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Cover illustration by Neil Barrett, from a black-figure cup by Exekias showing the god Dionysus sailing triumphant in his ship.

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WHAT'S IN A MYTH?

Readers of Kathryn Tempest's kind profile in *CA News* will know that I am a son of the manse. It will not surprise you, then, to hear that, like the Presbyterian preacher, I have three things to say about my chosen topic. But unlike the preacher, I do not propose to tell you what I am going to say, then say it, and finish by telling you what I have said. Instead I shall reveal my headings one at a time, hoping that, if nothing else, idle curiosity about where all this is going will fend off thoughts of the coming banquet – which is the traditional challenge facing the President on this occasion.

The first way of reading my title, then, is as a version of the old problem of definition: what makes a myth? This is a topic not much discussed recently; a feeling of exhaustion may have set in after many decades in which it was *the* great question. But perhaps it is time for another look in view of exciting recent trends in the study of ancient religion.

I suppose that among Classicists the definition advanced by Walter Burkert in his 1979 Sather lectures, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, is the most familiar, and the most widely accepted: 'myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance'.[1] The themes of *Structure and History* were further explored in the 1996 book, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Ancient Religions*. Burkert established and explored the implications of this definition with a brilliance that continues to astonish even after multiple readings; like the rest of his oeuvre, this book exerted and still exerts a profound influence on the study of myth and religion. He opened up exciting, hitherto unsuspected vistas, and libraries were filled with the books of other scholars following his lead. His passing in 2015 was a great loss to us all.

1 W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1979) 23.

Burkert wanted to know why mythology is a feature of all human societies, and he wanted to understand the deep-running links between myth and ritual. He found part of his answer in Vladimir Propp's work on the folktale.[2] Propp analysed a corpus of Russian stories, and determined that they could be reduced to exactly 31 functions, some or all of which appeared in every tale, and which, most remarkably, always appeared in the same order. The functions are events such as 'the hero is approached with a request or demand' or 'the hero acquires the use of a magical agent' or 'the villain is defeated'.[3] The names of hero and villain, the nature of the quest, the type of magical agent change from tale to tale; many embellishments may be added, but the underlying structure is invariable. Now all Propp's stories were of one type – tales of heroic quests – which means that different patterns might prevail in other kinds of story. Propp himself initially declined to generalise, or to speculate on the reasons for his interesting discovery. But it was hard not to think that he was on to something of wider importance here.

Burkert located the origins of these patterns in the basic circumstances of life. The sequences reflected what he called biological or cultural 'programs of action', deriving from universal needs and challenges: finding food, becoming an adult, giving birth, learning the ways of our elders (being initiated), coping with hardship and disease, dying. The programmes originate in the earliest history of our species, or even before. We share them with animals. I can well imagine the startled reaction of the audience in Berkeley when Burkert announced that 'every rat in search of food will incessantly run through all these "functions"',[4] or when he compared the pouring of libations to the behaviour of dogs at lampposts.[5] The reason myths travel so easily is that we instinctively

2 V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, tr. Laurence Scott (2nd edn, Austin 1968; Russian original 1928).
3 For the complete list see E. Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Malden 2005) 193–4.
4 Burkert, *Structure and History* 15.
5 *Ibid.* 43.

recognise structures which are deeply rooted in our psyche. The tale is adapted to local circumstances, but remains the same underneath. In the case of the quest, the whole tale can be boiled down to the single verb 'to get':[6] 'getting' implies a lack or need; one must find a way to remedy the lack; this will involve going somewhere to find the object desired; there will be obstacles to overcome; help may be needed; but ultimately (in the world of myth, at any rate) there will be a triumphant return. Thousands of stories fit this pattern; but to become myths, they need also to have what Burkert called the 'secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance'. The pattern also fits a story like Jack and the Beanstalk, but, generally speaking, such tales are told for their own sake; the pattern confers a tidy and pleasing conclusion, but this is not the same as the very deep satisfaction we feel if the tale concerns a revered ancestor or founder, for instance. Burkert called this kind of reference 'secondary' because, unlike Jack and the Beanstalk or an animal fable, the tale is not invented just for the sake of its application, and 'partial', because the tale cannot capture all of the reality to which it relates, and may not even try to.

