

# IMPRIMIS

## "Modern Values and the Challenge of Myth"

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the author of *Doorways Through Time: The Romance of Archaeology* (Tarcher/Putnam, 1987, 1991), *Art and the Romans* (Coronado Press, 1975), and editor of *The Conflict of Generations in Ancient Greece and Rome* (H.R. Gruner:

Amsterdam, 1976). His

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Preview: *Myth, whether it is the myth of the ancient Greeks and Romans or the myth of the Jews and Christians, is about truth and universals. It is about good and evil, virtue and vice. It is about the shared experiences of the human condition from pain, fear, cruelty, and defeat to joy, heroism, love, and triumph.*

As Stephen Bertman argues, many of the myths we have inherited from the past still have the power to profoundly affect our ideals and shape our lives. His remarks were delivered during Hillsdale College's September 1992 seminar on ancient myth.

### Aeneas and Ulysses: Ancient Heroes for a Modern World

Eastward across the sea from Greece lay the ancient citadel of Troy. Legend tells how a thousand ships once sailed there carrying an invading army. Besieged by Greek warriors, the fortified city finally fell after a decade of war.

The last battle took place inside the city walls. Having penetrated its defenses by guile, Greek commandos put the city to the torch. In the final struggle many Trojans heroically laid down their lives. The casualties would surely have included a Trojan prince named Aeneas. But the gods, we are told, kept him from throwing his life away in a cause they knew was lost. Instead, they urged him to flee, gathering up as many of his fellow citizens as he could find and commandeering ships for their escape. The city in flames, its sanctuaries vio-

lated, Aeneas moved through the ruins, leading the survivors to the shore.

The gods promised Aeneas that they would lead him to a new homeland, but ten years of searching, struggle, and sacrifice lay ahead until it was found. Surviving many perils and temptations, Aeneas at last led his people to Italy, where they were destined to found the nation of Rome.

At the very time that Aeneas was searching for a homeland, another veteran of the Trojan War was also sailing the seas. Ulysses, an enemy of Aeneas, was trying to get back home to Greece with the Greek soldiers he had commanded at Troy. Like the Trojans, Ulysses and his men would face countless trials and tragedies on their homeward way.

The goddess Calypso offered to make Ulysses divine if only he would stay with her. Likewise, Aeneas was tempted to remain forever with Dido, the sensuous queen of Carthage. But both heroes felt compelled to continue their journeys. Aeneas was fulfilling a vow to found a new nation, and Ulysses was returning home to help the wife and son he had left behind 20 years ago before, loved ones who now desperately needed him. Both heroes chose hardship over ease, danger over security and, in Ulysses' case, death over immortality.

### From Legend to Literature

Today we know the ancient stories of Aeneas and Ulysses from Vergil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Along with the *Iliad*, Homer's epic poem came to serve as the bible of classical Greece, and similarly, Vergil's became the national epic of Rome. But literary classics are like

mountains. Because their venerable outlines are so familiar, we look upon their presence as benign, ignoring the immense seismic pressures primordially responsible for their form.

The *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, which were legends long before they became literature, arose out of extended periods of social turmoil. The *Odyssey* was created between the 12th and 9th centuries B.C., during the Dark Ages of Greece when political and economic chaos followed the Heroic Age. Though this Greek epic portrays a world of palaces and feudal splendor, it actually depicts a culture that had ceased to exist. To a nostalgic audience that ached for order, the *Odyssey* held out the hope of a life restored. You *can* go home again, it argued, if—like Ulysses—you exert every fiber of muscle and every sinew of mind. Even those who know the poem well often fail to realize that more than half of the story deals not with maritime adventure but with the moral reconstruction of domestic society.

In like fashion, in the first century B.C., the Roman poet Vergil took pre-existing tales and used them to compose a sermon to inspire his people. The Romans had endured a century of class struggle, revolution, and civil war, terminating in the fall of the Republic. Through Aeneas' example, Vergil showed his fellow citizens that they had a special destiny, one that they could fulfill by imitating their heroic ancestor's virtues of dedication and self-sacrifice.

### The Power of the Past

In sailing through the turbulent waters of their time, the ancient Greeks and Romans could draw strength not only from legend and literature, but from the temporal perspectives of their respective cultures. In facing the perils of an uncharted future, they were sustained by a firm hold on the past.

The value the Greeks and Romans assigned to the past is symbolized by two figures from classical mythology. Achievements

in the arts, the Greeks believed, were inspired by divine powers they called Muses (hence the word "music"). Mnemosyne, whose name means "memory," was the mother goddess of the Muses and the arts. Underlying this relation was the conviction that creativity in the arts requires an under-

what we disparage as mythology the Greeks and Romans would have called their most ancient history, no less valid for the distance that separated them from the events their stories described. Myths embodied truths that transcended time. As such, they deserved special reverence.

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### The Burden of

The practice of referring to the past was easier

for the ancients than it is for us. First of all, there was less past to remember. Events were more comprehensible because their numbers had been winnowed by tradition, the precious residue preserved in memory and passed on orally

from generation to generation. The old and the wise and the storytellers were the keepers of the legacy, and the telling and retelling of treasured stories ingrained them in the hearts of the listeners.

