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# The Nazi Myth

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe  
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Translated by Brian Holmes

## *Situation*

1. The following text was originally a relatively brief exposé delivered on 7 May 1980, in Schiltigheim (Bas-Rhin, France), at a conference on “The Mechanisms of Fascism” organized by the Committee for Information about the Holocaust. In this context, we sought to present nothing more than an outline of analyses that demand further development.<sup>1</sup> If we have slightly modified our text in this new presentation, it remains nonetheless an outline.

2. We are not historians—much less historians specializing in the study of Nazism. Consequently, one should not expect from us a factual description of the myths or mythical elements of Nazism, nor a description of Nazism’s exhumation and use of an ancient stock of mythic material, to be considered, perhaps, as specifically German in nature.

Such expectations would necessarily be ill-founded since, acknowledging our ignorance (we have read little of the epoch’s endless, monotonous literature), we believe this phenomenon to be relatively superficial and secondary. Like all nationalisms, Nazism drew from its tradition, the German tradition, a certain number of symbolic elements—among which the properly mythic elements (or

1. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has offered such developments in *La Fiction du politique* (Paris, 1987); Jean-Luc Nancy has proposed others, with respect to myth, in *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris, 1986). Both books are forthcoming in English.

more precisely, the properly mythological elements) are not the only, nor perhaps the most important ones. Like all nationalisms, in other words, Nazism exalted, in a backward-looking way, the German or more broadly Germanic historico-cultural tradition (which, indeed, was to become the object of efforts seeking its annexation to a "Germanism"). But in this exaltation—which indiscriminately revives folklore and *Volkslied*, postromantic peasant imagery and Hanseatic cities, anti-Napoleonic student "leagues" (*Bünde*), medieval guilds, chivalric orders, the Holy Roman Empire, and so on—a mythology (we'll call it that of Erda, Odin, and Wotan), that had long since been abandoned, despite Wagner and a few others, could hardly matter to anyone except certain intellectuals and artists, or possibly certain educators and professors. In short, such an exaltation has nothing specific about it (no more than the exaltation of Joan of Arc by the French state of Pétain). But what should interest us here is the specificity of Nazism. And it should occupy us in such a way that the examination of its mythology, of its "mists" and its suspicious prestige, does not fulfill, as it sometimes does, the role of a facile expedient, and ultimately of a (somewhat racist, or at least stupidly anti-German) delaying tactic, whose aim is to sidestep analysis altogether.

That is why we will not speak here of Nazism's *myths*, in the plural. But only of the myth of Nazism, or of the National-Socialist myth *as such*. We will speak, in other words, of the fashion by which National Socialism constitutes itself, with or without the use of myths, in a dimension, for a function, and with a self-assurance that all three can be properly termed mythic.

That is why, to continue, we will guard ourselves against the devalorization of these myths, in the manner whereby a very fine critical analysis (by Roland Barthes) was able, in conjoining the instruments of sociology, of Brechtian Marxism, and of semiotics, to

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dismantle the mythologems structuring the cultural unconscious of petit-bourgeois France. Before a phenomenon of such amplitude, before such a massive phenomenon as Nazism, an analysis of this sort would have absolutely no interest—nor, one could even wager, any pertinence.

3. What interests us and claims our attention in Nazism is, essentially, its *ideology*, in the definition Hannah Arendt has given of this term in her book on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In this work, ideology is defined as the totally self-fulfilling (and willfully self-fulfilling) logic of an idea, an idea “by which the movement of history is explained as one consistent process.” “The movement of history and the logical process of this notion,” Arendt continues, “are supposed to correspond to each other, so that whatever happens, happens according to the logic of one ‘idea.’”<sup>2</sup>

Ideology, in other words, interests us and claims our attention insofar as, on the one hand, it always proposes itself as a *political* explanation of the world, that is, as an explanation of *history* (or still further, if you wish, as an explanation of *Weltgeschichte*: not the “history of the world” but rather the “world-as-history,” a world consisting only of a process, and the necessity of that process) on the basis of a single concept—the concept of race, for example, or the concept of class—and insofar as, on the other hand, this ideological explanation or conception of the world (*Weltanschauung*: vision, intuition, comprehensive grasp of the world—a philosophical term of which National Socialism, as you will see, made great use) seeks to be a *total* explanation or conception. This totality signifies that the explanation is indisputable, leaving neither gaps nor remainders—unlike philosophical thought, from which ideology shamelessly draws the greater part of its resources but which is characterized by a risky, problematic style, what Arendt calls the “insecurity” of philosophical questioning (*OT*, p. 470). (It follows, then, that philosophy is also rejected by the ideology that solicits it, and consigned to the incertitude and the timorous hesitations of “intellectuality.”)

