

Lessons in Mythology

Lessons in Mythology:

A Comparative Approach

Edited by

Edmund P. Cueva
and Deborah Beam Shelley

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a little girl, I feared “Tall Betsy” more than just about anything. Tall Betsy was a hateful creature who would come to take away bad children when they misbehaved—or so my grandmother told us. When we got a little out of control, my grandmother would call out in terror, “Oh, Lordy, look! Here comes Tall Betsy! I told you she would come if you didn’t start behaving.” One glance out the window at a tall, skinny, white presence coming down the street toward my grandmother’s house was enough to send us screaming and running to hide in the little closet in the back of the house. The closet had a tiny window that we could peek out of just enough to see Tall Betsy. Fortunately, once we ran and hid, terrified into submission, we would see Tall Betsy would turn around and walk back down the street. Once she was beyond our sight as we cowered in the little closet, my grandmother would come to tell us that we had been spared Tall Betsy’s wrath once again.

Oh course, Tall Betsy wasn’t real, although she seemed real enough to us at the time. She was a myth—a story that my grandmother had created to keep her unruly grandchildren in line. It was years before I figured out that Tall Betsy was actually the lady who lived down the street; when my cousins and I got a little out of control, my grandmother (who everyone called “Tom,” although no one seemed to know why, but that’s another myth) would call up her neighbor to say that it was time for Tall Betsy to make an appearance. The neighbor would get her broom, drape a white sheet over it, and carry it so that the broom was as high up as possible; with the sheet covering the lady’s face, it made her look about 10 feet tall. She would then come out into her yard and start walking down the street toward my grandmother’s house. This story, this myth, had a purpose, a specific function, and it worked very well in accomplishing what it was intended to do, and that was to help my grandmother keep her unruly little darlings in line. We didn’t know where Tall Betsy came from or what she would do to us if she ever made it to our house, but we quickly learned when our behavior was inappropriate, and we also learned that our actions always involved consequences. My grandmother’s myth helped to explain one inexplicable aspect of a world filled with wonder and mystery for a bunch of noisy children, and such is the stuff from which myths are created.

The word “myth” comes from the Greek word “mythos,” meaning story. Humans, by nature, have always been storytellers, from the very first people to communicate with gestures and signs to those who drew elaborate paintings on cave walls to the 12th century minstrels with their bawdy poems and songs to the modern-day storytellers with their evocative words and vivid imagery that can carry us away to far-off places and fanciful times just as easily as their graphic descriptions can bring us right back down to earth to confront the horror that exists here today. Myths are the stories of us; they tell us how we got here, where we came from, what we are supposed to do, why it rains some days and not others, why grass turns green and flowers bloom in the spring, and why leaves turn colors before they die in the winter. They have helped us comprehend the incomprehensible, explaining the more perplexing aspects of our lives, not necessarily with truths but with justifications, rationalizations, and clarifications that make it easier for us to understand the world in which we live. They have helped us learn about others since the elements of human stories—death, life, beauty, courage, friendship, betrayal, etc.—transcend time and space, making them universal and creating a connection among all human beings. Myths are not just about explaining different aspects of life; they are our lives.

In looking at various definitions of the word “myth,” one such definition I encountered described myth as “...a *traditional narrative usually involving supernatural or imaginary persons and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena*....” I remember, as a little girl, asking my father if Santa Claus was real, and I will never forget his answer: “As long as you believe in Santa Claus, he will continue to come.” Well, that was all the justification, rationalization, or clarification that I needed! I continued to believe in Santa and do so until this day, and as sure as my father said it, Santa Claus does come to my house every year. He may not come down the chimney in a red suit and with a bag of toys, but he is surely there. The Santa Claus myth is certainly a traditional narrative in that stories told of Santa (in some form) have been passed down from one generation to another for hundreds of years. By necessity, the Santa Claus myth involves a supernatural or imaginary person since any version of Santa would have difficulty traveling the 122 million miles necessary to visit all good children of the world in just one night. Finally, if you consider that Christmas is celebrated by almost 45% of the world’s population, it is safe to say that the myth embodies a popular idea about a social phenomenon. Santa represents the very spirit of Christmas—the idea of giving (whether gifts, our time, or ourselves) as a symbol of love for those around us, even for those we may not know. And that spirit is

definitely there with us, without fail, every single year, just as my father promised. So while Santa Claus (the man) may not be real, Santa (the myth) will play an important role in my life forever.

People utilize myths for a myriad of reasons, and the very concept of myth evokes different responses for different people. For some, the word may elicit memories of fairy tales read to them by their parents when they were children. Others may visualize mysterious or exotic locales—foggy swamps and trees dripping with moss or dark forests with rustling leaves and strange un-human sounds to abandoned houses with creaky stairs or starships fighting with laser swords and death rays. Some may recall hazy visions of pleasant experiences from days gone by while still others may recollect stories that were not even close to being accurate representations of their experiences in life. Some myths exist only in our imaginations while others remind us much too clearly of pain and suffering that is all too real. People have created, changed, passed on, and abandoned myths from the beginning of time and will probably continue to do so for whatever function those myths serve in their lives.