In this grossly simplified form Burkert's ideas may seem singularly unconvincing, and in so brief I space I hardly do them justice. As I said, they have seemed powerfully attractive to many of us, and for good reason. One problem is that the regularity of the patterns is less than it seems at first sight, as for instance Eric Csapo has demonstrated.[7] Another problem is the formidable difficulty involved in linking biology to culture given culture's unlimited complexity and frequent arbitrariness. Burkert speaks of biological or cultural programs of action as if both are on equal footing, but a 'cultural program of action' is very different from a 'biological program of action'. The way human culture relates to underlying evolutionary forces differs from ordinary biological

6 *Ibid.* 15.

7 Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* 190–211.

evolution in important ways. In particular it moves at a much faster pace than Burkert is comfortable with; he wants his programmes to be unchanged since the Palaeolithic. This is a model of evolutionary psychology not much in favour now.

But Burkert was surely right to look for the essence of mythology at the earliest possible stages of human development. I suggest that what is hard-wired into the human psyche is not this or that programme of action that issues in a story, but rather the propensity to represent reality as a story in the first place. In other words Burkert had it backwards: our addiction to narrative is the phenomenon, and the programmes of action are the epiphenomenon. The *action* is prior, yes: the need to get food is obviously pretty basic; and yes, getting the food means going out and overcoming obstacles. Calling it a *programme* of action, however, suggests a metaphor of computer programming, or a script from which one cannot depart. But the script is often disregarded, and the imaginative invention of detail is not something the computer can do. So instead of 'programme of action' I would prefer to speak of 'emplotted action', in which the narrative has much more freedom than implied by 'programme', for all that certain templates may be favoured or to some extent inevitable. We share some of these actions with animals, but making them into stories is distinctly human. We may need help to find our food; but what law of biology says that the helper should be magical? This is the work of imagination in story-telling. And story-telling itself can be considered a development of something even more basic, which is the human ability and even need to seek explanations: to ask, why? and, where did this come from?

This cognitive capacity is very old, perhaps as old as the emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens*, which is to say somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 years ago. The reason I say this is that the ability to conceptualise reality as something objective, distinct from any individual, out there to be apprehended and in need of explanation, derives from the elaborate social awareness that is the

specific mental difference of our species. Here I draw particularly on the fascinating work of Michael Tomasello and Daniel Smail.[8] Intelligent cooperation over competition as the basis of society is what gave early humans the edge over primates and all other creatures on the planet. Animals may work in groups to hunt, for instance, but the spoils are not equally shared, freeloaders are not punished, and individuals cooperate only to the extent that they think it is in their own interests or because they are forced to.[9] Humans, by contrast, have a sense of obligation and fairness, of collective intentions, of the group as something above and between individuals, of group welfare and future pay-off. Indeed we can imagine the future, the future perfect, and other tenses. We know that our individual point of view is only one point of view; we can imagine other people's points of view; we understand that the group has a point of view, and that consideration affects our reasoning. Individuals acquire a sense of ethical norms and values; they regulate their own behaviour in accordance with these norms, not only or even primarily because they fear punishment but because they think it's right. We feel guilty if we do something selfish, ashamed if we think we have let the group down, proud if we contribute to its success. We have systems of abstract and symbolic representation to communicate and reinforce shared values. Primates can do almost none of this, and what they can do is very rudimentary, and never in large groups. As one writer has put it, 10,000 chimpanzees in St. Peter's Square is chaos; 10,000 *homines sapientes* in St. Peter's Square is an outdoor mass.[10]

A norm is not what I think; it is what anyone *ought* to think. As a human being, I must learn how I relate to this abstraction; I must

8 M. Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge, MA 2014); *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge, MA 2016); D.L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2008).

9 Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* 146.

10 Michael Gerson, review of Y.N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Toronto 2014, rev. edn New York 2015; Hebrew original 2011) in *The Washington Post* 11 June 2015 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/myths-meaning-and-homo-sapiens/2015/06/11/28660902-106f-11e5-a0dc-2b6f404ff5cf_story.html?utm_term=.42948a37f8cb , accessed 25 June 2017).

understand how to make my behaviour conform to the expectations of this anyone; I must learn why my inclination to be selfish is wrong; and I will communicate my understanding to others in order to test and refine it, or to teach it to my children. Tomasello argues that the sense of objective and abstract reality derives from this sense of ethical norms. That is another large claim, but at least we may say that our developed social awareness reinforces a sense of the difference between who I am in myself and what is out there. Add to this now our sense of time. I know that I was taught how to behave by my elders, and that they were taught by their elders. I know that these values have a history. We reason that we are where we are because of where we have been before. Because we venerate our forebears, time hallows tradition, and gives it legitimacy.

