

Kirsti Katariina Simonsuuri

## Myth and Literature



Born in 1945 in Helsinki. Cand. Phil. in Classics and Philosophy from Helsinki University in 1971, MA in English from Edinburgh University in 1969, Cambridge University 1971-74 (Finland's "Rhodes"), Université de Strasbourg, Sciences humaines 1975-76, Ph. D. from Cambridge University in 1977. Docent in Comparative Literature at the Universities of Helsinki and Turku. Senior Research Fellow at the Academy of Finland 1981-89, National Fellowship for Artists 1990-92. The British Academy Wolfson Award for Younger Scholar in 1981. A Visiting Fellow at the Warburg Institute in London in 1981-82 (British Academy), at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel in 1983 (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), Ahmanson Fellow at the UCLA in 1984, a Fulbright Scholar at Harvard University in 1984-86, and at Columbia University 1986-88, and a Visiting Scholar at the Centre Louis Gernet de la Recherche Comparée sur les Sociétés Anciennes in 1979, 1989—90 (CNRS). Publications include *Homer's Original Genius*, Cambridge University Press 1979, and studies on ancient and modern literature, numerous collections of poetry, essays, novels in Finnish, some translated into English, French, Hungarian and other languages. J. H. Erkkö Prize for the best first book in Finland in 1980, Columbia University Translation Prize for *Enchanting Beasts* in 1991. — Address: Vuorimiehenkatu 4.A.27, SF-00140 Helsinki, Finland.

My time at the Wissenschaftskolleg has been useful in many unexpected ways. First of all, I have not been able to complete all my plans as delineated before my arrival; secondly, there have been several overtures to new work which are perhaps valuable and promising. The wonderful friendliness and superb professionalism of the administrative, secretarial and library staff have greatly contributed to this optimistic view. One can never see every facet of a given moment nor its significance to future developments, but, writing this now while looking at a Grunewald garden and lake, one can be reasonably hopeful.

As a Greek scholar, my interest in myth is of long duration and endurance, and has been rekindled in the activity of writing poetry and fiction. I maintain the view of a writer as an enlightened myth-maker in the modern world, a view where telling stories may serve the function of demythologizing as well as of inventing new mythos. Both in myth and in literature there exists a level of meaning which goes beyond the literal meaning. But myth does not limit its function to literature. I would like to see myth as a form that exists at the very foundation of culture; and therefore our criticism of culture, our "Kulturwissenschaft" is, in the first place, a criticism of myth. It is important to inquire in which particular and essentially variable ways myth, and archetype of all narration, can explain the social and cultural function of stories and story-telling.

Myths are not literature, however. Myths do not need literature, but literature needs myths. Perhaps myths could be seen as the schemes of meaning that yield new narratives in different cultural contexts. The fact that myths are tales, verbal forms, can also mean that they have philosophical content, or existential content, and thus yield philosophical meanings.

In the Greek world as elsewhere, mythological narratives most commonly relate to the origin of things. How things began? What happened in the beginning? Why are we like this, and so forth. The cosmogonic myths tend to be repeated and retold in other types of mythical tales, such as the foundation and succession myths. The early struggles of the cosmogonic myths set up parallels for later myths that may indeed display features more commonly associated with folktales or even fairytales. It seems to me that this cosmogonic struggle provides the most common pattern of Greek tales. It is first a struggle between order and disorder; and, once order has been established, it becomes a struggle between order and power, a struggle about power. The struggle between Kronos and Zeus is repeated in the struggle between Laios and Oidipus; between Labdakos and Laios, as the line of Kadmos in the city of Thebes performs its mythical and historical role of trying to eliminate deviations, of trying to correct the line. The struggle between Zeus and Prometheus, and for example, between Thanatos and Sisyphos show a similar structure, while displaying a great number of variants within the structure.

Thus my interest focused on the myths that seem to have cognitive functions, as keys to culture. They may not be evident, as the cognition is buried under metaphoric and polysemic language (as in poetry), as well as under fragmentation of meaning in referentiality and intertextuality. Allusion and intertextuality are powerful strategies of literary tradition, and may in part obscure, and have obscured, the more fundamental nature of original myths. Tradition can carry plenty that is simply false,

and there is such a mechanism as a respect for tradition, too, that distorts the understanding of myth as an archetypal form.

Greek tragedy, from where many of my texts derive, is still very close to the culture where these myths originated, although Greek tragedy introduces emotion to the world of myth devoid of feeling. Whereas in the myths themselves the cosmogonic struggles (and struggles about succession or identity) might have resulted in some sort of order, at least in the sense that they gave an explanation of how things are what they are, in Greek tragedy there is a tendency to intensify the consequences of such transgressions, and the consequences are suffering, loss of self, of individual life. Tragedy can therefore illuminate the world of myths with great insight. Tragedy places the boundaries of metaphors differently from us, but possibly not unlike the way those archaic societies which produced the myths did, and this is why we tend to feel that these poetic interpretations have "mythical power". Thus it seems that the violence of the Greek cosmogonic, succession and foundation myths, which later developed into myths concerning identity and knowledge, is a necessary consequence of the physical nature by which emotional life was metaphorically understood. There is no "as if" in Greek myth, and tragedy shows very little of it either.

Some of the year's work can be summarized as follows\_ I have finished some articles on myth and literature, to form part of a future book on these themes; and progressed somewhat in my book on Greek drama. I have written a radio play, which contains a scene experienced in a Berlin restaurant, and some longer poems for my next collection of poetry. The excitement of the German political and intellectual scene has inspired essays for newspapers and journals, which may later prove the kernel of "a Berlin diary". With Bettina Heintz and Luisa Passerini we organized a women's forum at the Wissenschaftskolleg in March and April and invited speakers from Berlin to discuss the theme of "Die Frauen zwischen Ost and West". During a week in Paris in February, I was able to revisit the Centre Louis Gernet and talk to colleagues, among them, Pierre Vidal-Naquet at the Centre, and Jean Bollack, a former fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Throughout the year, I have given guest lectures and readings at various institutions both in Germany and elsewhere, among them, Munich, Bologna, the Hay-on-Wye Festival of Literature, and the Literaturhaus in Berlin.