



MONASH University

**Traces of the Past: History and Myth in Vico, Benjamin and
Blumenberg**

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Abstract

The contention of this thesis is that attempts to articulate a dichotomy between ‘myth’ and ‘reason’ are untenable. My argument is that myth is not the other of reason, but a primary inculcation of a rational life.

Myths are stories that connect individuals and communities to their pasts (both real and imagined). I begin from the claim that myth is a semantically dense and rich term and, as a result of this, conceptually ambivalent. I offer a critique of different philosophical approaches to myth, namely those of Giambattista Vico, Walter Benjamin, and Hans Blumenberg.

In spite of their differences, Vico, Benjamin and Blumenberg all argue that the idea of myth as a phenomenon that is defeated by reason catalyses particular notions of the past as something that is overcome. To avoid this, they confront myth as a locus in which the past can re-emerge as a contested site in which it is received and continually worked upon by individuals and communities as a source of historical agency. Modelling this idea on what Jan Assman calls ‘cultural memory’, I argue that an important part of agency in history is the ability to negotiate an individual’s or a community’s connection to a past that is not superseded, but rather a past that continues to ‘figure’ in the present as a source of rational orientation and imagination.

Ultimately, I argue that Vico, Benjamin and Blumenberg’s conceptions of myth offer different ways of approaching the present as a site of tension between the possibilities of rational life, and the drive toward socio-cultural disintegration.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

James Kent

4/11/2019

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Introduction

This thesis argues that the dichotomy between ‘myth’ and ‘reason’ is untenable because myth is a primary inculcation of a rational life. This conclusion is based on the premise that myths are stories that connect individuals and communities to their pasts (both real and imagined). I begin from the claim that myth is a semantically dense and rich term and, as a result of this, conceptually ambivalent. I therefore offer a critique of different philosophical approaches to myth, namely those of Giambattista Vico, Walter Benjamin, and Hans Blumenberg.

As all three argue, albeit in different ways, mythic stories are not examples of erroneous belief, but rather a locus where individuals and groups can reflect, and ‘work on’, their pasts. Myth, therefore, plays a vital role in how human beings come to orientate, and exercise, their historical agency. Historical agency, in this case, is akin to what Richard Eldridge has called an “image of history” which is “generated imaginatively from within an experience of history...[which structures] a field for subsequent political and moral imagination.”¹

Undertaking a study of something as conceptually vague as myth requires some justification. As Chiara Bottici has argued, there is a temptation to avoid entirely “a concept as cumbersome as myth.”² She concludes, however, that looking for more specific substitutes is impossible because they invariably fail “to convey the semantic complexities of the concept of myth.”³ Its complexity is perhaps due to the fact that the term ‘myth’ still captures the conceptual transition from a specific form of speech, to a broader, abstract idea; as Kathryn Morgan writes, “the abstract noun *mythologia*

¹ Richard Eldridge, *Images of History: Kant, Benjamin, Freedom, and the Human Subject* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33.

² Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

³ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 4. Unencumbered by such reservations, Alasdair MacIntyre claims that, “man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal...Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things.” See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 250. Others, such as René Girard, have made a more specific claim, arguing that myth emerges out of earlier forms of cathartic symbolism, notably the ritual of sacrifice, its purpose being to “keep violence *outside* the community.” René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 105. There is also the tendency to approach myth along the axis of its *explanatory* function. As Luc Brisson has outlined, the teller of myths is the “privileged intermediary between a community and their system of explanation and the values to which that community adheres.” Luc Brisson, *Introduction à la Philosophie du Mythe* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 15.

does not occur before Plato.”⁴ In Homeric Greece, *mûthos* did not have the associations it now does, representing what Morgan calls a “...semantically restricted term for an authoritative speech-act”, wherein its authoritative status primarily made it distinguishable from *epos*, meaning ‘utterance’.⁵ *Logos*, could imply ‘narrative’ or ‘explanation’.⁶ The familiar binary distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, then, is a comparatively late idea, “a function of the rise of philosophical self-consciousness.”⁷ As Georges Gusdorf succinctly argues, “the time of myth, the prehistory of philosophy, is the time in which myth ruled supreme and, therefore, the time in which it was not recognised as such.”⁸

My intention at this early stage is to simply highlight that where the term ‘myth’ begins as a semantically precise, largely positive, form of speech, it eventually loses those connotations. Morgan writes:

*Before the Presocratics the world of myth was characterised by undemonstrable truth and poetic authority; the word mythos similarly connoted authoritative, efficacious and performative speech. In the aftermath of the first philosophers myth lost its positive connotations. No longer authoritative or efficacious, it remained undemonstrable, but in a trivial rather than a transcendent sense.*⁹

Evidence of this is seen in the fact that, as Norma Thompson argues in her study of Herodotus, “the myth that Aristotle’s *logos* was intended to replace was Herodotean.”¹⁰ However, it should be kept in mind that the Greek philosophers’

⁴ Kathryn Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 289.

⁵ Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*, 17.

⁶ Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*, 20.

⁷ Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, 23.

⁸ George Gusdorf, *Mythe et Métaphysique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984), 56. In the introduction to her translation of *Orestes*, Anne Carson points out that within the world invoked by Greek tragedy – a comparatively ‘modern’ working through of mythical traditions – “the truth has only one definition: it is identical with myth.” *An Oresteia*, trans. Anne Carson (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009), 176. With thanks to my friend Scott Robinson for this point.

⁹ Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, 16.

¹⁰ Norma Thompson, *Herodotus and the Origins of the Political Community* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 8. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defends poetry against history, on the grounds that it is “...something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.” Aristotle, “Poetics,” *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1451b.

criticism of *mûthos*, typically aimed at particular kinds of uncritical, or authoritative speech acts, occurred within a specific socio-cultural domain. This was largely the result of a slow cultural transition of favouring certain kinds of speech over others. Marcel Detienne suggests that as the poet bards increasingly came to serve the nobility, the poetic language became associated with the establishment: “the poet was no more than a parasite whose task was to gratify the elite on whom he depended.”¹¹ As the emerging new approach to thinking came to position itself as opposed to the frivolity of mythical thought and speech, the contours of myth itself became less defined; as Morgan claims: “myth in philosophy exists, quite precisely, as a shadow of its former self.”¹² Michèle Le Doeuff echoes this claim when she argues that “it is...a very old commonplace to associate philosophy with a certain *logos* thought of as defining itself through opposition to other types of discourse.”¹³

The singular concept of myth – as emerges with Plato’s use of the noun – catalyses a particular notion of the thinking activity’s relation to time. Le Doeuff argues that myth is more often invoked as a way of grouping forms of reflection which philosophy seeks to oppose or undermine, as a “break with myth, fable, the poetic, the domain of the image.”¹⁴ The idea that ‘rationality’ seeks to define itself by breaking from what it depicts as the ‘superstitious past’ is also the starting premise of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the rational dialectic, where they contend that enlightenment as a concept, “understood in the widest sense as the *advance* of

¹¹ Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 52. Detienne also shows that the gradual favouring of *logos* over *mûthos* was the result of a socio-cultural transition from religious language to what he calls “dialogue speech.” ‘Dialogue speech’, was favoured by the hoplite divisions; it was “egalitarian...(but) also secular...(and) belonged to human time, unlike the magicoreligious speech.” This meant that speech “no longer depend(ed) on the interplay of transcendental religious forces for its efficacy...It was here that preparations for the future status of legal or philosophical speech were made.” Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, 99.

¹² Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, 17.

¹³ Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. Colin Gordon (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 1.

¹⁴ Ibid. See, for example, Hume’s claim that, “So true it is, that however other nations may rival us in poetry, and excel us in some other agreeable arts, the improvements in reason and philosophy can only be owing to a land of toleration and liberty.” See David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature & Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1874), 308. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* which in many ways functions as a reply to Hume, was preoccupied with presenting an account of human cognition and its relation to the world. His argument that “...though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience” functions in effect as both a retort to Hume’s scepticism, as well as the more general superstition of beginning with the external world, rather than the mind. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 41.

thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters” (my emphasis).¹⁵ It is not the intention of this thesis to examine in detail the drawbacks of the many simplistic approaches to myth that understand it only in binary relation to reason, or *logos*. Rather, it begins by highlighting one primary conceptual inefficiency of such accounts. Namely, the manner in which pejorative conceptions of myth import a teleological, progressive view of historical time, wherein mythic ‘consciousness’ is superseded by more sophisticated forms.

One of the main problems with locating myth in a teleology of historical (and rational) progress or regression, is an ongoing ambivalence of our relation to what Le Doeuff calls ‘breaks’ from the past. What is past, what has been broken from, can either represent a bastion of irrationalism, or ‘authenticity’.¹⁶ In the Romantic treatise *The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*, the author associates myth with an aesthetic sensuousness:

*Before we make ideas aesthetic, i.e. mythological, they will have no interest for the people. Conversely, before mythology is rational, the philosopher must be ashamed of it...mythology must become philosophical to make people rational, and philosophy must become mythological to make philosophers sensuous.*¹⁷

This Romantic conception of myth’s sensuous authenticity (thereby allowing the *logos* to become accessible to ‘the people’) transforms, later in the nineteenth century,

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁶ Within contemporary philosophy itself, thinkers like A. C. Grayling have reiterated the need for a re-engagement with enlightenment goals in the face of what he considers a new tide of irrationalism. See his *The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). Ray Brassier has also suggested the enlightenment has been unfairly demonized within much of twentieth century philosophy, a great deal of which he argues essentially slipped back into forms of mythology. See Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Extinction and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), xi. Most recently of all, the cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker, invokes enlightenment as both an ongoing project to be defended, and a historical period in danger of being extinguished. Pinker makes the case for genuine historical and moral progress because of the achievements of enlightened rationality, but in so doing also conflates everything he considers to be anti-enlightenment, or irrational, into a single amorphous category: he thus makes a distinction between reason, science and humanism, and religious fundamentalism, political correctness and postmodernism. Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018). See especially his distinction between enlightenment and “counter enlightenments”, 1-36.

¹⁷ The essay is of unknown authorship, but attributed to one of Hegel, Schelling or Hölderlin. See “The Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism,” trans. Frederick C. Beiser, in. *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

with Nietzsche bemoaning “man, stripped of myth, eternally starving” which he considers a “product of that Socratism bent on [its] destruction.”¹⁸ In the twentieth century, mythical thought tended to be collapsed into various examples of superstition or, in some cases, a form of proto-rationalism. Here the ideology of myth’s relation to time could also be associated with a geographic past – myth was either ‘believed’ by those in the past, or contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples around the globe. The famous classicist of the early twentieth century, F. M. Cornford, begins a discussion of Thales with “a few remarks on the earlier age of mythology and superstition.”¹⁹ Some forty years later Drew Hyland offers some correction to this model of rational progress, due to his recognition of certain ‘philosophical’ elements in Greek epic, suggesting that “we can no longer speak in a facile way of philosophy ‘arising out of’ myth.”²⁰ He nonetheless negotiates the difficulty of the historical ‘event’ of *mythos* to *logos*, by concluding that certain myths were simply more ‘philosophical’ than previously thought.²¹ Ernst Cassirer, more sensitive to the intricacies and sophistication of myth than most, suggests that “all the attempts...to unify the mythical ideas...were bound to end in complete failure”, while nonetheless arguing that “myth is not theoretical in its very meaning and essence. It defies and challenges our fundamental categories of thought.”²² Cassirer’s intention was to offer a correction to the philosophical desire to ‘decode’ the meaning, or belief system, behind particular myths, by arguing that mythic consciousness, while symbolic, “is grounded in a law of its own kind.”²³ While this approach allows myth to be studied in its own right, avoiding any narrow attempt at rational ‘interpretation’, this still commits Cassirer, as he shows elsewhere, to a teleology of rational development, where reason overcomes the immediacy and primitiveness of mythic symbolism.²⁴

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 1993), 110.

¹⁹ F. M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 7.

²⁰ Drew A. Hyland, *The Origins of Philosophy* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1973), 29.

²¹ Hyland, *The Origins of Philosophy*, 29-96.

²² Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 73.

²³ Ernst Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking,” *The Warburg Years (1919-1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth and Technology*, trans. S. G. Lofts and A. Calcagno (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 10.

²⁴ Nowhere is this clearer as when Cassirer describes the diverse belief systems of the hundreds of different Indigenous Australian nations as simply “totemism”, and then goes on to argue that “the same basic feature of thought” can be seen in the belief systems of the people of New Guinea, wherein the “sign for a thing... (is) a real part of it.” See Cassirer, “The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thinking,” 19-20, 22. However, as the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner argued in 1953, “our dry and abstract language” struggles to articulate ideas that do not fit into the Indo-European understanding of “time as an abstract concept... (or our) sense of ‘history’”; to the extent that an older Aboriginal man

As Le Doeuff reminds us, however, the notion of a singular rationality *overcoming* a singular mythical imaginary does not pay sufficient attention to the strangeness of the history of reflection. “Plato gave back more than he took from the mysticism of his time...we need to draw the consequences of the fact that the philosopher reworks elements of a mode of discourse which philosophy elsewhere repudiates”; she concludes: “There is not *one* reason, or *one* imaginary.”²⁵ Why, then, persevere with the term ‘myth’? Although, as I have highlighted, no thinker or theory can fully reconcile all the elements captured by the term, like Bottici, I contend that its semantic and conceptual diversity draws out a vital facet of myth that the binary, or pejorative, accounts (and their corresponding notions of historical progress) do not. Namely, how the past, as it is engaged with in myth, can re-emerge as a contested site in which it is received and continually worked upon by individuals and communities as a source of historical agency (modelled on Eldridge’s conception of a ‘field’ of moral imagination). This is not a past that is superseded, but one that (in the form of myths that are received, worked upon, and begun anew) continues to ‘figure’ in the present.

If Humanity is not to be Totally Betrayed

The relationship between what I have called historical agency, and myth’s recollection of ambiguous pasts, requires further explication. In his discussion of the relation, and distinction, of ritual and myth, the scholar Walter Burkert argues that:

*Ritual is far older in the history of evolution, since it goes back even to animals, whereas myth only became possible with the advent of speech, a specifically human ability...We are left with the fact that stories are something new in relation to biologically observable ritual.*²⁶

that he spoke to simply said, “White man got no dreaming.” W. E. H. Stanner, “The Dreaming,” *The Dreaming and other Essays* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2009), 57.

²⁵ Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, 5.

²⁶ Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press, 1983), 31.

The details of this claim are, of course, subject to controversy. However, as Buckert reminds us, between the origins of myth and the traditions left to posterity, there are the “vast reaches of the unknowable.”²⁷ The idea that myth is rooted in forms of pre-linguistic mimetic ritual suggests that as a linguistic practice, myth is already engaged with, and catalysed by, our reception of a dimly remembered, obscure past. These ideas are further drawn out by Jan Assman and his work on ‘cultural memory’. My intention is not to use Assman’s theory as a strict framework, partly because his own intentions and interests are not philosophical, but rather relate to how his theory can inform broader historical investigations of ancient civilisations. However, his account of ‘cultural memory’ draws out one way of approaching a past that is unknown: Assman describes it as, in its broadest sense, “the handing down of meaning.”²⁸ In this context ‘meaning’ is something that goes “beyond [the] practical” and is both “handed down and brought to present life”; the example he gives is when “mimetic routines take on the status of rituals.”²⁹ What Assman calls ‘memory culture’ is therefore connected to a conception of time:

*Memory culture depends mainly, though not exclusively, on various links with the past...the past only comes into being insofar as we refer to it (my emphasis).*³⁰

‘The past’ in this model bears no relation to the passage of time in the physical sense. Rather, it is *invoked*: “what the art of memory is to learning, memory culture is to plans and hopes – that is, to the formation of an identity, including the social construction of meaning and time.”³¹ The vital distinction between ‘memory culture’ and ‘tradition’, argues Assman, is that the latter:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6-7.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, 17. Within the broad category of ‘cultural memory’, Assman makes a distinction between ‘memory cultures’ and later ‘written cultures.’ The latter does not rely entirely on the transmission of collective memory for socio-cultural meaning. Unlike Assman, I am more ambivalent about whether such a sharp, chronological delineation is possible. What a critique of myth shows precisely, I contend, is that all peoples, ancient or otherwise, seem to engage with their past as a source of ongoing recollection and negotiation. See Assman, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, 17-20; 70-72.

³¹ Ibid.

...leaves out the aspect of reception, the bridging of the gap, and also the negative factors of oblivion and suppression. Remembrance is a matter of emotional ties, cultural shaping, and a conscious reference to the past that overcomes the rupture between life and death.³²

It is my contention that myth plays a vital role in the sustenance of what Assman calls 'memory culture', insofar as it mediates the reception of our pasts, for those in the present. This differs from mere 'tradition' because the past that is invoked by memory culture is not simply handed down, in an unambiguous act of preservation, but remains a contested site.³³

That myth is, fundamentally, associated with the act of remembrance is touched upon by Hannah Arendt in her reflections on history. She argues that, although history "as a category of experience" is "older even than Homer", it is first recognised and reflected upon "...the moment when Ulysses, at the court of the king of the Phaeacians, listened to the story of his own deeds and sufferings...[as] a thing outside himself."³⁴ Arendt claims that this scene "is paradigmatic for both history and poetry; the 'reconciliation with reality', the catharsis...came about through the tears of remembrance."³⁵ Even if the viability of something like history as a 'category' of experience might be open to dispute, Arendt's point is important because it underlines that, in the case of myth, transmission is not a straightforward case of the traditions of the past being 'passed down'. Rather, to tell and listen to a myth is to confront elements of our past that are, for those who listen attentively in the present, highly ambiguous, and often deeply traumatic.³⁶ This is echoed by the classicist Gilbert

³² Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, 20.

³³ This stems from a tension at the heart of memory. As Paul Ricoeur has argued, memory "is tied to an ambition, a claim – that of being faithful to the past." He suggests that this problematically implies that "if we can reproach memory with being unreliable, it is precisely because it is our one and only resource for signifying the past character of what we declare we remember." While this is true, a study of myth as a 'carrier' of memory shows the extent to which it is difficult to grasp any objective past with which to compare the accuracy or frailty of memory. The shifting nature of myth corresponds to a changing past that is repeatedly invoked anew in a given present. See Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 21.

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 45.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Paul Kottman suggests that Herodotus focuses on the tears of the audiences who watched the tragic play, *The Fall of Miletus* by Phrynichus, because they were not straightforwardly cathartic, or even the result of being affected emotionally. Rather "their lamentation was the result of a shared recollection that was theirs." See Paul A. Kottman, "Memory, Mimesis, Tragedy: The Scene Before

Murray who claims that the Greek epic tradition recalls an era that would have been foreign even to Homer: an earlier period of tribal movement and migration by sea – “even in the *Iliad*, amid all its poetical refurbishments of life, there remain these unconscious marks of the breaking up of the Achaeans.”³⁷

What might this kind of access to the past mean for historical agency? This is addressed, philosophically speaking, by Horkheimer and Adorno in their discussion of the dialectical relation between myth and reason. They echo a dimension of Assman’s argument regarding the distinction between memory culture’s relation to a hope for the future, and the passing down of tradition, when they write:

*What is at issue here is not culture as a value...but the necessity for enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed. What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfilment of past hopes.*³⁸

By their judgment, this requires a study, not just of the rational ‘faculties’, but rather a reading of “the intertwinement of rationality and social reality.”³⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno avoid the reductive interpretation of myth as mere superstition, while also recognising that, historically speaking, myth and its associated rituals and socio-cultural practices came to be adopted into systems of domination. The correction *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers is predicated upon recognising rationality’s historical connection to the forms of social domination and authority associated with myth, while also acknowledging that myth shows forms of systemisation and abstraction typical of rationality. Their intention here, I argue, is to both illuminate the historical present as a place in which barbarism is not impossible, and to ‘rescue’ the past from its association with primitive irrationality. Joseph Mali makes a similar claim when, in outlining a historiography sensitive to myth, he suggests that the “crucial test” of any such discipline, “is whether it offers a new explanation for what is really ‘modern’ in contemporary history, to wit, the devastation of Western

Philosophy," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 1 (2003), 84. See Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey De Sélincourt (London: Penguin Books, 2003), Book Six, 21, 366-67.

³⁷ Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), 69.

³⁸ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.

³⁹ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

civilization in the totalitarian revolutions and wars of the twentieth century.”⁴⁰ By reconfiguring our relationship to history, Horkheimer and Adorno present the concept of the present, not as a summation of the past, but as a moment of ongoing negotiation between the possibility of rational judgment, and the drive toward barbarism and socio-cultural disintegration.

Thus, the focus of this thesis is the role myth plays in how individuals and communities relate to, and work on, their pasts. It avoids approaching myth along the common axis of liberation or authenticity, wherein myth is either something to be liquidated, or maintained, as in Justin E. H. Smith’s recent book *Irrationality*.⁴¹ I leave to one side the question of whether myth is intrinsic, or antithetical to human life. Neither is it my intention to draw a genealogical link between Vico, Benjamin and Blumenberg. These thinkers articulate heterogenous uses of the concept ‘myth’. If there is one point of affinity between them, however, it is their interest in how a renewed problematisation of myth leads to a reappraisal of how our past histories inform our agency as moral creatures. Naturally, given their different views on ‘myth’, there emerges a correspondingly different view of ‘the past’ and how it interacts with the present. Vico sees the past as something that is embedded within the foundations of the present, Benjamin considers the past as something that can be redeemed for the sake of those living, and Blumenberg views it as something that is in certain respects unknowable and also continually worked upon anew. As I will show, their respective discussions of myth draw out important implications for what it means to be a rational agent living in a particular historical moment.

Chapter Summary

The thesis begins with a discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The function of this first chapter is to draw out an element of their

⁴⁰ Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 29.

⁴¹ Smith offers a renewed engagement with the dialectic of enlightenment and myth in conjunction with a reading of the contemporary political sphere. However, his account of myth doesn’t really critique the category itself, and his conclusion that irrationality as a phenomenon of human life is both inescapable and undesirable tells us very little about what myth is, and how our lives as rational creatures are informed by our pasts. Myths, in his model, are still the irrational and fantastic stories we tell ourselves as part of living a human life. See Justin E. H. Smith, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 184-85, 289.

understanding of myth that will orientate the rest of the thesis. I suggest that the arguments regarding myth in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be divided into two not entirely reconcilable parts. The first approaches myth allegorically, as an insight into the emergence of human subjectivity. The second deals with Horkheimer and Adorno's recognition that myth provides insights into real forms of life that past humans were deeply attached to, and which they abandoned only with great reluctance. I claim that this perspective on myth allows us to see the historically determined ways in which myth (and thus reason) came to be entwined into socio-cultural systems of domination. This also highlights the extent to which myth reflects momentary glimpses of life that were extinguished in the passage of time. Although this chapter offers a distinctive reading of Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of myth, its primary intention is to introduce the organising theme of this thesis. My contention is that the authors offer an understanding of myth, not just as a sign of superstitious naiveté, but also a locus in which humans come to engage with the disasters and irretrievable possibilities of their pasts as a source of rational, and therefore moral, engagement.

Chapters two and three discuss Giambattista Vico's account of myth. If a reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers a point of departure, I argue that a 'return' to Vico is justified. This is because Vico addresses the core problem of the historical dimension of rationality's connection to mythic life. Chapter two presents a reading of Vico's theory of myth, one that I divide between an aesthetic and a historical reading (one sees a reflection of this division in later philosophical approaches, for example in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as the work of Hans Blumenberg). I suggest that Vico offers a method for understanding how the rational faculties are linked to their history, something he considered a direct riposte to the rationalism of Cartesian philosophy. His ultimate point is that because our rational faculties emerged from initial 'aesthetic' forms of distancing between subject and object, our capacity for rational judgment (contrary to Descartes' understanding of internal deliberation) is in fact predicated on communally agreed upon forms of meaning and truth. I claim that this draws out an account of rationality that is based around a notion of historical fragility. What this implies for philosophy according to Vico is the topic of chapter three. Specifically, because Vico considered myth to offer an historical iteration of reason's limitations and fallibility, he considered it

philosophy's role to find a 'way out' of those historically conditioned limitations. This involved recognising both "the boundaries of human reason [and the fact that] transgressing them means abandoning our humanity."⁴² These ideas remain of interest, I argue, because at their core is the argument that the ongoing 'life' of myth shows that the past is not something that is bypassed, but always 'present' in the present.

Chapters four and five deal with Walter Benjamin. My intention in these chapters is to provide a link between his account of myth and his theory of mimesis. In chapter four I argue that, for Benjamin, a study of mimesis represented his attempt to come to terms with the ways in which ancient, physical forms of relationality between human body and world were deposited in linguistic meaning. Ultimately Benjamin claims that language's capacity to be meaningful was due to this historical link to mimetic practice. He thus considered language to be, "the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity."⁴³ My suggestion is that Benjamin's highly original attempt to link language's capacity to be meaningful to a deep history of human experience, offers a unique point of entry into his ideas about myth. In particular, it offers up a way of reading his conception of myth's relationship to stories. This is the topic of chapter five. According to Benjamin, the loss of experience that is implied in the disappearance of storytelling, or the capacity to tell meaningful stories in modernity, leaves the human being without the ability to resist, or protect itself from, the totalising presence of mythic fate.⁴⁴ I contend that Benjamin's theory of mimesis offers a way of recognising myth as something that shapes and limits humanity's capacity to make rational judgements, while also emerging as a catalyst for how the hopes of the past (carried through time via stories) could be redeemed.

In chapters six and seven I address Hans Blumenberg's theory of myth. In chapter six I offer an alternative reading to the claim that Blumenberg's description of myth derives from a philosophical anthropology. While not discounting this important

⁴² Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. David Marsh (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 236.

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar", trans. Michael Jennings, in *Selected Writings, Volume Two, Part Two 1931*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 695.

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Volume Three, 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 144.

aspect of his approach, I suggest that the recent scholarship's privileging of the philosophical anthropology lens has certain limitations. In particular, this approach is unable to shed much light on Blumenberg's ideas regarding the manner in which the past itself can act as a stimulant for the ways in which human beings 'work' on myth itself, both as individuals and communities. I argue that this reading of Blumenberg's theory of myth provides an alternative account of the ways in which human beings exercise rational judgment in historical moments. Chapter seven attempts to draw out the arguments of the previous chapter by way of an example, specifically Blumenberg's recently published essay from his *Nachlass*, entitled *The Rigorism of Truth*. In this essay, Blumenberg undertakes a polemic against both Freud and Hannah Arendt for engaging in what he considers a misplaced faith in the liberatory potential of rational truth in moments of historical disaster. The little literature that exists on this essay seems to suggest that this unpublished piece exhibits either all the signs of a late, Romantic capitulation to the 'need' for myth in human life, or the failure to recognise his own faith and debts to the 'mythology' of reason's emancipatory hopes. My argument hinges on the claim that these readings put undue emphasis on the philosophical anthropology component of Blumenberg's work. Instead, I offer a new reading of the essay, in keeping with my alternative reading of his theory of myth. The essay transforms, then, from a polemic regarding the *need* for myth, into a nuanced description of the ways in which we can overestimate our capacity to overcome it.

By way of conclusion, I offer a brief discussion of Plato's myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*. This is intended to show that, while all the thinkers I discuss in the body of the thesis belong to the modern period (at least comparatively), the 'problem' of myth emerges with the 'beginning' of philosophy. Much of the commentary on Plato's seemingly bizarre decision to end perhaps the most famous example of rational critique with a myth shows, once again, the difficulties of giving a nuanced account of the relation between reason and myth. Following an argument proposed by Morgan, I propose that Plato's deployment of myth represents a serious engagement with how human communities attempt to ground their conception of rationality in an idea of the past, and the passage of time.

Chapter One:

A Semblance of Freedom: Horkheimer and Adorno's Conception of Myth

Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944) is well known for its critique of enlightenment rationality, mass culture and anti-Semitism. However, it also represents a problematisation of any reductive account of myth. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the enlightenment project, which they take to be synonymous with rationality from its beginning, has “always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters.”⁴⁵ The authors argue, however, that any notion that there has been a cumulative, rational elimination of fearful superstition can be quickly undermined. This thesis is unsurprising given that the book, written in North America, was composed as Europe descended, once again, into barbarism and cultural disintegration.⁴⁶ In short, the idea of a correlation between the passage of time with liberation from mythic fear had to be reevaluated.

Horkheimer and Adorno trace the rational desire to dominate fear as rooted in mythic forms of life, suggesting that human terror itself is, from the moment of its emergence in earliest prehistory, already a ‘rationalisation’ of what they call *Angst*, a totalising anxiety, or dread, that marked earliest human interactions with the natural world.⁴⁷ They write:

*The doubling of nature into appearance and essence, effect and force, made possible by myth no less than by science, springs from human fear, the expression of which becomes its explanation.*⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For the German edition, see Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988). References throughout this chapter will be to the English translation first, followed by the German original, abbreviated to ‘DE’ and ‘DA’ respectively.

⁴⁶ For an excellent overview of the historical circumstances in which Horkheimer and Adorno wrote, see James Schmidt, “Language, Mythology and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” *Social Research* 65 (1998), 807-38

⁴⁷ *Angst* implies a dread without an object, unlike fear (*Furcht*).

⁴⁸ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 10; DA, 21.

These remain ambiguous ideas. Particularly in the Anglophone literature, the primary argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has been reduced to a totalising critique of reason itself as inherently dominating and oppressive.⁴⁹ This is largely due, I argue, to a particular focus on one facet of the book's arguments, and a simplistic reading of its discussion of myth.

My claim in this chapter is that the work's main arguments regarding myth can be divided into two not entirely reconcilable parts.⁵⁰ The first treats myth allegorically, as a way of approaching a universalised account of the emergence of human subjectivity. The manner in which Horkheimer and Adorno present these arguments is deeply influenced by Freud. The common reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* focuses on this Freudian reading, which largely maintains his teleology of rational development. This saw myth as a 'step' in rational progress, more sophisticated and abstract than magic, but less so than modern rationality.⁵¹ Arguably one of Freud's great insights was his understanding that to study myth was in effect to be confronted with the historical remnants of the repressed human unconscious. While this dimension of his argument is familiar to readers of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example in their reading of the *Odyssey* as an allegorical reflection

⁴⁹ The Anglophone reception of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, particularly in the 1970s during its initial circulation, is a good example. One of the common claims was that the authors reduced German Fascism and Western liberalism to the same manifestation of dominant reason. Perry Anderson, for example, argues that Horkheimer and Adorno "effectively equated North American liberalism and German Fascism", a claim that was typical of the kind of reading that suggests *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presents an unambiguous, catastrophic critique of rationality's possibilities. See Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, (London: NLB, 1976), 33. This initial reception has contributed to so-called 'critical theory' being associated with a form of pessimism akin to a resignation, a genuine anathema to the intentions of the authors. As Christopher Rocco argues, the mainstream reception and interpretation of the book was also extremely influenced by Jürgen Habermas' criticism of what he saw as Horkheimer and Adorno's abandonment of the hopes of enlightenment. See Christopher Rocco, "Between Modernity and Postmodernity: Reading 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' Against the Grain," *Political Theory* 22, no. 1 (Feb. 1994), 71-2. See also Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment," trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* no. 26, *Critical Theory and Modernity* (Spring-Summer, 1982), 28, 30.

⁵⁰ The fragmentary, incomplete nature of the text is probably better understood as a collection of essays; the decision to turn it into a book being a reasonably late decision. See Schmidt, "Language, Mythology and Enlightenment," 809-10.

⁵¹ This was a commonly held belief in the psychology, sociology and anthropology of the time. Freud argued that civilization was a process, a case of gradually overcoming the human instinct for violence, but was less certain as to whether "the cultural process developed (in the human species) will succeed in mastering the derangements of communal life." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 70. The French sociologist, Marcel Mauss, criticises J. G. Frazer's "dogmatic" universalisation of diverse magical practices, but nonetheless argues that "magic...becomes the earliest form of human thought." See Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (London: Routledge, 2001), 15-16.

of the birth of the modern, bourgeois subject, my proposal is that the authors occasionally use this Freudian idea for other means.⁵² Specifically, I propose that Horkheimer and Adorno, while using the broader Freudian psychoanalytic structure, approach myth as representing historically *particular* instances of repression and trauma, rather than as only a universal category of primitive thinking as Freud does. In other words, there is a reading of the book that treats myth as representing genuine reflections of a past that is unknown to us, and which depicts forms of life radically different to those familiar to us today.

By approaching myth in terms of its real, historical dimension, rather than just its allegorical one, I argue that Horkheimer and Adorno unpick what they consider the historically contingent factors that led to myth's becoming entwined with forms of domination. They speculate that the myth's familiar to modernity might also contain fragmentary reflections of life and thought not associated with the dominating, patriarchal division of social labour. This line of argumentation leads the authors to suggest that, because myth shows us momentary glimpses of life that have been relinquished and forgotten, the disasters of modernity were not historically inevitable. This interpretation of the argument helps clarify how Horkheimer and Adorno can both acknowledge the presence of authoritarian forms of myth in rational discourse, while also refusing to eliminate the possibility of rational enlightenment escaping those conditions. It is the failure to acknowledge this latter, crucial element to *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* argument that leads to the common 'pessimistic' reading regarding the hopes of enlightenment. Ultimately, I suggest that Horkheimer and Adorno propose a fragmented and incomplete argument, outlining the ways in which the confrontation with our history of barbarism and mythic violence offers up qualitatively new (if only momentary) forms of reflection.⁵³ This alternative reading

⁵² Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 35-6; DA, 50-1.

⁵³ Thus, my position can be distinguished from Jürgen Habermas' seminal, largely pessimistic, interpretation of the book's key arguments, wherein he suggests that the authors, in their totalising critique of reason, find themselves nonetheless searching for "...at least *one* standard for their explanation of the corruption of *all* reasonable standards." The implication is that this is an untenable position. I claim, however, that Horkheimer and Adorno's arguments, instead, can be understood as representing a self-reflexive critique of the kinds of rational judgement available to us as creatures of history. The central point is not so much the hopelessness of reason itself, but the conditions under which it has emerged and been deployed. Despite this, I therefore agree with Habermas' conclusion that "Only a discourse which admits (the) everlasting impurity (of speech situations and convictions) can perhaps escape from myth, thus freeing itself, as it were, from the entwinement of myth and Enlightenment." See Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," 28, 30.

reconfigures what it would mean for rationality to meditate on its past, away from a universalised account of ‘reason’ and ‘myth’, toward something that is more unknown and elusive.

Disenchantment and the Coruscating Potency of Reason, or a Dialectic Between Common Humanity and Particular Ways of Being Human

Although the pessimistic reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is rooted in its reception history, particularly the Anglophone one of the 1970s, there are also contemporary examples. Ray Brassier, in his book *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007), uses a discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument as an entry point to a broader critique of what he considers a large swathe of twentieth century philosophy’s dogmatic association of enlightenment with domination. He likens this negative attitude to enlightenment to a form of latent Romanticism. Writing approvingly of Alan Badiou’s endorsement of the enlightenment project, he writes that, for Badiou (and presumably for Brassier):

*...the denigration of mathematical rationality in much post-Kantian European philosophy is symptomatic of the sway which Romanticism continues to exert over philosophical sensibility.*⁵⁴

He considers this latent Romanticism as continuing to “bemoan the ‘nihilistic’ consequences incurred by science’s disenchantment of the world and capital’s desecration of the earth.”⁵⁵ This allows Brassier to characterise *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a “natural theology”, wherein “the critique of enlightenment is carried out from the perspective of the commemorative consciousness which feels its own existence threatened by the scientific occlusion of ‘meaningful particularity’.”⁵⁶ This reading is problematic for multiple reasons. Leaving to one side the question as to whether this characterisation is a fair assessment of Romanticism as an historical or intellectual movement, Brassier’s categorising Horkheimer and Adorno’s arguments as a form of “nostalgia[a]” and “longing”, shows the extent to which he still

⁵⁴ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 97.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 48, 42.

understands myth as a more primitive (albeit authentic, at least according to the Romantic) iteration of thought and experience.⁵⁷

This reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* leads Brassier to mount a passionate defence of rationality and the hopes of enlightenment as ultimately liberating, rather than alienating. He attempts to undermine what he considers the reductive, dogmatic association of enlightenment with domination, suggesting it is better understood as a commitment to self understanding (coupled with the acknowledgement that self-understanding is historically contingent and liable to change).⁵⁸ He writes in the preface of *Nihil Unbound*:

*...the disenchantment of the world understood as a consequence of the process whereby the Enlightenment shattered the 'great chain of being' and defaced the 'book of the world' is a necessary consequence of the coruscating potency of reason, and hence an invigorating vector of intellectual discovery, rather than a calamitous diminishment.*⁵⁹

The 'disenchantment' of the world is something Brassier considers worth celebrating, as well as an important project in defiance of what he considers "the tide of anti-Enlightenment revisionism with which so much twentieth-century philosophy has been complicit."⁶⁰ Brassier includes the arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* within that broad assessment. I contend that this is due to a particularly narrow understanding of the influence of Freud over Horkheimer and Adorno. Specifically, Brassier focuses on the authors' interest in Freud's account of compulsive repetition in the formation of the ego, and their attempt to draw out particular conclusions regarding the mimetic, mythic and sacrificial basis of pre-historical cultural practices. The association of myth with reason, therefore, transforms reason into the neurotic desire to dominate nature by controlling it. His summary of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument is worth quoting in full. Brassier writes:

⁵⁷ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 42. For a discussion of the role of the absolute in Romanticism see Dalia Nasser, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy 1795-1805* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 8-12.

⁵⁸ See the interview with Brassier in 3AM Magazine where he outlines this conception of enlightenment. See "Nihil Unbound", Interview by Richard Marshall, <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/nihil-unbound/>, accessed 28/11/2017.

⁵⁹ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, xi.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

*...the sacrificial logic of myth is repeated in reason's own compulsive attempt to overcome myth by sacrificing it. Enlightenment reiterates mythic sacrifice by striving to sacrifice it. But as a result, it unwittingly mimics the fatal compulsion which it intended to overcome. Only by 'working through' the sacrificial trauma that drives rationality – a working through which Adorno and Horkheimer characterize in terms of reason's reflexive commemoration of its own natural history – can reason renounce its pathological compulsion to sacrifice and thereby become reconciled to the part played by nature within it.*⁶¹

Horkheimer and Adorno's theory, according to Brassier, roots instrumental reason within the history of magical mimesis, whereby the subject seeks to control nature by way of mirroring, and thereby dominating it. The death of myth (the sacrifice of the sacrifice) in other words did not represent a break from mythic thinking, but its compulsive repetition.⁶²

It seems plausible to suppose that the interpretation that Brassier offers, in particular his association of the main arguments of the book with a brand of Romanticism, stems from a particular conception of Freud's influence. If reason's desires are traced back to a history that locates magic and myth as a universalised, primitive form of cognition, this results in reason being depicted as a modern form of compulsive sacrifice, a historically modern iteration of 'primitive thinking'. This seems derived entirely from Brassier's focus on Horkheimer and Adorno's arguments regarding mimesis. The authors argue that it was the early mimetic instinct that established forms of relationality between what would become subject and object, as a form of orientation for early human beings, but also as a form of self-preservation. They write: "myth becomes enlightenment, and nature mere objectivity. Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted."⁶³ Mimesis was an instinct that connected what would become the human world, and its origins in a natural history. They call this the "remembrance of nature within the subject."⁶⁴ This is why they argue that reason, with its grounding in

⁶¹ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 32-3.

⁶² Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 34.

⁶³ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 6; DA, 15.

⁶⁴ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 32; DA, 47.

mimetic compulsion, reduces thought, and thus the world, to what they call “either/or”, a reflection of mimesis’ binary logic.⁶⁵ They write: “Mental representation is only an instrument. In thought, human beings distance themselves from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered.”⁶⁶

The emphasis on these parts of the argumentation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, risks reducing the book to a totalising account of history. ‘Myth’ as a singular expression of primitive domination, controls the inner logic of rational compulsion, and thereby history emerges as a particular narrative (or series of narratives) of domination and barbarism, where the hope of enlightened liberation is designated as impossible, due to the structure of human reflection itself. This in turn justifies both Brassier’s defence of reason’s liberating potential, as well as his need to remind us of the existence of a deep time that prefigures any narrow human concerns regarding the anthropomorphic world, an example of reason’s capacity to liberate us from naïve projections.⁶⁷

The reductive reading of Horkheimer and Adorno’s position is merely a symptom of a more general misunderstanding of myth. One possible response to this strain of thought lies in the acknowledgement of another reading of myth contained within the arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. My proposal is not to deny Freud’s influence, or the authors’ interest in how myth can impart certain reflections of the ways in which modern subjectivity came to be formed. Rather, I suggest that in addition to this largely allegorical, singular interpretation of myth as a way to understand the alienation of modern subjectivity, the authors also approach myth as representing historically *particular* instances of repression and trauma.⁶⁸ This

⁶⁵ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 31; DA, 46

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Brassier writes: “...natural history harbours temporal strata whose magnitude dwarfs that of the nature ‘whose appearing to us is conditioned by our belonging to it’ – for it proceeds regardless of whether anyone belongs to it or not...It is the failure to acknowledge the ways in which the socio-historical mediation of nature is itself mediated by natural history – which means not only evolutionary biology but also geology and cosmology – which allows philosophical discourses on ‘nature’ to become annexes of philosophical anthropology.” Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 48. To this latter charge, Horkheimer and Adorno respond: “...anthropomorphism contains a measure of truth in that natural history did not reckon with the happy throw of the dice it accomplished in engendering the human being.” Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 186; DA, 235. It was not the disenchanting, ‘coruscating potency’ of reason Horkheimer and Adorno feared, but rather the failure to trace the ways in which modern rationality had emerged out of a history of human practices.

⁶⁸ This is not to deny that the authors offer an allegorical reading of mythic traditions, in particular the *Odyssey*. Rather I am claiming that in addition to this reading they approach the critique of particular

alternative approach recognises the mythic, oral traditions as providing insights into real, material forms of life that past humans were deeply attached to, and which they abandoned only with great reluctance.

This particular approach to myth that I argue Horkheimer and Adorno gesture toward has been more precisely articulated in the intervening years, mostly in the field of anthropology. Australian anthropologist Howard Morphy writes that:

*[T]here is a dialectic between common humanity and particular ways of being human. It is the common humanity that creates the possibility of anthropology; it is the diversity of humanity that makes it necessary.*⁶⁹

Although not strictly in the context that Morphy intended, my suggestion is that this argument draws out something of what *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was trying to argue in Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of myth, the details of which I will discuss below. While it is clear that Horkheimer and Adorno found Freud's generalised theories of trauma useful in articulating ways of thinking philosophically about how human beings might have responded to the stimuli of the world throughout its natural history (therefore providing an account of subjectivity in its most general, universal terms), my proposal is that they also treat myth as a vital insight into the irreducible, utterly diverse ways in which human beings *have* lived.⁷⁰ These

myths as a form of archaeology. See Willem van Reijen, "The 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' Read as Allegory," trans. Josef Bleicher, Georg Stauth, Bryan S. Turner, *Theory, Culture and Society* 5, no. 2-3 (June 1998). There are, of course, also different allegorical readings on offer. Albrecht Wellmer argues: "The two allegories, or the two stories manifestly present in the text are (1) the story of the simultaneous emergence of a unitary self, the suppression of inner and outer nature, of social domination, and the emergence of art as "beauty rendered powerless"; (2) a story about the emergence of a patriarchal order and the accompanying need to put the threatening power of female sexuality under control. In addition, the third story, hardly perceptible in the text, is the story of the simultaneous emergence of a reflexive self, on the one hand, and of artistic beauty and aesthetic pleasure respectively, on the other. These stories are evidently different and, if distinguished, all three are of immense complexity, so that, once we begin to read Adorno's and Horkheimer's reading of the Sirens' episode stereoscopically, the suggestive and poetic power of their reading might well dissolve." See Albrecht Wellmer, "The Death of the Sirens and the Origins of the Work of Art," *New German Critique* no. 8, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Autumn, 2000), 6.

⁶⁹ Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2007), 7.

⁷⁰ The anthropologist Bruce Kapferer makes a compelling argument for the fact that anthropology, although a discipline that emerged out of the Enlightenment, also began to offer a wide ranging, empirical, basis for rationality's own "internal critique." It was these increasingly documented iterations of diverse kinds of human life and thinking, coupled with the disasters of their own lifetime, that acted as the historical and theoretical backdrop for Horkheimer and Adorno's arguments. See Bruce Kapferer, "Anthropology and the Dialectic of Enlightenment: A Discourse on the Definition and Ideals of a Threatened Discipline," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2007), 90.

momentary historical traces of alternative manifestations of human life, other than their momentary reflection in myth, have been lost to history and are unknown to the present. In this context, the Freudian insight into how human beings as a species respond to trauma and anxiety is mediated by the necessary acknowledgement of the radically divergent manifestations of those responses that are encapsulated by different mythic traditions. In this reading it is precisely the singular account of myth (and thus of reason and history) that the authors are seeking to undermine. Contrary to the pessimistic accounts that suggest Horkheimer and Adorno did not think enlightenment possible, it is worth remembering that they intended it as a genuine philosophical critique. They write:

*The critique of enlightenment...is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination.*⁷¹

This understanding of enlightenment acknowledges two things. Namely, its historical ties to mythic authority, and the fact that a conception of liberation *from* myth may only be coherent within the context of a history shaped *by* myth. In the following section I provide a reading of Freud's theory of trauma that I suggest opens up this subsequent reading of Horkheimer and Adorno.⁷²

Linking Horror to Holiness: Freud's Theory of die Angst and die Furcht

If it were possible to reduce Freud's work to a single idea, it might be the notion that the unconscious is ultimately unknowable, other than the way in which it interacts with the rational ego; that is through behaviour driven by repression. The unconscious vulnerabilities of the human being, in this model, are in constant negotiation with its rational faculties. As a correction to the popular nineteenth century conception of intellectual and historical progress, Freud insisted on the fact that reason often did not defeat the ambiguous pressures that marked it, but remained within an ineliminable negotiation with them. In Freud's view, the goal of psychoanalysis was not so much the elimination of psychological vulnerabilities, as a gradual uncovering of them, in

⁷¹ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, xviii; DA, 6.

⁷² Amy Allen has made a similar argument, claiming that "Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of the dialectic of enlightenment can provide us with a framework for thinking through the ambivalent entanglement of reason and power in human social life but commits us neither to a negative philosophy of history nor to a problematic reduction of reason to domination. See Amy Allen, "Reason, Power and History: Re-reading the 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'," *Thesis Eleven* Vol 120, no. 1 (2014), 12.

order to develop a greater understanding of the ways in which the mind attempted to dominate its own instincts.⁷³ Such an understanding, developed through the forms of trust fostered in a professional psychoanalytic setting, ideally limited or distanced, the effects of repression in the patient. With the exception of genuine neuroses, where the individual was unable to function within socio-cultural norms, Freud suggests that these forms of repression were in fact a precondition for the development of culture itself, and therefore a normal part of rational subjectivity.⁷⁴ Although Freud himself saw his discoveries within the perspective of a relatively conventional chronology of rationality's progressive defeat of superstitions (Galileo, Darwin, etc.), his influence on the work of Horkheimer and Adorno (amongst others) led to the problematisation of that idea.⁷⁵

Freud's theory of trauma and anxiety was based around a theory of the excitation of the nervous system. It explored how these very limited natural/biological responses were dealt with, and in some ways overcome, by the subject. This was Freud's way of acknowledging the natural phenomena at the foundation of human vulnerabilities, while maintaining a focus on the after-effect; namely the ways in which individual psychology and human culture function.⁷⁶ In Freud's view, the fears that emerge as a result of being a living creature in the world are not in themselves superstitious or irrational, although can (and often do) lead to neuroses that could be understood as a form of superstition. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud presents a case for the development of the subject as being the result of the mediation between the desire for pleasure and protection from non-pleasure, and the desire to protect and preserve oneself from the threats of the world. Crucially, this has a physical, biological dimension, which in itself offers a key to Freud's conception of subjectivity. He invites us to "picture a living organism in its most simplified possible

⁷³ Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id," *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage Books, 1995), 630-31.

⁷⁴ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 51-2.

⁷⁵ In his excellent biography of Freud, Peter Gay argues that Freud saw the findings of psychoanalysis as the third stage in "three historic injuries to (humanity's) megalomania", initiated by the discoveries of Copernicus, then Darwin. See Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for our Time* (New York: Norton 1998), 449.

⁷⁶ This so called 'middle period' of Freud's work, well represented in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is vitally important to the grounding presumptions of Horkheimer and Adorno's arguments pertaining to myth, history and culture. Yvonne Sherratt identifies Freud's middle period as when he develops the theory of the ego, the id, as well as narcissism. See Yvonne Sherratt, "Adorno's Concept of the Self: A Marriage of Freud and Hegelian Marxism," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 2004/1, no. 227, 102.

form as an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation. Then the surface turned towards the external world will from its very situation be differentiated and will serve as an organ for receiving stimuli.”⁷⁷ He suggests here that the living organism differentiates itself from the world by virtue of its biological and spatial relation to other matter. The incessant reception of stimuli, however, according to Freud, requires a process whereby it can be filtered. He writes that, “*Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli.*”⁷⁸

Therefore, the living thing, that Freud hypothesises strives toward pleasure as a result of largely unconscious and libidinal urges, repeatedly finds itself confronted with painful realities that thwart those desires:

*Most of the unpleasure that we experience is perceptual unpleasure. It may be perception of pressure by unsatisfied instincts; or it may be external perception which is either distressing in itself or which excites unpleasurable expectations in the mental apparatus – that is, which is recognised by it as a danger.*⁷⁹

Both the uncontrolled perusal of pleasure, as well as being beset by forms of trauma that can excite the nervous system, Freud suggests, requires the interjection of the ego:

*Under the influence of the ego’s instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle. This latter principle does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction.*⁸⁰

Here Freud proposes that the rational subject is predicated upon a form of coping mechanism that both limits the uncontrolled, animal instincts of earlier life, as well

⁷⁷ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1989), 28-9.

⁷⁸ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 30.

⁷⁹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 9.

⁸⁰ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 7.

the shielding from trauma that organisms are confronted with. In other words, pain emerges out of the realisation that a great deal of the pleasurable desires of human beings cannot be realised due to pragmatic, practical realities of self preservation, where that which cannot be gratified is pushed down and repressed as a form of coping mechanism. While this can manifest itself as crippling neurosis (Freud regards “the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli”⁸¹), in Freud’s view the mediation between desire and reality also functions as the precondition of conventional psychological development.

According to Freud, then, trauma plays an important role in the emergence of subjectivity as we know it, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. He outlined these ideas most explicitly seven years before the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *On Narcissism*.⁸² He uses the development of the infant as an example of ways in which human psychological development might have emerged. He argues that the infant cannot, in the beginning, distinguish or differentiate himself from the external world, and exists in a state of undifferentiated/unmediated existence. It is only after the child is first exposed to stressors (the withholding of parental touch, or food, for example) that he realises the world can be differentiated from his immediate desires; in other words, his first exposure to the distinction between his desires and reality. To cope with this discovery, the infant is forced to see the world, not as an extension of his wishes and desires, but a separate and distinct realm in which he is the central mediating subject. Subjectivity emerges as a result of those initial traumas.⁸³ Freud was deeply influenced by his colleague and friend Sándor Ferenczi, on this issue, who argued subjectivity could be understood, in effect, as a form of defence from the sudden realisation that the world did not obey the desires of the infant. According to Ferenczi, the repression of initial trauma, coupled with new and increasingly sophisticated ways of controlling the seemingly omnipotent forces of the

⁸¹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 35.

⁸² Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” *The Freud Reader*, 545-62.

⁸³ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” 547, 553, 558. See also *Civilisation and its Discontents*, 13.

outside world (e.g. the miming of movement and sounds in children), became the basis of psychological development in the young infant.⁸⁴

The stakes of Freud's interest in the relation between the development of the individual child and the speculative beginnings of human subjectivity is visible in his distinction between different forms of trauma. He proposes that:

*'Anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. 'Fear' requires a definite object of which to be afraid.*⁸⁵

The distinction between *Angst* as a directionless dread about how to respond to the infinite stimuli of the world, and *Furcht*, a directed, knowable fear, is an important one.⁸⁶ It distinguishes Freud's theory, as he explicitly states, from a more basic theory of 'shock'. The latter theory in his mind reduces all forms of trauma to the physical "molecular structure...of the nervous system", whereas his account seeks to explore "the effects produced on the organ of the mind by the breach in the shield against stimuli and by the problems that follow in its train."⁸⁷ Freud argues that it is what happens *after* this stimulus that is vital to an understanding of human psychology, and the development of human culture.⁸⁸ For Horkheimer and Adorno, however, the importance of what can be observed in the ontogenetic development of the child was that it offered glimpses of the kinds of ordeals that human beings might have experienced in the most remote periods of their past. The influence of Freud's arguments can be seen in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* when the authors argue that, "The cry of terror (*Der Ruf des Schreckens*) called forth by the unfamiliar becomes its

⁸⁴ Sandor Ferenczi, "Stages in the Development of the Adult Sense of Reality," in *Contributions to Psycho-analysis*, trans. Ernest Jones (Toronto: Richard G. Badger, 1916), 189-91.

⁸⁵ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 11.

⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Jenseits des Lustprinzips," in *Gesammelte Werk, Band 13* (London, Imago Publishing, 1940), 4.

⁸⁷ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 36.

⁸⁸ Freud takes this to be the basis for what he considers the conservative origins of human society and culture "Let us suppose, then, that all the organic instincts are conservative, are acquired historically and tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things. It follows that the phenomena of organic development must be attributed to external disturbing and diverting influences." Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 45.

name. It fixes the transcendence of the unknown in relation to the known, permanently linking horror to holiness.”⁸⁹

Arguably for Horkheimer and Adorno, the vital insight of Freud was the fact that a historical reception of the trauma deposited in myth – such that human culture could be understood as having sprung from forms of ‘self-preservation’, was vital in coming to terms with the continued presence of myth in rational life.⁹⁰ Post-Enlightenment orthodoxy had, given the immense success of the scientific method, accepted that myth should be judged according to its capacity to explain phenomena.⁹¹ This theory depicted the ‘primitive’ or naïve person, when confronted with terrifying or sublime natural events, as having failed to understand the event rationally, and the mythic ‘explanation’ to be a form of primitive cognition. Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, use this psychological theory as a way of understanding myth as historical deposits of barely remembered instances of repressed trauma.⁹² The utility of this idea, in going one step further than Freud, liberated the past and its myths from its association with nebulous, ambiguous reflections of past neuroses and superstitions. Instead, myth became a source of reflection regarding the forms of human life that have been relinquished and forgotten in the passage of history.

The Terror from Which Mana was Born

My proposal is that Horkheimer and Adorno offer a serious meditation on how the myths that survived prehistory illuminate the manner in which actual human experience and socio-cultural practices came to be codified within systems of authority and domination. In this reading, the nature of modern subjectivity is rooted

⁸⁹ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 10; DA, 21.

⁹⁰ For an important discussion of the relation between mimesis and self-preservation in the work of Adorno see Owen Hulatt, “Reason, Mimesis, and Self-Preservation in Adorno,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54, no. 1 (Jan. 2016), 144-45.

⁹¹ As Peter Gay argues, many enlightenment thinkers recognised a sophistication in pagan myth, insofar as it “reduces the world to order” but still considered its categories to be “unsettled, alive.” Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), 89.

