



The Absence of Myth

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The Absence of Myth



Sophia Heller

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For Wolfgang Giegerich and David Miller

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Introduction

The absence of myth is, to a certain extent, a “nonstatement.” Echoing what German theologian Dorothee Sölle said about Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God—“Those who believed in God were in no way affected by the statement, and those who did not believe in God were also not affected” (see Bierlein 325). Myth means nothing to those who have no use for or interest in it, and to those who hold steadfastly to myth, any assertion of myth’s absence or obsolescence will go unheard. However, there is a significant difference between the modern individual who expressly chooses to believe in or look for myth and extant aboriginal cultures still living in myth, because, for one thing, in modernity myth itself has left very little to believe in.

What we have inherited are concepts and imaginings of myth, as opposed to the concrete, living experience of myth. Myth has become a reflection on life without need for the literal reenactment of the reflection or narrative (such as through ceremony and worship). Any so-called living myth today is arbitrary, subject to human rather than divine modification, and lasts for about as long as our interest can hold. One can see how myth’s applicability has been whittled down to its romantic appeal and entertainment value; some of the clearest expressions of *myth* are “found” in fantasy fiction and film, such as the recent *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, and the comic book heroes of *X-Men*. No matter how deeply these creations may engross and inspire us, we still look for the ordinary human being behind the curtain pulling all the strings. No longer content with just the phenomenon itself, the mechanics or science of the creation is what fascinates us.

If these popular stories speak of realities, they are abstract, psychological realities. The images in these stories are metaphors for something else, metaphors that need to be analyzed and dissected until what's left is (ideally) a deepened understanding of human nature and the world we live in. But the metaphor itself is discarded in the process. Its role as a placeholder for a psychological truth becomes redundant once we understand the place it was holding, once we get the insight. Hobbits might show us the values of humility and courage, but presumably what we internalize are the values, not the Hobbits themselves. Now, no one without risk of being called delusional would take *Lord of the Rings* as gospel, consider Middle Earth to be real, or think that Tolkien was a god. But what makes myth a myth is, in part, the fact that it is absolutely true because it is real. And what makes it real is the belief that this life, this existence, is how it is, this is how the gods did it; this is what we must now do. When questioned about the reasons for performing a particular ritual or celebrating a particular ceremony, archaic peoples replied: "Because the [mythical] Ancestors prescribed it" (Australian Arunta); "This is how the Nemu [the mythical Ancestors] did it, and we do it the same way" (Kai of New Guinea); "Because the Sacred People did it this way for the first time" (Navajo) (Eliade, "Toward a Definition" 4). Living myth, said Mircea Eliade, means living religiously. Myth is "a reenactment of fabulous, exalting, meaningful events; one is present once again at the creative works of the Supernatural Beings" (5). Living myth is more than telling a good story; it is the reality or truth of lived life, expressed in the form of narratives that are held to be sacred.

In contrast, myths today are studied rather than lived. Since the beginnings of Western philosophy in ancient Greece, myth has been used as a tool for political discourse and, in more recent times, the inception of analytical psychology has enabled the appropriation of myth as an effective means for understanding human nature. The function of myth is critical rather than existential. More often than not, contemporary usages of "myth" tend to be easily interchangeable with the words "theory," "story," and "ideology," defined more by its methodology than by any stable content. Myth is more like a "parasitical form" (Barthes) that feeds on whatever it is applied to (culture, history, literature, psychology, etc.) in order to create a surplus of meaning that can claim for itself a

mythic appellation. But as real substance, as the cosmological World Tree centering the individual to the collective and the collective to the gods, living myth has long been outside the ken of modern civilization and, as such, is irrelevant to the necessities of living. Transformed to a metaphorical and conceptual level, myth has lost its former status as an objective reality; it no longer originates in the inviolable domain of Supernatural Beings and instead has become a method to be adopted or discarded at will.