We each have our own special reasons for keeping myths alive, reasons that are very important to us but that may not seem that significant to others. We often forget that myths can serve so many distinct functions and that their use and interpretation can be so unique and even dissimilar for different people. This book attempts to take some of those unique and distinct functions and interpretations into consideration as we look at myth and how it is applied, used, and interpreted in a variety of ways and in numerous contexts by individuals from different backgrounds and disciplines and with very different points of view.

Chapter One, “Your Personal Myth,” compares the ancient myth to contemporary personal narratives. Are they the same, and do they serve the same function for the people who use them? Ancient myths were created to explain the inexplicable; do today’s individuals use their stories as a way of understanding their own lives? Quoting from Chapter One, personal narratives are told “so the teller...can heal and reconcile the inexplicable circumstances that painted his/her life,” and, hopefully, “can confront traumas...and put them to rest...” The author of Chapter One believes in the power of journaling as a pathway to personal healing.

Chapter Two, “Nothing There,” takes a modern approach to myth as the author explains the creation of the Rothko Chapel, located in Houston, Texas and designed by artist Mark Rothko. In this chapel, Rothko has created a sacred, spiritual space, a “tranquil place of contemplation on a mythic scale” so that, upon entering, one is almost compelled to silence and meditation in a most intimate fashion. What makes the Rothko Chapel

mythic is that the space is completely devoid of anything remotely related to religion. There is no cross, no altar, no paintings or sculptures, nor any form of religious iconography present anywhere within the chapel.

Chapter Three, “Mythmaking in the Franco Regime,” attempts to demythologize the extensive effort to establish Franco as a brilliant Spanish military strategist, when, in fact, his actions unnecessarily prolonged the 1936–1939 civil war. This essay mainly focuses on a mural of Franco, appearing as a triumphant medieval crusader, with an image above him of St. James the Moor-Slayer (who fought for the Christians of Spain against the Moors in the Battle of Clavijo in 844). The pairing of the beloved and highly revered St. James along with Franco projects the image of a triumphant Franco who saved Spain rather than the cruel and sometimes clumsy general who made numerous military mistakes.

Chapter Four, “Beowulf’s Weapons: Origin and Animism,” takes an ancient approach to myth in literature. Primarily drawing on examples from *Beowulf*, this chapter discusses the ancient belief in animism and, in particular, the belief that an inanimate object could be spiritual, possessing a soul. This object could then take on a life of its own, involving itself with human affairs and helping or harming human interests, as with various swords, shields, and other weapons used by warriors in ancient battles.

Chapter Five, “Abjection in Grimms’ ‘Rumpelstiltskin’: A Mythic Paradigm of Masculinity’s Countertype,” looks at myth in literature from a completely different standpoint than that taken in the previous chapter. Using the definition of myth as a “naturalized particular and formulaic way of thinking about individuals and social relationships,” the author looks at Rumpelstiltskin and the construction of an identity of abject masculinity that drastically deviates from the 18th century ideal of German masculinity, leaving Rumpelstiltskin a distinctly ambiguous countertype.

Chapter Six, “Living the Myth: The Authorial Life of Walt Whitman,” again focuses on the use of myth and the construction of identity—in this case, the identity of the relatively unknown poet, Walt Whitman. In 1855, Whitman published his first edition of a volume of poems entitled *Leaves of Grass* that included a description of his enjoyment of the sensual pleasures of life. He was immediately criticized and rejected for that very same reason: his writings were considered too sexually explicit for the time. Whitman then spent the rest of his life rewriting *Leaves of Grass* while creating the myth of himself as the beloved “America’s Poet.”

Chapter Seven is about The Myth of Beauty and Goodness: Why is Evil so Sexy? This essay focuses on the strong belief that we have come to

accept, at least in this society, that beauty and goodness are synonymous and that it is more important to look good than to be good. Not only are attractive people privileged, often with feelings of entitlement, but their attractiveness can sometimes act as a shield to hide their evil behavior, all because we cannot get past the myth that just because someone looks good doesn't mean that they are.

Chapter Eight, "A World without Myth," discusses the concept of myth and its meaning today. There is so much violence, destruction, unnecessary deaths, and unspeakable torture, and for what? The author contends that much of the depravity present in today's world is myth-inspired—that people take myths and use them and twist them around for their own purposes to justify and even condone their actions and then, when necessary, blame the myth for what they have done.

These eight chapters take the reader full circle in terms of the uses and purposes of myth, from viewing personal narrative as a form of healing myth to observing the atrocities committed daily arising from the most destructive form of myth. Myths have existed from the beginning of the human race in a myriad of forms and serving a myriad of functions. Humans have always been storytellers and always will be. They are a part of the lives of every single person; they are the story of us.

