



#### 4. *The Greek Myths*

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The Greek myths are germane to our theme for two reasons: they provided a major resource for the symbolism of the Middle Ages and Renaissance and they played a role in the story of the origin and development of symbolism in western culture. As part of this story, I will examine in this section some theories as to the origins of the myths and the extent to which Plato's monumental achievement was a product of this tradition and of the beliefs of Greek peoples from an even earlier time. The myths and the gods they depicted were at the very center of Greek and Roman culture and spiritual life during the classical period and later and they were a feature of the education of literate people from the late Middle Ages and Renaissance up to our own day. They have therefore had a vibrant history over a period of some 4,000 years and only now as knowledge of classical literature and languages is being lost are they in danger of disappearing as a cultural force.

The first known written references to the Greek myths are in Homer's epic poems the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* which are now thought to have been written towards the end of the 8th Century BC. The *Iliad* of course relates the story of the latter part of the Trojan war when the Greeks besieged the city of Troy in an attempt to recover Helen the wife of

Menelaus of Sparta who had eloped with Paris the son of Priam, King of Troy. The *Odyssey* tells of Odysseus, one of the Greek chieftains, and his many adventures on his voyage home to Greece after the war. The two epics make frequent reference both to the Olympian Gods who play an intimate and essential part in the narrative and to many other of the characters in the myths making it clear that the stories of the Gods had become formalized by the time of Homer and thus must have originated much earlier. According to Apollodorus in his *Library*, the first and perhaps the most comprehensive early survey of the myths dating from the 1st Century AD, the story of the Trojan war was the climax of the whole cycle of myths.

Such is the sophistication of the masterpieces of Homer that it is unimaginable that they could have been the first literary works<sup>1</sup> in western history; there must have been other earlier writers whose work, lacking the greatness of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, did not survive. Nevertheless, we can regard Homer as the product of a virtually non-literate tradition which handed down the tales from generation to generation by word of mouth. Many features of the two epics illustrate how it must have been in a society without writing, where the bulk of intellectual energy was spent in just memorizing and passing on the cultural heritage. Gill points out that one third of the content of the Homeric epics is redundant; it consists of lines or phrases repeated for emphasis and easier memorization.<sup>2</sup> The use of simple vocabulary, nouns with consistent qualifiers ('the wine-dark sea'), a narrative style with frequent prepositions, the development of poetic meter and the probable accompaniment of poetry by music and song were all aids to memorization.<sup>3</sup> We shall see later how even after writing had developed, this task still involved time and intellectual energy and how it evolved into the Art of Memory.

Imagine a society in which almost the only recreation and much of the spiritual life was listening to the poets and storytellers and we begin to glimpse how the repertoire of the myths must have been inspired and embellished from time out of mind. In spite of the devices I have just outlined for easy memorization and protection of the integrity of the story-line, it is not difficult to see how, artists being what they are, the myths would have been altered and 'improved' generation after genera-

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<sup>1</sup> Vermeule points out how much of the battle imagery in Homer shares the iconographic format of the hunting imagery of earlier Bronze Age and Mycenaean art. Vermeule 85

<sup>2</sup> Gill 80. She demonstrates that this constant repetition was the foundation of the rhetorical figure of *copia*, or the duplication of expressions which was a feature of the commonplace books which I discuss below.

<sup>3</sup> See Plato *Republic* 601a

tion. During the twenty-five centuries since writing began in the West and the myths became relatively formalized, the process of embellishment by dozens of mythographers has continued.