If myth's ontological absence is self-evident, and arguing for the absence of myth subsequently redundant, what exactly is the reason for this study? Why spend time dredging up myth only to refute it, a task that carries the sneaking suspicion that the absence of myth is unacceptable and that there must be a way still to uphold myth as an existential force—even when it functions negatively, through its absence. Such an underlying motivation does, in fact, infuse some of the current myth scholarship cited in this book. On the one hand, a demythologized, scientific world is accepted while on the other hand, this demythologization is subsumed under a larger notion of myth that includes a scientific understanding of reality but is not rendered obsolete because of it (e.g., “the myth of mythlessness”). Yet this is a modern notion of “myth,” guided not by divine dictates but swollen instead with humankind's ideas about myth and the need for a comparable substitute, evidenced most conspicuously by the desire for a spiritual meaning in a world or religious tradition that is apparently not providing it.

It is this modern hunger for meaning, whether or not it is explicitly associated with the word *myth* that shows that the “non-statement” of myth's absence has been turned into a statement to protest against. And for those who believe that the remedy for the spiritual void lies specifically within myth, protestations against myth's obsolescence and redundancy are not quiet insofar as pains must assiduously be taken to prove and defend that which is collectively no longer self-evident. Myth then becomes more than an object of historical interest or a psychological tool; it becomes an unwitting pawn in the debate on the meaning of life. As I aim to explicate in this study, myth, in its emptied and malleable status, is thrust forward by scholars and psychologists, seekers alike, as proof that the sacred has not been secularized. And yet theories that have to work especially hard to show how and where myth is still alive

usually point not to myth, but to the desire on the part of the theorist for something that is no more, and furthermore, to the unwillingness to accept what could be a rather ordinary, decidedly nonmythic life.

Our time is clearly experiencing a dearth of meaning and purpose. One need only look at the self-help, career, New Age, religion, and psychology sections at bookstores to see a deluge of information, all geared to help the forsaken individual find his or her sacred purpose, authentic job, soulmate, inner peace, outer abundance, happiness, God, or the God within. Perhaps this is a gross generalization, but I do not think it is inaccurate, given that this book is being written in a time (early twenty-first century) and in places (Germany and the United States) that have witnessed such an overload of resources as to how to make one's life more meaningful that it would be impossible to cite all the cultural instances supporting this assertion. In any event, my starting point has little to do with the specifics of how to make life worth living. Rather, it is to take the observation that this need for a more worthy life exists and place it within the framework of myth, or, I should say, myth's absence, for what current civilization has inherited is not myth, but its absence. And to the extent that the ubiquitous search for something to fill the void of meaning is directed toward myth or God, it is worth examining this inheritance of absence more closely, because the search does not seem to be coming to any closure. On the contrary, the search for meaning and value has apparently found its way into a vacuum that must keep recycling infinite variations of the same product ("meaning") in order to calm and piece together our lonely, fractured selves. If this were not the case, the popular psychology/spirituality industry would have withered long ago, rather than exploding into a virtual smorgasbord where seekers can indulge whenever and wherever the urge strikes.

Myths are gone; the gods are dead. This, by the way, is not to attack one's personal religious beliefs and practices. It is to say that collectively and objectively, from the perspective of the world and not pockets of individuals, what was a source of metaphysical and religious meaning is no more. This godless and mythless state of the world is nothing new. Wolfgang Iegerich ("The Opposition of 'Individual and Collective'" 12) and David Miller ("A Myth Is as Good as a Smile!" 182) both cite Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" as

just one piece of evidence that by the fourteenth century myths and mythical figures had already withdrawn.

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days
 (A king that every Briton loves to praise)
 This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.
 The Elf-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke
 Their elfin dance on many a green mead,
 Or so was the opinion once, I read,
 Hundred of years ago, in days of yore.
 But no one now sees fairies any more.
 For now the saintly charity and prayer
 Of holy friars seem to have purged the air;
 They search the countryside through field and stream
 As thick as motes that speckle a sun-beam,
 Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,
 Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,
 Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies.
 And that's the reason why there are no fairies.
 Wherever there was wont to walk an elf
 Today there walks the holy friar himself
 As evening falls or when the daylight springs,
 Saying his mattins and his holy things,
 Walking his limit round from town to town.
 Women can now go safely up and down
 By every bush or under every tree;
 Here is no other incubus but he,
 So there is really no one else to hurt you
 And he will do no more than take your virtue.