Deborah Shelley

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CHAPTER ONE

YOUR PERSONAL MYTH

HENRY L. ROUBICEK

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-DOWNTOWN

Your Personal Mythology can bring you Peace

Just as the most pronounced purpose of a myth is to explain the inexplicable, so is the unmistakable function of personal narratives. Are they similar? Is there a relationship between the ancient myth and the contemporary personal narrative? Researchers in rhetorical studies suggest that the individual mythology of modern men and women is a synonym for their collective psychology. We tend to experience unusual states and step into troubling dilemmas. Dilemmas ignite tension, and tension is a component of every myth—at times, even parallel myths because we search for answers that often do not exist. A friend recently reflected about his mother's death. He was seventeen at the time. I will paraphrase:

I guess her last days, the days when she was conscious, were the hardest. Her bed was downstairs to make it easier for family and friends to visit her. I remember one morning; early morning; very early in the morning, my great aunt came over, along with some cousins. You know what my mother asked me to do? She told me to make coffee. Coffee? You want me to make coffee? I did, but I hated it. I was mad at my relatives for being alive and being able to drink coffee. I was angry with my mother too. I couldn't believe she wanted me to make coffee because I thought she'd want me with her every moment. I made coffee. The dog howled. I felt strange. I went back into my mother's room. She was dead. I think she waited for me to leave the room before dying. I think about that every night. I don't know what to do with it. But I can't let it go.

This oblique deliberation came from nowhere. There was no prompting from me. There was no logical segue into his narrative. He simply told it to me. He wanted to explain the inexplicable. My friend's revelation was

not unlike the one made by Apollo in *Phaethon, Son of Apollo* by Olivia Coolidge.¹ To summarize:

You are indeed my son and Clymene's, and worthy to be called so. Ask of me whatever thing you wish to prove your origin to me, and you shall have it. Phaethon swayed for a moment and was dizzy with excitement. He felt truly divine. He looked up at his radiant father and said, "Let me drive the chariot of the sun across the heavens for the day." Apollo frowned and shook his head. I cannot break my promise, but I will dissuade you if I can. How can you drive the chariot, whose horses need a strong hand on the reins? The climb is too steep. It is treacherous. Phaethon's pride was stubborn. When his father saw that nothing else would satisfy the boy, he bade the Hours bring forth his chariot and yoke the horses.... At the first the fiery horses sped off to the accustomed trail, but behind them the chariot was too light. It swayed. Phaethon could not keep control.... Phaethon and the horses fell like stone to the earth below. The chariot broke into pieces. Unhappy Clymene, the grieving god, and his sisters turned Phaethon into poplar trees. And Apollo, the great god, was tender like a father. He cried. He cried forever.

The significance of these illustrations must be made clear: they are told so that the teller (or protagonist) can heal and reconcile the inexplicable circumstances that painted his or her life.

Sometimes a personal narrative can smack more of a confession than a testimonial. Such is the case in journal entries. The very act of writing can be an avenue to that interior place where, free of pain and doubt, we can confront traumas or, if you will, our Greek tragedies, and put them to rest so we can then heal both body and mind. The words we write in a journal may be raw, but they can have a healing power even if they are never read by another human being. Still, they are stories. They contain those necessary particles that make a story and, more importantly, contain the overwhelming desire by the teller to understand, absorb, and gain clarity from the paralyzing circumstance that first fueled the need to journal. Like the myth, we rely on the power of the past tense for perspective and for providing a profound voice.

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke reinforces the human need for telling stories to explain the troubling and perplexing episodes in our lives. Like others, he sees these stories "as resembling myth" since we structure our past experiences much like the structure in a myth. In a sense, Burke views a human narrative like a personal mythology: a story of a life seen

¹ Olivia Coolidge, *Greek Myths* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001), 12–14.

looking backward.² The application is in the form of dramatism. Burke sees life as one dramatic episode after another, with each episode forming its own structured story. To Burke, a set of basic terms (Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose) describes how people discuss human motives. The “act” refers to all human action (e.g., I always take candy from the bowl). The “scene” is the context—another physical or abstract setting that has bearing on the action (e.g., the candy was too tempting, sitting there in the bowl). The “agent” refers to the people who perform the action (e.g., my sister told me you’d say it was alright). The “agency” is the channel or vehicle used to perform the act (e.g., the stool was next to the counter where the bowl was sitting, so it was easy to snatch the candy). Finally, the “purpose” explicitly names the motives of a given agent (e.g., I needed the candy because I was starving). When each term is applied correctly, one’s myth is formed, thus making it easy to construct a past experience in story form.

Walter Fisher concurs. The intellect, he believes, has a propensity for storytelling. We are indeed natural storytellers. It’s the way we structure our past experiences and, in some ways, create reality.³ We view and shape our lives largely through the process of storytelling and thus become mythical beings. When someone asks, “What happened?” Fisher claims we construct a story around the question. Such constructs are, according to several scholars, an attempt not only to portray but also to find meaning.

In her book, *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*, Christina Baldwin helps us to better grasp the notion of our personal myth. She writes,

Something is happening in the moment. Something is happening in our story and we don’t yet know it. We are just in it. We live in a story like a fish lives in water. We swim through words and images siphoning story through our minds the way a fish siphons water through its gills.⁴

Baldwin’s insight is remarkably close to the premise behind the film, *Big Fish*. The movie centers on Edward, an affable and spirited man whose stock in trade is the tall tale. However amplified his stories appear to be throughout the film, his tales turned out to be not as tall as they first seemed. Edward’s tales reflected the colorful range of experiences that

² Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 421–423.

