

of these mythologies work as sources of material, of correspondences, of depth for the modern writer (and every writer is modern—even John Dryden was not archaic when he was writing), and provided they're recognizable to the reader, they enrich and enhance the reading experience. Of the three, biblical myth probably covers the greatest range of human situations, encompassing all ages of life including the next life, all relationships whether personal or governmental, and all phases of the individual's experience, physical, sexual, psychological, spiritual. Still, both the worlds of Shakespeare and of fairy and folk tales provide fairly complete coverage as well.

What we mean in speaking of "myth" in general is story, the ability of story to explain ourselves to ourselves in ways that physics, philosophy, mathematics, chemistry—all very highly useful and informative in their own right—can't. That explanation takes the shape of stories that are deeply ingrained in our group memory, that shape our culture and are in turn shaped by it, that constitute a way of seeing by which we read the world and, ultimately, ourselves. Let's say it this way: **myth is a body of story that matters.**

Every community has its own body of story that matters. Nineteenth-century composer Richard Wagner went back to the Germanic myths for the material for his operas, and whether the results are good or bad in either historic or musical terms, the impulse to work with his tribal myths is completely understandable. The late twentieth century witnessed a great surge of Native American writing; much of which went back to tribal myth for material, for imagery, for theme, as in the case of Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman," Louise Erdrich's Kashpaw/Nanapush novels, and Gerald Vizenor's peculiar *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*. When Toni Morrison introduces human flight into *Song of Solomon*, many readers, white readers especially, take her to be referring to Icarus, whereas what she really has in mind, she has said, is the myth

9

It's Greek to Me

IN THESE LAST THREE CHAPTERS we've talked about three sorts of myth: Shakespearean, biblical, and folk/fairy tale. The connection of religion and myth sometimes causes trouble in class when someone takes myth to mean "untrue" and finds it hard to unite that meaning with deeply held religious beliefs. That's not what I mean by "myth," though. Rather, what I'm suggesting is the shaping and sustaining power of story and symbol. Whether one believes that the story of Adam and Eve is true, literally or figuratively, matters, but not in this context. Here, in this activity of reading and understanding literature, we're chiefly concerned with how that story functions as material for literary creators, the way in which it can inform a story or poem, and how it is perceived by the reader. All three

of the flying Africans, a story that matters to her community, her tribe. On one level, there's not much difference between Silko's project and Wagner's; he too is simply going back to the myths of his tribe. We sometimes forget that people in an age of top hats and stiff collars had tribes, but we do so at our peril. In all these cases, what the artist is doing is reaching back for stories that matter to him and his community—for myth.

In European and Euro-American cultures, of course, there's another source of myth. Let me rephrase that: MYTH. When most of us think myth, we mean the northern shores of the Mediterranean between two and three thousand years ago. We mean Greece and Rome. Greek and Roman myth is so much a part of the fabric of our consciousness, of our unconscious really, that we scarcely notice. You doubt me? In the town where I live, the college teams are known as the Spartans. Our high school? The Trojans. In my state we have a Troy (one of whose high schools is Athens—and they say there are no comedians in education), an Ithaca, a Sparta, a Romulus, a Remus, and a Rome. These communities are scattered around the state and date from different periods of settlement. Now if a town in the center of Michigan, a fair distance from anything that can be called Aegean or Ionian (although it's not very far from the town of Ionia), can be named Ithaca, it suggests that Greek myth has had pretty good staying power.

Let's go back to Toni Morrison for a moment. I'm always slightly amazed that Icarus gets all the ink. It was his father, Daedalus, who crafted the wings, who knew how to get off Crete and safely reach the mainland, and who in fact flew to safety. Icarus, the kid, the daredevil, failed to follow his father's advice and plunged to his death. His fall remains a source of enduring fascination for us and for our literature and art. In it we see so much: the parental attempt to save the child and the grief at having failed, the cure that proves as deadly as the ailment, the youthful exuberance that leads to self-destruction,

the clash between sober, adult wisdom and adolescent recklessness, and of course the terror involved in that headlong descent into the sea. Absolutely none of this has anything to do with Morrison and her flying Africans, so it's little wonder that she's a bit mystified by this response of her readers. But it's a story and a pattern that is so deeply burrowed into our consciousness that readers may almost automatically consider it whenever flying or falling is invoked. Clearly it doesn't fit the situation in *Song of Solomon*. But it does apply in other works. In 1558 Pieter Brueghel painted a wonderful picture, *Landscape with Fall of Icarus*. In the foreground we see a plowman and his ox, just beyond him a shepherd and his flock, and at sea a merchant ship sailing placidly along; this is a scene of utter ordinariness and tranquillity. Only in the lower right corner of the painting is there anything even remotely suggestive of trouble: a pair of legs askew as they disappear into the water. That's our boy. He really doesn't have much of a presence in the frame, but his presence makes all the difference. Without the pathos of the doomed boy, we have a picture of farming and merchant shipping with no narrative or thematic power. I teach, with some regularity, two great poems based on that painting, W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940) and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with Fall of Icarus" (1962). They're wonderful poems, very different from each other in tone, style, and form, but in essential agreement about how the world goes on even in the face of our private tragedies. Each artist alters what he finds in the painting. Brueghel introduces the plowman and the ship, neither of which appears in the version that comes to us from the Greeks. And Williams and Auden find, in their turn, slightly different elements to emphasize in the painting. Williams's poem stresses the pictorial elements of the painting, trying to capture the scene while sneaking in the thematic elements. Even his arrangement of the poem on the page, narrow and highly vertical, recalls the body plummeting

