed. And, still obstinate, he thought my time was running out, for immortality had never been granted to me. But Chiron, good friend and teacher of mortals, exchanged my fate for his—choosing to descend to Hades, and leaving me with eternity in my grasp. Now, with hope always reborn despite privations and fatigue, I encourage humans so that they, too, might win liberty and their immortal destiny.

Demeter and Persephone: Death and the Resurrection of Nature[16]

To Demeter I sing, and to her daughter Persephone, who was abducted when she went to the fields to gather flowers. One hundred buds sprouted from a single root when she chose to grasp its branch. But at that moment the Earth itself resounded as it opened and spat forth the lord of Hades, carried by his black steeds. Against her will, Hades carried off the maiden to his subterranean realm.

No witness heard or saw the deed. And for nine days Demeter, searching for her child, did not partake of ambrosia. Finally, the all-seeing Sun told the grieving mother everything that had occurred: “No mortal is guilty of this act. Zeus alone is responsible, because he has made Hades a gift of your daughter, Persephone. But, O goddess, cease your weeping, for a son-in-law like Hades is not without worth—is he not the brother of generous Zeus?” Burning with fury, the goddess left the heavenly agora and vast Olympus. Disguising her features, making herself ugly so that she would not be recognized, she descended to the cities and the fields of men. But in her state, the blessings that Demeter normally bestows remained locked within her, so that no seed would germinate nor plant give forth fruit.

Then Zeus sent for the offended goddess, but she ignored his summons, intent as she was on being reunited with their daughter. So the father of the gods dispatched Hermes, he of the winged feet, to treat with infernal Hades. And Hermes said: “Hades, king of the dead, Zeus has sent me to bring forth Persephone from your domain so that her mother may see her. And, seeing her, Demeter may set aside her fury, which has stopped the seeds from sprouting, in this way threatening to end the fragile race of man.” Persephone leapt for joy when Hades prescribed the place whence she might depart. But Hades fed Persephone the mysterious seeds of the pomegranate so that she should soon return to their dark domain. Then Hades gave his chariot to Hermes who, accompanied by Persephone, began the return journey.

The reunion of mother and daughter moved the gods, and far-seeing Zeus sent mother Rhea to them, and in their meeting she said to Demeter:

“Come, my child, for thundering Zeus has summoned you to the family of the gods, and has promised to give you whatever honors you choose among the immortals. But he has said that your daughter must, during the course of the year, spend one-third of her time in the kingdom of the shadows, and the other two seasons she will spend with you and the other immortals. So he has said it shall be, and so he has confirmed with a nod of his head. Now come, my daughter, be persuaded, and do not continue to be angry, but quickly make the plants grow that men may live.” Demeter obeyed, and immediately caused flower and fruit to blossom throughout nature.

She explained how there are mysteries that, out of respect for the gods, are to be neither disregarded nor probed. Blissful are those who have contemplated these mysteries, because

the uninitiated have no part in this, and after dying do not share the good fortune of seeing through the gloomy darkness!

Dionysus, the Divine Madness

None of us know anything at all; not even whether we know or do not know, nor if we know that we know or that we do not know; nor if in total there is something or whether there is not. Because things are as we believe them to be.[17] Therefore, reason should move aside and open another horizon for the gods to speak.

Wild Dionysus, I sing to you, crowned with ivy and laurel, son of Zeus and Semele, scion of the tribe of immortals. Raised by the nymphs of the forest, you fill the dark spaces with great fanfare—hail Dionysus, you of the many grape clusters.[18]

Semele doubted that her lover was really Zeus himself, and so she asked that he appear in all his power. When the Olympian fulfilled her wish, the apparition was so great and terrible that she fell dead as if struck down by lightning. Her unborn son was torn from her womb by the god, but as his gestation time was cut short, Zeus cut open his own thigh, inserted the child within it, and sewed the wound back up. When the time came, Zeus removed the living child from his leg. This is why he is called “Dionysus,” “Young Zeus,” and also “the Twice-Born.” But Hera, jealous of Zeus’s love for Semele, sought out the newborn to kill him. So it was that Dionysus had to be taken to Egypt where he was educated in deep caves. To further protect the child, Zeus, the father, transformed him into a young goat.

Dionysus was still young when he made wine from the vine. It was at that time that vengeful Hera found him and, driving him mad, sent him wandering through many countries, until the Asian Cybele—Great Mother of many peoples—purified him and returned his reason to him through mysterious procedures. Surrounded by his bacchantes, he carried the vine from people to people. Among those people was a tyrant who wished to destroy the sacred plant. But he went mad, and cut his own legs. Then, to avert the curse of the god, his subjects hacked him to pieces.

Before returning to Greece, Dionysus went to India, where he subjected the people to his inebriation and his rites. Back in Greece, yet another ruler opposed his cult, and as a consequence was torn to pieces by intoxicated and delirious women. After traveling from place to place, Dionysus desired to reach the Greek islands, and so he went to the shore, where he waited for a ship to pass.

Finally a ship arrived, its sailors intent on taking this stranger prisoner and selling him into slavery. But the crew saw vines growing all over the ship, while springs of wine flowed from the deck—and Dionysus himself transformed into a lion and began to roar menacingly. Driven mad, the sailors threw themselves into the sea, where they were changed into the dolphins that even today follow ships, always trying to explain to the sailors their bewildering destiny.

Dionysus continued his missionary labors. Encountering Ariadne of Crete (who, with her thread, had undone the labyrinth of the Minotaur), he delivered her from love’s pain. The god then continued onward in his panther-drawn chariot, in his hand the divine Thyrsus, his brow encircled with vine leaves and ivy. In every town he reached he established his cult, and at night by torchlight his inebriated devotees would dance to the sound of the tambourines, horns, and flutes. In divine ecstasy, the bacchantes overturned reason’s pretensions—and then, upon regaining their senses, doubted what they had seen, both before and after. That is why, when celebrating the fusion of the teachings of dark Dionysus with luminous Apollo, the human soul

yields up the ferocity of its unbridled instinct, and distant reason descends to comprehend these depths. And so, when vengeful Hera recognized Dionysus's merit, he was able to return to Olympus. Before this, however, he descended to hell, from where he brought the sad shadow of his mother, Semele, back to life.

IX. Nordic Myths[1]

Yggdrasil, the Tree of the World

To the house, powerful and courteous,
Three Aesir came from that family.
They came to Earth and found tired
Ask and Embla, luckless and weak.
Low in spirit and without inspiration
In life and word, lacking good color.
Odin raised their spirit, Honir gave them genius,
Lodur gave them words and good color.[2]

On the horizons of ice, in the cold winters of the Great North, what could be more loved than the tree—seed of fire, warm skin, and protector of the warrior horde—the serpent body that carries us in the Viking raid, tool of the fertile field, witness to the commitment we celebrate before it! We love the plant, and although the sun is made of gold, we feel it is like a plant. And so we have always dreamt that the world would end when the Wolf devours the sun, when a darkness envelops the Earth, when the plants die. We are descendants of Ask ("ash") and Embla ("elm"), two beautiful trees that were felled, and by the will of the gods—the Aesir, givers of form—returned to life as human beings.

Aesir and Asinias also loved the tree, and so it was there that they would meet to hold their deliberations. But better than those who converse about these things are those who know how to realize them.

Then asked Gangleri: "Where is it that the gods meet?"

Har replied: "At the ash tree, Yggdrasil. There the gods daily hold court and lay out the world's destiny." And Jafnhar added: "Its branches reach all the worlds, but its three roots begin where the Aesir[3] have their dwelling, Ginnungagap[4] where the Frost Giants live, and in Neflheim.[5] Beneath the last root is Hvergelmir,[6] where Nidhogg[7] gnaws on it. Under the root that runs toward the Frost Giants is Mimir's well,[8] where knowledge is to be found. It was here that Odin came to ask to be allowed to drink of its waters. His request was granted—but only after he gave one of his eyes as an offering."[9]

It is told that Odin, the great traveler, went to other countries in his ceaseless search for wisdom. During one of those voyages he descended into the depths of the mines and, seizing the dwarf Alberecht, they say, made him turn over the helmet of invisibility and the ring that held the great secret of Rhine gold that the gnome had robbed from its nymph custodians. It was over this that the giants Fafner and Otr fought with Odin. One of the giants, his skull crushed, fell lifeless, while the other changed himself into a dragon, lived, and became guardian of the treasure of the Nibelungen. That is, until finally Sigfried (our Sigurd) killed him, seizing the ring, source of so many troubles—troubles that continued until finally they destroyed all those who became involved with it, for only the wisdom of Odin could manage those forces. How could Odin—he who would sometimes even consult the hanged, and who in all his undertakings is driven by the "thirst for knowledge"—how could Odin not have gone to the Norns so as to drink of the water of knowledge?

Odin pleaded with the three Norns that he might drink of that water, but they would allow it only if he gave one of his eyes in exchange. Cursed be those three, who lanced the divine face only so as to accumulate more wealth![10] These three women, named Urd,[11] Verdandi,[12] and

Skuld,[13] shape the days of men. But there are still other Norns who determine the life of the humans, the elves, and the gnomes. Good lives are governed by the good Norns, bad by those of wicked lineage.

But there is much more to recall—how could one forget Balder's horse, which accompanied the hero to the funeral pyre upon his death; or Odin's horse, magnificent Sleipnir, who with eight hoofs encompassed the distances of the world? And what of the joyful memory of the two swans, nurtured in the sacred waters?[14]

Thor, the Valkyries, and Valhalla: The Warrior and His Heaven

Of all the Aesir, Thor is the strongest. The greatest dwelling known lies within his kingdom. The god travels in his chariot, pulled by two magnificent goats. With him he carries three powers. The first is the hammer, Mjollnir, which resounds like thunder and which the skulls of the ice trolls and the giants of the mountains know well. Another power lies in his belt, which increases his strength when he puts it on. Finally, with the power of his iron gloves he takes up his hammer, and thanks to the gloves the handle does not slip from his grasp, even when he delivers his furious blows. Tremendous as is Thor's energy, he is not alone on the fields of war. When the battle begins, the Valkyries ride and choose those who are destined to die with valor, so that they may carry these heroes to Valhalla.[15] There they will find enormous gates, and rooms built of shields; there they will find tables and goblets, there they will eat the sacred boar.

At dawn the warriors leap from their beds, take up their weapons, and rush onto the battlefields. There they meet in single combat and they fight, hurling each other to the ground. What better entertainment could fill the days of heroes? In the evening they return to Valhalla on their horses, and passing through its gigantic doors they are made comfortable in the great hall. Linking their arms, they form long chains, and as if moved by the winds of the sky or the waves of the sea they sway right and left as they roar out their songs. Later, as friends, they sit together and drink.[16]

Ragnarök, the Destiny of the Gods[17]

Then the Terrible Winter will come, and in the icy winds and ceaseless frost the snow will blow without end. There will be great battles incited by greed. Brother will mete out death to brother, and families will be annihilated, lost in murder and incest.[18]

In her song, the old Seer foretold how in Völuspá the guardians of hell will burst their chains asunder. She sang of the fall of the gods[19] and the collapse of the world;[20] she foresaw how one wolf would devour the sun while another would swallow the moon. She saw how the stars fell and listened to the trembling of the Earth. She prophesied how the chains that hold fast Fenris Wolf would be sundered, and how the Earth would be destroyed from end to end when the sea serpent roils the oceans and finally comes forth onto dry land.

The ship Naglfar, constructed of the fingernails of the dead, will be completed and embark on its voyage across the sea. But the gods will try to delay the launching because it will mean that many corpses will not be gathered in a timely way, their hair and nails continuing to grow with no one to cut them. The sky will part and the ash tree, Yggdrasil, will tremble. The Aesir will strap on their shining armor and advance toward the field of battle. Odin in his golden helmet will be fighting in the very jaws of Fenris Wolf; Thor will deal death to the great serpent, but will

in turn fall dead from its venom; Vitharr will break the jaws of the wolf. They will battle until all the Aesir and all the monsters destroy each other. Finally, Surtur, hurling his fire, will incinerate the world.[21]

What, then, will remain of heaven and Earth? And what of the gods? The seer foretells that the images of the gods and the Earth with its ancient peoples will have evaporated like a hallucination, like those from which Thor suffered when he thought he was being defeated. The illusion of this world and the gods who corresponded to this world will have vanished. Then the humans who are hiding will be nourished on morning dew. The Earth will be beautiful and green—it will bear fruit without sowing, and there will be palaces floating in the air. Everyone will gather and converse, remembering their ancient wisdom, and they will speak of the events that took place, of the Serpent that surrounds the Earth, and of Fenris Wolf. In the fields they will also find those gold pieces with which the Aesir played on their boards. Humanity will be ready to learn, and because of this, human beings will begin to walk among the gods. But now there is nothing more to add, because these things have not yet come to pass.