From here it is easy to get to myth-making. We have the raw ingredients: a need and a desire to explain; a need to find explanations that work for the group; and a sense of time that predisposes us to tell a story. We do not perhaps have a requirement that explanations take the form of a story, but the predisposition runs pretty deep. We understand reality as an ongoing process, and find stories far easier to remember than unsorted data. Our idea of the past is constructed as a story. Our sense of personal identity tends to take – many psychologists say always takes – the form of a story we tell ourselves. Even scientific explanations often depend upon stories (some philosophers would say always). It is very hard to think of causation outside of time. Certainly, as Classicists know better than anyone, science started life as a set of stories about the world. If the qualities of human cognition of which I have been speaking first evolved by adaptation for specific social purposes, the potential for exciting new applications was soon discovered and realised (a well recognised process dubbed ‘exaptation’ by Stephen Jay Gould and Elisabeth Vrba in 1982; an ugly, but memorable term).[11] Once the

11 S.J. Gould and E.S. Vrba, ‘Exaptation: A Missing Term in the Science of Form’, *Paleobiology* 8:1 (1982) 4─15.

story-telling gene was in the DNA, in other words, it took on a life of its own, and stories became more and more imaginative, performing many roles beyond the purely functional.

The implication of all of this for a definition of myth is that we should cast our net very wide indeed. I would go so far as to say that any story that directly or indirectly offers an explanation of something is a myth. There are explanations that are not stories, and stories that are not explanations, but the overlap is very extensive. The tale does not need to be traditional; new myths are invented all the time. But it must speak to the group – it must refer to Burkert's matter of 'collective importance'; one can doubt whether such a thing as a purely private tale exists (for the same reason that, as Wittgenstein pointed out, there is no such thing as a private language), but in any case a tale told only to oneself dies with its teller, and a tale that fails to communicate meaning to other people is stillborn. Since cause must precede effect, a myth must be set in the past; but it does not need to be set very far in the past. A nano-second will do. This stricture does not preclude myths about what may happen in the future, because these are predicated upon, and encode, understandings of the past in order to explain the present.

So that is my first point: a myth is a story offering an explanation about something of collective importance. A wildly risky generalisation, I know, and several books might be needed to defend it. You will notice that it includes the stories told by historians: I am perfectly comfortable with that; history is a modality of myth. What 'truth' means in this context is another subject altogether and one I will not explore in any detail this evening. Let me just note in passing, though, that I am in very good company here: Plato too thought that history was a kind of myth, since no story told by sub-lunar humans can be absolutely true.[12]

I move on instead to my second point. 'What's in a myth?': having

12 See e.g. Pl. *Crat.* 408c, *Crit.* 110a, *Tim.* 29d; discussion at R.L. Fowler, '*Mythos* and *Logos*', *JHS* 131 (2011) 45–66 at 63–5.

decided what kind of automobile myth is, let us lift the bonnet and look at its inner workings. How do the explanations work? Another vast topic, of course, and I shall offer no more than a couple of observations. Here's an analogy. Suppose the rate of my heartbeat is chronically very high. I go to the doctor and say, 'Doctor, my heart beats fast all the time.' The doctor examines me carefully and solemnly pronounces, 'You have tachycardia.' Now we Greek scholars know that this is a fancy word meaning no more than that my heart beats fast. Classical learning in this context may not confer an advantage; without it, you are apt to go away much relieved, because your condition has a scientific name, sanctioned by the professionals, who have studied all of this and know what to do. Of course, the label can be shorthand for a set of well-understood symptoms with known treatment. But other times it masks ignorance (the history of once real but now obsolete diseases suggests as much). The act of attaching a label makes one think the phenomenon has been explained, and uncertainty removed. In reality the problem of explanation has only been shunted to a different place. A good deal of mythological reasoning works this way, it seems to me. Where do winds come from? They are offspring of Typhoeus. Why do I find this person so attractive? It is the working of Eros, or Peitho, or both.Why is it right to obey this injunction? Because Themis so ordains it.