Here it would be necessary to rigorously show what kinds of relationships ideology, thus conceived as a total *Weltanschauung*, maintains with what Arendt calls “total domination” (*OT*, p. 436), that is to say, with what Carl Schmitt—basing himself in this on the authority both of the properly fascist discourse (that of Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile) and of the Jüngerian concept of “total mobilization” (which furnished a first definition of technology as total world power)—called the *Total State*.

It would further be necessary to rigorously demonstrate how the

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; New York, 1962), p. 469; hereafter abbreviated *OT*.

Total State is to be conceived as the *Subject-State* (whether it be a nation or humanity, whether it be a class, a race, or a party, this subject is or wills itself to be an absolute subject), such that in the last instance it is in modern philosophy, in the fully realized metaphysics of the Subject, that ideology finds its real guarantee: that is to say, in the thought of being (and/or of becoming, of history) defined as a subjectivity present to itself, as the support, the source, and the finality of representation, certitude, and will.

It would finally be necessary to rigorously demonstrate that the logic of the idea or of the subject, fulfilling itself in this way, is, as Hegel's analysis of the French Revolution permits us to see, first of all the Terror<sup>3</sup> (which in itself, however, is neither properly fascist, nor totalitarian), and then, in its most recent development, fascism. The *ideology of the subject* (which, perhaps, is no more than a pleonasm) is fascism, the definition holding, of course, for today. We'll evoke this point again; but it goes without saying that such a demonstration would exceed the limits that we must respect in this essay.

If, however, we have a certain propensity to insist on this point, it is in reality because we wish, in the case of Nazism, to mark our suspicion and scepticism of the hasty, crude, and usually blind accusation of *irrationality*. There is, on the contrary, a *logic of fascism*. This also means that *a certain logic is fascist*, and that this logic is not wholly foreign to the general logic of rationality inherent in the metaphysics of the Subject. We do not say that only to underline the degree to which the standard opposition—accepted both *within* and *with respect to* Nazi ideology—of *muthos* and *logos*, while seemingly elementary, is in fact very complex; nor only to recall that, like all totalitarianisms, Nazism claimed to be based on a science, which is to say, given the totalization and politicization of the All, that it claimed to be based on *science itself*, as universal knowledge. We say it above all because it must certainly not be forgotten that one of the essential ingredients in fascism is *emotion*, collective, mass emotion (but this emotion is not only the political emotion, it is the revolutionary emotion itself), and neither must it be forgotten that this emotion always joins itself to *concepts* (and, in the case of Nazism, these concepts can perfectly well be “revolutionary concepts,” they are concepts nonetheless).

All we have done here is simply to recall one of Wilhelm Reich's definitions in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*: fascism “is an amalgam between *rebellious* emotions and reactionary social ideas.”<sup>4</sup> Which does not mean, neither in the strictest interpretation of this text, nor for us, that all revolutionary emotion tends immediately toward fascism;

3. See G. W. F. Hegel, “Absolute Freedom and Terror,” *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York, 1967), pp. 599–610.—TRANS.

4. Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Vincent R. Carfagno (New York, 1970), p. xiv.—TRANS.

nor does it mean that reputedly "progressive" concepts are always, by their nature, safe from fascistic contagion. What is at issue, each time, is no doubt a manner of "making-myth," or of not making it.

4. Within the general phenomenon of totalitarian ideologies, we will fix on the specific difference or the intrinsic nature of National Socialism.

At the level on which we choose to situate our discussion, this specificity can be ascertained (after what is in fact the classic fashion) in the consequences of two statements:

- 1.—Nazism is a specifically German phenomenon.
- 2.—Nazi ideology is racist ideology.

Clearly, one ought not to draw from the conjunction of these two statements the conclusion that racism is the exclusive property of the Germans. The position occupied by French and English authors in the origins of racist ideology is well known. Here again, one must not expect from us a convenient, oversimplifying indictment of Germany, of the German soul, of the essence of the German people, of Germanity, and so on. On the contrary.