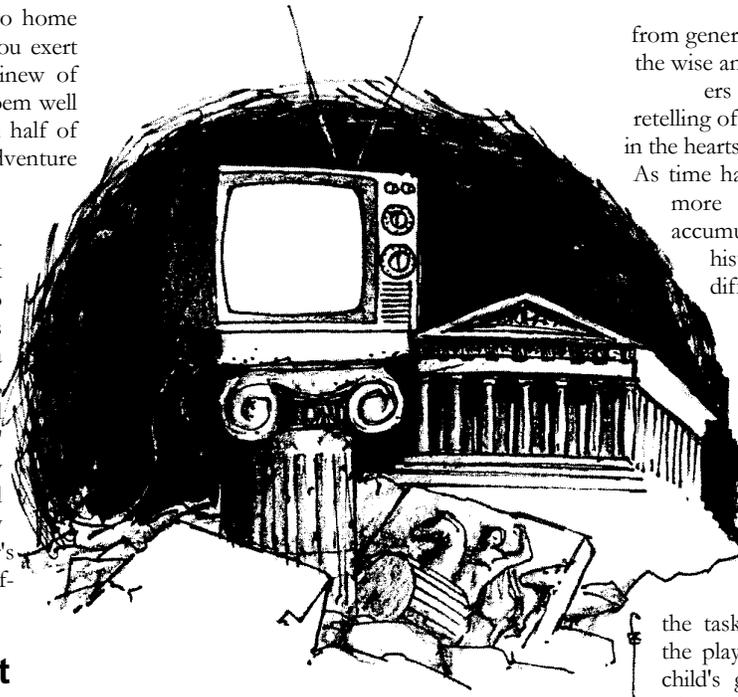
As time has gone on, however, more and more factual information has accumulated in the storehouse of history. Its sheer bulk makes it difficult to distinguish what is worth knowing. The printed page, the flypaper of human thought, attracts and adheres to itself all the buzzing and expiring minutiae of experience. The mass production and collection of books after the invention of the printing press radically expanded the burden of what can be learned and has made the task of learning intimidating. Like the player in a perverse version of the child's game, "I Pack My Trunk," he whose turn is historically last must memorize the most.

This explains a fundamental truth that few who enter the multicultural debate acknowledge: as creatures of time, we are all multicultural. And like the DNA that is encoded with our biological past, our cultural matrix is inscribed with the preferences and prejudices of earlier times. We

standing of tradition. In a larger sense, the tree of civilization cannot flourish unless its roots draw nourishment from the past.

To the Romans, Janus, for whom the month of January is named, was the god of beginnings. Janus was one of the most peculiar gods of mythology, for he had two faces, one which looked ahead and one which looked back, reminding that every new undertaking depends for its success on the guidance people can borrow from experience.

To speak of something as a "myth" today implies that it never really happened. Yet



may ignore our ancestry if we wish and elect to be ideological orphans, or we may search out our parentage. But the latter course is not easy. Pushing through the crowded terminal of civilization, we will have to hang on not only to our own luggage, but to the bulging, clumsy trunks of previous ages. No wonder so many students, faced with such a daunting task, resort to hiring Cliff, the friendly porter, to help carry their load.

But while Cliff's Notes may help a student pass an exam, they can't help a whole civilization pass the more challenging test of time. To do that, a people must have a deeper, historical in-sight into their own condition.

## Cultural Amnesia

The 18th century historian Gibbon, the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, lived 13 centuries after Aeneas' heirs had been vanquished. We are only two centuries removed from Gibbon's time, yet we have forgotten most of what Gibbon knew. Eight centuries separated the classical Greeks from the Trojan War, yet they remembered it in profound detail, just as the Romans remembered it centuries after.

Americans, by contrast, know little of what happened in their own country only decades ago. According to a Gallup Poll of college seniors sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in the late 1980s, 58 percent didn't know who was pres-

ident when the Korean War began, 42 percent couldn't place the Civil War in the right half century, and 24 percent thought Columbus landed in America in the 1500s. If even recent history blurs in the memory, there must be other factors apart from the passage of time that explain our gross and progressive cultural amnesia.

One such factor was the industrial revolution, which, by rapidly gratifying material desires, led to an increasing preoccupation with the present. A second factor has been

the electronic revolution, which has placed an even greater emphasis upon immediacy. Television is the best example of this phenomenon. It exists from moment to moment. Its instant images appear and disappear with the speed of light, melting the distinction between appearance and reality, and creating the illusion that all things are sensually accessible.

By contracting time itself until every-thing seems short-term, television desensitizes the mind to the notion of long-term consequences. What was past is no longer prologue. It is curbside trash.

Almost 50 years ago, Sir Winston Churchill warned that an "iron curtain" had descended across the continent of Europe. Today, across America and across the world, another iron curtain is descending—an electronic curtain—less apparent

and more pervasive than the curtain of Churchill's day. It is a curtain not geographical but temporal, one that isolates us from all other times but now

## The Challenge of Myth

**A**s an embodiment of ancient truth, myth challenges this kind of worship at the altar of the present. And because myth is enduring, it blatantly defies the law of disposability that often dictates human relationships and modern values.

Myth proclaims the *continuity* of existence and declares that a life lived only in the present is a life-betrayed. It also offers a definition of what it means to be human—a definition that still has the power to move men, even after thousands of years.

Myth is also, finally, about understanding the nature of time itself. Through ancient myth, each of us is a time traveler, journeying from past to future, oblivious as one melts into the other—like reveling passengers on a cruise ship, unconscious in the moonlit night of the speed at which we cross the ocean swell. We surrender to time, yielding fluidly to its flow like marine creatures carried on by an underwater current. For time is our sea. **8**