To an outsider, such reasoning looks circular. Human values or experiences have been projected onto a divine canvas, from which the explanation for the human practice or feeling is read back. But true though this observation might be, it is a very reductive way of looking at the phenomenon. On the inside things look much more complicated. For a start, people really believe in these abstractions and personifications. Their belief is reinforced by the teachings of their parents, the evident commitment of many other people, and the existence of social institutions of great antiquity. In modern occult societies and fringe cults, believers have strongly affective and personal relationships with their heroes and divinities, which

may seem totally fictional to outsiders; and the group may share a mythology, sometimes of amazing complexity. We have learned much about the power of ancient personification from the works by Emma Stafford and Amy Smith,[13] and Sarah Iles Johnston has shown in two fascinating recent articles how research on modern religious sects sheds light on the belief-world of Greek mythology.[14] In everyday life in Greece reminders of the mythical heritage were ubiquitous in the visual and built environment: in the decoration on domestic furnishings, the images on your coins, the herm at your door, hundreds of landmarks in village, town and country, the shrines, the great temples, the national and panhellenic sanctuaries. No social or public gathering was without its gods; casual references to gods and heroes peppered ordinary conversation. A plurality of media reinforced belief from every angle. The extreme anthropomorphism of Greek religion further reduced the distance between human and divine worlds: they are like us in many ways; they are all around us; indeed they are even inside of us. The reality of the belief-world was rendered undeniable by all of this continual confirmation. In such a world, the abstract projections and personifications are merely shorthand statements of what everybody knows to be true; it is not circular.

Let us take a closer look at one example of aetiology in action. Athenaeus (15.13 p. 674d), citing the Hellenistic historian Menodotus (*FGrHist* 541 F 1), says that the Carians wore garlands of willow in commemoration of Prometheus' release from bondage and his benefactions to humanity. Shortly afterwards he quotes a fragment of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Unbound* (fr. 202 Radt) which says that 'we place garlands on our heads in honour of Prometheus, as compensation for his bondage', and a fragment of the same writer's *Sphinx* (fr.

13 E. Stafford, *Worshipping Virtues: Personification and the Divine in Ancient Greece* (London and Swansea 2000); see also E. Stafford and J. Herrin, edd., *Personification in the Greek World: From Antiquity to Byzantium* (Aldershot 2005); A. Smith, *Polis and Personification in Classical Athenian Art* (Leiden 2011).

14 S.I. Johnston, 'Narrating Myths: Story and Belief in Ancient Greece', *Arethusa* 48 (2015) 169–215; 'The Greek Mythic Story World', *Arethusa* 48 (2015) 283–311.

235) which says that the garland is 'the best of bonds, according to Prometheus'. Hyginus in his *Astronomy* (2.15) has a similar note on the garland worn by Prometheus as a punishment. Now consider a passage in the *Library* of Apollodorus (2.119), which there is good reason to think is based on the mythographer Pherecydes of Athens. Pherecydes was writing about 465 BC which is to say during Aeschylus' working lifetime. Apollodorus says that, after he freed Prometheus, Herakles 'chose for himself the bond of olive'. Prometheus as we know had an important cult at Athens, and a festival the Prometheia. From these passages it is an easy inference that garlands were worn at the festival, and that they were made from withies of olive rather than willow. Willow was an obvious choice in a context of binding, but at Athens only the olive would do. Normally the garland is a positive signifier; in this case, interestingly, it does double duty. On the one hand, it is a punishment, reminding worshippers of the offence against Zeus; on the other hand, it celebrates the triumphant release of Prometheus and the benefits he bestowed on us. Greek ambivalence and anxiety about technology and progress is well known already from Hesiod's telling of the Prometheus tale, and of course it is the stuff of the surviving *Prometheus Bound*, which might have been started by Aeschylus and finished by his son. The craft industries at Athens were very important not only to the artisans but to the city as a whole. The olive too was central to its economy, but also one of its most potent signifiers; its appearance on the tetradrachms forcibly imposed on the Athenian empire visibly linked money, power, and culture. We know relatively little about the Prometheia, but the tiny detail of the olive is entirely typical of the way in which Greek ritual weaves multiple signifiers together to form a thick texture of meaning. The power of the group – in this case, craftsmen as a subset of the Athenian people – to create religious feeling is something we learned long ago from Durkheim; what we may add now is a much finer awareness of the way that complex forces interact – linguistic, symbolic, performative – in the awareness of the invidual, and of the group; the way cognition is

shared or distributed amongst individuals in reaction to each other and to external stimuli (recall the outdoor mass) is also a branch of these studies, in which Douglas Cairns and his colleagues in Edinburgh are making important contributions.[15]