With this the cycle of the last Viking is closed. Haki heard the voice, while his long serpent slithered toward the sea. Haki heard the sentences directed at his son, while the dense mist settled like a cloak on his shoulders. A red light burned far off in the fog, and the roar of the waves kissed the murmur of his words. So spoke Haki: “Do not confuse these fables with those that have been rendered innocent of the knowledge we have received. For now, these will continue to reach strange, intolerant people who erase the memory of other peoples. These people like to hear that Yggdrasil withers because Odin cut one of its branches to make his spear. They will lick their lips with delight because Odin lost an eye. They will rejoice because our heaven falls with a dreadful crash, for this appears to them to presage their dawn.

“We have told our things in this way, but of them they know nothing. Yggdrasil will rise up, immense and shining in the night, the entire heavens rotating about the axis of its Great North, while its apex connects with the fixed star and the sun turns pale on the frozen horizons. They will celebrate their most important day with our snow-covered tree, and on its top will be the fixed star, and that night we will send them gifts, descending from the sky in a golden sleigh pulled by reindeer. Our goblins, trolls, giants, and magic rings will inhabit their dreams and stories. Our forests will call them, and when they turn their heads quickly they will manage to glimpse an elf. They will hear the song of the nymph in the murmuring brooks and they will seek the pot of gold that the gnomes leave at the end of the rainbow.

“But let us go now! In our blizzards and glaciers the volcano erupts and the geyser hurls forth its heat. Tighten your hand on the helm, son and friend! We have already left the known fjords. In the aurora borealis the dancing gods change color, while we down here ride the waves of the furious sea.”[22]

X. American Myths

Popol Vuh (*Book of the Quiché People*)[1]

The Lost History

In the book of the Popol Vuh is depicted the arrival of the first inhabitants from the other side of the sea.[2] Here is recounted the history of darkness and life that was in the new world. This is the first book that was drawn in ancient times.[3] This great tale recounts how the heavens, the Earth,

and the hells were formed; how each one was divided into four points; how the measuring cord was extended and each of the four points were divided. With four points were formed the squares that were each further divided into three: the squares of the Sky, the Earth, and the underground world.

Human Generations: The Man-Animal, the Man of Clay, the Man of Wood, and the Man of Corn

As the Makers worked, they thought that when they had made light, a being would appear who would invoke them. To invoke them, this being would have to know how to speak, to name. It would have to eat, drink, and breathe. For this future being they created a suitable world, with land, water, air, plants, and animals. Having finished that creation, they said to the animals: “Speak and praise us!” But the animals could not speak. Instead, each animal began to screech in its own way. The Creators and Makers then said: “We have not succeeded in making animals who can speak and invoke our name.” So they spoke to them again, saying: “This is not good. Your flesh will be shredded.” And so the animals became food for one another.

As dawn approached, the Makers said that they must hurry and try again. Then they made a man of mud, but he could move neither his head nor his limbs. He could speak, though he had no understanding. He lasted for a time, but then became wet and could no longer stand erect. And so they undid their work and took counsel together.

They decided to make a man from wood, and so they made puppet men who could speak and could drag themselves over the Earth. These manikins had children who were also wooden puppets. But they were bloodless, their hands and feet dry. With the failure of these manikins, the Makers sent a great rain. They caused a flood to fall from the deep of the Sky. And all the beings rebelled against the wooden men. The animals great and small, the stones, the plates, the crockery, the pots—all rose up and began to scream: “You have burned us, and now we will burn you. You struck us, and now we will strike you!” Without knowing where they were going, the wooden men climbed onto the houses, but they were thrown from the roofs. They hid in caves, but these closed in on them, crushing them. And so they were wiped out. There are those who say that their descendants are the monkeys that live today in the forests. These beings look like men, but in fact they are the successors of the wooden manikin people.

The Makers spoke together and decided to put healthy food and drink inside the human being, and so they formed their flesh from white and yellow corn meal and prepared liquids with which they made their blood, making them stout and full of vigor. Since they looked like men, they ended up being men. They were beautiful, good, and endowed with intelligence. They looked around, and very soon their vision extended until they could see everything that was in the world. Immediately they gave thanks to the Creators and the Shaper. They said: “We spoke, we thought, we felt, and we know what is close and far away; we see the great and the small in the Sky and the Earth.”

The Makers and the Shapers did not like what they heard from their creatures. The First Fathers said: “What our creation says is not good. What if they become more than creatures, perhaps even gods like us?” So they met in Council to discuss the future of their creatures. They had started to fear what would happen if these creatures did not multiply, if they did not reproduce by the time the Sun went down. Over and over again the gods discussed all this, until they decided to fill the dreams of the humans and to veil their eyes so that they would be permitted to see only that which was a short distance away. In this way the wisdom of the origin of the Quiché race was suppressed. The Creators and the Makers created women, and when the men awoke from their dream, their hearts were filled with joy, thanks to their wives.[4]

The Destruction of the False Principal Macaw at the Hands of Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer[5]

When the Sun had not yet come up above the surface of the Earth there was already one known as Principal Macaw, who boasted of his power and virtues. Principal Macaw told the story of those who had perished in the floods of water and from the dark, resinous substance that fell from the skies.[6]

For a long time the men had to walk through unknown places, fleeing the cold and searching for food.[7]

They had fire, but when it went out they had to create it anew by rubbing sticks together. At the beginning they found themselves by the sea, and in the intense cold they walked upon it, until they reached other lands. Neither the Sun nor the Moon could be seen. Over time the tribes became separated. And now, when one group met another, they could no longer understand each other. It was the time in which they searched for the Sun that warms the forests and the animals. There were no houses, and only the skins of beasts for clothing. But when the first inhabitants arrived in the lands full of forests and rivers and volcanoes, Principal Macaw wanted them to believe that he was the Sun and the wealth, and that it was to him that men owed their obedience.

Two gods were engendered; they were called Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer. They found Principal Macaw when he had climbed a tree to eat of its fruit. Without being seen, Master Wizard drew as near as was prudent. Aiming his blowgun at Principal Macaw, at the opportune moment Master Wizard shot a dart into his jaw. The unhappy Principal Macaw fell to the ground with his voice screaming in his throat.

Master Wizard ran up with the intention of killing Principal Macaw. But when he got there, Master Wizard was grabbed and violently shaken, until Principal Macaw was able to rip out one of Master Wizard's arms and run away with it. Reaching his house, Principal Macaw put the arm into the fire so that its owner would have to search for it. Meanwhile, the two who had been engendered left in search of their grandfather, the Great Boar of the Dawn, and their grandmother, the Tapir of the Dawn, and with them formed a scheme.

Becoming two children, the two who had been engendered accompanied their grandparents to the house of Principal Macaw. Seeing them arrive, chief Macaw, completely exhausted by the pain in his jaw, went to the strangers, asking if they could cure it. They answered, saying that they were expert in that art, and with these assurances they put their hands on the bloodstained face of chief Macaw. While he groaned, the visitors tightly bound his head, neck, arms, and legs. Then they began to skin him. Skinning him completely, they removed his precious stones and the resplendent metal of which he boasted so much. So died Principal Macaw at the hands of Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer. Then these two went and recovered the arm, which finally fit perfectly back into the body of its owner.

The two who had been engendered went swiftly, then, to carry out the command they had been given by the powers of the Sky—the Words of the Sky, who are: Giant Master (Lightning), Mark of the Lightning, and Splendor of the Lightning. Those great forces of the Sky had also ordered them to destroy the two children of Principal Macaw: a son called Wise Earth-Fish and another called Giant of the Earth. These two ravaged life, and were killed by those who were engendered. So it was that their works were many, but they still had not been able to contain evil in its territory, because it was scattered far and wide and mixed with all the things.

The Ball Game in the Hells: Descent, Death, Resurrection, and Ascent of Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer

The Kingdom of Xibalbá is a subterranean world in which resides all the harm that humanity suffers. From it arise illnesses, rancor, and fratricidal strife. And to that place are dragged only those who have done evil—although before Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer, all humans were taken down to Xibalbá, not only those who were evil. Now, there came a time when the parents of Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer, called Supreme Master Wizard and Principal Master Magician, walked upon the surface of the world. When they took from those of Xibalbá their shields of leather, their rings, their gloves, their crowns, their helmets, and their ball, those-from-below were greatly offended. When the parents of Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer played with the ball during the game, they made the Earth tremble, and all of Xibalbá would grow angry. Finally, one day, those-from-below sent their ambassadors with the proposal to settle the dispute with a game of ball. But those of Xibalbá betrayed and sacrificed the parents, and this insult to the Sky remained unavenged.

Now Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer were happy because the Sky sent them to play ball above the heads of those of Xibalbá. Those who were engendered swept and arranged the space so that they might finally begin to play ball. Then, those-from-below said: “Those who play above our heads and make the Earth tremble, are they not the children of Supreme Master Wizard and Principal Master Magician? Are they not the children of those we sacrificed?” Thus they said, and agreed to call upon these disruptive ones. They sent ambassadors to those who were engendered, with instructions that Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer appear before them. “They must come here, because we wish to play ball with them. In seven days we shall play.”

Receiving the message, Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer remembered how those of Xibalbá had betrayed the Supreme Master Wizard and Principal Master Magician. And so they accepted the challenge, and descended into the underground world. They went down the steep slope, passing beyond the charmed rivers and the ravines. They arrived at the crossroads of the damned and continued on to the place where those of Xibalbá were. The leaders had put wooden puppets in their places so that no one could see their true faces (they also hid their names to have greater effect). But the visitors, who knew all this, said: “Greetings to you, Supreme Death; greetings to you, Principal Death; greetings to you, Prostrate Cripple; greetings to you, Blood Gatherer; greetings to you, Abscess Master; greetings to you, Jaundice Master; greetings to you, Bone Scepter; greetings to you, Skull Scepter; greetings to you, Blood Hawk; greetings to you, Bloody Teeth; greetings to you, Bloody Claws.” And they discovered the faces of all of them and named all of their names—not forgetting one—and with that, all of the concealments practiced by those of Xibalbá lost their power.

The chiefs, grumbling, invited Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer to sit down on a bench, but they refused because it was really a burning rock. And so those of Xibalbá offered them rooms in the Dark Mansion and gave them pine torches so that they could see and tobacco so that they could smoke. Later that night those of Xibalbá went to look for them so that they might play ball, and those who were engendered won the contest against those of Xibalbá. So, the chiefs sent them to rest at the Mansion of Obsidian, which was swarming with warriors, but they left uninjured and ready for a new game of ball. Again Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer won. They were rewarded with a rest in the Mansion of Incalculable Cold, to which, as homage, dense hail was added. Departing from there, Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer went to the Mansion of Jaguars, from which even ferocious beasts fled in fear. So that they might play ball, in the same

way they were sent to the Mansion of Fire, and then to the Mansion of Bats. In the end, the games concluded with the defeat of Xibalbá.

Then the chiefs ordered that a burning cooking stone be erected, and they requested that those who were engendered demonstrate their power by throwing themselves upon it. They did as they were asked and were burned, until all that was left was their white bones. And then those of Xibalbá cried out: “We have defeated them!” Then those of Xibalbá ground up their bones and scattered them over the river. But the following day, those who had been engendered returned in the form of two very poor men, who danced at the gates of Xibalbá. Taken before the chiefs, the beggars demonstrated many remarkable wonders. They would set something on fire and then restore it; they would destroy a thing, which would then reassemble itself. Excited by this magic, the chiefs asked: “Kill someone and then revive him.” And so they did. Then the chiefs said: “Now dismember yourselves, and then rejoin your parts.” And so they did.