There incontestably has been and there still is perhaps a German problem; Nazi ideology was a specifically political response to this problem; and there is no doubt whatsoever that the German tradition, and in particular the tradition of German thought, is not at all foreign to this ideology. But that does not mean that the tradition is responsible for it, and because of that fact, condemnable as a whole. Between a tradition of thought and the ideology that inscribes itself, always abusively, within it, there is an abyss. Nazism is no more in Kant, in Fichte, in Hölderlin, or in Nietzsche (all of whom were thinkers solicited by Nazism)—it is, at the extreme, no more even in the musician Wagner—than the Gulag is in Hegel or in Marx. Or the Terror, with all simplicity, in Rousseau. In the same way, and whatever its mediocrity (by whose measure its ignominy must however be weighed), Pétainism is not a sufficient reason to invalidate, for example, Maurice Barrès and Paul Claudel. Only to be condemned is the thought that puts itself deliberately (or confusedly, emotionally) at the service of an ideology behind which it hides, or from whose strength it profits: Heidegger during the first ten months of Nazism, Céline under the Occupation, and a good many others, at that time or since (and elsewhere).

Thus, we are led to add one further qualification: it will be our intention to distance ourselves—and this, to the very degree that our work here requires the isolation of the specific traits of a figure given to us by history as "German"—from any desire to present that historical configuration as the outcome of a determinism, whether this be understood along the lines of destiny or of mechanistic causality. Such a vision of things belongs—very precisely—to the "myth" we analyze. We do not propose here an interpretation of history as such. Our time still lacks, no doubt, the means to proffer, in this area, interpretations

no longer contaminated by mythic or mythifying thought. It is beyond this type of thinking that history, as such, waits to be thought anew.

The task here is therefore to understand, first of all, how Nazi ideology (what we will attempt to describe as the *Nazi myth*) was able to come into existence, and more precisely, why the German figure of totalitarianism is racism.

There exists an initial answer to this question, founded on the notion of political (and therefore also of technical) efficacy. Arendt proposes what could be considered its standard formulation, for example in phrases such as these:

The *Weltanschauungen* and ideologies of the nineteenth century are not in themselves totalitarian, and although racism and communism have become the decisive ideologies of the twentieth century they were not, in principle, any “more totalitarian” than the others; it happened because the elements of experience on which they were originally based—the struggle between the races for world domination, and the struggle between the classes for political power in the respective countries—turned out to be politically more important than those of other ideologies. [OT, p. 470]

But this initial answer does not explain why racism is the ideology of German totalitarianism, while class struggle (or at least one of its variations) is, or was, that of Russian totalitarianism.

Whence our need to propose a second answer, this one specific to National Socialism, and in which we will attempt to implicate, as strictly as possible, the concept of *myth*. This answer, in its elementary structure, can be articulated in two propositions:

1. It is because the German problem is fundamentally a problem of *identity* that the German figure of totalitarianism is racism.

2. It is because myth can be defined as an *identificatory mechanism* that racist ideology became bound up in the *construction* of a myth (and by that we mean the myth of the Aryan, insofar as it was deliberately, voluntarily, and technically elaborated *as such*).

This, expressed here in its most skeletal form, is what we would now like to demonstrate.

### *Mythic Identification*

It is doubtless necessary, first of all, to advance the following: since the close of the eighteenth century, it is in the German tradition,

and nowhere else, that the most rigorous reflection on the relationship of myth to the question of identification is elaborated.

The reason for this is, primarily, that the Germans—we will see why—read Greek particularly well, and that this problem or this investigation of myth is a very old problem inherited from Greek philosophy and, above all, from Plato.

It is known that Plato constructed the political (and, with the same gesture, delimited the philosophic as such) through the exclusion of myths—and of the major art forms linked to them—from the pedagogy of the citizen and more generally from the symbolic space of the city. From Plato dates the critical, cleanly drawn opposition between two uses of speech or two forms (or modes) of discourse: *muthos* and *logos*.

The Platonic decision concerning myths is based on a theologico-moral analysis of mythology: myths are fictions, and these fictions tell sacrilegious lies about the divine. It is consequently necessary to correct and to purge these myths, and to banish from them all the tales of patricides and matricides, of murders of every sort, of rape, of incest, of hate, and of treason. And it is well known that Plato sets about this orthopedic task, this redress or “straightening out” of myth (which is not, therefore, a pure and simple exclusion), with a certain stubbornness.

Why? For the essential reason that myths, through the role they play in traditional education, through their character of general reference in the habitual practice of the Greeks, induce bad attitudes or bad ethical (and political) behaviors. They are socially harmful.