“What is lost,” Giegerich writes, “(and irrevocably lost) is the natural world *as* ensouled, *as* animated, *as* spirited by all sorts of fairies, goblins, and little people” (“Opposition” 13). Though an animated, ensouled nature is just one aspect of living myth, what is relevant is that the “status of nature” is irreversibly changed such that a new mode or logic of being-in-the-world is initiated. In myth, natural phenomena are divinely personified (e.g., in Greek myth, the earth is Gaia, thunder is Zeus, the sun is Helios, the seas are Poseidon, and so forth), but when nature has been emptied of its animating

forces, as Chaucer's tale claims, the conditions for myth are also depleted. There is little reason for myth to persist when the repository for divine truth is lifted out of nature and placed into the hands of the holy friar, who is the mere servant of the singular, true (now abstracted into Spirit) God of Christianity. And Christianity, far from being just another "myth," logically and historically represents an intentional overcoming of myth.

Although the absence of myth is, objectively speaking, nothing new, it is a confrontation waiting to happen. As long as there persists a yearning for meaning, the implications of the loss of myth and religion have yet to be comprehended and instead are to be resisted. For religion as well as myth has fallen out of conviction if the question of what makes life meaningful has to be asked. This discussion of the absence of myth, then, is not intended indirectly to reverse myth's obsolescence or rehabilitate the gods/God. It is to delve into the absence, to penetrate and be penetrated by the sense of mythlessness and find out what wants to be known through the loss. My approach is not merely to assume the absence of myth; it is to treat this absence as necessary in its own right, necessary to the very notion of consciousness that is so cherished in the prevalent desire for soulful living. And given that this absence is closer to our reality than myth ever was, it, perhaps even more than myth, requires attention.



This book is divided into four chapters, with each one successively pushing into the ramifications of the absence of myth. Chapter 1 articulates the case for this absence by presenting current myth theory and demonstrating not only that the extensive study of myth is made possible because of myth's absence, but also that the rise of mythology is founded on a profound lack. Whether one deems this a lack of foundation, center, God, or meaning, the point is that, what inspires modern and postmodern myth is the desire for something that is acutely felt to be lost. Although some of the scholarship I review incorporates the loss of myth into an expanded theory of myth, others betray the unwillingness to accept the loss in that the so-called emptiness is shown to be actually quite full—of myth!

Yet whether one subsumes the absence of myth into an overarching theory, or disregards the absence of myth by calling mythlessness just another myth, the modern notion of myth itself must be redefined and translated into contemporary experience to ensure its vitality and applicability. And though I try to place thought *about* myth in contradistinction to examples of archaic or living myth, the redefining of archaic myth into current myth only confuses the seemingly straightforward matter of the absence of myth.

One problem with turning to myth for real sustenance, as indicated earlier, is that original myth is not part of modernity's experience. It exists more in anthropologists' reports and imaginings that can never be entirely objective. Current civilization is very far removed from an oral/aural and ritual-based tradition, and despite the awareness of mythical, cyclical aspects to life (e.g., the seasons, the moon, the calendar), humankind nonetheless lives linearly and progressively, outwardly striving to reach goals and acquire knowledge, determined, in a sense, to master life. Our narratives are not sacred, they are deconstructed; our rituals are public commodities or privately resurrected, belonging more to one's innermost being than to any collective at large.

Living long outside of myth, human thought has emptied the word *myth* of its original value and turned it into a concept that mirrors those who use and study it. Prior to its conceptualization, myth stood for the whole truth; it was the ritualized enactment of the whole of existence itself. But in ancient Greece, where the early philosophers critiqued myths while simultaneously bestowing their value, the distinction between two different periods of myth is absorbed into an already evolving definition of myth that comes to represent both truth and falsehood. And in much of the current, postmodern-influenced scholarship, generated in a time that extols the impossibility of an authoritative truth, myth is perceived as entirely fictitious and ideological. However, the equivocal usage of the same word, *myth*, proves problematic because it conflates the experience of living myth with imaginings about myth and dissolves the cultural specificity from within which myth is realized. This creates a split, or dissociation in psychological terms, between individual and collective, between the myth proponent's personal motivations (such as the desire for meaning) and the outer, objective reality that precludes what is yearned for.