From the beginning, the study of the myths, their classification, meaning and origin has consumed the interest of commentators. One of the first of these was Xenophanes (570-475BC) who believed that the Olympian Gods were personifications of meteorological phenomena. His contemporary, Theagenes of Rhegium, proposed that the names of the Gods reflected aspects of the human character such as wisdom, love or oratory. Prodicus of Cos thought that they were personifications of the materials which were essential to human life such as fire, water and bread. Euhemerus in the late 4th Century proposed that the Gods were merely heroes and leaders of ancient times whose exploits had been glorified by the storytellers over the centuries so that the heroes had gradually assumed the mantle of Gods.<sup>1</sup> However, it is now clear that these and subsequent attempts to ascribe a single origin for the myths is much too simplistic.<sup>2</sup> Robert Graves proposes that the original function of the myths was as songs intended to accompany religious rituals but he distinguishes at least twelve other types of story which are included by ancient and modern writers in the present corpus.<sup>3</sup> The myths are certainly very diverse in origin. They derived from different periods and originated in different areas. Many of the myths go back at least to the first half of 2nd millennium BC, that is from the earliest part of the Minoan era and others were derived from near Eastern sources possibly from Mesopotamia, Egypt or Asia Minor. A few can be related to stories from other cultures in the common Indo-European tradition.

Of interest to us are the history myths, also called legends, which most likely place the origins of the Gods and of the mythical heroes as leaders, places and events in the prehistory of the Greeks. It is suggested that during Stone Age times in Europe, the predominant tribal deity was female, the Earth Mother, her primacy deriving from an appreciation of the importance of the female in the processes of fertility, birth and the continuity of tribal existence. It was not until later after the role of the male in human conception was grasped that males in society, religion and history both as Gods and men began to supersede Goddesses and women as leaders. Be that as it may, it is the view of some authorities that many of the history myths can be explained as describing the conflicts

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<sup>1</sup> The English word euhemerism is still used to describe this mode of interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> See Kirk Chapter 3 where he expands on the historiography of the myths.

<sup>3</sup> Graves 12

between the earlier female dominated tribal cultures in Greece and later invaders who were male dominated. These conflicts possibly first occurred at the beginning of the second millennium BC when the Ionian peoples infiltrated Greece from the north. At the very least, the myths depict an age of lawlessness, murder and rape<sup>1</sup> as might be expected from Stone Age tribal warfare and at the same time show how life, lacking conventional security and morality, might nevertheless be fulfilled by moments of glory, passion and intensity.

Thus, according to this theory, the tradition of the mystery cults originated with the fertility rites of the female gods and the swashbuckling male Olympians arrived later with the invasion of the Ionians. It is noteworthy that none of the Olympian Gods are autochthonous, that is to say they did not derive their names or functions from attributes of the Earth such as rivers, snakes or trees, again suggesting that the Olympians were a later tradition. The distinction between these two threads of history was recognised from early on, for instance in the two greatest works of Hesiod, the 7th Century BC poet. His *Theogony* was a recital of the Olympian Gods and their ancestry while *Works and Days* was a handbook on practical life and husbandry and a hymn praising the cycles of nature.

The early part of the second millennium BC in Greek history was dominated by the Minoans, whose civilization was centered in Crete, and by the later Mycenaean culture on the mainland. The Minoans appear to have had principally female Gods but on the other hand references to some of the Olympians have been discovered on clay tablets from Knossos in Crete written in the script known as Linear B, an early form of Greek, and dating from about 1400 BC.<sup>2</sup> The hegemony of the Minoans is illustrated by the famous myth of Theseus and the Minotaur possibly describing an heroic attempt to challenge Minoan dominance of the mainland tribes. Both Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations collapsed about the end of the 14th Century BC either as result of catastrophic geological events or a further invasion, this time by the Achaean peoples. It was the Achaeans who are described by Homer as besieging Troy and

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<sup>1</sup> One wonders whether the stories of the virility of the Olympian Gods, in particular Zeus, and their continuous coupling with any earthly virgin who caught their fancy may not have been a convenient excuse for any unwanted pregnancy of the age. An irate parent might find it difficult to upbraid their daughter when they had the possibility of Zeus himself as a son in law.

<sup>2</sup> See Chadwick 1961

this probably occurred, if at all, at the beginning of the 12th Century BC.<sup>1</sup> The Trojan War in Homer's myth was the war of the Heroes: the climax of two generations of struggle by these Bronze Age chieftains during which they conveniently slaughtered each other so that the cycle of myths could be brought to a close. Two centuries later there was a further and this time a historical invasion by the Dorians and it is likely that they largely destroyed many of the earlier Hellenic cities and initiated a dark age lasting for three hundred years at the end of which the written history of Greece began.