Thus we touch on our question. For this condemnation of myths implies the recognition that their specific function is, in fact, that of *exemplarity*. Myth is a fiction, in the strong, active sense of “fashioning,” or, as Plato says, of “plastic art”: it is, therefore, a *fictioning*, whose role is to propose, if not to impose, models or types (this is still Plato’s vocabulary, and you will soon see where and how it re-emerges), types in imitation of which an individual, or a city, or an entire people, can grasp themselves and identify themselves.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the question posed by myth is that of *mimetism*, insofar as only mimetism is able to assure an identity. (It does so, to be sure, in a paradoxical way: but we can’t go into the details here.)<sup>6</sup> Thus Platonic orthopedics amount to a redress of mimetism in favor of rational conduct, that is to say “logical” conduct (in accordance with the *logos*). Thus one can understand why, in the same movement,

5. For this discussion and that of the following paragraph, see the third book of Plato’s *Republic*. The notion of “plastic art” is there conveyed through the vocabulary of *mold* and *impression*.—TRANS.

6. See Lacoue-Labarthe, “Diderot; le paradoxe et la *mimèsis*,” *L’imitation des modernes* (Paris, 1986).



Plato must also purify art, that is to say, banish art and ritually expel it from the city, insofar as it includes *mimesis* (imitation) in its mode of production or of enunciation: which means, essentially but not exclusively, theater and tragedy. All of which indicates, additionally, that the problem of myth is always indissociable from that of art, not so much because myth is a collective creation or work (the expression of a people, the constitution of their language, and so on) as because myth, like the work of art that exploits it, is an instrument of *identification*. It is, in fact, *the mimetic instrument par excellence*.

The German tradition (in classical philology, aesthetics, historical anthropology, and so on) will set apart a special place for this analysis, even if, as we will see, it will add something decisive to it. This is why one should not be surprised, for example, to see someone like Thomas Mann, in the speech in praise of Freud that sealed his condemnation by the Nazis (and thus a certain time after his break with the “conservative revolution”), reassemble this tradition by analyzing life “in the myth” as life “in quotation”: Cleopatra’s suicide, for example, quotes—which is to say, imitates—a given episode of the myth of Ishtar-Astarte.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, one will not be surprised that *Dr. Faustus*, which is no doubt one of the best books ever written about Nazism, should have as its dominant theme—without even bringing into the discussion its plot-structure, which is overtly mimetic and antagonistic—the question of art and of myth, seen from precisely this angle.

This said, why did an entire current of German thought, at least from romanticism on, link itself to this kind of problematic—to the point where it constitutes, as in Nietzsche, the central problematic? Any why, throughout the entire course of this process, did it stubbornly try—in yet another of Nietzsche’s expressions—to “overturn Platonism”? Why did the rector Krieck—a very official ideologue of the Nazi regime—propose to struggle against the “repression of myth by *logos* . . . from the time of Parmenides until our own”? And how could Heidegger, who nonetheless withdrew himself very rapidly from the service of National Socialism (and to whom the same Krieck was hostile)<sup>8</sup> say that “reason, glorified for so many centuries, is the most stubborn enemy of thought”? Or again, that History does not fall within the domain of science, but rather of mythology?

Here we can only very schematically decompose a difficult and complex analysis, which is intended to bear on an extremely precise stratum of history—between the so-called history of mentalities, art history, and political history— and which, for want of a better term, could be called the history of fictionings.

7. Thomas Mann, “Freud and the Future,” *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1947), p. 425.—TRANS.

8. On the relationship between Krieck and Heidegger see, in particular, *Nachlese zu Heidegger. Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Denken*, ed. Guido Schneeberger (Bern, 1962).

The fact is, to begin rather abruptly, that since the collapse of Christianity a specter has haunted Europe: the specter of imitation—which means, above all, the imitation of the ancients. The role played by the classical model (Athens, Sparta, Rome) in the construction of nation-states and of their culture is well known: from the classicism of Louis XIV to the Antique posturing of 1789 or the neoclassicism of the Empire, an entire process of political structuration unfolds, as a national identification and a technical organization (of government, of administration, of hierarchization, of domination, and so on) are simultaneously realized. It is in this sense that it would be necessary to give *historical imitation* the status of a political concept, as Marx, in fact, once thought of doing.