To be sure, not all mythologists insist on the irrefutable presence of myth, nor is there concordance as to the exact manifestations of current myth. But the boundaries between detached myth scholars and passionate myth defenders can be elusive. Modern myth resists precise definition because it has exploded into virtually all aspects of cultural communication. William Doty is one example of a mythologist who embraces an evolving, “polyphasic working definition” of myth, one whose purpose is to “foster a type of [. . .] appreciation that recognizes mythic multidimensionality in both origination and application” (*Mythography* 31, 33). Myth, in part, expresses “the primal, foundational accounts of aspects of the real, experienced world and humankind’s roles and relative statuses within it.” This, in turn, helps to elucidate “the political and moral values of a culture and provide systems of interpreting individual experience within a universal perspective” (33). Myth as a lens or template highlighting unseen aspects of a particular culture or political ideologies is no doubt a useful tool and, in this regard, much insight can be gained from mythology. But what I repeatedly noticed is that there persists this belief or hope that a thread remains linking archaic myth with modern (notions of) myth, unbroken even in its brokenness. The loophole is that modern myth, while not outwardly purporting to function exactly as its progenitor, is nevertheless presumed to be able to provide the culture and, even more so, the individual, with the same depth of meaning and purpose to life characteristic of archaic myth. Yet to the extent that modern notions of myth easily overlook the distinction between two distinct periods of myth, such a myth will be ineffective in fulfilling the needs of current culture precisely because it is fully grounded neither in antiquity nor in the present time.

Either arguing for the persistence of myth or acknowledging the failure of myth today demands contextualizing any definition of myth within the time that it is functional. This obligation, as well as the dilemma that erupts when historically distinct definitions of myth are muddled, is the subject of the first part of chapter 1. The second part grounds in contemporary myth theory what I have assumed to be a given, the absence of myth. However, my overall intent is to do more than back up the assertion of myth’s obsolescence. It is to uncover fallacies inherent in theory that must reconstitute myth to fit modern sensibilities, and to suggest where the

theory does the opposite of what the theorist ostensibly intends. This is indicative, for example, of a philosophical and psychological approach to myth, whereby myth becomes conflated with philosophy or psychology and is meant to serve as a means for uncovering truths about human nature and the nature of consciousness, how we see and understand ourselves and the world. This, however, is a kind of truth or insight apprehended through critical thought and analysis as opposed to the acceptance of truth as literal and embodied experience, such as was the condition of myth. One problem with couching current thought and analysis in myth is that myth becomes more of an obstruction and stunts the trajectory of an awareness or consciousness that can only come into its own *after* myth. The irony is that what makes the so-called return to myth possible or even desirable is itself only possible outside of myth. Consequently, any refutation or restructuring of the absence of myth in the name of consciousness becomes unconscious, answering a familiar call to comfort rather than accepting the rigors of reflection in a no longer deified world.

In chapter 2, I take a closer look at one phenomenon resulting directly from the absence of myth: personal myth. Personal myth represents a particular response to the collective loss of myth and religious meaning. Though it may profess otherwise, the personal myth approach does not and cannot seek to remedy this absence because it utterly depends on it. Its philosophy basically says that what the collective has lost, the individual can and should reclaim. And how one reclaims myth and meaning is through knowing and telling one's personal story. However, what separates a personal myth from a mere autobiography, biography, or memoir is the underlying belief or hope that if a personal story is contextualized within myth, it carries an archetypal and numinous significance and, as such, is elevated and geared to replace the metaphysical void created by the departure and death of the gods. This method receives, in part, its inspiration from Jungian depth psychology, specifically, Jung's notion of archetypes as mythological motifs patterning all of life. From this perspective, it seems impossible to be devoid of myth—one need only root out the archetypes to find the myth. The same could be said (and *is* said) for personal myth: one need only identify the archetypes peopling whichever psychological complexes are constellated at any given moment to find the myth

pertaining to the individual. But the transposition of myth from collective to individual is ambiguous and incomplete in that myth is simultaneously discredited (for the loss of collective myth is not disputed) and exalted insofar as myth's virtues are now upheld by the individual. Not unlike the redefining of myth to suit modern thought, the shift from collective to personal myth provides a surface solution at best for the prevailing existential concern: how is life to be meaningful.