⁹² Joel Whitebook argues that, more so than Freud, “one is struck by (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*)’s prescient appreciation of the realm of preoedipal experience.” See Joel Whitebook, “The Urgeschichte of Subjectivity Reconsidered,” *New German Critique* no. 8, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Autumn, 2000), 125.

in ancient forms of life that have been largely forgotten and repressed. What the authors want to emphasise, however, is the fact that this is not a universal account of cognition's development in history. Rather, it is a description of the historically contingent ways in which particular forms of early Mediterranean life influenced and shaped later ones, primarily in the ways in which early, tribal forms of authority were formalised into systematic forms of tyranny.⁹³ The account of reason that at first appears naturalised (i.e. inherently authoritative and totalising), instead emerges as the historically incidental result of particular human practices being transformed into restrictive and binary expressions, presumably as a result of now unknown historical pressures.⁹⁴

Freud's influence over Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of subjectivity can therefore be given a different emphasis; one that focuses not on the singularity of myth as a 'stage' of thought, but rather its representation of the diverse ways in which humans have confronted existence. In the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors describe the forms of trauma that early human beings would have undergone in order for modern subjectivity to be possible:

*Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self – the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings – was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood. The effort to hold itself together attends the ego at all its stages and the temptation to be rid of the ego has always gone hand-in-hand with the blind determination to preserve it.*⁹⁵

⁹³ Jay Bernstein contends that Horkheimer and Adorno do not offer an "inverted or regressive philosophy of history" but rather "dismantling the conceptual dualism of enlightenment and myth, and thereby the idea of history it grounds." J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 99.

⁹⁴ Philip Hogg writes that this idea is also the basis for Adorno's philosophy of language. Hogg writes: "Whilst Adorno claims that 'all philosophical critique is today possible as the critique of language,' this idea is based on a notion of language as a historical practise in which the real life of human beings is sedimented. It is not understood as an autonomous form that would remain untouched by life: 'Through language history wins a share in truth. Words are never merely signs of what is thought under them, but rather history erupts into words.'" Philip Hogg, *Communication and Expression: Adorno's Philosophy of Language*, trans. Antonia Hofstätter (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 4. The quote from Adorno derives from his 'Theses on the Language of the Philosopher,' in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*, ed. Donald Burke et al. (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 38.

⁹⁵ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 26; DA, 40.

They allude here to Freud's theory of repression, thereby making the emergence of the human subject in history a product of both the ego's 'holding together' of the individuated elements of the psyche, as well as the drive to get rid of the ego. Like Freud, the authors see something of that phylogenetic development of the species reflected ontogenetically, in the development of the individual child. Just as something of the patient's childhood is revealed in his neuroses, myths provide the fragmented evidence of ancient unconscious traumas. They write:

Over the millennia the living memory of prehistory, of its nomadic period and even more of the truly pre-patriarchal stages, has been expunged from human consciousness with the most terrible punishments.⁹⁶

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the very possibility of a 'prehistory' is predicated upon a repression, or forgetting, of events in the past. History's 'beginning' is predicated upon the repression of what came before. The past, subsequently, becomes associated with barbarism:

For civilisation, purely natural existence, both animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger. Mimetic, mythical, and metaphysical forms of behaviour were successively regarded as stages of world history which had been left behind, and the idea of reverting to them held the terror that the self would be changed back into the mere nature from which it had extricated itself with unspeakable exertions and which for that reason filled it with unspeakable dread.⁹⁷

They maintain that the memory of this repression, nonetheless, remains within the cultural artefacts left to the present, namely within myths themselves.

They address this explicitly in their discussion of the *Odyssey*. In Horkheimer and Adorno's eyes it was a temporally distant history that was represented in the lure of the Sirens; a confrontation with elements of ourselves that remind and lure us back

⁹⁶ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 24; DA, 37.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

to the early mists of myth, and of the early conditions of human existence. “Their allurements”, they write, “is that of losing oneself in the past.”⁹⁸ They continue:

*What Odysseus has left behind him has passed into the world of shades: so close is the self to the primeval myth from whose embrace it has wrested itself that its own lived past becomes a mythical prehistory. It seeks to combat this by a fixed order of time.*⁹⁹

Horkheimer and Adorno consider the only feasible access to this repressed past to be embedded with the aesthetic quality of epic myth:

*The urge to rescue the past as something living, instead of using it as the material of progress, has been satisfied only in art, in which even history, as a representation of past life, is included.*¹⁰⁰

The point I want to emphasise here is that Horkheimer and Adorno recognise the ways in which the artistic quality of myth also depicts its genuinely historical dimension. A great deal of the secondary literature, however, overlooks this point. Echoing Michael Shapiro, Patrick Deneen argues:

*Horkheimer and Adorno do not so much seek to understand the Odyssey on the terms it demands of its readers as to transfer elements of modern and particularly critical theory to its ancient setting...their conclusions depart radically from the explicit contents of the epic.*¹⁰¹

This argument suggests that Horkheimer and Adorno treat Homer purely as an aesthetic canvas, divorced from its material history, in order to import contemporary philosophical concerns. In particular, it suggests that this allegorical reading of Homer provides an account of the human subject. Deneen thus argues that the authors conclude that,

⁹⁸ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 25; DA, 39.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Patrick J. Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 189. Deneen is echoing the argument of Michael Shapiro, see Michael Shapiro, “Politicizing Ulysses: Rationalistic, Critical, and Genealogical Commentaries,” *Political Theory* 17 (1989), 10.

*...humanity is in a permanent state of conflict with nature...in the effort to dominate nature, human beings must at the same time practise repression of the self...this drive to dominate self, humanity, and nature, is born of humanity's ineluctable will towards self-preservation.*¹⁰²

My suggestion is that this is a foundational error in any approach to Horkheimer and Adorno's treatment of Homer, and myth more generally.

While it is true that the authors approach the character Odysseus as a symbol for the development of the modern subject ("the hero of the adventure turns out to be the prototype of the bourgeois individual"), they treat this allegory as containing a genuine, particular history. They recognise, in other words, that the aesthetic power of the epic, is derived from its reflecting deposits of human experience. "In its oldest stratum", they write, "the epic shows clear links to myth: the adventures are drawn from popular tradition."¹⁰³ According to Horkheimer and Adorno, then, the work of Homer, and in particular the *Odyssey*, did not represent an ahistorical, allegorical avenue for understanding modern subjectivity. Rather, it embodied a material legacy of the finalisation of countless oral traditions that would have been scattered around the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁴ This approach traces the historically contingent and particular forms of domination that emerged in Mediterranean life and, subsequently, how those forms of life are inherited in Western modernity. Hence, they argue:

*The Olympian gods maintained all kinds of commerce with the chthonic deities...The murky, undivided entity worshipped as the principle of mana at the earliest known stages of humanity lived on in the bright world of the Greek religion.*¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory*, 189.

¹⁰³ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 35; DA, 50.

¹⁰⁴ Thus, Katie Fleming argues that the authors were deeply influenced by the myth and ritual school's anthropological interpretation of Greek texts: "In this respect DdA is framed as an archaeological and anthropological study of human thought which traces the 'Urgeschichte der Herrschaft' – the originary history of domination." Katie Fleming, "Odysseus and Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno's 'Dialektik der Aufklärung'," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 19, no. 2 (2012), 122.

¹⁰⁵ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 10; DA, 20.

The episode with the Sirens embodied for the authors a ‘rationalised’ (i.e. systematised) iteration of a distant memory: the originary, tribal origins of Europe, and the associated socio-cultural practices.¹⁰⁶ For example, the authors argue that the phenomenon of ‘mana’ that underwrites a good deal of mythical, and magic cultures was rooted in older mimetic acts.¹⁰⁷ Although initially intended to distance early humans from the immanence of the world, mimetic rituals soon transformed into formalised systems of domination (*Herrschaft* – which is also used to mean ‘power’ within the essays¹⁰⁸). Crucially, Horkheimer and Adorno’s historical correlation between reason and *Herrschaft*, makes a distinction between the way in which the early mimetic rituals allowed for forms of mastery and control (a coming into relation), and the subsequent ways in which that mastery was immediately utilised brutally throughout history. My suggestion is that the authors intended this to highlight the idea that mimetic-mythic practice, and then rational behaviour, is not *inherently* totalitarian, but a fact of history.¹⁰⁹

Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno present the historical observation that the terror of mana was immediately sanctioned into law:

*Wherever it is found in ethnology, the terror from which mana was born was already sanctioned, at least by the tribal elders. Unidentical, fluid mana was solidified, violently materialized by men. Soon the sorcerers had populated every place with its emanations and coordinated the multiplicity of sacred realms with that of sacred rites.*¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ There is some speculation in the literature that the story of the Sirens may in fact derive from sailors coming across early iterations of cargo cults, perhaps off the coast of East Africa. See Mikal J. Aasved, “The Sirens and Cargo Cults,” *The Classical World* 89, no. 5 (May-Jun., 1996).

¹⁰⁷ Gusdorf argues that the exclusivity of ritual is based around practices of repetition and incantation. Gusdorf, *Mythe et Métaphysique*, 73.

¹⁰⁸ See for example their discussion of “Mythos, Herrschaft und Arbeit” in DA, 38.

¹⁰⁹ This is an argument echoed by Axel Honneth: “The argument of the Dialectic of Enlightenment does not pursue the goal of recommending another interpretation of the history of the human species from a social-theoretical perspective, but rather provokes a changed perception of parts of our apparently familiar lifeworld so that we will become attentive to their pathological character.” See Axel Honneth, “The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism,” *Constellations* Vol 7, no. 1 (March 2000), 124.

¹¹⁰ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 15; DA, 27.

Reason's association with the domination of myth, then, is a result of the particulars of history, a case of the initial attempts to derive meaning from the world becoming disfigured:

With the spirit world and its peculiarities they extended their esoteric knowledge and their power. The sacred essence was transferred to the sorcerers who managed it.¹¹¹

This centralisation of power replaced an earlier type of existence in which “the nomadic savage, despite his subjugation, could still participate in the magic which defined the limits of that world.”¹¹² The manner in which mythical statutes were increasingly centralised around figureheads of authority, the authors contend, is still evident in the underlying conditions of the law. They write: “The blindfold over the eyes of Justitia means not only that justice brooks no interference but that it does not originate in freedom.”¹¹³ The authors suggest in these passages that the realities in which shamanic authority transformed eventually into codified systems of control, in particular following the emergence of agriculture, is a result of events in the deep past.¹¹⁴ These realities, while largely unknown, are dimly remembered in passages like Odysseus' confrontation with the Sirens. They suggest that these systems of domination are not innate to human communication and experience, but rather an example of how they can be disfigured in particular moments of history.

The Lure of the Sirens: Philosophy as Homesickness

The impossibility of providing a generalised account of human subjectivity and experience is now something that is well established in modern anthropology, as Morphy's argues in his distinction between an idea of a “common humanity” and “particular ways of being human.” Horkheimer and Adorno's ideas relating to myth

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 12; DA, 23.

¹¹⁴ The political scientist James C. Scott recently has argued for the intrinsic link between the emergence of the particular kinds of domination associated with statehood, and the beginnings of the cultivation of agriculture, and the end of nomadic and semi-nomadic life. James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017), 253-56.

are clearly influenced, quite naturally, by the psychological and anthropological studies of their day.¹¹⁵ Despite this, I suggest that their proposal that myths might offer historically particular forms of trauma and repression, develops a particular conception of our relationship to humanity's past. While something like this position might be familiar to the modern anthropologist, Horkheimer and Adorno offer a philosophical dimension by proposing that a genuine meditation on that past might trigger qualitatively new forms of rational reflection in history.¹¹⁶

The crucial point that distinguishes the arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from the characterisations of it as a Romantic attack on reason itself, is Horkheimer and Adorno's recognition that these past forms of life are fundamentally unrecoverable and unknowable. There can be no return to more 'authentic' forms of life. Their argument that Homer "bears witness to the dialectic of enlightenment" has a specifically historical content. The comparatively modern, rationalised, organisation

¹¹⁵ These theories of early twentieth century anthropology and psychology that projected a generalisable account of human development via magic, myth and then reason, are now considered – quite rightly – naïve, racist and all together incorrect. Modern anthropology has shown the ways in which earlier iterations of the discipline vastly underestimated and misunderstood the myriad, countless forms of human life, experience, and solidarity that both exist, and have existed, within diverse cultures. Further, the once common assumption that contemporary hunter-gatherer societies could shed light onto the conditions of pre-historical cultures, has been convincingly debunked. This is the explicit claim made by James C. Scott in his review of Jared Diamond's book *The World until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* He writes: "Contemporary hunter-gatherer life can tell us a great deal about the world of states and empires but it can tell us nothing at all about our prehistory. We have virtually no credible evidence about the world until yesterday and, until we do, the only defensible intellectual position is to shut up." See James C. Scott, "Crops, Towns, Government," *London Review of Books* 35, no. 22 (21 November 2013), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n22/james-c-scott/crops-towns-government>, accessed on 4/12/17. A further example: the theory of mana as outlined by Hubert and Mauss, so important to Horkheimer and Adorno, related specifically to the shamanistic, magical cultures of Melanesia. See Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, 36. While it is possible to draw generalised accounts that associate the mana laws of New Guinea and, for example, the Dreaming stories of Indigenous Australian peoples, or the cultural systems of the Bushman of the Kalahari, modern anthropology has shown how reductive these universal accounts are, and the ways in which they reduce and de-humanise both the people studied, and their beliefs.

¹¹⁶ My proposal is different to arguments proposed by, for example, Avner Cohen, who suggests that, following the publication of *Dialectic*, the fundamental, binary relation between myth and reason had to be abandoned. While this is true, I suggest he overlooks how this reconfiguration of concepts emerges out of a renewed engagement with our pasts. See Avner Cohen, "Myth and Myth Criticism Following the 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'," *European Legacy* 15, no. 5 (2010), 593. My claim is closer to Roger Foster's argument that Horkheimer and Adorno offer a kind of genealogy of history, thereby not problematising reason per se, but the historical conditions in which it came to reflexively understand itself. See Roger Foster, "Dialectic of Enlightenment as Genealogy Critique," *Telos*, Summer (2001), 74.

of disparate Mediterranean stories is, in the authors' eyes, in constant tension with its "clear links to myth...[to] popular tradition."¹¹⁷ They write:

*But as the Homeric spirit takes over and "organises" the myths, it comes into contradiction with them...The two concepts diverge. They mark two phases of an historical process, which are still visible at the joints where the editors have stitched the epic together.*¹¹⁸

That is, although Homer represents the finalisation of a much older series of Mediterranean traditions, those legacies of the past, these forgotten pressures of life, remain embedded in the story. The authors' presentation of this idea is worth quoting at length, in part because it emphasises the way in which myth, in a discussion of its relation to modern iterations of subjectivity, rationality and domination, is tied to historically *particular* forms of life:

Myths are precipitated in the different strata of Homer's subject matter; but at the same time the reporting of them, the unity imposed on the diffuse legends, traces the path of the subject's flight from the mythical powers. This is already true, in a profound sense, of the Iliad. The anger of the mythical son of a goddess against the rational warrior king and organizer; the hero's undisciplined inactivity; finally, the enlistment of the victorious, doomed hero in a cause which is national, Hellenic, and no longer tribal, an allegiance mediated by mythic loyalty to his dead comrade – all these reflect the intertwinement of history and prehistory. The same development is still more vividly present in the Odyssey, since it is closer in form to the picaresque novel. The contrast between the single surviving ego and the multiplicity of fate reflects the antithesis between enlightenment and myth. The hero's peregrinations from Troy to Ithaca trace the path of the self through myths, a self infinitely weaker in comparison to the forces of nature and still in the process of formation as self-consciousness. The primeval world is secularised...the demons populate only the distance margins and islands of the civilised Mediterranean, retreating into the forms of rock and cave from

¹¹⁷ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 35; DA, 50.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

*which they had originally sprung in the face of primal dread [Schauder der Urzeit – literally the ‘shudder of prehistoric times’]. The adventures bestow names on each of these places, and the names give rise to a rational overview of space.*¹¹⁹

The authors claim that the contemporary, modern European subject inherited something of, for example, the not entirely easy transition from tribal to urban life (a repressed memory that is deposited in the very fabric of the cultural institutions with which she lives). This reading of the *Odyssey* suggests that the things recalled in the epic represent the many diverse forms of life to which early humans were deeply attached, and which had to be relinquished in the passage of history. These are forms of life and experience radically unfamiliar not only to modernity, but even to the earliest stages of recorded history (from this perspective, Homer’s fear of Circe’s magic is closer to our contemporary fear). Homer recalls, not just the Trojan War and what followed, but pre-agricultural, tribal forms of life. Achilles embodies both a warrior of Mycenaean Greece, as well as the memory of an earlier pastoral, warrior society. His raging against the bureaucracies implied by a nationalist war show the extent to which he represents a cultural memory of the Greek’s confrontation with their own deep past, probably originating in Neolithic, pastoral horse tribes from the Eurasian steppes.¹²⁰

Horkheimer and Adorno give other examples. Odysseus’ adventure with the Cyclops represents one particular stage of Greek society confronting its earlier, pre-agricultural, lawless origins. The lawlessness of Polyphemus, Horkheimer and Adorno remind us, does not infer a criminality, but that his thought itself is “rhapsodic.”¹²¹ The Cyclops does live according to laws, but they are laws radically unfamiliar to both the listener of the epic, and also Odysseus himself. The episode with the lotus eaters recalls a period of human life, the authors argue, that predates even hunting. The eating of flowers in modern cuisine recalls what they suggest is

¹¹⁹ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 37-8; DA, 53.

¹²⁰ The archaeological and linguistic evidence that points to the likelihood of the transmigration of a series of Neolithic, semi-nomadic people toward the sea can be seen in the Homeric songs. They depict a people dependent on the sea, who nonetheless retain a pastoral people’s fear of its unknown dangers. See J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 66-71.

¹²¹ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 51; DA, 72-3.

“the promise of a state in which the reproduction of life is independent of conscious self-preservation...[the joy of which] flashes up before the sense of smell.”¹²² The more contractual magic of Circe (she transforms Odysseus’ men into pigs, and attempts to sleep with Odysseus himself), for example, perhaps recalls a later period of chthonic cults. The hero can bargain with Circe, in a way that he cannot with the older terrors of the Aegean like Polyphemus: “the mythical monsters under whose power (Odysseus) falls represent, as it were, petrified contracts and legal claims dating from primeval times.”¹²³ Finally, Odysseus’ descent into the underworld, which Horkheimer and Adorno reflect may represent the “oldest stratum of the epic,” recalls mythic traditions structured by light and dark, pre-patriarchal systems of worship, and the necessity of blood sacrifice.¹²⁴

Achilles’ rage, and Odysseus’ fear of Polyphemus, reflects the radical changes human societies have undergone, even within the traditions familiar to us. Furthermore, they show how different historical communities have come to terms with, and reflected on, the fragmented memories of their pasts. In my reading, Horkheimer and Adorno are suggesting that, given there exist historical traces of different ways of thinking and being confined within the detritus of the comparatively narrow domain of European myth, consideration must be made for the forgotten forms of humanity that are momentarily reflected in those remnants. They suggest that the incapacity to do so can risk historical regression. This implies that enlightenment as an idea needs to incorporate a broader understanding of rational thought and its history, including repressed and unknown pasts. They write in the 1944 preface:

We have no doubt—and herein lies our petitio principii—that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have

¹²² Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 50; DA, 71.

¹²³ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 45, 55; DA, 65, 76-7.

¹²⁴ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 59-60; DA, 84. For the authors, it is in the confrontation with this deepest, most unknown manifestation of humanity’s past, that the possibility of enlightenment resides, in part because the overcoming of death, and the “forcing (of) the gates of hell” represents, still, the clearest articulation of enlightenment’s desires. See Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 60; DA, 84. However, Horkheimer and Adorno’s tracing of the modern conception of enlightenment all the way to the earliest forms of tribal life, was not intended as a straightforward attempt to locate an ‘ur moment’ of the beginning of domination and regression. Rather it emphasises how we are haunted by our ambiguous pasts, and how the incapacity to reflect on that dimension of our rational lives can trigger regression and violence.

*perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression...If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate.*¹²⁵

In this context the importance of the Sirens lies not only in the fact that they represent an echo of the ways in which human thought is entwined within historically sanctioned systems of domination. It also demonstrates that, just as Odysseus both “complies with the contract of his bondage” while also outwitting it, that a meditation on myth can offer up forms of liberation that are disconnected from its history of domination, even if only momentarily.

This nuanced historical reception of myth as proposed by Horkheimer and Adorno can be distinguished from the view of myth and the past, that saw the Sirens as representative of either ancient, dangerous magic, or authentic, true life. The authors suggest that this reduction of the past, and the failure of reason to reflect meaningfully on its history dissolves its critical and redemptive possibility. While the longing for homeland is the central logic of the ‘rationalised’ *Odyssey* (a narration of the escape from the ‘primeval’ world), the rejection of the primeval fears associated with nomadic forms of life implied by settlement engenders its own alienation. This alienation, according to the authors, sits at the very foundations of Western rationality’s self-image:

*If the fixed order of property implicit in settlement is the source of human alienation, in which all homesickness and longing spring from a lost primal state, at the same time it is toward settlement and fixed property, on which alone the concept of homeland is based, that all longing and homesickness are directed.*¹²⁶

The complexity of Odysseus’ desire for home can be associated with Assman’s theory of a cultural memory, specifically how a peoples’ past is not passed down as mere

¹²⁵ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, xvi; DDA, 3.

¹²⁶ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 60-1; DA, 85-6.

‘tradition’, but rather something that repeatedly presents itself anew as a source of communal work and imagination. As Horkheimer and Adorno show, however, Homeric epic does not depict an unambiguous case of a cultural group ‘coming to terms’ with its move away from pre-agrarian life. Rather, unlike the false myths of fascism, these mythic legacies are a catalyst for ongoing reflection for the audience:

The fact that – despite the fascist lies to the contrary – the concept of homeland is opposed to myth constitutes the innermost paradox of epic.¹²⁷

The authors conclude, referencing Novalis’ claim that all philosophy is homesickness, that that statement “holds good only if this longing is not dissipated in the phantasm of a lost original state, but homeland, and nature itself, are pictured as something that have had first to be wrested from myth.”¹²⁸ I argue that the authors’ focus on myth’s capacity to offer momentary reflections of lost pasts constituted this “wresting” of philosophy from homesickness because it rejects a static ‘past’ that can be either outrun or recaptured. Instead suggests that the faint echoes of the lost possibilities of life might one day be redeemed. Doing this would recognise the past as an ongoing, and ambiguous, source of rational orientation.

The Caesura

Horkheimer and Adorno’s position functions as a response to those that see the past either as a reflection of past barbarism, or authenticity. By way of response, they propose another way of reflecting on our history, one that recognises myth’s capacity to engender new forms of communal solidarity and liberty, in spite of its association with forms of domination. The authors again return to the *Odyssey* and its

¹²⁷ Ibid. It is from this strange dialectic that the modern-day forms of racist nationalism that Horkheimer and Adorno witnessed (and that can be still observed today) can emerge as both ‘rational’ (i.e. normative), as well as presented as mythic. They also see the longing for authentic homeland within the philosophical tradition itself, specifically the work of Heidegger, which they address only implicitly. Those philosophical systems that saw the history of European thought as a legacy of mistaken thinking, and the forgetting of genuine questions, had slipped, in the authors’ view, into the search for the mythical homeland. Adorno addresses this directly in, Theodor Adorno, “Why Still Philosophy?”, *Critical Models*, trans. Lydia Goehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5-17. Heidegger predicates his magnum opus on the argument that the “question has today been forgotten”, something that after Plato and Aristotle was “only to subside from then on.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper One, 1962), 21.

¹²⁸ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 61; DA, 86.

remembrance of ancient cultural memories. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the ways in which older myth is ‘disenchanted’ via its transformation into epic, offers what they call a “caesura.”¹²⁹ The horrifying document of civilisations’ domination of a primeval nature embodied in Homer shows the extent to which “civilisation itself resembles the primeval world.”¹³⁰ And yet crucially, they argue, “it is not in the content of the deeds reported that civilisation transcends that world. It is in the self-reflection which causes violence to pause at the moment of narrating such deeds.”¹³¹ The pause is catalysed by the way in which the story is told: instead of being sung, it is narrated, which:

*...for the first time reveals in all their clarity the horrors which in song are solemnly confused with fate. But when speech pauses, the caesura allows the events narrated to be transformed into something long past, and causes to flash up a semblance of freedom that civilisation has been unable wholly to extinguish ever since.*¹³²

The example the authors provide is Homer’s description of Odysseus’ execution of the maids who had been sleeping with the suitors. They are hanged, their bodies convulsing on the end of the rope – “but not for long”, Homer reassures the audience.¹³³ Horkheimer and Adorno cite the classicist Gilbert Murray’s theory that “scenes of torture have been expunged from Homer by civilising censorship”, a case of older, more savage iterations of the tradition slowly being eliminated from the story in the passage of history.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid. This is also what Walter Benjamin meant by his claim that the bureaucratic, legalistic world of Kafka remains, despite its modern setting, firmly within what he refers to as the “swamp world” of myth, a “prehistorical” place that comes long before the establishment of written law. I will address these themes in chapter four and five. See Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death”, *Selected Writings, Volume Two, Part Two 1931-1934*, 797, 808.

¹³¹ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 61; DA, 86.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2018), Book 22, 492.

¹³⁴ Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, 127.

The pause that follows the report (“The exactitude of the description, which already exhibits the coldness of anatomy and vivisection”¹³⁵), however, reflects a collective horror at the maids’ fate:

*In being brought to a standstill, the report is prevented from forgetting the victims of the execution and lays bare the unspeakably endless torment of the single second in which the maids fought against death.*¹³⁶

Here in this moment of the epic there lies a moment of reflection on the horrors humanity has undergone in its history. The difference between its origin in ancient song and its report in Homeric epic, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggests, is that the latter does not simply accept these horrors as reflective of an unmovable fate, but rather instigates a “self-reflection which causes violence to pause at the moment of narrating such deeds.”¹³⁷ In other words, in the recognition of, and reflection on, their subjugation under fate, the Homeric listeners are able to briefly interrupt this long history of disasters. In this self-reflective pause, “hope lies in the fact that it is long past.”¹³⁸ They continue:

*Over the ravelled skein of prehistory, barbarism, and culture, Homer passes the soothing hand of remembrance, bringing the solace of ‘once upon a time’. Only as the novel is the epic transmuted into fairy tale.*¹³⁹

Only through the distancing of the events of the epic into the remote past, can they emerge as something that can be reflected upon collectively, something which causes a form of solidarity and freedom to “flash up”, if only momentarily.¹⁴⁰ It is in this

¹³⁵ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 61; DA, 86.

¹³⁶ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 62; DA, 87.

¹³⁷ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 61; DA, 86.

¹³⁸ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 62; DA, 87. I was very influenced by Jim Mitchell’s arguments regarding this aspect of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See James Mitchell, “The Discussion of Myth in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Myth and the Unfinished Task of Enlightenment*,” MA Dissertation (University of Melbourne, 2014), 84-7. It can be accessed at <https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/43097>.

¹³⁹ Adorno & Horkheimer, DE, 62; DA, 87.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Ruderman argues for a distinction between modern conceptions of enlightenment, and older, more obscure ones. He thus argues that Homer can be understood as articulating his own understanding of enlightenment, arguing “By learning the limits, not of reason but of our expectations from the sacred, one could, Homer suggests, become a truly enlightened individual.” See Richard S.

moment of caesura, that Horkheimer and Adorno argue we recognise both the ineliminable presence of myth in human history *thus far*, as well as the fact that our notion of enlightened liberty only emerges as meaningful within the confines of that history.

In Horkheimer and Adorno's view, this implied that history, in spite of its repeated descents into barbarism, had failed to fully extinguish our hopes for liberation. This held true so long as rationality recognised the precarity of its position, and the need for it to negotiate the limits and fallibility of its hopes. The idea that we might reconcile some elements of the long distant past derives from a psychoanalytic idea. Unlike what Brassier claims, however, my suggestion is that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not predicated upon an unambiguous 'working through' of the historical trauma of sacrificial myth's presence in human life. This would imply that the past was familiar to those of us in the present seeking to rationalise it. Rather, my suggestion is that, following Freud's argument regarding the ultimate unknowability, or unreachability, of the unconscious, Horkheimer and Adorno approach myth as reflective of lost possibilities for living a human life. This approach to the past would involve, thus, a recognition that a working through of historical trauma, of what has obtained in history, also gestures toward an acknowledgement of that which is unknown, unrealised and unreachable. A chance of liberty, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, resides in our attempt to come to terms with those aspects of our past.

The approach to myth, and subsequently the past, that I propose is inherently difficult, but its only goal is to problematise the exclusivity between reason and myth. It also asks, subsequently, what is entailed by the fact that myth and reason are importantly related, but in ways perhaps not always understood within the tradition? In the chapters that follow I discuss a range of thinkers that have taken up the problem of myth. My intention is not to trace a historical genealogy between them, nor to argue for one's influence over the other. In many ways their respective approaches are irreconcilable. If there is one point of commonality, however, these thinkers engage with what I have argued is a less explicit part of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument: that a reconfiguration of myth, entails a reconfiguration of our relation to the past, or

Ruderman, "Odysseus and the Possibility of Enlightenment," *American Journal of Political Sciences* 43, no. 1 (Jan. 1999), 160.

pasts. This particular idea finds arguably its first articulation (at least in the modern period), in the thought of Giambattista Vico.

Chapter Two:

Frailty and Fantasia: The Approach to Myth in Vico's *Scienza nuova*

In the previous chapter I argued that Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of myth can be framed, not just as an allegorical reading of the formation of subjectivity, but also as an approach to historically remote forms of trauma experienced by human beings. It was not just Freud's work that structured the terms of this investigation, however. As Horkheimer argues in another essay, this approach to myth was catalysed by the emergence of the philosophy of history, something that he suggests stemmed from failed "attempts to make the present a time of general happiness...and whenever utopia cannot be realised."¹⁴¹ He considers one of the initiators of this tradition – and by extension one of the first in the modern era to consider myth on its own terms – to be Giambattista Vico.

My intention in this chapter is not to imply, or to trace, a clear genealogical link between Vico and his influence on later thinkers. However, if, as I have argued, some of the flawed readings of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are symptomatic of a broader failure to account for myth, then a return to Vico is justified. If Horkheimer is right to say that Vico's philosophical arguments can be configured around a particular philosophy of history, it is important to acknowledge that that position derives from his interest in myth. Indeed, Joseph Mali argues that the most accurate reading of Vico's most important work, *La Scienza nuova (The New Science)*, should have myth as its central concept.¹⁴² Vico himself argued the work was prefaced on his "discovery" of myth.¹⁴³ Most studies of Vico have attempted to harness him within a history of anticipation, resulting in a vast array of literature that situates him as an anticipator of later, more renowned philosophical movements.¹⁴⁴ In part this is due to

¹⁴¹ Max Horkheimer, "Vico and Mythology," *New Vico Studies* 5 (1987), 63.

¹⁴² See Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's 'New Science'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xiii.

¹⁴³ Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. David Marsh (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 24; Giambattista Vico, *La Scienza nuova* (Milano: Bur Rizzoli, 1977), 102-3. References will be given to the English translation first, and then the Italian original (shortened to NS and NS respectively).

¹⁴⁴ Martin Jay, for example, positions Vico within a history of ideas that culminates with Marx. See Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1984), 32-7. See also Lawrence H. Simon, "Vico and Marx: Perspectives on Historical Development," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 2 (Apr.-Jun., 1981), 317. Cassirer argues that Vico's work contains "the first dawning of the spirit of Romanticism." See Ernst Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer*

the inherent difficulty in grasping precisely what is at stake in the broader project of this relatively obscure Baroque thinker, but also to the fact that Vico himself saw his work as representing something new and unexplored.¹⁴⁵ Vico worked in the shadow of the Spanish Inquisition's control of Naples, a life's work that was both pious and conservative, as well as radical in its rejection of dominant philosophical orthodoxies. It is this aspect of his work that leads Horkheimer to argue that Vico's philosophy represents a series of "polemics against Cartesian philosophy."¹⁴⁶ This was a product of intellectual conviction, but also of historical inevitability. Horkheimer explains that, "Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* and the profound insights of his *Meditations* serve the function in his larger work to establish mathematics as the single form of secure cognition."¹⁴⁷ Having died in 1650, Cartesian philosophy was the dominant philosophical fashion, and thus, "...it was impossible to avoid a confrontation with his thought."¹⁴⁸ In this chapter I argue that it is only within the context of Cartesian orthodoxy, that Vico's philosophy, in particular his conception of myth, emerges as fully coherent.

More recent scholarship has questioned this approach, however. In *Vico's Uncanny Humanism*, Sandra Rudnick Luft argues that to conceive of Vico only within the context of the reception history of Cartesian philosophy, and Western humanism more generally, is to betray what is most radical in his work. In particular, Luft suggests that Vico is better understood outside the conventional history of Western philosophy's understanding of the humanist, patriarchal subject. Luft's intention is to draw out what is most idiosyncratic in Vico, something she thinks is

1935-1945 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 107. Sandra Rudnick Luft sees the project of postmodernism as grounded in Vichean potentialities. See Sandra Rudnick Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism: Reading the 'New Science' between Modern and Postmodern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁵ Giorgio Tagliacozzo argues convincingly that although Vico is still best understood as an 18th century thinker – in conversation with eighteenth century ideas (contrary to what some scholars have claimed) – his relative anonymity within that century, and ours, explains the common misinterpretation of his work. See Giorgio Tagliacozzo, "Vico: A Philosopher of the Eighteenth and Twentieth Century," *Italica* 59, no. 2 (Summer, 1982), 102. For more general works on Vico and his historical circumstances in Italian see: Nicola Badaloni, *Introduzione a Vico* (Roma: Laterza & Figli, 1984); Roberto Esposito, *La Politica e la Storia: Machiavelli e Vico* (Napoli: Liguori, 1980); Benedetto Croce, *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico* (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1962). The English literature is vast but, to begin, see for example, Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976), and the collection of essays edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo, aimed at the Anglo-American audience. See Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White, ed., *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1969).

¹⁴⁶ Max Horkheimer, "Vico and Mythology," *New Vico Studies* 5 (1987), 64.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

largely missed when contextualised with the dominant philosophical orthodoxies of his day. However, in what follows I argue that it is only within the context of Vico's 'response' to Descartes that his theory of myth becomes interesting, and arguably still relevant in any philosophical critique of myth. While Luft proposes what she calls an "alchemical" reading of Vico's text, in an attempt to approach it "interactively, hermeneutically, fragmentarily", this ignores the fact that, as Mali reminds us, Vico explicitly positions the study of myth as the focus of his scholarship.¹⁴⁹ The necessity of seeing Vico's account of myth as an explicit reply to Descartes is not merely due to historical continuity, but rather because as Horkheimer suggests, "the confrontation with Descartes means a confrontation with the question of whether mathematical thought is the true manifestation of the essence of man."¹⁵⁰ My contention is that it is precisely this question that Vico had in mind when he developed a central role for myth in human life and history.

Instead of the singular rationalising ego that discerns clear and distinct ideas that Descartes describes, Vico depicts truth and meaning as emerging out of humanity's communal, socio-cultural practices. At the root of these practices is myth. I suggest that Vico's theory of myth can be divided into two parts; an aesthetic, and a historical dimension. The aesthetic part refers to Vico's argument that myth is a reflection of an imaginative, poetic faculty that emerged in human life *before* reason. In this model, rational, conceptual distance in effect presupposes, and is enabled by, the initial distance that myth created between human subject and world. Put briefly, as Gillo Dorfles argues, Vico's aesthetic theory of myth can be understood as one of the first philosophies of experience.¹⁵¹ The historical dimension of Vico's theory of myth argues that its primary role as a mediator of human experience, leaves traces in history that subsequently contribute to myths remaining of value to a socio-cultural community. Vico understood that myths offer genuine, concrete reflections of human life that long pre-date historical records; this implied that the myths left to the present offer a legacy, however fragmented, of how human beings have grappled with the ever changing predicament of living in the world. Vico's philosophy of myth

¹⁴⁹ Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism*, ix.

¹⁵⁰ Horkheimer, "Vico and Mythology," 64. Isaiah Berlin agrees, suggesting that Vico's primary objection to Cartesian philosophy was its attempt to ground humanism in naturalistic principles. Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, xvii.

¹⁵¹ Gillo Dorfles, *L'estetica del Mito da Vico a Wittgenstein* (Milano: Mursia, 1967), 5.

promises to help understand something that the later Enlightenment struggled to account for: namely the continued thriving presence of various mythical traditions in spite of the many victories of rationality during the modern period.

Ultimately, Vico implies that philosophy should emphasise the collaborative, creative community as the source of meaning, rationality and truth. In this chapter I will introduce and defend my interpretation of Vico's theory of myth. In the following one I will outline what this model of myth implied for Vico's conception of how philosophy should be practiced in a given historical moment.

A Neapolitan Life

Vico was born in Naples in 1668. A relatively unknown thinker during his lifetime, he was nonetheless an active participant in the intellectual debates of the day, particularly in his native Naples. Having successfully won the position of Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Naples at the age of thirty, he was able to subsist on a meagre income, and begin to develop his philosophy. By the early eighteenth century he had developed what he called a '*scienza nuova*' – new science – that challenged Cartesian orthodoxy by insisting upon the primacy and value of historical and humanistic studies. Some degree of recognition came – he was named Naples' official historiographer in the 1730s – but for the most part his academic reputation was marked by bad luck.¹⁵² He failed to achieve academic promotion, and his books received a cool reception.¹⁵³

Vico's early works were for the most part written in Latin, a style which, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, was rapidly falling out of favour. These include *Le orazioni inaugurali 1699–1707* (*On Humanistic Education: Six Inaugural Orations 1699-1707*) (1709-10), *De Nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*) (1708), *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae*

¹⁵² Harold Samuel Stone, *Vico's Cultural History: The Production and Transmission of Ideas in Naples 1685-1750* (Leiden: E. J Brill, 1997), 323. See also the way Vico begins his own autobiography: Giambattista Vico, *An Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1944), 8-10.

¹⁵³ Stone, *Vico's Cultural History*, 258. Stone gives a good account of how the idiosyncrasies of the wider Neapolitan intellectual community, coupled with those thinkers that *did* hold Vico's work in esteem, both contributed to its uneven broader reception in Naples and Europe. See also 287.

originibus eruenda libri tres (On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians) (1710).¹⁵⁴ While largely met with indifference following their publication, they can all be considered important contributions to what would be Vico's magnum opus, *La Scienza nuova* (1725), with important revisions appearing in *La Scienza nuova seconda* (1730/1744). The first of his books to be published in the colloquial Neapolitan Italian, *La Scienza nuova*, like his earlier works, did not leave much of an impact upon Neapolitan intellectual life. However, although it is true that Vico did not enjoy the success he had always wanted, the picture of Vico as a man entirely isolated from the main intellectual currents is largely a creation of later thinkers. Although Vico's work did not "touch the core of Neapolitan life", as Samuel Stone writes, he was nonetheless deeply involved and embedded in its intellectual debates, reading widely, and enjoying the friendship of many scholars of the day.¹⁵⁵ Vico died in 1744, shortly after the publication of the third and last revision of *La Scienza nuova*. In an episode that is frequently recounted to summarise Vico's life, Isaac Newton, to whom Vico sent a first edition of the *La Scienza nuova*, failed to even acknowledge receipt of the work.¹⁵⁶

Ricorsi

Much of Vico scholarship has been focused on the question of whether he 'anticipates' ideas that found their full expression in later, better-known traditions in Western philosophy. The most obvious is Vico's theory of historical cycles, what he calls the "ricorsi," of history.¹⁵⁷ This is often suggested to be a precursor to ideas that

¹⁵⁴ Giambattista Vico, *Le Orazioni inaugurali I-VI*, ed. Gian Visconti (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1982); Giambattista Vico, *De Nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (Campobasso: Diogene Edizioni, 2014); Giambattista Vico, *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda libri tres* (Napoli: Felice Mosca, 1710). For English translations see Giambattista Vico, *On Humanistic Education': Six Inaugural Orations 1699-1707*, trans. Giorgio A. Pinton & Arthur W. Shippee (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993); Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, trans. Elio Gianturco (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990); Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, trans. L. M. Palmer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

¹⁵⁵ Stone, *Vico's Cultural History*, xviii. Stone argues that through a reception of the publishing history of Naples, a "plausible frame and context" for Vico's work and influences can be developed which proves that, although something of an outcast in terms of his ideas and success, Vico remained deeply embedded within an intellectual climate.

¹⁵⁶ Joseph M. Levine, "Giambattista Vico and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52, no. 1 (Jan. – March., 1991), 74.

¹⁵⁷ This theory is often referred to as Vico's theory of 'corsi e ricorsi' (the 'ebb and flow of history'), but there is no actual reference to this phrase in the *New Science*. There is, however, undoubtedly a conception of historical regression and disaster in Vico, that is perhaps more accurately called "Rottura e continuità" by Badaloni (literally "ruptures and continuity"). See Badaloni, *Introduzione a Vico*, 38.

were key to German Idealism.¹⁵⁸ The twentieth century Italian philosopher, Benedetto Croce, perhaps in an attempt to place the intellectual roots of Hegelianism into Italy, positioned Vico as its progenitor.¹⁵⁹ The empirical nature of Vico's approach to history is also said to find its full articulation in the work of Marx. Marx certainly read Vico, and there are certain potential affinities in their respective works.¹⁶⁰ For example, Vico suggests there is an element of historical inevitability in the increased liberty and autonomy of the Roman plebeians.¹⁶¹ There are important differences, however. Unlike in the work of Marx, there is no rigorous system of macro-historical development in Vico's theory.¹⁶² While both approaches are interested in the material facets of history, Vico makes no claim about the future. Similarly, in comparison to Hegel, there are tempting points of affinity between Vico's philosophy of history, and Hegel's work on the relation between historical time and *Geist*. However, unlike for Hegel, where the externalities of history embody a reflection of the internal teleology of consciousness, for Vico the internal world of consciousness is shaped by history.¹⁶³

In fact, Vico's theory of *ricorsi*, although it traces cyclic movements in history, is *not* an account of necessary, historic cycles, despite it being often mistaken for one.¹⁶⁴ His theory of *ricorsi* is, as Horkheimer argues, "much more empirical and less speculative" than the later Idealist systems.¹⁶⁵ It places no internal logic in history, and is instead a descriptive theory that traces the possibilities of human behaviour

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, the introduction of Martin Jay's *Marxism and Totality*, where he (albeit tentatively) positions Vico within a history of ideas that is 'fulfilled' with Marxist philosophy. For an overview of the relation between Vico and German historicism see, Silvia Caianiello, "Vico e lo Storicismo Tedesco," *Laboratorio dell' ISPF*, VIII ½ (2011).

¹⁵⁹ Benedetto Croce, *La Filosofia di Giambattista Vico* (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1922), 251-54 and *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1943), 88. See also Pietro Piovani, "Vico Without Hegel," in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, 103-23.

¹⁶⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 493.

¹⁶¹ Vico, NS, 26; SN, 106. For a discussion on Vico and Marx, see Lawrence H. Simon, "Vico and Marx: Perspectives on Historical Development," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 2 (Apr. – Jun., 1981), 317. See also my paper "Vico, Collingwood, and the Materiality of the Past," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 10, no. 2 (2016), 95-6, where I argue there is an important distinction between Marxist materialism and what I call Vichean 'materiality'.

¹⁶² For a more general discussion of Vico and the idea of historical progress, see Robert Nisbet & Gustavo Costa, "Vico and the Idea of Progress," *Social Research* 43, no. 3, Vico and Contemporary Thought-1 (Autumn 1976).

¹⁶³ Hegel writes: "The movement of carrying forward the form of its self-knowledge is the labour which it accomplishes as actual History." See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 488.

¹⁶⁴ Arnaldo Momigliano rightly argues that the straight, linear idea of progress had little traction in the early eighteenth century and that Vico's divine providence had to contain within its logic both the Christian Fall, and the humanist idea of decline. See Arnaldo Momigliano, "Vico's Scienza Nuova: Roman 'Bestioni' and Roman 'Eroi,'" *History and Theory* 5, no. 1 (1966), 12.

¹⁶⁵ Horkheimer, Vico and Mythology, 67.

within the limitations of historical reality. Vico argues: “it is well for us to keep in mind that human events are dominated by chance and choice.”¹⁶⁶ For Vico, *ricorsi* are evidence of a tension at the heart of human institutions, something he considers underwritten by communal, poetic life. It is these unseen forces littered in the detritus of the present that threaten to cause the destabilisation of civilisation, and the descent back into barbarism. This is not because of an innate destructive character in myth, but, according to Vico, due to humanity’s inability to comprehend mythic poetry’s role in sustaining civil life. He sees such a barbarism reflected in the rise of Cartesian rationalism, which he refers to as “the ignoble subtleties of malicious wits...a barbarism of reflection [which] turns such people into beasts even more savage than did the primitive barbarism of the senses.”¹⁶⁷ In Vico’s view, it was the role of philosophy to negotiate the frail forms of human meaning and truth in the face of material forces that might at any moment blow against the hopes of humanity.

Ultimately, Horkheimer sees in Vico’s work two primary confrontations: with Descartes, over the question “...whether mathematical thought is the true manifestation of the essence of man”, and with Thomas Hobbes, over his “...bald assertion that false doctrines are free inventions designed to deceive people.”¹⁶⁸ Vico’s position on these topics derives from his more nuanced understanding of myth. In the case of Descartes, Vico offers an alternative grounding to human knowledge that is historical and creative, rather than internal and “mathematical.” In the case of Hobbes, who argues that the false doctrines of myth are consciously fabricated to deceive people, and thus to control them, Vico suggests that myths are better judged according to their worth amongst communities, rather than their strict epistemic status.¹⁶⁹ By doing so he offers a new way of approaching the question of the epistemic value of myth, and sidesteps the question of truth and falsity. Instead he highlights the significance of myth as predicated upon it being the source of sustenance for communal life and socio-cultural practices. By doing so, he arrives at another account of truth which, as I will discuss, has important implications for his model of philosophy. Thus, although Vico can be understood in relation to intellectual trends that came later, I argue that his account of myth grounds his theory of history,

¹⁶⁶ Vico, *On the Study Methods of our Time*, 33.

¹⁶⁷ Vico, NS, 488; SN, 692.

¹⁶⁸ Horkheimer, “Vico and Myth,” 64, 72.

¹⁶⁹ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), 12-13.

not vice versa. A focus on his theory of myth and its associated role in human life and communication, shows the extent to which he is not interested in historical *cycles*. Rather, he is offering an alternative way of approaching the relation between human rational subjectivity and historical time, one in which the past is not superseded by increasingly rational agents, but rather one that continues to linger in the socio-cultural structures of the present.

Subjectivity and the *Senso Commune*

Sandra Rudnick Luft disagrees with this assessment. In her 2003 book, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism: Reading the "New Science" between Modern and Postmodern*, Luft proposes a new reading of Vico altogether. She contends that there are strands of Vico's work that only find their fullest expression centuries later in the concerns of modern and postmodern philosophy, in particular the decentralisation of subjectivity as an axiomatic starting point for empirical and ontological concerns. She proposes what she calls an "alchemical" reading, wherein Vico's concrete historical situation is ignored in favour of an attempt to approach texts "interactively, hermeneutically, fragmentarily, as one holds conversations with strangers only to discover shared insights."¹⁷⁰ Luft's suggests that such a method draws out what remains radically new in Vico's philosophy, something she thinks is lost when it is approached solely as a rejection of Cartesianism or, more specifically, the Western intellectual preoccupation with subjectivity. Rather than reading Vico from "a modernist perspective that takes for granted the conception of human nature conditioned by the subjectivism inherent to the West", Luft argues that a more appropriate approach is one that ignores the "humanist tradition[']s... reification of human subjectivity as the human subject."¹⁷¹ In other words, Luft presents Vico as entirely anomalous to the mainstream intellectual traditions of early modern Europe.

While Luft is right to insist on the strangeness of Vico's project, as well as to argue that "the *New Science* is too fragmentary, too heterodox, to be pressed into the procrustean bed of any totalizing interpretation", it is unclear precisely what stands to

¹⁷⁰ Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism*, ix.

¹⁷¹ Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism*, 4.

be gained from her approach.¹⁷² It is precisely within the historical context in which Vico wrote that his ideas can be appreciated for their singularity – a response to a set of concerns and problems. More precisely, it is only within the context of a European intellectual community largely captivated with the notion of Cartesian rational subjectivity that Vico’s alternative becomes philosophically interesting.

The idea that Vico has to be removed from a history of intellectual concerns in order to understand his project, finds a good rejoinder in both Horkheimer’s insistence that his work represents a polemical response to Descartes and Hobbes, as well as Mali’s claim that Vico’s central idea is his theory of myth. While Luft is right to suggest that the purely individualistic, rational subject is de-emphasised in Vico, she fails to account for the fact that Vico explicitly posits *another* form of subjectivity; namely the manner in which whole communities (and individuals within that community) interact with and derive meaning from their poetic/creative faculties. Inherent within this notion of subjectivity is the idea that the conceptual distance enjoyed by the rational subject is grounded in the initial distance that poetic myth creates between man and world. The world that ‘appears’ to each individual, in other words, is one that is sustained by the intricate, deep past of a communal socio-cultural history and its associated customs and meanings. As Mali argues:

*Vico consciously posited over against the narrowly rationalistic ‘reason’ of the individual – so magnified by the Cartesian Cogito and by modern Epicureans like Hobbes and Stoics like Spinoza – a contrary model of the mind, based on a collective-historical ‘reason’ of the common people, which he termed, significantly, senso commune, unfortunately (even if inevitably) translated as ‘common sense’.*¹⁷³

Here, Mali rightly emphasises that for Vico, it is precisely what human beings create in negotiation with their limitations that sustains what is unique to humanity, namely the belief in “divine providence, the moderation of passions through marriage, and the immortality of human souls attested by burial.”¹⁷⁴ The details of that claim will be

¹⁷² Luft, *Vico’s Uncanny Humanism*, xv.

¹⁷³ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 91.

¹⁷⁴ Vico NS, 131; SN, 236.

explored in the coming pages, but the crucial point to draw out is the fact that Vico posits rationality as a historically determined capacity that is shared amongst communities, rather than a faculty per se. Such an account acknowledges the limitations of reason, the negotiation with which becomes the task of critical thinking in general. Vico concludes that: “these are the boundaries of human reason, and transgressing them means abandoning our humanity.”¹⁷⁵

Thus, Luft is quite right when she suggests that, “Vico responded to the Cartesian turn in philosophy not by formulating an alternative epistemology, but by returning to what had been forgotten in Descartes’ radical doubt, the ontological condition of embodied beings and the social nature of their world.”¹⁷⁶ What is unclear, however, is why it is more interesting or illuminating to insist on Vico’s severance from the major intellectual debate of his lifetime, when it is in fact his explicit response to Descartes that makes his alternative system so extraordinary. Vico’s idea of community and ‘common sense’ (*senso commune*) – what he describes as “judgement without reflection shared by an entire class, an entire people, and entire nation, or the entire human race”¹⁷⁷ – is entrenched, not only within a set of early Modern intellectual concerns, but also has important debts to the Italian Renaissance tradition.¹⁷⁸ It is, at least arguably, precisely an “alternative epistemology”, despite Luft’s denial. Her approach misses the full importance of myth’s role in Vico’s philosophy, because it is in opposition to Cartesian rationalism, and the corresponding theories of subjectivity and truth, that the notion of mythically grounded, communal forms of social meaning becomes most important. My suggestion is not to reject Luft’s reading, for it draws out many important aspects of Vico’s work. However, if we are to understand the full implications of his philosophy, in particular the ways it affects the West’s focus on singular, ego-centric subjectivity, the ‘postmodern’ aspects of Vico’s work that Luft emphasises, need to be mediated by his Catholic belief in the fragility of fallen man. The idea that human rational

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Luft, *Vico’s Uncanny Humanism*, 49.

¹⁷⁷ Vico, NS, 79-80; SN, 166-67.

¹⁷⁸ See Rocco Rubini’s *The Other Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 6-7. Elsewhere Rubini has argued that a study of those influenced by Vico (such as Giuseppe Ferrari and Jules Michelet) represents a comparatively unexplored facet of the birth of “our modern consciousness.” Rocco Rubini, “The Vichian “Renaissance” between Giuseppe Ferrari and Jules Michelet,” *Intellectual History Review* 26, no. 1 (2016), 13.

endeavour is underwritten by certain vulnerabilities and limitations, that are in turn overcome via creative, social practices is something that only fully emerges in Vico's account of myth, and its subsequent relation with rational, philosophical thought.

Verum et Factum

Vico's primary opposition to Cartesian orthodoxy derived from a disagreement over the nature of metaphysics. He argues that metaphysics dealt with a form of truth that was associated with the historical traditions of human intellectual endeavour, rather than an eternal, unchanging one, which he considered the sole domain of God. Vico begins *La Scienza nuova* by arguing that metaphysics, "seeks to demonstrate God's providence in the world of the human spirit, which we call the civil world or the world of nations."¹⁷⁹ His positioning the book as a metaphysical work, what he considered a study of what he called "human authority", was founded on his theory of *verum et factum*, outlined in his earlier work, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*.¹⁸⁰ Vico's theory of *verum et factum* argued that what was true, and what was made, were the same. This implied that truth could only be derived from, and recognised in, what humans had created themselves.¹⁸¹ Although based around dubious etymology – Vico argues that the Latin for 'true' and 'made' are interchangeable – there is a radical element to Vico's response to Descartes.¹⁸² What Vico calls the "conceit of scholars" was for him emblematic of the mistaken assumption that the human mind was unchanged by historical events and socio-cultural practices.¹⁸³ This conceit also contended that philosophical problems, in particular those of the natural world, were unchanging, ever lasting conundrums. In

¹⁷⁹ Vico, NS, 1; SN, 73.

¹⁸⁰ Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, 45-7.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² As is noted in the literature, although Vico's theory of 'verum et factum' seems crucial to the conceptual framework of the *Science*, it isn't mentioned at all. See Stephan Otto, "Interprétation Transcendantale de l'Axiome 'Verum et Factum Convertuntur': Réflexions Sur le 'Liber Metaphysicus' de J. B. Vico," *Archives De Philosophie* 40, no. 1 (1977): 13-14. Massimo Lollini argues that, when compared to the narrow epistemological claim in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, the *Science* offers a "master key to open the archaeological study of the formation of the human civil world." See Massimo Lollini, "On Becoming Human: The Verum Factum Principle and Giambattista Vico's Humanism," *MIn* 127, no. 1 (01, 2012), S26. For the dubious, and highly contested nature of Vico's etymological claims, see J. Morrison, "Vico's Principle of Verum is Factum and the Problem of Historicism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 4 (1978), 580-81. See also Robert C. Miner, "'Verum-factum' and Practical Wisdom in the Early Writings of Giambattista Vico," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 1 (1998), 63-5.

¹⁸³ Vico, NS, 491; SN, 696.

this model, truth is struck upon according to the correct deployment of the rational faculties. Alternatively, Vico proposes that our capacity to think rationally, and the subsequent problems we grapple with, are shaped by our past. His argument that metaphysics began when the first peoples started thinking “in human fashion, and not when philosophers began to reflect on human ideas”, is Vico’s attempt to show that the very idea of a metaphysics is structured around a contingent history of mytho-poetic life.¹⁸⁴

The importance of Vico’s theory of *verum et factum* is essentially due to its account of the manner in which philosophy should proceed, because it changes what is epistemically available to human beings. It concerns itself with the legacy of human activity in the world, not the essential nature of the world itself. Indeed, while *factum* can translate to ‘made’ it can also translate to ‘act’, ‘work’, or ‘achievement’.¹⁸⁵ That is to say, Vico is arguing that the truth accessible to humans was one of activity, will, and achievement in the face of a world only truly known to God. When Vico wrote in *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* that he hoped to create a “metaphysics compatible with human frailty”, it was to neither deny all truths to man, nor to allow him all of them.¹⁸⁶ Rather, he hoped to build a philosophical system that could negotiate the finite, historically contingent world that human beings had built for itself in an ambiguous universe created by God. Perhaps more than anything else, this approach avoids the radical doubt that overcame Descartes. Descartes’ correlation of epistemic certainty with the verifiability of the thinking, conscious subject requires an axiomatic anchor point that can be established via the rational faculties.¹⁸⁷ It also consigns the past, with its varying belief systems and intellectual and socio-cultural practices, as fertile grounds for doubt: Descartes suggests that “...even the most accurate histories, if they do not exactly misrepresent or exaggerate the value of things in order to render them more worthy of being read, at least omit in them all the circumstances which are basest and least notable.”¹⁸⁸ Unlike Descartes, who would

¹⁸⁴ Vico, NS, 128; SN, 232.