Witnessing these wonders, Supreme Death and Principal Death asked: “Sacrifice and then revive us.” And in this way Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer sacrificed Supreme Death and Principal Death—but they did not revive them. Great was the confusion among those of Xibalbá upon seeing their supreme leaders split open, with their hearts removed. When those who were engendered split the chiefs in two, their followers fled, but all of them were captured and themselves cut in two. All of their children were led to a precipice, and all of them were used to fill in the abyss. There the lifeless bodies of those of Xibalbá remained. By these great wonders, by the metamorphosis of those who were engendered, were conquered those of Xibalbá.

Those who were engendered made their true names known and proclaimed that their parents, Supreme Master Wizard and Principal Master Sorcerer, had been avenged. Sealing off the hells, those who were engendered said: “The glory of Xibalbá no longer exists, but nevertheless we leave you dominion over the wicked. You shall have dominion over those of War, of Sadness, of Misery. But you will no longer ensnare the Children of the Dawn, nor will you seize men by surprise, as happened when Xibalbá dominated the world.” Then Master Wizard and Little Sorcerer addressed their parents, who in earlier times had been sacrificed in Xibalbá, saying: “We have avenged your torture and your death.” Then, enveloped in light, they rose up to the highest heavens, where they became the Sun and the Moon and illuminated the face of the Earth, dispelling the darkness that had reigned until then.

Notes to Universal Root Myths

I. Sumerian-Akkadian Myths

[1] In this retelling of the myth of Gilgamesh we have kept in mind the twelve Assyrian tablets, which are a compilation of earlier Akkadian ones, derived in turn from the Sumerian, as recent discoveries demonstrate. We have based our approach on a number of works, including R. Campbell Thompson’s translations of the original material, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), and those of G. Contenau in *L’ Epopée de Gilgamesh* (Paris: L’Artisan du livre, 1939). We have also consulted the works of Speiser, Bauer, Kramer, Heidel, Langdom, Schott, Ungnad, and, finally, G. Blanco’s *Cantar de Gilgamesh* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Galerna, 1978).

[2] The poem of Gilgamesh was apparently written toward the end of the third millennium b.c.e., but based on much older material. We are led to agree with this hypothesis on the basis of the history of developments in ceramic technology. In fact, around the time that this tale was written down, history’s first potter’s wheel had already been invented in Uruk (circa 3500 b.c.e.). The oldest example is an instrument consisting of a ceramic wheel 90 centimeters in diameter and 12

centimeters thick, which was rotated with the left hand while the material was worked with the right. The weight of the flywheel was sufficient for it to continue spinning for a number of minutes, freeing both of the potter's hands to perfect the work. Mesopotamia would later see the invention of the foot-powered wheel.

In the poem, however, the goddess Aruru creates the man of clay using nothing more than her moistened hands. This is a detail of some importance, since one can deduce from this technical description that the myth pertains to a time before the introduction of the potter's wheel. On comparing the Sumerian myth of creation of the human being with its Egyptian equivalent, for example, we see that in the latter case the god Khnum shapes the body out of clay using a potter's wheel (which had recently made its appearance in the Nile region during the Dynastic Era). The Sumerian poem alludes to the creation of the hero Enkidu as a "double," a copy of Gilgamesh, after the goddess Aruru "concentrates within herself." It is possible that this refers to a technique used in the production of ceramic human figures involving the making of copies through the use of molds (i.e., "within herself") based on a previously manufactured original. The fact that Enkidu is born covered with hair ("the hero was born with his body covered with hair as thick as the barley of the fields") could refer to the visible presence of materials added to reduce plasticity (cereal cuttings, straw, and so on), which were added to the clay to prevent it from cracking, as is still done in some areas where clay is used to prepare adobe. All of this technology corresponds to a stage previous to that of industrial ceramics and the use of the potter's wheel. Thus, the story predates the epoch of al'Ubaid and originates long before the appearance of the myth of Marduk, in which Marduk wishes to create man out of his blood and bones, although he later decides to do so with the blood of his enemy, Kingu. In this case, we are already in the presence of engobe, or glazed ceramics, of which there are numerous Babylonian examples from that period. Moreover, the British Museum contains a tablet on which a formula for enamel appears, based on lead and copper, from the Babylonian master Liballit, possibly contemporaneous with the writing of the myth of Marduk.

It could be objected that in the Hebrew Genesis, as in the Quiché *Popol Vuh,* there is no reference to the potter's wheel, even though it is a technology that already existed by the time of their respective compositions. As for Genesis, God creates Adam from clay, and later creates Eve from his rib (as in the case of Marduk, from blood and bone), and gives Adam life by blowing into him with his breath. There is no reference to the wheel, but the "blowing" is suggestive because the use of a mechanism for introducing air into a furnace predates the potter's wheel. It is a procedure that was then perfected with the bellows, allowing temperatures above 800 degrees C. to be reached, something not otherwise possible given the caloric content of the resins in the firewood of that region. It should also be noted that the invention of the convection furnace at times allowed temperatures of as much as 1,000 degrees C. to be reached, although air injection is an advance based on earlier techniques.

Among the Quiché it was said that the gods made the first man from mud. But over time the first man fell apart (it being a pre-ceramic time of dried clay); then the gods made man from wood, but this did not work either, and this version of humanity was in turn destroyed. And finally the gods made the human being from corn. This indicates that the origin of the myth can be fixed in the stage of Neolithic tools (stone, bone, and wood)—that is, prior to the ceramic revolution. On the other hand, neither the wheel nor the potter's lathe was known in the Americas, and hence there are no references to those technologies. It is true that the three classical translations of the *Popul Vuh* (Arciniegas, Recinos, and Chavez) contain descriptions of potter's tools and ceramic technology coexistent with the myth of the creation of the human being, but this only indicates that these technologies existed before the text itself was finalized.

In synthesis, the Sumerian myth presents us with the oldest example of the creation of the human being by a potter-god. Nonetheless, uncertainties about the dating of certain ceramics based on their firing temperatures could cast some doubt on these conclusions. Fortunately, many problems of this

type have been resolved, beginning with Wedgwood's work on Etruscan vases. The pyrometer designed by this researcher (notwithstanding imperfections in its scale) allowed the amount of heat absorbed by a specific clay to be determined. Knowing the composition of a clay and then submitting a replica to controlled firing allowed the degree of contraction to be determined, according to the parameters established in the scale. The criteria indicated that the greater the heat, the greater the contraction, which then remains fixed once the piece has cooled. Another method consisted of submitting a piece of test material to increasing temperatures, up to the point that contraction occurs, and noting at what temperature this happens. Today, technology allows pyrometric analysis of far greater precision, so that it is possible to determine the temperature at which pottery was fired to within one-tenth of a degree.

[3] "The fragments 'The Death of Gilgamesh' and 'The Descent to Hell' come from Sumerian tablets found in Nippur, which have been dated to the first half of the second millennium b.c.e. Although they are not connected to the structure of the poem, the second one is found in literal translation in the Assyrian Tablet XII, the most complete and recent version that we have of the poem." *Cantar de Gilgamesh* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Galerna, 1978, p. 95). In A. Schott's translation, the text that appears regarding Enkidu's speech to Gilgamesh is as follows: "Look, my body, which you held with tenderness—vermin now gnaw away like old clothes. Yes, my body, which you touched with joy, is invaded by decay, becoming filled with the dust of the Earth!… Have you seen one who died, burned in combat? I certainly have—he was in the silent night, reclining on his bed and drinking pure water. Have you seen someone fall in battle? I certainly have—his dear parents cradle his head and his wife leans over him. Have you seen someone whose remains were discarded on the steppe? O poor me! I have seen him also—he finds no peace. Have you seen someone whose soul is cared for by no one? I have seen it—from nothing more than leftovers in the pot and crumbs by the road must he eat." *El país de los sumerios,* H. Schmökel (Buenos Aires: Ed. Eudeba, 1984, p. 210).

[4] The vision of a jeweled Paradise is usually linked to wisdom, and at times to eternal life. In the latter case, guardians—frequently serpents, as in a Cretan myth cited by Apollodorus—often defend the city. In that tale, the serpents possess the herb of immortality, whereas in the Gilgamesh myth the serpent steals the plant of life that the hero already possesses.

These themes have been the subject of interpretations ranging from the extremely spiritual to the crudest positivism. Here is one example: "…the celestial paradise is enjoyed in a schizophrenic trance, induced either by asceticism, by glandular disturbance, or by use of hallucinogenic drugs. It is not always possible to judge which of these causes produced the mystic visions of, say, Ezekiel, 'Enoch,' Jacob Boehme, Thomas Traherne, or William Blake. Yet, jeweled gardens of delight are commonly connected in myth to the eating of an ambrosia forbidden to mortals; and this points to a hallucinogenic drug reserved for a small circle of adepts, which gives them sensations of divine glory and wisdom. The Gilgamesh reference to buckthorn [espino cerva] must be a blind, however—buckthorn was eaten by ancient mystics not as an illuminant but as a preliminary purgative.… All gardens of delight are originally ruled by goddesses; upon the change from matriarchy to patriarchy, male gods usurp them.… The jeweled Sumerian paradise to which Gilgamesh went was owned by Siduri, Goddess of Wisdom, who had made the Sun-god Shamash its guardian; in later versions of the epic, Shamash has degraded Siduri to a mere 'ale-wife' serving at a near-by tavern." *Hebrew Myths, The Book of Genesis,* R. Graves and R. Patai (New York: Doubleday, 1964, p. 80).

As for the relationship among immortality, serpents, and the act of theft, Wilkins in his *Hindu Mythology* observes how Garuda brought a bit of amrita (ambrosia) from the Moon for the Nagas, or serpent deities, as the price to free his mother from slavery. Indra tried to persuade Garuda to give him the amrita so that the Nagas would not become immortal. But Garuda did not change his mind, and instead handed a vessel containing the substance to the abductors. However, Indra stole it while the Nagas were bathing. The Nagas, believing that the ambrosia must have spilled onto the

Kusa herb (*Poa Cynosuroides*), licked the plant. The herb's sharp thorns ripped their tongues, and so it is that the serpent has a forked tongue. *Hindu Mythology–Vedic and Puranic,* W. J. Wilkins (London: Curzon, 1973).
[5] From the fragment called "The Death of Gilgamesh."

II. Assyro-Babylonian Myths

[1] The poem, written in Babylon based on Sumerian material, was later found in the royal library of Assurbanipal (seventh century b.c.e.).
[2] The eleven monsters and their chief, Kingu, are the twelve constellations of the zodiac that Marduk will place in the sky like statues (fixed images).
[3] A reference to the Enuma Elish–Tablet I (When On High), v. 147 to 157. See, e.g., *Poema Babilónico de la Creación,* E. L. Peinado and M. G. Cordero (Madrid: Ed. Nacional, 1981, p. 98). The translators of this work have also consulted works including Enuma Elish–Tablet I in *The Babylonian Genesis,* A. Heidel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 24).
[4] Tablet 3, v. 134–38. Tablet 4, v. 1–32.
[5] The plant associated with Tiamat and Kingu could be a member of an aquatic species with poisonous qualities that, in small doses, could also have curative powers (i.e., the "blood" of Kingu as a giver of life). Such apparently contradictory ideas are not unheard of. In Pausanias 8, 17, 6 ss, we read that the water of the Styx had pernicious properties, destroying iron, metal, and ceramics. At the same time, these waters also possessed the quality of an "elixir of life," as can be seen in the case of Achilles, who is made invulnerable by his immersion in them. As we read in Hesiod: "Such is the oath the gods made of the primeval and immortal water of the Styx, which never fails, but leaps forth from the rocks." *Theogony,* v. 805.
[6] The Zodiac.
[7] The Sun.
[8] The star Sirius.
[9] The planet Jupiter.
[10] Tablet 5, v. 14–22.
[11] Bab-El, meaning "Door of God."
[12] Tablet 6, v. 5–10. The Iggi and the Anunnaki, entities of the heavens and the infernal depths, respectively.
[13] Tablet 6, v. 11–16.
[14] Tablet 6, v. 29–37. The blood released through the sacrifice of Kingu cleanses the gods of their guilt, and allows the transmission of life to humanity. Perhaps the phrase "in an incomprehensible act" reveals the perplexed state of the Babylonian poet (or the lack of evidence) in the face of an unsatisfactory explanation—an explanation that at one time may have made sense in a more complete Sumerian context (from which the myth derives). In the Chaldean tradition, Marduk and Aruru were the ancestors of man. In the poem of Gilgamesh, by moistening her hands and molding clay, the goddess creates humankind—just as she later creates Enkidu, the king's double. Another version (transmitted by the priest Berossus) has humanity modeled from clay, with which the blood of a god was mixed.
[15] This refers to the truncated, stepped pyramid (ziggurat), at whose apex always stood a small temple that was also an astronomical observatory. The Esagila complex included other towers, residences, and fortified walls in which ramps were frequently used in place of steps. In the underground spaces of the pyramid, funeral or ritual chambers were found in which Marduk "rested" or "died" for the New Year festivities (Akitu). Afterward, he would be rescued from the "mountain of death," and through complex ceremonies, the destinies of the New Year would be set.