³ Walter R. Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration,” *Communication Monographs* 52 (1985): 347–367.

⁴ Christina Baldwin, *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2005), 77.

touched the lives of countless characters who beautifully unfurled in each of his stories.

Edward's son, Will, thought of his father as a fraud whose inflated tales represented his inability to show his authentic self. Because Edward's fragmented life (catalogued into memorable episodes) was the heart of the film, it was at the end of the story, or, with poetic symbolism, at the end of Edward's life, when Will and Edward finally connected. While sitting by his father's hospital bed, Edward presses Will to retell the story about how he (Edward) would die. It was a story Edward told Will many years ago.

Edward claimed that when he and his friends were very young, they learned how they would die by glaring into the glass eye of the most feared witch in Alabama. To appease his father, Will agrees to retell the story. As he begins, Will responds to his own telling with a surprising blend of warmth and humor, as if he was hearing the story for the first time. The definition of Edward's life peaked when Will recounts the part of the story when he and his father reached the river. To paraphrase:

I gently carry you from the car to the riverbank, and you wave to the cheers of your loving friends who have gathered to convey their final farewells to the man they love so dearly. Everyone and I mean everyone was there. And the thing of it is no one looked sad. Everyone was so happy to see you. Then, I carry you into the river, you hand your ring to Mom who is waiting in the river for us, and I gently place you in the water.⁵

After the retelling, we return to the hospital room as Will, reflecting on the end of the story, smiles, wipes the tears from his eyes, and whispers to his father, "You became what you always wanted to be, a big fish." "Exactly," Edward answers. And he passes peacefully. Moments later we see Will and his wife at the funeral as they see the same characters his father described in his stories. Each character is just as his father described, only not as fantastic as Will had imagined them. This can be seen as the consummate human connection.

Stories help people connect with one another. It is that simple, and it is that profound. I remember an old Hassidic quotation that says it best: "What's truer than truth? The story."

⁵ *Big Fish*, directed by Tim Burton and Daniel Wallace (United States: Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 2003).

The Case of a Storyteller Searching for Truth: Explaining the Inexplicable

To claim that myths can help us find answers to perplexing life questions in a very challenging and often confusing world is a bold statement. However, focusing on the case of one person can sometimes be enough to offer the depth and detail necessary to become more accepting of such a defiant proposition. As a result, it might be easier to see how the myth and personal narrative share the primary function of trying to explain the inexplicable.

Author and storyteller, Joel Ben Izzy, compiled a series of myths from China, India, Russia, and Israel and included them in *The Beggar King and the Secret of Happiness*, a project that spawned from his unfortunate life-changing twist in the summer of 1997 when he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Usually treatable, the case of this storyteller's illness manifested into a strange complication when Izzy awoke from surgery to discover that he could no longer speak.

To one who relied on telling stories in oral form as a living, this complication begged the question about something for which there was no true answer: "Why me?" The tension and intense personal conflict from which Izzy harnessed the courage to seek answers wasn't even disclosed in the book he wrote for the purpose of finding those answers. The tension within his soul was indeed secondary to the explicit themes (e.g., loss, luck, love, persistence, pride, etc.) that mounted the myths. Rather than conveying the raw, debilitating emotions that ignited this frightened and perplexed storyteller to produce the book, each theme is exquisitely camouflaged by cultural wit and wisdom, with each representing the self-imposed inquiries asked relentlessly by Izzy during his journey into self-discovery. As Joel Ben Izzy says in the prologue:

Sit back and let me tell you my tale, of a journey that took me through dark times, yet gave me a gift that I treasure. That gift is this story, which I now pass on to you a tale of lost horses and found wisdom, of buried treasures and wild strawberries, of the beggar king and the secret of happiness.⁶

Unless we research Izzy's past, there are no clues that a bout with thyroid cancer was the impetus behind the collection of themes discovered within the numerous myths found in this book. In fact, when you begin to read his collection, it's hard not to feel that you are being taken on a

⁶ Joel Ben Izzy, *The Beggar King and the Secret of Happiness* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2005), 1–2.

fanciful journey into the unknown, meandering from one story to another without any apparent destination. None of the myths contained in the *Beggar King* reveal Izzy as the protagonist. None of the stories disclose any kind of health scare as the incentive for including it in the book. None of the plots of any of the stories are remotely similar to Izzy's life. There are no clear parables that surface conveniently near the end of a story to make the lesson behind the myth clear to the casual reader. What each story does provide are reasons to laugh, to cry, and to hope.