¹⁸⁵ C. Lewis, C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 718.

¹⁸⁶ Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, 109.

¹⁸⁷ See his “Meditation on First Philosophy,” in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 131-200. See in particular the Fourth Meditation, 171-179. See also his “Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason,” 79-130. See in particular his methodology of doubt, 92, and his famous formulation of “I think therefore I am (*Cogito Ergo Sum*), 101.

¹⁸⁸ Descartes, “Discourse on the Method,” 84-5.

cast around for a place in which to secure his certainty, Vico was sure that, in spite of the many doubts he had about the world, “there shines an eternal and inextinguishable light. It is a truth which cannot be doubted: *The civil world is certainly the creation of humankind.*”¹⁸⁹

If, according to Vico, all that we could know was what we had made in human collectives throughout history, our cultural production became the grounds upon which philosophy orientated itself. Given the centrality of myths to the history of that production, Vico considered them vital to an understanding of how modern rationality had emerged not just as a pure cognitive faculty, but a socio-cultural capacity. As Hans Blumenberg has argued, this approach also allowed Vico to overcome a problem that only the inheritors of Cartesian philosophy would eventually confront: namely, “the unsolved central problem of the Enlightenment, the problem of how it was to comprehend itself historically (*das ihrer geschichtlichen Selbsterfassung*).”¹⁹⁰ As I have argued, two conceptions of myth emerge from this; one aesthetic, one historical. However, as Vico shows with his metaphysics of *verum et factum*, these distinct forms are related both in terms of how myth was initially created, but also how we came to know and recognise it. In the following section, I discuss the aesthetic dimension of Vico’s theory of myth.

Unbound Fantasies: Frailty and Fantasia

Unlike Descartes’ suggestion that the phenomenal world should be ignored in establishing founding principles for rationality, Vico turns precisely to the material as a point of orientation in thinking about the human being as rational agent. He begins *La Scienza nuova* by arguing that his discovery that the earth’s first peoples were poets was “la chiave maestra di questa Scienza” (“the master key of this science”).¹⁹¹ It is this proposal that Joseph Mali refers to when he argues that the discovery of myth is critical to Vico’s most important ideas.¹⁹² Contrary to the Cartesian belief that internal introspection by the thinking subject was the key to establishing philosophical

¹⁸⁹ Vico, NS, 119-120; SN, 219-20.

¹⁹⁰ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 376-380; Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979), 412-15.

¹⁹¹ Vico, NS, 24; SN, 102-103.

¹⁹² Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 2.

certainty, in effect positing that logical possibility derives from rational conceivability, Vico suggests that the mind was “indeterminate by nature”, and shaped by historical forces.¹⁹³ The epistemic implications of Vico’s notion of the historical determinacy of subjectivity, depicts the possibility of knowledge, as Mali writes, as a “creative, not merely receptive, appropriation of the world.”¹⁹⁴ In this model, myth emerges historically as the aesthetic creation of human beings that came to determine the nature of their subjectivity and relationship with the world around them.

What I am here calling Vico’s ‘aesthetic’ approach to myth, departed from the assumption that the forms of life that marked the earliest human beings would be radically unfamiliar to the modern subject. Vico writes that he had:

*...finally descended into the confused minds of the founders of the gentile nations, all vivid sensations and vast/unbounded fantasies (tutti robustissimi sensi e vastissime fantasie).*¹⁹⁵

Such a ‘descent’, he suggests, is fraught with danger and difficulty. He nonetheless sets out:

*...to descend from today’s civilized human nature...which we can by no means imagine and can conceive only with great effort.*¹⁹⁶

The solution to the impenetrability of almost all history, for Vico, was to take myth seriously not only as a remnant of human history, but also as a form of aesthetic creation. Myth becomes not just an indirect reflection of otherwise obscure practices (forms of life, customs, rituals, beliefs, etc.) but also provides insight into how those activities rendered their initial experiences of the world meaningful. The implication is that if the world as experienced by human beings was rendered meaningful by myth, then all subsequent connected matrixes of meaning amongst historical socio-cultural groups is enmeshed within that mythical matrix. This primary conclusion is

¹⁹³ Vico, NS, 75; SN, 161.

¹⁹⁴ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 61.

¹⁹⁵ Vico, NS, 4; SN, 78.

¹⁹⁶ Vico, NS, 124-125; SN, 227.

based upon what Vico called the “master-key” of his new science: that human life is underwritten by myth, or what he calls “poetic symbols.”¹⁹⁷

The key to Vico’s aesthetic conception of myth lies buried in the original Italian, and is misleadingly translated. The *vastissime fantasie*, translated as *unbounded fantasies* in the English, is suggestive of naïve impressions and superstitions but is better associated with the creative, imaginative faculty, *fantasia*. While Vico suggests the first peoples were subject to ‘flights of fancy’, and predisposed to superstitious beliefs, this capacity also lay the foundations for more complex systems of cultural belief and social practice. This is an important reiteration of the fact – often lost in the translation – that Vico did not consider the first peoples to be unambiguously ‘primitive’ but, rather, engaged, creative and complex. In opposition to those who considered myth a relic of esoteric ancient wisdom, to be deciphered by scholars, Vico suggested that it instead represented an incomplete reflection of the ways in which the first human beings experienced the world.¹⁹⁸

It is within this context that Vico’s argument for the indeterminacy of the human mind and the belief in the finitude of the human creature needs to be framed.¹⁹⁹ Because the only knowledge accessible to the human being is that which it makes itself, rather than what was created by God, Vico recognised the inherent frailty of both the creature that needs to ‘create’ its world, as well as the vulnerability of that creation. The historical agent is thus left exposed to the many ambiguous, terrifying realities that the human being can be confronted with in the passage of time, and which can challenge or distort the series of socio-cultural practices that make up their world. The *frailty* of human beings, thus, derives from our vulnerability and

¹⁹⁷ Vico, NS, 24, SN, 103.

¹⁹⁸ This is what I take to be the deeper meaning behind Dorflès’ argument that Vico discovered aesthetics as a ‘philosophy of experience’. Dorflès, *L’estetica del Mito da Vico a Wittgenstein*, 5. Paolo Rossi also points out that, within the history of ideas, Vico’s theory of the brutish origins of human life was one of many (Hobbes, Mandeville, Rousseau) that contributed to what he calls the ‘death of Adam’. Vico, however, tried to avoid this by separating the development of the gentiles and the Jews. See Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 267-70.

¹⁹⁹ I owe a great deal to the paper by Samuel Moyn and his discussion of the importance of man’s “fallen state” to Vico’s project. See Samuel Moyn, “Metaphorically Speaking: Hans Blumenberg, Giambattista Vico, and the Problem of Origins,” *Qui Parle* 12, no. 1, The End of Nature (Spring/Summer 2000), 62.

susceptibility to historical contingency and change.²⁰⁰ The role of philosophy in Vico's project, then, involves a negotiation with that frailty:

*If philosophy is to benefit humankind, it must raise and support us as frail and fallen beings (l'uomo caduto e debole), rather than strip us of our nature or abandon us in our corruption.*²⁰¹

Vico considered the creative faculty (*fantasia*) to be the manner in which human beings dealt with the immediate unsuitability for their minds to confront the material realities of the phenomenal world, or their 'fallenness'. It is from here that his aesthetic concept of myth emerges.

Vico begins *La Scienza nuova* with a description of how human life is underwritten by what he considers mythical archetypes:

*These archetypes – which is what myths are in essence – were created by people endowed with vigorous imaginations but feeble powers of reasoning.*²⁰²

Despite being dismissive of their strictly rational capacities, Vico differentiates himself from the "conceit" of other scholars, by taking these creative practices, and their creators, seriously:

*For when nations first became aware of their origins, and scholars first studied them, they judged them according to the enlightenment, refinement and magnificence of their age, when in fact by their very nature these origins must rather have been small, crude and obscure.*²⁰³

Although Vico subscribes to what would have then been the universal belief that the past was more brutish than the present, the vital point of distinction is that he

²⁰⁰ For an excellent discussion of *fantasia* see A. G. Grant, "Vico and Bultmann on Myth: The Problem with Demythologising," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Autumn 2000). See in particular 58-9 where he writes: "...the need for imaginative universals arises out of the need for the first human begins to respond to the existential terrors of the natural world," 58.

²⁰¹ Vico, NS, 77; SN, 163.

²⁰² Vico, NS, 24; SN, 103.

²⁰³ Vico, NS, 76; SN, 162.

considers this a product of the particularities of their historical situation, rather than innate intellectual immaturity. He argues that this is what scholars imply when they “...assert that what they know is as old as the world”, the implication being that older peoples were not intelligent enough to do so.²⁰⁴ Although Vico acknowledges the crudity of the earliest expressions of human beings, he suggests that they are constitutive foundations for all rational discourse:

*For metaphysics has its origins in the history of human ideas, beginning with humankind’s very first civilised thoughts. With the aid of metaphysics, I have been able to descend into the confused minds of the first founders of the pagan nations, which were filled with vivid sensations and unbound fantasies.*²⁰⁵

It is for this reason that Vico considered *La Scienza nuova* to be a philosophy of what he called “human authority”, effectively what he imagined as a critique of the ways in which our communal feats of imagination condition the world familiar to the human being as a social, and cultural creature.²⁰⁶

Vico’s argument that myth rendered the world meaningful for its first peoples implies that myth assisted them in overcoming an initial predicament. In *La Scienza nuova*’s ‘Dello Stabilimento de Principi’ (‘Establishing Principles’) Vico depicts an initial situation for the first humans that is beset by all forms of terrors and anxieties:

The races descended from Ham and Japheth were destined to be scattered throughout the earth’s great forest, where they wandered like beasts for 200 years. Solitary and aimless, they bore children whom they raised like beasts, lacking human customs and speech, and living in a brutish state. Precisely this much time had to elapse before the earth, drenched by the universal flood, could dry out. The earth then sent forth what Aristotle calls dry exhalations into the atmosphere, which generated lightning bolts that stunned and terrified

²⁰⁴ Vico, NS, 77; SN, 163.

²⁰⁵ Vico, NS, 4; SN, 78.

²⁰⁶ Vico, NS, 5; SN, 79.

*humankind. In their fright, people abandoned themselves to false religions worshipping various Jupiters.*²⁰⁷

Vico's argument that the initial terror and anxiety caused by the initial confrontation with violent and ambiguous forces in the natural world, catalysed the worshipping of primitive godheads. He suggests that this initial rudimentary worship leads to more extensive and sophisticated rituals and beliefs:

*In these religions, they developed a sort of divination which divined the future from thunder and lightning, and from the flight of eagles, which they considered birds sacred to Jupiter.*²⁰⁸

The process of naming and systemising a foreign and overwhelmingly hostile force led ultimately to forms of guilt and shame borne out of a directed fear toward a deity, rather than an anxiety toward an undifferentiated, hostile nature:

*...they were shaken and roused by a terrible fear of Uranus and Jupiter, the gods they had invented and embraced. Some of them now finally stopped wandering and took shelter in certain places. Here they settled down with certain women. And in their fear of the deities they perceived, they celebrated marriages, engaging secretly in religious and chaste carnal unions. In this way, they founded families...Through protracted settlement and the burial of their ancestors, they came to found and divide the first dominions of the earth.*²⁰⁹

Thus, Vico concludes that the three pillars of civilised institutions – “divine providence, solemn matrimony, and the universal belief in the immortality of the soul, which originated with burial rites” – emerge from an initial vulnerability in the world, and a subsequent capacity to derive meaning from it.

²⁰⁷ Vico, NS, 48-49; SN, 128-29.

²⁰⁸ Vico, NS, 49; SN, 128.

²⁰⁹ Vico, NS, 9; SN, 84.

This distinguishes his project from the likes of Thomas Hobbes and his theory of the ‘state of nature’, which he read in Italian translation.²¹⁰ Hobbes suggests that the laws of humanity prevent the descent into the so called ‘state of nature’, which is famously “nasty, brutish, and short.”²¹¹ Hobbes’ interpretation of this strain of Natural law is contractual, insofar as the individual’s desire for safety is secured by deference to a sovereign. A mutual agreement based on self interest keeps the brutish nature of human beings at bay.²¹² Vico’s understanding of the law, conversely, suggests that modern law derives historically from earlier mythic statutes and taboos. For Vico, human cruelty and violence are not manifestations of an innate part of human nature. Rather, they are elements of life that have emerged in tandem with humanity’s attempts to come to terms with the material contingencies of the world.²¹³ In Vichean terms, the law, and by definition myth, did not keep the first peoples in check, but rather the *world* itself.

This implies that for Vico the catalysing trauma that the aesthetic dimension of poetic myth helps alleviate is not entirely overcome, but remains deposited within the historical structure of myth’s transference and resonance. That fragility is also embedded within rational life as well. This is evident in his notion that early, mimetic poetry’s (*poesia*) ability to help human beings give voice to what was initially a mute,

²¹⁰ Vico, NS, 87; SN, 178. Vico dismisses Hobbes’ work, because it ignored the reality of divine providence, a concept to be discussed in the following chapter. See also the excellent discussion in Erich Auerbach, “Vico and Aesthetic Historicism,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 8, no. 2 (Dec., 1949), 110-18.

²¹¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 82.

²¹² The position of Hobbes in the history of Natural Law is contentious, insofar as he is commonly attributed as being responsible for rejecting its traditional basis, where the law is based on divine or universal truths, suggesting the law could only be enforceable by a sovereign, which in turn catalysed the emergence of what is now known as Positivist law. While this is true, he is also discussed in more modern interpretations of Natural law that posit the rights of human beings as being deduced from their universal equality, something that is established through the rational faculties. See Heinrich A. Rommen, *The Natural Law: A Study in Legal and Social History and Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 92; and Norberto Bobbio, *Thomas Hobbes and the Natural Law Tradition*, trans. Daniella Gobetti (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

²¹³ Vico sees the development of social and political institutions, and the associated forms of violence and upheaval (“divine government..., aristocratic states..., democracies and later monarchies”) as being embedded in language’s development: “The first dates from the age of families when pagan peoples had just embraced civilisation...it was mute or wordless language which used gestures or physical objects bearing a natural relationship to the ideas they wanted to signify...The second language used heroic emblems – such as similes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and descriptions of nature...The third language was the human or civilised language which used vocabulary agreed on by popular convention.” Vico, NS, 22-23; SN, 100-01.

animalistic terror, remains embedded within the inner structure of what he calls “heroic hexameter” (i.e. epic poetry):²¹⁴

*In this metre of heroic verse, song arose naturally from the stimulus of violent emotions. Even today we see that people break into song when they are moved by strong emotions, especially powerful grief or joy.*²¹⁵

Vico even goes so far as to suggest that the person who suffers from a stutter finds it quickly diminished when speech is approached as a song – a technique still employed today.²¹⁶ The question of how language becomes and remains meaningful is critical here. By arguing for a connection between the most primitive forms of poetic mimesis and rational language, Vico implies that language’s capacity to be meaningful between people is largely rendered possible by an initial mimetic logic. By bringing a form of logic and coherence to human trauma via systems of repetition, poetic myth remains with the structure of language itself. My suggestion is that this is a vital component of Vico’s philosophy of myth, largely because he draws an important correlation between myth’s initial (what I have called) aesthetic function, and its history. What begins as a mimetic practice, eventually develops into more complex forms of performative storytelling and custom. It is the historical survival of myth which allows human communities to collectively reflect on that legacy as a source of meaningful life in itself.

The Sceptre of Agamemnon

Vico’s aesthetic account of myth helps explain how human communities came to confront the initial emergencies of existence. Subsequently, myth’s *survival*, what I am calling its historical dimension, was testament to the fact that humans continued to

²¹⁴ Vico writes: “the world in its childhood was made up of poetic nations, for poetry is simply imitation.” Vico, NS, 94; SN, 187. This was an idea that resonated deeply with Walter Benjamin, who mentions Vico explicitly when he argues that myth did not represent simply the products of “devious priestly fraud” but was essentially where “the human race, however unclearly, addressed its own nature, drawing . . . strength for the long journey ahead.” Walter Benjamin, “The Regression of Poetry,” *Selected Writings: Volume Four, 1938-1940*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 364. For a good discussion of Benjamin’s relation to a Vichean tradition see David L. Marshall, “The Intrication of Political and Rhetorical Inquiry in Walter Benjamin,” *History of Political Thought* XXXIV, no. 4 (Winter 2013), 704.

²¹⁵ Vico, NS, 186; SN, 309.

²¹⁶ Vico, NS, 189; SN, 314.

rely on these poetic images and stories. Unlike the approaches to Homer that considered his writings quasi-divine, Vico makes a concerted attempt in the *La Scienza nuova* to show that his writings, whether the work of one man or many, offered historical reflections of a societies' ongoing imaginative work.²¹⁷

It is worth noting that, despite many of his ideas appearing quaint to the modern reader, Vico's ideas are not purely speculative.²¹⁸ Although it is difficult to establish precisely what kind of literature was available to him in early eighteenth century Naples, Vico clearly had access (whether directly or indirectly) to the growing body of research on indigenous American peoples, something to which he refers.²¹⁹ Although an important facet of his work rests on a Baroque theology that commits him to now untenable positions, he is also working with an eye to the emerging scholarly work on indigenous peoples around the world. His interest in the fledgling discipline of anthropology has important implications, I think, in understanding the historical dimension of his ideas around myth. It involved, perhaps uniquely for Vico's time, a desire to look to both past cultures (e.g. ancient Greece), as well as contemporary non-European ones, on their own terms. This approach denied that the inhabitants of the past, as well as non-European peoples, were fundamentally inferior, superstitious, or barbaric. This allowed Vico to recognise both an extraordinary diversity in the ways people have lived, but also simultaneously, a certain affinity between all human beings, in terms of how they experience the world initially, as well as how they come to reflect on those experiences within communities. In so doing, I argue that Vico came to understand that, in addition to myth helping human beings initially to carve out their world from an undifferentiated nature, its role in underwriting the foundation of human culture and social practice was predicated upon the ways in which communities engage with, and reflect upon, their own history as a source of ongoing rational orientation.

²¹⁷ See NS, 355-396; SN, "Della Discoverta del Vero Omero", 531-78

²¹⁸ The reception of Vico's anthropological interest has also become increasingly sophisticated. The limited reading of Vico's notion of the poetic imagination as unambiguously 'irrational', or 'pre-rational' is still present well into the latter half of the twentieth century. See, for example, Edmund Leach, "Vico and the Future of Anthropology," *Social Research* 43, no. 4, Vico and Contemporary Thought – 2 (Winter, 1976), 810.

²¹⁹ See for example Vico, NS, 145, 216; SN, 250, 352. Most striking is that Vico actively compares the pre-history of European traditions and the contemporary traditions of indigenous Americans, proving that he considered their 'predicament' to be similar.

One of the best examples that Vico provides of this idea is his claim that entire mythical traditions can be encapsulated in the symbolism of subsequent historical periods. He writes with admiration of Homer's ability to reduce the entire history of a nation (in this case the myth of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes) into a symbol, namely the sceptre of Agamemnon. The myth of Cadmus is intricate and convoluted but, as Vico writes:

*Homer relates the same history with marvellous brevity and propriety by reducing it to the symbol of the sceptre which Agamemnon inherits. The sceptre is fashioned by Vulcan and Jupiter...Jupiter then gives Mercury a sceptre. This is the caduceus which Mercury used to bring the first agrarian law to the plebians, thus creating the heroic kingdoms of the first cities. Mercury then gave it to Pelops, who gave it to Thyestes, who gave it to Atreus, who gave it to Agamemnon – which is the entire dynasty of the royal house of Argos.*²²⁰

This gives some indication of Vico's notion that past mythical traditions can be entirely contained within particular symbolic icons of later ones. In effect, this describes the ways in which societies and cultures reflect on the traditions to which they owe a cultural debt. This suggests that Vico is aware that the important symbols and allegories in (for example) Homer, provide momentary reflections of periods that predate Homeric Greece significantly. The concept of 'cultural memory' is a modern one. However, Vico's notion of the ways in which fragments of ancient cultural memory and historical detritus become deposited deep into socio-cultural custom as a source of communal meaning amongst communities, is very similar.²²¹ In Vico's model (like Assman's later), this was not just a matter of the passing down of stories and traditions, a case of straight-forward historical and cultural lineage. Vico's point is that these stories that are passed down are re-worked and re-organised within the reception history of later times; such as when he suggests that, "We find a fuller and

²²⁰ Vico, NS, 307; SN, 472.

²²¹ The term 'cultural memory' would have been unfamiliar to Vico but its usage in modern scholarship captures a Vichean idea. See for example the excellent paper by Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka where they write: "In cultural formation, a collective experience crystallizes, whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible again across millennia." See Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique*, no. 65, Cultural History/Cultural Studies (Spring – Summer, 1995), 129. Assman developed these ideas in later work, for example in Assman, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*. See footnotes 30, 32.

more detailed account of the history of the world on the shield of Achilles as described by Homer.”²²²

Another example Vico gives of the ways a people work on their own past is Odysseus’ confrontation with Polyphemus the Cyclops. He writes that the interaction of cunning Odysseus with the simpler, more savage Cyclops represents a historical legacy of what he calls Heroic Greece’s interaction with the legacy of an even earlier form of Greek life.²²³ Vico sees the primitive state of the first peoples reflected in the Homeric depiction of the Cyclops in his cave, a primary state without law or agriculture:

*...we may contemplate the long time which must have passed before the pagan peoples, developing from a state of bestial native freedom through a long period of Cyclopean family discipline, were civilised enough to obey naturally the laws of their emerging civil states.*²²⁴

Here Vico makes the connection between myth and the early emergence of legal statutes. Having described the horrors of the primeval forest that the first peoples wandered through aimlessly, he argues that the first institutions to place limits on the forms of life that reflected those fears were the “*leges sanguinis*”, or the ‘blood laws.’²²⁵ The ambiguous authority of these laws, that punished acts such as murder and incest, were marked by their “*spaventose pene insassiva*” (“frightful penalties”).²²⁶ Vico argues elsewhere that there exists an etymological link between law and pasture, namely in “the Greek noun *nomos*.” He takes this to be etymological evidence of the ways certain forms of life and associated practices emerged together.²²⁷ It is for perhaps this reason that Vico, although with guarded suspicion of the barbarity of the first peoples, seems to retain a modicum of admiration for what Eric Auerbach called the “magic formalism” of the Cyclops; a world which must have

²²² Vico, NS, 307; SN, 472.

²²³ The debt that thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno owed to Vico is clear here.

²²⁴ Vico, NS, 218, 281; SN, 354, 439.

²²⁵ Vico, NS, 167; SN, 282.

²²⁶ *Ibid.* See where he quotes Ulpian: “*lex dura est, sed certa est*” (“The law is harsh, but it is certain”), NS, 116; SN, 216.

²²⁷ Vico, NS, 466; SN, 663.

been almost overwhelming in its rhapsodical beauty and immanence, before the more complex forms of reason disenchant the world.²²⁸

Homer also calls the Cyclops ‘lawless’, by which he meant, ‘without law’.²²⁹ Polyphemus’ world is rendered meaningful, not by the regulations and norms of the law, but via the sheer aesthetic power of the rhapsodical poetry and myths that he and his people live by.²³⁰ For Vico, Homer’s description of an older civilisation represented Homeric Greece working on its own past, but simultaneously the even fainter memories of Bronze Age Greece (the time of Odysseus) reflecting on its pre-agricultural origins. The vast reception history of this one adventure is captured, according to Vico, in the eye of the Cyclops:

*‘Every giant has his own grove (lucus)’ was originally true, but later it was misunderstood, altered and corrupted. By the age of Homer, it was falsely interpreted as meaning that every giant had an eye in the middle of his forehead.*²³¹

The aesthetic work of Homer, then, provides fragmentary insights into the deepest recesses of past traditions, but also remnants of how subsequent cultures and societies received and ‘worked upon’ those initial legacies. Hans Blumenberg, who will be the topic of later chapters, argues that Vico has a greater admiration for Hercules than for Prometheus, because “for him it is not the fire-bringer but rather the vanquisher of monsters who establishes the possibility of human life (*menschenmöglichkeit*).”²³² Just as the shield of Achilles contains the entire history of the world, Hercules, slayer of monsters, embodies a finalisation of earlier aesthetic traditions, one that kills

²²⁸ Eric Auerbach, *Scenes From the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 193-94.

²²⁹ The translation by Emily Wilson describes the Cyclops as having “no common laws”, See Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 9, 243.

²³⁰ In the Wilson edition, the cyclops is described as “lacking knowledge of normal customs”, Book 9, 246. See Pericles Lewis, “The ‘True’ Homer: Myth and Enlightenment in Vico, Horkheimer and Adorno,” *New Vico Studies* 10 (1992), 28. This is an important paper that outlines the Vichean character to many of the projects that the so-called ‘Frankfurt School’ take up in the twentieth century. See also Joseph Maier, “Vico and Critical Theory,” *Social Research* 43, no. 4 Vico and Contemporary Thought-2 (Winter, 1976).

²³¹ Vico, NS, 244; SN, 390.

²³² Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 379; *Arbeit am Mythos*, 413. This is precisely how works of myth function as works on myth, wherein one mythical traditions work upon the terrors of earlier mythical legacies, ultimately slaying them, such that the world becomes more bearable. See also Giuseppe D’Acunto, “Blumenberg: Metafora e ‘Inconcettualità,’” *Informaci6fica*, XI, 22 (2014), 71.

earlier terrors that inhabited the world and pushes them to the very edges of a culture's socio-cultural imagination. In this light, Vico's argument that Agamemnon's sceptre embodies historical legacies that those in Homer's day were grappling with themselves captures how human communities come to reflect on their pasts as a necessary part of living in the present. Something of what this might mean pragmatically for a historical community can be seen in Odysseus' 'slaying' of the pastoral past, symbolised in his blinding of lawless, pre-agrarian Polyphemus.

For Vico, the beginning of human thought was catalysed not by rational thinking, but by poetic myths that were sung in order to "reduce savage liberty to dutiful behaviour."²³³ The legacy of that initial situation was what Vico called myth's capacity to offer "*vera narratio*", literally 'true narration'.²³⁴ However, when Vico argues that myths represent the 'true narrations' of early civilisation, he intends something more radical than the idea that they embodied merely corrupted archaic histories. His claim that "...all pagan histories have mythical origins, and the myths of the pagan nations were their first histories", is more sophisticated than it first appears.²³⁵ Tracing the etymological relation of *mûthos* and *logos*, Vico's argument that *mûthos* was often translated into Latin as *vera narratio*, is his attempt to draw out a similar argument to that proposed by Kathryn Morgan (discussed in the Introduction). That is, that that myth, or 'true narration', makes no claim to verifiable truth. Instead, myth's capacity to remain truthful was reliant on it resonating between people as having captured something of communal value.

Vico's interest in *vera narratio* represents his attempt to show that myth not only informs human experience initially, but that the reception of those experiences amongst human communities, embodies important historical legacies precisely by virtue of their having survived for so long – for having resonated as true. Myth, then, provides two forms of orientation in the world; an originary one where the immediacy of the world is distanced in the earliest stage of human life, as well as a historical one, where the reception and reflection on myth offers a source of communal meaning. It is because of this that I suggest that Luft, while right in her attempt to convey both the

²³³ Vico, NS, 124; SN, 227.

²³⁴ Vico, NS, 157-159; SN, 268-71.

²³⁵ Vico, NS, 44; SN, 123.

originality, and continued worth of Vico's philosophy, is arguably wrong in her attempt to disassociate him entirely from the Cartesian tradition. It is also why I argue Joseph Mali is entirely correct to suggest that it is within the context of Cartesian rationalism that Vico's alternative model is most illuminating, especially in terms of a wider discussion on myth. I have argued that Vico is fruitfully read as offering an entirely new understanding of rational agency, one that is grounded in a history of the ways in which human beings have both derived meaning from the world, and how they have subsequently reflected on that initial legacy as a source of ongoing communal solidarity and cultural continuity. This offers a different account of the rational faculties and its relationship to truth; instead of departing from 'clear and distinct perception', Vico contends that what is true consists of what is made by human beings in history, during moments of individual and collective creative endeavour. As Horkheimer argues, the fragility of a historically construed truth redefines the ways in which we might conduct philosophy, but also life more generally, in the contemporary sphere: "under the deceptive veneer of the present we find within civilized states tensions of a kind which may well result in frightening relapses."²³⁶ In the next chapter I explore what the philosophical implications are for Vico's illumination of the mythic dimension of our pasts.

²³⁶ Horkheimer, "Vico and Myth," 75.

Chapter Three:

An Eternal and Inextinguishable Light: Divine Providence and Divinari

The aesthetic and historical dimension of Vico's account of myth highlights a fundamental idea in his philosophy: namely, the frailty of human beings. The idea of human existence being made possible (that is, bearable) by virtue of its poetic foundations, however, should not be interpreted as a story of human life railing against a predicament for which it is ultimately unsuited. In Vico's work, there is no real theory of the fundamental maladaptation of the species. Rather, myth represents only the historically determined limits, or scope, of rationality, under which reflection must operate.

This notion of human frailty provides the key to one of the more critical elements of his philosophy: divine providence (*divina provvidenza*). For Vico, divine providence accompanies the forms of life that are shaped by the frailty of the human predicament. He posits that myth was the foundation of human endeavour, rather than its irrational detritus. He simultaneously argues that it is a product of whatever historically contingent emergency presents itself to human beings in particular moments. Vico therefore settles on the indeterminacy of the human being, and the subsequent historically determined nature of what it creates.²³⁷ By doing so, he transforms philosophy's role from an uncovering of unchanging principles, toward a confrontation with the contingent manner in which human beings have created their world. Although he argues that *La Scienza nuova*, represents "a philosophy of human 'authority' (*una filosofia dell'autorità*)", Vico also insists that it only emerges as comprehensible within the light of divine providence. This is due to the fact that, despite "human authority" deriving from "the free use of the will", "authority" itself is "originally...divine."²³⁸ Ultimately, this implies that the fundamental nature of the

²³⁷ Hence Eugene Gadol's claim that what Vico discovered was essentially that "man himself is the creator of the inner structure of the cultural object which is at once a particular (historical) and a universal (conceptual)" is not without its problems. This is due to the fact that a true reading of Vico must concede that it is precisely the universality of concepts that Vico undermines, by arguing that the poetic foundations of the very possibility of conceptual thought are historically determined/contingent. See Eugene T. Gadol, "The Idealistic Foundations of Cultural Anthropology: Vico, Kant and Cassirer," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 12 (2) (1974), 216.

²³⁸ Vico, NS, 151; SN, 260.

world can only be known to God, and the human rational faculties can only come to deal with what it has made, and known, itself.

It is arguably the theory of divine providence that often sees Vico's philosophy positioned as a form of proto-Idealism, the assumption being that it depicts a progressive, teleological model of historical time, and human rational development.²³⁹ However, it probably also contributes to those that consider Vico embodying, like Cassirer, "the first dawns of the spirit of Romanticism," if the point of emphasis is the frailty of human life, and the authentic truth of poetic creation.²⁴⁰ In this chapter I pursue another reading, one that I argue captures what Vico's theory of divine providence implies for a broader understanding of how philosophy might approach myth and its history as constitutive, and ongoing, dimensions of a *rational* life. This reading approaches Vico's theory of divine providence only in relation to another equally important idea. What is most relevant to the human being, according to Vico, is the project of "divining" (*divinari*) the presence of divine providence in the process of human creativity. In the reading I propose, the process of *divinari* names the way in which human beings can reflect on their pasts as a source of ongoing meaning and truth. My suggestion is that Vico's model allows for a conception of human autonomy that recognises the frail and contingent nature of our world, and of the inaccessibility of the divine.

In the Dense and Dark Night

Having established his epistemology that stated human beings could only know what they had made ("verum et factum"), Vico was able to recognise the importance of myth in human life, both aesthetically and historically. Subsequently his focus on myth helped him develop his epistemology further. He labels his theory of divine providence as inherently Platonic; not a philosophy of fate (that he associates with that of Zeno and Spinoza) or chance (Epicurus, Hobbes), but a philosophy of creative human action. It was Plato, he writes, "that established the fact that human institutions

²³⁹ See James C. Morrison, "How to Interpret the Idea of Divine Providence in Vico's 'New Science'," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1979), 258-59.

²⁴⁰ Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth and Culture*, 107.

are guided by providence.”²⁴¹ The important distinction between Vico’s idea of divine providence, and fate or chance, comes in the beginning of the section ‘De’ Principi’ of *La Scienza nuova*. Here, in one of the most famous passages, he writes:

*Still, in the dense and dark night (in tal densa notte) which envelops remotest antiquity, there shines an eternal and inextinguishable light. It is a truth which cannot be doubted: The civil world is certainly the creation of humankind (che questo mondo civile egli certamente è stato fatto dagli uomini). And consequently, the principles of the civil world can and must be discovered within the modifications of the human mind (le modificazione della nostra medesima mente umana). If we reflect on this we can only wonder why all the philosophers have so earnestly pursued a knowledge of the world of nature, which only God can know as its creator, while they neglected to study the world of nations, or civil world, which people can in fact know because they created it.*²⁴²

Vico’s insistence that the civil world must *necessarily* be the creation of human activity, leads him to dismiss the philosophers that concern themselves with the natural world, the realm of divine creation. It is because these philosophers were, he writes, totally unaware of providence, that his own study “must be a rational civil theology of divine providence” (*dev’ essere una teologia civile ragionata della provvidenza divine*).²⁴³ Without the knowledge of providence, these other philosophers reduced the human world to “blind collision of atoms” in the case of the Epicureans, and an “inexorable chain of causes and effects” in the case of the Stoics.²⁴⁴ Vico dislikes these models because they reduce human life to a product of a nature that is fundamentally unknowable. Life and history are reduced to an effect (and at the mercy) of impenetrable, ambiguous forces. Divine providence, on the other hand, is the reflection of a knowable human activity and creativity that manifests itself in the face of, and *in spite of*, the fatality of nature.

²⁴¹ Vico, NS, 490; SN, 694. See also Nancy Du Bois Marcus, *Vico and Plato* (New York: Peter Lang: 2001), 221-36.

²⁴² Vico, NS, 119-120; SN, 219-20.

²⁴³ Vico, NS, 126; SN, 229.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Vico shows his commitment to Platonism when he writes that although the manifestations of divine providence:

*...were created temporal and particular, the orders which providence establishes in it are universal and eternal (universali ed eterni).*²⁴⁵

Here, Vico distinguishes between the material reflections of divine providence (human history) and the manner in which that historical legacy represents the eternal, or the divine. Vico reflects that, human authority lay “in the free use of the will”, something that emerged “when people began to exercise the freedom of their human will and so to control their bodily impulses.”²⁴⁶ However, the manifestation of that authority occurred within “..institutions which providence bestowed on the great polity of humankind without the knowledge or advice of humankind, and often contrary to human planning.”²⁴⁷ As Karl Löwith argues, this does *not* make man the ‘God of history’ in Vico’s system.²⁴⁸ Rather, history becomes the legacy of what humans create in the narrow space allowed them by God. Divine providence, thus, does not *drive* history, but merely establishes a divinely bestowed *potentiality within history* that is extended to human beings. This potentiality waxes and wanes with the worldly realities humans are faced with.

Once again, Horkheimer’s interpretation of Vico is worth referencing and, in this case, quoting in full:

When Vico calls providence the "queen of human actions" (par. 312), when his own science explicitly seeks to furnish "a demonstration, so to speak, of what providence has wrought in history" (par. 342), faith in a divine purpose and redemptive meaning of history seems to constitute the chief tenor of his philosophy. Yet, whenever he concretely applies the concept of providence, the term basically signifies nothing else but the rule or law whereby men—despite their individualistic, barbarian, and egotistical instincts—are finally led to a social and cultural existence. The surface features of history, among whom Vico

²⁴⁵ Vico, NS, 127; SN, 231.

²⁴⁶ Vico, NS, 151; SN, 260.

²⁴⁷ NS, NS 127; SN, 231.

²⁴⁸ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957), 124-25.

counts especially the motives and actions of individuals, are not essential or decisive; rather, without the awareness of individuals and behind their backs (as it were), a series of social formations succeed each other, thus making possible human civilization...The inquiry into these hidden laws thus becomes the real theme of the "new science." As Vico observes (ibid.), the true meaning of the term "providence" emerges from its connection with divinitas which in turn derives from divinari (to grasp what is hidden).²⁴⁹

Vico envisioned his study of myth as a process of divining (uncovering) the secret manifestations of divinely bestowed “human authority” that were scattered in the creative, imaginative activities throughout history. Such representations could be divined, lingering in the civil institutions of humanity, in an ancient analogy or metaphor (“every...metaphor is a miniature myth”), to a form of life mirrored in architecture (“the most ancient traces of medieval barbarism are the little churches...now for the most part in ruins”).²⁵⁰

As discussed in the previous chapter, Vico’s alternative epistemology offers a new way of approaching humanity’s creative, imaginative legacy. Rather than reject the past as a representation of superstition or naiveté, as Horkheimer highlights in the passage above, the task of the so-called ‘new science’ is an uncovering of the historical limits of human agency. For Vico this is a case of human authority (and therefore autonomy) actualising itself within the confines of historical contingency. Philosophy would therefore entail a grappling with what is left to history, rather than what is unknown (and in his view unknowable) in nature, and in so doing coming to terms with the forces that came to shape the desires and interests of philosophy itself. In other words, the philosophical process of *divinari*, to divine, or uncover what is hidden, becomes a process of asking what it would mean for philosophy to engage with the mythico-historical forces that shape the nature and direction of its critical gaze.

²⁴⁹ Horkheimer, “Vico and Mythology,” 66.

²⁵⁰ Vico, NS, 159, 464; SN, 271, 661.

The Return of Barbarism

This approach to the past was not merely of scholarly interest. Vico's suggestion is that the failure of a socio-cultural collective to see its past as a constitutive and ongoing part of its survival risked historical disaster. When Vico was nineteen, on June the 5th, 1688, Naples experienced an earthquake that affected all of southern Italy. The church of San Paolo Maggiore's façade was destroyed, a great deal of which included columns left over from the original pagan temple dedicated to the Dioscuri.²⁵¹ The disaster, which generated a great deal of literature (including true accounts and poetry), did not spark a scientific debate like the later Lisbon earthquake of 1755, but did give rise to broader reflections on the nature of divine intervention and sin.²⁵² It is not hard to imagine the young Vico being struck by this event, given how it reflects certain ideas that he would later wrestle with. The destruction of a Catholic building that was built upon and incorporated the remaining architecture of an earlier pagan site, is a material example of how Vico imagined how the past lingers in the institutions of the present.

Although the earthquake was a natural event, the destruction of the church's façade represents both the deep history of customs, and their incredible vulnerability to historical chance. Vico suggests that it is our incapacity to recognise the ways in which past traditions and practices support contemporary life that leads to historical collapse. Myth's ongoing presence depicted the historical present not necessarily as a culmination of human life, but as a meeting point between different iterations of life, all in an uneasy negotiation. Vico observes the fact that a number of European towns are named after saints, the corresponding church of which would be built on elevated and protected sites, around which the locals built their dwellings:

An immense number of cities, towns, and castles in Europe take their name from saints. For people who wished to hear mass and the other holy offices of

²⁵¹ Stone, *Vico's Cultural History*, 9.

²⁵² Stone, *Vico's Cultural History*, 12.

*our religion built little churches on elevated or protected sites, which we may define as the Christians' natural refuges in that age.*²⁵³

What at first appears to be a standard argument regarding the development of urban sprawl immediately transforms into a more difficult but illuminating passage:

*Everywhere in Europe, the most ancient traces of medieval barbarism (barbarie seconda²⁵⁴) are the little churches built on such sites, now for the most part in ruins.*²⁵⁵

I contend that there are two important points to draw from Vico's argument. The first is his idea that modern European life still functioned around the ancient requirements of a local peoples' desire and ability to worship safely, harassed as they often were by neighbours and conquerors. The necessary defensive attitude of medieval and earlier peoples was, for Vico, something that still left its indelible mark on daily life in his own present (and indeed, in our own). In Vico's eyes, although things like town architecture reflected early medieval forms of life, he traces the need to worship to the earliest iterations of cultic ritual and worship, an uncommon position in his time. The second point highlights Vico's understanding of the ways in which human life and reflection engage with, and emerge from, a given historical moment. His allusion to the revisitation of barbarism suggests that the present is still imbued with the often violent and ambiguous socio-cultural forces of a past age that have not been entirely left behind, or resolved.

The returns of barbarism in Vico's system were not the result of inevitable historical and cultural degeneration, but rather the collapse of culture that is born out of the failure to acknowledge the historically frail normative systems upon which civilisation was founded. From an explanatory perspective, Vico presumably hoped to show how well established cultures could collapse, including his own. The point was to emphasise the fact that human institutions were still predicated on highly ambiguous and often unknowable legacies of the past, a reflection of the human

²⁵³ Vico, NS, 464; SN, 661.

²⁵⁴ Vico's more literal use of 'second barbarism' has traditionally been translated to refer directly to what are now referred to (not unproblematically) as the 'dark ages'.

²⁵⁵ Vico, NS, 464; SN, 661.

being's 'fallen' stature. The acknowledgement of this state of affairs, in Vico's view, allowed for the successful negotiation with both humanity's promise and possibility, and its susceptibility to barbaric regression in the face of material historical conditions that might, suddenly, emerge as a new crisis. This was in his eyes the task of *divinari* – a negotiation of humanity's possibilities in the face of its fallibilities. It was only within the delimitations of those historical particularities that human life could express its autonomy and rational capacity. For Vico, this capacity is historically constituted, rather than an ordained right. What *is* divinely bestowed is the capacity to strive for it. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the process of uncovering, of *divinari*, is not associated with an unmasking of the future, but rather a discovery of what is hidden within the interstices of human history. Because Vico argues that the human subject and society is historically constituted, uncovering what is hidden in humanity's past is, in effect, uncovering what is hidden from itself as a rational actor *in* history.

It is worth reiterating the position of Joseph Mali who argues that Vico's most important argument relates to myth's permeation of all facets of cultural and social life, a fabric that represents the form of truth accessible to human beings. Mali emphasises the fact that for Vico, "our modern 'civil world' was not only created by the poetic fictions of the first men, but still consists in them – insofar as their fictions permeate all our social practices."²⁵⁶ However, as Mali contends, the manner in which Vico's theory outlines a way in which human life engages with its own history as a source of meaning and orientation, has not just epistemological and ontological implications (i.e. regarding the relationship between subject and world) but also ethical ones. Mali writes approvingly of Alasdair MacIntyre's own criticism of "excessive scientism" as beginning with a reading of Vico.²⁵⁷ MacIntyre writes:

...it was Vico who first stressed the importance of the undeniable fact, which is becoming tedious to reiterate, that the subject matters of moral philosophy at least – the evaluative and normative concepts, maxims, arguments and judgments about which the moral philosopher enquires – are nowhere to be found except as embodied in the historical lives of particular social groups and

²⁵⁶ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 88.

²⁵⁷ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 268. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 309.

*so possessing the distinctive characteristics of historical existence...Morality which is no particular society's morality is nowhere to be found.*²⁵⁸

MacIntyre uses Vico to focus specifically on the historical contingency of moral virtue, but Mali correctly identifies the broader implications of Vico's account of the vulnerability of the foundations of culture. His concern was the risks that emerge in history, when the fallibility of our historically constituted selves is not fully understood or appreciated. It goes beyond MacIntyre's more basic claim that moral normativity is historically contingent, and suggests instead that to engage with a system of normativity, of laws and taboos, is to critically reflect on our past (and by extension our myths). In Mali's approach, Vico's conception of the return of barbarism is a materialisation *in* history of humanity's inability to understand itself, and thus to live rationally.

This approach was also an attempt to articulate the value of understanding moral normativity (as an imperfect reflection of our past selves) as a site of rational striving and negotiation. This was distinguishable from those that considered moral action and worth as either entirely relative, or extensions of nature. Within the context of his own life, Vico was most worried about the Natural Law theorists. Mali writes that Vico:

*[considered] these theorists, while seeking to refute the extreme conventionalist views of the sceptics and the libertines about the sheer contingency and relativity of all moral values, reached the opposite extremity, that of naturalism, and ultimately reduced the multiplicity of all moral values to certain basic utilitarian instincts and rational considerations of self preservation in man. In so doing they reduced all the cultural activities of man to mere tactics of a defence mechanism.*²⁵⁹

Vico's new science was intended to show that, by managing to derive a matrix of meaning from the natural world the human being manages to transform the world,

²⁵⁸ Ibid. MacIntyre suggests elsewhere, referencing Vico and James Joyce, that "mythology...is at the heart of things." MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 251.

²⁵⁹ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 48-9.

from the necessary collision of atoms, to a divinely bestowed locus of human autonomy.

History as Our Lot: Human Authority and the Free Use of the Will

The importance of the past as a source of human agency in Vico's work is arguably articulated best by Patrick Hutton, who writes that for Vico, "history is our lot, not our way to salvation."²⁶⁰ This feature of his position on history also brings the radical aspect of his theory of myth into sharper relief. In a model of history that is not teleological, or cyclical, myth ceases to appear as a necessarily rudimentary form of human expression, and instead can present as another form of human reflection and creation. *Divinari* – the uncovering of what is hidden – is a theory pertaining to how a human community's past should be *approached* as a vital part of their humanity. In Vichean terms, because the legacy of human creativity is always subject to the disasters of "chance and choice", how a community comes to *work upon* its past is a vital part of living a moral life.

If myth is not irrational, but a form of poetic creativity that underwrites our capacity *to be* rational, humanity's past is not something to be abandoned.²⁶¹ Where Descartes began his project by a rejection of previously held, and potentially dubious or misleading beliefs, Vico proposes a negotiation with a past that, while perhaps naïve, represents the presence of human will in history, or a transformation from "divine authority to human authority."²⁶² He continues:

In the purest philosophical sense, this authority is the essential property of human nature which not even God can take from man without destroying him...This philosophy of authority is intimately connected to the rational civil

²⁶⁰ See Patrick H. Hutton, "Vico and the End of History," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 22, no. 3, Vico For Historians (Fall 1996), 556.

²⁶¹ Because myth embodies the limiting structures of how human reflection has historically obtained, it also functions in outlining the limits and fallibility of thought. David Ingram argues that these limits are vital for Vico's idea of what rationality can expect in history. See his "Vico's New Science on Interpretation: Beyond Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Issues in Interpretation Theory*, ed. Pol Vandavelde (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007), 222. According to Vico, the feelings of wonder, veneration and desire, that represent the "three stages of human institutions (and the) three lights of providential divinity", can at any time be "distorted by the conceit of scholars and the conceit of nations." Vico, NS, 491; SN, 696.

²⁶² Vico, NS, 151; SN, 259.

*theology of providence. For by using providence's theological proofs, authority's philosophical proofs can clarify and distinguish our philosophical proofs...Hence as we study the institutions of nations during their darkest antiquity, the philosophy of authority renders our human judgement certain, even though it is by nature most uncertain...In other words it reduces philology to the form of a science.*²⁶³

Karl Löwith is right, therefore, to argue that Vico's model of human authority radically reconfigures how we understand history:

*What distinguishes the belief in providence from that in fate or chance is that divine providence uses for the attainment of its universal ends the free, though corrupted, will of man. The doctrine of fate ignores the dialectic between providential necessity and the freedom of the will, while the Epicurean doctrine of chance reduces freedom to mere capriciousness.*²⁶⁴

Löwith suggests that Vico's understanding of divine providence's actualisation relies on history becoming a contested site for a community to understand itself. The contestation is between the divinely inspired will of human action, and human being's corrupted, fallen nature. However, for Vico, humanity's salvation did not lie with God, but with its own concerted effort to work with the historical limitations of its world.

This marks the important correlation between his ideas pertaining to *fantasia* (the imaginative capacity to keep the ambivalences of the world at bay, allowing it to be meaningful), and the concept of *divinari* (a process by which human beings uncover the extent to which what they have made is hidden from themselves). Mali puts it this way:

²⁶³ Vico, NS, 151-152; SN, 260.

²⁶⁴ Löwith, "Meaning in History," 124.

*...because ultimately what mattered in human life and history was not what human beings are made of –their physis – but rather what they have made of and against this nature – their nomos.*²⁶⁵

Thus, as Mali suggests, the project of *divinari* was a moral project as much as anything else. By rejecting the naturalised grounds of human creativity and rationality, Vico reconfigures myth's location in human affairs; from deception, or ignorance, to a form of legitimate creative expression. As such, Vico's account of myth must not be understood as a case of lingering regressive forces in civilised, modern life. Myth, while often associated with violent ritual, was not unambiguously destructive. Rather, it both creates the possibility of the world familiar to human beings but also delimits that human world to a finite set of possibilities. Vico suggests that these ambivalent, imaginative forces of myth create the spheres of possibility of human autonomy, within the confines of what Hutton calls our historical "lot."

At the Feet of Achilles

What would it mean to approach myth and our past as a source of moral reflection, as Vico suggests we should? In what follows, I leave Vico and the surrounding literature to one side in order to provide a speculative account of ways in which Homeric myth might offer such a thing. While this account is partly inspired by Adam Nicolson, an author and private scholar who has written highly original work on ways of approaching Homer, my discussion remains grounded in Vico's ideas.²⁶⁶ Of particular interest are the facets of Vico's theory which will help establish the stakes of my discussion of Walter Benjamin in the following chapters, in particular the latter's focus on how storytelling's negotiation with a community's past can disenchant myth.

One of the more famous scenes of the *Iliad* is the meeting between Priam and Achilles. In this scene, Priam enters the Greek camp, and begs Achilles for the body of his son Hector, who he has killed in single combat. Priam says:

I have gone through what no other mortal on earth has gone through;

²⁶⁵ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 51.

²⁶⁶ Adam Nicolson, *The Mighty Dead: Why Homer Matters* (London: William Collins, 2014).

*I put my lips to the hands of the man who has killed my children.*²⁶⁷

Unexpectedly, Achilles is moved by Priam's words. It causes him to reflect on his own father, Peleus, and the recent death of his only friend Patroklos. Homer writes:

*So he spoke, and stirred in the other a passion of grieving
for his own father. He took the old man's hand and pushed him
gently away, and the two remembered, as Priam sat huddled
at the feet of Achilles and wept close for manslaughtering Hektor
and Achilles wept now for his own father, now again
for Patroklos.*²⁶⁸

Struck by mercy and humility, Achilles allows Priam to return to Troy with the body of his son. This moment of humility is one of the more memorable of the *Iliad*. And yet the next day the war continues, and Troy is eventually sacked, Priam himself murdered by Achilles' own son. Despite this, Nicolson claims that the moment in which "both men give way to grief...is the *Iliad*'s triumph."²⁶⁹ He goes on to claim that, in spite of the barbarous end for Troy, "...in poetry, in passing, a better world is momentarily – or in fact everlastingly – seen."²⁷⁰

Nicolson's argument is not based around the idea that Homeric epic maintains a hold over history purely by virtue of the unchanging strength of its poetic beauty. He contends, in ways similar to Horkheimer and Adorno, that the Homeric traditions represent what is left of a series of socio-cultural memories that represent an ongoing source of communal reflection. The figure of Achilles, suggests Nicolson, represents a form of archetype of the early Greeks' memory of much earlier, Bronze Age and Neolithic heroes and warrior cultures.²⁷¹ This is not the archetype envisioned by psychoanalysis, but one that derives from a historical 'finalisation' of the stories and traditions that were told by the Greek peoples. These stories originated on the

²⁶⁷ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Book 24, 488.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Nicolson, *The Mighty Dead*, 206-07.

²⁷⁰ Nicolson, *The Mighty Dead*, 207.

²⁷¹ Nicolson, *The Mighty Dead*, 117.

Eurasian steppes, before those tribes descended onto the Mediterranean.²⁷² These are, of course, not explicit, unambiguous memories. Nicolson writes:

*The semi-pastoral economic and political system was the breeding ground for a dynamic and mobile warrior culture which would eventually spread throughout Eurasia...a single world of Bronze Age chieftainship stretched across the whole of northern Eurasia from the Atlantic to the Asian steppe. It is a world hinged on the idea of the hero, quite different from the developed, literate cultures of the eastern Mediterranean...In his Greek heroes, Homer gives voice to the northern warrior world...the only place you can hear the Bronze Age warriors of the northern grasslands speak and dream and weep...In places where you might least expect to find them, echoes of the world of Achilles come drifting up at you.*²⁷³

The memories of these past lives are captured within the character of Achilles, who distrusts kings, the city-state and its laws, and lives his life according to a more ancient code. As a distinctly Greek character, Achilles embodies the Vichean notion of the Greeks' negotiation with the cultural memory of their own past.²⁷⁴ Just as Agamemnon's shield embodied the finalisation of past mythic histories according to Vico, so too does the symbolic character of Achilles. Achilles represents a much older form of life.²⁷⁵ He is, in some important respects, much like Polyphemus the Cyclops:

²⁷² Ibid. The literature on the origins of the Greeks in the Eurasian Steppes is vast. See David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth*, 233-43. Gilbert Murray, who was read by Horkheimer and Adorno, suggests that early Greek cultures were regularly "broken up by migrations from the north." See Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of Greek Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 39.

²⁷³ Nicolson, *The Mighty Dead*, 117, 144-78.

²⁷⁴ This idea is based on Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory – see also footnote 224, as well as my discussion in the Introduction. Assmann describes three kinds of memory, namely "mimetic memory", "memory of things" and "communicative memory." "Cultural memory" which he describes as a "handing down of meaning", a locus wherein the three specific kinds of memory "merge almost seamlessly." See Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early*, 5-6. In regards to Homer specifically, he argues that Homer "...may stand at the end of the world he describes, and his poetry may be its monument." He argues that the *Iliad* itself, although representing a cultural memory of Greece's fragmented origins, was a socio-cultural rallying point: "In Greece, we have a memory shared by many scattered groups based on the *Iliad* under the sign of 'integration'." See 250, 248.

²⁷⁵ Gilbert Murray also acknowledges the tribal origins of Achilles. See Murray, *The Rise of Greek Epic*, 206-07. For a discussion on Achilles as a wanderer and a vagabond, see Dean Hammer, "Achilles as Vagabond: The Culture of Autonomy in the 'Iliad'," *The Classical World* 90, no. 5 (May -Jun., 1997). Strikingly, Hammer argues that the solidarity between Priam and Achilles is not due to a shared

where the latter was entirely without *nomos* (the law), Achilles lived according to a sincere, tribal warrior code. In that respect he is a far more ancient character than cunning Odysseus.

These ideas are not entirely speculative. The scholar Walter Burkert, for example, has suggested that Greek myth reflects much older forms of life, dating back even to the most ancient forms of hunter-gather existence. Burkert claims that within the more modern iterations of Greek religious tradition, there can be found the “old hunting instincts breaking through the thin crust of civilisation.”²⁷⁶ Of the hero Hercules, he contends that he derives from a myriad of historical traditions, but points out that it is striking that he is often more associated with the overcoming and slaying of wild animals:

*The name Heracles is no doubt far later than the story patterns; there was no individual to start with, but tales structured by practical and ritual experience: bearing the marks of shamanistic hunting ritual, these tales accumulated to create the character whom the Greeks called Heracles.*²⁷⁷

He also argues that the fire-hardened stick that Odysseus uses to kill Polyphemus with has a deep resonance:

*[The spear is]...in fact superfluous. Odysseus has his sword, he even considers killing the sleeping ogre with it...But the tale postulates more specific means. The wooden spear, hardened by fire, is, historically, the primordial weapon of man...Does this mean that the Cyclops tale is Palaeolithic? The wooden spear alone would not prove this; but in connection with the ‘master of animals’ theme, the problem of eating and sacrifice, such a provenience becomes quite probable.*²⁷⁸

sense of human community, but rather the insight that they are both, ultimately, wanderers and vagabonds. See Hammer, “Achilles as Vagabond,” 365.