Of course, the myth of death and resurrection had already taken shape much earlier in Sumer. On this matter, Schmökel comments: “Today we know that the problem of life, death, and resurrection, expressed in the mystery of Inanna and Dumuzi, was a core problem in the ancient Sumerian religion.… We must ask if the somber description of the beyond in the epic of Gilgamesh should not be considered a reaction against hopes that were too effusive in that regard. All those who committed themselves wholly to faith in the giver of life—Inanna and her lover Dumuzi, who annually in the autumn would descend to the netherworld accompanied by the lamentations of mankind, and then be joyously received upon his return the following spring—could perhaps participate in that return, and themselves become a link in the eternal chain of death and rebirth.… And we have already seen that, at least in the first dynasty of Ur, the belief in the king as Dumuzi gave rise to the strangest events: whole groups of men would take hemlock in the tomb of the dead sovereign or deceased priestess in order to accompany their god and arise again with him. We will leave aside the question of the degree of spontaneity in such cases—the fact that those men and women put an end to their lives without any visible coercion appears certain.” *El País de los Sumerios,* H. Schmökel (Ed. Eudeba, Buenos Aires, 1984, p. 210).

[16] Tablet 6, v. 95–98. A possible reference to the Flood.

[17] Tablet 6, v. 120–23. “Black heads” is a designation given to human beings. In any case, reducing the many names of Marduk reveals the monotheistic aspect of Babylonian religion following the expansion of this local divinity throughout Lower and Upper Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and the eastern Mediterranean. The Assyrians would proceed in the same way with Assur.

[18] Tablet 7, v. 161–62. This refers to the final words of Enuma Elish.

III. Egyptian Myths

[1] The form that we have given to this creation story corresponds to the mythology of Memphis and the basalt inscription that Pharaoh Shabaka had engraved in approximately 700 b.c.e. This inscription had in turn been transcribed from a papyrus of a considerably older date. Atum was the principal god during the time of the Old Kingdom, although occasionally he was linked to Ra, the solar disc. In the New Kingdom, Ra came to occupy the central position at the expense of Atum and the other gods. The sources on which we are drawing show Ptah as the creator of all that exists, but in Egyptian mythology there are always difficulties in following the process of transformation of a divine entity. Very often, a god that is totally unknown in one era will begin to take the first tentative steps onto the historical stage in subsequent eras. Later, this figure may even develop to the point where it threatens to absorb all religious or mythic life for an extended period. Egypt, with its long cultural history, is rich with examples of this kind. According to the *Aegyptiaca* (referred to by Flavius Josephus), the first dynasty began around 3000 b.c.e. (during the time that the capital was in Tinis). Up until the time of Persian, Greek, and Roman domination, Egypt remained active, and hence openly in transformation. Even during the Ptolemaic era, Egyptian mythology continued developing new forms that influenced the Hellenistic world, just as it had influenced the beginnings of Greek culture in earlier times. We are speaking, therefore, of some 3,000 years of continuous development, and it is clear that a great deal of confusion could be occasioned by the appearance and transformation of myths over such an extended period of time. So it is that over the course of a millennium or more, a given divinity can take on different—and at times even opposing—characteristics.

[2] Both the not-yet-born and the already-dead coexist in the present of Ptah.

[3] One legend specifically mentions Byblos. Phoenicia was a region of Asia Minor on the west coast of Syria that extended from Lebanon to the Mediterranean, and as far south as Mount Carmel. Its principal cities were Byblos, Beirut, Sidon, Tyre, and Acca. During the period of Roman domination, the territory of Celesyria (or Phoenicia of Lebanon) was included, and the ancient nation was

designated as Maritime Phoenicia. We have used Phoenicia in the story to highlight the root "Phoenix"—the fabled bird that died in fire and was reborn from its own ashes. In any case, we should not overlook that in fact "Phoenicia" comes from the Greek "Phoenikia," that is, "country of palm trees," and that the inhabitants of that place called themselves "Canaanites" and not "Phoenicians."

[4] This is an allusion to the preparation of a mummy, as related by Herodotus (*Histories,* Book 2, 86ff.).

[5] Some have sought to derive the word "pyramid" from the Greek term meaning "wheat cake," arguing that the Egyptians and Greeks prepared certain pastries in that shape. It has also been maintained that these pastries perhaps derived in turn from others that were used in ceremonial theophagic practices. However, still others hold that they were merely artfully adorned foodstuffs.

Pyramid, from the Greek *pyramis,* has the same root as pira—pyra—and as fire—pyr. "Pira" has been used for the pyres upon which the bodies of the dead or ritual sacrifices are burned. We do not have the exact word in the ancient Egyptian language that refers to a pyramid in a geometric sense. In any case, the Greek name for that body and the initial mathematical studies regarding it could well have derived from Egyptian teaching, as Plato maintains in the *Timaeus* where he deals with the earliest scientific knowledge his people had as being Egyptian in origin. These considerations have allowed a play on words in which the term "pyramid" is in the end identified with the potter's kiln.

For his part, Herodotus (*Histories,* 2, C and C1) tells a story regarding the motivation for the building of the pyramids, connecting it to the theme of Osiris. Given a reasonable degree of license, we feel that the composition of the paragraph on which we are commenting is acceptable, especially bearing in mind the antiquity of the myth proper to primitive ceramic culture (in which the rebirth of man is brought about by the potter-god). As for the Mesopotamian pyramids (ziggurats), they lead us to consider the idea that these constructions were not only temples and astronomical observatories but also the "sacred mountains" in which Marduk was buried and from where he later resurrected. As for the step and covered or semi-covered pyramids of Mexico and Central America (e.g., Xochicalco, Chichen Itza, Cholula, Teotihuacan), we have no data that would lead us to state that they functioned as sepulchers or filled any function beyond being cultic constructions and serving as astronomical observatories. As for the historical development of the Egyptian pyramids, they evolved from the mastabas, which by the Third Dynasty were already linked to the cult of the Sun in Heliopolis.

[6] According to what may be observed, for example, in the *Papyrus of Ani* (Brit. Mus. N. 10,470, sheets 3 and 4).

[7] The tall white crown of the Upper Nile and the flat red crown of the Lower Nile represented both the origins of the pharaoh and his power over those regions. At times both crowns were combined to form the double crown. In the period of the New Empire, the blue crown of war came into use. Often, the ureaeus, the sacred cobra, or ostrich feathers were used in conjunction with the tall crown, each of these representing power over both lands. In the case of Osiris, the crown takes on a priestly character, as in a tiara. The same occurs with the papal headdress (in which, instead, the three-tiered crown can be observed). In this case, the pontifical tiara can be seen to derive from the miter of the bishops, though its style is somewhat more Egyptian.

[8] The whip and the crook or staff frequently appear crossed over the chest of the pharaohs. In the representations of Osiris they serve a priestly function, in the same way as the crooked staff of the Christian bishops.

[9] Ka was not the spirit but rather the vehicle that visited the mummified corpse. It had some physical properties, and as it appears in the various epochs of the *Book of the Dead* was represented as a "double." When the Ka of the pharaoh was represented, it was usually by two identical painted or sculpted figures holding hands.

[10] The equal-armed cross was the Chaldeo-Babylonian symbol of Anu. The Ankh cross or *crux ansata* was a Tau with a circle and a handle, a symbol of triumph over death and the attribute of Sekhet. This cross was later adopted by the Coptic Christians.
[11] Ba was the spirit, not subject to material vicissitudes. It was normally represented as a bird with a human face.
[12] Amenti was hell, the kingdom of the dead.
[13] Khnum, often represented with a human body and a ram's head, was the main divinity of the Elephantine Triad of Upper Egypt. This divinity made the bodies of humans from clay, forming them on his potter's wheel. In its spinning, this wheel acts like the wheel of fortune, determining the destiny of each person from the moment of their birth. Beltz (citing E. Naville, *The Temple of Deir el-Bahri, 2*, tables 47–52) has Khnum speaking these words as he creates an important queen: "I wish to give you the body of a goddess, perfect like all the gods. You will receive from me not only happiness and health but the crown of both countries. You are at the summit of all living beings; you who are queen of Upper and Lower Egypt." *Los Mitos Egipcios,* W. Beltz (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1986, pp. 97–98).
[14] Thoth, god of Hermopolis and creator of culture, also had the role of the one who guides souls to Amenti. He was usually represented as having a human body and the head of an ibis. His equivalence to the Greek Hermes gave rise to the figure of Hermes-Thoth. Later, around the third century c.e., the neoplatonists and other gnostic sects produced the *Corpus Hermeticum* (*Pymander, The Key, Asclepius, The Emerald Tablet,* and so on), which they attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus (the "thrice-great"), the creator of science, the arts, and law.
[15] The sycamore was a type of fig tree with extremely durable wood that was used to make sarcophagi. An allusion is also made here to the Djed tree, which represented the resurrection of Osiris—new shoots springing from its dead trunk.
[16] "Lady of the West" is the name the goddess-mother Hathor would take in funerary invocations. She lived in the western region of Libya where the kingdom of the dead was located.
[17] Anubis, with the body of a man and the head of a jackal, was the accuser in the judgment of the dead. At times he was known as the "Embalmer" or "Guardian of the Tombs." Anubis was said to have helped in the embalming of Osiris. He also appeared as "the One Who Is on His Mountain," that is, in charge of the funerary pyramid.
[18] The amulets (ushabtis, or "those who answer") were clay figurines placed in the tombs to accompany the dead to the land of Amenti, where they would acquire human size and characteristics, carrying out the more onerous labors on behalf of the deceased.
[19] Horus, with his parents Osiris and Isis, formed part of the trinity of Abydos. In his aspect as the rising sun he was represented with the head of a falcon and a solar disc on his forehead.
[20] A local god of Coptos and certain desert regions. Represented with an erect phallus like Priapus, he was a divinity of regeneration in the court of Seth. Called "Bull of his Mother," he was both the son and the husband of a divinity that presided over the East. At some point there may have been intermixture between Seth and Min, since some legends present Seth as a black bull, assassinating Osiris. On the other hand, the very ancient Min may in fact be closely related to the legendary Minos of Crete, also represented as a bull.
[21] Apophis was a monstrous serpent that lay in wait for the ship of the Sun. Over time, he became identified with Seth in his demonic aspect. In the *Book of the Dead,* invocations are made to ensure that this serpent does not destroy the ship, which carries the deceased.
[22] The loss of a god's head indicates not death but rather a replacement of attributes. Thus, many divinities can easily be identified thanks to the fact that the head they bear is the totem of their people or the place from which they came.
[23] We have thought it important to make note of the history of Akhenaton under a subtitle that refers to its quality as an "antimyth." In reality, we are dealing with another root myth: that of the one god,

who, as a system of thought, clashes strongly with those overpopulated pantheons. Although there were already monotheistic proposals in Mesopotamia, it is in Egypt and with Akhenaton (1364–1347 b.c.e.) that this particular religious form gains strength. Akhenaton's reform lasts only as long as his reign, however. According to Beltz, the priestly castes that granted an honorific primacy to the clergy of Amon of Thebes often saw themselves as both the treasure and the safeguard of national traditions. Their successful resistance to Akhenaton's reforms had not only a religious but a national character as well. After they had annulled the reforms of this heretical sovereign, their influence and power became stronger than ever. According to Tokarev, "The temples became the greatest economic power of the country. The kings of the Twentieth Dynasty were puppets in the hands of the Theban high priests, whose functions were formerly hereditary." As opposed to Christianity and Islam—religions that advanced in alliance with the new political forces—Egyptian religion regressed toward autochthonous forms. If Akhenaton's political and religious reforms had progressed, it is quite probable that a universal religion would have arisen much earlier than those known today. In any case, although the traces of heresy were officially erased, its influence transcended the borders of Egypt.