The protagonist, plot, conflict, and even the mandatory components to every story (the punch line), along with the tension that defined the writer's purpose for constructing the book, are not within waving distance of the reader's perceptual threshold when compared to the deliberate and descriptive themes woven brilliantly into each myth. What Izzy does so poignantly is to take his readers on a journey, then return them safely to the present. We are compelled to reflect alongside Izzy, contemplating answers to the puzzling dilemmas that dot our daily lives. And Izzy brilliantly offers a collection of myths that end abruptly, much like the unforeseen and frightening personal scrimmage we may encounter when receiving shocking news that could change our lives dramatically. "The Strawberry," a Zen Buddhist tale found in the *Beggar King*, is an example of such a myth. To paraphrase:

A Zen master had traveled to a distant village. As he was running late for his return train, he decided to take what he thought was a shortcut. He found himself walking along a steep path, staring off into the distance. So taken was he by the beauty of the view that he did not notice where he was walking. At that instant, he kicked a small stone and, a moment later, realized that he did not hear it land. He stopped, only to discover that he stood atop a huge cliff. Another step and he would have walked right off, to a hundred-foot drop below. As he stood there, gazing out at the mountains in the distance, he was suddenly shaken by a loud roar. He turned around to see a huge tiger slowly approaching. He took a step to the side, only to have the ground crumble beneath his feet. Falling off the edge of the cliff, heels overhead, his hands reached out to grab whatever might save him. An instant later, he found himself clinging with one hand to a thorny vine, growing out of a crack in the rock. He looked up to the top of the cliff, where he saw the tiger, licking his lips. His eyes searched far below him, to the bottom of the cliff. There, looking up at him waited a second tiger. With one tiger above and another below, he looked again at the vine, its sharp thorns cutting into his hand. Near the vine, he saw a tiny mouse crawl out. It scampered along a tiny ledge to the vine, looked at him for a moment, then looked at the tiger, and finally began to gnaw at the vine. The monk searched for anything else he might grab, but there was nothing. Then, far off to his side, he spotted a tiny plant. Surely, it was too

small to hold his weight, but he reached for it just the same. It had green leaves, and as he parted them, he glimpsed something small and red. It was a wild strawberry plant, with one perfectly ripe strawberry. He plucked it from the plant and ate it. And as he did so he thought, "Isn't life sweet?"⁷

The ever-present, single, and very solitary moment that one must live without wavering, or not at all, is a common theme found throughout the *Beggar King*. The question "Why Me?" is never once asked, even implicitly, in any of the myths found between the covers of this volume. After all, it isn't a question that can adequately field the inexplicable.

The case of Joel Ben Izzy isn't a profound one. In fact, it represents the simplest of cases: a man turns to myth as a method for engaging in self-talk, and by enticing readers to travel on the abstract and ambiguous roads with him, he engages us in dialogue of the richest kind. When we read Izzy's story, we are compelled to ask, "Why?" whereas some rhetoricians historically ask, "Why Not?" An example is narrative theorist Walter Fisher. He views myth as getting us ready for anything, especially the fear of the inexplicable that alone can impoverish the existence of the individual. Fisher's contention is to be prepared for whatever life brings. His advice would be to "expect everything and be surprised by nothing." To be accepting of troubling times is what Fisher insinuates. Still, most of us want answers. Myths give us "mythical" answers to how the world began, how creatures and plants came into being, and why certain things in the cosmos have certain qualities. They may also help us to understand why monkeys look for trouble, why rabbits have wiggly noses, and why the sun and moon live in the sky. However, finding ways in which myths can help humans reconcile even the most devastating, most inconceivable episodes in their lives, as in the case of Joel Ben Izzy, could be the most valuable function of the well-crafted myth.

Summary and Final Remark

What is pronounced in a myth is its function as a potentially responsive and resourceful set of answers to perplexing questions. If used wisely, the myth can heal the human heart, mind, and soul.

The pieces that mold a myth aren't scientific. They are more powerful than science. They are about knowing that the story of our lives makes us mythical, and that's a good thing. It allows us to understand who we are and to what we have to ascribe some meaning. Knowing the stories of our lives mandates that we are able to document the stories of our lives.

⁷ Ibid., 156–158.

For me, telling stories is one of the most human of all acts. Each time we retell stories, they evolve, as does all myth. Sometimes the evolving nature of telling and retelling has us wondering if our lives are nothing more than distorted episodes, prone to fabrication and the like. In truth, when our mind constructs a story, we crystallize memorable images of our lives. Sometimes those images change based on the audience. What does not change is the awesomeness of it all.

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CHAPTER TWO

NOTHING THERE: THE MARK ROTHKO CHAPEL AND ITS MODERN APPROACH TO MYTH

SUSAN J. BAKER
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-DOWNTOWN

Tucked away between a tall hedge and a low trimmed grass lawn, sheltered from the hot grey urban noise of Houston, rests the Rothko Chapel.¹ (Fig. 1) The building, first designed by Phillip Johnson and then completed by Howard Barnstone, is specifically styled after the Church of Santa Fosca in Torcello, Italy, and is like any number of such shaped Christian structures.² In every other feature, however, the chapel is unexpected, particularly the fourteen large non-figurative canvases by Mark Rothko, perhaps his most difficult paintings to understand, yet which transform the interior into a tranquil place of contemplation on a mythic scale. (Fig. 2)

Plans for this somber yet spiritual space began as early as 1962 when John and Dominique de Ménéil first met the artist. A warm friendship with Rothko was forged when the De Ménéils admired a group of paintings that Rothko had done for a New York restaurant, a commission from which he had withdrawn largely because of his dislike of the intended light and commercial environment for the work. Rothko found the De Ménéils more sympathetic to his pictorial aims than his previous patron had been, and before long they were in discussions about the creation of a Houston chapel.