²⁷⁶ Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 138.

²⁷⁷ Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 96.

²⁷⁸ Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, 31-4.

Achilles' confrontation with a more urbane, civil man in Priam, embodies the meeting between the tribal origins of the Mediterranean, and the city state that would replace it. It also represents the meeting of two laws, that of Achilles' commitment to a stateless warrior code, and Priam's belief in the norms of the city. In other words, it is the meeting between two possibilities, or historical manifestations, of human life. Vico articulates this idea precisely when he writes:

*Homer's two epics prove to be two treasuries, in which we may discover the natural law of the Greeks when they were still a barbarous people.*²⁷⁹

Achilles sudden mercy in spite of his savage cruelty, captured in his weeping with Priam over their respective family losses, represents the ways in which the reflection on humanity's frailty before forces seemingly outside of its control, can inspire qualitatively new forms of understanding and reflection. It does so, according to Vico, by holding fast to the knowledge that "the world of nations is in fact a human creation", meaning the chance to make it more humane is contingent on the modifications of humanity's own behaviour and belief.²⁸⁰

Vico's argument goes beyond the claim that myths can retain some form of 'moral weight'. It also counters the archetypal argument that suggests myths retain an unchanging moral kernel that resonates with a people in spite of historical circumstances. This point is fruitfully compared to Assman's differentiation between 'memory culture' and 'tradition'. For Vico it is not the same 'lessons' that continue to be extracted from the myths, implying a moral realm separate from our histories. Rather, the important point is that myth's capacity to be meaningful remains a source of ongoing reflection and historical negotiation. In that light, foundational episodes like that between Priam and Achilles, by embodying almost entirely forgotten forms of life as well as very familiar ones, offer a reflection of what is possible within the limits of what history has presented. Vico's ideas gesture towards the notion that the reconciliation between Achilles and Priam, in spite of the subsequent disasters of history, offers the promise of something new emerging from the already limited

²⁷⁹ Vico, NS, 6; SN, 80.

²⁸⁰ Vico, NS, 489; SN, 693.

horizons of that past. For Vico, the divinity of human life was their capacity to redeem what had been distorted in the passage of time.

Piety and Wisdom

What is to be gained from a study of Vico today? My intention in these chapters has not been a ‘rehabilitation’ of Vico. His strange, baroque system is inarguably difficult, and has been influential in only a very limited sense. He remains, however, an important and often overlooked figure in any discussion of myth’s relation to reason. Ultimately, I suggest this is because his account of myth is in effect a reconfiguration of the ways in which human beings should relate to, and reflect on, their histories. As Löwith argues, Vico’s ideas are “rather classic than Christian” insofar as he is unconcerned with “faith in a future fulfilment.”²⁸¹ He goes on:

*The cyclic recurrence provides for the education and even “salvation” of mankind by the rebirth of its social nature. It saves man by preserving him. This alone, but not redemption, is the “primary end” and providential meaning of history.*²⁸²

Here, Löwith shows that’s Vico’s ideas uncover an alternative way of how human beings can relate to their past; not as dead, but as ever-present in the very manifestation (and maintenance) of socio-cultural life in the present. As Löwith concludes, this picture of history is neither progressive, or cyclical in the sense of a steady growth and regression, but “a historiocyclic progression from *corso* to *ricorso* in which the cycle itself has providential significance by being an ultimate remedy for man’s corrupted nature.”²⁸³ The historical reality of *ricorsi*, then, represents the contested site of any given historical moment, where the possibility of human authority that is divinely bestowed sits in an uneasy presence with the ever-present risk of historical, and thus human, regression. Vico concludes: “In sum all the observations contained in this work lead to one conclusion. My *New Science* is

²⁸¹ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 134.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 135.

indissolubly linked to the study of piety; and unless one is pious, one cannot truly be wise.”²⁸⁴

That the tears of Achilles can continue to maintain a hold over us is testament to the fact that, just as he was overcome with a sudden mercy when confronted with a form of grief unfamiliar to him, so too could something qualitatively new emerge from our engagement with the historically conditioned limits of what it is to be human. I argue, therefore, that although a minor thinker, and “precisely on the border line of the critical transition from the theology to the philosophy of history and, therefore, deeply ambiguous”, Vico offers largely unexplored avenues regarding how we might approach our hopes for rational autonomy and agency, and the still confounding reality of historical disaster.²⁸⁵

That the past sits in an uneasy and ambiguous relation with the present was one of the primary concerns of Walter Benjamin, whose account of myth is the topic of the following two chapters. While Vico considered the negotiation between humanity’s divine potential and its often bleak realities as representing a kind of piety toward God, Benjamin’s focus was on how the past could be redeemed, for the sake of the living.

²⁸⁴ Vico, NS, 49; SN, 696.

²⁸⁵ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 135.

Chapter Four:

Drawings of the Elk: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Mimesis

If it is true that a rational life is predicated upon the long and obscure history of human creative endeavour, as Vico argues, what then? What would it mean for reason to understand myth not as its binary opposite, but its grounding possibility? It may be legitimate to argue that Vico represents an 'alternative' to the philosophical tradition begun by the Cartesian system. It could be argued that Vico's influence in Western philosophy emerges occasionally, but vividly, in disparate thinkers and times. However, this largely historical/philological question is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I would like to ask what it would mean to engage with Vico's thesis that human creative, poetic, endeavour underpins human life? One possible resource for developing an answer to this question lies with the philosophy of Walter Benjamin. This approach has two possible directions, one historical, one philosophical. The strictly historical pathway looks to the influence Vico had over Benjamin's thought, to which the answer must be, a small one. Vico is mentioned only a handful of times in the entirety of Benjamin's corpus. Toward the end of his life Benjamin positions his own work as part of the legacy of Carl Gustav Jochmann, who he traces within a lineage beginning with Vico.²⁸⁶ However, I do not propose to elaborate on the direct influence of Vico's work on Benjamin's which, typical of many of the latter's influences, remains ambiguous, and would in itself demand its own study.²⁸⁷ Rather, this chapter will pursue the implications posed by the initial question regarding Vico's work as an alternative way of approaching myth, and by extension the past.

As I argued in the previous chapters, one of the important aspects of Vico's work is in his liquidation of the binary opposition between poetic myth, and rationality. Fundamentally, he interrogates the ways in which rationality as an urbane,

²⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Regression of Poetry," SW 4, 364-365; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 584. Hereafter references to the Benjamin texts discussed in detail will be to the English *Selected Writings*, followed by the German *Gesammelte Schriften*, abbreviated to SW and GS respectively.

²⁸⁷ See the already cited Marshall, "The Intrication of Political and Rhetorical Inquiry in Walter Benjamin," 704, footnote 221. See also Joseph Mali, "Retrospective Prophets: Vico, Benjamin and other German Mythologists," *Clio*, 26 (1997). Mali argues convincingly that Benjamin hopes for a 'redemptive' philosophy was derived from Vico, 428.

dispassionate human faculty relies not merely on a cognitive ability, but also on an ongoing engagement with the material history of all human creativity. This was based on a theory that argued that poetic myth initially helped early human beings create ‘distance’ between their bodies and the terrors of the natural world. The reception of that distancing, subsequently, was the catalysing source of a great deal of socio-cultural tradition, cohesion and meaning. Benjamin did not take up this project explicitly, however I argue that aspects of his corpus can be understood from this direction. Specifically, I contend that Benjamin’s approach to the ‘problem’ of myth’s presence in human life, ongoing throughout his life, can be fruitfully read in conjunction with his theory of mimesis, specifically the short essays of the early 1930s: *On Astrology*, *Doctrine of the Similar*, and *On the Mimetic Faculty*. In these essays, Benjamin argues that, “there may be no single one of [humanity’s] higher functions that is not codetermined by the mimetic faculty.”²⁸⁸ Benjamin’s account of mimesis is fundamentally concerned with how human beings “established relations” as a way of overcoming undifferentiated space; or how they came to contest, and overthrow, the authority of nature.²⁸⁹ Deeply influenced by intellectuals like the psychologists Sigmund Freud and Heinz Werner, and the sociologist Roger Caillois, Benjamin claims that “we no longer possess in our perception whatever once made it possible to speak of a similarity which might exist between a constellation of stars and a human.”²⁹⁰ He argues that this is the case because the matrixes of meaning derived from those initial mimetic practices have been deposited into modern linguistic exchange.

In this chapter, I argue that Benjamin’s account of mimesis (in particular when read in relation to his important intellectual influences) can be understood as an attempt to outline the ways in which the original matrixes of relations that were established between the body and the world, continue to mediate meaning in language. My contention is that Benjamin’s discussion of mimesis has important repercussions for his association of myth with the stultifying, petrifying presence of fate in human life. Benjamin’s idea of myth relates (although not always

²⁸⁸ Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2, 694; GS II, 204-05.

²⁸⁹ Benjamin, “The Knowledge That the First Material on Which the Mimetic Faculty Tested Itself,” SW 3, 253; GS, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band VI* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 127. The quote originates from another fragment written at a similar time (to be discussed in the following section) but the argument is the same.

²⁹⁰ Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2, 694; GS II, 207.

unambiguously) to a category of human experience – what he calls the “uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate.”²⁹¹ It is from this sphere that Benjamin believes the human mimetic drive seeks to wrest back certain forms of independence or liberty.²⁹² Thus, although Benjamin does not have any explicit theory of ‘distance’ as Vico does, I suggest that there is a fertile reading of Benjamin that contrasts his work on mimesis, myth and storytelling. It offers a reflection of how he imagined it might be possible for the disenchantment from myth to reside in the history of our reflections on it. Further, it gestures toward his fears of the dangers inherent in our hopes for myth’s liquidation, in spite of its calcifying effect over human autonomy.²⁹³ In the present chapter, I will outline Benjamin’s theory of mimesis, and its debts to other thinkers. In the subsequent chapter, I will turn to Benjamin’s explicit discussion of myth, and stories as a repository of a people’s past.

The Border at Portbou

By now, the broad strokes of Walter Benjamin’s life (1892-1940) are familiar to most, and indeed have passed into their own mythology.²⁹⁴ Born into a wealthy, middle class Berlin family, Benjamin’s university education spanned across several institutions. He received his PhD from the University of Bern in 1919 with the dissertation, *Begriff der Kunstkritik in der Deutschen Romantik (The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism)*.²⁹⁵ In 1924 he wrote *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels (The Origin of German Tragic Drama)*, intended to be submitted as his *Habilitation* thesis. He later withdrew it from consideration, however, after being told that it was likely to be rejected, something he regretted for the rest of his life.²⁹⁶ Benjamin subsequently abandoned formal academia, to become an essayist and literary critic. His fame was almost entirely posthumous, outside of a very select group of German intellectuals. Some of his most famous pieces of writing, to name only a few, include, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt (On the Critique of Violence)* (1921),

²⁹¹ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 248; GS II, 197.

²⁹² Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2, 694; GS II, 207.

²⁹³ Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” SW 3, 143; GS II, 439.

²⁹⁴ Udi. E. Greenberg, “The Politics of the Walter Benjamin Industry,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 3 (2008), 55-6. For a discussion of Benjamin’s main concerns and their relation to his own life, see Susan Handelman, “Walter Benjamin and the Angel of History,” *CrossCurrents* 41, no. 3 (1991), 350.

²⁹⁵ Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 113.

²⁹⁶ Eiland & Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 231-33.

Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften (Goethe's Elective Affinities) (1924), *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction)* (1935) and *Über den Begriff der Geschichte (Theses on the Philosophy of History)* (1940).²⁹⁷

In 1927 Benjamin began what he considered his *magnum opus*, the *Passagen Werk (The Arcades Project)*. Throughout the 1930s he lived as an exile in Paris, with brief stints in Italy and Denmark, having escaped Germany in March 1933, in the wake of Hitler's rise to power and the Reichstag fire. Despite the precarious nature of his situation, he eked out a meagre living, borrowing money from family and friends, and writing for the *Institut für Sozialforschung*.²⁹⁸ Unlike many other Jewish intellectuals, Benjamin did not leave Europe as the intentions of Nazi Germany became clearer. In September 1940, having finally been forced to escape France, he found the Spanish border at Portbou closed, and committed suicide. Although many of his documents had been entrusted to friends, the briefcase he was carrying during the crossing of the Pyrenees was lost. Benjamin lore suggests that it was the finished draft of the *Passagen Werk*, although this is unverifiable. His work has since inspired its own small industry within the academy, no doubt due to his superb abilities as a writer, and the fascination with the often highly idiosyncratic style of his philosophical approach.

Drawings of the Elk

Perhaps the most succinct account of Benjamin's ideas on mimesis comes in a short piece of writing from 1936, written some years after the aforementioned mimesis essays.²⁹⁹ What initially might appear as a highly idiosyncratic fragment will emerge as more straightforward in light of the arguments I propose in this chapter:

²⁹⁷ See Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Selected Writings: Volume One, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 236-52; "Goethe's Elective Affinities," SW1, 297-360; "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," SW 3, 101-33; "Theses on the Philosophy of History," SW 4, 389-400.

²⁹⁸ Eiland & Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*. See chapters "Exile" and "The Paris Arcades", 391-575.

²⁹⁹ Jeneen Hobby argues that Benjamin has no explicit "concept" of mimesis, "...and certainly not an idea," but also suggests that what Benjamin himself calls both a "doctrine" and a "faculty" remained "fundamental to his work on the philosophy of language." See Janeen Hobby, "Benjamin and the Faculty of Mimesis," *16 Cardozo Law Review* 16 (3-4) (1995), 1431.

*The knowledge that the first material on which the mimetic faculty tested itself was the human body should be used more fruitfully than hitherto to throw light on the primal history (Urgeschichte) of the arts. We should ask whether the earliest mimesis of objects through dance and sculpture was not largely based on imitation of the performances through which primitive man established relations with these objects. Perhaps Stone Age man produced such incomparable drawings of the elk only because the hand guiding the implement still remembered the bow with which it had felled the beast.*³⁰⁰

The term *Urgeschichte* has an important role in Benjamin's work. Originally intended to refer simply to the forgotten period of prehistory, in Benjamin's later writings, it comes to refer to a presence, or the remnant of, the archaic past with the historical present as it appears to the modern subject. In the passage, Benjamin is asking about the extent to which a history of aesthetic creation and experience – concrete human practices of the past that are otherwise lost – can be understood within the context of the movements of the human body. He suggests that “the fact that the resemblances we can perceive, for example, in people's faces, in buildings, and plant forms, in certain cloud formations and skin diseases, are nothing more than tiny prospects from a cosmos of similarity”, or, a whole web of codified meanings and relations that have disappeared from human life.³⁰¹ Benjamin argues that this mimetic capacity, at least for historically remote peoples, was “life determining”. It was in practices like “dance, [or] other cultic occasions”, where similarities that early humans must have recognised between the stars, and themselves, became not just cases of mimicry, but a situation in which “such imitation could be produced, such similarity *dealt with*” (my emphasis).³⁰² That is, the movements of the human body came to determine the world as it appeared to the human being, but also how she came to think of her place in it as an existential question.³⁰³ As he signals in the fragment, the establishment of

³⁰⁰ Benjamin, “The Knowledge That the First Material on Which the Mimetic Faculty Tested Itself,” SW 3, 253; GS VI, 127.

³⁰¹ Benjamin, “On Astrology,” SW 2, 684; GS VI, 192.

³⁰² Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” SW 2, 721; GS II, 211.

³⁰³ Atsuko Tsuji explains Benjamin's idea thus: “Movement of the limbs enables us to imitate the mysteries of the world or the universe because these have no form and, thus, cannot be seen, read and replicated in bodily movement.” Atsuko Tsuji, “Experience in the Very Moment of Writing: Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's Theory of Mimesis,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 1 (2010), 130.

countless and intricately connected sets of relations between human being and world, went beyond the physical.

The historical context of Benjamin's theory of mimesis lay in his desire to articulate a philosophy of language. Although the mimetic relations between human and world have largely been lost, Benjamin argues that they did not entirely disappear, but rather "very gradually found [their] way into language and writing."³⁰⁴ His intention was to capture a facet of language that positivist accounts could not. In *Problems in the Sociology of Language (Probleme der Sprachsoziologie)*, written just after the mimesis essay, Benjamin explicitly names Rudolf Carnap's work on positivist semiotics in *Logische Syntax der Sprache*, published in 1934 as symptomatic of a broader problem. These systems are, Benjamin writes:

*...concerned solely with the representational functions of signs [where the] links in the chain of proof...are not taken from verbal language. Rather, Carnap's 'logical syntax' operates with the so called languages of coordinates.*³⁰⁵

Benjamin's disagreement with this approach concerned the fact that it was in essence an analysis of relations *within* language, where truth predicates could be derived by the calculus of these relations. Although Carnap concedes that true languages have other dimensions, in Benjamin's view, he and the other positivists were unable to approach them in any genuine sense due to the ahistoricity of their method. They argued that language's meaning was restricted purely to the logic of semantic relations, not the history of its development (which might be intellectually of interest, but distinct).³⁰⁶ Benjamin, in contrast, sought to unify both language's meaning and its past.

In addition to Carnap's positivist approach, there is good reason to think that Benjamin also considered his theory of the mimetic origins of language as a form of

³⁰⁴ Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," SW 2 697; GS II, 209.

³⁰⁵ Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," SW 3, 77; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band III* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 466-67.

³⁰⁶ Benjamin references Carnap's *Logische Syntax der Sprache* (Vienna: Springer, 1934), released as volume 8 of *Schriften zur wissenschaftlichen Weltauffassung*. See Benjamin, SW 3, 77; GS III, 466-67.

reply to contemporary neo-Kantianism. Benjamin probably had in mind Ernst Cassirer's work on symbolic forms, published throughout the 1920s, and to which he also refers in *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*.³⁰⁷ Benjamin describes Cassirer's attempt to "relate primitive linguistic concepts to the form of mythical concepts, rather than to that of logical concepts." While approving of Cassirer's interest in myth, the crucial difference for Benjamin is that Cassirer's approach still maintains an important differentiation between 'mythical' and 'logical' concept formation, as historically and cognitively distinct.³⁰⁸ Benjamin, on the other hand, rejects the idea that the emergence of rationality constitutes an explicit breakaway from mythical modes of cognition into more complex symbolic ones at some remote point in history, as Cassirer does.³⁰⁹

Benjamin's desire in linking language's unique capabilities to an original mimetic faculty represents a challenge to these ahistorical, or historically naïve, theories. More precisely, he remains largely ambivalent as to whether anything new will emerge from such an approach. He acknowledges that, "the mimetic faculty has been conceded some influence on language...but...such considerations remained closely tied to the common place, sensuous realm of similarity."³¹⁰ This has been done, he laments, "without consideration of a further meaning, still less a history, of the mimetic faculty."³¹¹ The question remains, he suggests, as to whether the already acknowledged "primitive" correlations between mimesis and language, which he locates in onomatopoeia – a word's association with the sound the word names – "can be developed and adapted to improved understanding."³¹² On the face of it, Benjamin's approach may appear speculative. However, he imagines it as a material investigation. The evidence was, after all, deposited in language itself. As Chris

³⁰⁷ See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two: Mythical Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955). See also Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," SW 3, 70; GS III, 456.

³⁰⁸ See also Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," SW 3, 70; GS III, 456.

³⁰⁹ Cassirer talks about how, within mythic language, there exists "another force, the power of logic." See Ernst Cassirer, "Language and Myth: A Contribution to the Problem of the Names of the Gods," *The Warburg Years (1919-1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*, trans. S. G. Lofts and A. Calcagno (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 212. See also Benjamin, "Problems in the Sociology of Language," SW 3, 70; GS III, 456.

³¹⁰ Benjamin, SW 2, 721, GS II, 211.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

Andre has argued, Benjamin's focus on language functioned as "a reminder that the visual image represents only a portion of available human experience."³¹³

By embodying a modern representation of the ancient tactic of mimesis, language became in effect representative of a vast, secret history of human thinking, of the fleeting examples of humanity's confrontation with the practical realities of life in the remote past.³¹⁴ Benjamin suggests we see a shadow of this in graphology, which "has taught in us to recognise in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it."³¹⁵ Benjamin sought only to interrogate the possibilities that emerged from a theory of language that, firstly, accepted some form of relation between language and the mimetic faculty, and secondly, examined the relation within the context of their history.

On Astrology

The exact time of writing of the three short essays to be discussed – *On Astrology*, *Doctrine of the Similar*, and *On the Mimetic Faculty* – is not known exactly. All were written within approximately a year of each other, between sometime in 1932, and September 1933.³¹⁶ Considering the similarity of the arguments, they could be said to represent different drafts of the one essay, or at least different approaches to the same problem. *On Astrology* (*Zur Astrologie*), which is more a fragment than an essay, is

³¹³ Chris Andre, "Aphrodite's Children: Hopeless Love, Historiography, and Benjamin's Dialectical Image," *SubStance* 27, no. 1 (1998), 127.

³¹⁴ Susanne Langer provides a good discussion of the importance of the practical realities of early human beings' lives in her account of the emergence and meaning of dance. She points out, in ways similar to Benjamin, that the dance offers glimpses of forms of life that are infinitely remote from modernity, but that nonetheless remain recognizable. She writes that some of the earliest iterations of dance "divides the sphere of holiness from that of profane existence. What is created is the image of a world of vital forces." Langer's central point is that the meaning of the dance – even its contemporary meaning – is contingent on those initial realities that the dance reflected, as continuing to maintain a hold on human beings in the world. In the spirit of Benjamin, Langer suggests that the gestures that make up the dance are reflections of a long-lost set of relations between human being and world, an aura that points to the presence of the remnants of a 'dream' or 'enchanted' world, within the movements themselves. In Benjaminian terms, it is the hold that these remnants of the past have over modern people that points to their redemptive possibilities. See Susanne Langer, "From Feeling and Form," *What is Dance: Readings in Theory and Criticism*, ed. Roger Copeland, Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 28-46.

³¹⁵ Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW 2, 722; GS II, 212.

³¹⁶ Based on the timeline offered in the English edition of the selected works. See Benjamin, "On Astrology," SW 2, 685; "Doctrine of the Similar," SW 2, 698; "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW 2, 722.

the earliest piece and was probably written in 1932.³¹⁷ This piece of writing marks one of Benjamin's first attempts to deal with the topic of mimesis, and the mimetic faculty. He begins by arguing that any serious study of astrology must divorce itself from its correlation with what he calls "influences" and "radiant energies."³¹⁸ For Benjamin, this allows astrology to be taken seriously as a human practice (with accompanying world view) with a history, not merely a reflection of past 'irrational' behaviour. Benjamin Loveluck offers a simple way of approaching the stranger elements of Benjamin's discussion, arguing that, "although the establishment of such a link between human social experiences and stellar observations may seem remote, only tangentially significant, or even unacceptably 'esoteric' and speculative, [it] captures the deep sense in which for Benjamin the experience of the world changes across time."³¹⁹ Such a change is visible in the fact that, "Antiquity had a much sharper mimetic sense for physiognomic resemblances than does modern man...[and perhaps] physiognomy was based on animal resemblances."³²⁰ For Benjamin, then, a study of astrology or mimesis more broadly, captured the extraordinary ways in which the human experience of the world can transform over time.

Crucially for Benjamin, the relation between astrology's meaning and early human practices is no longer immediately accessible. He writes:

*As students of ancient traditions, we have to reckon with the possibility that manifest configurations, mimetic resemblances, may once have existed where today we are no longer in a position even to guess at them. For example, in the constellations of the stars.*³²¹

It is important to take into account the full breadth of Benjamin's claim. The horoscope in its earliest iterations, he argues, must "be understood as an originary totality that astrological interpretation merely subjects to analysis" – that is, an entire world and worldview that astrology itself only subjected to interpretation.³²² As noted

³¹⁷ Benjamin, "On Astrology," SW 2, 685.

³¹⁸ Benjamin, "On Astrology," SW 2, 684; GS VI, 192.

³¹⁹ Benjamin Loveluck, "The Redemption of Experience: On Walter Benjamin's 'Hermeneutical Materialism'," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37, no. 2 (2011), 178.

³²⁰ Benjamin, "On Astrology," SW 2, 685; GS VI, 193.

³²¹ Ibid

³²² Ibid

in the quote above, he concludes that this implies that in all probability humans were able to imitate the movement of the stars, both as individuals and groups, in a manner that would be entirely unrecognisable to modern human beings. This imitation, Benjamin insists, “may be seen as the only authority that gave to astrology the character of experience.”³²³ He suggests that such a capacity is something that modern humans might occasionally feel inside themselves (for example, in the strange capacity to see a human form in random objects) but that the full extension of meaning that the stars once held is irretrievably lost: “these rare moments furnish no conception of the nascent promises that lay in the constellations of the stars.”³²⁴ In spite of the full wealth of meaning that was derived from human’s early mimetic expression having disappeared, the mimetic faculty itself remains, albeit in a withered form. Within the adult this faculty and capacity for understanding has been swallowed up by more abstract representations. However, as Benjamin observes, the “mimetic genius” is still visible in the modern child, “who even today in the early years of his life will evidence the utmost mimetic genius by learning language.”³²⁵ The mimetic capacity that was visible in the child (and lost in the adult), writes Susan Buck-Morss, was for Benjamin “an active, creative form of mimesis, involving the ability to make correspondences by means of spontaneous fantasy.”³²⁶ Buck-Morss argues that this capacity drew out the “unsevered connection between perception and action.”

On Astrology is directed not so much at the details of the mimetic faculty itself (something Benjamin does not even refer to directly until *Doctrine of the Similar*), but rather its representation in a concrete historical practice. These practices date back to a period in which Benjamin believed, as Blair Ogden argues, life was “expressed as an unquestionable animism.”³²⁷ Ogden argues that, although this form of life was infinitely remote from the conditions of modernity, *On Astrology* aimed “to illuminate

³²³ Ibid

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid. Many of the first generation of critical theorist including Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer, were interested in childhood, both in terms of the ‘image’ of the child, as well as their psychological development. See Roger Neustadter, “An End of ‘Childhood Amnesia’: The Utopian Ideal of Childhood in Critical Theory,” *Mid-American Review of Sociology* 16, no. 2 (1992), 72-3.

³²⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 263.

³²⁷ Blair Ogden, “Benjamin, Wittgenstein and Philosophical Anthropology: A Reevaluation of the Mimetic Faculty,” *Grey Room*, no. 39, Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art (Spring 2010), 61.

our common life via the terms of an elementary culture.”³²⁸ In other words, it attempted to show that astrology *as such* was merely one small interpretative element within a world of relations (and, thus, meanings and experiences) that were lost to the modern human being. The capacity to make out various shapes – what Benjamin calls “a pale shadow” – in the stars today, represented nothing more than the faint recognition of a world long gone.

This world is, however, nonetheless in some sense still present.³²⁹ As Benjamin went on to describe in greater detail in the later essays, it was this more nuanced understanding of mimesis that drew out the vital connection between, for example, the animism of prehistory, and the abstraction of language. Meaning in language, or in gestural imitation such as dance, flashed up in a moment of recognisability not because of an abstract correspondence that was cognised by the mind, but because that word or gesture was an explicit manifestation, and recollection, of a history of human experience and life.³³⁰ By representing a tiny fragment of a series of lost

³²⁸ Ibid. Ogden suggests that Benjamin’s theory of mimesis is derived and inspired by the work of Heinz Werner (to be discussed in detail shortly), who argued that mimesis was important only insofar as it developed a set of relations between subject and world. It was these sets of relations that Benjamin argues (in all likelihood with Werner’s theory in mind) established an “originary totality... a characteristic unity” between otherwise abstract and unrelated phenomena, such that they became imbued with meaning. Its meaning was derived not merely in the sets of relations themselves, but how those objects came to relate, or appear similar, to certain human movements and activities. See Benjamin, “On Astrology,” SW 2, 685; GS VI, 193; Heinz Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development* (New York: International Universities Press, 1940).

³²⁹ Benjamin, “On Astrology,” SW 2, 685; GS VI, 193.

³³⁰ An important qualification is necessary at this point. This does not suggest that, as Giorgio Agamben writes in his short essay *Note sul gesto*, that gesture is “pure mediality.” He writes: “Il gesto è, in questo senso, comunicazione di una comunicabilità. Esso non ha propriamente nulla da dire, perché ciò che mostra è l’essere-nel-linguaggio dell’uomo come pura medialità” (“Gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of man as pure mediality”). Agamben’s approach to gesture seems informed by Benjamin’s, but it ignores the materiality of history that is crucial for Benjamin’s account. Agamben seems to suggest that gesture communicates both a condition of the possibility of meaning, as well as indicating a form of expression that cannot be put into words. It is the pure expression of the possibility of human communicability. But Benjamin is explicit that the gestures that operate within mimesis are the setting up of a series of relations between subject and world, i.e. they mediate a set of relations that are not reflected by the gesture, but contained within the sum total of the gesture’s expression. This does not make them ‘pure mediality’, as Agamben claims (that is, the expression of the inexpressible), but rather the mediation of a set of relations, *and its history*, between human being and world that is captured within the movement of the physical body. See Giorgio Agamben, “Note Sul Gesto,” *Mezzi Senza Fine* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996), 52. For the English translation see, Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2000), 58. For a discussion of Agamben’s interest in ‘pure gesture’ see Colby Dickinson, “Beyond Violence, Beyond the Text: The Role of Gesture in Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben, and its Affinity with the Work of René Girard,” *Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 6 (2011), 957-59. For the relation of Agamben’s conception of pure means to the political (and by extension to

mediating relations between human being and world, the mimetic capacity sheds a fragment of light onto very remote forms of life, the lost connections of which are deposited and vanished into language's capacity to resonate between and amongst communities. A study of what Benjamin calls a "rational astrology" would in effect be a study of the ways in which other forms of human creative endeavour not normally associated with rational reflection came to inform, or mediate, our capacity to *be* rational.³³¹

Doctrine of the Similar

An important basis for Benjamin's discussion of mimesis is the discipline of developmental psychology, in particular phylogenetic and ontogenetic theories. These ideas suggested that the compressed, rapid development of the child might provide critical insights into the development of the human species. This is where Benjamin begins the essay he wrote some months after the astrology fragment, entitled *Doctrine of the Similar (Lehre vom Ähnlichen)*. Written in early 1933, it represents both an extension of the arguments presented in *On Astrology* as well as a deeper, more explicit, engagement with his theory of mimesis. Benjamin begins by reiterating that the human being has the greatest capacity for generating similarity. Further, he argues that "there may be no single one of their higher functions that is not codetermined by the mimetic faculty."³³² While the history of the development of this capacity is enmeshed within a particular practice like astrology, Benjamin argues that it is also materially present in the development of the modern child, in particular their play: "Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behaviour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train."³³³ Benjamin argues that any answer to the question regarding what advantage this form of mimetic behaviour has in the ontogenetic case, "presupposes pointed thinking about the phylogenetic significance of mimetic conduct."³³⁴

Benjamin's work) see Benjamin Morgan, "Undoing Legal Violence: Walter Benjamin's and Giorgio Agamben's Aesthetics of Pure Means," *Journal of Law and Society* 34, no. 1 (2007), 53-4.

³³¹ Benjamin, "On Astrology," SW 2, 685; GS VI, 193.

³³² Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," SW 2, 694; GS II, 204-05.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

In similar fashion to the astrology fragment, Benjamin departs from the assumption that the *Merkwelt* (perceptual world) of modern man is infinitely remote from one in which the “magical correspondence” mediated the world of ancient civilisations and tribal societies.³³⁵ That is, any approach to mimesis from a phylogenetic perspective (the development of the species) has to account for the fact that there is only the faintest residue of the full extent of its power left to the modern world. Benjamin’s hypothesis in the astrology fragment, and reiterated in this essay, suggests that “processes in the sky were imitable, both collectively and individually, by people who lived in earlier times.”³³⁶ This leads him to conclude that “this imitability contained instructions for *mastering* an already present similarity”— this was the basis for astrology’s “experiential character” (my emphasis).³³⁷ As Alison Ross has argued, the capacity to render similarity meaningful is grounded in “experiencing something in the most elemental way possible, i.e. to become it.”³³⁸ Benjamin seems to be suggesting that it was not in the initial recognised similarity between body and object that rendered it meaningful, but rather in the sets of relations that emerge in the *ongoing* process of the human being becoming similar to what surrounds it. What is lost to history, Benjamin suggests however, is entirely present within the newborn, who is faced with the need to master a reality by rendering it meaningful.

It is important not to misunderstand this particular point, however. Benjamin was not suggesting that unambiguous conclusions regarding the development of the human species could be derived from observation of the development of infants. Rather, in ways similar to those of Horkheimer and Adorno (as discussed in the first chapter), Benjamin suggests that the manner in which vulnerable infants come to rely on mimesis to establish relations, first in space and then amongst its human community, might offer ways of thinking about the kinds of trauma early humans underwent, and the ways in which they coped. Although the newborn might be in “full possession of this [mimetic] gift”, Benjamin concedes that even in the observation of the child, a grasp of how the development of mimesis works is

³³⁵ Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2, 695; GS II, 205-06

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ross goes on to suggest that “the mimetic capacity of human beings to ‘become’ the object...becomes the capacity to experience the ‘meaning’ of the similar.” See Alison Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 79.

difficult.³³⁹ “The perception of similarity”, he writes, “is in every case bound to a flashing up. It flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other perceptions.”³⁴⁰ He argues, however, that the child’s ability to learn and develop language offers a concrete example of the mimetic faculty. The “canon” of language, he suggests, offers a “basis [for which] we can attain more clarity regarding the obscurity which clings to the concept of nonsensuous similarity.”³⁴¹ In Benjamin’s view, then, the ways in which children learn language, offers a glimpse of radically unfamiliar forms of human life that are lost to the past, as well as the many distinct ways human societies have developed throughout the world. At this point Benjamin enters into his detailed discussion of language’s mimetic quality.

Just as the presence of astrology within human history suggests, “we no longer possess in our perception whatever once made it possible to speak of a similarity which might exist between a constellation of stars and a human”, Benjamin argues for a similar history of the development of language.³⁴² Whereas modern languages appear as abstract systems, he suggests that a shadow of their original onomatopoeic structure remains. This renders language not an “agreed upon system of signs”, but a semantic reflection of a material history of human movement and behaviour.³⁴³ This is what Benjamin calls the concept of “nonsensuous similarity” (*unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit*), where a connection between a set of relations is recognisable, but the exact correlation between the imitated and imitator is not immediately identifiable.³⁴⁴ More precisely, where the sensuous character of the similarity has dispersed into history, leaving only the recognition of a nonsensuous similarity, i.e. one without a sensuous correspondence. The connection between mimesis and language, according to Benjamin, lies in the former’s ability to make the world ‘readable’. The shaman who might ‘read’ the future in the sky, performs the same fundamental act as the

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid. D. Robert DeChaine argues that this idea is intricately linked to Benjamin’s broader interest in messianism. He writes: “This conception of time as an instantaneous flash represents the force of Benjamin’s messianic impulse: a time which slices through history, which functions not as a linear succession of events, but rather, as a gathering up of history, of past and present and future, all in a single moment.” D. R. DeChaine, “Magic, Mimesis, and Revolutionary Praxis: Illuminating Walter Benjamin’s Rhetoric of Redemption,” *Western Journal of Communication* 64, no. 3 (Summer, 2000), 291.

³⁴¹ Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2, 696; GS II, 207.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

student who reads a textbook. This is because “the astrologer reads the constellation from the stars in the sky; simultaneously, he reads the future or fate from it”, just as the student derives meaning from the words immediately.³⁴⁵ Benjamin reasons:

*[If reading]...from stars, entrails and coincidences was reading per se, and if it provided mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by runes, then one might well assume that the mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, very gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of the development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity.*³⁴⁶

Benjamin argues that language thereby becomes the medium through which human beings’ earliest capacity to recognise and imitate similarity passes “without residue” into a form of abstract expression. Language, thus, becomes a repository of the entire history of the ways in which “objects encounter and come into relation with one another.”³⁴⁷

Here, Benjamin is seeking a way of conceptualising the manner in which the many unique forms of human creative endeavour and remote practices might be understood as playing a role in the history of human reflection. He expresses this desire when he speculates: “it is to script and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its old powers.”³⁴⁸ Thus, for Benjamin, the “flashing up” of languages’ meaning was crucially connected to, in many cases, ancient cultic and ritualistic practices; wherein an old, lost correspondence between human body and world flits past in its recognisability, “fleetingly out of the stream of things only to sink down once more” into the surrounding hum of meaningful relations.³⁴⁹ The fascination with mimesis did not represent, however, an interest in an ‘access’ to the past for its own sake. As Michael Taussig argues, Benjamin’s interest in mimesis:

³⁴⁵ Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2, 697; GS 2, 209.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2, 698; GS II, 209 – 210.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

[was] testament to Benjamin's enduring theme, the surfacing of 'the primitive' within modernity as a direct result of modernity, especially of its everyday rhythms of montage and shock alongside the revelation of the optical unconscious that is made possible by mimetic machinery such as the camera and the movies.³⁵⁰

The implication is that Benjamin is always focused on how this faculty, and its history, presents itself to us in modern life.³⁵¹

On the Mimetic Faculty

On The Mimetic Faculty (Über das Mimetische Vermögen) was written some months after *Doctrine of the Similar*, between April and September 1933.³⁵² Blair Ogden suggests that this essay takes the ideas of the latter but presents it in more material terms.³⁵³ It is true that Benjamin lends a stronger focus to the mimetic faculty's tangible history – in runes, and hieroglyphs, for example – as well as drawing out the implications of a psycho-history of graphology, and the direct (if hidden) link between a study of semiotics, and the past human ability to read stars and entrails.³⁵⁴ If anything, however, this deeper engagement with material examples of mimesis leads Benjamin down an even more idiosyncratic path. This is a view echoed by Winfried Menninghaus who argues that *On The Mimetic Faculty* differs from *Doctrine of the Similar*, primarily in the last paragraphs, which he argues display a clear strain of mysticism.³⁵⁵ Using this argument as a point of departure, and in light of the fact that the two essays do cover much of the same ground, I will devote the most attention to *On the Mimetic Faculty*'s final paragraphs.

³⁵⁰ Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 19-20.

³⁵¹ It is important to clarify that, as Loveluck argues, Benjamin's interest in how the past might be 'redeemed', "does not imply that Benjamin is referring back to some original or authentic experience." In other words, our recognition of meaning, and its history, that 'flits past' is not a confrontation with the authentic past (and therefore an authentic human experience), but rather a renewed sense of the *relation* between past and present. See Loveluck, "The Redemption of Experience," 183.

³⁵² Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW 2, 722; GS II, 213.

³⁵³ Ogden, "Benjamin, Wittgenstein and Philosophical Anthropology," 63.

³⁵⁴ Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW 2, 722; GS II, 213.

³⁵⁵ Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 61.

In *Doctrine of the Similar*, Benjamin finished with an attempt to explain the magical correspondence of language as synonymous with a ‘flashing up’ of meaning through correspondence. Such a flashing up happens, he writes, “fleetingly out of the stream of things only in order to sink down once more.”³⁵⁶ In the later essay, he goes into greater detail. Benjamin reiterates his claim that the earliest representations of the mimetic faculty were in the ‘readability’ of the stars, entrails and the dance. These activities became meaningful in ways that went beyond their association with their correspondence of similarity. A dance, for example, no longer represents only an animalistic urge to move, a simple desire to ‘imitate’ the movement of heavenly bodies. In fact, it signifies, and becomes enmeshed within, systems of meaningful signs related to ritual. The dance therefore ceases to be a case of mere imitation, thereby fundamentally changing the nature of the association between constellation and body. Benjamin takes these origins of communicability to be instances of reading “what was never written.”³⁵⁷ The unwritten origins of the written becomes, historically speaking, deposited within the symbolic: “the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. That bearer is the semiotic element.”³⁵⁸ Crucially, he continues:

*Thus, the nexus of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man – like its perception by him – is in many cases, and particularly the most important, tied to its flashing up. It flits past.*³⁵⁹

This ‘flitting past’ of meaning for Benjamin is the moment of recognition of a series of lost relationships between human body and world that manifests itself directly in the material, semiotic quality of the written word. It is in this way that the mimetic gift, “formerly the foundation of occult practices gained admittance to writing and language.”³⁶⁰ Benjamin speculates this gift might still emerge in the very possibility of graphology, wherein “the unconscious of the writer” can be derived from what they

³⁵⁶ Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” SW 2, 698; GS II, 209 – 10.

³⁵⁷ Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” SW 2, 722; GS II, 213.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

have written.³⁶¹ Roger Foster's description of Benjamin's project is worth quoting at length:

*What is common to Benjamin's reflections on language... is the effort to delineate a type of experience that is expressed in language, without being reducible to an explicit conceptual content. It is a type of linguistic meaningfulness that does not occur in a subjective act that synthesizes a blind and inert material. In fact, it is precisely the division of subject and object in this model...that Benjamin wants to call into question...What Benjamin is after is a way of making accessible within language the experience of the separation of subject and world that is presupposed by the narrow, "bourgeois" view of language as the communication of propositional contents. It is, in other words, the historical conditions of the reduction of language to a means for the transmission of contents that Benjamin wants to make accessible within language. The structure by means of which language represents the world is itself the result of a form of historical experience, and it is this form that must be shown within this structure.*³⁶²

It was this dimension of Benjamin's discussion that Menninghaus considers a form of mysticism.

Benjamin concludes the essay thus:

*In this way, language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behaviour and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earliest powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.*³⁶³

Benjamin approaches the question of magic as a facet of human reflection, action and practice, rather than superstition. From this perspective, magic simply refers to the systems of meaning and associated forces that characterised early ritual and cultic

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* (SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 64-5.

³⁶³ Ibid.

custom. By definition, in a magical relationship, the nature of the connection is not immediately recognisable. It is this same relationship that Benjamin sees between the semiotic element of language and the possibility of its being meaningful in the world. His argument implies that if language were to become simply a set of symbols, devoid of history, they would cease to be meaningful. The mystical quality of the argument lies in the fact that although in practical terms, the magical relationship between body and world has dispersed, its very abstraction into the meaningful symbol relies on the shadow of that original relationship occupying a space that ‘flits past’. It is *present* only through its felt *absence*.

Benjamin was not unfamiliar with the charge of mysticism. Some years later, in 1938, Adorno would criticise one of his drafts of *Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire* (written some years after the mimesis essays). Adorno argues that within his “almost anthropological” materialism, there “lurk[ed] a deeply Romantic element...your work has situated itself at the crossroads of magic and positivism.”³⁶⁴ Adorno accuses Benjamin, in the presentation of mere historical fragments, of failing to interpret them, of absolving himself of “theorizing.”³⁶⁵ He continues:

*The exclusion of theory confirms the empirical. It gives it a delusively epic character on the one hand, and on the other deprives phenomena, as mere objects of subjective experience, of their true historico-philosophical weight.*³⁶⁶

Adorno’s concern revolved around the fact that Benjamin’s “materialist-historiographic invocation” wanted the remnants of the past to ‘speak for themselves’ in a “wide-eyed presentation of mere facticity.”³⁶⁷ The danger of this approach risked descending into what Adorno considered a banal positivism, wherein the relics of the past were either immediately recognisable to the modern subject, or utterly unfamiliar. In the latter case these phenomena are categorised as magical, where the objects of the past, in failing to be recognisable in their empirical immanence, were

³⁶⁴ Benjamin, “Exchange with Adorno on the ‘Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” SW 4, 101. The complete correspondence can be found in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel, 1928-1940* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 364-86.

³⁶⁵ Benjamin, “Exchange with Adorno,” SW 4, 102.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

dismissed as relics of superstition, i.e. unknowable. Ironically, for Adorno, this made Benjamin's work "bewitched", arguing that "...only theory could break the spell."³⁶⁸

Of course, there is a case to be made that Benjamin in some ways did work at the crossroads Adorno accused him of. However, as he argues in his response to Adorno's letter, the "wide-eyed presentation" of facts when dealing with the past was in certain respects unavoidable, a case of "the proper philological attitude."³⁶⁹ Grappling with what Adorno called "mere facticity" was where Benjamin argued that "the nondifferentiation between magic and positivism must be liquidated."³⁷⁰ He proceeds to give a more specific defence, relating it to the arguments made in his essay *Goethe's Elective Affinities*. He writes:

...the critique of the attitude of the philologist is an old concern, and in its innermost core identical to the critique of myth. It provokes, in each case, the application of philological technique...it aims to open up the material content, from which the truth content can then be plucked off historically like petals.³⁷¹

Here Benjamin suggests that the philologist's desire to approach and interpret the artefacts of the past always risks an undialectical empiricism, but he insists that such an approach did not necessarily have to fall into a mystic presentation of the 'mere facts'. *On the Mimetic Faculty* is usefully read from this perspective. Although Benjamin concedes that the connection between mimesis and modern language has passed "without residue", he nonetheless insists that language remains an "archive" of the infinitely remote systems of relations between human body and world that originally rendered the latter meaningful.³⁷² Thus, despite the fact that he argues that modern, rationalistic language has "liquidated" the original magical correspondence, he suggests there remains a 'way into' that lost history.³⁷³ Starting with his approach to astrology as an historical rather than superstitious practice in *On Astrology*, Benjamin's attempt to derive the history and function of language via its mimetic roots can in effect be read as an attempt to 'disenchant' (or "exorcise" as he referred

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Benjamin, "Exchange with Adorno," SW 4, 107.

³⁷⁰ Benjamin, "Exchange with Adorno," SW 4, 108.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW 2, 722; GS II, 213.

³⁷³ Ibid.

to it) the history of human magical practices.³⁷⁴ By exposing them as simply forms of human expression that are not well understood, nor included in conventional depictions of rational reflection, Benjamin proposes that any attempt to come to terms with the meaning of language must recognise its association with obscure facets of past lives. Menninghaus is correct to identify a mystic element to Benjamin's approach to language, however this element derives from a desire to approach an otherwise unapproachable dimension of the past as a constitutive part of humanity's ongoing capacity to render the world experiential. That is, as Ross has argued, Benjamin's interest in mimesis was in "how to rescue the semantic resources that he thinks are placed at risk once its powers begin to dissipate."³⁷⁵

Assimilation to the Surroundings: Benjamin's Influences

The ideas expressed in the mimesis essays may appear idiosyncratic to the modern reader. However, Benjamin was influenced by, and responding to, a highly fertile series of debates occurring at the crossroads of anthropology, developmental psychology and sociology during the 1920s and 30s. Specifically, these debates concerned how the mimetic capacity was one of the primary ways in which human beings contested the forceful ambiguity of the natural world. These debates were predicated upon the notion, already discussed in chapter one, that a study of mimetic practices observed in the development of children and in some cases animals (ontogenesis), had implications for our understanding of the development of the human species (phylogenesis). In both cases, the development of the subject was understood as emerging from the attempt to overthrow a totalising, ambiguous nature, the authority of which derived from its nebulous, pre-conceptual appearance. The thinkers that appear to have had the greatest influence on Benjamin on this topic (namely, Freud, Heinz Werner and Roger Caillois) differ significantly.³⁷⁶ However, all three claim that early mimetic acts in human life and society were responsible for, as Caillois puts it, an "assimilation to the surroundings."³⁷⁷ Their broader point was

³⁷⁴ Benjamin, "Exchange with Adorno," SW 4, 108.

³⁷⁵ Alison Ross, *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 81.

³⁷⁶ As Karlheinz Barck argues, the correspondence between Benjamin and Erich Auerbach also shows that Benjamin was influenced by the latter's own work on mimesis. See Karlheinz Barck, Anthony Reynolds, "Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach: Fragments of a Correspondence," *Diacritics* 22, no. 3/4 (1992), 83.

³⁷⁷ Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (Winter,

that the mimetic expression of the physical body was the key to integrating themselves into the otherwise undifferentiated world (both in terms of space and time) which was inherently overwhelming. Mimetic acts that form the grounds for ritual and magic are, in short, intended to alleviate what Benjamin calls “these traumatic shocks” to the nervous system, sustained in the remote past.³⁷⁸ The interest these debates held for Benjamin lay in their illumination of how the traumas and violence of the human contestation with nature might leave historical traces within the nexus of meaningful human experience. As I will argue in the following chapter, this idea has important implications for Benjamin’s approach to myth.

The modern interest in the mimetic capacity of human beings was inspired mostly by Freud and psychoanalysis, but also by other psychological schools, as well as the ideas expressed by sociologists like Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss. On a personal level, Benjamin’s interest in mimesis seems to have begun soon after the birth of his son Stefan in 1918, whereupon he kept a record of the child’s behaviour and language development.³⁷⁹ This would no doubt have accompanied his already established interest in myth – while attending the University of Munich between 1915-1917, Benjamin attended the seminars of Walter Lehmann, an expert of pre-Columbian ethnology and mythology.³⁸⁰ Intellectually, many of the ideas surrounding his theory of mimesis came from Freud (who Benjamin mentions in *On Some Motifs on Baudelaire* later in the 1930s), Heinz Werner the psychologist, as well as Roger Caillois, with whom he became familiar after attending his seminars at the Collège de Sociologie during the early 1930s.³⁸¹ Benjamin placed particular importance on one of Freud’s primary arguments in his 1921 essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he argues that consciousness is just as important for protection *from* stimuli, as it is for the reception *of* stimuli.³⁸² Benjamin considered psychoanalysis a theory that

1984), 27.

³⁷⁸ Benjamin discusses this in his 1939 essay, *Some Motifs on Baudelaire*. See Benjamin, SW 4, 317.

³⁷⁹ Eiland & Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 101-03.

³⁸⁰ Mali, *Mythistory*, 230.

³⁸¹ Elizabeth Stewart, *Catastrophe and Survival: Walter Benjamin and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 91. For the collected writings of the members of the Collège de Sociologie see Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de Sociologie 1937-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

³⁸² Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 30. See also Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” SW 4, 317. As already discussed, Freud was influenced by his friend and colleague Sándor Ferenczi, who argued that the development of the child mirrored the kind of challenges that early human beings had been confronted with, the repression of which was deposited in the structures of socio-cultural

“strives to understand the nature of these traumatic shocks.”³⁸³ In Freud’s case, mimicry was considered a manifestation of the overstimulation of the nervous system; for example, in a compulsive tic.³⁸⁴ Arguably the most important theory that Benjamin derived from Freud, though, was the idea of shock; it cemented the notion (possibly quite early in his career, dependent on when he read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) that human thinking arose in opposition to a nature that was initially unwelcoming and confronting. This made the history of social and cultural development part of a much deeper history of human attempts to seek protection from trauma.

He was, further, deeply influenced by the psychologist Heinz Werner, whose work on mimicry was well known. Benjamin wrote the mimeses essays having recently read Werner’s *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik*, published in 1932.³⁸⁵ Blair Ogden argues that Werner’s approach to mimesis was unique. He writes:

*Werner's study of mimesis is reoriented from representation toward expression. Unlike a representation in the Platonic sense of the term, a facial expression is not proximally experienced as an imitation. The meaning of a physiognomy is not behind its appearance, hidden in a different metaphysical realm, but is the sum total of its expression.*³⁸⁶

In *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development* (published some eight years after *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik*, and considered the culmination of Werner’s thought up until that point), he argues that a mimetic representation does not have a

development. Ferenczi, “Stages in the Development of the Adult Sense of Reality,” 201. See also footnote 84.

³⁸³ Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” SW 4, 317. Philip Hogh discusses this idea in greater detail, albeit in relation to Adorno and Freud. He writes: “But if the stimuli from the outside are as powerful, omnipresent and permanent as must be pre-supposed of natural threats, and if the shock that is caused by these stimuli on the nervous system is so vast that escaping it is not enough to master these stimuli, the nervous system then has to develop certain techniques that promise temporary and relative rest. In magical rituals, techniques and types of behaviour were developed and established that cannot be explained as more or less immediate reactions to internal and external stimuli that we can find in the animal world. That is what makes magic rituals specifically human.” See Philip Hogh, “A Forcefield between Nature, Society and Reason: Approaching Adorno’s Philosophy of Language,” *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 17 (Spring/Summer 2010), 33.

³⁸⁴ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 35-41.

³⁸⁵ He references the book in the endnotes of “Problems in the Sociology of Language. See Benjamin, “Problems in the Sociology of Language,” SW 3, 93; GS III, 478.

³⁸⁶ Ogden, “Benjamin, Wittgenstein and Philosophical Anthropology,” 59.

dual presence of representation and recognition, as in Plato, but is, rather, the simultaneous totality of meaning and appearance.³⁸⁷ Werner writes:

*The most important form of representation is language. It is by means of representation through language and through the naming process that the human mentality reaches the level of the abstract concept.*³⁸⁸

He continues:

*This belief that names are essential properties of things is the basis of all word magic...When a word is applied to a thing, this thing actually receives the quality expressed by the name. The Trobrianders firmly believe, to give one brief instance, that the pronouncement of the word "spider" induces a web-like structure in the taytu vine.*³⁸⁹

According to Werner, children display something similar when they "experience names both as things in themselves and as fused in the object they denote."³⁹⁰ He argues that the newborn child is unable to differentiate between sensory and emotional phenomena:

*This state of consciousness may be described as a mere state of feeling, a total sensation, in which object and subject are merged. Many of the young child's activities can be understood only through the assumption that the motor-emotional and sensory factors are blended into one another.*³⁹¹

The child starts to distinguish itself from the world around it through mimicry, which also entails an emotional development. As Ogden argues, Werner seems to suggest that the development of empathy is due to the capacity to differentiate and distinguish other beings as both physically and *emotionally* distinct. Werner argues that the child's ability to become an active, participating subject, allows her to successfully distance herself from the unmediated world with which she is initially confronted.³⁹²

³⁸⁷ Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*, 254-98.

³⁸⁸ Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*, 254.

³⁸⁹ Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*, 255.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*, 65.

³⁹² Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*, 65-8. See also Ogden, "Benjamin, Wittgenstein and Philosophical Anthropology," 61.

Bodily gestures, crying, infant babble, all constitute the important work of an infant's attempt to garner some form of independence from the murky presence of the various authorities of which it is victim, perhaps mirroring similar confrontations between human beings and nature in the past.

These were vital ideas for Benjamin. His notion that language's meaning is not a case of descriptive symbolic reference but the simultaneous manifestation of symbol and meaning, also implies that early mimetic behaviour (in Wernerian terms), 'made' the world in a simultaneous totality of representation and meaning. Or, to put it another way, human beings 'danced' the world into existence, and in so doing tore themselves away from the more ambiguous, spatially undifferentiated world of nature. As Benjamin explicitly stipulates in the astrology paper, the remnants of astrological practices left to the present uncover the shadow form of, not a naïve proto-scientific world of cause and superstitious explanation, but a worldly totality that has entirely disappeared – something that “today we are no longer in a position even to guess at.”³⁹³ His suggestion that the lingering presence of simultaneous similarity “flits past” in symbolic language, implies that linguistic meaning relies on some iteration of the unknown past emerging as recognisable to the modern human being. His desire to disenchant mimesis as magical practice, then, is as much about offering a renewed approach to the elements of the unknown past that materialise in modernity, as about linguistic theory.

There are further points of affinity in Benjamin's debt to Caillois, who worked in tandem with Georges Bataille, at the Collège de Sociologie, the seminars of which Benjamin attended throughout the 1930s with interest, but not without scepticism.³⁹⁴ Although the exact chronology of that attendance in relation to the mimesis essays in the early thirties is unclear, it is undeniable that a confluence of influences permeated his thought at this time. Caillois argues in a paper published in 1935 that mimicry is

³⁹³ Benjamin, “On Astrology,” SW 2, 685; GS VI, 193.

