

Man and Myth¹

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1 Original "El hombre y el mito, El alma matinal y otras estaciones del hombre de hoy." *In Obras Completas*, 10th ed. (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 1987), 3:23–28. Transcribed by V. S. Conttren from VANDEN, Harry E.; BECKER, Marc (ed.). **José Carlos Mariátegui: an anthology**. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011, pp. 383-388.

I.

All modern intellectual investigations on the global crisis lead to a unanimous conclusion: bourgeois civilization suffers from a lack of myth, of faith, of hope. Missing is the expression of its material bankruptcy. The rationalist experience has had the paradoxical effect of leading humanity to the disconsolate conviction that reason cannot offer a way forward. Rationalism has only served to discredit reason. Mussolini has said that demagogues killed the idea of freedom. More accurate, undoubtedly, is that rationalists killed the idea of reason. Reason has eradicated the residue of old myths from the soul of bourgeois civilization. Western man for some time has placed Reason and Science at the altar of dead gods. But neither Reason nor Science can be a myth. Neither Reason nor Science can meet the need of the infinite that exists in man. Reason itself has been challenged, demonstrating to humanity that it is not enough. Only Myth possesses the precious virtue of satisfying its deepest self.

Reason and Science have eroded and dissolved the prestige of the ancient religions. Eucken in his book on the meaning and value of life clearly and accurately explains the mechanism of this solvent.² Creations of science have given humanity a feeling of power. Humanity, previously overwhelmed with the supernatural, has suddenly discovered an exorbitant power to correct and rectify Nature. This feeling has removed the roots of the old metaphysics from its soul.

But man, as philosophy defines him, is a metaphysical animal. He does not live productively without a metaphysical conception of life. Myth moves man in

² Rudolf Christoph Eucken (January 5, 1846–September 15, 1926) was a German philosopher and writer.

history. Without myth, the history of humanity has no sense of history. History is made by people possessed and illuminated by a higher belief, by a superhuman hope; others are the anonymous chorus of the drama. The crisis of bourgeois civilization appeared obvious from the moment that this civilization displayed its lack of myth. Renan, once proud of positivism, melancholically highlighted the decline of religion, and was disquieted about the future of European civilization. "Religious people," he wrote, "live in a shadow. On what will those who come after us live?"³ The despairing question still awaits an answer.

Bourgeois civilization has fallen into scepticism. The war seemed to revive the myth of the liberal revolution: Liberty, Democracy, Peace. But the bourgeoisie's allies soon sacrificed them to their interests and grudges at the conference of Versailles. The rejuvenation of these myths nevertheless served to fulfil the liberal revolution in Europe. Its invocation sentenced to death the residue of feudalism and absolutism that still survives in Central Europe, Russia, and Turkey. And above all, the war proved once more in vivid and tragic fashion the value of myth. The people who were capable of victory were those capable of a massive myth.

II

Modern man feels the urgent need for myth. Scepticism is infertile, and humanity is not satisfied with infertility. An exasperated and at times impotent "will to believe," so sharp in postwar people, was already intense and categorical in pre-war people. A poem by Henri Frank, *Dance in Front of the Ark*, is a document

³ Ernest Renan, **Feuilles détachées faisant suite aux Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse**, 2nd ed. (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1892), 17-18.

I keep on hand regarding the mood of literature in the pre-war years. A great and deep emotion beats in this poem. For this, above all, let me quote him. Henri Frank tells us of his deep “will to believe.” As an Israelite, he tries first to illuminate his soul with faith in the god of Israel. The attempt is futile. The words of the god of his fathers sound strange at this time. The poet does not understand them. He declares himself deaf to their meaning. As a modern man, the word from Sinai cannot move him. A dead faith cannot be resurrected. It is buried under twenty centuries. “Israel has died from having given a god to the world.” The voice of the modern world proposes its fictional and precarious myth: Reason. But Henri Frank is unable to accept it. “Reason,” he says, “is not the universe.”

La raison sans Dieu c'est la chambre sans lampe.⁴

The poet leaves in search of God. He is urgent to satisfy his thirst for infinity and eternity. But the pilgrimage is unsuccessful. The pilgrim wanted to make do with the illusion of daily life.

*¡Ah! sache franchement saisir de tout moment—
la fuyante fumée et le sue éphémère.⁵*

He finally thinks that the “truth is enthusiasm without hope.” The man carries truth within himself.

*Si l'Arche est vide où tu pensais trouver la loi,
rien n'est réel que ta danse.⁶*

4 “Reason without god is a room without a lamp.”