The majority of the myths described by Apollodorus are, at least on the surface, of this historical type although Dowden says<sup>2</sup> that it cannot be proved that any single figure in the myths actually existed and that it is extremely doubtful that even the siege of Troy was an actual historical event. But this does not mean that the myths were just dimly remembered tales of the heroic past. We have seen how medieval thinkers managed to extract at least four meanings from any biblical or other text. The historical myths are at the same time a matrix for many layers of meaning: allegorical, psychological and spiritual.

The insight of Xenophanes that the characters of the myths were personifications of abstract concepts can only have been partially correct but it had a seminal influence on the literature of the age of symbolism. We shall meet personifications again and again in the allegories and emblems in the Middle Ages and Renaissance and it is easy to understand how they might have originated. Abstract ideas are obviously the most difficult elements to conceive and express in any language but particularly so in a primitive society where vocabulary was simple and might not even have the words which defined the abstractions. Abstractions were personified; for instance, Mars and Venus, war and love, expressing in their gender alone some of the meaning intended. At the same time, primitive society necessarily felt a close affinity to nature and imputed personalities to all objects in nature, animate and inanimate.<sup>3</sup> Early Greek, like other primitive languages, did not necessarily have the words for abstract terms and the only way to present these ideas was indirectly through more concrete words or through personification. An example often quoted is at the end of Book 1 of the *Iliad* where Hephaestus manages to forestall a quarrel between Zeus and his mother Hera who are arguing over which

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<sup>1</sup> A more recent chronology, not accepted by all scholars, puts the Trojan war in the early part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BC. If this is correct the so-called dark age of the Dorians can easily be explained because it did not exist at all. See Rohl 409.

<sup>2</sup> Dowden 65

<sup>3</sup> Varro, the Roman historian, credits the early Greeks with 30,000 gods!

of the heroes they should support. Hephaestus makes a pretty speech and offers Hera a cup of nectar. This breaks the ice and calm is restored. Hephaestus continues around the hall serving nectar and “a fit of helpless laughter seized the happy gods as they watched him bustling up and down the hall.”<sup>1</sup>

Laughter is the usual translation of this passage but as Grafton<sup>2</sup> points out this spoils the meaning of the passage since it implies derision when it really means joy. The Gods were happy that the potential quarrel had been defused but unfortunately for the translators there is no separate word in Homeric Greek for the abstract word joy only for the concrete word laughter. Similarly, Gombrich points to two passages in the *Iliad* where Flight is described as the companion of Panic and Panic as the son of Ares, God of War.<sup>3</sup> Grafton also makes the interesting observation that abstract nouns in Greek are generally in the feminine gender which would make it easy to personify the concepts as Goddesses particularly since the personal pronoun is rarely used in Latin and Greek. Personification also appeared in works of art from an early date. Pausanias<sup>4</sup> describes the famous 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC Chest of Kypselos, the decoration of which includes the figures of Death, Sleep, Justice and Injustice all depicted as women.

Returning to the origins of the myths, it has also been suggested that some of these stories originated in the widespread discoveries during classical times of ancient fossil bones in lands around the Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> Mayor has shown that there were numerous references to fossils in the literature of classical travelers including Pausanias, Apollonius and Pliny<sup>6</sup> and she plausibly proposes that these could easily have given rise to the myths of battles of ancient giants and heroes. Even in the time of St. Clement of Rome in the first century AD, it was believed that “the giants were men of immense bodies, whose bones of enormous size, are still shown in certain places for confirmation of their existence.”<sup>7</sup> The theory also explains the Cyclops with her single eye resembling the skull of a

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<sup>1</sup> *Iliad* I, 599 Trans. E.V. Rieu

<sup>2</sup> Grafton 217

<sup>3</sup> *Iliad* II, ix, 2 and xiii, 299 cited Gombrich 128

<sup>4</sup> Pausanias was a Greek writer of the 2nd cent AD. In his book *Description of Greece* written between 143 and 161 he describes in detail what he saw traveling through Greece. The book gives valuable information about classical art, customs and religion and in particular local myths for which he is one of the only sources.