³⁹⁴ Eiland & Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 591. The history of Benjamin's relationship with the Collège de Sociologie is under-explored in the literature. Veronica Ciantelli argues that both the Collège and Benjamin were interested in how the radically unfamiliar aspects of myth, could be not only recognisable to, but might also resonate with, the modern subject. Simultaneously they also wanted to guard against “leur manipulation” (their manipulation), which was threatened by the increasingly dangerous political situation. See Veronica Ciantelli, “Histoire d'Une Rencontre Manquée. Walter Benjamin Et Le Collège De Sociologie,” *Synergies Pays Germanophones* no. 10 (2017), 59.

vitality connected to what he calls “assimilation to the surroundings.”³⁹⁵ He begins his analysis with a discussion of insects, and their use of mimesis in various mechanisms of survival. Crucially, in terms similar to Benjamin, Caillois refers to mimesis as a form of incantation, or magic, the goal of which is to orientate in space:

*...The law of magic – things that have once been in contact remain united – corresponds association with contiguity, just as association by resemblance corresponds quite precisely to the attraction similitum of magic: like produces like.*³⁹⁶

For Caillois the emphasis is not on distance per se, but rather on the fact that in differentiating space, “the organism is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege.”³⁹⁷ There are points of affinity here with Werner’s claim that empathy develops from a child’s recognition, through mimesis, that they represent an individual totality embedded in complex systems of relations with other individuals. The emphasis on *spatial orientation* rather than *distance* gained, represents different approaches to the same overall problem: namely the ways in which human beings overcome certain traumas, or shocks to the nervous system. Caillois argues that the fear of the dark constitutes an important example of what might be considered a shock, or stressor. The dark does not so much conceal, but eliminate the space between subject and the world, such that it becomes unlocatable, unknowable and unbearable. ‘Shock’ cannot be understood as a simple form of fear, that implies an emotion directed toward a particular object, but rather a form of anxiety and alienation that robs the subject of its place in space and time. Regarding the schizophrenic, Caillois writes that he is someone who says of himself: “[I] know where I am, but I do not feel as though I’m at the spot where I find myself.”³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia, 27. Benjamin and Adorno also wrote reviews of Caillois’ work in a 1938 edition of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Both were critical of elements of his approach, while also recognising that it offered important new ways of thinking about mimesis. See Hobby, “Benjamin and the Faculty of Mimesis,” 1428.

³⁹⁶ Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia, 25.

³⁹⁷ Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia, 28. Caillois would go on to refine his theories of mimicry, for example in his 1958 book, *Les Jeux et les Hommes*. Here his study of games relies in large part on his theory of mimesis, but crucially, on inter-community mimetic practice. See Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1958. See in particular 67-73.

³⁹⁸ Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia, 30

Like Freud and Werner, albeit in slightly different ways, Caillois roots the primary source of human reflection deep within a natural history, which he suggests continues to mediate human subjectivity. These ideas are of particular importance to my proposed reading of Benjamin's approach to mimesis. It shows the extent to which Benjamin's ideas can be contextualised within a broader intellectual attempt to conceive of the totality of human expression as delimited by the socio-cultural practices and systems that initially emerged to extract human beings from a purely natural sphere. In Benjamin's case it locates mimesis, and by extension language, as a repository (what he calls "archive") of human attempts to subdue and assert their own authority over a nebulous and ambiguous nature.³⁹⁹

These ideas must be distinguished from the naïve 'child savage' theories of the nineteenth century, that saw a certain child-like naiveté in the remaining tribal cultures observed by early anthropologists. The attempt to draw affinities between the development of the species, and the individual child, were not intended to reduce infant development, or indeed the development of the human species, to one linear, unified developmental path. Neither was it intended (in most cases) to draw comparisons between infants and historic, or contemporary tribal cultures. The point was not that distinct forms of mimetic behaviour led to the systems of communication familiar to modernity, but rather that the mimetic faculty itself appeared to offer a grounds for humans development. In Benjamin's case, he seems to want to emphasise the many ways in which the physical body came into relation with the world (in different cultural communities across time and space) as being an important, and largely ignored, component of how human socio-cultural practices developed. It is telling that he suggests that the fact that the child "plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train" is a matter of "schooling."⁴⁰⁰ The infant's challenge is to gain a foothold in the world, such that it can be mediated and made to bend to the child's desires. The value of observing infant development represented, in effect, a way in which to understand how that initial schooling might have occurred.

³⁹⁹ Freud, for example, sees evidence of the remnants of the trauma humans underwent in the struggle with nature in both the neurotic and the child. He discusses the appearance of a compulsive tic as a manifestation of an older biological "instinct." Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 43.

⁴⁰⁰ Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW 2, 720; GS II, 210.

The idea that a system of spatial orientations is necessary to alleviate a primary form of alienation from the world was both idiosyncratic during Benjamin's life (although popular in niche intellectual circles) and remains so today. However, there are contemporary examples of this area of study. While operating strictly within the confines of empirical evidence, they highlight ways in which to conceive of Benjamin's major arguments regarding mimesis. In particular, they help to understand his interest in mimesis as providing unique insights into the ways in which initial human movement and communication helped develop the foundations for sophisticated forms of socio-cultural life.

The developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello studies both the higher apes and children. His fundamental thesis is that the human linguistic capacity derives from the practices of showing and gesturing the body. He connects the development of this ability to certain forms of gestural imitation that are unique to higher apes. His studies have found that the forms of meaning that develop from the gestures of these apes are infinitely more complex than those of the other ape species.⁴⁰¹ These movements were tied to practical needs like foraging and inter-family cooperation, the flourishing of which Tomasello argues, allowed for the conditions of possibility of certain forms of collective cooperation. It was out of these forms of cooperation that linguistic communication emerged in early homo-sapiens.⁴⁰² He contends that a study of children's development provides an important reflection of both the affinities, and important distinctions between human and higher ape communication.

Tomasello argues that the human capacity for complex thought derives from the initial need for particular kinds of cooperation and, eventually, solidarity. The success of communication relies on specific understandings of other beings, and joint goals. He calls this phenomenon "shared intentionality":

Human cooperative communication is more complex than ape intentional communication because its underlying social-cognitive infrastructure

⁴⁰¹ Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 13-55.

⁴⁰² Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 57-108.

*comprises not only skills for understanding individual intentionality but also skills and motivations for shared intentionality.*⁴⁰³

He argues elsewhere that, because of this, thinking itself is not inherently an individual activity. He argues that, “Human thinking is individual improvisation enmeshed in a sociocultural matrix.”⁴⁰⁴ He continues:

*In general, humans are able to coordinate with others, in a way that other primates seemingly are not, to form a “we” that acts as a kind of plural agent to create everything from a collaborative hunting party to a cultural institution.*⁴⁰⁵

Tomasello claims that the capacity to cooperate at a highly complex level is because,

*...human communication is cooperatively structured in ways that communication of other primates is not...The initial steps in this process almost certainly took place in the gestural modality.*⁴⁰⁶

In other words, the shared community that is implied by the emergence of complex, linguistic practice is predicated upon forms of primitive, gestural communication that foster and develop particular conceptions of community.

While Tomasello’s work offers a way of understanding how initial mimetic activity helped develop what are considered uniquely human capabilities, Philip Hogg is correct to suggest that in spite of the rigour of his research, Tomasello “describes the functional change of language and communication...as a continuous and seamless – indeed harmonious – process.”⁴⁰⁷ Hogg’s claim is that Tomasello’s account is missing both the possibilities of existential emergency in early human life, but more importantly, and concretely, the intense difficulties and dangers of the social realities of that existence. To put it another way, Tomasello forgets the violence and trauma of

⁴⁰³ Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 321.

⁴⁰⁴ Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1.

⁴⁰⁵ Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking*, 3.

⁴⁰⁶ Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 7-8.

⁴⁰⁷ Hogg, *Communication and Expression*, 28.

history as an inescapable element of humanity's legacy. Hogh argues that the harmonious picture offered by Tomasello:

*...does not involve reflection on the living conditions of early hominids and as a consequence no reflection on the respective experiences of such beings and social forms in which that process took place is necessary.*⁴⁰⁸

Although Hogh intends this criticism as a springboard for a discussion of Adorno's philosophy of language, there are justifiable parallels with Benjamin's. Tomasello's work offers up a point at which to reflect on the ways in which unique forms of human meaning might have developed, but then diverged from, other hominid gestural communications. In Tomasello's terms, this is just another way of acknowledging that human cultural behaviours have their origins in responses to the natural domain. However, unlike the purely Darwinian conceptualisation, Benjamin recognises that these new forms of cooperation and communication were not only catalysed by trauma, but they could become distorted (as with the domination of mythic authority).⁴⁰⁹

Although mimesis allows for the introduction of a binary tangibility of the world, such a restricted life also has its drawbacks. This is a world overshadowed by myth, one ruled by priests, shamans and the deities themselves. In short, where Tomasello sees the materialisation of communication from a Darwinian perspective, where a teleology of cooperation leads to language and conceptual thought, Benjamin's approach to mimesis also recognises the long history of violence, domination and the renouncement of human autonomy that leaves a trace in the development of human culture and tradition.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Albeit in a later historical context, Assman recognises, the positive aspects of the new kinds of cultural retention and exchange implied by communicative memory "are counterbalanced by the negative forms of loss through forgetting and through suppression by way of manipulation, censorship, destruction, (and) circumscription." Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, 9.

Mimesis as the Contestation of the Authority of Nature

Although it will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, it suffices at this point merely to highlight the fact that Benjamin's conception of myth as a totalising manifestation of fate in human life has important (albeit not always explicit) links to his notion of the ways in which human beings contest the authority of nature. This, in turn, has an important relation to his earlier claims in the mimesis essays, where he argues that the physical interaction of the human body with the world represented the first attempts of human beings to wrest some form of meaning from a space that initially appeared nebulous and undifferentiated.

Benjamin draws this link explicitly when he ponders (as quoted at the beginning of the chapter) as to whether the mimetic gifts of Stone Age artists were perhaps due to their bodies' recollection of the hunt – "because the hand guiding the implement still remembered the bow with which it had felled the beast." The aura of the drawing derives from a recollection of the physical body's interaction with space. How could it be that such remote forms of life were still 'recognisable' to modern human beings? I argue that, for Benjamin, the initial emergency that drove humans to mimetic expression in the first place is yet to be overcome: the complete enmeshment of life with fate. While the mimetic faculty assisted human beings in staking out a space in the world, as the mimetic logic of much early ritual shows, the emergence of myth represented the 'locating' of nature's authority (that was otherwise everywhere) in particular forms of space and time. What had been initially an entirely totalising force, was now a matrix of magics that could be channelled and responded to. The resonance of the associated rituals and other activities amongst human communities throughout time subsequently came to be liquidated into language. It is for this reason that I argue that Benjamin's essays on mimesis contain, *sotto voce*, an implicit exegesis on humanity's negotiation with myth, if they are read within the context of two of Benjamin's other writings: firstly, his 1921 essay *On the Critique of Violence* and, secondly, *The Storyteller*, from 1936.

On the Critique of Violence contains one of the more explicit discussions of myth in Benjamin's corpus. *The Storyteller*, on the other hand, argues that language was the only tool humanity had (through the exchange of stories) to rail against the

seemingly immovable institution of fate in human life, “the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest.”⁴¹⁰ In the next chapter I will argue that, in Benjamin’s view, the possibility of the overcoming of myth, or fate, resided in the momentary recognition that the domain (and exchange) of historical experience continued to be mediated by a series of otherwise forgotten pasts. Language’s capacity to briefly interrupt myth’s authority was directly linked to its ability to faintly recall the physical body’s desire to assert a form of control over ambiguous ‘fatalistic’ space.⁴¹¹

⁴¹⁰ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 157; GS II, 458.

⁴¹¹ There are echoes here of the Vichean insistence that philosophy must be concerned only with what humanity itself made. That is, the question of the escape from the limiting horizons of experience and meaning had to be posed within that horizon. The alternative was restricted to the work of God, and could not by definition be a negotiation with historical finitude.

Chapter Five:

Shaking the Nightmare Off the Chest: Benjamin on Myth and Stories.

In this chapter I propose that a way to conceive of the relation between ‘myth’ and ‘storytelling’ in Benjamin’s corpus can be grounded in his theory of language’s mimetic origins. I will suggest that comparing these two categories help distinguish more precisely what Benjamin meant when he deployed the term ‘myth’ and, further, how he understood the ways in which humans seek to overcome it.⁴¹²

What, then, is the relation between myth and storytelling? For Benjamin, the ‘violence’ of myth (*mythische Gewalt* – the German implies much more than mere physical violence, but also authority/domination/power/force) is something that “bursts” into human life “from the ambiguous sphere of fate.”⁴¹³ Jürgen Habermas describes Benjamin’s conceptualisation of myth, and the human grappling with it, thus:

*Myth is the mark of a human race hopelessly deprived of its vocation to a good and just life and exiled into the cycle of sheer reproduction and survival. The mythic fate can be brought to a standstill only for a transitory moment. The fragments of experience that have been wrung at such moments from fate (from the continuum of empty time) for the relevance of the time of the now shape the duration of the endangered tradition.*⁴¹⁴

In contradistinction, storytelling refers to the exchange of human experiences deposited in the oral traditions left to history, a domain in which the “exchange [of] experience” could temper the often terrifying presence of fate in earthly life.⁴¹⁵ Benjamin insists that the capacity to tell stories is, “the securest among our possessions”, embodying the most powerful disenchantment of “the nightmare which

⁴¹² An earlier version of parts of this chapter appears in “Pushing the Monstrous to the Edge of the World; Shaking the Nightmare off the Chest: Hans Blumenberg and Walter Benjamin’s Philosophies of Myth,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2017), 363-377.

⁴¹³ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 248; GS II, 197.

⁴¹⁴ Habermas, “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 100.

⁴¹⁵ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 143; GS II, 439.

myth had placed upon [humankind's] chest.”⁴¹⁶ This ability was something that created a source of communal solidarity in the face of the often nebulous authority of the gods.

The primary point of distinction between myth and storytelling, and also the first clue as to their relation, lies in Benjamin's deep worry about the *end* of myth. Both Habermas and Winfried Menninghaus argue that Benjamin's primary concern regarding the Enlightenment desire for myth's unambiguous dissolution was its being synonymous with the destruction of the history of human experience.⁴¹⁷ Given that in Benjamin's reading myth was a form of authority that coloured and mediated experience, the loss of myth would represent in effect the loss of 'context' in which human history had hitherto been lived. This must not be interpreted as Romanticism's (or at least a reading of Romanticism) concern that myth represented an unalterable, authentic context for human life. Regarding the distinction between that position and Benjamin's, Menninghaus writes:

*If the leitmotif of Enlightenment reflection about myth is that of dissolution and displacement, and if the Romantics by contrast call for a restitution of myth (directed toward the future rather than toward the past), then in the utopian horizon of Benjamin's reflections on myth stands the motif of its Sprengung, its blasting apart.*⁴¹⁸

Menninghaus suggests here that Benjamin's worry regarding myth's end was not synonymous with a conservative anxiety about human meaning and its rootedness in tradition. At the same time, it also dismissed the binary absolutism of the Enlightenment project, that suggested human liberation was contingent on the destruction of older authorities. Rather, Benjamin sought an end to myth only within a

⁴¹⁶ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 157-158; GS II, 457-458. For a general overview of Benjamin's concept of myth see Günter Hartung, "Mythos," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), 552-572. Hartung argues that the concept of myth cannot be studied in isolation from the other key concerns of Benjamin's work, see 552.

⁴¹⁷ See Jürgen Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," and Winfried Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Myth," trans. Gary Smith, *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 314.

⁴¹⁸ Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Myth," 296. See also Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 100.

context in which its associated forms of human experience could still remain meaningful.

Habermas echoes this anxiety as central to Benjamin's approach to myth; that the *disenchantment* from myth also implied a loss of both experience, and the ability to exchange it amongst people:

It is as if Benjamin were afraid of myth's being eradicated without any intervening liberation – as if myth would have to be given up as beaten, but its contents could be preserved for transposition into tradition, in order to triumph even in defeat...Far from being a guarantee of liberation, deritualization menaces us with a specific loss of experience.⁴¹⁹

In spite of its stultifying role in life, for Benjamin, the loss of myth was synonymous with the loss of both a point of orientation in the world, and the historical repository of human attempts to negotiate with that orientation. While he considered myth to be modality of experience under which all human beings suffered, a form of life that delimited their capacity to express their own judgment and autonomy, he also recognised that, historically, it was the only context in which human beings had lived a qualitatively 'human' life. Without these matrixes of life, humans would be left as they were before they were able to transform the totalising forces of nature into the at least manageable forces of fate: vulnerable, and without the tools to resist an undifferentiated world felt to be pressing down around them.

Within the context of this thesis' broader argument, my claim is that Benjamin's distinction between myth and storytelling represents in effect the recognition that any attempt to 'break' from myth must contend with two things: firstly, that the desire for liberation is informed by a history of human experiences shaped by myth. Secondly, that the liquidation of that history, however representative of a legacy of domination and barbarism, also risks the destruction of our capacity to tell stories, and thus the ability to render the world meaningful.⁴²⁰ Habermas' argument in particular highlights

⁴¹⁹ Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 106.

⁴²⁰ I have been greatly influenced by Joseph Mali's discussion of Benjamin's interest in the ways myth's liquidation was intricately tied to a renewed immersion into it. Mali writes: "Benjamin believed

the fact that Benjamin's interest in the liberation from myth was tempered by his acknowledgement that such a hope, or desire, was mediated and informed by a history forged by myth. The hope for the future relied on the aspects of the past that might be redeemed. I argue, therefore, that any possible solution to the problem of *overcoming* myth, concerns Benjamin's attitude to the possibility of myth's *redemption*.⁴²¹

The Loss of Experience

Before embarking on a discussion of both *On the Critique of Violence* and *The Storyteller* essays, it will be important to clarify Benjamin's definitions of 'experience'. While Benjamin argues that storytelling represents nothing more than the unique human ability to "exchange experience", he makes a distinction between two forms: *Erlebnis*, which names the contemporary form of lived experience, and *Erfahrung*, a traditional form of experience that is communicable between people.⁴²² Crucially, it is the latter that Benjamin considers to be vital to the possibility of human exchange and solidarity, as well as the form that is "coming to an end."⁴²³ For Benjamin, modernity is marked by what Ross calls the "loss of collective experience."⁴²⁴

that any mythic image that could be redeemed...for humanity has, or might still, become 'genuinely historical' – that is, that it might inspire human beings in their social and political struggles for amelioration and eventual redemption of the human predicament." He argues in addition that Benjamin was one "whose aim was to blast apart seemingly solid narrations, theories and ideologies from their deep mythological premises so as to recollect from their wreckage some singular original images, or 'symbols', which might still contain potential meanings for modernity." See Joseph Mali, "The Reconciliation of Myth: Benjamin's Homage to Bachofen," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 1 (Jan., 1999), 168, 178-79

⁴²¹ Joseph Weiss argues that for Benjamin the mimetic faculty is crucial to any hope for redemption from myth. He writes: "Even in a radically secularized, profane world, the promise of redemption rests at the heart of all social and political criticism. Benjamin's thought uncompromisingly insists that we will never live up to this promise without mimesis." Joseph Weiss, "The Force of Critique: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Mimetic Redemption of Nature-History," *Telos* 2014, no. 166 (2014), 55. While I agree with this point, the claim I want to emphasize is that the mimetic faculty is not *merely* a faculty, but also one with a history of a negotiation with myth (the echoes of which is deposited in storytelling). Thus, the mimetic faculty's capacity for liberation, or redemption, is also informed by the history of mimetic practice's engagement with the mythic world.

⁴²² Benjamin, GS II, 438-65.

⁴²³ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 143; GS II, 439.

⁴²⁴ Ross, *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image*, 77.

Within this context, the full implications of Benjamin's primary lament that "that the art of storytelling is coming to an end" become clearer.⁴²⁵ The storyteller is unique because he is someone who offers "counsel", adding further that:

*[If] today 'having counsel' is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence, we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others.*⁴²⁶

One possible interpretation of this worry is that Benjamin was concerned that modern forms of experience no longer connected to those forms of historical experience that human beings had recounted and exchanged as a source of individual and communal wisdom. By extension, this prevented human beings from reflecting on their past as a source of commonality between peoples. This is perhaps why Benjamin suggests that the fading of storytelling occurred at the same time as the disappearance of the forms of labour with which stories are conventionally associated. Benjamin suggests that storytelling emerges from the boredom those forms of labour inspired. He writes:

*...the activities that are intimately associated with boredom...are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. With this, the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears. For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to.*⁴²⁷

Casting further back in history, Benjamin muses that perhaps storytelling can be subdivided between different forms of counsel, or wisdom, that emerged from the two primary forms of human labour: "one embodied in the settled tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seamen" – this covers both the image of the storyteller who "has come from afar (and) the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions."⁴²⁸ For Benjamin, the loss of this kind of storytelling represents the loss of the one form of human expression that had carved

⁴²⁵ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 143; GS II, 439.

⁴²⁶ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 145; GS II, 442.

⁴²⁷ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 149; GS II, 447.

⁴²⁸ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 144; GS II, 440.

out a space in which human beings could be briefly relieved of their ongoing confrontation with fate.

Storytelling's capacity to resist myth derives from the fact that, in being a form of linguistic exchange between people, it represents the 'bearer' of the mimetic repository of human experience. It bears noting that Benjamin compares the fragility of this situation to a flickering flame, in both *On the Mimetic Faculty*, and later in *The Storyteller*. In the former, Benjamin describes how the mimetic element "in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. The bearer is the semiotic element."⁴²⁹ This manifests according to Benjamin, in "a flash", where, vitally for him, its flashing up as recognisable comes from its "production by man", as distinct from nature.⁴³⁰ These moments of production represent the forms of meaningful experience that have been, to use Habermas' term, "wrung" from the sphere of fate. In the concluding sentences of *The Storyteller*, Benjamin argues that the storyteller "is the man who would let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis for the incomparable aura that surrounds the storyteller."⁴³¹ The source of the aura, Benjamin explains, is the ability for the storyteller to cast back "through a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but much of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to what is most his own)."⁴³² The metaphor of the flame is telling because it shows, arguably, the extent to which Benjamin believed that just as the history of mimetic practice clung like a flame to the 'wick' of language, so too did storytelling to communal life. In both cases what was transferred, or exchanged, were the otherwise invisible forms of life that human beings had eked under the totalising authority of fate; and that were, vitally, *communicable between members of a community*.

This is why in the essay Benjamin distinguishes between the story and the novel. As the novel is, fundamentally, a creation of modern life, Benjamin argues that its "birthplace...is the individual in his isolation, the individual who can no longer speak of his concerns in exemplary fashion, who himself lacks counsel and can give

⁴²⁹ Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW 2, 722; GS II, 213.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 162; GS II, 464.

⁴³² Ibid.

none.”⁴³³ While the novel can offer someone the hope of “warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (that is, it can offer forms of comfort), it cannot offer “the epic side of truth – wisdom” because that is inextricably tied up within the epic storytelling traditions.⁴³⁴ Fundamentally, this is the distinction between the poverty of modern experience (*Erlebnis*), and those forms that emerge only in the forms of counsel and wisdom that spring from the communicability that originated in the oral tradition (*Erfahrung*).

Menninghaus suggests that *Erfahrung* has a double register in Benjamin’s work:

*Erfahrung in Benjamin’s sense means, on the one hand, an ultimately messianic category of unrestricted synthesis, from his opposition to the determination of consciousness and action by the mythical constraints, which reproduce always the same and does not permit anything new. On the other hand, experience distinguishes itself from abstract knowledge through its link to mythical forms of meaning. Experience, then, breaks apart myth by its own means – a dialectical passage de mythe.*⁴³⁵

Menninghaus draws attention to two important ideas in Benjamin. Firstly, the notion that the experience relayed in stories offers a “messianic” (that is, an “unrestricted”), emancipatory potential in the face of “mythical constraints.” Secondly, that this form of experience is strictly distinct from the abstract knowledge accessible via our purely rational faculties, because of “its link to mythical forms of meaning.” The link, as has been discussed, is that *Erfahrung* only emerges as a category of human experience as it coexists with mythical life. Thus, Menninghaus’ argument draws out the primary claim I will make in this chapter: myth’s dissolution only presents itself as a possibility for human life within the historical matrixes of experience catalysed by myth itself. The only qualification necessary comes from Habermas’s argument, quoted earlier, where he insists that such freedom only springs forth momentarily in a “transitory moment.”⁴³⁶

⁴³³ Benjamin, “The Storyteller, SW 3, 146; GS II, 443.

⁴³⁴ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 156, 146; GS II, 457, 443.

⁴³⁵ Menninghaus, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Myth,” 322.

⁴³⁶ Habermas, “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 100.

Myth as Fate: Benjamin's *Zur Kritik der Gewalt (On the Critique of Violence)*, 1921

Written in 1921 and published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt (On the Critique of Violence)* now represents one of the most discussed essays of Benjamin's early work.⁴³⁷ It was not, however, always considered such an important part of his oeuvre. The beginnings of the sustained interest in the paper can be dated to Derrida's address to the Cardozo Law School in 1989.⁴³⁸ The subsequent vast literature it inspired has, if anything, compounded the difficulties of the text itself.⁴³⁹ I do not want to suggest that my discussion in any way approaches a *definitive* account of the essay. Instead, my intention is to focus only on Benjamin's discussion of myth and its association with fate. Although the essay has been discussed extensively in the secondary literature, there has been no sustained attempt to understand how the category of myth relates to Benjamin's later work on storytelling. My claim is that Benjamin's conception of myth as fate, as "a mere

⁴³⁷ Many of the ideas explored in this discussion of Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* essay were inspired by an extraordinary conversation I had with my friend Jim Mitchell in August 2013. I would also like to acknowledge, once again, the immense influence his thesis had on my own thinking. See Mitchell, "The Discussion of Myth in Dialectic of Enlightenment."

⁴³⁸ See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Force of Authority," *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld & David Carlson (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1992), 3-67. Axel Honneth, for one, argues that the literature surrounding Benjamin is largely disposable, in part because his work resists categorization. See Axel Honneth, "A Communicative Disclosure of the Past: on the Relation Between Anthropology and Philosophy of History In Walter Benjamin," *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999), 118-34. A subsidiary project of this chapter is to both acknowledge, as Habermas does, that Benjamin is a thinker "on whom it is not possible to gain a purchase" while also resisting the temptation of the argument that Benjamin's work is entirely resistant to systematization. See Habermas "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 92. While this might be true in one sense, this does not imply that his work cannot be approached fruitfully, and it does not take into account the sense in which Benjamin himself was aware of the difficulties of systematizing the diverse spheres in which he worked.

⁴³⁹ Alison Ross presents a convincing argument that a large part of the recent secondary literature has failed to interpret the central arguments as presented by Benjamin. She writes that many "deconstructive" interpretations "contradict the explicit position Benjamin takes here as well as in his other early writings. Hence a type of consensus has emerged that the best way to negotiate the difference between divine and mythic violence is by redefining the category of violence." This results, she suggests, in readings like that of Werner Hamacher, where Benjamin's notion of 'divine violence' is replaced "with a quasi-transcendental operation that is baptized as *nonviolence*." See Alison Ross, "The Distinction Between Mythic and Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' from the Perspective of 'Goethe's Elective Affinities'," *New German Critique* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2014), 99. Alexei Procyshyn argues that the essay should be read as an explicit response to Max Weber's theory of political action in *Politics as a Vocation*, in which Benjamin proposes a theory of political action where certain actions can exist outside of the "instrumentality" of mythic-violence (that is, within determinate means of political action and justice that are mediated by institutional structures). See Alexei Procyshyn, "Manifest Reason: Walter Benjamin on Violence and Collective Agency," *Constellations* 21, no. 3 (September 2014), 399-400.

manifestation of the gods”, aids an understanding of Benjamin’s conception of the forms of totalising experience that the mimetic faculty (and then storytelling) sought to lessen.⁴⁴⁰

Both Habermas and Menninghaus suggest that Benjamin’s conception of myth was explicitly historical, but also resistant to accounts that located it only in the remote past. As Menninghaus points out, Benjamin “dissociated himself from all definitions of myth that he viewed as indifferent to philosophy of history.”⁴⁴¹ However:

*A conception of myth that exclusively stresses the difference between abstract, conceptual thought and myth’s capacity to provide more concrete and figurative forms of sense and meaning... [was] for Benjamin also a ‘purely aesthetic’ and ahistorical view.*⁴⁴²

Menninghaus continues: “Benjamin wants to appropriate the universalizing capacity of a purely formal conception of myth, to the extent it is compatible with a specific historico-philosophical orientation.”⁴⁴³ He argues that Benjamin’s account of myth:

*[Did not envision it] transforming pre-mythical “chaos” into “veracity” in the “world” (that is, putting an end to chaos), but rather as giving it the appearance of “life” by differentiating “elements.”*⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴⁰ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 248; GS II, 197.

⁴⁴¹ Menninghaus, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Myth,” 294.

⁴⁴² Ibid. In Menninghaus’ essay, the term “purely aesthetic” is given in quotation marks, however the term does not correspond to the reference which is given, namely Benjamin’s letters. See *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 287 and Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 407. Benjamin probably had the work of Cassirer in mind, who while deeply interested in myth, maintained that it represented a pre-conceptual form of human cognition, and thus a historically remote phenomenon. Benjamin writes: “Some time ago I read Cassirer’s *Begriffsform in mythischen Denken* with much interest. I still question, though, the practicability of an attempt to illuminate mythical thought...solely by contrast with the conceptual.” Benjamin, *The Correspondence* 287; Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, 407.

⁴⁴³ Menninghaus, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Myth,” 295. In other words, Benjamin’s work has to be maintained apart from universalisable accounts of myth (Menninghaus specifically names Lévi-Strauss’) that treat it as a historically rigid, preconceptual modality of human thought and experience.

⁴⁴⁴ Menninghaus, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Myth,” 315. The quotes from Benjamin are from his “Goethe’s Elective Affinities”, *Selected Writings: Volume One, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 340. See also “Goethes wahlverwandtschaften” *Gesammelte Schriften, Band I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 180.

Habermas echoes this, suggesting that, for Benjamin:

*...the semantic potential on which human beings draw in order to invest the world with meaning and make it accessible to experience was first deposited in myth.*⁴⁴⁵

This is a vital point. While Benjamin correlates myth with amorphous manifestations of fatalistic authority, he also suggests that these forms of mythic experience cannot be divorced (as Menninghaus rightly suggests) from the historical practices that they catalysed. The point is not merely that myth represents the unbearable yoke of fate, but that those material forms of violent authority were inextricably tied up in the human practices that allowed them to establish, as Menninghaus argues, a semblance of ‘life’.

The essay’s opening with a discussion of the relation of violence (*Gewalt* – power, authority) to law and justice, therefore, represents an attempt to make sense of violent force within the context of its history. Benjamin begins with a criticism of the approach to law that takes the very narrow sphere of Darwinian theory, “this dogma of natural history”, and extends it into the realm of legal justice.⁴⁴⁶ He summarises this theory as the suggestion that “the violence that is, almost alone, appropriate to natural ends is thereby also legal.”⁴⁴⁷ In criticising *Naturrecht* (natural law) as the mistaken belief that the legitimacy of the law, and the legality of its contents, can be grounded in the ‘naturally’ occurring violence of nature, he positions *positive Recht* (positive law) as its alternative, “which sees violence as a product of history.”⁴⁴⁸ Although he argues that the theory of positive law is broadly acceptable given it grounds legal justice in a history of human institutions and the distinction between “sanctioned force and unsanctioned force”, Benjamin insists that “both schools meet in their common basic dogma: just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means used for just ends.”⁴⁴⁹ In other words, Benjamin argues that both major legal

⁴⁴⁵ Habermas, “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 110.

⁴⁴⁶ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 237; GS II, 180.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

theories are based around the idea that “ends” of justice can be legitimised according to the means deemed sanctioned, in this case either naturally occurring violence, or the violence implemented historically throughout human institutions. Benjamin seeks, thus, “a standpoint outside positive legal philosophy, but also outside natural law.”⁴⁵⁰

As he writes toward the end of the essay, such a “standpoint” in any critique of violence might be derived from the “philosophy of its history,” that takes into account its vast “temporal data.”⁴⁵¹ By this, Benjamin implies that a genuine approach to legalistic violence and authority in *contemporary* life, must be positioned in relation to law’s historical connection to remote periods of human society and culture. He speculates that legal authority is connected, at its root, to the authority imposed over human life by myth. Therefore, when Benjamin proposes that “according to ancient mythical thought the marked bearer of guilt (was) life itself”, he sees the same logic at the heart of the law.⁴⁵² Earlier in the essay, he writes:

...If violence, violence crowned by fate, is the origin of the law, then it may be readily supposed that where the highest violence, that over life and death, occurs in the legal system, the origins of law jut manifestly and fearsomely into existence. In agreement with this is the fact that the death penalty in primitive legal systems is imposed even for such crimes as offense against property, to which it seems quite out of ‘proportion’. Its purpose is not to punish the infringement of law but to establish new law. For in the exercise of violence over life and death, more than in any other legal act, the law reaffirms itself. But in this very violence something rotten in the law is revealed, above all to a finer sensibility, because the latter knows itself to be

⁴⁵⁰ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 238; GS II, 181.

⁴⁵¹ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 251; GS II, 202.

⁴⁵² Ibid. Eli Friedlander writes: “The violence in law is triggered or unleashed by guilt that belongs to another sphere, that of mere natural life. The natural as it appears here is not to be understood in contrast to the artificial. It is not the bodily in contrast to the mind. Nor is it what barely lives, life excluded from all forms of common existence. Rather, it is life in common insofar as it is a field of manifestation of fate, insofar as it has not undergone a higher spiritual determination.” See Eli Friedlander, “Assuming Violence: A Commentary on Walter Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence,’” *boundary 2* 42, no. 4 (2015), 171. Assman has argued that the memory cultures that are carried via the myths of the ancient East, are “connected to guilt and an awareness of guilt arising from the breaking of oaths and contracts.” He suggests that the transition of this cultural memory sees the emergence of sophisticated forms of (in particular) monarchical law. See Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, 231-32.

*infinitely remote from conditions in which fate might imperiously have shown itself in such a sentence.*⁴⁵³

Although a difficult passage, fundamentally, Benjamin makes two points. Firstly, that the law, like myth, is founded on a need to “reaffirm” itself in every judgment to reassert its authority, and, secondly, the law’s unwillingness to recognise its historical connection to very old forms of mythic sacrifice. The death penalty was imposed on relatively minor crimes because the goal was not primarily to punish, but to reassert the authority of the mythic statute, to reimpose the taboo over all life. The mythic/legal decision was not merely a judgement, but a declaration of which forms of life were forbidden.⁴⁵⁴ The authority of such a declaration imposes “frontiers” that “may not be infringed”, and stem from a “demonically ambiguous” sphere.⁴⁵⁵ Benjamin reminds the reader, however, that the context within which the law reasserts itself in modernity is “infinitely remote from [these] conditions.”⁴⁵⁶ Where once the binary nature of myth and then law (where “violence as a means is either lawmaking or law preserving”) might have once served a function in human communities, it now represented the restrictive sphere in which life is lived.⁴⁵⁷

Having drawn a correlation between the violence of law and the violence of myth (what Benjamin calls “mythic violence” [*mythische Gewalt*]), he outlines a conception of the forms of authority that might break out of these fatalistic, totalising

⁴⁵³ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 242; GS II, 188.

⁴⁵⁴ Gusdorf reminds us that often the meaning of early myth is not always recoverable: “The mythic systems that appear to us as the most inhumane...nevertheless had to preserve a possibility of existence... which our retrospective investigations, tinted by humanitarianism, will not always allow us to recover.” See Gusdorf, *Mythe et Métaphysique*, 66. Gusdorf shows us that Benjamin, in making a claim about the historical connection between the emergence of legal traditions, and earlier mythic taboo and ritual, highlights that the *source* of the law’s authority is historically remote, and highly ambiguous. The critique of the ‘violence’ of myth, then, is a reflection on elements of our history that are radically unfamiliar to us, aside from the recognisability of that very violence in the present.

⁴⁵⁵ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 249; GS II, 199. Alison Ross argues that Benjamin used the term ‘ambiguity’ (*Zweideutigkeit*) in distinct ways throughout his career. She writes: “...the ‘Critique of Violence’ typifies the way the term is used in the early work to confer an exclusively pejorative meaning. In general, ambiguity in the early work is used to condemn the lack of clarity and absence of truth that Benjamin defines as attributes of ‘myth’. See Alison Ross, “The Ambiguity of Ambiguity in Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’,” *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, ed. Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 39.

⁴⁵⁶ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 242; GS II, 188.

⁴⁵⁷ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 243; GS II, 189.

forms of life. Benjamin calls this “divine violence” (*göttliche Gewalt*).⁴⁵⁸ In order to understand the full implications of what divine violence might mean it is important to reiterate that in Benjamin’s model, the critique of myth represented a grappling with what he call an “ambiguous sphere” of life.⁴⁵⁹ Peter Fenves writes:

*The supposedly “natural” attitude—which Benjamin will associate with mythology—consists in the general premises that there is a world of substantial things that lie outside of our consciousness and that our experience is the result of the manner in which these things affect us.*⁴⁶⁰

For Fenves, Benjamin’s association of myth with a kind of violent force, or power (*Gewalt*), is an attempt to describe how the ambiguity of the natural world, and the biological elements of our life, inform the experience of life. The break from the mythic world would entail an escape from the ‘experience’ of those forces.⁴⁶¹ Fenves is therefore justified in asking of Benjamin how a break from that “ambiguous sphere” might emerge on the level of the experiential.⁴⁶² Arguably, there are some limitations to Fenves’ approach insofar as it struggles to recognise that the experiential character of myth is not merely of a totalising force in human life, but also the history of human negotiations with that force. A critique of violence via the forces of law and myth would therefore be the attempt to find a critical ‘standpoint’ within a present, and a past, awash with those forces. Ultimately, Benjamin is interested in how communal reflections on the violence of myth’s history might engender something other than that violence. Benjamin addresses this explicitly towards the end of the essay:

⁴⁵⁸ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 248; GS II, 197.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 2.

⁴⁶¹ As Fenves notes later in his discussion of the *Critique of Violence*, “...mythic *Gewalt*, according to Benjamin, is characterized by the shedding of blood, whereas divine *Gewalt*...is equally deadly but nevertheless bloodless.” Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 225. The implication is that the natural realm of myth is mediated by the spilling of the blood of ‘mere’ life, where the guilty is reduced to his mere biological conditions. A divine violence would break out of this binary reduction of life.

⁴⁶² Fenves writes: “So far from being an expiatory force, however, blood inclines in the opposite direction: where no blood flows, there is—perhaps—expiation. A question is then implied...how can the absence of bloodshed show itself as such—that is, as the absence of violent bloodshed and not merely the absence of blood being shed? A life other than “mere life” would make itself apparent wherever this nonappearance itself appears.” Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 226.

*Since, however, every conceivable solution to human problems, not to speak of deliverance from the confines of all the world-historical conditions of existence obtaining hitherto, remains impossible if violence is totally excluded in principle, the question necessarily arises as to what kinds of violence exist other than all those envisaged by legal theory...How could it be, therefore, if all the violence imposed by fate, using justified means, were of itself in irreconcilable conflict with just ends, and if at the same time a different kind of violence arose that certainly could be either the justified or the unjustified means to those ends but was not related to them as means at all but in some different way?*⁴⁶³

I argue that in this passage Benjamin is asking the extent to which qualitatively new forms of human reflection can spring from *within* the historical horizons of mythic life.⁴⁶⁴

Benjamin distinguishes mythic violence, a manifestation and reiteration of already established systems of violent authority, and divine violence, by arguing that while the former is concerned with “power” (*Macht*), the latter is concerned with “justice” (*Gerechtigkeit*).⁴⁶⁵ He states that, where mythic violence is “lawmaking, divine violence is law destroying.”⁴⁶⁶ The distinction lies in Benjamin’s notion that while mythic violence brings “at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates.”⁴⁶⁷ The following passage offers material examples of the two forms of violence:

The legend of Niobe may be contrasted with God’s judgement on the company of Korah, as an example of such violence. God’s judgement strikes privileged Levites, strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilation it also expiates, and a profound connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable. For blood is the symbol of mere life. The dissolution of legal

⁴⁶³ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 247; GS II, 196.

⁴⁶⁴ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 248; GS II, 197.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 249; GS II, 199.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

*violence stems...from the guilt of more natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to a retribution that 'expiates' the guilt of mere life – and doubtless also purifies the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law.*⁴⁶⁸

Benjamin's association of divine violence with a brutal, annihilating manifestation of God's power seems impossible to reconcile with his notions of expiation. In order to navigate this difficult passage, the reading I propose emphasises the way Benjamin approaches the phenomenon of fate, not merely as a domain of experience and existence, but as something with a history. The implication would be that to confront fate as a force to be overcome, is also to confront the historical remnants of humanity's reflections on a life lived under fate. My approach is informed by Assman, who argues that the primary distinction between early Judaism and its polytheistic contemporaries was its being based on "resistance against cultural and political structures of a hostile outside world."⁴⁶⁹ He suggests that the history of religion "manifests itself as a drama of memory" in which communities grapple with half forgotten or repressed pasts.⁴⁷⁰

In this context, then, the distinction between Niobe and the company of Korah can be read not as an argument for the justice of monotheistic law, but as two historical examples of human communities' reflections on a fateful life. The story of Niobe represents a period in the Greek communities where it was universally established that fate was inescapable. Hence, its authority is reflected in the legend, a case of the reinstatement of the "guilt of more natural life." The 'bloodiness' of mythic violence over mere life (that is, naturalistic life) is evident in the legend of Niobe (although she is not killed, her children are slaughtered), and Benjamin sees in this punishment an echo of the primitive legal systems of early Greek communities that relied on capital punishment, but also possibly human sacrifice.⁴⁷¹ In the case of

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, 175.

⁴⁷⁰ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, 204.

⁴⁷¹ Walter Burkert argues that the early Greek rituals emerged naturally from far older forms of hunting and associated cultic practise: "From this perspective, then, we can understand man's terrifying violence as deriving from the behaviour of the predatory animal, whose characteristics he came to acquire in the course of becoming man." See Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 17. Pomeroy et. al. do not rule out the possibility that early Minoan civilization engaged in human sacrifice. See Sarah Pomeroy, Stanley Burstein, Walter Donlan, Jennifer Roberts, *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.

the company of Korah, in the manifestation of God's divine power, those at its mercy are not condemned to an endless cycle of guilt and suffering, as in myth, but to an expiatory redemption that "purifies the guilty...of law." Again, I suggest this is most effectively read within the context of what it represents historically for Benjamin, not in the literal theological interpretation of divine slaughter. Benjamin, thus, seems to suggest that these early Judaic stories represented in the Old Testament are *not* representative of the same endless cycle of mythic violence, imposed only to reassert its authority, but an historical representation of the ways in which certain communities in ancient periods of tribal culture sought to overcome the forces of fate. Notably, God's vengeance *cleanses* them of guilt, a legacy that remains in the Christian doctrine that claims sin can be forgiven through confession, due to the forgiveness of Christ. For Benjamin the "divine power [of] religious tradition" is primarily a product of its history, insofar as the expiation comes not only for the company of Korah itself, but also for the audiences of people who hear the story retold.⁴⁷² The communities that retell the story recognise, if only momentarily, the possibility of its free life.⁴⁷³

Although this argument is not made explicitly in *On the Critique of Violence*, it is telling that Benjamin immediately connects the divine power of certain elements of religious tradition with what he calls the "educative power" (*erzieherische Gewalt*).⁴⁷⁴ He argues:

*This divine power is not only attested by religious tradition but is also found in present-day life in at least one sanctioned manifestation. The educative power, which in its perfected form stands outside the law, is one of its manifestations.*⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷² Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," SW 1, 250; GS II, 200.

⁴⁷³ Eli Friedlander points out that fate cannot be simplistically reduced to systems of punishment but that "fate is that condition of life that is essentially guilty." That is, fate shapes a form of life itself, and the law associates an "indeterminate guilt with a specific misdeed." Therefore the expiation of myth would imply the sudden visibility of another kind of life. See Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 118. Miguel Vatter has argued that Benjamin sought to develop a conception of 'eternal life' that was opposed to the guilt of mythic life. See Miguel Vatter. "Married Life, Gay Life as a Work of Art, and Eternal Life: Toward a Biopolitical Reading of Benjamin," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 44, no. 4 (2011), 314, 318.

⁴⁷⁴ Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," SW 1, 250; GS II, 200.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Here Benjamin argues that education, by standing “outside the law”, represents another iteration of the human attempt to break out of the reduction of life to the binary system of fate and guilt. It has its roots in the kinds of new reflection represented by the story of the company of Korah. Benjamin elaborates that the relationship between law and punishment is different in the early Judaic texts, from that of myth: “For the question ‘May I kill?’ meets the irreducible answer in the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill.’” Crucially, though, unlike in mythic violence:

*No judgement of the deed can be derived from the commandment. And so neither the divine judgment nor the grounds for this judgement can be known in advance...It exists not as a criterion of judgement, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it.*⁴⁷⁶

In other words, according to Benjamin, the Judaic religions represent not a system of judgement (as with myth) but a space in which human beings can reflect on their own actions as autonomous creatures and, in certain extreme cases, disregard God’s commandment. Under mythic rule, this is impossible. It is this spirit that materialises, according to Benjamin, in moments of education “in its perfect form”: qualitatively new forms of human reflection, detached from already existing, historically sanctioned, systems of domination and authority.

Richard Eldridge echoes this idea when he argues that Benjamin was fundamentally interested in whether:

*... ‘divine power’ in the form of ‘educative power’ might manifest itself in unpredictable, apocatastatic reversals of ossified human interests and gropings toward courses of meaningful life. While it is possible for this to happen, this possibility must be more awaited than consciously seized and instituted.*⁴⁷⁷

Benjamin sees a fleeting iteration of this in the legend of Prometheus, the titan who is punished for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity. He is chained to a

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ Eldridge, *Images of History*, 137.

rock where an eagle sent by Zeus picks away at his liver. The liver grows back every day, thereby sentencing Prometheus to an eternity of agony. However, as Benjamin argues:

*Prometheus...challenges fate with dignified courage, fights it with varying fortunes, and is not left by the legend without hope of one day bringing a new law to men.*⁴⁷⁸

As Benjamin highlights, throughout his reception history, Prometheus becomes a symbol of hope and human ingenuity, a case of autonomy and freedom being celebrated even while it is crushed by fate.⁴⁷⁹ It is essentially this model, Benjamin argues, that modernity still pictures “in admiring the miscreant.”⁴⁸⁰ Just as the Judaic religion represented a series of historical responses to earlier forms of mythic life, even those traditions in which myth triumphs can still be recognised as communities reflecting on the nature of a life lived under fate. Although they cannot be conflated, both represent historical instances of new forms of human thinking grappling with, and occasionally overcoming, systems of domination that prevent free life.

Benjamin imagines something like the general workers’ strike as representing an iteration of “unalloyed violence”, a case where “the rule of myth is broken occasionally in the present age”, pointing to the fact that “the coming age is not so unimaginably remote that an attack on law is altogether futile.”⁴⁸¹ However, he warns immediately that, “...only mythic violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty...because the expiatory power of violence is invisible to men.”⁴⁸² In

⁴⁷⁸ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 248; GS II, 197.

⁴⁷⁹ Thus, Mali argues: “...the heroes in Greek tragedy are still “mythic,” even though they dare to counter the divine laws and orders, because ultimately they always come to the “cathartic” realization that fate is omnipotent and therewith reaffirm it.” Mali, *Mythistory*, 237.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid. A perfect example of this, at least in Australia, is the matrix of myths surrounding the bushranger Ned Kelly. With thanks to Jim Mitchell for this point.

⁴⁸¹ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 252; GS II, 203.

⁴⁸² Ibid. For the most part, I have not addressed the more explicit political themes discussed in the essay. There remains disagreement about the nature of Benjamin’s understanding of the role of the strike within the context of a politico-legal totality. Werner Hamacher famously considers Benjamin’s discussion of divine violence to be sketching a politics of non-violence. See Werner Hamacher, “Affirmative, Strike: Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence,’” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew E. Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 121-22. Tracy McNulty refers to Benjamin’s conception of “annihilation through anarchy.” See Tracy McNulty, “The Commandment Against the Law: Writing and Divine Justice in Walter Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence,’” *Diacritics* 37, no. 2/3, Taking Exception to the Exception (Summer-Fall,

other words, the forms of freedom that are promised in such disparate forms of human expression as the workers' strike, and the legend of Prometheus, are only recognisable as such within the historical horizon of mythical meaning: namely, the forms of political action and violence that are familiar and comprehensible to history. Freedom is thus extinguished as a hope at the moment of its articulation. The crux of this idea is best articulated by Menninghaus, who suggests that Benjamin's position is perfectly drawn out in the case of Greek tragedy:

The mythical spell of the superior 'natural laws' can first be broken by the intervention of a 'supranatural' life in such a 'natural life' – modelling a world according to the notion of moral self-determination. The heroes of Greek tragedy, who make the alien fatality of mythical fate their own, and thereby allow, in the moral actualization of utopia, an 'end' of myth to come into view, undertake precisely this (my emphasis).⁴⁸³

Here Menninghaus suggests that the stories portrayed in artistic forms like tragedy represent a momentary overthrowing of myth. This is a case of “moral self-determination” emerging from within the confines of the violence of mythic fate, all before an attentive audience. The example of tragedy helps connect Benjamin's ideas on myth with those of mimesis. In this context, tragedy represents cultural and artistic legacies in which the real historical trauma of myth is deposited.⁴⁸⁴ What this implies, I suggest, is that the hope for the end of myth remains mediated by a history

2007), 36. Duy Lap Nguyen, on the other hand, argues: “...this suspension of law is a task that Benjamin identified with the proletarian general strike. But in the ‘Critique of Violence,’ Benjamin never clearly explains how the strategy of general strike is supposed to accomplish such a grandiose task.” Duy Lap Nguyen, “On the Suspension of Law and the Total Transformation of Labour: Reflections on the Philosophy of History in Walter Benjamin's ‘Critique of Violence,’” *Thesis Eleven* 130, no. 1 (October 2015), 97.

⁴⁸³ Menninghaus, “Walter Benjamin's Theory of Myth,” 317-18.

⁴⁸⁴ This is especially compelling given the largely accepted historical links between tragic theatre and earlier rituals. The link between tragedy and the dithyrambic ritual is first mentioned by Aristotle. See Aristotle, “Poetics,” trans. Ingram Bywater, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1449a10. Louis Gernet draws a connection between the “frenzied” nature of the original dithyramb, which proves “access to a world that is supernatural” and Attic theatre but remains cautious regarding the details of the development. See Louis Gernet, *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece*, trans. John Hamilton and Blaise Nagy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 55-6. See also Michael Tierney, “Dionysus, the Dithyramb, and the Origin of Tragedy,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 33, no. 131 (1944): 340-41. For a more skeptical view see Scott Scullion, “Nothing to Do with Dionysus: Tragedy Misconceived as Ritual,” *The Classical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2002), 125-26.

of the human encounter with fate. Any hope for new forms of historical experience, must be posed within that context.

Benjamin seems to propose that a philosophical critique of myth's long affiliation with the fragmented, often barbarous shapes of human life and history (what he calls "the philosophy of its history"), offers an emancipatory potential. At the same time, he submits that this idea must negotiate with the reality that its recognisability as emancipatory can only be meaningful within the historical (as opposed to utopian) context of myth. The only legitimate 'site' of that negotiation in Benjamin's theory, I argue, lies in storytelling.

Liberation from Myth as Delimited by the History of the Encounter with Myth: *Der Erzähler (The Storyteller)*, 1936

My argument regarding *On the Critique of Violence* essay, when interpreted within the context of Benjamin's later mimesis texts, can be summarised thus: myth manifests itself in life as oppressive and violent. However, liberation from those forms of oppression are tied up within the historical remnants of human exchange that were driven by the experience of fatalistic life itself. At this point I would like to advance the argument that the reading of mimesis outlined in the previous chapter is useful within the context of Benjamin's discussion of myth and fate. I contend that his discussion of myth as something which all life is lived under draws out what Benjamin might have meant by the "originary totality" that a practice like astrology interprets. His explanation of the 'experience' of fate can be read in light of the ways he later used the work of Werner and Caillois and their research on infant development to account for how human beings *might* have first dealt with the stress of an unmediated reality. Just as the progress of the infant did not provide straightforward answers to the ways in which the human species developed, but instead provided insight into the kinds of alienation and trauma human beings can confront in the world, Benjamin studies the forms of fatalistic authority left to history as indicative of the kinds of experiences distant human life might have undergone. To be clear, nothing in Benjamin's discussion of myth allows us to say anything concrete about what those earliest forms of human experience looked like, other than speculations about initial encounters with the violence and authority of nature.

However, as Benjamin's reading of Freud, Werner and Caillois suggests, the way to initiate a study of those primary, totalising forms of life is with an encounter with the socio-cultural memories in which those initial traumas are deposited.

Thus, *On the Critique of Violence* offers an extremely useful source for conceptualising the ways in which Benjamin conceives of how fate informs and colours human existence. I have argued that Benjamin's theory of mimesis can be contextualised as an extension of his theory of fate (insofar as mimetic behaviour represents a 'response' to the kinds of forces that would come to be known as fate) in which the history of mimetic gesture (and thus language) is imbued with those originary confrontations with nature. In this light, Benjamin's extremely sophisticated discussion of fate and its relation to the law in the *Critique of Violence* essay, can be contextualised as an attempt to account for the ways in which the initial, highly ambiguous, human encounters with the forces of nature still inform, and mediate, all facets of human life. Put another way, Benjamin is seeking a way of examining the manner in which the forms of early human life that are captured in the term 'fate', where human existence is defined by rigid and binary power relations, continue to exclude what Habermas calls "cumulative changes in the structures of domination" in the present.⁴⁸⁵ I propose that there is a defensible reading that positions *The Storyteller* as a culmination of Benjamin's notion that forms of human liberation over fatalistic life manifest through linguistic exchange; that is, through storytelling. Many of the central arguments presented in the essay were discussed in the previous section on the loss of experience. As such, the following discussion will focus on how Benjamin's account of storytelling can be connected to his discussion of myth.

Benjamin associates storytelling explicitly with the epic, oral traditions that have, he writes, transformed in "rhythms comparable to those of the change that has come over the earth's surface in the course of thousands of centuries."⁴⁸⁶ Some five pages later, again discussing the oral traditions, Benjamin refers to the "slow piling up, one on top of the other, of thin, transparent layers which constitute the most appropriate images of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the

⁴⁸⁵ Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 118.

⁴⁸⁶ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 147; GS II, 443.

layers of various retellings.”⁴⁸⁷ The emphasis here is on the long (quasi-natural) history of the exchange of stories within communities. Benjamin wants to emphasise the sheer chronological scale of the countless ways in which human beings have tried to resist the totalising presence of fate, the evidence of which he suggests is deposited in the layered textures of a story’s history. The capacity for a story to remain meaningful over countless retellings is due to the vital connection between storytelling and the movement of the human body, particularly the hand. An aspect of the tradition now largely lost, Benjamin writes that, “...in genuine storytelling what is expressed gains support in a hundred ways from the work-seasoned gestures of the hand.”⁴⁸⁸ In these passages Benjamin recognises that it is precisely the most vulnerable aspects of human existence – in this case the fragility of the body in confrontation with the world – that are deployed in storytelling as a source of protection.

The following passage offers an explicit point of comparison with the mimesis essays. Benjamin speculates:

*One might go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman’s relationship – whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. It is a kind of procedure which may perhaps most adequately be exemplified by the proverb, if one thinks of this as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a gesture like ivy around a wall.*⁴⁸⁹

These passages recall the fact that the performative, gestural foundations of the oral tradition, and storytelling in general, are in fact representations of a “material, human life.”⁴⁹⁰ A proverb, in short, by embodying a decayed ‘finalisation’ of a story, in effect represents a fragment of those initial “gestures” that first rendered the word “differentiated”, as Menninghaus suggests. The moral associated with a modern

⁴⁸⁷ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 150; GS II, 448.

