CHAPTER 13

(Re)creative Myths and Constructed History: The Case of Poland

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My chapter follows the line of a critique of scientism in Western historical thought. It is a product of a scepticism toward disciplinary history, which was always and still is a powerful instrument of ideological manipulation. In this chapter, I put the problem of community in terms of ‘becoming’ or growing rather than of ‘being constructed’. I am interested here in the concept of palingenesis – the process of beginning again, of a new genesis – especially because I regard the present time as kairos, ‘the right time’, a special moment in world history for making decisions that will be crucial for the future.

This paper refers also to an ethical turn in historical thought that, in a sense, comes back to R. G. Collingwood’s idea of history as human self-knowledge. Thinking about our past might help us in our search for ourselves and the meaning of life insofar as we consider history as a literary genre that originates from the most powerful myth – the myth of searching for a lost identity (Northrop Frye).

A Post-Mythical and Post-Scientific Understanding of Myth

In order to study myths, one has to have courage, erudition, a certain naivety, and a drop of desperation. The literature on myths is enormous, but most of the methodologies used for the study of myth, be they sociological, symbolist, psychoanalytical, structuralist,
Marxist, and so on, approach myth from a functionalist perspective and seek to determine its uses and misuses in pragmatic terms. Theorists of history have a great interest in myths, which are understood as epistemological principles, since historical writing plays an important role in supporting myths. Thus, according to Jerzy Topolski, the history of historiography is a story about the continuous creation of myths and the attempts of historians to dissolve them. But such an understanding of myths refers to an abstract knowledge about the past that pushes us farther and farther away from reality. Interest in those myths that are latent in historical narratives is another sign of a textualist and constructivist approach to history that makes us realize how wide the gap is between the ‘historical past’ and the ‘real past’. Marie-Laure Ryan suggests differences among three types of discourse: science, fiction, and myth. She argues that if the conflict between myth and science is to be resolved, we need to distinguish among four ways of understanding myth: 1) as authoritative, inspired, community-defining, literal-truths (the fundamentalist mode); 2) as authoritative, inspired, community-defining but potentially figural truths (the mainstream religion mode); 3) as literary truth, offering one source of inspiration among many others; and 4) as fictional truth, forming entertaining narratives about imaginary worlds. Ryan claims that communities that still have certain myths embodied in their cultural systems have to decide whether, ‘to accept the fundamentalist view and reject science altogether; start an “alternative science” to support their liberal belief in myth; accept both myth and science but establish a hierarchy when the two come in conflict; or adopt myth to science by opting for the figural interpretation.’

Following Ryan, I would prefer to consider myth as a mode of discourse that contributes to the foundation of culture. One might also presuppose that myths are specific kinds of memories, a reservoir of ‘cultural genes’ that preserve the basic features or archetypes of a given culture. I am not inclined to see history (considered as a science) and myth as opposed to each other. Myth and science can be seen as complementary modes of grasping a common reality. We might consider the category of the ‘non-historical’ as applying to the present, like Walter Benjamin’s ‘now-time’ (Jetzeit), the time of ‘becoming’, a dimension of time pregnant with chances and possibilities. This is the religious time of kairos, which offers a possibility of ‘fulfillment’. The ‘now-time’ marks a moment of fullness in which a historian, or ‘prophetic critic’, after Deborah J. Haynes, would be able to focus on the potentiality of the present to become a future different from any past. Such a ‘new’ kind of scholar would foretell the future. S/he would carefully examine the present and indicate possible results of present actions, and in so doing would also voice collective fears and hopes. By repeating, indicating and quoting certain ideas, motives, symbols and metaphors that circulate in a given community or culture, the ‘prophetic critic’ would act as a powerful ‘vehicle’ of cultural (mythic) memory that would help to transcend the present cultural stage and expand the ‘horizon of expectations’ of a given community. One of his/her tasks would be to diagnose the present in such a way as to help this community to concentrate on those actions that might extend its ‘space of experience’.