<sup>5</sup> Mayor 2000

<sup>6</sup> In his *Natural History* written in 77AD

<sup>7</sup> Clement *Recognitions* 1, 29. See Mayor 262

mammoth, the dragon's teeth of Cadmus, the gold guarding griffins of Scythia, the giant cattle of Geryon and the Caledonian boar whose tusks could have been fossilized mammoth tusks. The only weakness in this theory, as Mayor acknowledges, is the complete absence of any attempt at an explanation of fossil bones by the natural philosophers who either considered the subject as merely sensational or irrelevant or later in Hellenistic times were constrained by Aristotle's theory that species never evolve or change.



Figure 15 Hercules and Hesione battle the monster of Troy. The fossil skull of a dinosaur eroding out of a rock is accurately depicted on a Greek vase from 560-540BC even to the bony plates round the eye socket.

Yet another category of the myths deriving from the earliest moments of Greek society included expressions of religious ideas or attempts at explanations of natural phenomena such as the origin of the world and society and of the mystery of death, explanations for the heavenly bodies, the regular cycles of the seasons, the weather, earthquakes, fire and the invention of the useful arts. Lucretius, the Roman philosopher, is quite practical about the origin of myths. “there’s no question all mortals are repressed by fear; they see many phenomena on earth and in the sky for which they are unable to account for with any rational explanation so they imagine them to be the work of the Gods.”<sup>1</sup>

We can examine these myths in the epic poem, the *Metamorphoses*, written by Ovid (43BC-17AD),<sup>2</sup> the Roman poet, at about the time of the

<sup>1</sup> Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* 1, 151-4 trans. G.D.A. Sharpley.

<sup>2</sup> The literary history of the West could easily have been very different. Ovid was dissatisfied with the *Metamorphoses* and burned his only copy and the libraries of Rome similarly destroyed their copies when Ovid was banished from Rome by the Emperor.

birth of Christ. Apart from its own inherent beauty, this was, as we shall see, a principal source of the myths and one of the most influential Latin works in the late Middle Ages, the Renaissance and beyond. There were dozens of translations, glosses, prose versions and adaptations of the *Metamorphoses* during the period. Albert von Halberstadt's German translation in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century is possibly the first vernacular translation of any classical text. The Italian poets Ariosto and Boccaccio relied on it and Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare<sup>1</sup> and Milton used it for source material.<sup>2</sup> The *Ovide Moralisé*, an allegorical adaptation which I referred to above, is a central example of the attempts by medieval writers to syncretize the classical and Christian literary traditions. This too was widely circulated in different versions. The printer and translator Colard Mansion was so carried away with his own French edition of 1484 that the book's publication bankrupted him. He fled to Italy to escape his creditors. An edition by Raffaello Regio published in 1503 is said to have been reprinted twelve times in seven years and the second edition of 1510 sold more than 50,000 copies.<sup>3</sup> An edition of 1559 published in Lyons is also relevant to our theme; it was in the format of an emblem book containing short extracts from Ovid's stories with an accompanying picture for each extract cut by Bernard Salomon, the well-known artist nicknamed *le Petit Bernard*, Little Bernard. These cuts, which have been described as Salomon's chef d'oeuvre,<sup>4</sup> were themselves adopted by later writers.