⁴⁸⁸ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 161-62; GS II, 464.

⁴⁸⁹ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 162; GS II, 464.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

proverb, Benjamin alleges, is the last ‘flashing up’ of deeply ambiguous, but nonetheless recognisable and meaningful, forms of early human experience. This is the source of their powers of “disenchantment.”⁴⁹¹

Benjamin is very clear about how that disenchantment occurred:

*“And they lived happily ever after,” says the fairy tale. The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales.*⁴⁹²

Here Benjamin makes an explicit reference to the forms of wisdom that come out of the epic tradition as they are told and retold. The fairy tale, Benjamin asserts, offers these kinds of wisdom:

*In the figure of the fool it shows us how mankind ‘acts dumb’ toward myth, in the figure of the youngest brother, it shows us how one’s chances increase as the mythical primordial time is left behind, ...in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of the child in the fairy tale, it shows that nature not only is subservient to myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man. The wisest thing – so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day – is to meet the mythical forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits.*⁴⁹³

Of immediate note is Benjamin’s correlation between childhood and the beginnings of the human species, something he also notes explicitly in the mimesis essays. Benjamin emphasises that, just as children come into conflict with overwhelming forces, a dominant concern for early human beings was how to placate the violence of a nature that controlled their lives. He concludes that, “the liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but

⁴⁹¹ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 157-58; GS 2, 457-58.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

points to its complicity with liberated man.”⁴⁹⁴ That is, the fairy tale’s strength lies in its ability to contest the authority of nature by making it an ally of humanity. This immediately offers a reading that relates to Benjamin’s notion of the “expiatory” potential of divine violence, insofar as a fairy tale ‘uses’ mythic authority by subverting it, and offering forms of liberation from its power. Strikingly, Benjamin argues that a grown man might feel the spirit of the “complicity” of liberation “when he is happy,” something the child feels in the soothing reassurance of the fairy tale.⁴⁹⁵

Benjamin’s overarching point is that the forms of liberation that emerge from storytelling, are caused by the kinds of experience that inspire wisdom (*Erfahrung*), what he calls the “epic side of truth.”⁴⁹⁶ As Benjamin argues at the beginning of the essay, this disappearance of storytelling is synonymous with the disappearance of this kind of wisdom. The forms of truth that come from wisdom are derived from a specific form of communal exchange where, like in tragedy, human subjugation before fate becomes a locus of hope (if only momentarily). This is one way of reading Benjamin’s worry that, once the forms of labour synonymous with storytelling disappear, “the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears.”⁴⁹⁷ His fear regarding the loss of the specific forms of experience tied up in particular forms of linguistic exchange (in this case physical labour), can be linked to the disappearance of a point of orientation *within* the sphere of fate. This distant and ambiguous memories that are echoed in storytelling are mirrored in the adult’s momentary happiness, and the child’s calm during the retelling of the fairy tale.

An important reflection of this can be seen in Benjamin’s discussion of the relation of storytelling to death. He argues, “death is the sanction for everything that the storyteller can tell...In other words his stories refer back to natural history.”⁴⁹⁸ Reminding the reader that death now occupies an almost invisible part of life, whereas in the past “it used to be that there was not a single house, hardly a single room, in which someone had not once died,” Benjamin writes:

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 146; GS II, 442.

⁴⁹⁷ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 149; GS, II, 446.

⁴⁹⁸ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” SW 3, 151; GS II, 450.

*Yet, characteristically, it is not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – which first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.*⁴⁹⁹

The source of a life's transmissibility at the time of death, where the man "encounter[s] himself", derives from the "authority which even the poorest wretch in the act of dying possesses for the living around him. This authority lies at the very origin of the story."⁵⁰⁰ One facet of the authority "borrowed" from death, then, is derived from the necessity of storytelling's communicability between storyteller and a willing, attentive audience, whose task it is "to assure [themselves] of the possibility of reproducing the story. Memory is the epic faculty par excellence."⁵⁰¹ It is memory, Benjamin concludes, "that creates the chain of tradition which transmits an event from generation to generation."⁵⁰² Here Benjamin offers a connection between mimesis, a reflection and encapsulation of the initial traumatic experiences of the human species, and that memory passing from the history of human gesture, into language and stories. For Benjamin this is the tracing of storytelling's link to a "natural history."⁵⁰³

What is it that is remembered and recounted in these stories, passed on to subsequent generations? According to Benjamin, it is "the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest."⁵⁰⁴ It is for this reason that Benjamin argues, some two years before he wrote *The Storyteller*, and a year after the mimesis essays, that Odysseus "stands at the dividing line between myth and fairy tale. Reason and cunning have inserted tricks into myths, their forces cease to be invincible."⁵⁰⁵ It is important to reiterate that in Benjamin's model this does not imply a developmental account of human reflection, where reason gradually 'consumes' myth (as evidenced in his suspicions regarding Cassirer's theory). The account Benjamin proposes, I argue, is more subtle. He implies that the "cunning" of fairy tales is derived from the authority of language, while also

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 153; GS II, 453.

⁵⁰² Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 154; GS II, 453.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," SW 3, 157; GS II, 457-58.

⁵⁰⁵ Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," SW 2, 799; GS II, 415.

conceding that such cunning is framed and delimited by a fractured memory of that initial encounter with fate. If Benjamin is correct to suggest that with the figure of Odysseus, the myth begins to take on the form of fairy tale, then it recalls the reading of Horkheimer and Adorno I proposed in chapter one. Namely, that the myriad stories that are ‘finalised’ with *The Odyssey*, can be approached as historical fragments of the ways in which historically remote communities came to terms with forces or powers that seemed beyond their control. These are lingering memories of types of human existence that are otherwise forgotten, and that are now radically unfamiliar, which nonetheless provide a source of communal imaginative work. To stop at the crossroads between myth and storytelling is to be suddenly confronted with the long prehistory of the hell of fate as well as the remnants of the aesthetic dimension of human attempts to extricate themselves from it.

It is precisely a natural history that resides at the very foundations of Odysseus’ journey, a case of the frailty of one man facing the terrifying and ambivalent world. All stories contain, at their foundations, the dread of myth as catalysing force, making history, for Benjamin, the legacy of human beings being preyed upon by the continued presence of fate. If history is the legacy of human experience, constituted of attempts to exercise their own autonomous judgement, the fact that the Sirens’ call still echoes through time, reminds us that human judgement has thus far only been able to express itself within the context of its historical limitations. Therefore, I argue that Benjamin’s distinction between myth and storytelling represents the differentiation between fate and the flashes of emancipatory potential that flit past in the communal memory, and reception, of fate as reflective of the human predicament. The way a story resonates with humanity in terms of its circumstances in the world might be referred to as its truthfulness.

Benjamin and the Elk

For Benjamin it is precisely this detritus of history, the remnants and reflections of the earliest human experiences, that hold the potential to interrupt the necessity and violence of historical time – understood here as the repeated, failed attempts to overcome myth’s authority. In this context, modernity is still imbued with the prehistoric quality of life lived according to fate’s judgment, insofar as, in Benjamin’s

vision, modernity is still in thrall to the original conditions of the “swamp world” (*Sumpfwelt*).⁵⁰⁶ As this chapter outlined, this is a very specific claim about the conditions in which human experience becomes meaningful and recognizable, which in turn has important implications for Benjamin’s understanding of history. As an idea, the concept of ‘pre-history’ attempts to distance certain ambiguous forms of human life that appear infinitely remote to the conditions of modern experience. As I have shown in connecting Benjamin’s account of myth to his theory of mimesis, historical experience as such is a reflection of myth’s disastrous victory over human attempts to exert its own autonomy. This mythic victory, however, remains the only context in which life is communicable and meaningful. The hope for redemption (what he calls bringing “a new law to men”) has an essential relation to a negotiation with history, which is understood here as the repeated failures of the species’ attempt to assert itself in the world.⁵⁰⁷

For Benjamin, the hope for an ‘othering’ of human life (outside fate) is necessarily tied to, and delimited by, the way these archaic experiences mediate the experience of the present.⁵⁰⁸ Benjamin maintains, however, that the lost possibilities of the past might one day be realised, insisting that such a new beginning would have to begin, as it were, in the negotiation with the fact that such liberation remains unrealized within the scattered detritus of what has already been. This would constitute a redemption of the past, for the sake of the present.

⁵⁰⁶ Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” SW 2, 808; GS II, 428.

⁵⁰⁷ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1, 248; GS II, 197.

⁵⁰⁸ In Freudian terms, the history familiar to us would constitute a repression of the terrifying (but formative), obscure, history of the species.

Chapter Six:

A Human Nature that has Never Been: Hans Blumenberg on Philosophical Anthropology and Historical Life.

While both Vico and Benjamin understood that myth was not simply a manifestation of straightforward irrationalism, but a non-reducible phenomenon that interacted in complex ways with how humans related to their past, this did not preclude their approach to myth being structured around a *liberation from* it. Hans Blumenberg, the focus of the next two chapters, can typically be read as either explicitly *resistant*, or at best ambivalent, to framing myth in this manner. Instead, his reluctance to approach myth along an axis of liberation and ensnarement, suggests that he believed myth to be an intractable part of the way human beings reflect and work on their pasts, rather than as something that needs to be excised from it.

Blumenberg's fundamental claim regarding myth is that it is created to alleviate anxiety (*Angst*). Within the secondary literature, Blumenberg's argument is typically considered to be a contribution to the German tradition of 'philosophical anthropology'.⁵⁰⁹ This term concerns the philosophical tradition that seeks an account of 'the human being' as such. The philosophical anthropology attributed to Blumenberg depicts the human species as a creature fundamentally lacking in a biological niche, from which culture (of which myth was a dimension) emerged as a form of coping mechanism, or adaption, to prevent a totalising anxiety about its place in the world. From this perspective, for Blumenberg, myth functions as a form of relief from anxiety that arises due to fundamental deficiencies of the human species. The implication is that myth is an essential component in overcoming a biological

⁵⁰⁹ I will look in particular detail at Angus Nicholls' excellent contribution, the first book length treatment of Blumenberg's theory of myth in English. See Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2015). See also, Pini Ifergan, "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Project: Metaphorology as Anthropology," *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (2015), 361; Vida Pavesich, "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Anthropology: After Heidegger and Cassirer," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, no. 3 (July 2008), 430-31; Philip Rose, "Philosophy, Myth, and the 'Significance' of Speculative Thought," *Metaphilosophy* 38, No. 5 (October 2007), 633, 636. Rüdiger Campe, Jocelyn Holland, Paul Reitter, "From the Theory of Technology to the Technique of Metaphor, Blumenberg's Opening Move," *Qui Parle* 12, no. 1 The End of Nature (Spring/Summer 2000), 109-11. A comparatively early discussion of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology appears in David Adams, "Metaphors for Mankind: The Development of Hans Blumenberg's Anthropological Metaphorology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52, no. 1 (Jan. – Mar., 1991), 154-55.

shortcoming, and critical to the formation, and sustenance of, socio-cultural institutions.

The approach to Blumenberg's theory of myth that I propose in this chapter is distinguishable from this position. I argue that the way recent scholarship has privileged philosophical anthropology as a framework for understanding Blumenberg's theory of myth has significant limitations. In spite of his speculations regarding the first humans, Blumenberg was also deeply suspicious of essentialist descriptions, and indeed of any account of the 'human being' as such. He argues, not without scepticism, that "man can be viewed either as a poor or as a rich creature."⁵¹⁰ His scepticism, I argue, is not directed at the claim itself, but rather that the binary distinction is the result of a long history of human imaginative work. The implication is that what follows in any metaphysical system, and any consequent theory of reality, rests on one of these two suppositions, without reflexively recognising the history of human concerns from which it materialised. The problem is, Blumenberg writes, that, "what remains as the subject matter of anthropology is a 'human nature' that has never been 'nature' and never will be."⁵¹¹

It is not only his ambivalence regarding definitive accounts of the nature of the human species that makes Blumenberg's association with philosophical anthropology imperfect. Another issue is that it frames him within a scholarly tradition that approaches myth in terms of symbolic representation. Blumenberg, however, has a more sophisticated account that extends beyond the symbolic, and instead focuses on what he ultimately considers to be the non-conceptual foundation of what he calls the mythically framed "historical horizons of meaning."⁵¹² The implication of this theory is that myth, and by extension history, is informed by deeply ambiguous elements of human creativity that cannot translate into symbolism or conceptuality, and which are therefore not always straightforwardly knowable. This leads me to suggest that something that was equally important to Blumenberg as the phenomenon of human anxiety, was the idea that the obscure elements of, and our interactions with, our pasts

⁵¹⁰ Hans Blumenberg, "An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric," trans. Robert M. Wallace, in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, eds. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 429.

⁵¹¹ Blumenberg, "An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric," 456.

⁵¹² Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 5.

are a crucial dimension of a human life. Specifically, the ways in which the past acts as a stimulant for myth in terms of how human communities and individuals relate to, and ‘work on’, their pasts (both real and imagined). This dimension of Blumenberg’s ideas contextualises his description of human anxiety as only *accessible* as it manifests in history (namely, as it appears in the conceptual and symbolic schemata of human interests and concerns), rather than as describing an ontological feature of the human being itself.

I argue that what emerges in a discussion that emphasises Blumenberg’s ideas regarding the precarity of historical life, rather than the inherent frailty of the human creature itself, is a philosophy that engages with the way myth shapes a given historical moment (even if the specifics of precisely how are often lost and unknown to the present), and in turn how those historical moments shape our rational agency and moral disposition.

Reoccupations and Metaphors

The philosophy of Blumenberg (1920-1996) resists easy categorisation. A well-known (albeit idiosyncratic) figure within the intellectual circles of his native Germany, the Anglo-American academy did not become familiar with him until the translation of his large monographs, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (*Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*), *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (*Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt*), and *Work on Myth* (*Arbeit am Mythos*) by Robert Wallace during the 1980s.⁵¹³ These three books are rich in historical detail in a manner unusual for Anglo-American philosophy, even those sections that became familiar with the works of the Frankfurt School in the sixties and seventies.⁵¹⁴ These large works, however, form only part of Blumenberg’s broader corpus, much of which has only

⁵¹³ See his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983); *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989); *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985). For the original German editions see, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966); *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975); *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979). Henceforth, those of Blumenberg’s texts that are discussed in detail will reference both the English translation and the German original.

⁵¹⁴ A good example of the ways in which the American Academy first received Blumenberg is Richard Rorty’s review of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, which he treats as a broad history of ideas, with a philosophical bent. See Richard Rorty, “Against Belatedness,” *London Review of Books* 5, no. 11 (11-16 June), 1983, www.lrb.co.uk/v05/n11/richard-rorty/against-belatedness, accessed on 25/7/2018.

become available in English translation relatively recently. These include: *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (*Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*), *Shipwreck with Spectator* (*Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer*), and *The Laughter of the Thracian Women* (*Das Lachen der Thrakerin*).⁵¹⁵ There remain multiple books, significant to understanding the context of Blumenberg's oeuvre, that are not translated into English: *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* (*Theory of Non-conceptuality*), *Höhlenausgänge* (*Cave Exits*), *Beschreibung des Menschen* (*Description of Man*), *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (*The Legibility of the World*), as well as many unpublished fragments that are only recently emerging from the *Nachlass*.⁵¹⁶

Blumenberg's university studies, begun in 1939, were interrupted by the war. He gained his PhD in 1947, and his *habilitation* thesis in 1950.⁵¹⁷ Blumenberg spent the remainder of his life in Germany, working in various philosophy departments, and taking part in the intellectual debates of the day. Perhaps the most notable was his engagement with the 'secularisation' debate, which raged in Germany throughout the 1950s and 60s. The theory, best articulated by Carl Schmitt as well as Karl Löwith, posited that historical modernity, with its faith in technological and moral progress, was nothing more than a secularised iteration of medieval eschatology that saw a teleological end of history.⁵¹⁸ Blumenberg's rejection of this thesis was the subject of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. He argued that the modern notion of historical progress had its roots in the early modern comprehension of the complexity and continued progression of the scientific method. The discovery that the individual and

⁵¹⁵ See Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*; *Shipwreck with Spectator*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997); *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman: A Protohistory of Theory*, trans. Spencer Hawkins (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015). For the German editions see, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1960); *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer: Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979); *Das Lachen der Thrakerin: Eine Urgeschichte der Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987).

⁵¹⁶ See *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007); *Höhlenausgänge* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996); *Beschreibung des Menschen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2014); *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981).

⁵¹⁷ Franz Josef Wetz, Hermann Timm (ed.), *Die Kunst des Überlebens: Nachdenken über Hans Blumenberg* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 10-11.

⁵¹⁸ See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 18-19; Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36-7. For a discussion of the correspondence between Schmitt and Blumenberg, see Pini Ifergan, "Cutting to the Chase: Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg on Political Theology and Secularization," *New German Critique* 111, 37, No. 3 (Fall 2010), 149-71.

Blumenberg also engaged with Karl Löwith on the topic of modernity. See Olivier Agard, "La Légitimité Des « Avant-dernières Choses »: La Discussion Blumenberg/Kracauer Sur La Modernité," *Archives De Philosophie* 67, no. 2 (2004): 227-47.

collective labour of ongoing scientific progress would take longer than the span of a natural human life led, he argued, to fundamentally new ways of understanding human life's relation to historical time.⁵¹⁹ Blumenberg's thesis states that the realisation that human "self-assertion", rather than God, would shape history, represented a "reoccupation" of an answer to a question that was originally posed by medieval scholasticism. This question, or anxiety, concerned the manner in which the world would end.⁵²⁰ Thus the modern notion of progress did not constitute a 'secularisation' of a concept per se. Rather, it was a new answer to an older question, the old answer to which no longer resonated as viable in satiating human anxieties regarding life's relation to the passage of time. Although this account led to Blumenberg being depicted as a defender of the modern rational project, arguably the more important facet of the work is clarified only when read in conjunction with important arguments made in other works (in particular *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, which was published before *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, but only translated into English in 2010). Within that context, the arguments pertaining to Blumenberg's theory of modern "self-assertion" do not relate necessarily to a defence of modernity. Rather, they embody an attempt to understand the ways in which the history of what underwrites rational reflection – often a series of ambiguous, not fully articulated hopes, desires, and anxieties – can be distinguished from a conventional, teleological history of ideas. He proposes we approach the history of thought by expanding it to include an 'history of anxieties', and the manner in which human beings rendered those anxieties meaningful via myth.

Anxiety, Relief, Leisure; Distance and Significance⁵²¹

Blumenberg argues that to attempt to understand myth demands a coming to terms with what is already taken for granted:

⁵¹⁹ This is explored in detail in his book on Copernicus, see Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*.

⁵²⁰ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 462. As Robert Pippin has argued, Blumenberg (who in fact agrees with Löwith et. al. on many points) is not interested so much in a defence of modernity per se, but rather "the nature of, and motivation for, conceptual change within a tradition." Robert B. Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem," *The Review of Metaphysics* 40, no. 3 (1987), 542.

⁵²¹ An earlier version of parts of the material used here appear in "Pushing the Monstrous to the Edge of the World; Shaking the Nightmare off the Chest: Hans Blumenberg and Walter Benjamin's Philosophies of Myth."

*To those who are bored with this success, the mastering of reality may seem a dream that has been dreamed out, or never worth dreaming. It is easy for the cultivation of boredom and discontent to commence when one accepts as a matter of course...the conditions under which life experiences its difficulties in what are now only marginal problems.*⁵²²

Here Blumenberg suggests that the history of human dilemmas is predicated upon an initial, resounding success: the ability to live in a world in which the human position is more or less explicit. This does not eliminate the possibilities of trauma, of course, but Blumenberg's argument posits that such a 'luxury' assumes an earlier, already banished, totalising anxiety. Blumenberg speculates that the early human creature:

*[having] avail[ed] itself of the sensory advantage of raising itself upright into a bipedal posture...left the protection of a more hidden form of life, and an adapted one, in order to expose itself to the risks of the widened horizon of its perception, which were also those of its perceivability.*⁵²³

Specifically, Blumenberg contends that the shift from the receding forest to the savannah, in some radically distant time in the history of the species, necessitated the standing on two limbs in order to anticipate threats over longer distances. This brought about a radical shift in the extent of human horizons, both literally and metaphorically, insofar as the creature became aware of the possibility of threats to life coming from any direction, and at any time – it “made the unoccupied distant horizon into the ongoing expectation of hitherto unknown things.”⁵²⁴ Maladapted to the rigours of life on the savannah, early humans were overcome by the totalising effect of this “indefinite anticipation”, or anxiety (*Angst*), eventually settling in caves, spaces for communal life that were “easy to close off from the outside.”⁵²⁵

⁵²² Blumenberg, WM, 3; AM, 9.

⁵²³ Blumenberg, WM, 4; AM, 10.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid. In *Höhlenausgänge*, he goes into more detail, arguing that those who stayed in the cave, that were unable to take part in the hunt, created their own world of ritual, painting, and storytelling to mitigate a “culture of concern” (*Kultur der Sorge*). See Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, 35. With thanks to Andreas Dorrer for his help in the translation of this term. As Maria Moss puts it: “...both the telling of a story and the painting of a picture are functional processes: they either equip the hunter with a narrative armour to help them overcome a reality perceived as too threatening to deal with, or they

Blumenberg calls this initial situation that had to be overcome the ‘absolutism of reality’ (*Absolutismus der Wirklichkeit*).

Blumenberg’s suggestion is that a model that posits myth as a form of relief from anxiety must acknowledge that it succeeds, therefore, in establishing a form of leisure that allows for more complex forms of reflection. Early in *Work on Myth* Blumenberg writes, “Geschichten werden erzählt, um etwas zu vertreiben.” The English translation – “Stories are told in order to ‘kill’ something” – is misleading.⁵²⁶ The act of killing suggests a finality that is not implied by the verb *vertreiben*, which can also be translated as ‘to expel’ or ‘to banish’. This is an important distinction that clarifies one of the central ideas pertaining to Blumenberg’s theory of myth, because it suggests that the primary condition, or predicament, of human life that myth seeks to alleviate is never entirely overcome, but is merely pushed to the very edges of possibility and consciousness. Although the origins of human life were obscure, Blumenberg argues that the mythical legacy left to the present necessitates that there must have been some form of initial predicament that inspired creative endeavour. That predicament demanded of the human being, “not just to shiver in the dark, but to sing as well.”⁵²⁷ He writes:

*To equip the world with names means to divide up and classify the undivided, to make the intangible tangible (greifbar), though not comprehensible (begreifbar). The setting up of means of orientation also counteracts elementary forms of confusion – of perplexity, at the least, and, the limiting case, of panic.*⁵²⁸

For Blumenberg, this functions as an important response to those theories that consider myth to be an expression of a primitive embodiment of the human desire to answer questions, or a rudimentary system of symbols that eventually gave way to

become the imaginative enrichment of a (physically) unthreatened existence.” Maria Moss, “Myth and Metaphor: Key Issues in Hans Blumenberg’s Cultural Anthropology,” *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, no. 7 (2010), 92.

⁵²⁶ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 34; Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 40 (hereafter, WM and AM).

⁵²⁷ Blumenberg, WM, 62; AM, 72.

⁵²⁸ Blumenberg, WM, 42; AM, 49.

reason.⁵²⁹ He suggests that myth as creative endeavour predates the explanatory urge, but allows for the conditions of existential leisure under which these questions might at some point be asked. That is, the association of reason with successful explanatory power forgets, according to Blumenberg, the fact that the initial emergency for human beings was not the need to answer questions, but rather to *eliminate* them: “the pushing things to a distance is also the way to bring about the suspension or deflection of questionability. Myths do not answer questions; they make things unquestionable (*sie machen unbefragbar*).”⁵³⁰

Although the details of the beginnings of human life are unknown, Blumenberg speculates that a project of constructing the world’s unquestionability might have been of pressing concern for those that confronted a world without conceptual categories.⁵³¹ This places the emphasis not on reason’s explanatory, or instrumental, capacity, but rather its ability to render the world significant at all, such that explanation would be coherent, meaningful and contribute to an epistemological architecture (whether as ‘myth’ or ‘reason’). Blumenberg suggests reason’s success relies on this precondition of “significance” (*Bedeutsamkeit*).⁵³² The ways in which this obtained historically, however, was not a naturally ordained expression of the rational capacity. It could have been otherwise:

If significance is the quality of the world as it would not originally have been for men, *then it is wrung from a situation that produced anxiety, the forcing of which into concealment is brought about and confirmed by that very significance. Significance is the form in which the background of nothing (des Nichts), as that which produces anxiety, has been put at a distance, whereby,*

⁵²⁹ This marks the primary distinction between Blumenberg and Cassirer’s account of myth. Blumenberg claims that despite Cassirer’s sophisticated understanding of myth, he still associated it, fundamentally, with a more primitive form of reflection. Hence Blumenberg argues, quoting Cassirer: “Thus it is not as a result of the fact that a certain content is “thrust back into temporal distance” and “situated in the depths of the past” that it gets its mythical quality, but rather as a result of its stability through time.” Blumenberg, WM, 160; AM, 177. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two: Mythical Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 105. For a discussion of Blumenberg’s debt to Cassirer see Oliver Müller, *Sorge um die Vernunft: Hans Blumenbergs phänomenologische Anthropologie* (Paderbon: Mentis, 2005), 204-08.

⁵³⁰ Blumenberg, WM, 126; AM, 142.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Blumenberg, WM, 59-111; AM, 68-126.

*without this 'prehistory', the function of what is significant remains uncomprehended, though present (my emphasis).*⁵³³

The 'significance' of myth precedes the kinds of reason familiar to something as recent as philosophy because it distances, and thus grounds, everything that is presupposed in the 'starting point' of philosophy: namely, a world that can be held at a distance and interrogated.⁵³⁴ Blumenberg writes:

*Myth is a way of expressing the fact that the world and the powers that hold sway in it are not abandoned to pure arbitrariness. However this may be signified, whether by a separation of powers or through a codification of competences or through a 'legalisation' of relationships, it is a system of the elimination of arbitrariness.*⁵³⁵

For Blumenberg, this entails the futility of any division between *mythos* and *logos* as such. If myth, already in the beginning, represents the delineation and codification of the purely arbitrary, Blumenberg makes it clear that:

*The antithesis between myth and reason is a late and a poor invention, because it forgoes seeing the function of myth, in the overcoming of that archaic unfamiliarity of the world, as itself a rational function, however due for expiration its means may seem after the event.*⁵³⁶

The more sophisticated works of *logos* that would come later, and the urbane disposition required for their undertaking, was conditioned upon the terrors of the world being distanced and, thus, controlled:

Leisure and dispassion in viewing the world, which theory presupposes, are already results of that millenniums-long work of myth itself, which told of the

⁵³³ Blumenberg, WM, 110; AM, 125.

⁵³⁴ For a discussion of the use of the concept of 'distance' in philosophical anthropology, and its relation to the corresponding concept of human 'instinct deficiency', see Alison Ross, "Between Luxury and Need: The Idea of Distance in Philosophical Anthropology." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25, no. 3 (2017), 384-87.

⁵³⁵ Blumenberg, WM, 43; AM, 50.

⁵³⁶ Blumenberg, WM, 48; AM, 56.

*monstrous as something that is far in the past and has been forced back to the edge of the world.*⁵³⁷

Here, myth is not explanatory, but conditioning by virtue of its creating a distance between the human creature and its world. According to Blumenberg's formulation, myth is "not even a 'symbolic form' but above all a 'form as such'", out of which symbolic meaning is constructed.⁵³⁸ The idea that myth already mediates the basis for the historico-symbolic world familiar to the human subject, emphasises Blumenberg's reluctance to approach any definitive account of the *origins* of how human beings established the leisure required for *logos*. He implies that any search for such an account is already subject to a history of anxieties and wishes; and that rationality's axiomatic hostility to whatever it considers irrational to be subject to the same history of myth it seeks to break from.

Evidence of Blumenberg's reluctance to talk about the origins of the species, while nonetheless reflecting on the ways obscure periods of history inform life in subsequent ones, can be found in his explicit warning against the discussion of 'beginnings'. He instead proposes the concept of the *Vorvergangenheit* (the past's past).⁵³⁹ Such a perspective illuminates the myths that are familiar to history as the comparatively very recent webs of stories and metaphors that resonated with countless pre-historical generations because they continued to be what Blumenberg calls 'significant'.⁵⁴⁰ This helps us see, Blumenberg writes, that a figure like Homer, who often represents a symbolic beginning for Western history, embodies something comparatively late. In this view Homer represents a finalisation of the oral traditions worked upon by countless generations of attentive audiences:

*It illustrates the way our temporal perspective is corrected by the realization that what is earliest for us was already, in its immanent history, something late.*⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁷ Blumenberg, WM, 26; AM, 33.

⁵³⁸ Blumenberg, WM, 168; AM, 186.

⁵³⁹ Blumenberg, WM 3; AM, 9.

⁵⁴⁰ Blumenberg, WM, 59-111; AM, 68-126.

⁵⁴¹ Blumenberg, WM, 152; AM, 169.

Such a chronological perspective allows us to see the ways symbolically meaningful creative endeavours from obscure periods of history continue to mediate present reflection, but also the ways in which unknown pasts are filled in with mythic narratives. While the original work *of* myth is unknown to us, lost to the most unfamiliar periods of the past, Blumenberg argues that the reception of that initial story, the work *on* myth, remains an ongoing project: works *of* myth are always simultaneously works *on* myth. This results in his acknowledging that myth and reason "...come from *one* root."⁵⁴² While the origins of myth are obscure, its metaphorical symbolism is evident in the ways rational reflection organises and expresses itself and, by the same token, the instrumentality of reason is evident even in the earliest iterations of myth familiar to the present. This basic argument necessitates the recognition of perhaps Blumenberg's most important claim: "myth itself is a piece of high-carat 'work of logos'."⁵⁴³

This idea already rejects an account of myth as primitive, pre-rational explanation, because 'significance' can be both created and judged without reference to explanatory power. Reason, then, ceases to be the more sophisticated iteration of explanation that overcomes myth in historical progress. As a result, Blumenberg claims:

That the course of things proceeded "from mythos to logos" is a dangerous misconception because we think that we assure ourselves by it that somewhere in the past the irreversible 'spring forward'(Fortsprung) took place that determined that something had been put far behind us and that from then on only 'steps forward' had to be executed...Myth had hardly defined the philosopher's objects, but it had defined the standard of achievements that he could not fall short of...Theory sees in myth an ensemble of answers to questions, such as it is itself, or wants to be. That forces it, while rejecting the answers, to acknowledge the questions.⁵⁴⁴

Although myth might have been 'overcome' in many respects, Blumenberg suggests that this rational reception of myth still fundamentally operated according to forms of

⁵⁴² Blumenberg, WM, 27; AM, 33.

⁵⁴³ Blumenberg, WM, 12; AM, 18.

⁵⁴⁴ Blumenberg, WM, 27; AM, 34.

significance informed by mythic desires and anxieties. The fact that reason sees myth as a primitive iteration of explanation, leaves it having to acknowledge the questions that myth supposedly answered erroneously. By way of example, Blumenberg discusses Thales' attempt to break away from mythological orthodoxy. As Blumenberg points out, "if one of the functions of myth is to convert numinous indefiniteness into nominal definiteness and to make what is uncanny familiar and addressable, then this process leads *ad absurdum* when 'everything is full of gods'."⁵⁴⁵ While the answers to questions might have become more sophisticated or 'rational', the architecture of what could be known was mediated by questions that emerged as a result of myth's desire that the world be differentiated. These questions actually *gained* legitimacy by reason's acknowledging them. The need to hold back "numinous indefiniteness" remained largely unchanged, what Blumenberg calls the necessity of reason to "acknowledge...the questions," and the anxieties that underwrote them. That history (that which is familiar and that which is unknown) is underwritten by obscure elements of human creativity, has important implications for how one might approach Blumenberg's theory of myth.

Blumenberg and the Human Sciences

The publication in 2015 of Angus Nicholls' *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth* represents the first English language book devoted solely to Blumenberg's account of myth.⁵⁴⁶ This is an important study, particularly

⁵⁴⁵ Blumenberg, WM, 25; AM, 32.

⁵⁴⁶ Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth*. Hereafter MHS. The less contemporary literature on Blumenberg – that saw him largely as a historian of modernity – treats his approach to myth as something of an oddity. See for example, David Ingram, "Blumenberg and the Philosophical Grounds of Historiography," *History and Theory* 29, no.1 (Feb. 1990), 10-15; Elías José Palti, "In Memoriam: Hans Blumenberg (1920-1996), an Unended Quest," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 3 (Jul., 1997), 521-23. Ingram suggests that Blumenberg argues that myth and reason are "anthropological – one is almost tempted to say, metaphysical – constants", see Ingram, 10. Palti makes the strange claim that Blumenberg was "torn between two mutually contradictory demands: the 'philosophical' and the 'historical'"; strange, because it is precisely this distinction Blumenberg seeks to interrogate. See, 524. Some slip into depictions of myth as somehow resonating with lost 'authentic' forms of human life. See for example Paul Rose' interest in the importance of Blumenberg's conception of 'significance'. In what is otherwise an outstanding discussion of the ways in which myth can change or invert its meaning almost infinitely while remaining significant, Rose seeks to construct a Blumenberg inspired model of mythic 'world orientation' to mitigate alienation – in particular environmental alienation – in the modern world. He is unable to construct this, however, without an appeal to older forms of authentic life that are 'lost' in modernity, something that Blumenberg is strictly opposed to. See Paul Rose, "Philosophy and the 'Significance' of Speculative Thought," 649-53.

because it locates Blumenberg within the broader tradition of German ‘human-sciences’ known as ‘philosophical anthropology’. A grounding premise of Nicholls’ thesis is that, fundamentally, this uniquely German tradition that approaches the human being outside the framework of the positivist sciences is radically unfamiliar to Anglo-American readers.⁵⁴⁷ He argues that, “Hans Blumenberg is the inheritor of a question that has preoccupied European and particularly German thought since at least the middle of the eighteenth century: is a science of myth possible?”⁵⁴⁸ What came to be known as philosophical anthropology in the twentieth century emerged from those initial studies.

Starting with Vico, proceeding through thinkers like Herder and Schelling, Nicholls argues that the ‘human sciences’ became distinct and recognisable as a ‘philosophical anthropology’ with thinkers such as Husserl and Dilthey.⁵⁴⁹ Ultimately, however, Nicholls argues that, although someone like Vico might occupy an anticipatory role in the history of the discipline, philosophical anthropology is best understood as a rearticulation of Kant’s fourth question. He writes:

Philosophische Anthropologie *has little to do with Anglophone anthropology – with the academic discipline that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century through the work of largely ‘armchair’ anthropologists such as Edward Burnet Tylor, and which was refined into an ethnographic method by fieldwork*

⁵⁴⁷ Nicholls is not suggesting that Blumenberg hasn’t been associated with philosophical anthropology before, just that the tradition, and its implications, is largely unfamiliar to the English speaking academy. For an early discussion of Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology see Wayne Hudson, “After Blumenberg: Historicism and Philosophical Anthropology,” *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no.4 (1993). Hudson’s argument is nuanced, insofar as it recognises Blumenberg’s explicit association with the German tradition of philosophical anthropology, while also arguing that he was what Hudson calls a “historicist”, namely someone who “attempts to explicate the character of phenomena as the result or product of a specific path of historical development.” See Hudson, “After Blumenberg”, 112.

⁵⁴⁸ Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 71-90.

⁵⁴⁹ Husserl was sceptical of the reduction of his phenomenology to an anthropology, but his work was nonetheless highly influential in that sphere. See Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 154-55, 188-90. Dilthey was notable for his desire to bring a rigorous approach, similar (but distinct) from the natural sciences, to the human sciences. For an overview of his approach to philosophy see “Dilthey’s Draft for a Preface (1911),” trans. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Patricia Van Tuyl, *Selected Works, Volume II: Understanding the Human World*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1-4. In his essay “The Reality of the External World” Dilthey gives an account of the child’s first experiences of the world: “The effort to escape displeasure and to satisfy all its drives is followed by the consciousness of being restrained, of displeasure and dissatisfaction. What the child has experienced extends to the entire life of the adult.” See Dilthey, “The Reality of the External World,” *Selected Works, Volume II: Understanding the Human World*, 23-4.

*anthropologists such as Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. In fact, philosophical anthropology does not directly engage in fieldwork or in encounters with 'exotic' non-European cultures at all, even if it may at times draw on such data. Insofar as it is seen as a sub-discipline of philosophy, it is simply the reposing – within the context of the early twentieth century and its scientific advancements – of Kant's fourth question: What is the human being?*⁵⁵⁰

By the 1920s, thinkers like Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner had come to see their work as a form of anti-Darwinism.⁵⁵¹ Nicholls writes that it was Scheler, for example, who argued that human beings were defined “precisely by their lack of biological specialisation”, while Plessner was “concerned with situating philosophical anthropology in relation to both Dilthey's conception of the human sciences and Husserl's phenomenology.”⁵⁵² It was the notion of the human creature as maladapted for his surroundings, wherein the creation of culture represented a form of defence/coping mechanism, that was taken up in more detail by the likes of Erich Rothacker, Paul Alsberg and Arnold Gehlen.

Rothacker posited a theory that distinguished humans from animals by the former's ability to derive “significance” from objects.⁵⁵³ The theory of ‘significance’, which Blumenberg places at the heart of his theory of myth and metaphor, explains how human beings differentiate and distinguish an overwhelming totality. Nicholls argues that Rothacker's theory of significance is, in Blumenberg's work:

⁵⁵⁰ Nicholls, MHS, 80.

⁵⁵¹ Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, trans. Manfred S. Frings (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 5-9. Plessner explicitly introduces his approach to “the essence of man” as “directed against two dogmatic systems: idealism...and positivism of the Darwinian-Spencerian variety.” See Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behaviour*, trans. J. S. Churchill & Marjorie Grene (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 13.

⁵⁵² Nicholls, MHS, 82.

⁵⁵³ Erich Rothacker, *Geschichtsphilosophie* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1934), 98-9. In an earlier work, Rothacker suggests that a human being's cognitive capacity is partly culturally and historically conditioned, and cites Vico as the first to suggest this. See Erich Rothacker, *Logik und Systematik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche. Buchgesellschaft, 1965), 15-16.

... 'related to finitude' and can be positive or negative, attractive or threatening. The human being cannot be indifferent and pay equal attention to everything upon its horizon.⁵⁵⁴

The implication is that the human ability to derive significance from the world is necessarily tied to their finitude as creatures. According to Nicholls, Blumenberg's attachment to Rothacker's theory of significance, interacts importantly with the anthropologist Paul Alsberg's conception of human beings as a 'creature of distance'. Alsberg proposes that the vital moment in early human life was bipedal development, allowing human creatures to further anticipate threats.⁵⁵⁵ The discovery that threats could be repelled 'at a distance' by the throwing of stones, showed early human beings that distance (first physical and then conceptual) allowed them to control situations that would otherwise be overwhelming.⁵⁵⁶

Blumenberg's description of the desire to derive control via distance and the need for significance, was deeply influenced by Gehlen's notion of deficiency, for whom the human being was of an "exposed and vulnerable...constitution," that must create a niche in its environment.⁵⁵⁷ This made reason, as Nicholls writes, not a "higher metaphysical faculty, but simply a survival mechanism that responded to the human being's special biological needs."⁵⁵⁸ Gehlen, a political conservative who joined the Nazi party, presented his account of human deficiency as a defence of historical institutions and customs. The significance of this position was that these traditions were all that prevented human life from floating adrift from critical structures of meaning that rendered life possible.⁵⁵⁹ The influence of Gehlen on Blumenberg has been emphasised in recent scholarship. This reading of Blumenberg is both understandable and defensible, given it provides a way of understanding and conceptualising the stakes of his broader philosophy. This emphasis draws out a

⁵⁵⁴ Nicholls, MHS, 84. See also Blumenberg, WM, 67; AM, 77.

⁵⁵⁵ See Paul Alsberg, *In Quest of Man: A Biological Approach to the Problem of Man's Place in Nature* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1970), 130-39.

⁵⁵⁶ Nicholls, MHS, 113, 116. Alsberg is an important figure in Blumenberg's thought, in particular in his *Description of Man*, but goes unmentioned in *Work on Myth*. As with many of Blumenberg's influences, Alsberg's presence is implicit, rather than explicit.

⁵⁵⁷ Arnold Gehlen, *Man, his Nature and Place in the World*, trans. Clare McMillan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 28.

⁵⁵⁸ Nicholls, MHS, 84-5.

⁵⁵⁹ Gehlen, *Man, his Nature and Place in the World*, 24-31.

particular reading of Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, that insists on the inherently frailty of human beings, and their need for reassurance.⁵⁶⁰

While the influence of Gehlen over Blumenberg is undeniable, the latter's theory of deficiency has important differences. Where Gehlen suggests life without the mythic structures of meaning embedded in cultural practices and institutions would imply a form of nihilistic chaos, Blumenberg makes a more nuanced judgement.⁵⁶¹ He argues that any understanding of human frailty must be granted within the context of the ways in which 'significance' has marked historical life, rather than the initial situation that catalysed the need for it:

If there is anything at all that deserves the attribution of the phrase 'It stays with me,' it is the archaic imagination, whatever it may have been that provided its initial material (my emphasis).⁵⁶²

Here Blumenberg suggests, contra Gehlen, that speculation regarding the earliest forms of human life are futile, thus implying that although it may be the case that myth facilitates life, it is equally unclear what life without it might be like.⁵⁶³ Gehlen's account, in ascribing an ahistorical, ontological essence to human needs, leads ultimately, as Habermas argued, to a form of dogmatism.⁵⁶⁴ This dogma suggests that historically sanctioned socio-cultural institutions must be preserved in order to protect human beings from epistemological and normative disintegration, but also that their capacity to survive rests on the tools that allowed the human being to overcome his initial frailty. While Blumenberg concedes this might be the case, he begins from a refusal to associate myth only with origins, suggesting that all we have

⁵⁶⁰ See Adams, "Metaphors for Mankind", 159; Pavesich, "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Anthropology", 429; Rüdiger et. al., 110; Ifergan, "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Project", 366. Ifergan argues that there is a "broad scholarly consensus" regarding the affinity between Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology and Gehlen's, referencing in particular Oliver Müller's book. See Müller, *Sorge um die Vernunft*, 272-76.

⁵⁶¹ See Blumenberg, "An Anthropological Approach to Rhetoric," 439.

⁵⁶² Blumenberg, WM, 67, 59; AM, 77, 68.

⁵⁶³ As Felix Heidenreich has argued, Blumenberg's criticism of the essentialism of philosophical anthropology was predicated around an acknowledgment of the sheer diversity of human interests and desires: "(Blumenberg) emphasizes the fact that humans strive towards very different goals in life. The openness or "undefinedness" of man renders comprehensible why the conceptions of the good life are so fundamentally different." Felix Heidenreich, "Political Aspects in Hans Blumenberg's Philosophy," *Revista de Filosofia Aurora* 27, No. 41 (2015), 535.

⁵⁶⁴ Nicholls, MHS, 193; Jürgen Habermas, "Anthropologie," *Das Fischer Lexikon Philosophie*, ed. Alwin Diemer, Ivo Frenzel (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1958), 32-3.

is the manner in which we work upon the legacy of what he calls the “archaic imagination.” He suggests that the obsession with myth’s origin is still predicated upon the assumption that myth is best associated with early forms of human experience:

*The identification of myth with ‘its’ primeval epoch places the accent of theory on the question – which is inaccessible to us, and consequently delivered over to speculation – of its origin.*⁵⁶⁵

Blumenberg’s point is precisely that myth does not belong solely to the past, but neither is modern myth merely a contemporary preservation of an ancient inheritance. It is this latter component of his theory that I suggest raises certain problems for readings of Blumenberg that privilege only his interest in philosophical anthropology.

Nicholls’ intention in tracing the lineage of Blumenberg’s influences is to show the extent to which that tradition exerted an important hold over Blumenberg’s work. Having discussed this in detail, Nicholls concludes:

*Blumenberg’s theory of myth is based upon a speculative account of anthropogenesis, and amounts to a quasi-Darwinian theory of culture that arises from a critique of Darwin. It is a theory of myth that is inseparable from Blumenberg’s answer, which is a hypothetical and therefore less than final answer, to Kant’s fourth question, which is the fundamental question of the human sciences.*⁵⁶⁶

By locating philosophical anthropology within the reception history of responses to Kant, or more specifically one component of Kant’s work, Nicholls successfully positions Blumenberg’s concerns as responding to a Kantian tradition that sought to interrogate the essence of the human creature. As he reiterates later, however, Blumenberg’s response to Kant’s question, is “functional and self-consciously hypothetical.”⁵⁶⁷ This emphasises quite correctly that, for Blumenberg, the response

⁵⁶⁵ Blumenberg, WM, 67; AM, 77.

⁵⁶⁶ Nicholls, MHS, 5.

⁵⁶⁷ Nicholls, MHS, 34.

to the ‘question of man’ is, as was clear in his denial of a human nature, always contingent. This remains only a partial formulation, however.

There is undoubtedly a reading of Blumenberg’s account of myth as deriving from a Kantian inspired philosophical anthropology, one which has strong biographical justifications. However, I dispute the idea that the approach can adequately characterise all the components of the theory. Specifically, I think greater emphasis needs to be put on the fact that (as is implied when he argues that “what remains as the subject matter of anthropology is a ‘human nature’ that has never been ‘nature’ and never will be”) his description of myth contains an important discussion of the human being as a distinctly historical creature, rather than a commentary on the nature of the animal itself.

The Regime of Wishes

Although Blumenberg provides *an* answer to Kant’s fourth question, I suggest that it is within the context of a much broader account of how human beings navigate their historical circumstances, which ultimately denies the legitimacy of the question itself or, rather, exposes the historical horizon in which such a question emerges.⁵⁶⁸ In this context, myth informs an understanding of the ways in which human beings have managed to render the world meaningful, rather than an understanding of the species itself, whose origins remain ambiguous. At the very beginning of *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg suggests that in thinking about the possible origins of thought:

*...one encounters the necessity of picturing an initial situation that serves the purpose of the old status naturalis of philosophical theories of culture and the state (my emphasis).*⁵⁶⁹

The implications for this claim, on the first page of *Work on Myth*, cannot be overstated. Blumenberg’s account of the so-called ‘Absolutism of Reality’ certainly represents a form of contribution to the tradition of speculative philosophical

⁵⁶⁸ This argument has been made before. As early as 1991, David Adams argued that Blumenberg’s anthropology should be understood as a contingent source of orientation within a deeper history of anxieties. See David Adams, “Metaphors for Mankind,” 160-61.

⁵⁶⁹ Blumenberg, WM, 3; AM, 9.

anthropology. However, it does so within the context of his insistence that, "...theories about the origin of myths are idle. Here the rule is: *Ignorabimus* [We will not know]. Is that bad? No, since we don't know anything about the 'origins' in other cases either."⁵⁷⁰

While he concedes the inescapable temptation of using beginnings as a source of orientation, he also insists that a genuinely philosophical approach to myth must, "independently of conjectures about remote times" (that is, outside of a speculation regarding human nature and its origins):

*...prove itself with respect to the question of whether it can make comprehensible the effectiveness and the effective power of mythical elements, both archaic ones and possible newly formed ones.*⁵⁷¹

This argument suggests that philosophy must engage with the material, historical legacies of the ways in which myth functions and succeeds, rather than in terms of our speculative projections regarding myth's role in life.⁵⁷² Blumenberg reminds us that any rational attempt to come to terms with something essential (for example, like our desire to establish our origins as a way of understanding ourselves) is always contingent on an obscure past of mythic wishes that continues to inform the way we approach the historical moment in which we find ourselves. As Robert Savage succinctly puts it, "...paradoxically, Blumenberg's myth of origin narrates the impossibility of narratively recuperating the origin of myth."⁵⁷³

⁵⁷⁰ Blumenberg, WM, 45; AM, 53.

⁵⁷¹ Blumenberg, WM, 66; AM, 76.

⁵⁷² Samuel Moyn has written an important paper on Blumenberg's interest in our collective obsession with origins. Moyn traces Blumenberg's work back to Vico's theory of the "logic of fantasy", and points out that, while Blumenberg himself was interested in origins, it was always predicated upon an acknowledgement of its contingency on historical events and requirements. See Samuel Moyn, "Metaphorically Speaking: Hans Blumenberg, Giambattista Vico, and the Problem of Origins," *Qui Parle* 12, no. 1 (April 2000), 71-2.

⁵⁷³ Robert Savage, "Aporias of Origin: Hans Blumenberg's Primal Scene of Hominization," in *Erinnerung an das Humane*, ed. Michael Moxter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 64. Blumenberg's claim that, "To speak of beginnings is always to be suspected of a mania for returning to origins" is a way to position himself against multiple intellectual traditions, as well as highlighting the 'limits' of any philosophical exploration (Blumenberg, WM 21; AM, 28). On the one hand, it offers a critique of the Romantic accounts of human thinking that see the authenticity of human life shrouded in forgotten origins, the best example of which was Heidegger's philosophy of Being. This model sees modern reflection and history as a representation of a 'wrong turn', away from authentic forms of life. It can also be interpreted as offering a riposte to positivism, which grounds any account of human origins in the empirical realm of 'stones and bones'. This approach suggests that an account of the human being

Early in *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg highlights the fact that the modern era was distinct in its desire to reduce “...the value of everything prior to it as nil.”⁵⁷⁴ He construes this attitude in early modern life as symptomatic of a fundamentally mythic desire for history to ‘begin anew’, in order to ground and legislate the new approaches to rational enquiry. He refers to this phenomenon in his first book, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, as “the new seriousness.”⁵⁷⁵ Blumenberg uses this argument regarding modernity’s attitude to history to make a wider observation which is worth quoting in full. This is partly because it articulates the core of his understanding of history’s relation to myth, but also because it articulates a key theme of this thesis:

In historylessness lies the opportunity of every remythification. It is easiest to project mythical turning points into empty space. That is why the removal of history from school curricula is not so much a mistake in planning or a failure of understanding as, rather, an alarming symptom: Either mythification is already at work or it will immediately be induced by the loss of the historical consciousness of time. It may well be that we can learn nothing from history but the fact that we have a history; but this is already enough to prevent us from putting ourselves under the regime of wishes....It is true that a sense of history is not yet a resolve to bring about a particular future; but there is simply no other way of gaining sensitivity to a future than through the insight into the uniqueness and irretrievability of what is past (my emphasis).⁵⁷⁶

It is telling that this argument concerning wishes comes shortly after an extensive discussion of Freud’s theory of the unconscious; specifically the Oedipal complex

must depart from what we can know empirically about our origins. See Blumenberg’s detailed discussion of the problem of Heidegger’s approach in WM, 110; AM, 125. See, just for example, Richard Leakey, *The Origin of Humankind* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1994), 92, 110. This should not be taken as discounting the quality of Leakey’s work, but rather as a good example of the notion that the only way to deal with the origins of the human species, is to proceed according to what the empirical evidence shows.

⁵⁷⁴ Blumenberg, WM, 99; AM, 112.

⁵⁷⁵ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 474. This is a term Blumenberg uses to designate the habit of rational traditions throughout history to occasionally jettison past rational projects in order to emphasise their own intellectual seriousness and desire to, finally, establish truth. It is a crucial part of rationality’s self-legitimation, Blumenberg argues, to undermine past intellectual traditions in order to establish its credibility. This, ironically, also sows the seeds of doubt, by showing that past projects can be shown to be false or misguided, which in turn undermines any appeal to finality that a current rational project might strive for.

⁵⁷⁶ Blumenberg, WM, 99; AM, 112.

(not merely the desire for incest with the mother, but also an “unexpressed inclination to return home” to her) and the theory of the death drive (“the final intensification of the desire to return”).⁵⁷⁷

That this discussion takes place in the chapter Blumenberg entitles “Significance” has multiple implications. It draws attention to the fact that Freud offers a way of understanding how the need for significance stems from our deepest wishes, but also that what underwrites history, like the human mind, is often unknown and unreachable. Further, it shows that Freud’s work itself both contributes to that long history of the ‘work on’ myth by searching for significance, and does so by looking toward a “desire to return” to origins. It is in this latter context that Freud’s work can be understood as the attempt to make sense of the tumultuous period of European history in which he lived by suggesting it was subject to a series of unconscious drives that mark the human being from its origins. While still beset by barbarism, history becomes less inexplicable, and more significant to those that find themselves caught in it. Blumenberg writes that:

*...the death instinct had its own logical force in the development and completion of Freud’s total myth; but the point in time, so close to a catastrophe in which Freud was involved in many ways, may also have suited his need for consolation.*⁵⁷⁸

Blumenberg goes on to argue that this was a case of “the formal renewal of myth – as the servicing of the need for significance – ...[tying] acute experience and important current events into the context of long familiarity.”⁵⁷⁹ Blumenberg, I contend, makes two insinuations in these passages: firstly, that the past is susceptible to mythification, i.e. the creation of imagined and projected histories. Secondly, that the consolation, or significance that human beings might seek out, itself derives from, and feeds into, the mythical confines of historical life, and not merely from an axiomatic anxious ‘state’ of the human creature.

⁵⁷⁷ Blumenberg, WM, 87, 89; AM, 99, 102. Notably for Freud, the deepest recesses of the unconscious, including the desires and anxieties of the ego, could often manifest in dreams, what he considered the repressed wishes of the subject. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 200-14.

⁵⁷⁸ Blumenberg, WM, 95; AM, 108-09.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

While conceding that the human creature appears to be beset by anxieties that drive its need for significance, Blumenberg is also aware that the exact nature of those traumas are, like the unconscious, ambiguous and often unreachable.⁵⁸⁰ Within the context of this chapter this is a vital point because it locates myth, not as an outgrowth of an anthropology of necessary human frailty (where history becomes an extension of various deficiencies of the species) but as something that arises due to human requirements at particular moments in history. The implication is not that humans *need* myth to derive meaning from existence given that, as Blumenberg argues, the initial predicament humanity found itself confronted with is both unknown and prone to its own mythification. Instead, he emphasises the way myth itself is an ever-present mediator of our collective and individual histories, implying that myth can only be a reflection of human beings as historical agents, rather than an absolute commentary on them as a species.⁵⁸¹ Speculation regarding the latter would necessarily be subject to the histories of wishes, and their underlying traumas, that informs both the past and present. Effectively the distinction is between what Blumenberg refers to in a later passage as the “antinomy between what we need from history and what we find in history, an antinomy that we cannot master, because it is only a part of the constitutive antinomy of wishes and realities.”⁵⁸² The fact that Blumenberg concedes the possibility that nothing might be learnt from history, other than the fact we have one, already resists the mythical attempt to account for human life along the axis of its desires. Instead, it attempts to contextualise the mythical structures of human life according to the historical circumstances in which they arose, which are in themselves a product of aspects of our past that are not always recognisable.

The emphasis would thus be on myth representing fragments of traditions and forms of life that are otherwise lost to history. This is distinct from a history of ideas, the logic of which usually implies a form of necessary transition or teleology from

⁵⁸⁰ In terms of Blumenberg’s articulation of a human nature, Ifergan calls this a “balancing act between temptation and refusal.” See Ifergan, “Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophical Project,” 362.

⁵⁸¹ Kasper Lysemose claims that Blumenberg’s philosophical anthropology is “significant in an existential sense.” He claims this leads us to a kind of philosophical resignation regarding what can and cannot be known. My approach offers a way of negotiating that possibility by focusing on human beings as historical creatures. See Kasper Lysemose, “The Being, the Origin and the Becoming of Man: A Presentation of Philosophical Anthropogenealogy and Some Ensuing Methodological Considerations,” *Human Studies* 35, no. 1 (2012), 127-29.