Chapter 3 confronts the equivocal usages of myth evident in both the first and second chapters. Here I consider the questions, how does the equivocation of myth persist, and does it perhaps serve its own purpose? Expressed another way, how is it that myth lives on amid the general acknowledgment of the lack of a transcendent God? One persuasive answer is found in a postmodern style of thought, a style that opts for imagination and alternating perspectives over literalized and fixated assumptions as to the nature of reality. A postmodern approach to the absence of myth thus welcomes absence or negativity as a general principle because it undermines false or egotistical claims to that which ultimately remains unknowable and is therefore not for the taking. But an absent myth, in this case, does not mean the end of myth; it just adopts a different perspective on myth, meaning, and the divine. God as dead is just one perspective, but it is not to be mistaken for *the* perspective on God's status. Rather, this statement is reversed (e.g., "Nietzsche is dead"—God) and this playful, shifting consciousness creates a space or gap wherein both statements are just as true as they are false. The point is to incite a sense of unknowing, and to dethrone the individual who would claim to know. Ambiguity and equivocation are deemed necessary precisely because they resist a clear, rational approach and compel one to enter the murky "in-between spaces," those liminal spaces between all binary oppositions, such as present-absent, truth-falsehood, inner-outer, and so on. The desirability and necessity of engaging the in-between spaces enable an encounter with the complex, paradoxical nature of life, a truth that can only be apprehended by standing outside of one's habitual mode of understanding.

In chapter 4, I try to give myth and the pursuit of myth the benefit of the doubt. Although I have been contending that one primary motivation for refuting the absence of myth arises from the

desire for a meaning that is hard put to materialize, I also think that the persistence and variation of modern and postmodern myth point to another goal repeatedly surfacing in thought and culture: the striving to become conscious. Although the inability completely to relinquish myth can indicate an unwillingness to accept reality on its own, God-less terms, it also carries hints of the desire to reach a level of awareness that does bear a resemblance to mythical cultures insofar as a total consciousness and presence render questions of meaning and purpose irrelevant, the split into dualistic thinking is overcome, and one knows oneself to be held by something much larger and already whole unto itself, whether one terms this God, Being, soul, spirit, or something else. Yet rather than looking at how to redefine myth to meet the evolving demands of consciousness, this final chapter tackles the question—is the idea of pure consciousness itself a myth? Does the process of becoming conscious mean that we will eventually come back full circle and return to myth, not a phenomenal myth as in antiquity but a logical or psychological one? Will a “new myth” emerge, one that maintains the existential equivalency of archaic myth, but without need for concretization through ritual, sacrifice, or worship? In addressing these questions, I continue the progression into the logic of myth as well as its absence, to see if, in fact, the myth somehow contains within itself its own future demise or survival.

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CHAPTER 1

The Absence of Myth

The absence of myth is hardly a radical notion. It antecedes the phenomenon called mythology insofar as a loss of myth makes theorizing about myth possible. A culture still living in myth would not need to theorize about that which fashioned the fabric of its existence. The narratives would be self-explanatory and sufficient. The collective that knows without needing to believe (or to write it down) that it is part of a living religion has no need for mythology or for myth, because when *mythos* or *muthos* comes into Greek language as a technical and philosophical term, a separation or rupture from a predominantly prereflective and ritualistic mode of being-in-the-world is already under way. Even the word *myth* itself, then, serves as a placeholder for phenomena that are lost the moment an attempt at capture (or recapture) is made. And any theory of myth posits itself in direct relationship to the loss of mythic and religious phenomena, whether or not such a loss is confronted in the theory.