5 “Ah! To know to boldly seize each moment—the fleeting hope and the ephemeral essence”

6 “If the Ark is empty where you hoped to find the law, nothing is real but your dance.”

III

Philosophers give us a truth similar to that of poets. Contemporary philosophy has swept away the positivist mediocre edifice. It has clarified and demarcated the modest confines of reason. It has formulated the current theories of Myth and Action. It is useless, according to these theories, to search for an absolute truth. The truth of today is not the truth of tomorrow. A truth is only valid for a period of time. We should be content with a relative truth.

But this relativist language is not accessible or intelligible to the common people. Common people are not so subtle. Humanity is reluctant to follow a truth that it does not believe to be absolute and supreme. It is futile to recommend the excellence of faith, of myth, of action. We must propose a faith, a myth, an action. Where will we find the myth able to revive the spirit of the declining order?

The question annoys the intellectual and spiritual anarchy of bourgeois civilization. Some souls are striving to restore the Middle Ages and the Catholic ideal. Others work to return to the Renaissance and the classical ideal. Fascism, in the words of its theorists, has been given a medieval and Catholic mentality. They think they represent the spirit of the Counter-Reformation; but on the other hand, they claim to embody the idea of Nation, a typically liberal idea. The theory seems to take pleasure in inventing the most affected sophistry. But all attempts to resurrect myths are doomed to failure. Each era wishes to have its own sense of the world. There is nothing more sterile than trying to revive a dead myth. Jean R. Bloch, in an article published in the journal *Europe*, writes words of profound truth on this topic. In the Cathedral of Chartres, he felt the wonderfully faithful voice of the distant Middle Ages. But he warns how much that voice is foreign to

the concerns of this time. "It would be crazy," he writes, "to think that the same faith would repeat the same miracle. Look at your surroundings: somewhere a new, active mysticism capable of miracles, is able to fill the miserable with hope, raise martyrs, and transform the world with promises of goodness and virtue. When you have found it, designated it, appointed it, you will absolutely not be the same man."

Ortega y Gasset speaks of the "disenchanted soul." Romain Rolland speaks of the "enchanted soul." Which of the two is right? Both souls exist. The "disenchanted soul" of Ortega y Gasset is the soul of a decadent bourgeois civilization. The "enchanted soul" of Romain Rolland is the soul of the framers of the new civilization. Ortega y Gasset only sees the sunset, the twilight, *tramonto*, *der Untergang*. Romain Rolland sees the sunrise, the dawn, *der Aurgang*. What most clearly and obviously differentiates them in this era of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is myth. The bourgeoisie no longer has any myths. It has become incredulous, sceptical, nihilistic. The reborn liberal myth has aged too much. The proletariat has a myth: the social revolution. It moves toward that myth with a passionate and active faith. The bourgeoisie denies; the proletariat affirms. The bourgeois intellectuals entertain themselves with a rationalist critique of the method, theory, revolutionary technique. What a misunderstanding! The strength of revolutionaries is not in their science; it is in their faith, in their passion, in their will. It is a religious, mystical, spiritual force. It is the force of myth. The revolutionary excitement, as I wrote in an article on Gandhi, is a religious emotion.⁷ Religious motives have been displaced from the heavens to earth. They are not divine; they are human, social.

⁷ José Carlos Mariátegui, "Gandhi," in **La escena contemporánea**, 14th ed. (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 1987), 193–99.

The religious, mystical, metaphysical character of socialism has been established for some time. Georges Sorel, one of the highest representatives of French thought of the twentieth century, wrote in his *Reflections on Violence* that “a new analogy has been discovered between religion and the revolutionary socialism which aims at the apprenticeship, preparation, and even reconstruction of the individual. This is a gigantic task. But Bergson has taught us that it is not only religion that occupies the profound region of our mental life; revolutionary myths equally have their place with religion.” Renan, as Sorel himself recalls, notes the religious faith of the socialists, showing their resistance to any disappointment: —After each abortive experiment they recommence their work: the solution is not yet found, but it will be. The idea that no solution exists never occurs to them, and therein lies their strength.”⁸

The same philosophy that teaches us the necessity of myth and faith is usually incapable of understanding the faith and myth of modern times. It is the “Poverty of Philosophy,” to quote Marx. Professional intellectuals will not find the path of faith; the masses will find it. It will later fall to the philosophers to codify the thought that emerges from this great mass achievement. Were the philosophers of Roman decadence able to understand the language of Christianity? The philosophy of bourgeois decadence can have no better future.

—*Mundial*, Lima, 16 January 1925.

8 Georges Sorel, **Reflections on Violence** (New York: Collier Books, 1950), 52.