The fact that we return to a discussion of myths today can be seen as an effect of an identity crisis, as an outcome of the problem caused by the decline of the nation-state, the present attempt to unify Europe, and a critique of history as the predominant approach to the past. Perhaps we have had enough of historical determinism or the ‘deification of history’ and enough of the historicism and relativism that it has caused. I believe that this is especially the case in Poland, where the demand for a point of reference that is beyond history is quite explicit among young people, who seem to be searching for a perspective that does not depend on history. Michel Foucault’s definition of history (‘l’histoire c’est le discours du pouvoir’), together with Emmanuel Lévinas’ claim that history is part of a Western philosophy of violence appear, after a long period of Communist official state historiography, to be very persuasive. Thus, certain questions inevitably arise: can we still trust history, or better, can we still trust historians? What is history for? Can we still believe that we can learn something from history (or rather, from historians)? These questions are particularly relevant to Poland, where the official (state) historiography has been depreciated and devalued. Rebuilding a faith in history would largely be made possible by re-establishing

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1 Topolski, 1997 (on theoretical consideration on the concepts of fundamental myths, see pp. 97-108).

the ethics of the historian. This would mean the historian assuming the role of a responsible intellectual who is thrown into the world that s/he wants to understand, rather than that of a hero of science who seeks knowledge in order to control and rule the world.

This criticism of history as ideology is accompanied by the search for an alternative approach to the past. Indeed, all the humanities seem to be searching for a principle capable of providing a transcultural image of society. But what category might be able to offer an integrated (or ‘defragmented’) image of a human being? We see a fervent interest in the ‘Other’ and otherness, and a search for an idiomatic translation that would permit us to understand other people(s) and other cultures. We thus observe attention shifting from time to space (or, in the case of time, from chronos to kairos), from word to image, from logos to eros/caritas, from ‘cause and effect’ reasoning to metaphorical or relational thinking, and from logic to rhetoric or poetics. From this perspective, our interest in myth can be seen as a reaction to the modern world view based on Science, Logic and Reason, a reaction that provides a place where our lost humanity might be rediscovered. Myth is a space where the desired integration of the ‘cubist’ individual might be achieved, where the pre-modern relations between individuals, between the individual and nature, and between the individual and the Absolute might be rediscovered. But the question remains: is it possible to find a myth that would be ‘everybody’s story’?

The voices of past Others remind us that history is one of many possible approaches to the past, that it is a specifically Western, Eurocentric, imperialistic, masculinist and therefore ideologically biased vision of time. However, in Europe we are so obsessed by history that we tend to identify history with the past. ‘Epistemophilia’, to use Melanie Klein’s expression, is indeed closely connected with ‘historiophobia’.

Although myth is still a very suspect way of dealing with the past, it does resemble primitive, pre-civilised and atavistic thinking, and as such perhaps represents an alternative way of perceiving the limitations of a civilised way of thinking. Myth allows us to see how a historical way of viewing the past obscures what we have had to give up in order to enter history. Myth returns to the order of phantasms and reveals the unconscious master narratives (to use Fredric Jameson’s idea) that inform our historical consciousness. Myth gives access to our repressed history, and history is our repressed myth. In fact, when historians decided to attack myth and expel it from history, they actually undermined the most important basis for our approach to the past. To set history against myth, that is, to separate history from myth, enfeebles both, for it is myth that protects and saves fundamental features of a given community’s cultural ego. When history defines a community’s ‘space of experience’, it deprives this community of any basis for hope which could revise and enlarge its ‘horizon of expectations’. To rebuild a community means to regenerate its morality, to re-establish its ethical foundation that has been shattered by the collision of its expectations with brutal reality. When dealing with myths, historians tend to make them banal and treat them as expressions of a pathological condition of consciousness. They seem to forget the healing value of mythical belief: myth does what love does – it revives hope.

Thus, if we agree that myth is an expression of the deepest level of history, we can ask whether there are any myths that exist above or beyond everything that separates history from myth.

**Polish Baroque and Romanticism: Two Sources of ‘Polishness’**

There are two epochs in Poland’s past during which the ‘essence’ of Polishness is supposed to have been manifested. These periods are referred to in terms of the pleasure and pain principle. The first epoch, characterised by the pleasure principle, was the 16th and 17th centuries, and was considered the Golden Age of Polish culture. The

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On Polish literature in general, see: Milosz, 1969. As regards particular literary works that participated in the creation of Polish national myths, see for example: Kochanowski, 1928; Micheuwo, 1581; Mickiewicz, 1968; Mickiewicz, 1989; Pasek, 1978.