When I say “the absence of myth,” my usage of the term *myth* refers to myth in its most original or archaic sense. It is defined neither as a true nor false story but as the total experience and expression (in narrative form) of life. An example of living myth can be seen in Carl Jung’s encounter with Pueblo Indians in New Mexico. The Indian chief told Jung, “[W]e are a people who live on the roof of the world; we are the sons of Father Sun, and with our religion we daily help our father to go across the sky. We do this not only for ourselves, but for the whole world. If we were to cease practicing our religion, in ten years the sun would no longer rise. Then it would be night forever” (*Memories* 252). For the Pueblos, God is

self-evident and embodied in nature. There is no distinction between the literal phenomenon of the sun rising and the religious meaning of the phenomenon. God is the sun. And without due worship, the reason for this god, for the sun itself, is changed. As the chief said, it would be night forever. This myth is not a story or hypothesis about God; it is the self-display, in nature, of the truth or reality of this particular culture.

For much of the world, the sun, or just about any other natural phenomenon, is not objectively understood as divine. Our relationship to the sun is scientific when we see a mass of energy, heat, and light. But knowledge of nature is made possible only when the conditions for myth no longer hold. Jung states something similar when recounting this story of the Pueblos: knowledge depends on the sacrifice of myth.¹ And yet—perhaps to say that one is not living in myth because it can be named as *myth*, or because natural events have lost their mystique, is too narrow and stuck in a literal-mindedness that does not consider the modern perspective that one of myth's multiple and evolving functions is to describe the ineffable. If myth is, at bottom, intended to facilitate a discussion and exploration of inexplicable and timeless truths, then, conceivably does it matter which form these truths take, whether ones of cosmologies or natural metaphors or scientific explanations?

Moreover, the assumption that a completely mythic or “primitive” mode of being-in-the-world is undifferentiated and unconscious balks when confronted with the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, which aims to show that the prehistoric mind is no less capable of intellectual thought than the modern one, albeit to varying degrees. The issue then becomes less one of trying to find a demarcation between myth and mythlessness than of addressing the implications of applying such nebulous terms to today's means for understanding and experiencing life. The need and desire that propel the labeling of current phenomena “myth” demands as much attention as the feasibility of the label itself. For the problem of an absence of myth is not only what one deems to be an indication of myth or not-myth, but that even such a naming is sought. Why would anyone living in what seems to be such a secular world say that there is myth, and what could one point to as evidence?

Adding to the confusion is that myth does not have a fixed meaning. Bruce Lincoln has shown that the prehistory of *mythos* and *logos* in Homer and Hesiod is marked by contradictory representations, where *logos* constitutes falsehood and *mythos* carries the authority of truth (18). This is in contradistinction to the generally assumed, modern definition of these terms, in which *logos* represents truth and *mythos* a fictional story. Thus, for the mind that fastens on contradictory connotations of myth, to say one is not in myth becomes as empty and meaningless as to say one is in myth. The truth or fallacy of such a statement is not only contingent on one's seemingly arbitrary position on or above this continuum encompassing mythology, but is also dependent on a foundation of knowledge that has come to resemble a mirror far more than the solidity of bricks and mortar. And although the emergence of critical interpretation and/or rejection of myth in conjunction with the development of philosophical thought initiated by the pre-Socratics and cemented in Plato is an attempt to clear the smoke obfuscating the mirrors, more often than not this demythologizing paves the way for modern interpreters to *re*mythologize, bringing us back to myth (where some say we have never left, which precludes the need to re-mythologize in the first place). Properly re-mythologized, we presumably face myth no longer as naïve participants but with a more complex understanding and appreciation of the world, its inhabitants, and the means of reflection.

Lest the fissures implicit in demythologization spread too deep, myth scholarship tends to include demythologization as a subsidiary to the larger concept called myth; even the word *demythologization* itself is contained within another theory of myth. Rudolf Bultmann coined the term and, though far from eliminating myth, its purpose (specifically applied to the New Testament) is to "extricate the true, existential subject matter of the mythology" (Segal, *Theorizing* 24). Demythologization, in this sense, becomes another means to retain myth when the narratives themselves can no longer be accepted literally. It is a way to hang on to the meaning of the same narrative, but the truth of the myth is now transposed from an embodied expression to an abstracted one. However, although an implied thread that remains unbroken even in its brokenness persists in linking human existence under the

rubric of myth, there is still this tacit gap or absence. Yes, humankind can be united throughout the ages by the sheer fact of human existential experience, but this unity is made possible by abstracting knowledge from the actual experience, and there is a significant gap between cultures living in myth and cultures living in modernity (to name only two historical periods).