⁵⁸² Blumenberg, WM, 100; AM, 113.

one idea to another. Instead he envisages a history of anxieties that shape the concerns to which human beings dedicate themselves. Underneath the history of thought, then, would lie the history of those anxieties that catalysed it. The result of such a reading is that Blumenberg's theory of myth emerges as, not a speculative account of what human beings *are*, but rather what they *do*, or have done, throughout history, as historical agents.⁵⁸³ Pini Ifergan argues something similar, suggesting that Blumenberg's account of human deficiency, while it is derived from a philosophical anthropology, departs from the claim that "man is not a created being, but was made ...himself," a notion that owes a clear debt to Vico.⁵⁸⁴ This fragmented history of creative endeavour, of which myth is one of the more important components, represents an (highly incomplete and enigmatic) account of the ways in which human life emerged and came to recognise itself.

Notably, a similar argument has been made by Robert Pippin in his description of Blumenberg's theory of myth. He writes:

*All mythic sense-making is treated as radically historical. There is no common, underlying savage mind; no archetypal sense making, no ever re-emerging species-characteristic divisions and classifications in experience. What we take up, use, alter and expand in some standard narrative always represents a 'working out' of an historically particular version of the fears and anxieties Blumenberg has identified as unavoidable in human experience.*⁵⁸⁵

Pippin's reading offers a way of understanding Blumenberg's approach to traumas as historically embedded and non-essential, insofar as the initial *cause* of human anxiety is lost to time, and all that remains are the fragments of what humans created to

⁵⁸³ This is an important distinction inspired by Jerome Carroll's arguments regarding philosophical anthropology. See Jerome Carroll, "'Indirect' or 'Engaged': A Comparison of Hans Blumenberg's and Charles Taylor's Debt and Contribution to Philosophical Anthropology," *History of European Ideas* 39: 6 (2013), 860.

⁵⁸⁴ Ifergan, "Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Project," 365. Ifergan's paper offers a highly convincing account of Blumenberg's attempt towards the end of his life to "integrate (the) two foundational arguments" of his life's work, namely his metaphorology and his anthropology. See 376. My arguments in the present chapter are not intended as a disagreement with Ifergan's thesis, only to draw out and emphasise certain facets of Blumenberg's account of the relation between metaphor, myth and historical life.

⁵⁸⁵ Robert B. Pippin, "Modern Mythic Meaning: Blumenberg Contra Nietzsche," *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 4 (1993), 41.

mitigate it. As such, it is only the ‘work’ on the mythic form that is accessible to us in a historical moment. This implies that any rational desire to locate an axiomatic position removed from those limits, must necessarily emerge from that mythico-historical horizon.⁵⁸⁶

As Ifergan has argued in another paper, Blumenberg’s theories do not render him a philosophical sceptic, as someone who is “at best able to provide partial explanations of various elements of reality.”⁵⁸⁷ On the contrary, Ifergan contends that if Blumenberg is to be labelled a sceptic, it is following a model where “we have conceded our inability to know that which we wanted to know, but we are still interested in knowing what was it that we wanted to know.”⁵⁸⁸ Ifergan argues that although Blumenberg refuses to offer an absolute commentary on the human creature, his distinction between the anthropological theory and the historical details of myths implies that human beings have an “inability to tolerate radical meaninglessness.”⁵⁸⁹ While I agree with Ifergan, my proposal is that the idea that human beings resist meaninglessness can itself be read as a commentary on how certain unknowable dimensions of our past can inform the historical ‘life’ of concepts, and thus rational agency.

Metaphorology and the “Nutrient Solution”: Absolute Metaphors and the Work on Myth

In the chapter thus far, I have proposed that a fruitful perspective on Blumenberg’s theory of myth begins by de-emphasising the tendency to understand it through the prism of philosophical anthropology. I have suggested, instead, that myth offers a better reflection of the ways in which human thinking engages with and negotiates its many pasts as a source of communal and individual orientation in a historical moment. This idea finds support, I will argue, in Blumenberg’s understanding of

⁵⁸⁶ This is argued by Robert Savage in his review of *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*. See Robert Savage, “Laughter from the Lifeworld: Hans Blumenberg’s Theory of Nonconceptuality,” *Thesis Eleven*, no. 94 (August 2008), 123-24. Savage’s reading of Blumenberg, both in this review article, as well as in the translator’s afterword of *Paradigm for a Metaphorology*, is similar to my own, and these two pieces were extremely influential to my thinking.

⁵⁸⁷ Pini Ifergan, “Reading Hans Blumenberg’s Work on Myth,” *The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (Jan., 2016), 55.

⁵⁸⁸ Ifergan, “Reading Hans Blumenberg’s Work on Myth,” 63.

⁵⁸⁹ Ifergan, “Reading Hans Blumenberg’s Work on Myth,” 72.

myth's relation to concepts and rationality, and how those latter two things function in history.

For Blumenberg, concepts are something that emerge in the passage of history, a representation of the need for preparatory anticipation, or, the “capacity for foresight, anticipation of what has not yet taken place, preparation for what is absent, beyond the horizon.”⁵⁹⁰ The necessity of concepts, or rather the need to overcome what Blumenberg calls the “intentionality of consciousness without an object”, was due to what he speculates was the need to conquer a form of anxiety that was not satiated by the animal instinct of fleeing. This was a situation in which the scenarios that once inspired instinctive flight “had to be dealt with by standing one's ground or had to be avoided by means of anticipation.”⁵⁹¹ He contends in *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* that an apparatus like the hunter's animal trap, as would have been used by early humans, indicates an extraordinarily sophisticated account of a human being's understanding of themselves and their world. As Blumenberg argues, the trap requires an anticipation of the shape and size of an animal, its typical behaviour, in a projected time in the future that has an essential (but abstract) relation to the present.⁵⁹² The historical reality of the trap, in other words, represents an orientation toward the future, and a conception of what one wants and how to procure it.⁵⁹³

Importantly for Blumenberg, however, he makes a vital distinction between concepts and rationality, arguing that the former only conditions the latter, but rarely satisfies its desires.⁵⁹⁴ He argues that the concept must be plastic enough (*Spielraum*) to anticipate as many scenarios as possible, but specific enough (*Konkrete*) that it can perform the fundamentally conservative function of anticipating probabilities.⁵⁹⁵ It is both the limits and plasticity of concepts that must lead, Blumenberg suggests,

⁵⁹⁰ Blumenberg, WM, 168; AM, 186.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² ...sie ist in allem ausgerichtet auf die Figur und die Maße, die Verhaltensweise und Bewegungsart eines erst erwarteten, nicht gegenwertigen, erst in Besitz und Zugriff zu bringenden Gegenstandes. See Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*, 10.

⁵⁹³ In an important paper on Blumenberg's account of leisure, Tobias Keiling argues that he makes a distinction between different types of reason – conceptual, and theorising, wherein leisure is a condition for the latter. See Tobias Keiling, "The Pleasure of the Non-Conceptual: Theory, Leisure and Happiness in Hans Blumenberg's Philosophical Anthropology," *Sats* 17, no. 1 (2016), 84.

⁵⁹⁴ Der Begriff is zwar kein Surrogat, aber ist zur Enttäuschung der auf ihn gesetzten philosophischen Erwartungen nicht die Erfüllung der Intentionen der Vernunft, sondern nur deren Durchgang, deren Richtungsnahme. See Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*, 10.

⁵⁹⁵ Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*, 12.

ultimately to a rational disappointment: a situation in which human beings inevitably find themselves up against the limits of its conceptual apparatus. This is a case of the rational faculties attempting to move beyond their conditioning horizon, of rational instrumentality trying to outgrow the domain in which its anticipatory anxieties are coherent. In the case of myth, it is precisely its plasticity, but also its concreteness, that distinguishes it from other kinds of expression. As he argues, myth, at its most basic level, should not be understood as “‘symbolic form’ (*symbolische Form*) but above all a ‘form as such’ (*Form überhaupt*), by which to define the undefined.”⁵⁹⁶

Although Blumenberg suggests that the above formula “is meant to be understood anthropologically, not epistemologically” wherein the ‘form’ of myth provides “stability in the world”, it is clear that he only considers the historical legacy of that initial situation as accessible to reflection.⁵⁹⁷ As is evident in his rejection of Cassirer’s model of myth as primitive symbolism (something he argues is due to Cassirer’s interest in myth only in terms of its “origin and its quality as an origin”⁵⁹⁸), Blumenberg considered mythic images as something that informed the *possibility* of symbolic meaning. This implies that what is most visible to the historical agent that works on myth, is not the form as such, but the work that continues within the structures of the form. For Blumenberg, myth is distinguished by “an increase in the visibility of...myth’s potential” with the passage of time, as for example when Camus “said of Sisyphus that one should imagine him as being happy.”⁵⁹⁹ For Blumenberg, the complete inversion of the original myth is evidence of the extreme adaptability of myths according to the material requirements of humans in history, but also of the often ambiguous facets of historical life that underpin and drive our rational and conceptual capacities.

A key to this approach is Blumenberg’s theory that myths emerge from concepts that are themselves limited in scope by what human beings confronted and reflected upon in unknown periods of the past. Blumenberg suggests that this is evident in the ways the history of reflection appears confined to a series of

⁵⁹⁶ Blumenberg, WM, 168; AM, 186.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ Blumenberg, WM, 69; AM, 79. See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brian (London: Penguin, 1955), 111.

rudimentary ‘images’ that repeatedly reappear, a testament to concepts’ plasticity and concreteness. Blumenberg refers to these images as ‘absolute metaphors’, instances of the most rudimentary human expression that are ‘pre-conceptual’, or more precisely, non-conceptual.⁶⁰⁰ He suggests these non-conceptual apparatuses are expressions of the human attempt to derive the most basic, binary forms of significance from an undifferentiated reality, which in turn condition the limits of what is conceptually coherent. That these images “cannot be dissolved into conceptuality” implies that the concepts that condition rational enquiry are founded upon ineliminable metaphors that by definition resist any such enquiry. It is the inability to know, or be familiar with, these non-conceptual expressions, that contributes to what Blumenberg would suggest is a history of anxieties and wishes. The source of rational orientation (if there can be one) is not so much the origins of the human being in history, but rather the evaluation of our need for orientation in history per se. That these absolute metaphors are inaccessible is the point of departure for what he calls a “metaphorology.”⁶⁰¹

This theory derives in part from readings of Vico and Kant. Blumenberg argues that it was Vico who first recognised that the Cartesian emphasis on ‘clear and distinct’ perception in the first rule of his *Discours de la Méthode*, would ultimately “eviscerate history.”⁶⁰² Vico’s concern was, as discussed in the previous chapters, that the kind of clarity sought by Descartes was the sole domain of God, and ignored the fact that human truth largely emerged from the history of human creativity. Regarding Vico’s theory, Blumenberg writes:

*What remains for us mortals? Not the ‘clarity’ of the given, but solely that of whatever we have made for ourselves: the world of our images, and artefacts, our conjectures and projections – in short the universe of our imagination.*⁶⁰³

Vico’s alternative to Cartesian epistemology recognised that the grounding conditions of human thought and exchange were marked by a history of human creation and endeavour, rather than in an ahistorical emphasis on the internal function of cognition.

⁶⁰⁰ Blumenberg, *Paradigm for a Metaphorology*, 5; *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, 12-13. Hereafter PFM and PZM.

⁶⁰¹ Blumenberg, PFM, 5; PZM, 12-13.

⁶⁰² Blumenberg, PFM, 1-2; PZM, 7-8.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

Crucially for Blumenberg, Vico recognised that “...metaphors can also...be *foundational elements* of philosophical language, ‘translations’ that resist being converted back into authenticity and logicity.”⁶⁰⁴

Blumenberg argues that, for Kant, the problem of the metaphor represents an unspoken and largely unpursued venture, evident in his speculation regarding ‘the symbol’ in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Regarding concepts of reason, those “to which no sensible intuition can ever adequately correspond” (i.e. concepts that cannot be grasped empirically or purely through the understanding), Blumenberg writes that Kant seems to concede that they “occur through the provision or a representation that has only the ‘form of the reflection’ in common with the intended referent.”⁶⁰⁵ Blumenberg’s intention when he suggests that Kant’s concept of symbols “correspond fairly exactly to metaphors”, is merely to show the extent to which Kant acknowledged the way certain irreducible ‘images’ mediated the ways the rational faculties recognised and orientated themselves. All of this leads Blumenberg to conclude that a study of a metaphorology offers in effect a study of the ways in which the history of thinking’s development continues to delimit thinking itself. He writes:

*That these metaphors are called ‘absolute’ means only that they prove resistant to terminological claims and cannot be dissolved into conceptuality, not that one metaphor could not be replaced or represented by an other, or corrected through a more precise one. Even absolute metaphors therefore have a history. They have a history in a more radical sense than concepts, for the historical transformation of a metaphor brings to light the metakinetcs of the historical horizons of meaning and ways of seeing within which concepts undergo their modifications...metaphorology seeks to burrow down to the substructure of thought, the underground, the nutrient solution of systematic crystallizations; but it also aims to show with what ‘courage’ the mind pre-empts itself in its images, and how its history is projected in the courage of its conjectures.*⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁴ Blumenberg, PFM, 3; PZM, 10.

⁶⁰⁵ Blumenberg, PFM, 4; PZM, 11.

⁶⁰⁶ Blumenberg, PFM, 5; PZM, 12-13.

A history of metaphors is radically distinct from a more conventional history of ideas, or even a history of conceptuality, because it seeks to understand the grounding conditions for human thinking while also acknowledging that any such investigation is subject to that very history of delimitations. It must thus recognise its historical contingency by acknowledging that even the rational desire to account for something axiomatically, distinguished from the history of its subject, is mediated by the history of creative images that human beings have conjured to render the world meaningful.

According to Blumenberg, a successful metaphorology – namely a philosophy that takes seriously the “historical horizons of meaning” in which it proceeds – would be the furthest from ideology. Although language might condition what is expressible in life, Blumenberg argues that:

We are determined even more compellingly by the supply of images available for selection and the images we select...what interests me...is the methodological import of the attempt to trace stylistic differences of a way of life back to a layer of elementary ideas that always shows itself most clearly where the ‘supply of images’ has been tapped.⁶⁰⁷

What Blumenberg means here is essentially that regardless of reason’s desires, or perhaps more accurately its anxieties, and in spite of the increasing sophistication of rational discourse, it cannot outrun the fundamental metaphors (“the supply of images”) that render its discoveries meaningful. While “myth is regarded as a ‘prelogical phenomenon and assigned to a primitive form of mental ‘development’”, a study of absolute metaphors shows the fundamental similarity (in terms of its scope of desires and horizon of interests) of reason and myth.⁶⁰⁸ Thus, “the difference between myth and ‘absolute metaphor’ would...be a purely genetic one: myth bears the sanction of its primordial, unfathomable origin.”⁶⁰⁹

An acknowledgement of this provides a deeper insight of the full extent of human concerns that catalysed reflection. Blumenberg gives the example of the

⁶⁰⁷ Blumenberg, PFM, 63; PZM, 92.

⁶⁰⁸ Blumenberg, PFM, 78; PZM, 112.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

reception history of the concept of truth itself, something that he argues has had such “latitude” that it “basically sufficed for all philosophical systems.”⁶¹⁰ As he suggests, however, such latitude leaves one open, forever, to the “age old question ‘What is truth?’.” Here the concreteness of the idea of truth comes into conflict with its almost infinite plasticity. He writes:

*If...we pursue the history of the metaphor most closely linked to the problem of truth, the metaphor of light, the question explicates itself in a concealed plenitude never yet hazarded by any system. The metaphors of light cannot be translated back into concepts; analysis seeks to disclose the questions to which answers are sought and risked, questions of a presystematic nature whose intentional fullness ‘provoked’ the metaphors, as it were. We should not shrink from the supposed naïveté of spelling out these fundamental questions, regardless of whether they were ever actually posed in so many words.*⁶¹¹

The agility of the concept of truth therefore is at once the reason for the repeated reliance on it according to vastly different historical needs, but also for its deep ambivalence and repeated emergence as a problem to be solved.⁶¹² That ‘light’ continues to inform our basic understanding of truth’s liberatory power is evident in the synonymy of god with the sun, Plato’s allegory of the cave, all the way to the Enlightenment, as well as contemporary reactions to such a legacy in the so called ‘dark Enlightenment’.⁶¹³ Blumenberg devoted entire books to tracing single

⁶¹⁰ Blumenberg, PFM 7; PZM, 15. See also his tracing of the relation of the concept of the ‘creative being’ with that of the concept of nature. Hans Blumenberg, “‘Imitation of Nature’: Toward a Prehistory of the Idea of the Creative Being,” trans. Anna Wertz, *Qui Parle* 12, no. 1 (2000), 18, 21, 48.

⁶¹¹ Blumenberg, PFM 7; PZM, 15.

⁶¹² Blumenberg addresses the metaphor of light in detail in “Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation,” trans Joel Anderson, in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 31, 36, 54.

⁶¹³ See Plato, *Republic*, 514a-520a, in *Complete Works*, ed John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). All Plato references are to this edition of the *Complete Works*. The contemporary ‘dark Enlightenment’ movement names a disparate, neo-reactionary response to the (real or perceived) legacy of Enlightenment, proposed by thinkers like Nick Land. It is notable for conflating naïve notions of historical progress with the hope of rational liberation. In the context of this chapter, it is interesting only insofar as it is unable to conceive of the paradigms of its goals without the basic metaphor of darkness. For a selection of Land’s work, see Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007* (London and Cambridge, MA: Urbanomic, Sequence Press, 2007). His theory of the “Dark Enlightenment” appears online at www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/, accessed on 22/03/2019.

metaphors, and the ways in which their transformation throughout historical traditions signalled important intellectual and cultural shifts, which on the surface of history, might appear as part of a coherent teleological history of ideas, or not appear at all. It was only with attention devoted to the so called “nutrient solution” that fed conceptuality itself, that one could be in a position to account for the ways in which rationality was ensconced within a limited historical horizon of meaning.⁶¹⁴ Blumenberg considers this a form of correction following the end of metaphysics: “Metaphysics has often revealed itself to us to be metaphoric taken at its word; the demise of metaphysics calls metaphoric back to its place.”⁶¹⁵ In other words, in the absence of any definitive account of the human being, something that is both rationally and historically unavailable, Blumenberg suggests interrogating the historical dimension in which conceptuality itself (and thus rational, moral judgment) is comprehensible.

Shipwrecks and Laughter

Blumenberg suggests that the way to approach the historical limitations of our world is to look to the myth’s that shape it. The measure of a myth’s “‘historical influence’ is its sheer survival, the simple fact that [they] did not perish along with the mass of what has been forgotten.”⁶¹⁶

In *The Laughter of the Thracian Maids*, Blumenberg uses a tracing of the old story of how Thales fell down the well as a reflection of how philosophy comes to think of itself. One version of the story proceeds like this: Thales, said to be the first philosopher, is seen wandering at night by a young woman (sometimes a maid). Observing the heavens, Thales doesn't notice the well (or sometimes ditch) directly in

⁶¹⁴ Ifergan offers a different reading of Blumenberg’s historical tracing of metaphors, specifically his interest in the image of the cave. He argues that the history of these metaphors, for Blumenberg, sheds light on the human creature and its compulsion to grapple with its origins, that are only vaguely remembered. He writes, “Blumenberg sought to go beyond the claim that the cave is merely an image that points to our limitations – to humankind’s inability to adopt a vantage point that is not already a part of our *modus operandi* – for he believed that the cave is more than just an image of a border that we are forced to maintain. As such, Blumenberg emphasized that the entry into the cave is a manifestation of natural human compulsion to reconstruct a situation that has been lost.” Pini Ifergan, “Hans Blumenberg: The Cave Project,” *Erinnerung an das Humane*, ed. Michael Moxter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 190.

⁶¹⁵ Blumenberg, PFM, 132; PZM, 193.

⁶¹⁶ Blumenberg, WM, 170; AM, 189-90.

front of him. He trips and falls. The maid laughs at the supposed wise man, who cannot see what lies directly in front of him. Emerging originally as one of the Aesopic fables, perhaps intended as a mere mockery of self-indulgent eccentrics, it is Plato who transforms the old man into Thales.⁶¹⁷ Plato takes the laughter of the maid to be fitting, and warns, “the same joke applies to all who spend their lives in philosophy.”⁶¹⁸ Later, Gnosticism derives a different ‘moral’:

*The earthly is not confronted as the reality close at hand and belonging to life skills, but rather the lowly muck, into which he falls...The well comes to resemble the pit of sin, and not without reason, since the sky explorer’s theory has been written up in the catalogue of vices as curiosity.*⁶¹⁹

Much later in the modern period, Blumenberg suggests that the Socratic admonishment that we should not consider the natural world, but rather ourselves, can be seen in Christoph August Heumann’s claim:

*[the Cartesians] went on the same wrong path of the Ionian confinement to nature ‘and thus simply stand in need of a Socratic correction...for even Thales’ maid can teach us that the following applies to those who let the field of philosophical practise lie untilled: they are senseless with reason: they act comprehending, while they comprehend nothing’.*⁶²⁰

As Blumenberg rightly points out, at this point in the metaphor:

*The Thracian maid became symbolic for a constantly returning problem of philosophy: not dissipating into theory self-forgettingly, not using reason to produce nonsense. The maid is now a philosophical figure herself...she has even become Socratic.*⁶²¹

⁶¹⁷ Plato uses this example in the *Theaetetus* dialogue. See Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174a.

⁶¹⁸ Blumenberg, *The Laughter of the Thracian Women*, 6; *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*, 14. Hereafter LTW, LT. The quote is Blumenberg’s translation, see Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174a-b.

⁶¹⁹ Blumenberg, LTW, 45; LT, 60-1.

⁶²⁰ Blumenberg, LTW 74-75; LT, 96.

⁶²¹ Blumenberg, LTW 75; LT, 97.

This captures what Blumenberg imagines the project of a metaphorology to be, what he consciously calls “a protohistory of theory.” The use of the indefinite article is vital; as he argues in the first line of the book:

*We will have to continue to do without the protohistory of theory because we cannot know anything about it. There was no desire on the part of theory to leave a record of it. A protohistory of theory cannot replace the protohistory of theory. It can only recall what has eluded us.*⁶²²

This is an important point for my proposed reading of Blumenberg. His suggestion is not that these basic metaphors tell us something about the origins of thought. The story of Thales, from that perspective, constitutes a comparatively late historical instance of the ways in which foundational imagery comes to mediate all forms of conceptuality. The point to emphasise is the fact that, although that initial non-conceptual ‘absolute metaphor’ resists all attempts at conceptualisation and recollection, its presence lingers in those mythical traditions that have been passed down and endlessly reconstructed as an ongoing site of imaginative work.⁶²³

In the short book *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Blumenberg studies the use of the shipwreck metaphor as an image to explain the nature of existence. He contends that the changes in how the metaphor is used traces not only how past peoples have accounted for, and described, human existence, but also in turn how later cultures have received those ideas, and reconstructed them according to contemporary needs. Although the book’s details could justify its own study, Blumenberg returns repeatedly to the relation of the shipwreck to safety, in particular the safety of the spectator who watches the ship sink from the cliffs. In the ancient world, seafaring,

⁶²² Blumenberg, *LTW* vii; *LT*, “Über dieses Buch”, prefatory remark (no page number).

⁶²³ As Spencer Hawkins argues, the idea that metaphors were a site of work was also why Blumenberg collected anecdotes, especially about philosophers: “Anecdotes about philosophers can thus perform philosophical disputation by other means, and they function at their most subversive when they show how contingent events stymie philosophers’ claims to universal, abstract knowledge. While the particularity of anecdotes makes them insufficient vehicles for general claims to truth, they tend to promote skepticism about any claim that refuses to bend to historical contingency.” Spencer Hawkins, “Anecdote as Philosophical Intervention: Hans Blumenberg’s Figure of the Absent-minded Phenomenologist,” *Monatshefte* 109, no. 3 (2017): 452. Paul Fleming has also written about Blumenberg’s use of anecdote, see Paul Fleming, “On the Edge of Non-Contingency: Anecdotes and the Lifeworld,” *Telos* 158, no. 158 (2012), 26. See also his “The Perfect Story: Anecdote and Exemplarity in Linnaeus and Blumenberg,” *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (2011), 80-3.

“like flying through the air...and stealing fire” is always punished by fate, the lesson implying that “the solid ground is the appropriate place for men to live.”⁶²⁴ While at first, in early Greek parable, the spectator of the shipwreck is associated with the conservative behaviour proper to the human being, soon the metaphor is used differently. Here Blumenberg cites the ways in which the stories of the early philosophers (Zeno of Citium, Aristippus) and their experiences with the sea came to indicate their intellectual daring. Leaving the shore, what was once the embodiment of rashness, came to represent a Promethean resolve to challenge established norms.⁶²⁵ The association of the rational thinker with daring blasphemy would in turn colour the ways in which Greek thought and culture has been thought of in later periods. This is especially the case when the blasphemy of the Greeks is treated as a lost utopia, when the courage existed to strike out from shore. By the time Goethe was writing, Blumenberg posits, the metaphor takes on a more sinister meaning: “like the shipwrecked, we must hold tight to the plank that saved us, and put our precious lost baggage out of our minds.”⁶²⁶ This mirrors the metaphor used by Montaigne centuries before in his account of his intellectual projects: “I cling to what I see and hold, and do not go far from port.”⁶²⁷ By the early modern period, the daring of *logos* has, as Blumenberg traces, taken on an air of conservative scepticism, even resentment. For Nietzsche, the safe haven of the shoreline, or even a port, has disappeared from the horizon: “We have left the land and embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us – indeed, we have gone further and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out!...and there is no longer any ‘land’.”⁶²⁸ Life and intellectual endeavour becomes associated with mere survival rather than discovery, a ship lost at sea, without hope of rescue.

As Blumenberg concludes, having traced the shifts of this single metaphor, “the weakness of the metaphor when built up into a full comparison is clearly that it encourages arguments against leaving the comfortable ship.”⁶²⁹ Those who might worry that such a binary image might restrict the way we think about ourselves, Blumenberg assures us, need only understand that the metaphor can change again.

⁶²⁴ Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 12; *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer*, 15. Hereafter SS, SZ.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Blumenberg, SS, 18; SZ, 22.

⁶²⁷ Blumenberg, SS, 15; SZ, 19.

⁶²⁸ Blumenberg, SS, 19; SZ, 23.

⁶²⁹ Blumenberg, SS, 78, SZ, 82.

And yet, Blumenberg shows that in spite of the inversion of metaphor, again and again, we orientate ourselves according to the logic of the spectator. Even those who have the courage for “the naked nothingness of the leap overboard”, rely on the anchorage point of those watching them from a position of safety. Those inclined to stay on the ship, can now become a new form of spectator “...of those who possess and want to spread the courage to leap into the water and start all over from the beginning, possibly counting on returning to the undamaged ship as the last preserve of a despised history.”⁶³⁰ Such a leap into the unknown is only coherent, Blumenberg claims, because the metaphor itself reassures us that:

*...the seas evidently contain material other than what has already been used. Where can it come from, in order to give courage to the ones who are beginning anew? Perhaps from earlier shipwrecks?*⁶³¹

This last passage in particular contains multiple claims. It is, firstly, an acknowledgement of the vastly different ways in which human beings (in the Western tradition alone) have tried to account for the nature of their existence in terms of a single metaphor. It can also be read, however, as both an account of the ways in which the detritus of the past might offer qualitatively new ways of thinking but, perhaps more importantly, that that *image* of the past as a form of anchorage point and salvation is a vital source of orientation, and consolation, for those who seek the courage to strike out anew. For Blumenberg, perhaps more than any other example, this is evidence of what he called the “historical horizons of meaning” (*geschichtlicher Sinnhorizonte*).⁶³²

Thus, Blumenberg’s claim that the significance of metaphor and myth reduced anxiety and trauma, is itself subject to those horizons. It was not intended to trace a lineage to an ‘originary trauma’ from which all culture emerged. This would imply that certain foundational forms of anxiety catalysed certain forms of reflection and creative endeavour, which in turn came to condition all forms of meaning in history. Instead, Blumenberg’s tracing of the lines of tradition that are left to the present is

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Blumenberg, PFM, 5; PZM, 13.

intended to emphasise the ways in which the unknown past functions as a catalyst for our subsequent construction of it. The human desire for, and capacity to, seek its origins derives precisely from the impossibility of doing so. He argues this point in the opening chapter of his last book, *Höhlenausgänge* (*Cave Exits*), where he argues for the impossibility of thinking origins from the perspective of an unknown history – *Einen Anfang der Zeit können wir nicht denken* (“we cannot think of a beginning of time”).⁶³³ It is precisely because the past cannot be known definitively that it is worked upon, constructed, and re-constructed via the few metaphors and myths that have survived.

In particular, those limitations apply to reason’s desire to over-extend itself beyond the matrixes of meaning that appear in our historical horizon, to settle something ‘once and for all’. In other words, the desire (whether in its ‘mythic’ or ‘rational’ iteration) to fill the void of empty time, can only emerge from what has been created in the face of the fundamental unknowability *of* that time. The desire to escape myth, then, is only coherent within the context of mythic desires.

The Oppressiveness of Contingency, or Frailty in History

If, as I have argued in this chapter, Blumenberg’s theory of myth is better understood as an account of how thought can orientate itself in the face of its unfamiliar past, what are the implications? The connection Blumenberg draws between myth and its capacity to ease anxiety does not necessarily imply that anxiety is an essential characteristic of human life, something that is often a common after-effect of a focus on his philosophical anthropology. Although Blumenberg posits that historical life has been marked by anxiety, he also argues that any attempt to consolidate an account of human nature according to a theory of trauma is already shaped and delimited by the myths that may or may not have eased that initial situation.⁶³⁴ Blumenberg leaves the question as to whether humanity *needs* myth unanswered, and instead emphasises the fact that there is no other historical position than one informed and dominated by

⁶³³ Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, 11.

⁶³⁴ Brad Tabas argues that Blumenberg’s concession that the desire to pinpoint a human essence is simultaneously “the inevitable products of culture and a human need” while “all attempts to define the human must conclude that the human is finally indefinable.” Brad Tabas, “Blumenberg, Politics, Anthropology,” *Telos* 158 (Spring 2012), 152.

myth to ask the question, no axiomatic point for theory to disengage itself from the mythic dimension of history. The image of the past as a contested site that continually changes its form according to the demands of the present day, shapes, in turn, the manner in which human beings approach the question of being rational agents *in* history. This would imply, I have argued, a form of *historical*, rather than species frailty, as a way of thinking about the human capacity to be rational.⁶³⁵

Everything in history, as Blumenberg states, is marked by the ‘oppressiveness of contingency’, a phrase he uses in one of the more remarkable chapters of *Work on Myth*, “To Bring Myth to an End.” He writes:

*Anyone who considers these forms of a ‘final myth’ to be obsolete rubbish will be mistaken; the oppressiveness of contingency, which lies behind myth, does not cease. Ernst Bloch returns, in 1977, to a discussion of death and immortality conducted in Königstein on the day of Adorno’s death in 1969, and desires, on the day of the murder of Jürgen Ponto, that it be published in the final volume of his ‘Gesammelte Schriften’. That interval that is encompassed by these dates is perhaps itself an aspect of the subject.*⁶³⁶

This paragraph could easily be depicted as a way of describing the forms of contingency and uncertainty that catalysed human anxiety in earliest history, suggesting that the originary trauma still lies behind all human discourse. However, it is equally possible to read Blumenberg’s emphasis on the forms of contingency that lurk in a historical moment as a demand to take the historical constraints of life and meaning seriously. This entails a focus on the ways unknown pasts have been deposited in the resonance of metaphors, rather than trying to derive an explanation for historical disaster from a particular failing of the human being itself. The point to emphasise is not just that all meaning is historically *contingent* and could have been

⁶³⁵ It is possible to draw points of affinity between Blumenberg, and Assman’s ideas on cultural memory, insofar as both acknowledge how the past informs the socio-cultural parameters of the present. However, Blumenberg is much more explicit in his focus on how our unknown pasts, and our work on them, mediate human life at the level of the (pre) conceptual. Assman’s focus is in the ways the concept of cultural memory helps draw out historical insights. See Assman, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 10-11.

⁶³⁶ Blumenberg, WM, 293-94; AM, 325.

otherwise (possible, but speculative), but that fragments of unknown histories are deposited in the ways in which symbolic meaning *has* developed in history.

Blumenberg sees the murder of Jürgen Ponto by members of the Red Army Faction as reflective of the ways communities and individuals overestimate their capacity to overcome their historical and mythical circumstances. Further, he highlights the extraordinary ambiguity of the present as it ‘appears’ in its immanence to a historical community, and the ways in which it resists systemisation into ideology. Our desire for it to do so, our desire for it to become comprehensible, suggests Blumenberg, is often at the root of historical disaster. In the case of revolutionary action, Blumenberg seems to remind us that utopian desires are also mediated by violent legacies, where the need for liberation from oppression (whether political or intellectual) is delimited by what is comprehensible in history. This leaves entirely to one side the question of the human being, and instead posits another question: how and in what unknown ways have our histories marked and mediated our thinking? Such an inquiry acknowledges that all subsequent questions must understand their position in relation to the limiting horizons of meaning that the past establishes.

My final chapter is concerned with the broader implications of my proposed reading of Blumenberg’s theory of myth. Ultimately, I claim that a focus on Blumenberg’s emphasis on myth’s capacity to illuminate how human beings relate to their past commits him to two key positions: firstly, an insistence on the importance of the ways *individuals* struggle to derive meaning from the world. This is something that accounts like Nicholls’ largely overlook in favour of a collective, top-down approach to the creation of meaning in communities. Although I have only gestured toward this idea thus far, a central concern for Blumenberg was the way individuals, in grappling with their historical situation, often overestimate their ability to overcome myth. Secondly, Blumenberg also offers a rigorous refusal to succumb to certain demands of philosophy, that in turn offers a warning to those who would blindly follow *logos*’ demands. An ignorance of the historical horizon of thought, Blumenberg suggests, can have practical, pragmatic, and often disastrous consequences *in* history. Understanding the limitations of judgement was not merely important for philosophy, but had practical, political repercussions.

Chapter Seven:

The Rigorism of Truth and the Strangeness of the Past

In the previous chapter, I argued that an emphasis on what Blumenberg's theory of myth says about humanity's relation to its history re-contextualises his account of myth's relation to human vulnerability; from an essential claim about the nature of the species, to a descriptive one regarding the fragility of the human 'life-world'. Blumenberg's conception of myth gives an important account of the historically contingent ways in which meaning came to be codified via conceptuality, and then symbolised in history. Furthermore, it describes the ways in which those 'limiting horizons' delimit the forms of human thought that emerge in history. For Blumenberg, while myth is a vital constitutive part of the possibility of human meaning, he contends that any 'end' of myth necessarily falls into the locus of meaning that is shaped and delimited by myth and its history; a fact that he believes philosophy should be highly sensitive to.

For Blumenberg, acknowledging the ways metaphor and myth codified forms of meaning for human beings throughout history, necessitates an acknowledgement of the many *other* ways in which humans must have constructed meaning for themselves, both in lost mythical traditions, as well as during unknown periods of the past. The fact that the surviving myths continued to resonate often due to historical chance, or due to their incredible plasticity and adaptability, rather than because of an essential worth, emphasises the irreducibility of 'the human being' to any one possibility. What is important to emphasise here is that although this argument constitutes a refusal to acknowledge any necessary quality to the manner in which human cultures developed, it also refuses to account for myth's function solely in terms of its role in creating meaning within large, collective groups. The theories of symbolic meaning and rationality that emerge out of philosophical anthropology tend to focus on the manner in which meaning is established within *communities* as a function of the species' abilities (or failures). One implication of focusing on Blumenberg's notion of the precarity of meaning as it emerges in the historical 'life-world' is the role the individual plays in negotiating history and its mythic structure.

For Blumenberg, both communities and individuals are forced to confront the mythical dimensions of their lives. Both could find themselves, Blumenberg suggests, in a situation in which they confront their historical moment, and overestimate their capacity to overcome its mythic construction. As Spencer Hawkins writes, Blumenberg actively wondered whether, “the conditions on other planets might make it easier to be a good person.”⁶³⁷ Although *Work on Myth*’s first half deals with myth in its broadest terms, the second half is devoted entirely to tracing the reception history of the Prometheus myth. It lends particular focus on Goethe’s attempt to come to terms with the legacy of his own life within the context of his grappling with the figure of Prometheus.⁶³⁸ In this second part of the book, Blumenberg gestures toward the ways myth interacts with individuals at different moments in history. For Blumenberg, the frailty, or contingency, of meaning cannot be evaded, but must be taken into account in any philosophical attempt to orientate ourselves in thought. This orientation would be a matter of reconciling our rational faculties with their historical emergence.

This theme has seen further development in Blumenberg’s recently published critique of Freud and Hannah Arendt. Entitled *The Rigorism of Truth*, this short polemic offers a coherent political dimension to his theory of myth. This chapter deals with what I consider the primary argument offered in the essay: namely, the dangers of deploying what is thought to be a liberating rationality, in a strange and unpredictable historical moment. Blumenberg suggests that the unpredictability of such a moment derives from reason’s struggles to understand its relation to what I will call the ‘strangeness of the past’. This is a term intended to encompass Blumenberg’s account of both the past’s obscurity (the vast swathes of it that are unknown, unfamiliar and inaccessible to the present) and its ambiguity (how to understand and interpret the history familiar to us, both as individuals and as communities). Focusing on these dimensions of the past captures the ways in which a past is mythically constructed to render it intelligible, something that Blumenberg argues has radical implications for how the rational faculties are deployed in a given moment in the present.

⁶³⁷ Spencer Hawkins, “Afterword: Reading into the Distance”, in *LTW*, 136. See also Hans Blumenberg, *Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 156.

⁶³⁸ Blumenberg, *WM*, 299-636; *AM*, 329-689.

The Rigorism of Truth

Blumenberg wrote the short essay *Rigorismus der Wahrheit* (*Rigorism of Truth*) sometime between the mid 1970s and the early 1980s (Blumenberg was compiling material on Sigmund Freud between 1975 and 1982, and Hannah Arendt for the most part in 1978).⁶³⁹ Unpublished during his lifetime, it was published from the *Nachlass* in 2015, after having been recognized as important by Rüdiger Zill of Potsdam University in 2009.⁶⁴⁰ It was translated into English in 2018. Blumenberg did not publish the piece during his lifetime out of respect for Hans Jonas, the mutual friend he shared with Arendt. Records suggest that Blumenberg and Arendt themselves only met once in 1956.⁶⁴¹

This twelve-page polemic has two main arguments. Firstly, it argues that Freud, with the publication of *Moses and Monotheism* in 1939, robbed the Jewish people of its founding figurehead during an hour of great historical need. Secondly, it charges Hannah Arendt, with the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, of denying the Jewish people the mythic/sacrificial figure that Adolf Eichmann's execution represented for the fledgling state of Israel. This betrayal by two of the most prominent Jews of that century was, for Blumenberg, a product of what he saw as a faith in the liberating potential of what he calls the 'rigorism of truth'. That is, Blumenberg charges both Freud and Arendt of being aware of the danger of their respective historical moments, but ignoring it in the name of a particular understanding of truth's emancipatory function in history.

According to Blumenberg, Freud's attempt to establish the historical root of monotheism, by arguing that Moses was not Jewish, but born of Egyptian nobility, robbed the Jewish peoples of their symbolic leader at the outbreak of the Second

⁶³⁹ Hans Blumenberg, *Rigorism of Truth: 'Moses the Egyptian' and Other Writings on Freud and Arendt*, trans. Joe Paul Kroll (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2018); Hans Blumenberg, *Rigorismus der Wahrheit: 'Moses der Ägypter' und weitere Texte zu Freud und Arendt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2015). See Ahlrich Meyer's afterword, *Rigorism of Truth*, 74, 83; *Rigorismus der Wahrheit*, 108, 119. Hereafter RT, RW respectively. References to Meyer's afterword will be referenced as Meyer, RT and Meyer, RW.

⁶⁴⁰ Blumenberg, RT, 94; RW, 131-32.

⁶⁴¹ Meyer, RT, 82; RW, 118.

World War. Of Freud, Blumenberg writes: “He was one of those people who trust that the truth can achieve anything, even freedom, and thus from their love of truth feel entitled to expect everything of themselves and of others.”⁶⁴² Arendt, on the other hand, in her reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann for the *New York Times* in the early sixties, resists the attempts to paint Eichmann as a monster, and instead reduces him to a banal bureaucrat, a manifestation of the broader technocratic and bureaucratic systems that enforce evil actions. This was the theory behind her famous formulation concerning the “banality of evil.”⁶⁴³ According to Blumenberg, what he considers Arendt’s reckless disregard for the historical moment (in this case the need, or desire, for a fledgling Israel to have a founding myth) was born out of her regard for “rigorism.” He writes: “Hannah Arendt’s rigorism is very much like that of Sigmund Freud. She believes in the truth – that it is her truth, she can neither change nor prevent...Hannah Arendt takes fearless analysis to be the therapy that she thinks she owes her comrades in affliction.”⁶⁴⁴ While Freud did not live to see the disastrous results of the war, Blumenberg chastises Arendt for her failure to grasp the deep ambivalence regarding the status of human life and action following the Holocaust:

*Hannah Arendt...was a moralist. Her book is a document of rigorism, the definition of which is the refusal to acknowledge an ultimate and inexorable dilemma in human action. One can and must be at all times be certain of what is to be done and what remains the right thing to do. To moralize the political implies that it too can be fraught with dilemmas only on the surface, but must in the final instance be capable of unity of the will.*⁶⁴⁵

In short, Blumenberg accuses Freud, but especially Arendt (he suspects that had Freud been alive to witness the trial, he “would have immediately recognised...the mythical dimension of the killing of the negative hero of the state”) of ignoring the often ambiguous status of human action and normative commitment in history. The ignoring of what Blumenberg calls an “ultimate and inexorable dilemma” derives

⁶⁴² Blumenberg, RT, 1; RW, 9.

⁶⁴³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1977). Hereafter EJ.

⁶⁴⁴ Blumenberg, RT, 5; RW, 13.

⁶⁴⁵ Blumenberg, RT, 9; RW, 18.

from what he considers a faith in the liberating power of universal judgment, and truth, over life.

Of the contemporary reactions to the posthumous publication of this short essay, seemingly all of them have reached similar interpretations of Blumenberg's argument. The intention here is not to reject these interpretations, merely to argue that they are not the only plausible ones. Ahlrich Meyer, Blumenberg's last assistant, and the editor of the short collection in which *The Rigorism of Truth* appears, while arguing that the essay provides important insights for students of Blumenberg's work, also suggests that it shows Blumenberg in a particularly unforgiving light. Meyer argues that the reason for this "contains a biographical substratum": having been named a *Halbjude* according to Nazi policy, Blumenberg was barred from studying at university. Meyer concludes that this caused an "interest in Judaism [that] was a hidden constant in his life."⁶⁴⁶ Of Freud, Meyer writes that Blumenberg could not "forgive the old man in exile", because of his "theoretically founded indifference to political events."⁶⁴⁷ He argues that Blumenberg considered Arendt to have, quoting the former's own words, "failed to understand a process in which there had been a 'mythical necessity of archaic violence'."⁶⁴⁸ He argues, therefore:

*[The essay] can be understood only against the background of a defense of myth...Blumenberg places myth...in its human dimension above truth claims of any kind, because myths, unlike the truth, fulfil the human desire for consolation. The figures of the founding prophet and of the conquered enemy are such consoling myths.*⁶⁴⁹

A reading of Blumenberg's position that posits the necessity of myth above rational truth in human life has historical links to the initial reception of *Work on Myth* in the early 1980s. After its publication, multiple reviews criticized the book for what they considered Blumenberg's emphasis on the aesthetic component of myth, while

⁶⁴⁶ Meyer, RT, 93; RW, 130.

⁶⁴⁷ Meyer, RT 80; RW, 115.

⁶⁴⁸ Meyer, RT 81; RW, 116. The Blumenberg quote comes from one of his index cards, published from the *Nachlass* in the same volume as *Rigorism of Truth*. See RT, 46; RW, 77.

⁶⁴⁹ Meyer, RT, 73; RW, 107.

ignoring its dangerous political dimension.⁶⁵⁰ The fear was that in the depiction of man as a frail creature in need of consolation or, as Odo Marquard argues, the “relief from the absolute,” Blumenberg had outlined a conservative defence of tradition.⁶⁵¹ Meyer reads this position of Blumenberg’s as a capitulation to previously held views:

*The great philosopher, who began as a proponent of the Enlightenment, later on appears to have been convinced “that we still need myths,” as Karl Heinz Bohrer put it following the publication of Blumenberg’s ‘Work on Myth’, even “new myths”, which Blumenberg had once cautioned against.*⁶⁵²

He concludes that Blumenberg “remythicizes the Eichmann trial...into a mythological scenario that places the punishment of the Nazi murderer of the Jews in an archaic context of revenge and the slaughter of enemies.”⁶⁵³

Martin Jay, in an excellent discussion of *The Rigorism of Truth*, also depicts Blumenberg as having probably overstepped in his depiction of Freud, and especially Arendt, as being blind to political consequences. He writes that “Blumenberg was...on unsteady ground in characterizing her as a moral rigorist.”⁶⁵⁴ Jay recognizes that for Blumenberg, the forms of consolation that myth provided were not “eternal” or “enduring archetypes” (like in the work of Mircea Eliade or Joseph Campbell, for example), acknowledging that Blumenberg emphasises myth’s correlation with material circumstances and needs.⁶⁵⁵ Despite this, he suggests that Blumenberg fails to take account of his own historical moment:

⁶⁵⁰ See Jürgen Maruhn, “Hans Blumenberg, ‘Arbeit am Mythos’,” *Das Argument* 124 (1980), 883-84, H. L. Ollig, “Hans Blumenberg, ‘Arbeit am Mythos’,” *Theologie und Philosophie* 10, no. 1 (1981), 148-52, Götz Müller, “Hans Blumenberg, ‘Arbeit am Mythos’,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 100 (1981), 314-18.

⁶⁵¹ Odo Marquard, “Enlastung vom Absoluten,” in *Die Kunst des Überlebens” Nachdenken über Hans Blumenberg*, ed. Franz Josef Wetz and Hermann Timm (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 20.

⁶⁵² Meyer, RT, 87; RW, 123.

⁶⁵³ Meyer, RT 88; RW, 123-24.

⁶⁵⁴ Martin Jay, “Against Rigor: Hans Blumenberg on Freud and Arendt,” *New German Critique* 44, no. 3, 132 (2017), 138.

⁶⁵⁵ Jay, “Against Rigor,” 139. Mircea Eliade famously draws a distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ realms, but also associates myth with a ‘traditional’ past, implying that myth is a form of universal category of experience that humans deeply desire, and miss in a secularised history. Hence his suggestion that a recreation of a mythic event is a “magical (entering of) sacred time.” See Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 23. Joseph Campbell approaches the Indo-European mythical tradition of the ‘hero’s journey’, but extends it to a universalised account of the ‘monomyth’, a fundamental structure that underlies all mythical stories. He argues: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural

...the hope that the truth will triumph is so powerful that we can see it operating in the case of Blumenberg himself. For he was no less a compulsive truth teller than his two targets, no less reluctant than they to risk the world's doom in the name of intellectual honesty.⁶⁵⁶

Jay rightly points out that Blumenberg, “tacitly echoing Freud’s confession at the beginning of *Moses and Monotheism*...tells us in *Rigorism of Truth* that he is “prepared to court indignation” but could not draw back from his inflammatory comparison.”⁶⁵⁷ Jay’s argument that Blumenberg, in his critique of a faith in the emancipatory power of *logos*, was unwilling to abandon it himself, is different to Meyer’s claim that Blumenberg called for remythification of historical moments. Jay suggests that Blumenberg was unwilling to acknowledge his faith in truth, or rational enquiry, while Meyer contends that Blumenberg ‘gives up’ on the promise of Enlightenment, to accept the radical frailty of human life, and the need for myths to console.

While both represent legitimate interpretations of Blumenberg’s position in the essay, I argue that there is another that rejects both Meyer’s underlying premise that Blumenberg’s position derives from an abandonment of reason and “a defense of myth”, as well as Jay’s suggestion that Blumenberg was unaware of his susceptibility to the lure of liberating truth. This alternative reading of Blumenberg’s stance requires a nuanced rejection of these two arguments because, in a very particular sense, he *does* both defend the need for myth in human life, as well as his own desire for truth. However, as I will argue, both these tendencies derive from an account of life as it is embedded within the matrix of history. A discussion of Freud and Arendt’s arguments will contextualise the prism through which Blumenberg presents his critique.

wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” This universal understanding of myth has had a huge influence on popular culture, most notably in George Lucas’ *Star Wars* series. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 30.

⁶⁵⁶ Jay, “Against Rigor,” 139.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Not a Question of Gain, But of Research: Freud and Arendt

As Blumenberg notes, Freud was aware of the possible dangers of his research into the origins of monotheism. He begins the book by acknowledging the risks:

*To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken lightheartedly – especially by one belonging to that people. No consideration, however, will move me to set aside truth in favour of supposed national interests.*⁶⁵⁸

Consisting of three essays, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) draws critical parallels between the emergence of monotheism, and Freud's arguments regarding the beginnings of human culture in *Totem and Taboo*, published in 1912. In the latter book, Freud argues that earliest human life consisted of primitive communities, or 'hordes', under strict patriarchal rule. The eventual murder of the dominant male by his sons led, Freud suggests, to feelings of intense guilt on behalf of those left in the tribe. In earliest prehistory, Freud argues that the guilt came to be displaced by the totemic worship of the murdered father and rudimentary systems of taboo that mediated behaviour.⁶⁵⁹ Freud sees the origins of all forms of moral and religious norms in these largely unknowable beginnings of human institutions. In *Moses and Monotheism* Freud argues that Moses was in fact an Egyptian prince and that, having given the Jewish people a proto-monotheistic religion derived from Egyptian tradition, led them into the desert where he was murdered by his people. Freud suggests that the guilt his murder catalysed led to his memory being cherished, and the religion accepted with Moses as the quasi-totemic figurehead.⁶⁶⁰ He traces the phenomenon of anti-Semitism to the still unresolved neuroses of gentile peoples who, Freud claims, resent the fact they are not part of the 'chosen people' of the one God (especially those that accepted Christianity late, thus being still "barbarically polytheistic").⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁸ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1939), 3. Hereafter MM.

⁶⁵⁹ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 122-23.

⁶⁶⁰ Freud, MM, 105.

⁶⁶¹ Freud, MM, 117.

Freud's discussion of anti-Semitism is important in the context of what Blumenberg considered a wilful disregard for the particular emergencies of history. Throughout the three essays, Freud flags an awareness of the danger of his own historical moment, but insists on the necessity of the project. In the prefatory note to the third essay, he notes that there is "nothing to lose" in following up the first two essays with a third. He does so while simultaneously noting that "[he] lives in very remarkable times. We find with astonishment that progress has concluded an alliance with barbarism."⁶⁶² After applauding the conservative Christian democracies that have, in his view, defended "cultural progress", Freud acknowledges that, "If our research leads us to the result that reduces religion to the status of a neurosis...then we may be sure we shall incur in this country the greatest resentment of the powers that be."⁶⁶³ Simultaneously, however, he dismisses anti-Semitism with the observation that Jews have suffered ever since the "rebirth of Christ...the resurrected Moses and the returned primeval father of the primitive horde as well."⁶⁶⁴ In spite of their collective misfortune, Freud locates an element of blame with the Jews themselves. He writes: "The poor Jewish people, who with its usual stiff-necked obduracy continued to deny the murder of their 'father', has dearly expiated this in the course of centuries. Over and over again they heard the reproach: 'You killed our God'."⁶⁶⁵ Freud goes on to question, "what do we gain by deriving Jewish monotheism from the Egyptians?" He replies, "The answer is that it is not a question of gain, but of research. And perhaps we shall learn something by elucidating the real process."⁶⁶⁶ It is this supposed indifference to historical trauma in the face of truth telling that Blumenberg considers so egregious.

Arendt's argument in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is well known, if not often misunderstood. Her conclusion following her detailed reporting of the trial of Adolf Eichmann for the *New York Times* suggests that Eichmann, one of the primary architects of the Final Solution, was a conventional, unremarkable man, who committed extraordinary crimes. Arendt speculates that Eichmann's lack of imagination was typical of most Nazis, who she suggests were not uniquely

⁶⁶² Freud, MM, 67.

⁶⁶³ Freud, MM, 67-8.

⁶⁶⁴ Freud, MM, 114.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ Freud, MM, 82.

sociopathic people, but merely bureaucrats, members of the lower middle class, who lacked moral imagination. This does not imply that Arendt thought anyone could have committed the crimes Eichmann did, only that there was nothing remarkable in his commitment to the Final Solution.⁶⁶⁷ Arendt argues that Eichmann's total lack of imagination – both his inability to admit guilt, or to resent his prosecutors, meant that “everybody could see that this man was not a ‘monster’, but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown.”⁶⁶⁸ Arendt does not only blame the Nazis for the efficiency of the Holocaust but also, infamously, members of the Jewish leadership, something that Blumenberg considered unforgivable.

Arendt distinguishes between “Israeli heroism and the submissive meekness with which the Jews went to their death – arriving on time at the transportation points, walking on their own feet to the places of execution, digging their own graves, undressing and making neat piles of their clothing, and lying down side by side to be shot.”⁶⁶⁹ While recognising the near impossibility of doing otherwise, she nonetheless sees a certain complicity on behalf of the Jewish people given that, in her view, “politically speaking, it is under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that ‘it could happen’ in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*.”⁶⁷⁰ Arendt gives the example of “the Danish people and their government [as] unique among all the countries of Europe” regarding their “non-violent action and...resistance” to Nazi demands for information on, and assistance processing, their Jewish population.⁶⁷¹ Ultimately, Arendt concludes that the evil of Eichmann's actions were brought about, not from a supernatural malice for the Jews, but technocratic adherence to rules and laws that are treated as immutable, under which the individual feels he is helpless. She sees evidence of this in the fact that Eichmann acknowledged he had ceased to follow Kant's categorical imperative (as he understood it) once he “was charged with carrying out the Final Solution”, but “consoled himself with the thought that he no longer ‘was master of his own deeds’,

⁶⁶⁷ Arendt argues that the extent of his failure to imagine was represented in his telling misinterpretation of Kant's categorical imperative, mistaking a universal law, for that of a state law. Arendt, EJ, 135-37.

⁶⁶⁸ Arendt, EJ, 54.

⁶⁶⁹ Arendt, EJ, 11.

⁶⁷⁰ Arendt, EJ, 233.

⁶⁷¹ Arendt, EJ, 171.

that he was unable ‘to change anything’.⁶⁷² For Arendt, this failure to take moral responsibility defined “the banality of evil.”⁶⁷³ For Blumenberg, Arendt’s claim that the bureaucratic mechanisms of the Holocaust were aided by Jewish cooperation, was indicative of a total failure to empathise with the incredible circumstances the Jews found themselves in and, in reducing Eichmann to a clown, dismissed their need for symbolic justice.⁶⁷⁴

To Have Thought the Incredible

The interpretations of *Rigorism of Truth* that suggest Blumenberg was unduly critical of, or misinterpreted Freud and Arendt’s arguments, and in so doing either called for a return to myth or forgot his own commitment to the rational project, appear to stem from the more dubious of Blumenberg’s claims. There is good evidence to suggest, for example, as Meyer does, that the publication of *Moses and Monotheism* was not representative of a wilful disregard for the “absolutely wrong moment” in 1939, given parts of it were published in *Imago* in 1937.⁶⁷⁵ At the very least, as Meyer argues, the reason Freud withheld parts of the manuscript until 1939 are “more complicated than Blumenberg presents them.”⁶⁷⁶ Meyer is also probably right to suggest that Arendt was not as unfamiliar with the mythic dimensions of the Eichmann trial – what Arendt calls (quoting the American lawyer Yosel Rogat) “long forgotten propositions” – as Blumenberg suggests.⁶⁷⁷ Similarly Jay, while conceding his characterization of Freud might have been fair, argues that Blumenberg “ignored the fact that Arendt was deeply suspicious of the fetish for truth.”⁶⁷⁸ In the case of both Meyer and Jay, their interpretation of Blumenberg’s position appears to be grounded in what they consider to be a surprising affiliation with Zionism. Jay suggests

⁶⁷² Arendt, EJ, 136.