The battle of Vienna (1683), with the famous victory of Jan III Sobieski over the Turks, was the last successful battle of the Noble Republic of Poland and there followed a period of slow decline. From 1772, Poland was partitioned among Prussia, Russia, and Austria, and in 1795 finally disappeared from the map of Europe for a period of 150 years. The second epoch that supposedly manifested the essence of Polishness (this time characterised by the pain principle) was the period of Romanticism in the 19th century. This was a period of humiliation, rebellion and uprising, conspiracy, dreams of independence and of the rebirth of the Polish State.

It was in the 16th and 17th centuries that the belief in the uniqueness, exceptionality and individuality of the Polish nobility found its fullest expression. This belief was sustained by two myths; that of the origin of the Polish nobility in ancient Sarmatia, and that of Poland’s continuity with the Roman Empire. Poland was considered to be antemurale christianitatis (the bulwark of Christendom). It was the shield of Europe, and Poles regarded themselves as a chosen nation whose mission was to defend Europe from heretics, pagans, and barbarians. The nobility of Poland’s purpose was manifested in an image of itself as a country without religious conflict, a country of tolerance, a ‘land without stakes’ (that is, a community that did not burn heretics). Poland was also an exceptional case as regards its political system, which was called ‘noble democracy’. This system was governed by the principle of ‘Golden Freedom’, the nobility and, after 1573, was headed by an elective king who ‘rules but does not govern’. What is more, the prosperity of the Polish economy, based especially on grain production and grain trade, promoted the idea of Poland as the ‘Great Mill’ of Europe. Poland was a Catholic country, and to be a true Pole meant to be Roman Catholic. A crucial element in religious life was the cult of Holy Mary, connected especially with the monastery of Jasna Góra at Częstochowa, home to the miraculous icon of the Black Madonna, crowned as the ‘Queen of Poland’.

Frank Ankersmit claims that Western historical consciousness originated in the traumatic experience of certain historical events. This idea could be linked to a common belief that history is fascinating for ‘unhappy nations’. I am inclined to argue that Polish historical consciousness, burdened by Romanticism, was based on and supported by traumatic events. In the case of Poland, it is this fragment of its history that ‘hurts’, in Jameson’s sense of the term. Polish culture is a ‘wound culture’, that is, it is founded upon the experiences of trauma, suffering, victimisation and melancholy. The Polish ‘psychic reality’, as a response to this trauma, is manifested in its fundamental myths.

In the 19th century, the age of partitions, passionate Romanticism empowered a distinct kind of Polish messianism. The greatest Polish poets – the national prophets – Mickiewicz, Krasiński, and Słowacki, called Poland, the nation without a state, ‘the Christ of Nations’. Poles would sacrifice themselves for Freedom, Honour and God, and this sacrifice was not just for their own freedom, it was ‘for your freedom and ours’. Poland’s destiny was to be the leader of oppressed Slavic nations while, at the same time, protecting Europe from despotism, materialism, and atheism. The geographical situation of Poland, its location in Europe between the two great powers of Germany and Russia, the sense of the uniqueness of the Polish nation, and the belief that Poland was a bulwark of Christendom, informed Polish messianism or, in other words, the belief in the historical mission of Poland. I consider that Polish messianism is one of the deepest convictions governing the way Poles think about themselves, their country and their sense of meaningful existence.

A clear continuity in the collective consciousness as regards the messianistic role of Poland is manifested in the aura that is associated with Poland entering the European Union. In May 1998, the Polish Embassy in Brussels was officially opened. In the main hall there is a huge painting (4 x 3.40 metres) by Franciszek Starowieski. This work refers to the myth of the rape of Europa by Zeus. It represents a naked woman (Europa), sitting on a ‘techno-bull’ that kidnap another woman (Poland), who is surrounded by a nimbus. The caption of the painting is, ‘Polonia divina rapta per Europa profana’, however, according to Paweł Dobrowolski (the spokesman of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the title of the painting is, ‘Poland being absorbed by Europe’. This controversial allegory is interpreted in two ways: either as Europe, profane, bereft of values and lacking any element of spirituality and depth, absorbing and degrading Poland,

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which was originally divine and pure; or as Poland kidnapped, but sacrificing herself in order to save the continent.