This gap or difference is logical; it can be seen in the changing modes or forms of reflecting on the world. Wolfgang Giegerich points out one example of this in the differences between the dream-time narratives of Australian aborigines and the epics of Homer and Hesiod or the Old Testament. Dream-time narratives have no beginning or end or any distinction from the greater whole; they flow together to make one infinite narrative. “*All* images and narrative events *together* represent a living, ever-changing interconnected whole from which they cannot be separated into individual units” (“The Historicity of Myth” 2). One just dives into the narrative at any given point to pick it up. But when narratives are selectively edited to create a particular order and clearly establish “In the beginning,” as in Hesiod’s *Theogony* or Genesis, a separation from “the ocean of mythic knowledge” is already under way. Now there is a formal and historical “In the beginning,” rather than a mythic beginning that is not really a beginning as such, but a continual renewal and reentering of the whole myth. Consciousness is not immersed as deeply *in* the narrative; rather, consciousness has begun to distance itself *from* the narrative in order to craft and systemize the narrative toward a particular end already in mind.

The absence of myth is not only implicit in the nature of interpretation and analysis that demands a distance so as to obtain a better view of that which seeks to be elucidated (such as in demythologizing), but also in the lack of myth as an organizing and unifying center. This lack of center is by no means revelatory insofar as talk of mythlessness or the death of the gods has been acknowledged by many; no longer is one solely dependent on Nietzsche’s famous proclamation or Yeats’s loose anarchy or Eliot’s hollow men to declare modern Western civilization’s secularized and fragmented status.² The rise of postmodernism, situated on its lack of credible and mythic “grand narratives” (Lyotard) and virtual reality obviates the need for and resists any unifying center. And

Loyal Rue has even designated the term “amythia” specifically to describe the current mythless condition.

Even so, the Western importing of uprooted customs, watered-down religious practices, and pieces of philosophical systems from every appealing Other (e.g. “Tibetan Buddhism in Hollywood and Krishna Consciousness in airports” [Doniger, “Foreword,” Feldman and Richardson xii]) could be seen to betray the desire to alleviate the absence and to be anesthetized from the implications inherent in a void. Much innocence remains to be shattered, for whereas contemporary theories and discussions of myth may give credence to its intrinsic absence, myth in all its positivity remains as a cushion to fall back on. This is seen in the belief that mythlessness is itself just another myth, or that we are in between myths, which is to suggest that when the new myth arrives, the alienation that results from its absence will be eradicated. We will be rescued from our own emptiness. Life again will be meaningful and, if we are to believe Rue, we will stave off our impending annihilation. (Rue fears that in a state of *amythia*, “there is little chance that Western culture will survive very far into the twenty-first century” [3]. Terrorism, crime, the threat of nuclear destruction, deteriorating school and family systems are all indications of a way of life that may not have a future unless we can find a way to come together and reclaim or reestablish a cultural myth.)

To argue for myth’s presence (or, rather, myth’s *need*) amid its confirmed absence is far from a dialectical debate because in order to establish myth’s presence, its absence tends to be refuted. Despite its absence, myth persists. The absence or gap resulting from the shift in how humanity reflects on the world is ignored or covered up rather than allowed to penetrate into today’s reality or means of reflecting.

Rue’s observations into the state of modern affairs ring true. He knows the church is no longer satisfying or meaningful for many, and he knows that, for a culture to survive, it cannot remain attached to previous forms of life and thought. Things change, they evolve, and the old myths lose their vitality and necessity. “The demands of the present will not be denied, nor will they be well served by efforts to apply to them the solutions of the past” (4). And yet—at the end of his book Rue wants us all to go back to church! He thinks the myth we desperately need is not only possible, but will