[24] Heliopolis.

[25] The translations of the *Hymn to Aton* are numerous. For this work we have drawn on fragments of diverse translations, modifying them and giving them a unified style.

IV. Hebrew Myths

[1] Genesis 2:9 and 2:16–17.

[2] Based on Book 5 of John Milton's *Paradise Lost.*

[3] Genesis 3:4–5.

[4] In this story, following the tone of the myth of Gilgamesh—"he who knew all" but who returned to die in Uruk—the serpent is interested in having man acquire knowledge, but impedes him from achieving immortality.

[5] Genesis 3:22–24.

[6] Annunciation of the Laws of Moses.

[7] Genesis 22:1–14.

[8] "God also said to Abraham: 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall be the mother of nations; kings of many peoples shall spring from her.' Then Abraham threw himself down on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" Genesis, 17:15–18.

[9] "Then the stranger said: 'I will surely return to you in due season, and Sarah your wife will have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah had grown very old; Sarah was long past the age of child-bearing. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'Shall I have a child now that I have grown old, and am past child-bearing, and my husband is old?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? In due season I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied this, saying, 'I did not laugh,' for she was afraid; but he said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'" Genesis, 18:10–16.

[10] The theme of Abraham was treated dramatically by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling.* In one of the possible scenarios on the theme of the sacrifice, he writes: "It was early morning. Abraham rose in good time, embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who had taken her disgrace from her, and was her pride and hope for all generations. So they rode on in silence, and Abraham's eyes were fixed on the ground, until the fourth day when he looked up and saw afar the mountain in Moriah, but he turned his gaze once again to the ground. Silently, he arranged the

firewood and bound Isaac; silently he drew the knife. Then he saw the ram that God had appointed. He sacrificed that and returned home.… From that day on, Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac throve as before; but Abraham's eye was darkened, he saw joy no more." *Fear and Trembling,* S. Kierkegaard (London: Penguin, 1985, p. 46).

For our part, rather than emphasizing guilt as a motif of existence, we have highlighted certain redemptive aspects of the myth that involve divine mockery in the face of the laughter motivated by incredulity.

[11] It is not only Jacob but also Moses who struggles with God. Thus we are told: "During the journey, while they were encamping for the night, the Lord met Moses, meaning to kill him." Exodus, 4:24.

[12] Israel, that is, "He Who Strives with God," or "He Whom God Strives With."

[13] Peniel, that is, "the Face of God."

[14] "Arabic lexicographers explain that the nature of the lameness produced by injury to the sinew of the thigh socket causes a person so afflicted to walk on the tips of his toes. Such a dislocation of the hip is common among wrestlers, and was first described by Hippocrates. Displacement of the femur-head lengthens the leg, tightens the thigh tendons, and puts the muscles into spasm—which makes for a rolling, swaggering walk, with the heel permanently raised, like that attributed by Homer to the god Hephaestus. A belief that contact with the *jinn* results in a loose-mannered gait, as though disjointed, is found among the Arabs: perhaps a memory of the limping dance performed by devotees who believed themselves divinely possessed, like the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings, 18:26). Beth Hoglah, near Jericho, may have been so called for this reason, because *hajala* in Arabic means to hobble or hop, and both Jerome and Eusebius call Beth Hoglah 'the place of the ring-dance.' The Tyrians performed such limping dances in honor of Hercules Melkarth. It is possible, therefore, that the Peniel myth originally accounts for a limping ceremony which commemorated Jacob's triumphal entry into Canaan after wrestling with a rival." *Hebrew Myths, The Book of Genesis,* Graves and Patai, p. 229, footnote 7.

[15] The theme of the divine limp is found extensively in universal mythology—from lame Hephaestus, who is thrown from Olympus, to the Terena and other tribal peoples such as those of Vancouver Island. The Ute Indians of Whiterocks in Utah practiced "limping dances," and this can also be read in the Talmudic text that refers to the dances of abandon celebrated around the second century b.c.e. with the goal of producing rain. The idea of the divine limp also appears in ancient China. The founder of the Yin Dynasty, T'ang, who fought against drought, and the Great Yu, founder of the Chang Dynasty, were both hemiplegic and limped. Comments on this detail can be found in Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (4, vol. 7) and in C. Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973, vol. 2, pp. 460–64). On the point of the limping dances or ecstatic dances carried out with the goal of encouraging rainfall, we believe that the officiant or officiants of the ritual simulate the discomfort of those who complain of arthritic pains when storms approach. In such cases, an attempt is made to "trick" the heavens—and within that logic, if one limps it is because the rains are about to fall, and so it can do nothing else but rain. In the case of Jacob's fight and subsequent limp, we believe that although it may have had to do with a rite, it was related not to the theme of rain but rather to the change of stage of the protagonist. This is confirmed by the transformation of his name into nothing less than that of Israel.

We might also consider the other case mentioned above. In this example of the struggle with Jehovah, Moses is not left lame; however, the fight is followed by the institution of circumcision. Furthermore, all of this occurs upon Moses's return from Egypt, following God's command to rescue his people from Pharaoh's imprisonment. Therefore, the story of the "attempt" by God to "kill" Moses may also reflect a ceremony of change of condition.

[16] We can do no less than transcribe a few paragraphs of Freud's curious study regarding Moses and monotheism. Although his reasoning cannot be completely supported with any historical certainty, nonetheless certain aspects are worth bearing in mind. Of course, we will not reproduce

here the psychoanalytic themes of the thesis that appeared under the title *Moses and Monotheism* in *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism and Other Works* (see, e.g., London: Penguin, 1990). In the first chapter of this somewhat dated work, Freud attempts to prove that Moses was an Egyptian, and as proof cites a document of Sargon of Agade (founder of Babylon, circa 2800 b.c.e.) in which there appears a version of the story of a "rescue from the water" that was circulating throughout the entire cultural world of Mesopotamia at that time, and hence became known to the Semites born in Babylon or, like Abraham, born in Ur of Chaldea.

The text says: "Sargon, the mighty King, the King of Agade am I. My mother was a Vestal, my father I knew not, while my father's brother dwelt in the mountains. In my city, Azupirani, which lies on the bank of the Euphrates, my mother, the Vestal, conceived me. Secretly she bore me. She laid me in a coffer made of reeds, closed the cover with pitch, and let me down into the river, which did not drown me. The river carried me to Akki, the drawer of water. Akki, the drawer of water, lifted me out in the kindness of his heart. Akki, the drawer of water, brought me up as his own son."

Subsequently (p. 301ff.) Freud says: "…the Aten religion was abolished, the capital city of the Pharaoh, who was branded as a criminal, was destroyed and plundered. In about 1350 b.c.e. the Eighteenth Dynasty came to an end; after a period of anarchy, order was restored by general Haremhab, who reigned until 1315 b.c.e. Akhenaton's reform seemed to be an episode doomed to be forgotten. To this point we have been dealing with what is established historically, and now 'our' hypothetical sequel begins.

"Among those in Akhenaton's entourage there was a man who was perhaps called Tuthmosis, like many other people at that time—the name is not of great importance except that its second component must have been '-mose.' He was in a high position and a convinced adherent of the Aten religion, but, in contrast to the meditative king, he was energetic and passionate. For him the death of Akhenaton and the abolition of his religion meant the end of all his expectations.… Under the necessity of his disappointment and loneliness he turned to these foreigners and with them sought compensation for his losses. He chose them as his people and tried to realize his ideals in them. After he had left Egypt with them, accompanied by his followers, he made them holy by the mark of circumcision, gave them laws and introduced them into the doctrines of the Aten religion, which the Egyptians had just thrown off."

As for circumcision, we know that this was already an established rite in Egypt prior to Moses. And its use by various peoples can be historically confirmed even before its use by the Egyptians, so that it cannot be said to derive solely from them. That Moses could have been Egyptian does not strike us as especially important. The point of interest, rather, is that Egyptian cultural influence made itself felt in that part of the Jewish people who settled in the land of the pharaohs. The events set in motion by Akhenaton took place very close in time to the Exodus, and the religious theses espoused by Moses had much in common with those of the Egyptian reformer.

As for Freud's historical interests, we must remember that around 1934 numerous hypotheses were circulating regarding the Egyptian origin of Moses, among them those of James Breasted and Edward Meyer, whom Freud often cites, echoing their discussion of the theme. Of course, from the time of *Totem and Taboo* in 1913, Freud was not indifferent to the theme of the foundations of religion. When *Moses and Monotheism* concludes that Moses was assassinated by a group of his own followers, neither the antecedents to the case nor the father–son relationship can be overlooked, at least not within the logic of psychoanalysis or that of the anthropological tradition represented by J. G. Frazer, to whom Freud was so indebted. Frazer held that the assassination of the leaders was a tendency that could be either manifest or hidden, but one that existed in many societies. As leaders know or intuit, the people must both care for them and guard against them—*"He must not only be guarded, he must also be guarded against."*

[17] Exodus 3:2–16. See also Exodus 6:2–3.

[18] Exodus, 12:37–38.

[19] According to Eusebius and Julius Africanus, Amenhotep had a canal built, which, beginning in the Nile at Coptos, below Thebes, passed through Cosseir on the Red Sea. This canal was closed during the invasion of Cambyses. Aristotle comments that either Ramses II or Sesostris opened a canal through the isthmus. The work was interrupted and then later continued by Necho, until finally it was finished by Darius. The canal started in Patumos on the Red Sea and ended in the Nile near Bubastis. The Ptolemies improved it, and Strabo describes seeing it in operation. The Romans maintained this canal for a century and a half following the Arab conquest. Apparently, the canal was blocked and then rebuilt by Omar. It remained navigable up to c.e. 765 at which time El-Mansur decided to close it to prevent Mohamed-ben-Abula from receiving provisions from his rebel companions (for more details on Egyptian canals see, e.g., *Rompimiento del Istmo de Suez* by C. S. Montesinos). Regarding the passage of the Israelites through a dry part of the Red Sea, despite the sparse historical data on this question, everything points to the existence of a system of sluices in a branch connected to the Nile—or at least indicates that excavation was in progress on two dry sectors that were later to have been connected by water. If this was the case, provisional containment walls would allow the canal work to proceed. It is thus possible that a heavily weighted Egyptian unit passing along one of those walls might well have caused it to collapse. If this explanation seems less than credible, we should remember the indirect route at one time planned for the Suez Canal, as described by Stephenson, Negrelli, and Paulin Talabot. According to that scheme, known as the Linant-Bey plan, twenty-four sluices were to be built connecting the Red Sea to the Nile. Furthermore, at the official opening of the Suez Canal on November 17, 1869, there were numerous sections that were barely twenty-two meters wide and 8.5 to 9 meters deep. We are not speaking, then, of a canal of vast dimensions or sluices of great height.

[20] “When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. This is why it was called Marah.” Exodus 15:23.

[21] “The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.” Exodus, 16:31. Here “manna” means “What is this?”—a reference to the surprise expressed by the Israelites upon eating the seeds that Moses gave to them.

[22] Exodus 19:18–21.

[23] Exodus 20:18.

[24] Deuteronomy 33:4–7.

[25] Deuteronomy 33:10–12.

V. Chinese Myths

[1] The doctrine of the Tao is much older than either Lao Tsu or Confucius (both of whom lived in the sixth century b.c.e.). The rudiments of these ideas existed in the origin of the Huang Ho culture. Moreover, important antecedents to the development of Confucianism and Taoism can be found in *The I Ching: The Book of Changes* (possibly pre-tenth century b.c.e.). The *I Ching* is at times attributed to the legendary Fu Hsi; at other times to Wen, founder of the Chou Dynasty; and sometimes to a succession of authors and editors. What is clear, however, is that it has had enormous influence on the formation of numerous schools of thought, as well as giving rise to a series of divinatory techniques and other superstitions that still exist today.

[2] Reference to the *Tao Te Ching.*

[3] This is an allusion to chapter 11 of the *Tao Te Ching.* In the Chinese-English translation by Lin Yutang (from which it was translated into Spanish by A. Whitelow), we can read: “Thirty spokes are united around the hub; the usefulness of the wheel comes from its non-existence…”(?) *Sabiduría China,* transl. A. Whitelow (Buenos Aires: Nueva, 1945, p. 35).

[4] Profundity in Taoism is considered the infinitely small, and the Profundity of Profundity, the infinite smallness of the infinitely small.