Despite the ambiguities in the interpretation of this painting, it is clear that in this representation of Poland we have a resurrection of one of the most powerful Polish myths, that of messianism, the idea of the Poles as a chosen nation and Poland as the *antermure christianteatis*. Juxtaposed with this messianism, there is also a representation of demonism in the form of the 'black myth of the West'. Looking at Starowieyski's painting, one might say that the 'final combat' over the vision of the future will take place not between history and myth, but between two powerful myths: a futuristic myth that comes with consumerism and has nothing to do with national messianism; and a past-oriented, national myth that supports tradition and the eternal Polish values. I would argue, however, that the roots of this myth of messianism go deeper and touch yet another level – the myth (or archetype) of the victim.

**The Myth of the Victim: Between Dionysus and Jesus**

For Poles, the motifs of the decline and rebirth of Poland, of a chain of life, death and palingenesis or resurrection, are not ways of thinking about their past and present. Instead, they are the motifs that define a destiny embodied in the historical events of the 19th and 20th centuries, they are the symbols of a sacramental drama that unfolds at the deepest level of national existence. Since the cycles of military defeat, political partition, liberation and rebirth have been regularly repeated in Poland's history, this cyclical pattern has come to form a kind of archetype or 'master narrative' that enlivens the Polish people and defines their historical identity. In terms of Eliade’s conception of 'the myth of the eternal return', Poles regard as normal the experience of cyclical catastrophe. Death is viewed not only as inevitable for individual human beings, but as desirable for the nation's periodic renewal and revitalisation.

From the beginning of the 19th century, there has been a deeply rooted conviction in the Polish consciousness that each generation has to give its blood to the Homeland and that such a sacrifice is a necessary condition for the rebirth of the country. This belief was once so strong that, after a series of events, occurring roughly every 15 years and including the November Uprising (1831), the People’s Spring (1848), and the January Uprising (1863), Otto von Bismarck expressed his surprise when nothing happened around 1880. When we look at the calendar of historical events that took place later, we see a chain of sacrificial generations: 1905 and the Revolution in Russian Poland; 1914 to 1918/21 with World War I, the Silesian Uprisings, the Great Polish Uprising and the Polish – Soviet War; 1939 to 1945 with World War II and the Warsaw Uprising; 1956 and the revolt of workers in Poznan; 1970 and the revolt of workers in the Baltic cities; and finally, 1981 and the massacre of workers in Silesia under martial law. There is also a belief that the battle for a free Poland is not yet finished, since there was no blood spilled in the 1990s. The 'Velvet Revolution' did not fulfil this criterion because where there is no blood, there is no catharsis, and consequently there can be no rebirth.

The Polish literary critic Maria Janion observes that Poles have a feeling of living in the midst of some existential enigma in which they are fated to stumble, be led astray, and be betrayed and cheated (by reality itself). While having this rich tradition of failures, Poles have never accepted the view that these defeats were fiascos (or rather, they were fiascos on a political level, but they supported the spirit of the nation). The defence of Poland in October 1939, when Polish cavalry charged German tanks (as the myth would have it), and the Warsaw Uprising, have become the stuff of legend, but Poles relive them as moments of pathos in the tragedy of their history. They see themselves as tragic heroes, and failure is the existential experience necessary for the recognition of the tragedy of being.

The category of 'victim' is a key concept in order to understand the Polish approach to Poland's history. Polishness is manifested in the myth of the victim and his/her tragedy. Because Poland is traditionally compared to the Christ of the Passion, it is easy to say that Polish history simply replicates the story of Christ's sacrifice, and certainly the Polish history of the modern period conduces to a Christian-type valuation of suffering as a blessing. But a consideration of Poland’s past would reveal that there are many elements of Dionysian paganism in Polish consciousness and that, after a thousand years of belonging to Christendom, Poland’s Christianisation is still a kind of unfinished project. By this I mean that the Polish world view tends as much towards pagan notions of the tragic as it does towards

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Christian notions of redemption. This means that defeat and death for a noble cause are in themselves redemptive, having ritual values of ontological transformation, and are not merely the means of attaining life after death. Poles have had many tragic reversals in the past, but the sufferings caused by those events did not humiliate so much as inspire them. In this sense, suffering has had a cathartic value. The motives for suffering and victimisation are connected as much with a Greek Dionysus as with a Christian Jesus, indeed, I would claim that when the myth of sacrifice is analysed on the basis of Polish consciousness, it becomes a place where Christianity and paganism, and religion and myth come together. On one hand, suffering feeds history, but on the other, it allows history to deviate from linearity, causality and change.