Ovid's poem relates some two hundred and fifty different stories involving hundreds of different characters.<sup>5</sup> According to the *Metamorphoses* the myths describe,

the World's originall, past humane thought:

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Fortunately for us, friends had kept copies of the epic. Ovid's other great work the *Ars Amatoria* or Art of Love was also extraordinarily influential on Renaissance literature. See page 164

<sup>1</sup> We owe *Midsummer Night's Dream* to Ovid since he was the only classical author who relates the story of Pyramus and Thisbe

<sup>2</sup> In an 1808 edition of Quarles *Emblemes*, the editor bewails the fact that the *Metamorphoses* is preferred in the schools to the sacred realities of Moses and the Prophets. Cited in Bath 1994 275

<sup>3</sup> Allen 174

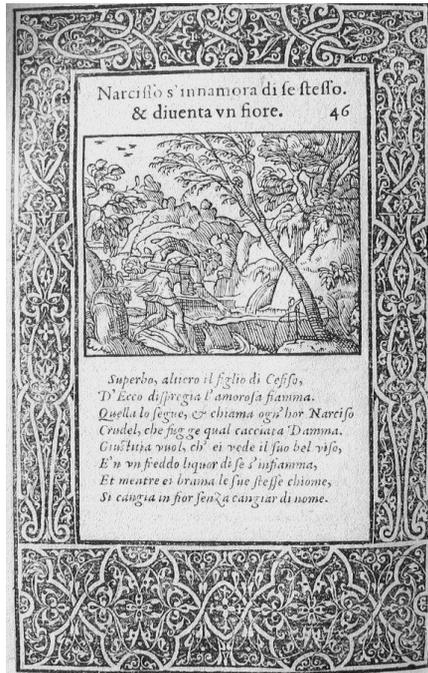
<sup>4</sup> J-C Brunet *Manuel du Librairie...* Sup. 1878 II 118 so describes the cuts for the first edition which I have not seen but later editions were actually reversed copies of cuts by the equally renowned Virgil Solis for another version of the *Metamorphoses* of 1562 published by Feyerabend.

<sup>5</sup> Hyginus in his *Liber Fabularum*, probably written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, which like the *Library* of Apollodorus attempted to be a complete representation of all the myths, refers to over 1,200 mythical characters.

What Nature was, what God; the cause of things,  
 From whence the Snow, from whence the lightning springs:  
 Whether Jove thunder, or the winds, that rake  
 The breaking Clouds: what caus'd the earth to quake;  
 What course the Starres observed, what e'er lay hid  
 from vulgar sense.<sup>1</sup>

This extract is taken from Book XV, the last book of the *Metamorphoses* in which Ovid sums up his philosophical beliefs and, with the voice of Pythagoras, expounds the theme of the great poem which is that change is the one certainty for earthly things.

Nothing lasts under the same form... I have seen what once was solid earth now changed into sea. ...Nor does anything retain its own appearance permanently. Ever innovative nature continually produces one shape from another.... Nothing in the entire universe persists, believe me, but things vary and adopt a new form ..... the sum of things remains unchanged....Nothing is constant in the whole world. Everything is in a state of flux (Time flows on with constant motion.)...The year passes through a succession of seasons, in the same way that our own bodies are constantly changing.. All things change but nothing dies, the spirit wanders hither and thither taking possession of what limbs it pleases but never does it perish .... the soul is always the same.<sup>2</sup>



This sounds very familiar: the constancy and universality of the soul and the multifarious and changeable character of material things. We see

Figure 16 Narcissus from Symeoni's 1584 Italian edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

<sup>1</sup> This is in the translation of George Sandys first published in five parts in 1621 in Oxford, England but reputed to be the first book of poetry written in America. The purpose of the translation he says was to discover 'the mysteries of all Philosophie.'

<sup>2</sup> These extracts are from the Penguin prose translation of 1955 by Mary Innes 340.

glimpses and reflections of the doctrines of Pythagoras and Plato which prompts the questions: where did Ovid get his material and does his work reflect the beliefs of the early peoples who created these stories? His immediate sources were twofold: the poems of Nicander who wrote mainly about the origins of local cults and the *Orthogonia* of Boios which related a long catalog of transformations of men into birds.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, earlier versions of the myths which we still have, had concentrated on transformations to a lesser extent. In Homer the few that there are demonstrate principally the random and choleric power of the Gods. Never-



Figure 17 The illustration to Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in George Sandys' translation: 'the first book written in America'.

theless, as we have seen, the nature of transformation and change was an ubiquitous concern of Greek and Roman philosophy,<sup>2</sup> and Ovid seized on it as the theme of his epic to illustrate this concern.