from the sky. Auden's poem, on the other hand, is a meditation on the private nature of suffering and the way in which the larger world takes no interest in our private disasters. It is astonishing and pleasing to discover that the painting can occasion these two very different responses. Beyond them, readers find their own messages in all this. As someone who was a teenager in the sixties, I am reminded by the fate of Icarus of all those kids who bought muscle cars with names like GTO and 442 and Charger and Barracuda. All the driver education and solid parental advice in the world can't overcome the allure of that kind of power, and sadly, in too many cases those young drivers shared the fate of Icarus. My students, somewhat younger than I am, will inevitably draw other parallels. Still, it all goes back to the myth: the boy, the wings, the unscheduled dive.

So that's one way classical myth can work: overt subject matter for poems and paintings and operas and novels. What else can myth do?

Here's a thought. Let's say you wanted to write an epic poem about a community of poor fishermen in the Caribbean. If this was a place you came from, and you knew these people like you know your own family, you'd want to depict the jealousies and resentments and adventure and danger, as well as capturing their dignity and their life in a way that conveys all that has escaped the notice of tourists and white property owners. You could, I suppose, try being really, *really* earnest, portraying the characters as very serious and sober, making them noble by virtue of their goodness. But I bet that wouldn't work. What you'd wind up with instead would probably be very stiff and artificial, and artificiality is never noble. Besides, these folks aren't saints. They make a lot of mistakes: they're petty, envious, lustful, occasionally greedy as well as courageous, elegant, powerful, knowledgeable, profound. And you want noble, after all, not Tonto—there's no Lone Ranger here.

Alternatively, you might try grafting their story onto some older story of rivalry and violence, a story where even the victor is ultimately doomed, a story where, despite occasional personal shortcomings, the characters have an unmistakable nobility. You could give your characters names like Helen, Philoctetes, Hector, and Achilles. At least that's what Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott does in his *Omeros* (1990). Those names are drawn, of course, from *The Iliad*, although Walcott uses elements—parallels, persons, and situations—of both it and *The Odyssey* in his epic.

The question we will inevitably ask is, *Why?*

Why should someone in the late twentieth century draw on a story that was passed along orally from the twelfth through the eighth century B.C. and not written down until maybe two or three hundred years later? *Why* should someone try to compare modern fishermen with these legendary heroes, many of whom were descended from gods? Well for starters, Homer's legendary heroes *were* farmers and fishermen. Besides, aren't we all descended from gods? Walcott reminds us by this parallel of the potential for greatness that resides in all of us, no matter how humble our worldly circumstances.

That's one answer. The other is that the situations match up more closely than we might expect. The plot of *The Iliad* is not particularly divine or global. Those who have never read it assume mistakenly that it is the story of the Trojan War. It is not. It is the story of a single, rather lengthy action: the wrath of Achilles. Achilles becomes angry with his leader, Agamemnon, withdraws his support from the Greeks, only rejoining the battle when the consequences of his action have destroyed his best friend, Patroclus. At this point he turns his wrath against the Trojans and in particular their greatest hero, Hector, whom he eventually kills. His reason for such anger? Agamemnon has taken his war prize. Trivial? It gets worse. The prize is a woman. Agamemnon, forced by divine order and by public

sentiment to return his concubine to her father, retaliates against the person who most publicly sided against him, Achilles, by taking his concubine, Briseis. Is that petty enough? Is that noble? No Helen, no judgment of Paris, no Trojan horse. At its core, it's the story of a man who goes berserk because his stolen war bride is confiscated, acted out against a background of wholesale slaughter, the whole of which is taking place because another man, Menelaus (brother of Agamemnon) has had his wife stolen by Paris, half brother of Hector. That's how Hector winds up having to carry the hopes for salvation of all Troy on his shoulders.

And yet somehow, through the centuries, this story dominated by the theft of two women has come to epitomize ideals of heroism and loyalty, sacrifice and loss. Hector is more stubbornly heroic in his doomed enterprise than anyone you've ever seen. Achilles' grief at the loss of his beloved friend is truly heartbreaking. The big duels—between Hector and Ajax, between Diomedes and Paris, between Hector and Patroclus, between Hector and Achilles—are genuinely exciting and suspenseful, their outcomes sources of grand celebration and dismay. No wonder so many modern writers have often borrowed from and emulated Homer.