[5] In this free translation, the return to sleep means the contraction or the freezing of all things after the first expansion. The great vortex continues to expand, according to Taoism, but the contraction that balances the universal wave begins in each thing.
[6] *Yin* has been interpreted as a passive force, complementary to *Yang*. Yin, however, appears as a force that is previous to Yang. Associating Yin with the feminine and Yang with the masculine has given rise to a number of anthropological discussions in which it has been argued that this anteriority is historical rather than conceptual. This argument leads to the conclusion that the primacy of the feminine corresponds to a matriarchal epoch that was later displaced by the patriarchy in which Yang asserts its activity, as for example with the Dragon Emperor (Yang) and the Feng Empress (Yin).
[7] This is an allusion to the myths of the afterlife. In the fragment included below, we find reflected various popular beliefs about the afterlife, although they are drawn from different epochs. For example, consider the case of the Eight Immortals that only appears in the thirteenth century c.e. (Yuan Dynasty), alongside figures that were feared or venerated anywhere from the eleventh to the second centuries b.c.e. (the classical period of the Chou Dynasty). In any case, this is a work of great merit that also gives certain ritual rules: “Do you know what they will do with you?” asked Tcheng-Kuang, looking at him attentively. “They will skin you alive, they will tear out your nails, your teeth, and your eyes, they will strip off your flesh and throw it to the vultures. Then dogs will gnaw your bones. And during the one hundred and five days of the Yin solstice, your relatives will not be able to visit your tomb and offer you the sacrifices of the festival of death. The young men of your village will throw their kites—illustrated with the legends of the Eight Immortal Sages—into the air. From these kites they will hang their bells and lanterns. Millions of lanterns will be lit that day in China, but none will be lit for you.… Nor will they burn sulfur or the leaves of the artemisa in the middle of the patio to expel the demons. Ching, the great demon who carries the register of Life and Death, will already have written your name on the door of Hell, on the Great Ocean, on the path that leads to the Yellow Fountains, where the dead live.… Sung-Ti, the Infernal Majesty who lives in the palace of the Black Ropes; and the Lord of the Five Senses, Yen-Lo; the terrible and the implacable Ping-Tang, Lord of the Hells; all will one by one make you pass through their torture chambers in an infinite cycle of torments. You will not go to the Kwang Sung Paradise, where the Queen Mother of the West strolls amid her peach trees, nor will you ever again see the sun, Father Yang, beautiful Raven of Gold, cross the sky in his chariot of flames.” See, e.g., *La Flor del Tao,* A. Quiroga (Madrid: Cárcamo, 1982, pp. 13ff., from the bilingual edition).
[8] *Ta Chuan: The Great Treatise.* See, e.g., *I Ching: Disertación de Ta Chuan,* transl. A. Martínez (Quindio, Colombia: Ed. Tao, 1974).
[9] *Tao Te Ching,* op. cit., 71.

VI. Indian Myths

[1] The mystical literature of India is without doubt the most extensive in the world. Moreover, it is rich in extremely interesting scientific, philosophic, and artistic concepts. There have been many attempts to organize that enormous production in a simple way. Following a basic scheme, we can say that the four Vedas were followed by works of exegesis such as the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads. The oldest substrate of the Vedas can be dated to around the fifteenth century b.c.e. and the Brahmanas to around the sixth century b.c.e., while in general the Aranyakas are more recent, many of them having been first sketched out at almost the same time as the Brahmanas. The Upanishads, the most recent of these writings, are given the name “Vedanta” because they close the Vedic cycle. The Vedic cycle was composed in the language of the invaders of India, today referred to as Indo-European or Indo-Aryan. This language continued to transform over time, until finally being systematized in its classical expression known as Sanskrit. No longer used for secular

purposes, today in the East it holds a position similar to that of ancient Greek in the West. According to Max Muller, the Vedas were written between 1200 and 800 b.c.e., the Brahmanas from 800 to 600 b.c.e., and the rest from 600 to 200 b.c.e. We note, however, that there is nothing in these texts that indicates when they were written, and it is clear that they were transmitted orally for many centuries before being written down. As for modern Hindu mythology, we can mention the two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata; the Puranas (traditional stories, of which there are eighteen); and the Tantras (there are five major ones). In this first section, which we have called “Fire, Storm, and Exaltation,” we have limited ourselves to presenting a loose and abbreviated version of some of the hymns dedicated to the three most important divinities of the Rig Veda. Authors such as Yaska, perhaps one of the oldest authorities in Vedic commentary, consider that Agni, Indra, and Surya (the Sun) constitute the fundamental trilogy of the literary monument that concerns us. It seems, however, that the supplanting of Soma in that trilogy corresponds to an important change in the mythic perspective of later authors with respect to the original Vedic stage.

[2] Fire as the form of Agni. Various kinds of fire are distinguished in Agni: that of the Earth (wildfire, domestic fire, and sacrificial fire), that of the air (thunderbolt and lightning), and that of heaven (the sun). Agni is usually called “eater of wood” or “eater of fat,” the latter referring to the sacrificial fat that is spilled over him. He is born by the rubbing together of the two sacred sticks, and has no feet, hands, or head. He does, however, possess numerous tongues and hair of flames. His voice is a crackling. More than 200 hymns of the *Rig Veda* are dedicated to him, and he was also worshipped by the branch of the Aryans that settled in Iran. There he took on great importance in pre-Zarathustran religion, which continued after the reformer and appears even to this day in the religion of the Parsis. With the advance of Islam, the Parsi community in Iran was greatly reduced. The majority settled in Bombay, and their numbers in Iran dwindled to the current approximately 30,000. While Indra absorbed many of his attributes, nonetheless Agni in his sacrificial character continues to be involved with most of the Hindu divinities.

[3] Storm as the form of Indra. Strictly speaking, the image of Indra is the lightning bolt. Here, however, he appears as the guide of the waters after having liberated them with his triumph over Vrta, the female-demon who held them prisoner. Vrta may have been a goddess of the native peoples, against whom the Aryans fought during their invasion of India through the Punjab. Although the indigenous inhabitants, who were displaced to the south, may have channeled water toward their fields and possessed a more advanced civilization than that of the foreigners, they lacked weapons of iron such as those of the invading hordes. In the *Rig Veda,* the aboriginal inhabitants are called “Dasyu,” no doubt a reference to the Dravidian people. We can also see in Indra the god who struggles against drought and liberates the beneficent waters of the sky. Some 200 hymns of the *Rig Veda* are dedicated to this god (one-quarter of the book), demonstrating the importance that he had in those times. Later, as he lost force, other gods absorbed many of his attributes.

[4] Exaltation, as the form of the inebriating god Soma. This drink corresponds to the Haoma of the Aryans who invaded Iran. Even today the characteristics of the Soma-producing plant are the subject of much discussion. It seems possible that over time the drink was obtained from a succession of plants, giving rise to the confusion that has surrounded this theme. According to W. Wilkins in his *Hindu Mythology,* the plant in question is the acidic *Asclepias* of Roxburgh. It grows in the hills of the Punjab, in the Bolan Pass, around Poona, and elsewhere. But by the period in which the *Vishnu Purana* was written, intoxicants were already strictly prohibited, and hence Soma as such was not exalted. In any case, in this text it is loosely related to the moon, and with this the trail is completely lost. According to other authors, the plant is none other than a variety of *Zygophyllaceae*. It could be that what is involved is the seeds of the plant known as Syrian Rue (*Peganum harmala*), which was used by the Mesopotamians, who burnt it as a ceremonial fumigant.

There are also those who see in Soma a fermented, beer-like drink, similar to those consumed by the Indo-Europeans. But the most interesting theory has come from A. Hofmann (the discoverer of

LSD). He states that Soma is in reality the fungus *Amanita muscaria*. According to Hofmann, what had been an ethnobotanical enigma for more than 2,000 years was solved in 1968—the year that *Plants of the Gods* was published. In that work (which he wrote in collaboration with R. Evans Schultes), Hofmann claims that the *Amanita* has been known as a hallucinogen since 1730, thanks to the information of a Swedish official who had been imprisoned in Siberia.

This official reported that the shamans there dried it, then added reindeer milk and ingested it. The resulting symptoms are the same as those reported by the native peoples of Lake Superior and other parts of North and Central America, who followed similar practices. It was later confirmed in the laboratory that the active ingredient was not muscarine as had been thought, but rather ibotenic acid. This acid was isolated, and finally the biochemist Takamoto obtained the alkaloid, muscimole. It was known through this investigation that it is in the process of drying the mushroom that the transformation is produced that converts the acid into muscimole.

The Swedish official mentioned earlier supplied another important observation from Russia. Apparently, in certain Siberian tribes the urine of shamans who had previously taken the mushroom was in turn ingested by others, producing effects similar to those displayed earlier by the shaman in trance. The authors of *Plants of the Gods* mention that this was possible because the psychoactive ingredients passed into the urine without being metabolized, or at least in metabolic forms that were still active—something not often found in the hallucinogenic components of plants. And what is more, in the *Vedas* it is mentioned that the urine of some participants in the Soma ceremony was collected in special receptacles, facts that allow us to establish these curious relationships. In India today, urine therapy based on drinking one's own urine while fasting is still practiced. While this is not identical to the case described above, it is a custom that could very well have its earliest roots in the Vedic era of Soma "medicine."

Regarding the *Amanita,* a late twelfth century Roman fresco in the chapel of Plaincourault shows it as the tree of Eden, with the famous serpent coiled around it. As for toxic substances used in religious ceremonies, the Assyrians already knew of *cannabis* in the first millennium b.c.e., and it was of course also used in Tibet and India to the same ends. In his travels, Marco Polo tells of the case of Hasan-al-Sabah, known as the "old man of the mountain," who used *hashish* (from whose name comes "hashashim" or "ashasin," which later becomes "assassin"). He claims that Al-Hasan would subject a group of young people to the intoxicant and then send them off against his enemies.

Surely, much of the use of aromatic substances had its origins in the inhalation of the smoke of hallucinogenic plants burnt for ritual purposes. With the observation of their toxic effects, it is possible that over time these plants were replaced by the resins still in use today in the practices of many religions—for example, incense, myrrh, and storax, as well as aromatic woods such as sandalwood. A similar path can be traced in the origin of certain perfumes that have disappeared over time.

As for the extent of use, we can say that out of the enormous number of terrestrial plant species, only some 150 have been used for their hallucinogenic properties. Of these, about 20 were known in the Eastern Hemisphere and 130 in the Western Hemisphere, with a significant number indigenous to Central and North America. In the origins of the universal religions, a few features can be observed that seem to suggest the presence of hallucinogenic substances. It would seem that, given the numerous references found in the *Rig Veda* (some 120 hymns), Soma ranks as the third most important god of Vedic India. And we cannot overlook the fact that in various times and places any number of religious manifestations have been related to the activity of toxic substances. Regarding abnormalities of perception and representation, see, for example, *Contributions to Thought,* "Psychology of the Image—Variations of the Space of Representation in States of Altered Consciousness" in *Silo: Collected Works, Volume I* (San Diego: Latitude Press, 2003).

[5] *Rig Veda* I, 1, 2. An adaptation that draws in part on the translation of F. Villar Liébana (Madrid: Ed. Nacional, 1975).