It is difficult to reconstruct thought from before the historical period for the obvious reason that there is no contemporary material to work

<sup>1</sup> Plato also proposes the theory that birds evolved from men. *Timaeus* 90d

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Lucretius, in *De Rerum Natura*, of the Nature of Things, said "everything is transformed by nature and forced into new paths". He seems almost to have grasped the modern theory of how species are thus forced into new paths.

from. Inferences have to be drawn from later writers including the sketchy fragments of the preSocratics, from the myths and from knowledge of other primitive peoples. Amongst the most respected of the scholars of early Greek thought is Cornford<sup>1</sup> who has suggested the origins of some of the fundamentals including God, the Soul and Nature or *Physis*, the nature of things. *Physis* means more than just the material things around us; it has multiple meanings as did much of the early Greek vocabulary and which in the hands of successive writers changed meaning over the centuries. It denotes at the same time the nature of the original substance from which all things are made, the process of growth out of this substance and the life-giving element which promotes this growth and variation. We have already seen that the Greeks believed that every part of the universe was alive, even those things which we would now consider inanimate. We should also note what is not at all obvious from an objective view of nature as we know it today; *physis* for the Greeks had a strong moral element. The universe had a destiny or fate, an ordering of its progress which neither man nor even the Gods should transgress. Every element of nature had its place in the development of this Destiny and even the primeval unfolding of the early universe, the creation of elements from the original chaos, was expressed in terms of guilt for the disruption of an earlier, simpler, structure. Guilt which must eventually be atoned for was a theme which pervaded the whole body of myths and Greek culture itself. Transgressions beyond the bounds of Destiny would necessarily have inevitable repercussions for the transgressor and his family possibly for many generations.<sup>2</sup>

For the origins of this unexpected concept we must touch on the controversial topic of the structure and religion of primitive societies. It is apparent that there was and is an interplay between such societies and the cosmologies they create. Xenophanes had pointed out how man creates God in his own particular image:

The Ethiopians say that their Gods are snub-nosed and black-skinned and the Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired. If only oxen and horses had hands and wanted to draw with their hands or to make the works of art that men make, then horses would draw the figures of their

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<sup>1</sup> F.M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy* 1905 is regarded as a classic but is now dated. Aspects of the book are criticized by Robert Ackerman in his introduction to the recent Mythos edition and by Bertrand Russell in the first Chapter of *The History of Western Philosophy*. Nevertheless, it is a fascinating review of the concepts involved and of the writing of the preSocratics.

<sup>2</sup> Christians have been atoning for the transgression of Adam ever since he surrendered to the temptations of the serpent.

Gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and would make their bodies on the model of their own.<sup>1</sup>

The same thought goes for primitive society as a whole. The cosmology once established helped to perpetuate the customs and beliefs of that society. The moral element in the concept of Destiny in Greek cosmology possibly originated as a reinforcement of the authoritarianism of early tribal societies. We can appreciate that small groups are readily subject to tight control by their leaders, such discipline being all the more necessary when survival itself was the highest preoccupation. Order was the counterbalance to change and chaos and the moral and spiritual imperatives of order reinforced the same political and social demands. Throughout the whole period of the age of symbolism, manifestations of hierarchy and order are emphasized by the establishment, in the metaphysical idea of the Great Chain of Being, in the politics of the feudal system and the divine right of kings and in the art and literature which underpinned these societies.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the idea of an universal soul, on the face of it a rather sophisticated metaphysical concept, possibly arose out of the psychological needs of a small structured society which emphasized the continuity of the group despite the death of its individual members. The tribe as a structure persisted; only the parts of the structure changed. At a time when the causes of human conception, birth and its timing were only poorly understood, it is not difficult to imagine that a belief in reincarnation would emerge so as to justify the perpetuation of the group. In the words of Apuleius, men are “individually mortal, together perpetual.” Similarly, since all material things were thought to be equally alive and to participate in the universal soul, transformation of a more general kind from human to animal and back, from animal to plant, from god to man was more readily conceivable than it might be today.