In a really good aetiology, all the data are accounted for, and everything fits our presuppositions and expectations; the Q.E.D ('and that's why we...') has a snap to it, crisp as a Mozart cadence. Is that feeling of satisfaction perhaps the ultimate *raison d'être* of myth? Might we not say that the fundamental 'programme of action' is neither biological nor cultural, but psychological? What is hard-wired, as I said before, is a propensity, a cognitive capacity, a potential; it is therefore flexible and adaptable, feeding off other programmes but also creating them. Since the Neolithic revolution there have been fundamental changes in cognition and genetic make-up – and the influence is not all one-way, from biology to culture. Burkert borrowed the formula 'lack – lack liquidated' from Alan Dundes to describe the Proppian quest programme: could the fundamental lack be one of knowledge? We feel this lack acutely, and design stratagems that make us feel as if the lack is liquidated. The mechanisms by which we do this are very closely related to processes of ideology and belief, which to us are very real; it is a development very much to be welcomed that the concept of 'belief' has come back in to the centre of the study of ancient religion, and alongside that a growing interest in how modern studies of human cognition can help us understand the ancient world.[16]

An important point about the myth-making of ancient society is that it is completely bottom-up and organic, and often very messy. Competing aetia may be on offer. The aetiology of cults that have not had the benefit, if that is the right word, of intervention and control from the polis is particularly chaotic. Yet even at the exalted level of the polis explanations can be surprisingly flexible. We know of three

15 See the History of Distributed Cognition project website http://www.hdc.ed.ac.uk/ (accessed 25 June 2017).

16 For a recent overview of some relevant work see Thomas Harrison, 'Beyond the *Polis*? New Approaches to Greek Religion', *JHS* 135 (2015) 165–80.

separate stories accounting for the origins of the Panathenaea: one to do with Erichthonius and the chariot-race (the apobatai); another to do with Theseus; another to do with Athena and the Titanomachy.[17] We know of several competing accounts of how the Palladion (the statue of Athena at the lawcourt so named) came to Athens.[18] These were not fractious scholars' constructs but stories battling it out in the streets. Sometimes one can see how they work together to account for different aspects of the same festival, but other times they are irreconcilable. Or a myth may be fairly stable, such as that of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, but just how it explains the ritual actions may be a matter of dispute. Myths and their relation to their explananda change constantly, whether these myths are religious, historical or scientific; the dynamic is unavoidable given that humans cannot resist asking 'why' but are usually not in a position to give a definitive answer.

The reasons this or that tale gains purchase are various: the degree to which it reflects the concerns of the particular audience (and there were many different audiences); the authority that vouches for the myth – a poet, perhaps, or an artist, a philosopher or a civic official; the myth's consistency with other accounts; the virtuosity of the story-telling. Any or all of these factors may contribute to success; and success often goes by the name of 'truth'. I have hitherto concentrated for reasons of economy on aetiological myth, in which explanations are fairly direct – we do this now, because Theseus did so then – but there are myths in which the explanations are more indirect: they may encode and exemplify values (heroic values, civic values, family values) rather than giving an account of origins. In all cases, however, the truth of myth is transitory, since it depends on assumptions and values that will change in time. Is it worrying that our explanations are ultimately false coin? That is a pessimistic way to look at it. They are not *entirely* false. I find myself once again in agreement with Plato (worryingly,

17 For details see Robert Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford 2005) 253–69.

18 See R. Fowler, 'History', in E. Eidinow and J. Kindt, edd., *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Religion* (Oxford 2015) 195–209 at 206.