[6] *Rig Veda* I, 31, 2.
[7] *Rig Veda* I, 36, 14ff.
[8] *Rig Veda* I, 60, 3.
[9] *Rig Veda* I, 78, 2. It is possible that the historical Buddha is descended from a branch of this Gotama family. In the *Rig Veda* the Rahüganas are mentioned as belonging to that group (I, 78, 5).
[10] *Rig Veda* II. 4, 5ff.
[11] *Rig Veda* I, 32, 1ff.
[12] *Rig Veda* III, 48, 1ff.
[13] *Rig Veda* IX, 1, 5ff.
[14] *Rig Veda* IX, 45, 3ff.
[15] *Rig Veda* IX, 48, 3ff.1
[16] *Rig Veda* IX, 50, 1.
[17] *Rig Veda* IX, 57, 1ff.
[18] *Rig Veda* X, 129, 1ff. An adaptation that draws in part on the translation of R. Griffith.
[19] Based on works including W. Wilkins's translation of the Mahabharata, *Mitología Hindú* (Barcelona: Visión, 1980).
[20] A reference to the teaching of Buddha (500 b.c.e.), according to whose doctrine the human being can be liberated from the wheel of reincarnations and reach Nirvana, a kind of dissolution from the point of view of the sense characteristics that form the "I." The Buddhist doctrine (strictly speaking a philosophy and not a religion) was gradually converted into a religious belief that in turn gave rise to an abundant mythology.
[21] "Om" is often pronounced at the beginning of prayers and religious ceremonies. Originally, the letters that made up this word (a-u-m) represented the *Vedas.* With time, it came to denote the three principal deities of the Puranic cycle—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.
[22] This oration comes from the *Vishnu Purana*. Regarding Brahma's name, Monier Williams has this to say: "Only a few hymns of the Vedas appear to contain the simple conception of the existence of a divine and omnipresent being. Even in these, the idea of a god present in all of nature is a bit diffuse and undefined. In the Purusha Sutra of the Rig Veda, the One Spirit is named Purusha. The most common name in the later system is Brahman, neutral (nominative Brahma), from the root *brih,* 'to expand,' denoting the unity of the expansive essence, or the universally diffused substance of the universe.… Brahma is the neutral, being the 'simply infinite being' (the only real and eternal essence) who, when passing to manifested essence, is called Brahma; when it develops itself in the world it is called Vishnu; and when it again dissolves within itself into a single being, it takes the name Shiva; all the remaining and innumerable gods and semi-gods are also new manifestations of the neutral Brahman, who is eternal." *Indian Wisdom,* M. Williams, p. 12. Cited by Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology–Vedic and Puranic*, p. 106.
[23] The title of this section, "The Forms of Beauty and Horror," synthesizes the contradictory sensation that divinities so often present, in which both their dual beneficent and sinister faces can be seen. The first case presented is the transformation of Krishna before the hero Arjuna. The second is that of the radiant Parvati, who is quite capable of destroying a monster, drinking its blood, and devouring its remains—and then, as mild and beautiful as always, returning to the side of her beloved Shiva. Baudelaire, struck by a similar contradictory state provoked within him by his lover, wrote his *Hymn to Beauty,* which could very well be dedicated to those ambivalent gods: "Are you of heaven or the nether world? Charmed Destiny, your pet, attends your walk; you scatter joys and sorrows at your whim, and govern all, and answer no man's call.… Beauty, you walk on corpses, mocking them; Horror is charming as your other gems.… What difference, then, from heaven or from hell? O Beauty, monstrous in simplicity? If eye, smile, step can open me the way to find unknown,

sublime Infinity? *Flowers of Evil,* C. Baudelaire, transl. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[24] Arjuna is one of the heroes of the epic *Mahabharata.*

[25] Adapted from *The Bhagavad Gita,* Canto 11, see, e.g., the translation of J. Roviralta Borrell (Mexico City: Diana, 1974). The *Bhagavad Gita* is an episode within the *Mahabharata,* written toward the third century b.c.e.

VII. Persian Myths

[1] Zarathustra, or Zoroaster, lived between approximately 660 and 580 b.c.e. His preaching began in a remote district of eastern Iran. From the religious point of view, he is one of the more important figures because, among other things, his personal existence is as verifiable as that of Mohammed—something that is not the case for many other founders. Although making use of Indo-Iranian and various primitive elements, this prophet initiates a new universal religion that will have a powerful impact on others. His cosmology and cosmogony, his apocalypticism, and his ideas on salvation begin a religious cycle that, together with Isaiah, Malachi, and Daniel (of the Bible), will have enormous influence in wide regions of both the East and the West.

Subsequently, Zoroastrianism, transformed into Mithraism, will advance once again, this time toward Imperial Rome. In fierce competition with Christianity, it will have great influence on this new religion, but even when Christianity imposes itself in alliance with Roman political power, the seeds of Mithraism will grow in the bosom of the Church to the point of being expressed as serious heresies. The same will occur in Iran, where the Muslim invasion will end up eradicating Zoroastrianism almost entirely, but many of its ideas will go on to produce the Shiite heresy within Islam. Once again in the nineteenth century, Ba' and the Bahai faith will arise as yet another transformation of the teachings of Zarathustra.

In its doctrinary aspect, the writing of the *Avesta* or *Zend-Avesta* is attributed to Zarathustra, but it seems that the prophet wrote only the *Yasna* (perhaps only seventeen of its hymns, or *Gathas*). The *Avesta* is made up of the *Yasna* (seventy-two chapters of Parsi liturgy); the *Vispared* (twenty-four chapters of invocations); the *Vendidad* (another twenty-two chapters); the *Yashts* (twenty-one chapters with invocations to angels, which constitutes the *Avesta* of the priesthood); and the *Khordah Avesta* or *Minor Avesta* (book of priestly and private devotions).

For our quotation from the *Avesta,* we have used only the *Gathas* and the *Vendidad-Sade*. The *Gathas* were written in Avestin, the language of ancient Bactria, but the original texts suffered numerous vicissitudes from the time of Alexander's passage through Persia. That is why the material has come down to us in the Pehlevi language, surely with major gaps and interpolations of all kinds.

We should bear in mind that, probably owing to the wars or disputes that occurred between those primitive tribes, the division between the Indian and Iranian branches of the Aryans caused certain divinities or spirit-beings that were held in common at the time of their origin to diverge and even take on opposing characters. Thus, Indra and the Devas are worthy of devotion in the Hindu *Vedas,* but have a sinister character in the *Avesta.* The same occurs with the legendary Yima of the Avesta ("Jamshid, chief of peoples and herds" for Anquetil-Duperron, according to the citation of Bergua), who, in the *Vedas,* appears as Yama, the divinity of death (*Rig-Veda* 1, 38, 5). Haoma (Soma in the *Vedas*) and Mithra (the Vedic Mitra), however, both maintain their beneficent characteristics.

[2] This is an allusion to the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* "When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home and the lakes of his home and went into the mountains." *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* F. Nietzsche (London: Penguin, 1961, p. 39). It seems that Nietzsche's preoccupation with the Persian prophet began when, as a youth, he saw Zarathustra in his dreams. In correspondence with his sister Elizabeth and Lou Andreas Salomé, as well as in comments to Peter

Gast and E. Rhode, Nietzsche describes Zarathustra as someone capable of founding a new morality—and, as such, a destroyer or transformer of established values.
[3] A reference to Zarathustra's cosmological and cosmogonic system, developed by Persian magi.
[4] Kine, soul of living beings and particularly of livestock. Ahura Mazda, divinity of Light, also known as Ohrmazd.
[5] Yasna 44.3. Adapted from *Avesta,* which see, e.g., transl. by J. Bergúa (Madrid: Bergúa, 1974).
[6] Yasna 44.4.
[7] Yasna 44.5.
[8] Yasna 44.6.
[9] Based on the second Fargard, 2ff. Adaptation of *Vendidad-Sade.*
[10] *Vendidad-Sade,* second Fargard, 2, 7ff.
[11] *Vendidad-Sade,* nineteenth Fargard, 52.
[12] *Vendidad-Sade,* tenth Fargard, 17.
[13] *Vendidad-Sade,* eighteenth Fargard, 29 and 31.
[14] *Vendidad-Sade,* fifteenth Fargard, 5 and 6.
[15] Yasna 30.3.
[16] Yasna 30.4.
[17] Yasna 30.5.
[18] Yasna 30.6.
[19] Yasna 30.8. Refers to the alliance between the Daeva spirits and Ahriman, god of darkness and evil.
[20] Yasna 30.8.
[21] Yasna 45.2.
[22] Yasna 53.2.
[23] Yasna 51.13.
[24] Yasna 49.11.
[25] Yasna 51.15.

VIII. Greco-Roman Myths

[1] Under this heading we have included not only a number of Greek and Roman myths but also myths belonging to the Cretan-Mycenean world, which would in reality, therefore, merit separate treatment. The reader will notice that we consistently use Greek rather than Roman names for the subjects dealt with, since the sons of Romulus absorbed their most prominent myths from Greek culture, at times changing only the names and places in which certain events unfolded. In no way are we saying that Roman culture never gave rise to its own myths and legends, for the successive waves of invaders of those lands must surely have encountered older inhabitants, who certainly possessed mythic and religious forms differing to a greater or lesser degree from the newer contributions. Moreover, the influence of the Greeks on Roman culture is not the only factor to consider, since numerous related "histories" come from the Egyptians, Phrygians, Hittites, and others.

Turning to the case at hand, we see that within Greek mythology itself the names of many gods have foreign origins. However, it is one thing to collect (and frequently transform) legends and myths from the pens of ancient mythographers, and it is quite another to understand the actual role that the gods, demigods, and other entities played in the personal and collective cult. In reality it is there—in the cults themselves—that the real importance of myths should be sought, and in relation to the system of beliefs that people held, more than to simple poetic, plastic, and at times philosophic expression, as for example in the case of Plato, creator of "myths" (*Symposium, Phaedo, Phaedrus, Republic,* and others) through which he expounds his doctrine. For our part, we have appealed to

the texts of Homer, Pindar, Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus for their great expressive beauty. Of course, we have also drawn on Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days,* which, although they lack the poetic flight of other authors, constitute important works of compilation and "classification."

Historically, the myths that concern us circulated throughout the Greek-speaking world from the tenth century b.c.e. to approximately the fourth century of the present era. Thus, works such as those of Hecatus, written in the sixth century b.c.e., would have been of inestimable value, but unfortunately only dubious fragments of his four books of *Genealogies* have reached us. Nonetheless, that author's work seems to have decisively influenced Pherecyde, who writes on the first Athenian myths.

To be sure, it is not a question of rejecting later, including Roman, authors. However, in the measure that time passes, the tangle of information grows in such a way that the original source becomes confused with more recent creations. The most important beings mentioned in this chapter of "Greco-Roman myths" are (Greek designations with Roman equivalents): Cronus = Saturn; Zeus = Jupiter; Hera = Juno; Rhea = Cybele; Hermes = Mercury; Demeter = Ceres; Persephone = Proserpina; Dionysus = Bacchus; and Herakles = Hercules.

[2] Adaptation from Hesiod's *Theogony,* v. 154–81 (see, e.g., London: Penguin, 1973). Hesiod of Askra, first half of the seventh century b.c.e.(?).

[3] There are three Erinyes: Tisiphone (Avenger of Murder), Alecto (Unceasing in Anger), and Magaera (Ever Jealous). According to A. Garibay, all three refer to personifications of the idea of redressing the order destroyed by a crime. They have, among other missions, the mandate to repress the rebellion of the young against the old. They live in Erebus and are older than Zeus. For A. Bartra, they are the spirits of punishment and blood vengeance. Lastly, P. Grimal relates that they were born from the drops of blood with which the Earth was impregnated when Uranus was castrated. They were also called "Eumenides" and "the "Furies" by the Romans.

[4] *Theogony,* v. 460–74.

[5] *Theogony,* v. 470–501.

[6] *Theogony,* v. 686–92.

[7] *Theogony,* v. 693–99.

[8] *Theogony,* v. 717–20.

[9] *Theogony,* v. 730–32.

[10] Freely adapted from Euripides' *The Trojan Women;* see near the end of scene 11 in J. P. Sartre's adaptation (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1967). The quoted passage is the speech given by Poseidon, but we have taken the liberty of putting it in the mouth of Prometheus since it fits his character so closely, as well as the general context in which the Titan tells his tale. In any case, the surprise evoked by the introduction of admonishments such as: "Make war, stupid mortals—destroy fields and cities, violate temples and tombs, torture the vanquished—you only prepare your own destruction!" is understandable inasmuch as it breaks with the serious epic style in a mocking dissonance more proper to the mid-twentieth century, with a very Sartrean flavor. Euripides was born on Salamis in 480 b.c.e. and died in 406.

[11] Adapted from *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, Episode 2. Aeschylus was born in Eleusis in 525 b.c.e. and died in 456.

[12] *Prometheus Bound,* Episode 2, after the first Chorus.