¹ My thanks to Mark Cervenka, Associate Professor of Art and painter, for his insights on experiencing the Rothko Chapel.

² See Dominique de Ménéil, "The Rothko Chapel," *Art Journal* 30, no. 3 (Spring, 1971): 249–250.

The commission offered Rothko the opportunity to create something equivalent to a secular hymn in physical form, a place only peripherally religious in any traditional sense. As a site for mystical contemplation, this modern chapel is comparable only to Henri Matisse's Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary in the southeast of France, realized some twenty years earlier. The Houston chapel installation of paintings is the culmination of three decades of Rothko's pictorial quest for an expression of the mythic in contemporary pure plastic form (plasticity meaning the building blocks of colors, forms, and arrangements that an artist uses to evoke a psychic idea). The large color fields that define the interior space of the chapel replace the need for Christian or other religious iconography to evoke the mysteries of the divine. Here, the color interaction and placement of the large-scale canvases convey something mythic without reliance on symbolism or narratives. As will become evident, Rothko's chapel allows the viewer to experience, in a directly perceptible way, the dichotomies between the physical and the mystical, the earthly and the heavenly, the real and the mythic. The worshipper is also obliged to confront a divinity that, if it exists, is impossible to know with any certainty. For Rothko, the chapel was an opportunity to clarify, in architectural language, the primitive emotions perpetuating man's mythic search for meaning.

Not everyone likes what Rothko built, but he did not expect that many would. He told a colleague he wanted "to make something you don't want to look at."³ Visitors often react to the interior of the Rothko Chapel with confusion. Others find it depressing or at least gloomy. Individuals adhering to fundamental religious beliefs can find it irreverent in its lack of commitment to any institutionalized doctrine. The problem may be that, at first, there seems to be nothing there; the chapel houses no typical icons from the Christian or any other religious or mythic traditions. It seemingly contains only dark vacuous canvases hung around a quasi-octagonal interior.

Can a dim, ostensibly empty space, void of any iconography, be (or at least occupy the same place in the human imagination) an illustrated myth? Traditionally, myths have been defined as narratives or stories that rise up from the collective that help societies make sense of themselves, their origins, and their existence. Mythic narratives frequently contain heroes, sometimes with miraculous births and endowed with superhuman abilities, who confront adversity, either leading to triumph or death. Traditional Christian chapels have been decorated for generations by the myths of sacred heroes of the faith—champions of the godly life often

³ According to Ulfert Wilke in *Mark Rothko, A Biography*, ed. James E. B. Breslin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 469.

martyred for their beliefs. Could nonfigurative, broadly painted grounds of color, as found carefully arranged within the Houston chapel, evoke the mythic without such glorious story telling? Rothko found a way to do so.

From his early career, Rothko was fascinated with how myths captured primordial human emotions, especially feelings of terror and loss. Born in 1903 to Russian Jewish parents, Rothko witnessed, along with the rest of the world, increasing aggression against Jewish peoples, culminating in the Holocaust. While his parents had very early on immigrated to America, Rothko found mythic stories of violence and tragedy increasingly relevant, given news from Europe. Rothko most admired how primitive art depicted mythic tragedies. He wrote:

Primitive art is the “manifestation of terror, the symbolization of man’s basic horror of insecurity, in which the environment was a mist of terrors, darkness, and evil forces in both his waking and sleeping state while conscious life was the eternal fending off the powers of evil who would destroy him.”⁴

It is not surprising that Rothko’s career would culminate in an installation of fourteen nearly black paintings that so perfectly express the tragic events of the twentieth century.

The De Ménils were devout Catholics, yet they felt comfortable commissioning a Jewish artist to realize the chapel, perhaps because they valued Rothko’s life-long curiosity about expressions of spirituality from ancient to modern times. Dominique de Ménil understood,

It might be an important sign that we cannot represent Jesus or his apostles anymore.... Only in the exaltation of the Renaissance was it possible for Michelangelo to still represent God as a bearded man, but nobody is visually naïve any longer. We are cluttered with images, and only abstract art can bring us in the threshold of the divine.⁵

The De Ménils were also content to establish the chapel as interdenominational. For Rothko, all religions and myths had their origins in primitive experience, as did the subsequent symbolisms invented to express understandings of the divine. A review of Rothko’s development as an artist will clarify how he came to design the chapel to capture a

⁴ Mark Rothko in *Mark Rothko: The Artist’s Reality, Philosophies of Art*, by Christopher Rothko (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 108.