⁶⁷³ Arendt, EJ, 252.

⁶⁷⁴ It should be noted that this was a sentiment shared by many, perhaps most notably by Arendt’s friend Gershom Scholem. In a letter to Arendt he writes: “It is the heartless, the downright malicious tone you employ in dealing with the topic that so profoundly concerns the center of our life...I haven’t the slightest sympathy for the light hearted style, by which I mean the English word ‘flippancy’, that you employ all too often in your book.” See *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, ed. Marie Luise Knott, trans. Anthony David (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 202. For a detailed overview of the reception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University press, 2004), 328-78.

⁶⁷⁵ Blumenberg, RT, 1; RW, 18.

⁶⁷⁶ Meyer, RT, 78; RW, 113.

⁶⁷⁷ Meyer, RT, 88; RW, 124.

⁶⁷⁸ Jay, “Against Rigor,” 137.

Blumenberg displays an “unexpected allegiance to the Zionist project”, and Meyer writes that the “greatest surprise of the text ... is that Blumenberg’s polemic... follows a decidedly Zionist narrative.”⁶⁷⁹ They both link a sympathy for the Zionist project with Blumenberg’s own experiences under the Nazi regime.⁶⁸⁰ Arguably, it is this autobiographical interpretation of Blumenberg’s position that drives the interpretation of *Rigorism of Truth* as either a call for remythification, wherein the Jewish people require a myth to forge their homeland (Meyer), or a polemic that criticises the hope of liberating truth in history, while simultaneously relying on rational critique to convey the pragmatic “challenges of being Jewish in a hostile world” (Jay).⁶⁸¹ Behind all this, *sotto voce*, is the assumption that Blumenberg’s account of the relation between myth and human life is grounded in a philosophical anthropology that posits the frailty of human beings as the axiomatic point of departure. While the bibliographic question of Blumenberg’s relationship with his Jewish ancestry, and to Zionism itself is an open one, there are alternative readings of the text.

What Blumenberg is doing, I argue, is problematising the very idea of exercising rational judgment within a historical context that is only rendered coherent according to myth. Rather than reading Blumenberg’s essay as a polemic derived from an account of the essential link between human life and myth, what if it were read as an account of the ineliminability of myth in historical life and, further, the way moral action is rendered meaningful *by* myth? Where the former points to a necessary link between humans as creatures of deficiency, and the consolations of myth, the latter simply presents myth as a product of the ways in which human vulnerabilities emerged in history and came to be rendered symbolically meaningful in both ‘rational’ and ‘mythic’ life. The distinction is between myth as an essential component to human beings, or myth as having shaped the only history familiar to us. Such a starting point delineates the impossibility (historically speaking) of approaching the destruction of Moses as figurehead, and of Eichmann’s trial, in anything other than mythic terms. This transforms his comments about the mythic dimensions of Freud and Arendt’s position, into an argument regarding the ways humans derive meaning from an unknown past within the context of a historically and

⁶⁷⁹ Jay, “Against Rigor,” 135; Meyer, RT, 84; RW, 120.

⁶⁸⁰ Jay, “Against Rigor,” 135; Meyer, RT, 73; RW, 107.

⁶⁸¹ Jay, “Against Rigor,” 135.

politically ambiguous present. By doing so, I suggest he signals a skepticism regarding the liberatory hopes of rational judgment within the confines of those historical markers, rather than making a totalising claim about humanity's essential need for consolation or relief, as Meyer outlines. This possibility also responds to Jay's critique because it concedes Blumenberg's acknowledgement of the mythico-historical horizon from which he engages meaningfully with a rational critique.

The first hints of this position come early in the essay, when Blumenberg charges Freud with having "seen too little of what is political about his version of the story's beginnings."⁶⁸² He continues:

*Freud did not believe that something like analysis could help the victims. Worse still, he did not even believe in the mechanism of repetition, in which a stranger, one possessed by the frenzy of blood, would once more renew the sublimating chastisements of the desert and yet, in the wildest autism, serve only the historical interests of the chastised.*⁶⁸³

This passage charges Freud with ignoring the political ramifications of publishing his work. However, it also suggests that he failed to recognise his own theory of neurosis that is reflected in Hitler's unconscious, compulsive mirroring of the traumatic origins of the Jewish people. The ramifications of this failure, Blumenberg seems to suggest, is an inability to comprehend how the mythical dimensions of historical events are rendered symbolically meaningful by different historical actors. In this case, the manner in which the compulsion of Hitler would shape how the period following the war would come to be understood collectively by the Jewish people. Ultimately, Blumenberg suggests that Freud's "transferring onto [the Jewish people] that they must love and serve the truth" was due to Freud being concerned with his final contribution to scholarship, what he called a "worthy exit."⁶⁸⁴ The criticism of Freud, while less severe and wide-ranging than that of Arendt, is important within the context of the argument outlined here. For Blumenberg, Freud's overstating the powers and function of truth was perhaps a product of personal hubris. Most damning,

⁶⁸² Blumenberg, RT, 2; RW, 10.

⁶⁸³ Blumenberg, RT, 3; RW, 11.

⁶⁸⁴ Blumenberg, RT, 3-4; RW, 11-12.

however, was his failure to recognise the neurotic (and thus mythic) dimension of the historical moment in which Hitler came to power. This is an illuminating moment in any attempt to come to terms with Blumenberg's argument. This is because it clarifies his notion of how those who underestimated the manner in which historical periods are rendered meaningful for a community or an individual, risk genuine historical disaster.

What this means precisely will clarify in Blumenberg's more substantial attack on Arendt. In comparison to Freud's contribution some decades previously, Blumenberg calls Arendt's work on Eichmann, "unbearable to a new degree."⁶⁸⁵ Blumenberg writes that, given that "a state's founder can be the negative national hero", "...Arendt took Adolf Eichmann from the State of Israel."⁶⁸⁶ It is the specific manner in which Arendt did so, however, that Blumenberg reserves for the most vehement criticism. One of the more controversial arguments Arendt makes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is that the Final Solution would not have been so brutally efficient if it were not for the collaboration of many Jews. Arendt writes:

*The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people (my emphasis).*⁶⁸⁷

Blumenberg suggests that the root of this claim stems from the fact that "it is Zionism that Hannah Arendt could not forgive", seeing in the political organisation of the Jewish people a certain form of collective identity that prevented autonomous judgment. This caused "the prevention of resistance, and thus once again a collaboration with the persecutors."⁶⁸⁸ Blumenberg suggests that Arendt's suspicion of Zionism was due to her convictions as a political scientist, wherein the "self-organization of the persecuted [Zionism] deprived the individual of his chance to wager everything, to cry out loud just once."⁶⁸⁹ As previously discussed, according to

⁶⁸⁵ Blumenberg, RT, 4; RW, 12.

⁶⁸⁶ Blumenberg, RT 5; RW, 13.

⁶⁸⁷ Arendt, EJ, 125.

⁶⁸⁸ Blumenberg, RT, 5-6; RW, 14.

⁶⁸⁹ Blumenberg, RT, 6; RW, 15.

Arendt, this is something that marks totalitarian regimes: the fact that “most people will comply but *some people will not*.” It is the non-compliance of some individuals (that is, the ability to exert autonomous moral judgment when most will not), that causes Arendt to cast judgment on these historical actors. For Blumenberg, however, Arendt’s most outrageous claim is that the supposed collaboration assisted the actual mechanics of the Holocaust to work more efficiently:

Does Hannah Arendt really believe this? It is the charge she brings against those who thought that something could be salvaged or who merely pretended to have come to a realistic appraisal of the situation. But it was a reality of the incredible, with which nobody can be expected to reckon. What Hannah Arendt demands is to have thought the incredible, the possibility of resistance to a machine with which the world had for years failed to deal...⁶⁹⁰

This is a vital part of Blumenberg’s argument. This is evident in his claim that Arendt showed an “incomprehension” of the historical reality of the predicament of the Jewish peoples during the Final Solution, what he considers tantamount to demanding the victims to have “thought the incredible.”⁶⁹¹ For Blumenberg, this is not a general claim about the horrors of Nazi actions, but a specific one regarding the ways in which different actors attempt to make sense of their historical moment. Arendt’s failure to understand this, according to Blumenberg, should be “viewed another quarter century later, a singular specimen for a theory of nonconceptuality.”⁶⁹²

The Analysis and the Myth

Blumenberg’s charge that Arendt demanded of the Jewish people to have “thought the incredible”, and his subsequent association of that with a “theory of nonconceptuality” is, I propose, a singular accusation regarding Arendt’s failure to understand the ways in which myth underwrites historical life. According to Blumenberg, Arendt’s naïve expectation that more people should have resisted the daily machinations of Nazi atrocities underestimates the extent to which the events

⁶⁹⁰ Blumenberg, RT, 6; RW, 14.

⁶⁹¹ Blumenberg, RT, 6-7; RW, 14-15.

⁶⁹² Blumenberg, RT, 7; RW, 15-16.

that occurred were unthinkable. It was unthinkable, quite literally, in the sense that to extract oneself from the mythic dimension of historical life during the Holocaust would have been to over-extend beyond the grounds of what was comprehensible. According to Blumenberg, Arendt fails to see that the exercising of an urbane, rational judgement in that situation might be beyond the capacities of many; she subsequently overestimates someone's ability to, rationally speaking, 'take stock' in a situation that is ineliminably tied to mythic frames of reference. It was historically material examples like this that Blumenberg thought undermined the political theorist's account of the possibilities of autonomous judgment in ambiguous historical circumstances.

This highlights the shortcomings of understanding Blumenberg's account of myth only according to collective forms of meaning and decision-making. He suggests that Arendt's claim that some resisted in more explicit ways than others, does not discount the efforts of those "that thought something might be salvaged." For Blumenberg, Arendt's desire for rational judgement in these contexts was naïve because it forgot the many different ways individuals made sense of their persecution within the context of their people's historical trauma. This emphasises Blumenberg's notion that, although myth is built up around communal matrixes of meaning, individuals are also forced to arrive at their own judgments.⁶⁹³ Blumenberg's retort to Arendt's claim is: "The whole thing would not have taken place so discreetly if it had not worked so smoothly? Perhaps, but it would have worked."⁶⁹⁴

This draws out the wider implications of his criticism regarding Arendt's faith in the so-called "rigorism of truth." Blumenberg considers her attempt to 'intervene' in the name of "a whole truth" (as she herself calls it), to be an explicit misreading of the mythic dimensions (and thus limitations) of the trial. This does not, as others have proposed, necessarily support a reading that suggests Blumenberg is calling for the *necessity* of a mythic beginning for Israel, but rather the historical inevitability of it

⁶⁹³ Thus, while Nicholls is right to suggest that the significance of myth "must contain at least some element of objectivity in order to speak to the collective human interests of an epoch", implying that, "for Blumenberg, there is no such thing as 'private' or 'individual' myth", it is also true that the individual often grapples with the "interests of an epoch" alone. Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*, 84.

⁶⁹⁴ Blumenberg, RT, 6; RW, 14.

appearing as such.⁶⁹⁵ Blumenberg is not arguing that states must necessarily be founded in myth but merely that, historically speaking, there is no other way to conceive of one given the events of both the recent and forgotten past. The symbolic reality of statehood, in other words, is only meaningful within the confines of historically sanctioned myth. In an important passage, he concedes the discomfort and troubling nature of such a fact:

*But there can be no subsumption where the organizer of a genocide is, in a kind of state ceremony, made a scapegoat, in part and even not least for that which he would only potentially have done. One may be fervently opposed to this ritual; but first one must have understood what it means to the others (i.e., the victims and witnesses), and to what insignificance this meaning condemns one's criticism.*⁶⁹⁶

Ultimately, in Blumenberg's view, this is the major error of Arendt's project: the notion that a faith in the liberating quality of the rigours of truth ("she would like to see [Eichmann's] figure from the vantage point of humanity, out of a reluctance to leave it to Zionism"⁶⁹⁷) would cut through the ways in which the witnesses of the Holocaust managed to render their experience meaningful. The only way this was possible for many Jews was via a solidarity that emerged from the historical context of not only the crimes of the twentieth century, but the long story of Jewish persecution, and the associated rituals that differentiated them from their persecutors. According to Blumenberg, the 'thinking' of the Holocaust was only possible within the context of the history that rendered it meaningful to those who experienced it, rather than before a universal, rational judgment. Concerning such a judgement, he argues: "With all respect for the rightness of such considerations, one must say that universal moralism fails to touch what is necessary only in a mythical sense."⁶⁹⁸ Arendt, then, attempts to generalize the guilt of the German people, wherein

⁶⁹⁵ This position is distinguishable from Felix Heidenreich's argument that Blumenberg suggests that Israel "would have all the right to produce and use this myth." I do not think Blumenberg is as explicit at this. While he might concede there is a right to act in such a way, it stems from an intense difficulty in making sense of history, rather than a conscious right to use and manipulate a story for political use. See Heidenreich, "Political Aspects in Hans Blumenberg's Philosophy," 532.

⁶⁹⁶ Blumenberg, RT, 8; RW, 17.

⁶⁹⁷ Blumenberg, RT, 9; RW, 18.

⁶⁹⁸ Blumenberg, RT, 8; RW, 17.

Eichmann comes to represent the ways in which “the ever eager functionary came from the background of the petit bourgeois.” This is the grounds for both her understanding of the “banality of evil” and also, as Blumenberg argues, “why *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is above all a book against Eichmann’s sole guilt.”⁶⁹⁹ Arendt’s contextualizing of Eichmann’s individual guilt, so that he is degraded to a ‘clown’ amongst other clowns, is especially unforgivable for Blumenberg because it forgets what Eichmann represents as an individual figurehead, and symbol, in the recent past.

It is this factor that leads Blumenberg to claim that Arendt did not understand the historically determined, mythical dimensions of the trial:

*What the mythical act must concentrate in one figure, because it cannot otherwise attain the level of intuitiveness that every claim to legitimacy requires, appears diffuse to the political scientist...This sole guilt...is the political core of the process, which would have been disturbed or even destroyed by any question as to who had made the murderous bureaucrats possible and might now be hiding behind the imaginary vastness of the negative hero. But one cannot have both at once: the analysis and the myth.*⁷⁰⁰

Because of this misunderstanding, Blumenberg charges Arendt with being “a moralist”, wherein the faith in the liberation of rational truth trumps an acknowledgement of the difficulty in casting moral judgment over action during deeply uncertain periods of history: “to moralise the political implies that it too can be fraught with dilemmas only on the surface, but must in the final instance be capable of the unity of the will.”⁷⁰¹ It was precisely because the Holocaust and its historical eventualities were so profoundly unique in their historical, political and moral ambiguity, that Blumenberg argues the trial was inseparable from the mythic conditions from which it arose (both the Jewish origin stories and the pseudo-Nazi myth itself). As a result, any attempt at rational judgment outside the mythic confines

⁶⁹⁹ Blumenberg, RT, 9; RW, 17-18.

⁷⁰⁰ Blumenberg, RT, 9; RW, 18.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

of that historical moment was not only doomed, but threatened a people at their most vulnerable. His defence of this position is worth quoting in full:

*In failing to recognize the public and political status of the trial as staking a claim to national legitimacy, [Arendt] sees the victims and their descendants as engaging in an act of retribution. Even if this act of state should not have been a particularly fine example of the fulfillment of its intentions, it is all the more important to see what was or must have been the intention.*⁷⁰²

Here Blumenberg concedes the potentially troubling implications of grounding a state in the symbolism of archaic mythic resolution, but contends that within the confines of the history we are familiar with, both the way the Jews identify with their own history and the way the Nazis tried to invert, or finalise it, any alternative is literally unimaginable, insofar as it does not appear as *conceptually* meaningful within the historical horizon that presents itself to us.

History's Devious Ways and the Confines of Myth

The reading of Blumenberg proposed by those that suggest he offers an account of the frailty of the human creature per se, also contains a claim that Blumenberg, generally speaking, was skeptical of *logos*'s capacity to render life meaningful. This is evident in Meyer's reading of the essay as evidence of the fact that Blumenberg, late in life, had conceded that myths were still necessary for humans in constant need of consolation and relief. It is also evident, albeit to a lesser degree, in Jay's contention that Blumenberg had somehow repressed his commitment to rational enquiry in his critique of Freud and Arendt. Instead, I suggest that Blumenberg's suspicions regarding the possibilities of rational judgment within the confines of a mythic history was not necessarily a suspicion of *logos*. Rather it represents an interrogation of the implications of doing philosophy ensconced within a history which has for the most part been lost or forgotten, and which we have consequently constructed according to our desires, and worries.

⁷⁰² Blumenberg, RT, 10; RW, 19.

The ‘necessity’ of myth in this context is not because of an essential, inextricable link to human beings. Rather, it is due to Blumenberg’s account of the mythic, metaphoric grounds of conceptuality itself. As he argues in *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*:

*Metaphor...is an essentially historical object whose testimonial value presupposes that the witness did not possess, and could not have possessed, a metaphorology of their own...By providing a point of orientation, the content of absolute metaphors determines a particular attitude or conduct; they give structure to a world, representing the nonexperienceable, nonapprehensible totality of the real.*⁷⁰³

This argument implies that what is thinkable within the context of a world that is more or less comprehensible is determined by myth’s historical presence. This makes the precariousness of meaning, and rational judgement, only possible within the often violent and uncertain context of that past. For Blumenberg, the *grounds* for judgment are *non conceptual* phenomena that emerged in the passage of history. The focus is not on the need for myth in itself, but the manner in which myth has shaped the horizons from which we derive meaning *in* history. He makes this point by arguing that Freud, ironically:

*Would have immediately recognised...the mythical dimension of killing the negative hero of the state. Here it was not the father of the primal horde...but the founder of the state, who had become so by means of the greatest massacre in history – and by history’s devious ways (my emphasis).*⁷⁰⁴

In other words, Blumenberg isn’t sceptical about the possibility of life without myth. Instead, he interrogates the possibility of liberation from the mythically grounded historical horizons from which human life and institutions materialised. Rather than postulating a definitive account of the ways myth and metaphor creates and delineates meaning for the human creature, this interrogation seeks to establish the legitimacy (or even coherence) of any intellectual project that looks to overcome the confines of

⁷⁰³ Blumenberg, PFM, 14; PZM, 25.

⁷⁰⁴ Blumenberg, RT, 11; RW, 21.

a historical moment, which is only comprehensible within its confines. As I argued in the previous chapter, Blumenberg considered this approach to be the most coherent response to the death of metaphysics, something that “calls metaphysics back to its place.”⁷⁰⁵

While this may seem a minor point, it is an essential one in any attempt to locate *Rigorism of Truth* within the context of Blumenberg’s oeuvre: either as a late capitulation to a form of crude Romanticism as Meyer claims, or as an attempt to outline the philosophical implications of the ways myth has shaped historical life and rational judgment. This latter reading suggests that the strangeness of the past (meant in terms of both its largely forgotten legacy as well as the difficulty in interpreting known events) is, quite literally, the only condition under which we can attempt to make sense of the world. Blumenberg’s approach requires a confrontation with the ineliminable presence of myth in the foundations of what emerges as coherent in the passage of history. This extends to the very limiting hopes of philosophy itself:

*To bring myth to an end was once supposed to have been the work of logos. This consciousness of itself on the part of philosophy – or better, of the historians of philosophy – is contradicted by the fact that work aimed at putting an end to myth is again and again accomplished in the form of a metaphor of myth.*⁷⁰⁶

Blumenberg sees this in Arendt’s desire to pass judgment on Eichmann from the perspective of a Kantian universal moral law, “a tribunal of all humanity, a secularized form of the last judgment.”⁷⁰⁷ Arendt (at least according to Blumenberg) attempts to outrun the specific historical associations of the trial with archaic mythic rites with a universalisable rationality, hoping that it would be capable of passing judgment from the perspective of all humanity. Blumenberg’s retort states that the trial can only be understood from the perspective of the (constructed and reconstructed) specificities of a people’s historical trauma.

⁷⁰⁵ Blumenberg, PFM, 132; PZM, 193.

⁷⁰⁶ Blumenberg, WM, 629; AM, 681. Elsewhere, he writes, “Demythification is in large measure nothing more than remetaphorization.” See “Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality,” in *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 94.

⁷⁰⁷ Blumenberg, RT, 10; RW, 19.

While it is inevitable that reason might want to engage with historical injustices, Blumenberg seems to suggest that such a desire must recognise the grounds upon which it is conceptually coherent. Philosophy, in other words, must come to terms with the manner in which both its desires, as well as its *modus operandi*, have appeared *in* history, as in itself an important source of rational orientation, abandoning the faith that a universal perspective for judgement is possible. This is particularly the case, he argues in *Work on Myth*, in the modern age, where rational achievements and historical teleology converge to conclude that *logos* can overcome all historical contexts:

*As God's defender, as the subject of history, man enters the role in which he is indispensable. It is not only for the world that, as its observer and actor, indeed as the producer of its 'reality', he cannot be imagined as absent, but also indirectly, by way of this role in the world, for God as well, whose 'fortune' is now suspected of lying in man's hands.*⁷⁰⁸

In the end, even the highest desire of *logos* – namely the elimination of mystery from the world – is shown to have emerged from a mythic goal, and remains comprehensible only within the context of the image of an eliminated mysterious God. Within the context of his theory of absolute metaphors, and with an acknowledgement of its “conceptual history”, Blumenberg argues that philosophy has to come to terms with its non-conceptual conditions of possibility; philosophy became a process of negotiating the presence of these metaphors: “...to ascertain and analyse their conceptually irredeemable expressive function.”⁷⁰⁹ This represents at least one response to Meyer’s reading of the essay.

A rejoinder to Jay’s interpretation, on the other hand (in which he suggests that Blumenberg forgets his own commitment to rational critique), would involve a different emphasis, albeit from the same basic argumentative position. Jay’s argument seems to stem from a basic agreement with Meyer’s interpretation of Blumenberg’s call for ‘more myths’, to which he contributes a further criticism regarding

⁷⁰⁸ Blumenberg, WM, 32; AM, 39.

⁷⁰⁹ Blumenberg, PFM, 3; PZM, 10.

Blumenberg's commitment to reason, and philosophy more generally. The response to Meyer I propose also has important implications for Jay's argument. As Jay himself argues, Blumenberg is aware that his convictions regarding Freud and Arendt have led him to a rational critique of their work, to the extent that he was "prepared to court indignation" – in itself an acknowledgement of the potentially destructive power of truth in historical life.⁷¹⁰ Blumenberg clearly acknowledges his own desires regarding truth, but I contend that these wishes are delimited by the acknowledgement of the ways in which rational enquiry came to be meaningful for agents in history.

While such a claim is not made explicitly within the brief pages of *Rigorism of Truth*, when read in conjunction with other parts of Blumenberg's oeuvre (in particular *Work on Myth*, the notes of which he was compiling during a similar period, as well as his theory of non-conceptuality), there is good reason to support such an interpretation. Blumenberg's point is to emphasise that the desire for rational, moral action is itself informed by a mythic domain that regulates what it means to engage in moral deliberation.⁷¹¹ This offers a coherent rejoinder to Jay's interpretation, insofar as it suggests Blumenberg does not forget his own commitment to rational enquiry, but rather proposes a modicum of 'historical caution' in terms of what rational agents can hope to achieve. He suggests that the danger of deploying a universal normativity within the context of a particular historical moment, is due to the fundamentally unknown ways in which (what I have called) the 'strangeness' of the past renders the present meaningful. Blumenberg's claim that Arendt's "refusal to acknowledge an ultimate and inexorable dilemma in human action" represents a criticism of those who deploy an urbane rationalism, a "fearless analysis", in the search for truth, while ignoring the danger of specific historical moments in which the

⁷¹⁰ Blumenberg, RT, 5; RW, 13.

⁷¹¹ In this context, the argument that the human creature is a symbolic animal presents itself as something that could have been otherwise – the manner in which human beings adapted to their situation in the world and rendered it meaningful could have manifested in other ways. Although Blumenberg compares his idea of the metaphor to Kant's notion of the 'symbol' in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, namely the manner in which (according to Blumenberg) "concepts can be secured only through intuitions", unlike Kant for whom the relation of the faculties with the world is universal, for Blumenberg "even absolute metaphors have a history." Blumenberg, PFM, 4-5; PZM, 12-13. Alison Ross argues that Blumenberg's theory of metaphor offers new perspectives on how "the aesthetic presentation of moral law comes to the aid of ethical conduct in Kant's practical philosophy. Alison Ross, "Moral Metaphorics, or Kant after Blumenberg: Towards an Analysis of the Aesthetic Settings of Morality," *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (2011), 48.

possibility of judgment is highly in doubt.⁷¹² Such a fearlessness, and ignorance of the precarity of the moment, leads Blumenberg to conclude that “Hannah Arendt could not have written this book any differently from the way she wrote it...That is precisely why she ought not to have written it.”⁷¹³ Specifically, the uncertainty of the moment did not derive from the *need* for the Jewish people to establish a state following the crimes of the Holocaust. Rather, Blumenberg seems to imply that the only manner in which the Holocaust *could* appear meaningful to those who were its victims was still radically unclear. As he argues in the essay *An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric*, the uncertainty of how to act in, or interpret, history is often a product of how our concepts and symbols have derived from that history:

*The animal symbolicum masters the reality that is originally lethal to him by letting it be represented; he looks away from what is uncanny or uncomfortable for him...This becomes clearest where judgment, with its claim to identify, cannot reach its goal at all, either because the demands of its object exceed what its procedure can handle (as in the case of “the world,” “life,” “history,” “consciousness”) or because there is insufficient scope for the procedure, as in situations where one is compelled to act, and in which rapid orientation and vivid plausibility is needed.*⁷¹⁴

For Blumenberg, the aftermath of the Holocaust was precisely a moment in which the conflicting symbolic and conceptual desires of those who suffered were outstripped by the sheer unthinkability of the events, something that (at least for him) Arendt was not sufficiently sensitive to.

For the sufferers of this unique historical trauma, how could such an experience be comprehended? Blumenberg suggests that the horrors of the Shoah could only appear as comprehensible within the context of the origins of the Jewish people, as well as their persecution. That included documented crimes, and those which have been re-imagined in the absence of historical certainty. Israel, then, became a

⁷¹² Blumenberg, RT, 9, 5; RW, 18, 13.

⁷¹³ Blumenberg, RT, 11; RW, 20.

⁷¹⁴ Blumenberg, “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric,” 440.

symbolic locus of meaning under which the Jewish people could gather. The trial of Eichmann, in this context, ‘locates’ the crimes of the war within a comprehensible history of Jewish origins, the associated rituals that differentiated them from others, and the violence they suffered as a result of their perceived hubris. Eichmann, “whose ashes were more than [Israel] could bear”, emerges as a monster due to a confluence of factors. It was not only how the mythic history of the Jews determined the ways in which the Nazi’s came to think of, and carry out, their historic crimes. It was also the manner in which post-war Jewish communities came to reflect on their experience as both a collective and as individuals, having survived the historical disaster. The often deeply ambiguous ways in which humans come to find meaning in historical moments is ultimately due to what Blumenberg calls “history’s devious ways.”⁷¹⁵ Eichmann cannot appear in anything other than his historical, mythic contexts. By ignoring the precarity and mythic foundations of historical instances and institutions, Blumenberg suggests that Arendt risks the breakdown of communal, meaningful exchange, and thus the risk of further historical disaster.

Historical Crisis and Rhetoric as Action

Blumenberg’s argument was therefore not purely abstract, but had an explicit political dimension. He saw the hubris typical of rational projects like those of Freud and Arendt, as risking genuine historical crisis, because it misread the domains in which moral action and rational judgment were possible. For Blumenberg, the dangers of “metaphysics taken at its word” related to the ways in which the associated ideologies manifested in *political* life. In a world where the earth can literally be destroyed by humanity’s creations, he suggests that the urge for action, supported by a concept of universal judgment, can be disastrous:

If history teaches us anything at all, it is this, that without this capacity to use substitutes for actions, not much would be left of mankind. The ritualised replacement of a human sacrifice by an animal sacrifice...may have been a beginning...Politically, the rebuke that a verbal or demonstrative act is “pure rhetoric” is regarded as a serious one; but that is itself part of a rhetoric that

⁷¹⁵ Blumenberg, RT,12; RW, 21.

*does not want to admit...that a policy is better, the more it can afford to restrict itself to "mere words."*⁷¹⁶

He suggests instead that a metaphorology concerned with the “nutrient solution” of how the history of metaphysics and associated ideologies developed, might be the closest to what could be considered truth.

In *Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie* (*The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State*), Blumenberg outlines the problems of a politics emerging from an overarching theory of reality.⁷¹⁷ Angus Nicholls deals with this essay in another paper, in which he suggests that *Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie* should be contextualised via Blumenberg’s reading of Plato’s *Protagoras* in *Work on Myth* and his hostility to Platonism in general.⁷¹⁸ According to Nicholls, the essay also contains “the most extraordinary...implicit polemic against Ernst Cassirer’s *Myth of the State*.”⁷¹⁹ Nicholls writes:

Cassirer had seen National Socialism as cynically having deployed myth in order to increase its political power. According to this view, this resurgence of myth did not amount to a suspension of the Enlightenment; it was much more the cynical and technical exploitation of myth by a modern nation, the institutions of which had been weakened by the crisis of the Weimar Republic. The main precursor to this cynical use of myth is, in Cassirer’s view, Machiavelli. It was Machiavelli who, in Cassirer’s account, undertook to

⁷¹⁶ Blumenberg, “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric,” 440-441. Vida Pavesich uses Blumenberg’s account of rhetoric to defend our respect for ideas like “rights” and “social justice”, calling it an “anthropology of hope.” See Vida Pavesich, “The Anthropology of Hope and the Philosophy of History: Rethinking Kant’s Third and Fourth Questions with Blumenberg and McCarthy,” *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (2011), 35-6. Axel Fliethmann argues that Blumenberg’s interest in metaphor “addresses...the fundamental challenge for any epistemology: whether or not it can stay ‘pure’, unmediated and uncontaminated by rhetoric.” See Axel Fliethmann, “Blumen Berg: Topoi in Blumenberg’s Philosophy,” *Thesis Eleven* 104, no. 1 (2011), 63. See also Anthony Reynolds, “Unfamiliar Methods: Blumenberg and Rorty on Metaphor,” *Qui Parle* 12, no. 1 (2000), 97-9. Contrary to my argument, J. M. Fritzman argues that Blumenberg’s account of rhetoric is based on a “universal philosophical anthropology...Following such thinkers as Gottfried Herder, Paul Alsberg and Arnold Gehlen.” J. M. Fritzman, “Blumenberg and the Rationality of Rhetoric,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 10, no. 4 (1992), 427.

⁷¹⁷ Hans Blumenberg, “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie,” *Schweizer Monatshefte* 48 (1968/9), 121-46.

⁷¹⁸ Angus Nicholls, “Hans Blumenberg on Political Myth: Recent Publications from the Nachlass,” *The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (Jan., 2016), 14.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1946).

*divorce politics from ethics in what came to be a new technical 'art' of politics.*⁷²⁰

According to Nicholls, Blumenberg disagrees with Cassirer entirely:

*Writing against Cassirer, and only six years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Blumenberg claims that it is precisely Machiavelli who introduces a modern conception of politics that could prove to be useful within the context of the Cold War. A political technique which divorces itself from ethics, and which sees its legitimacy as being purely artificial rather than written in the stars or in the ground of Being, is a politics of words rather than deeds. And in the nuclear age, implies Blumenberg, words are definitely preferable to deeds.*⁷²¹

Here Nicholls, correctly in my view, outlines the extent to which Blumenberg is suspicious of any totalising account of what rationality could achieve in a deeply uncertain moment in time.

Blumenberg traces this hubris, once again, to founding images in the philosophical tradition. Echoing his claim in *An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric* that assumptions about the human being derive from considering it either a “poor or...rich creature”, he looks to the figure of Prometheus: “Prometheus is a key figure for anthropology, not for theology.”⁷²² He suggests that in spite of the important differences between Platonic and Aristotelian systems, “the differentiation...is an internal dissension in metaphysics, a case of the narcissism of small differences.”⁷²³ Both, vitally, showcased that:

[The] victorious metaphysics prevailed by affirming, reassuringly, that there remained nothing essential to be accomplished in the world. The decisions had

⁷²⁰ Nicholls, “Hans Blumenberg on Political Myth,” 14.

⁷²¹ Nicholls, “Hans Blumenberg on Political Myth,” 15.

⁷²² Blumenberg, “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric,” 429; Blumenberg, WM, 330; AM, 361. Anthony Reynolds traces Blumenberg’s defence of rhetoric to Vico and his theory of its use to help the frail human being. See Anthony Reynolds, “Forgetting Rhetoric,” *Angelaki* 8, no. 1 (2003), 20.

⁷²³ Blumenberg, WM, 331; AM, 362.

*already been made in the realm of Ideas or the forms – in other words, by nature.*⁷²⁴

The connection to be made between this argument and Blumenberg's suspicion of political action in uncertain historical moments, is that both articulate Blumenberg's refusal to forget the material damage that can be caused by a rational system that considers itself somehow distinct from its historical emergence or actualisation. The sudden introduction of the possibility of nuclear holocaust into history radically redefines what it would mean to take action or cast judgment as a rational agent.

Blumenberg's defence of rhetoric as a form of action *in lieu* of action, instead of what is traditionally seen (and rejected as) as intellectual play, reinforces my reading of Blumenberg's account of myth as an ongoing, historically mediated contested site that is continually 'worked on'. By rejecting metaphysics as not only a sign of rational hubris, but also risking material historical disaster, Blumenberg instead insists that we consider the manner in which moral action and judgment is made coherent by the ways our past is rendered meaningful by our ongoing work on myth. Central to this position is Blumenberg's conception of the strangeness of the past, of "history's devious ways" as he calls it. Another fragment from his *Nachlass* illuminates the manner in which Blumenberg sought to approach a past he considered, for the most part, unapproachable.

Written at a similar time to *The Rigorism of Truth* (it appears in the same published collection), the fragment concerns an entry in Thomas Mann's diary, dated the twelfth of July, 1941. Invited to the Horkheimers' for a house warming party, Mann writes: "These Jews have a sense of Hitler's greatness that I cannot bear."⁷²⁵ Blumenberg suggests that Mann's dismay at the inability of the Jewish intellectuals "to find small the man" anticipates Arendt's "surprise at the dismay" caused by her attempts to paint Eichmann as a clown.⁷²⁶ Blumenberg argues that for the Jewish intellectuals, "...their enemy, in his apocalyptic uniqueness, had to fill the historic dimension in which he emerged. For he fulfilled a destiny, which these open or disguised Hegelians could after all see only under the rubric of the 'cunning of

⁷²⁴ Ibid.

⁷²⁵ Blumenberg, RT, 61-62; RW, 94-5.

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

reason’.”⁷²⁷ Ultimately, Blumenberg sides with Mann: “No, he too, to whom this was unbearable, was right.”⁷²⁸ What might at first appear another dubious argument, given the context within which all of these Jewish intellectuals found themselves in California, is an important clarification of Blumenberg’s position regarding history. His defence of Mann is born out of a refusal to subsume Hitler and his crimes into a teleological historical development, that renders history merely an external iteration of metaphysical ideology, a case of it being taken at its word.

Whether this is a fair reading of thinkers like Horkheimer and his colleagues is not strictly relevant. It does, however, represent a rebuttal of any notion of history as a process of mythical disasters like those proposed by (one particular) reading of Horkheimer and Adorno’s inversion of Hegel’s rational dialectic, where history comes to represent a legacy of barbarism – “from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” as Adorno described it in *Negative Dialectics*.⁷²⁹ This small fragment clarifies the extent to which Blumenberg can be said to reject a conception of the past as either a series of progressions *or* disasters. Vitaly, his agreement with Mann relates to his refusal to locate the tangible crises of history within a logic of disaster, over which a universal rational faculty can pass judgment. Instead, Blumenberg seems to suggest that a serious attempt to view historical events as radically ambiguous both helps to clarify the ways in which they surfaced out of historically material (i.e. political) events, as well as dissuade us from attempting to locate them within an ideological narrative where a liberating, rational truth can operate. For Blumenberg, this problematises not reason *per se*, but the attempt to ground an understanding of our rational faculties in relation to a foundational idea of the past and its connection to a present.

This neither denies the reality of historical nightmares, like that of the Holocaust, or the inherent dangers in mythic symbolism shaping and delimiting life. This is evident in Blumenberg’s acknowledgment of the troubling implications of the sacrificial associations of Eichmann’s trial. His broader point, however, is to insist on a philosophy that negotiates within the confines of what is accessible to human

⁷²⁷ Ibid.

⁷²⁸ Ibid.

⁷²⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 320.

beings, not to gesture beyond the horizon of what is meaningful and possible. To take that notion seriously, the Blumenberg essay implies, is to understand the ways in which the universal desires of reason are predicated upon concepts that are mediated by the myths and metaphors that emerged *in* history. This is something he alludes to in the last pages of *Work on Myth*:

*If myth has something to do with the nameless being given names, the formless receiving form, the bestiary becoming human, and that which is already human in form being humanized, then the center of the pantheon must lie precisely where what is at issue is the origin and the continuance of the figure that is man. Even when this focus is fading away, something of the perils of the beginning would still have to be perceptible.*⁷³⁰

If Blumenberg is right to suggest that myth, ultimately, has the human being at the centre of its concerns, but that simultaneously the details regarding its origins is unclear, then his claim is not about *the* human being, but *human beings* as they have lived. Myth appears, not as something that indicates the ‘nature’ of the human creature, but as a way of approaching just *some* of the ways in which we have come to understand ourselves.

He gestures to this in the final lines of *Work on Myth*, in a chapter entitled “To Bring to an End, if not Myth, Then at Least One Myth.” Writing of the difficulty of conceiving of a renewed iteration of the Prometheus story, he writes:

*Why should the world have to continue in existence if there is nothing more to say? But what if there were still something to say, after all?*⁷³¹

Here, at the very conclusion, Blumenberg draws attention to the fact that his own offering of *logos* constitutes an ongoing, and non-definitive work *of and on* myth. This takes into account both a still contested past, and an entirely unknowable and unfamiliar future, which might yet demand new things of us.

⁷³⁰ Blumenberg, WM, 630; AM, 682.

⁷³¹ Blumenberg, WM, 636; AM, 689.

Conclusion:

The Thousand Year Journey: The Myth of Er in Plato's *Republic*

Although this thesis has primarily discussed thinkers that lived in the twentieth century (with the exception of Vico), the 'problem' of myth is not unique to the modern era. Indeed, although Vico's work itself might be said to represent, in certain respects, a modern outlook, it is worth remembering that he considered his greatest influence to be Plato.⁷³² Plato's work on myth has inspired its own vast literature. In this brief concluding discussion, I do not intend to provide a systematic critique of a topic that could justify its own project. My claim is only that, although Plato is (in)famous for his banishment of the poets from the ideal state, he also offers one of the more nuanced accounts of myth's relation to our understanding of what it is to live a rational life. I will argue, echoing Kathryn Morgan, that Plato's suspicion of *mythologia* (namely, uncertain or unverifiable testimony) is tempered by his acknowledgement that *mûthos* (an authoritative story worthy of retelling) represents a source in which a contemporary people can enter communion with its distant past. This echoes the unifying theme of this thesis overall, namely that a grappling with myth often involves the attempt to come to terms with a past that is largely repressed or forgotten, but that nonetheless continues to inform our lives as rational agents in history.

One of the more notable examples of this can be found in Plato's concluding the *Republic* with the myth of Er. Morgan argues that the approach to myth typified by the story of Er is representative of what she calls his "middle dialogues", after which she suggests that his appreciation for the role of myth in the rational dialectic becomes more sophisticated.⁷³³ Nevertheless, the story of Er shows an extremely nuanced account of the manner in which myth informs our lives. The character Socrates recounts the myth to illustrate to Glaucon that the soul is immortal.⁷³⁴ The myth recounts a man who is killed in battle, but whose body does not decompose. He finds himself in the underworld, which he journeys through with other souls. In the underworld, Er witnesses souls choosing their next life. Animals choose the life of

⁷³² See Nancy Du Bois Marcus, *Vico and Plato*, 8-12.

⁷³³ Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*, 242

⁷³⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 608c.

men, while most human souls, knowing its difficulty, choose the life of animals. Orpheus chooses the life of a swan and Agamemnon becomes an eagle. Odysseus, on the other hand, goes “looking for the life of a private individual who did his own work.”⁷³⁵ Days later, Er awakes upon his funeral pyre, and tells the gathered crowd about his soul’s travels.⁷³⁶ Plato argues that this story “could save us, if we were persuaded by it.”⁷³⁷ Abruptly, the dialogue ends.

It is striking that in the same work where he bans the poet from the Republic, Plato concludes it with a myth. The literature that attempts to unpick what Plato might have intended is vast and often contradictory. Some of it is dismayed by Plato’s ‘collapse’ back into myth.⁷³⁸ In arguments such as these it seems taken for granted that myths imply unverifiable accounts, and as such the concern is how they relate to a rational dialectic. Even those that defend Plato’s use of myth seem resigned to an argument that suggests that myth offers some form of symbolic justification, and reflection, of the *logos*.⁷³⁹ This approach takes literally Plato’s argument earlier in the *Republic*, that deference to the poets and their work enslaves human beings to a life lived via heightened and hysterical emotions. Other approaches concede that Plato saw value in myth, but this was limited purely to a focus on its pedagogical worth, wherein myths have an aesthetic quality that rationality does not; an allegorical, or metaphorical value that helps those engaged in the dialectic to grasp the pure reason ‘hidden’ within.⁷⁴⁰ My intention is to sidestep these larger debates, in favour of emphasising another possible reading that draws out some of the key themes of this thesis.

Morgan argues that Plato’s understanding of myth is extremely sophisticated, and inextricably linked to a conception of historical time.⁷⁴¹ Although she argues this conception of history only really appears in the later dialogues, I argue that the story

⁷³⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 620c.

⁷³⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 614c.

⁷³⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 621b.

⁷³⁸ Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s “Republic”* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 340-50.

⁷³⁹ See for example, Ronald R. Johnson, “Does Plato’s ‘Myth of Er’ Contribute to the Argument of the ‘Republic’?”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32, no. 1. (1999), 11-12.

⁷⁴⁰ See for example Helen H. Bacon, “Plato and the Greek Literary Tradition,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-)* 131 (2001), 351-52; Janet E. Smith, “Plato’s Use of Myth in the Education of Philosophic Man,” *Phoenix* 40, no. 1 (Spring, 1986), 22, 32.

⁷⁴¹ Kathryn Morgan, “Plato and the Stability of History,” *Greek Notions of the Past in the Archaic and Classical Eras*, ed. John Marincola et. al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 227-252.

of Er gestures towards ideas that would later be articulated more explicitly in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*. Unlike Thucydides, whose, "...frank avowal of the difficulty of accurate knowledge about what happened before the Peloponnesian War" precludes him from critical analysis of the more distant past, Morgan argues that Plato's conception of history deals with a "cosmic" scale.⁷⁴² Where Thucydides abandons the deep past as something that is obscure and unknowable, Plato understands that a people's past remains a site of ongoing (albeit not always conscious or explicit) reflection. Plato's cosmic view of history acknowledges the fact that intermittently throughout history, humanity suffers horrifying cataclysms and regressions. Morgan argues that, for Plato, this cultural memory of cyclic destruction is forgotten by subsequent generations. She writes that: "The great stretch of history in question in Plato's dialogues is not confined to the ages analysed by the Greek historians, but stretches back even further", to obscure periods of the past.⁷⁴³ She continues: "The only cultural memory that survives the cycles is one of cosmic trauma and the past, as a result, becomes mythologised."⁷⁴⁴ Here Morgan suggests that Plato considers the surviving mythologies to embody the collective *working on* of past traumas. Crucially, however, she suggests that Plato's view of history should be understood, "...as a heuristic device rather than emphasising a picture of history as *decadence*" (my emphasis).⁷⁴⁵ Morgan argues:

*Because catastrophe creates cultural discontinuity and trauma, mythologising becomes an inescapable aspect of the investigation of the past, rather than (as it is for Thucydides) a poetic or sentimental tendency that can be overcome by the rigorous application of stringent methodological standards...access to long-term history is thus through rationalisation of myth, so that mythical patterns take a privileged and foundational role.*⁷⁴⁶

Myth, thus, comes to represent the contested site on which a present moment reflects on its past, rather than simply archaic reflections of a simplistic and naïve world. Morgan concludes that this approach to history and myth "...lets Plato mediate on the

⁷⁴² Morgan, "Plato and the Stability of History", 241, 232.

⁷⁴³ Morgan, "Plato and the Stability of History," 232.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁵ Morgan, "Plato and the Stability of History," 236.

⁷⁴⁶ Morgan, "Plato and the Stability of History," 233.

uses of history and the emotional and political value of deploying a past that is or is not cut off from the present.”⁷⁴⁷ The suggestion is that, for rational agents reflecting on the failures and fallibility of human thought and action in the past, myth embodies a historically distant (and yet immanent) source of communal reflection.

This argument provides an opening in which to think about the repeated presence of myth and oral tradition in the Platonic dialogues. The idea that Plato’s understanding of myth in effect reflects a particular conception of humanity’s relation to time and its passage, suggests that he saw the critique of myth as a way for current thought to engage with its most ambiguous past, as a form of archaeology. This re-emphasises the etymological meaning implicit in the difficult word *mûthos*. Its association with “authoritative, true narration” does not imply an unambiguously trustworthy recounting of events (empirically speaking). Rather, as R. G. Collingwood has argued, Plato sees in the “act of imagining [and the] aesthetic consciousness...a possible object of philosophical thought, a constituent element of reality.”⁷⁴⁸ In other words, the philosophical worth of myth stemmed from its reflection of a real world of human experience. It was the recollection of these experiences that played an important, if sometimes enigmatic, part of a community’s past and ongoing life.

It is vital to recall that the banning of poetry in the *Republic* is done within a very particular historical context. In the Athens of Plato’s day, the mythical traditions still held enormous sway, while being almost entirely divorced from the kind of life that originally gave rise to them.⁷⁴⁹ The point to emphasise is that the roots of these myths were derived from forms of living that would have been entirely foreign to the people of Athens, despite being dimly remembered via cultural memory. Plato would have recognised the ways in which (as was mentioned in the Introduction) these mythical traditions came to be tied up in forms of empty custom, and symbolism. This

⁷⁴⁷ Morgan, “Plato and the Stability of History,” 252.

⁷⁴⁸ R. G. Collingwood, “Plato’s Philosophy of Art,” *Mind* 34, no. 134 (April, 1925), 172.

⁷⁴⁹ Sarah Pomeroy et. al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, 44. They suggest that the established Greek mythical traditions, by the time of Plato, were probably over one thousand years old. Gilbert Murray, although acknowledging that Homeric poetry had been cleansed of human sacrifice, argues that its historical roots were tied to “very primitive tradition,” see Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, 131. Walter Burkert echoes this claim when he argues that the oral traditions of the Mediterranean derived from, and still showed reflections of, pre-agricultural, hunter-gatherer life. See Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 138.

was a case of myth working in tandem with codified and official forms of authority, rather than genuine, free expressions of human reflection; hence the character Socrates arguing that, “if you admit the pleasure-giving Muse, whether in lyrics or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law or the thing that everyone has always believed to be best, namely, reason.”⁷⁵⁰

This allows us to see beyond the common readings of Plato as an elitist, and instead as someone who approached myth not as empty, dogmatic tradition, but, as Collingwood argues, something that played a vital role in the sustenance of a rational life.⁷⁵¹ In Simone Weil’s essay on the *Iliad*, where she argues that it is fundamentally a poem that deals with the human confrontation with force, she suggests that “the geometrically stringent chastisement, which spontaneously punishes the abuse of force, was the primary issue in Greek thought...Plato moves from this starting point to [his] reflections on man and the cosmos.”⁷⁵² Weil’s broader argument hinges on the idea that where the Western tradition has now lost a notion of what is elsewhere called ‘karma’, the conception of something like ‘balance’ in the face of ‘force’ (which might also be called fate) was key to the Greek “apprenticeship of virtue.”⁷⁵³ The notion that the Greek concept of virtue was tied to the need to negotiate the kinds of forces that buffeted and often destroyed human beings (of which the *Iliad* was the best example) helps clarify how Plato might have engaged with myth as a reflection of our past cultural memories. This positions myth as a vast repository of the human confrontation with the traumatic dimensions of life, through which philosophical reflection can be refracted. In myth, the encounter of a fallible human life lived *under* myth (like the meeting of Achilles and Priam) offers up new ways in which to contemplate the emancipation from those very mythic authorities. Plato does this when he forces the Athenians of his own time, and his readers today, to confront the ongoing and seemingly inescapable forms of what Weil calls “the force that men

⁷⁵⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 607a.

⁷⁵¹ The most well-known reading of Plato as a totalitarian comes from Karl Popper, who argues that Plato consistently betrayed his own ideas, and was led “by the internal logic of his anti-humanitarianism aim, the internal logic of power” to a support of oligarchs and tyrants. See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies: Volume One, The Spell of Plato* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 200. Popper’s discussion of Plato’s account of myth suggests it was a conscious lie for the sake of the state, 140-44.

⁷⁵² Simone Weil, *The ‘Iliad’ or the Poem of Force*, trans. James P. Holoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 54.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*

wield, the force that subdues men, in the face of which human flesh shrinks back.”⁷⁵⁴ As Morgan argues, this is not a claim about the inevitability, or cyclical nature of, the degeneration of human institutions and life.⁷⁵⁵ Such historic descents into barbarism represent, not a logic, but the repeated failures of human beings to live a rational, and thus virtuous, life. Myth shows the extent to which reflection is dependent on a constant negotiation with the real possibility of its ending, and the fallibility of the idea of human liberation from authorities other than its own.

Catherine Malabou makes a similar argument in her discussion of the myth of Er, and its relation to Plato’s allegory of the cave. She points out that the character Socrates insists on the fact that, just as Er must return to the land of the living, so too must the man who escapes the cave “descend into the cave again.”⁷⁵⁶ The failure to descend back to the people, Socrates says, embodies the refusal to “share their labours and honours.”⁷⁵⁷ The implication is that philosophy must engage not only with the abstraction of the Good, but also a community’s negotiation with it in the world. In particular, Plato seems to suggest that one of the primary sites in which we grapple with the virtuous life occurs in our meditations on the disasters and traumas of the past that are reflected in myth. This is echoed by Francisco Gonzalez who writes:

*But are not these recalcitrant and opaque elements of mortal life that threaten the ideal city precisely what the concluding myth attempts to bring into view? From the perspective of the myth of Er, the project of the Republic is thus revealed to be a utopian ideal, i.e., only an exhortation to care for what continually sinks into carelessness, to bring to knowledge what continually retreats into oblivion.*⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁵⁴ Weil, *The ‘Iliad’ or the Poem of Force*, 45.

⁷⁵⁵ As Erich Auerbach has argued, there is “no encounter with fate” in the Platonic dialogues, as there is in tragedy or epic. The engagement with the force depicted in myth, then, has a different register. Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 6.

⁷⁵⁶ Catherine Malabou, “Odysseus’ Changed Soul: A Contemporary Reading of the Myth of Er,” *Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics*, ed. Abraham Jacob Greenstine, Ryan J. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 38.

⁷⁵⁷ Republic, 519d.

⁷⁵⁸ Francisco J. Gonzalez, “Combatting Oblivion: The Myth of Er as Both Philosophy’s Challenge and Inspiration,” in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, ed. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, Francisco J. Gonzalez (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 278.

That Plato is concerned with the ineffable dimension of the risk of *historical* oblivion is, as A. A. Long points out, a key part of his critique of the state, specifically his discussion of the soul. He writes: “In the *Republic* the decline of the ideal state starts when sons of the perfectly rational guardians succeed their fathers. The souls of their sons are not ruled by reason.”⁷⁵⁹ As Long argues, Plato’s deployment of the term ‘soul’ (*thumos*), in the context of the sons is “an unmistakable allusion to Homer’s warrior culture.”⁷⁶⁰ Long’s claim is that where in Homeric Greece, *thumos* could reflect many sides of a soul, in Plato’s time it recalled the angry, vengeful facets of Homer’s characters and their interaction with fate. In other words, Plato knew that his republic was always vulnerable to the fallibilities of the human creatures’ confrontation with what Weil calls force. He therefore invokes a Homeric term to point to a distant memory of that reality.

Plato ends the *Republic*, and the story of Er, with a final discussion of the soul’s relation to the passage of time, and what it means to be virtuous:

*The soul is immortal and able to endure every evil and every good, and we’ll always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason in every way. That way we’ll be friends both to ourselves and to the gods while we remain here on earth and afterwards – like victors in the games who go around collecting their prizes – we’ll receive our rewards. Hence, both in this life and on the thousand year journey we’ve described, we’ll do well and be happy.*⁷⁶¹

There are many ways this passage could be read. It does not need to be approached in terms of the strict Platonic interpretation that argues for the immortality of the individual soul. Instead, the journey of the soul can be read in a way that is sympathetic to Malabou’s claim regarding Plato’s insistence on the necessity of the return to the world, as well as Gonzalez’s suggestion that he is concerned with the frailty of mortal life. Plato’s distinction between the soul and the individual, such as the Homeric dimension lurking in the souls of the sons of the philosopher kings, is simply one way of showing that both individuals and communities are haunted by

⁷⁵⁹ A. A. Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 143.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶¹ Plato, *Republic*, 521c-d.

their pasts in ways that are not always straightforward. The soul's resistance to the "extremes of good and evil" that marks "that journey of a thousand years," mirrors the malleability of a peoples' cultural memory that individuals and communities confront anew in a historical moment that demands such imaginative work.⁷⁶²

The encounter with myth in this context is merely one way of seeing how our pasts are a primary inculcation of a rational life. Simultaneously, this encounter also emphasises that those mythic legacies are mediated by forces that do violence to our capacity to emancipate ourselves. Although the arguments of the thinkers in this thesis cannot be distilled to one point, Vico, Benjamin and Blumenberg all treat myth as a locus in which the historical dimension of human life erupts into the present as a source of individual and communal imaginative work. Within this ongoing negotiation with the detritus of past reflections, there exists the material testament of humanity's repeated collapse into cruel and brutal forms of life that eliminate the chance of free human agency.⁷⁶³ Following Richard Eldridge once again (who is himself following Kant), the hope is that there is within this devastating past, the "faint traces (*schwache Spuren*)...of the approach of a moral culture, traces that, however weak, are woven both through our sense of ourselves as agents and our dark histories."⁷⁶⁴ I have argued that a meeting with myth is a meeting with these faint traces.

⁷⁶² Max Latona makes a similar argument when he suggests that, for Plato, the role of myth in civic life is as a conduit of "the past through memory...to illuminate present day human experience." Max Latona, "The Tale Is Not My Own (οὐκ ἐμὸς ὁ μῦθος): Myth and Recollection in Plato," *Apeiron* 37, no. 3 (2004), 210.

⁷⁶³ Jürgen Habermas has called this "the traces of violence that deform repeated attempts at dialogue." See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 315.

⁷⁶⁴ Richard Eldridge, *Images of History*, 73. The term "faint traces" comes from Kant, see Immanuel Kant, "Idea for A Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 50.

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