[13] Son of Iapetus. Iapetus, in turn, is the son of Uranus and Gaia and brother of Cronus and the other Titans (Oceanus, Coeus, Hyperion, and Creus), and the Titanids (Tethys, Rhea, Themis, Mnemosyne, Phoebe, Dione, and Theia). The Titans and Titanids belong to the first generation of gods (called the "Titan gods"). From the line of Iapetus and Clymene come Atlantis, Menoetius, Prometheus, and Epimetheus; just as from the line of Cronus and Rhea come Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, Poseidon, and Zeus. Prometheus is, then, a "cousin" of Zeus. But it is the line of

Cronus (those of the “Cronida”) that prevails. Epimetheus, brother of Prometheus (and his opposite, with his clumsiness and lack of ingenuity), accepts Pandora as a gift, and Zeus uses her to ruin humanity one more time. From Epimetheus and Pandora is born Pyrrha, and from Prometheus and Clymene is born Deucalion. These two form the couple that repopulates the world after the Flood that Zeus sent as a new punishment. And once again it is thanks to another action of Prometheus that human beings manage to save themselves. This comes about because Prometheus instructs Deucalion and Pyrrha to build an Ark. Afterward, the survivors of the catastrophe make men rise again by throwing stones behind themselves (over the shoulder), while they walk through the fields. Then women and men are born, a product of that “sowing.” In all of the above, it is most notably the line of the children of Iapetus that promotes the propagation of the human being.

[14] *Theogony,* v. 535–70 and 615–18.

[15] *Theogony,* v. 521–25.

[16] Adapted from *The Homeric Hymns,* 2: To Demeter (in *Iliad* 2) (see, e.g., Buenos Aires: Losada, 1982).

[17] *On Nature,* 1 and 2, by Metrodorus of Kio.

[18] Adapted from *The Homeric Hymns,* 26: Hymn to Dionysus.

IX. Nordic Myths

[1] Regarding the antecedents of Nordic literature related to myths, F. Durand gives the following historical review: “In 1643, the Icelandic bishop of Skalholt discovered a manuscript, which he gave to Frederick III, king of Denmark. The *Codex Regius* contained, under the generic title of *Edda,* a group of very old poems that had been transcribed by Snorri in the early thirteenth century. Later the manuscript of another scholar, Saemund, was found, which contained the same works and shed light on the use of the plural, *Eddas*. Conceived in a pre-literary era, the greater part these poems appear to date from the seventh and eighth centuries, but certain philologists date the most archaic of them as belonging to the sixth century. It is evident that these poems were first recited in Norway, and were transmitted from generation to generation until the colonizers brought them to the island of ‘fire and ice.’ Later, the medieval scribes copied them onto vellum parchment, saving them from oblivion. The rest of Scandinavia also participated in carrying forward this work. So, for example, in the Danish *History of Saxo Grammaticus* there can be found Latin translations of what can be characterized as proto-Eddic works.

“The magnificent tenth century Danish poem, the *Bjarkemaalet,* which Olaf made his men sing in formation in Stiklestad, differs only slightly from certain Eddic strophes.” See, e.g., *Los Vikingos,* F. Durand (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1975, pp. 108–109). In this way, a tradition that had begun in the era of migrations (between the third and fourth centuries) and spread throughout the Germanic world, was recovered.

This particular mythic literature remained restricted to the Scandinavian environment, but if we are speaking of groups of more or less epic Nordic legends or writings, we find as many productions in England as in Germany and other countries. However, owing to a complex of factors, including geography, we are here focusing on a type of literature that is found concentrated principally in Iceland. From the discovery and colonization of Iceland by the Norwegians (around c.e. 874) to the first generation of Christian Icelanders (around c.e. 1000), numerous phenomena occurred throughout the Scandinavian world that can readily be shown to coincide with the “Viking cycle.”

This turbulent epoch, of expansion and continuous conflict, ran head-on into the advance of the continental powers and Christianity. During this period, invaluable documentation was destroyed or lost in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. However, in Iceland, an enormous body of work was preserved, and moreover continued to be produced, until well into the eighth century. This is the case of the *Elder Edda,* from which we have drawn the verses with mythological themes, leaving

aside the epic themes. Fortunately for literature, the towering figure of Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) then appeared. He composed numerous sagas, and, particularly in his *Gylfaginning* (*The Deluding of Gylfi*), and to some degree in his *Skaldskaparmal* (*The Poetics*), single-handedly rescued Nordic mythology. Thus, thanks to the Icelanders we have the *Elder Edda* or *Verse Edda* (also known as the *Poetic Edda*), as well as the *Younger Edda* (or *Prose Edda* or *Snorri's Edda*), which together constitute the most reliable sources of Nordic mythology.

[2] *Elder Edda,* Völuspá, 17–18.

[3] This is a generic designation for the gods. When speaking of a particular goddess, she would be called an Asinia.

[4] Space filled with energy. When the ice stopped flowing, this place was filled and sank from the weight of the ice. When, in some places, ice and volcanic fire fought with one another and the frozen glaciers melted, Ymir began to form from the drops of water. Ymir is the first of the Frost Giants. He has within him volcanic heat and some of the energy of Ginnungagap.

[5] The place of northern ice, as opposed to Muspel, the mythic hot region of the south. There lives a giant who brandishes a sword of fire with which he defends the place. At the end of time he will leave there and set the world afire.

[6] A spring.

[7]The serpent that gnaws at the roots of Yggdrasil.

[8] One of the Aesir.

[9] Adapted from *The Gylfaginning* (*The Deluding of Gylfi*). The loss of an eye in exchange for a greater good also appears reflected in other legends and stories such as the following, which moreover tells us something about bellicose Viking behavior: "When he reached the farm where Armod and his wife and daughter were sleeping, Egil threw open the door and went to Armod's bed. Drawing his sword, he grabbed Armod's beard with his other hand and pulled him to the edge of the bed. But Armod's wife and daughter quickly rose and pleaded with Egil not to kill him. Egil said that although Armod deserves to be killed, he would desist for their sakes. And so Egil cut the beard from Armod's chin; then he *plucked out Armod's eye* with his finger and left it hanging on his cheek; then Egil and his companions departed." *Egil's Saga,* Snorri Sturluson.

[10] Based on *The Song of the Nibelungen.*

[11] The spirit of the past. The Norns should be viewed as engraving on their tablets, that is, imprinting the magic runes in which they set down people's destinies. This is not a case, then, of their being "spinners" in the style of the Roman Parcae or the Greek Moirae.

[12] The spirit of the present.

[13] The spirit of the future.

[14] Adapted from *The Gylfaginning,* 6 and 16.

[15] The dwelling of the heroes. The Valkyries choose the valiant who die in battle, but also decide the outcome of the battles. These warrior women bring to mind the Amazons, although their action is somewhat less direct. We are also reminded of historical precedents in which the women of the primitive Germans participated in, and at times affected, the outcome of battles. It is possible that such customs later contributed to the mythification of the Viking Valkyries.

In his *Germanica,* Tacitus (c.e. 55–120) tells us: "Close at hand, too, are their dearest, whence is heard the wailing voice of woman and the child's cry: here are the witnesses who are in each man's eyes most precious; here the praise he covets most: they take their wounds to mother and wife, who do not shirk from counting the hurts and demanding a sight of them: they minister to the combatants food and exhortation.

"Tradition relates that some having lost, or losing battles, have been restored thanks to their women, by their incessant prayers and by the baring of their breasts; for so is it brought home to the men that the slavery, which they dread much more keenly on their women's account, is close at

hand: it follows that the loyalty of those tribes is more effectually guaranteed from whom, among other hostages, maids of high birth have been exacted.

"Further, they conceive that in woman there is a certain uncanny and prophetic sense: they neither scorn to consult them nor slight their answers." Tacitus, *Germania,* transl. W. Peterson (London: William Heinemann, 1914).

[16] Tacitus (*Germanica,* p. 346) referring to the inebriating drink (beer) and to the nutritional habits of the primitive Germans, comments: "They make a drink of barley and wheat that is something like wine. Those who live near the shores of the Rhine buy it. Their food is simple: wild apples, fresh venison, and curdled milk. Without any pomp, fuss, or luxury they satisfy their hunger; but they do not use the same temperance against thirst. And if one gave them to drink as much as they like, it would be as easy to defeat them with wine as with weapons."

Mead is mentioned in the *Edda*—a drink of the gods and one that should not be confused with beer, even though they are sometimes figuratively identified.

[17] Since Wagner, "Ragnarök" has been translated as the "Twilight of the Gods." However, a more correct translation would be "Destiny of the Gods," which we have taken as the title of this scene.

[18] Adapted from *La Alucinación de Gylfi,* Snorri Sturluson, transl. J. L. Borges (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1984, 51).

[19] *Völuspa,* 58.

[20] *Völuspa,* 45.

[21] *La Alucinación de Gylfi,* 51.

[22] This final speech of Haki's is loosely reminiscent of Snorri's description in the *Ynglingasaga* of the battle of Fyrisvellir, in which Haki was seriously wounded. "And so he ordered his ship to be brought, he had it loaded with dead men and their weapons, he had it launched, he had the helm set toward the sea and the sails hoisted, and had a pyre of dry wood lit on deck. The wind blew from the land. Haki was dying or already dead when he was laid on the pyre. The flaming ship then disappeared over the horizon, and this was long etched in memory." The bitterness of a world that is dying is reflected in the words that we have put in Haki's mouth. Haki is not a Viking who converts to Christianity—on the contrary, he makes us understand that the defeat before the advancing religion (that of the "foreign peoples") is in reality only an interval during which numerous Nordic images and myths invade the conqueror.

X. American Myths

[1] There are numerous American myths, including brilliant productions such as *The Book of Chilam Balam,* a great literary monument of the Mayan culture in the Yucatán region of Mexico. In our treatment, we have focused on the book of the Quichés of Guatemala, which has been translated under various titles: *Popul Vuh: The Ancient Stories of the Quiché* by A. Recinos (Mexico: F.C.E. Our references are to the sixth printing of 1970, although the book was written in 1947); *Popul Vuh or Book of the Council of the Quiché Indians* by M. Asturias and J. M. Gonzalez de Mendoza (Buenos Aires: Losada. Our references are to the second edition of 1969, although it was written in 1927); *Pop Wuj: Mytho-historical Kiche Poem* by Adrian I. Chavez (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: Centro Editorial Vile. We reference the first edition of 1981, although the text was written in 1979).

The Recinos translation was based on the manuscript entitled *Art of the Three Tongues* (*Arte de las Tres Lenguas*), written at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Friar Francisco Ximenez. The original document passed to the Brasseur collection and later into the hands of A. Pinart, who in turn sold it to E. Aller, and from there it reached the Newberry Library, from which Recinos obtained a photocopy.

Arciniegas's work was translated to the Spanish from the French version, entitled *Les dieux, les héros, et les hommes de l'ancien Guatemala d'aprés le Livre du Conseil* by P. Reynaud, who used

the Ximenez manuscript. And finally, the Chavez translation was also based on the Ximenez manuscript, although with the precaution of preserving the two columns that the friar had used. Ximenez had put the Quiché transcription (Hispanicized) in the first column and the Spanish translation in the second column. Chavez updated the original Quiché transcribed by Ximenez and used that material as the basis of his Spanish translation. In 1927 a translation by Villacorta and Rodas, based on the French text of Brasseur, was published in Guatemala, but the book has remained unavailable to us. The same occurred with another Brasseur translation by J. Arriola, published in Guatemala in 1972. In each case, the source document is that of Ximenez. Between 1701 and 1703, a manuscript written in the Quiché language but using the Latin alphabet came to him through the royal council of the town of Santo Tomás (today Chichicastenango). The document dated from the mid-sixteenth century. Unfortunately, the original was lost, but Ximenez took care to copy it, although with some alterations.

[2] Chavez believes that this phrase refers to the crossing from Asia of the new inhabitants of North America—that is, from the West.

[3] Chavez states that the “paintings” were real books or tablets folded together and bound, and not simply isolated engravings on rock, bone, or wood. Supporting his point of view, he cites *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* by Friar Diego de Landa, in which the author says: “We found a great number of their books, their letters, and because there was nothing there that did not involve superstition and the falsity of the demon, we burned all of it. This they felt very strongly and suffered greatly from it.”

[4] Adapted from the translation by Recinos, *Popul Vuh: The Ancient Stories of the Quiché.*

[5] From here to the end our text also draws on the translation of Arciniegas.

[6] Chavez believes that this is some sort of oil from a cosmic cataclysm. But it could be the result of burning petroleum expelled in the rupture of a methane stratum during a volcanic eruption.

[7] A reference to a long and winding “descent” from very cold regions to regions more suitable for permanent settlements.