Analysing the Polish attitude toward the past, one might claim that while the general history of Poland from the Romantic perspective could be connected with the paradigm of Christ's passion, the nation's famous 'martyrs' are closer to the paradigm of Dionysus's suffering in as much as they are more ecstatic and have an element of mystical ontological metamorphosis. Janion points out that, although Poland has traditionally been represented as 'the Christ of Nations', it sometimes appears as a phantasm, a demonic force or a cruel and bloodthirsty vampire. The Polish motherland needs blood in order to survive and regenerate. Poles bitten by her went mad, as happened, for instance, to Tadeusz Rejtan who, trying to stop the Polish Parliament from ratifying the first partition in 1773, rent his clothes and threw himself on the floor shouting, 'kill me, stamp on me, but do not kill my Homeland' (seven years later he committed suicide). Thus, we may speak of 'Polish Rejtanism', a kind of patriotic madness. Hence, Janion claims, we are dealing with a kind of vampiric patriotism that reveals demonic powers we all possess. The 'homeland' requires a kind of revenge for its martyrdom that extends far beyond the limits of Christian charity and reaches back to Dionysian mysteries.

**Conclusion: The Myth of Searching**

Northrop Frye pointed out that, beyond cultural heritage alone, there has to be some psychological heritage that links the European tradition with the traditions of other cultures. He introduces the concept of a 'mythological universe' which is a reservoir of beliefs developed from basic existential dilemmas. Like Frye, I would argue that history and myth (considered as literary genres) have their source in the myth of the search for lost identity, and that this myth lies at the centre of the 'mythological universe' common to different cultures. Therefore a search for the ego of a culture is like a vocation or calling for a given community, and the history of its culture would be a kind of self-reading and self-writing in order to return to a 'unity', to the Hegelian notion of a thing in and of itself. One might also claim that the current 'ethical turn' in the human sciences is another sign of the embodiment of the myth of the lost identity, where the fragmented subject returns on the ground of ethics.

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Polish Myths

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The above table offers a schematic representation of the main myths that have contributed to Polish identity at one time or another. At present, the basic problem of the Polish approach to Poland’s past is the myth of lost Polishness. Poles turn back and look for an archetypal Eden in which Poland had existed in its ‘original state’ before being expelled from this garden by the tragedy of war and the sin of Communism. They therefore want to re-create this innocent state of the nation (myth) and to reconstruct the world before the fall (history). The Solidarity movement distanced itself from the People’s Republic and wanted to return to the tradition of the Second Polish Republic that had come into being in 1918 after the long period of partitions.

This desire to bring back the past manifested itself in gestures such as referring to Polish constitutions of that period, rebuilding the tradition of political parties and organisations, reintroducing national symbols (principally the crowned eagle), encouraging the admiration of politicians (Piłsudski’s cult), and so on.

After 1989, it appears that this return to the imaginary Eden is impossible, not so much because of the changes in the political situation, but mainly because the nation whose existence was supported by these myths no longer exists.

Living in a democratic, liberal and tolerant country, we have suddenly discovered that not all Poles are Catholic (or that our faith is superficial), that we have minorities that want to speak with their own voices, and that the stereotype of the ‘Polish mother’ is now being undermined by a vigorous feminist movement. Faced with these changes, one might say that the fundamental Polish myths are constructs or concepts that functioned in a specific way in the epoch of the nation-state and that they were embodied in a historiographical discourse that allowed them to be manipulated for different political agendas. It suddenly seems that all the constructs that made up the skeleton of the way the Poles thought about the past (nation, state, history, gender, race etc.), as well as the myths that supported them, have become ‘dead metaphors’.

Poles have realised that they are speaking a ‘dead language’, a language for a world that no longer exists. They are also coming close to admitting that wounds in the Polish soul cannot be healed by a return to the ‘Golden Age’ and that they can no longer believe in the
utopia of the wonderful future originating in the past. In the social consciousness there has to re-emerge a belief in the possibility of a 'new beginning', but this must be a 'new beginning' in a new world, not in the old one. Thus, the concepts of palingenesis, with its god, Dionysus, and 'now-time' seem to be more powerful at present than the concept of resurrection as manifested in the Christ paradigm and the concept of historical time based on eschatological progress.