since I abhor both his metaphysics and his politics): in the *Republic* (2.377a) he remarks that there are two kinds of *logoi*; myths are the false kind, generally speaking, 'but there is some truth in them'. Myths *do* contain truth, but the trouble is knowing which part is true. We do not have access to the god's-eye view; nonetheless, we often manage to do rather well with this imperfect toolkit. And we never stop trying. Indeed we are constitutionally unable to stop trying. But I also wonder if human beings really *want* to know the answers. There is a charming story about Eduard Fraenkel that seems pertinent here. Someone said to him, won't it be wonderful when we get to heaven – there we will find the original text of all of Aeschylus' plays, just as he wrote them, without any corruptions or interpolations. We will find out at last which conjectures are correct. What bliss! To which Fraenkel replied, 'That would not be heaven for a scholar'. The search for answers, not the answers themselves, is what lies within our grasp. We can choose to lament the limitations of that grasp; or we can embrace the chance to play an exhilarating game – a curious game, which only works if one thinks it is *not* a game, that one is playing for everything. As the poet said, man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?

And so I come to the last way of reading my title, 'what's in a myth?', which is, why does myth matter? For studying Greek society, the foundational status of Greek myth has long been obvious. Even on a traditional understanding of 'the Greek myths' as stories about their gods and heroes, this was a culture absolutely saturated in myth, and obsessed with its own past – rather the opposite of our own, depressingly presentist society. I spoke earlier of the ubiquitous presence of myth in everyday life; myth was never far from grander arenas, either, whether lawcourt or assembly or international embassy. Life-and-death alliances could be clinched by a perceived mythological connection. And of course myth was the wellspring of high literary and artistic culture. So much is very familiar. If, however, we entertain a broader conception of myth as a way of understanding through stories, we may look for new and unexpected ways to bring Greek myth, history, poetry,

science, and philosophy together under one umbrella. In my work on mythography I have tried to see what happens to our appreciation of Greek myth and history, mythography and historiography if we consider these two activities as species of the same genus. Brilliant and pioneering work has been done by Geoffrey Lloyd on Greek ways of thinking (and not just Greek) since his first book *Polarity and Analogy* of 1966,[19] and Rosalind Thomas's *Herodotus in Context* (Cambridge 2000) turns up a myriad of surprising links between the Hippocratic doctors, the Sophists and the historians in the way they argue their cases. If these writers have focused more on the 'explanation' side of the formula, others such as Richard Buxton, Nick Lowe and Irene de Jong have done great work on the 'story' side, thinking about kinds of stories, the contexts of story-telling, and the cognitive mechanisms of narrative.[20] The literature on the last of these topics has been burgeoning since Lowe's book.[21] There is, I think, great potential in bringing these two areas together, and asking about the interface between story and explanation in Greek culture. When, where and why do narrative and explanation converge and diverge? To what extent to the qualities of a good story overlap with the qualities of a good explanation? What sorts of narrative moves are deployed to fill in the gaps in the data?

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19 Among his many works in which he touches on these subjects I mention here *The Revolutions of Wisdom. Studies in the Claims and Practice of Ancient Greek Science* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1987); *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections. Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (Oxford 2004); *Cognitive Variations: Reflections on the Unity and Diversity of the Human Mind* (Oxford 2007); *The Ideals of Inquiry: An Ancient History* (Oxford 2014); *Analogical Investigations: Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Human Reasoning* (Cambridge 2015).

20 R.G.A. Buxton, *Imaginary Greece: Contexts of Mythology* (Cambridge 1994); *Forms of Astonishment: Greek Myths of Metamorphosis* (Oxford 2009); *Myths and Tragedies in their Ancient Contexts* (Oxford 2013); N.J. Lowe, *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative* (Cambridge 2000); I.J.F. de Jong, *Narratology and Classics: A Practical Guide* (Oxford 2014), which gives references to her many earlier explorations of narratology in Greek literature.

21 See e.g. Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA 2009); Arnim W. Geertz and Jeppe Sinding Jensen, edd., *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture. Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative* (London and New York 2011); Douglas Cairns and Ruth Scodel, edd., *Defining Greek Narrative* (Edinburgh 2014).