An overall picture can be hypothesized of tribal beliefs in a universe of which every constituent part is alive including small tightly knit human groups living in the natural world close to the land and their fellow creatures with a strong belief that the future is governed by a Destiny over which they have no control, that misfortune comes from overstepping the bounds of Destiny, that they share with all things in an universal Soul and that death and change are barely distinguishable facets of outward representations of that Soul. As Cassirer puts it, primitive man had “the

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<sup>1</sup> Cited Toynbee 1945 61

<sup>2</sup> See page 126 for a further discussion of the relationship between order, art and decoration in medieval and Renaissance times.

deep conviction of a fundamental and indelible solidarity of life that hedges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, we can hypothesize on the origin of language itself. That moment when word was first linked to object must have been an apotheosis, an enlightenment, an event of such epochal significance that for ever after the *logos* was afforded divine status. We now know that in many primitive cultures, creation itself was initiated by the mere utterance of God.<sup>2</sup> We can point to the fact that the Greek *mythos* like *logos* originally meant word. Language was the starting point of culture; without it there could have been no way of passing on memories of culture and so before language there was effectively nothing. The spontaneous emergence of language was for all intents and purposes the moment of creation.

This was the backdrop to the myths and the subsequent development of Greek philosophy. As for the latter, possibly the introduction of writing<sup>3</sup> in its turn was enough to stimulate a revolution in thought just as did the invention of printing two thousand years later. It is true that Pythagoras did not commit any of his doctrines to writing or if he did nothing has survived but Pythagoras was at least partly a mystic and it is hard to see how anyone would be able successfully to organize their logical and philosophical insights or pass them on to their successors in the manner of the preSocratics without being able to write them down. The poets who had told and retold the myths might not have had large or appreciative audiences for the subtleties of the *Timaens*. During the 6th to 4th centuries BC, the heyday of the philosophers, the Greeks enjoyed a benign climate, a healthy economy, a high level of education and in the democratic city-state a stable political organization, which encouraged freedom of thought in all citizens. These conditions must have been strong stimulants to rational speculation.

The fact is that Greek poets, sculptors, playwrights and philosophers from the time of Homer on seemed to display a fierce and determined rationalism and an obsession with universals. The continual reference of the philosophers to the One to which the multiplicity of earthly things would be resolved, is perhaps a reflection of the natural human propensity to reduce complex relationships to simple rules. Empedocles reported-

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<sup>1</sup> Cassirer 1944 82-83

<sup>2</sup> Gill 90-91 reviews examples of creation myths from many cultures where Creation follows from an act of speech by God.

<sup>3</sup> According to Casson in his *Libraries in the Ancient World* writing was introduced to Greece in about 550BC.

ly said “the universe is alternately in motion and at rest – in motion when love is making one out of many or strife is making many out of one.”<sup>1</sup>

The Greeks were interested primarily in general principles and not in narrative. Homer tells us in the first few lines of the *Iliad* that the theme of his story was the suffering caused to thousands of people by a simple quarrel between two men and that this senseless tragedy and its origin was nevertheless a natural part of the human condition. He did not choose to relate the whole history of the war but illustrated his theme with a short extract from the end of the conflict. It was the same with the great playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides who made use of the myths not to retell them but to illustrate their grand themes such as the fate of evildoers or of those who overstepped the bounds of Destiny and attempted in their *hubris* to emulate the Gods. Similarly, Greek artists, such as the sculptor Phidias, did not portray individuals but rather the ideals of beauty or strength. It is not surprising, perhaps it was inevitable, that with such a background philosophy should flourish.



Figure 18 Chaos – Emblem 122 in Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* of 1586.