⁵ Dominique de Ménil quoted in David E. Brauer’s “Space as Spirit” in *Image of the Not-Seen: Search for Understanding: The Rothko Chapel Art Series*, eds. K. C. Eynatten, Kate Hutchins, and Don Quaintance (Houston: The Rothko Chapel, 2007), 43.

collective human wisdom and to provoke questions that all religious expressions ask about the nature of their gods.

Rothko's interest in primitive religions began with his studies of ancient Greece. Rothko was especially curious about the perseverance of Greek myth into modern times. He believed that the Greek stories or images, like those illustrated on Geometric and Archaic style ceramic vases, captured primal emotions tied to early man's experiences. The subsequent narratives and symbols were invented to carry those memories. The powerful emotions sustained in these myths served as impetus for these narratives to be passed on from generation to generation into modern times. In a radio address, Rothko stated that myths endured,

because they are the symbols of man's primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance.... And modern psychology finds them persisting still in our dreams, our vernacular, and our art, for all the changes in the outward conditions of life.⁶

Rothko believed, however, that it was the abstract elements found in the earliest realizations of these myths (the Geometric or Archaic periods of Greece, for example, rather than the later more naturalizing Classical or Hellenistic) that evoked the greatest emotions in the viewer. The plastic elements alone (the forms used rather than the story being told) could act upon the viewer to weld up in him the same emotional memories triggered by the reading of mythic tales; thus, abstractions offered a uniquely powerful and collective expression when compared to realistic illustrations of specific mythic narratives.

How did Rothko come to the conclusion that the earliest abstract renderings of Greek myths, like the pure color fields of his chapel, were equal in their ability to express the human emotions and desires typically evoked by the mythic narratives themselves? The answer in part lies in Rothko's artistic training when he was exposed to European modernist art movements that also embraced the primitive. Rothko's beginnings as a painter were not traditional; he did not major in art at college, spent only two years at Yale studying liberal arts, and did not go to one of the fine arts academies. Instead, he stumbled into the more loosely organized Art Students League of New York which had the reputation for being a place where artists could experience greater expressive freedom. Students were

⁶ Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, "The Portrait and the Modern Artist," WNYC broadcast, October 13, 1943.

not required to follow a certain curriculum; instead, they competed to sign up for classes with an admired instructor, simply for the opportunity.

While at the League, Rothko ran across a fellow Russian Jew, Max Weber, a painter associated with the Stieglitz circle. Alfred Stieglitz was a photographer who, early in the twentieth century, had opened up a radical New York gallery representing a group of avant-garde artists known for their alliance with European modernist artistic movements. Weber was especially interested in German Expressionism and French Cubism, modern styles that rejected naturalistic form in favor of abstraction. Weber professed a love for the primitive, as did many European intellectuals at the time. He collected African tribal works, pre-Columbian art, and Native American objects. In 1910, Weber had contributed an article to Stieglitz's art magazine, *Camera Work*, praising the power of so-called "savage" arts, including Chinese dolls, Hopi images, and Native American quilts. These, he argued were "finer in color than the works of modern painters."⁷ According to Dore Ashton, (one of Rothko's most respected biographers), by the time Rothko met Weber,

Weber was already celebrated for his early works in a primitivistic manner, where echoes of tribal arts were frequent, and for his adaptation of the cubist spatial canon to an essentially expressionist vision.⁸

For Weber, the abstract quality of primitive art proved that naturalistic representations were not imperative for expressing human experience. In fact, distortions of what the eye sees externally allowed the artist to present an interior, psychological reality, carrying with it waves of emotion similar to those evoked by narrative myth.

Weber thought that abstract form resonated perceptible vibrations that explained their impact on the human soul. Such theories stemmed from new scientific studies (Albert Einstein's being the most popularly known) that increasingly described the material world as a flux of molecular atomic energy. For the art world, this meant that traditional paintings that represented the world as comprised of isolated solid objects, arranged in intervals within an illusionistic space, looked obsolete. A more subtle understanding of the physical world was now available. Artists began to view objects, along with the intervals between them, as comprised of the same atomic matter: energy. The goal in modern art was to depict a new reality whereby the form of one object appeared to bump into the

⁷ Max Weber, "Chinese Dolls and Modern Colorists," *Camera Work* 31 (July 1910): 59.

⁸ Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 12.

surrounding air, and that air then flowed into the next object in constant, integrated motion at the molecular level. Terms like “continuity of space” or “simultaneity” were commonly used by artists to describe the immersion of foreground into background, seen in Expressionist and Cubist art—styles that were developed in an effort to express this flux of indivisible energy at the atomic level of reality.

Weber was influenced by these new scientific understandings of the molecular composition of the physical world, as well as by theories of the fourth dimension, stating the

immensity of all things exists outside and in the presence of objects, and is the space that envelops a tree, a tower, a mountain, or any solid; or the interval between objects or volumes of matter if receptively beheld.⁹

Weber believed there was expressive power embedded in these forms that caused resonance in the human psyche. He stated how this “immensity” “arouses imagination and stirs emotion.”¹⁰ “The flower,” Weber argued, “is not satisfied to be merely a flower in light and space and temperature (because) it wants to be a flower in us in our soul,” and that “things live in us and through us.”¹¹ In this manner, the human soul was indivisible from surrounding sensations because the vibrating world made a perceptible and emotional connection with the viewer. Weber believed the distorted proportions and exaggerated colors found in primitive art were capable of inadvertently tapping into the interconnectedness of animate and inanimate things because abstract art avoided mimicking the mere surfaces of the natural world as seen by the naked eye and instead revealed nature’s inherent atomic fluctuations.