And when did that begin?

Almost immediately. Virgil, who died in 19 B.C., patterned his Aeneas on the Homeric heroes. If Achilles did it or Odysseus went there, so does Aeneas. Why? It's what heroes do. Aeneas goes to the underworld. Why? Odysseus went there. He kills a giant from the enemy camp in a final climactic battle. Why? Achilles did. And so on. The whole thing is less derivative than it sounds and not without humor and irony. Aeneas and his followers are survivors of Troy, so here we have this Trojan hero acting out the patterns set down by his enemies. Moreover, when these Trojans sail past Ithaca, home to Odysseus, they jeer and curse the agent of their destruction.

On the whole, though, Virgil has him undertake these actions because Homer had already defined what it means to be a hero.

Back to Walcott. Almost exactly two thousand years after Virgil, Walcott has his heroes perform actions that we can recognize as symbolic reenactments of those in Homer. Sometimes it's a bit of a stretch, since we can't have a lot of battlefield duels out in the fishing boats. Nor can he call his Helen "the face that launched a thousand dinghies." Lacks grandeur, that phrase. What he can do, though, is place them in situations where their nobility and their courage are put to the test, while reminding us that they are acting out some of the most basic, most primal patterns known to humans, exactly as Homer did all those centuries before. The need to protect one's family: Hector. The need to maintain one's dignity: Achilles. The determination to remain faithful and to have faith: Penelope. The struggle to return home: Odysseus. Homer gives us four great struggles of the human being: with nature, with the divine, with other humans, and with ourselves. What is there, after all, against which we need to prove ourselves but those four things?

In our modern world, of course, parallels may be *ironized*, that is, turned on their head for purposes of irony. How many of us would see the comedy of three escaped convicts as parallel to the wanderings of Odysseus? Still, that's what the brothers Joel and Ethan Coen give us in their 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* It's about trying to get home, isn't it? Or this, the most famous example: a single day in Dublin in 1904, on which a young man decides on his future and an older man wanders the city, eventually returning home to his wife in the small hours of the next morning. The book has only one overt clue that this all might have something to do with Homer, its one-word title: *Ulysses* (1922). As we now know, James Joyce envisioned every one of the eighteen episodes of the novel as

a parallel to some incident or situation in *The Odyssey*. There's an episode in a newspaper office, for instance, which parallels Odysseus's visit to Aeolus, the god of the winds, but the parallel may seem pretty tenuous. To be sure, newspapermen are a windy group and there are a lot of rhetorical flourishes in the episode, to say nothing of the fact that a gust of wind does zip through at one point. Still, we can see it as resembling the Homeric original only if we understand that resemblance in terms of a funhouse mirror, full of distortion and goofy correspondences—if we understand it, in other words, as an ironic parallel. The fact that it's ironic makes the parallel—and the Aeolus episode—such fun. Joyce is less interested than Walcott in investing his characters with classical nobility, although finally they do take on something of that quality. After watching poor old Leopold Bloom stroll around Dublin all day and half the night, running into no end of trouble and recalling great heartbreak in his life, we may well come to feel he is noble in his own way. His nobility, however, is not that of Odysseus.

Greek and Roman myth, of course, is more than Homer. The transformations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* show up in all sorts of later works, not least in Franz Kafka's story of a man who wakes up one morning to find he's changed into an enormous beetle. He called it "The Metamorphosis." Indiana Jones may look like pure Hollywood, but the intrepid searcher after fabulous treasure goes back to Apollonius and *The Argonautica*, the story of Jason and the Argonauts. Something a bit homier? Sophocles' plays of Oedipus and his doomed clan show up over and over again in all sorts of variations. There is, in fact, no form of dysfunctional family or no personal disintegration of character for which there is not a Greek or Roman model. Not for nothing do the names of Greek tragic characters figure in Freud's theories. The wronged woman gone violent in her grief and madness? Would you like Aeneas and Dido or Jason

and Medea? And as in every good early religion, they had an explanation for natural phenomena, from the change of seasons (Demeter and Persephone and Hades) to why the nightingale sounds the way it does (Philomena and Terens). Happily for us, most of it got written down, often in several versions, so that we have access to this wonderful body of story. And because writers and readers share knowledge of a big portion of this body of story, this mythology, when writers use it, we readers recognize it, sometimes to its full extent, sometimes only dimly or only because we know the Looney Tunes version. That recognition makes our experience of literature richer, deeper, more meaningful, so that our own modern stories also matter, also share in the power of myth.

Oh, did I forget to say? That title of Walcott's, *Omeros*? In the local dialect, it means Homer. Naturally.