What counts as truth? What are the differences between truth-oriented narratives like myths that make use of fictitious elements, and outright fiction? These and many other related questions could be put to texts of all kinds, not only poetic but historical, philosophical, and scientific. For instance, one might ask about speechifying, that inveterate Greek habit. Speeches are used in many genres to explore character motivations, display emotions, set out arguments; we could usefully consider the relationship between speech-making and explanation as a single, if multifarious, phenomenon across Greek literature. Greek historians are particularly prone to seek the causes of events in personal motives; for instance, according to Herodotus the cause of the Ionian revolt was Aristogoras' failure to deliver the island of Naxos to Artaphernes and his fear that he would be deprived of his position in Miletus as a result (Hdt. 5.35).[22] It is perhaps not surprising then, that if historians attribute causes to individuals' ambitions and desires, and speeches had been traditional since epic to explore such matters, that we find a lot of speeches in the historians; yet it remains a strange habit to modern sensibilities. It's another huge topic, and I don't have a ready explanation, but let me draw your attention to an interesting passage in Herodotus that offers a small illustration of what I am talking about. The Persian fleet, amongst which are many Ionians pressed into service, is sailing south towards Attica after the battle of Artemisium. According to Herodotus,

> Themistocles took the fastest ships and called on the way at places where drinking water was to be found, and cut notices on the rocks near by for the Ionians to read ─ as they did when they moved up on the following day. 'Men of Ionia' ─ his message ran ─ 'it is wrong that you should make war upon your fathers and help to bring Greeks into subjection. The best thing you can do is to join our side; if this is impossible, you might at least remain neutral, and ask the Carians to do the same. If you are unable to do either, but are held by a compulsion so strong that it puts desertion out of the question, there is still another course open to you: in the next battle, remember that you

22 Histiaeus of Miletus gave him a nudge, says Herodotus; he too was acting for personal reasons.

and we are of the same blood, and that our quarrel with Persia arose originally on your account ─ and fight badly.'[23]

Now I don't know how you picture the scene, but if you take Herodotus at his word, that's a lot of rocks. At each watering-place too. Imagine the Ionian sailors trying casually to read all of this while the Persians looked the other way. The absurdity of the picture warns us, however, that this is the wrong way to think about the passage. Probably the message on the rocks was not much more than 'Ionians desert!', as Herodotus was no doubt perfectly aware. What's happening here is that the historian imagines Themistocles making a speech directly to the Ionians, like a general before a battle. He appeals to their personal motives; Herodotus adds after this passage that Themistocles reasoned either that the message would work (if the Persians didn't hear about it – seems unlikely) or that the Persians would be reluctant to deploy the Ionian ships, thus weakening their forces. Themistocles' own reasoning, the first object of Herodotus' consideration, thus involves an assessment of others' motivation. The passage illustrates how easily the speech-reflex kicks in in Greek historians. It also suggests that the 'reality' that the historian is trying to explain is different from the 'reality' a modern reader might first think of (what was actually written on those rocks). A fresh look at speeches and other explanatory devices through the lens of cognitive studies could bring many interesting insights.

There is a larger sense, however, in which myth matters, larger than Greece or any other society, a sense brought to mind by the Fraenkel anecdote. We see all around us today the grave dangers posed by those who deal in false certainty. Dogma both religious and political trounces pragmatism. Socrates long ago taught the necessity of humility in ignorance; it is a lesson we perpetually forget. To understand that myth, with all its tentativeness, is the foundation of all human sciences, is not to undermine the status of truth; it is to acknowledge just how precious and rare a commodity it is, and to

23 Hdt. 8.22, tr. A. de Sélincourt.

appreciate how very, very difficult it is to attain. My principles may be your anathema; let us discuss the reasons why before we resort to other means of settling our dispute. There are many who will refuse to discuss, I know, and we must be realistic; but let us at least make the effort. The nature of public discourse these days is very alarming: relentless shouting, hypercritical distrust of everything and everyone, or, conversely, blind and hypocritical certainty that I am right and you are wrong. Classicists can take the long view. We are extremely well placed to try to moderate this lamentable state of affairs, each of us in our own way according to capacity and inclination, but all of us through our teaching, where we can hope to instill in our students the understanding that the greatest harm in human history has been caused by those who have failed to appreciate the precariousness of truth – who have failed, in other words, to appreciate what's in a myth.

Here endeth the lesson. It is a long way from a tiny corner of rural Ontario to this podium, and I thank you *ab imo pectore* for the honour you have done me in making me President of this great Association.