Weber’s theories about primitive art’s unique emotional power rang true for Rothko and his own convictions about myth. He stated,

Why the most gifted painters of our time should be preoccupied with the forms of the archaic and the myths from which they have stemmed, why Negro sculpture and archaic Greek should have been such potent catalyzers of our present day art, we can leave to historians and psychologists. But the fact remains that our age [is] distinguished by its distortions, and everywhere the gifted men whether they seat the model in their studio or

⁹ Max Weber, “The Fourth Dimension From a Plastic Point of View,” *Camera Work* 31 (July 1910): 25.

¹⁰ Weber, “The Fourth Dimension,” 25.

¹¹ Max Weber, *Essays on Art* (California: William Edwin Rudge Publisher, 1916), 15.

seek the form within themselves, all have distorted the present to conform with the forms of Nineveh, the Nile or the Mesopotamian plane.¹²

It was Wassily Kandinsky who provided an explanation as to why primitive and modern abstract art forms were able to generate such powerful emotions in the viewer. Kandinsky wrote a justification for non-figurative art in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published late in 1911. Many of Weber's views about the primitive paralleled ideas in Kandinsky's book, excerpts of which were published periodically in Stieglitz's *Camera Work*, beginning in 1912. Kandinsky turned to the essentially nonmaterial characteristics of music to explain the power of abstraction. While a musical tune might sound like something in nature (perhaps the wind or a bird), a melodic composition was not required to have a specific connection with the natural world in order to be enjoyed. A pleasing arrangement of notes could cause the listener to well up with emotion, not only because the sounds triggered an emotional memory of a beautiful or tragic time when similar sounds were heard, but because of the physical reaction of the human brain to the musical vibrations themselves. Kandinsky argued that color and music are similar in that both are, essentially, measurable energy. Musical notes reverberated sound that, upon being absorbed by the ear, acted upon the soul of man (a scientist might describe it as fired synapses that trigger a psychic response). Color, inasmuch that it was also essentially energy (or radiating light), stimulated the senses in a manner similar to music, only with the receptors being in the eyes instead of the ears. Kandinsky argued that while a painter might illustrate a story in his composition, it was the color and form that he used, the plastic elements and not the story itself, which contributed the greatest toward achieving the necessary emotional sensations. The stories stimulated the imagination via associations the reader had formed over time, but color was immediate, similar to how the body reacts instantly when touching a hot stove before becoming fully conscious as to why. Kandinsky argued that for "a more sensitive soul the effect of colors is deeper [than the narrative] and intensely moving."¹³ It was more direct than an object that merely created a memory or an association because, instead, it produced a "corresponding spiritual vibration" in the soul of the body. One color was not enough to sustain a significant impression, but a

¹² Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, "Manuscript drafts of a letter to the editor," in *Mark Rothko Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 30–31.

¹³ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1977), 24.

composition of colors, along with the lines and forms created by those colors, could create a strong emotional effect, especially within the sensitive viewer, like a symphony that combined numerous individual sounds. Throughout his theorizing, Kandinsky used the language of music and its ability to express emotion without relying on associations. He stated,

No more sufficient, in the psychic sphere, is the theory of association. Generally speaking, color is a power which directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.¹⁴

Kandinsky titled many of his paintings with terms associated with music, such as “symphony” or “improvisation.”

Many artists of Rothko’s generation studied Kandinsky, and Rothko’s interest in his work was well known.¹⁵ In his own theories on art, Rothko also used the language of music to convey the impact of the “plastic” element in painting. Rothko stated,

Now, in the world of the painter, his sense of the essential and the infinite must be realized plastically. He must express his notions of reality in the terms of shapes, space, colors, rhythms, and the other plastic elements which we have previously described, for they constitute the language of painting, just as sound, timbres, and measures constitute that of the musician, or words and sentences that of the linguist. Or rather, the painter must represent them by the means of colored shapes arranged in certain rhythms constituting certain ideated and controlled movements toward a particular effect, this effect or end being the subject of the picture.¹⁶

Rothko redefined “subject matter” in art, shifting content from the illustration of a narrative text or story to the direct psychic effect triggered in the viewer upon perceiving the plastic elements of the painting. This is why, for Rothko, the more abstracted archaic imagery from ancient Greece was more powerful than were the later naturalistic ones because the essential plastic elements were not disguised behind illusionism.

Rothko’s appreciation for ancient myth was linked to his belief in the psychological impact of abstracted form. Myths were comprised of “the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Ashton, *About Rothko*, 75.

¹⁶ Rothko, *The Artist’s Reality*, 98.