We can detect references to the myths in the work of the earliest Greek ‘philosophers’ or preSocratics as they are now called, in their belief that the universe and life originated in a manner reminiscent of the foundation myths to which I have referred. For instance, according to them, the very first form of the universe was *chaos* and a proper translation of the earliest meaning of this word is not confusion but emptiness or gap – the gap between heaven and earth. We can see that the dualities<sup>2</sup> of Pythagoras are evidently derived from this and other simple observations of the major distinctions of life and existence,

particularly the difference between the sexes, these differences being beautifully addressed by the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite herself,

The pure sky loves to violate the land,  
and the land is seized by desire for this embrace

<sup>1</sup> Cited Hopper 39

<sup>2</sup> See page 12 above.

the teeming rain from the sky  
makes the land fecund, so that for mortals it generates  
the pastures for their flocks and the sap of Demeter  
and the fruit on their trees. From these moist embraces  
everything which is comes into being.  
And I am the cause of this.<sup>1</sup>

It was only with Heraclitus (540-475 BC) that any significant break was made with the mythical tradition: he proposed first that the universe was eternal, secondly that change was inevitable and finally that this change was mediated by a natural set of principles, the *logos*.<sup>2</sup> Nature and the material world might be complex, multifarious and ever-changing but the guiding principle was simple, rational and eternal.<sup>3</sup> It was in this reconciliation of the continual transformations of the material world with the unchanging underlying *logos* that we find the origin of the Platonic Forms.

The stories of the Greek myths formed a vast reservoir of material for the writers of the Renaissance and the books of emblems, devices and other symbols and they continue to do so for modern literature. Steiner puts the case emphatically.

It is, to a more or less conscious degree, from Greek grammar and from the vocabulary of Greek philosophy and lyric expression that we continue to derive the markers of our communal and personal identity in the West. Hence the persistent authority of Greek motifs and the drama, poetry and speculative discourse in which these are enunciated or enacted, over our art, literature and thought.<sup>4</sup>

To a certain extent the more important characters of the myths, particularly the Olympian Gods, had been preserved throughout the Middle Ages through the medium of the zodiacal figures which were the stuff of magic and astrology but the rediscovery of classical texts brought about an explosion of enthusiasm for the ancient stories. Apart from the innumerable editions and translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* referred to above, the archetype of the Renaissance collections was Boccaccio's *Genealogia de gli Dei*, the Genealogy of the Gods, and there were many others. There were contemporary encyclopaedias of the myths; one of the first of these was the *Theologica Mythologica*, Theological Mythology, by

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<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus *The Danaids*

<sup>2</sup> In a famous and cryptic phrase prefiguring Pseudo-Dionysius, Heraclitus related the idea of the *logos* to the world of the Olympians when he wrote 'The one, the only truly wise, is both willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus'.

<sup>3</sup> We have seen that Christian theology reverted to the idea that God had actually created the universe out of nothing since this was the revelation of Genesis.

<sup>4</sup> Steiner 1986 132

Wilhelm Pictor in which Theophrastus, Aristotle's successor, teaches his disciples in dialogue form about the allegorical meaning of the Gods. The *Mascherata della Geneologia degl'Iddei de' Gentile* of Baccio Baldini was a description and interpretation of the twenty-one main gods and goddesses of ancient Rome and another popular handbook on ancient mythology, published in 17 editions from 1556 onwards, was that of Vincenzo Cartari, *Le Immagini degli Dei Antichi*, Images of the Gods of the Ancients. Its popularity was due to the fact that it was much more than a catalog of stories but an extended exposition of Platonic dogma. The book was divided into three parts: the first depicted the gods who represented eternal heavenly concepts, the second gods with changeable material and earthly characteristics and the third the gods of love and the Graces. The introduction and commentary uses these gods as illustration of the theme that life on Earth is an interlude where the soul is imprisoned in the material body and subject to the vagaries of Fate beyond human control. Only through the medium of Love can the soul expect to rejoin the heavenly mysteries to which it aspires.

The success of these Renaissance mythologies and there were many more attests to the realization by contemporaries of the importance of the myths as a part of cultural history and in particular of the part that they played in the origin and development of the symbolic vocabulary of medieval Europe with the help of which it might be possible to comprehend the nature of God and the meaning of life.