Within the history of a Europe dogged by imitation, the drama of Germany was not simply its division, to the extent, as is well known, that a German language could barely be said to exist and that, in 1750, no “representative” work of art (even Luther’s Bible is difficult to consider as such) had as yet come to light in that language. The drama of Germany was also that it suffered an imitation *twice removed*, and saw itself obliged to imitate the imitation of antiquity that France did not cease to export for at least two centuries. Germany, in other words, was not only missing an identity but also lacked the ownership of its means of identification. From this point of view, it is not at all surprising that the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns should have been kept up so long in Germany—that is to say, at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century. And it would be perfectly accurate to describe the emergence of German nationalism as the *appropriation of the means of identification*. (That, in fact, may at least partially define the content of the “conservative revolutions” whose hate of “cosmopolitanism” must not be forgotten.)

What Germany lacked, therefore, in practical terms, was its subject (and modern metaphysics, as the metaphysics of the Subject, did not complete itself there by any accident). Consequently, what Germany wanted to create was such a subject, its own subject. This explains its intellectual and aesthetic voluntarism, which, shortly before 1930, Walter Benjamin pinpointed (in that echo of the baroque period which expressionism represented in his eyes) as a “will to art.”<sup>9</sup> If the Germans’ obsession or fear was always that of failing to become artists, of not being able to accede to “great Art”; if in their art or their practice there was often such an effort, and so many theoretical expectations, it is because what was at stake was their identity (or the vertigo of an absence of identity).

But there is more: it can be said, no doubt, that what dominates German history, from this point of view, is a pitiless logic of the *double*

9. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, 1977).

*bind* (of the double, contradictory injunction with which Gregory Bateson, following Freud, explains psychosis). The malady, in the precise sense of the term,<sup>10</sup> that seems always to have menaced Germany is schizophrenia, to which so many German artists would appear to have succumbed.

Why a logic of the *double bind*? Because the appropriation of the means of identification must both take place, and not take place, through the imitation of the ancients, essentially the Greeks. It must because there is no other model but that of the Greeks (following the collapse of religious transcendence and its corresponding social and political structures: one will recall that it is German thought that proclaimed the death of God and that popular romanticism founded itself on a nostalgia for medieval Christianity). It must not because the Greek model has already served the needs of others. How to respond to this double, contradictory imperative?

There were probably, within the horizons of German culture, two ways out: first of all, a theoretical route, to be precise, a *speculative* route; this is the dialectic (the logic of conservation and suppression, of elevation into a higher identity, of a generalized resolution of the contradiction). Hegel is its most visible and (perhaps) most rigorous representative, but, in the age of “speculative idealism” itself, he does not have a monopoly on the general outline of this solution (which, of course, will in particular open the way for Marx). The dialectical “way out” no doubt represents, contrary to Nietzsche’s thought (although it is known just how far an obsession with identity was to lead him), the hope of a “healthy” Germany. But we cannot linger here over this first route.

There seems, on the other hand, to have been an aesthetic solution, or the hope of an aesthetic solution: we will focus on this, for it is not without consequence in the “malady” of National Socialism.

What is its principle?

It is that of a recourse to other Greeks than those who had been used before (in French neoclassicism). Already Johann Winckelmann had said: “There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean, by imitating the ancients.”<sup>11</sup> But it remained to find out what, exactly, to imitate in the ancients, in order to so radically differentiate the Germans.

It is known that the Germans discovered, at the dawn of speculative idealism and of romantic philology (in the last decade of the eigh-

10. The French *maladie* derives from the Latin *male habitus*, whose meaning the authoritative *Petit Robert* renders as “qui se trouve en mauvais état”: one who finds himself in a bad *state*.—TRANS.

11. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “On the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks,” *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*, ed. David Irwin (London, 1972), p. 61.—TRANS.

teenth century, at Jena, among Schlegel, Hölderlin, Hegel, and Schelling), that Greece, in reality, had been double: there had been a Greece of measure and of clarity, of theory and of art (in the proper sense of these terms), of “beautiful form,” of virile, heroic rigor, of law, of the City, of the light of day; and a buried Greece, nocturnal, somber (or too blindingly bright), the archaic, savage Greece of group rituals, of bloody sacrifices and collective intoxications, of the cult of the dead and of the Earth Mother—in short, a mystical Greece, on which the other, not without difficulty, was raised (through the “repression” of the mystical one), but which always remained silently present right up to the final collapse, particularly in tragedy and in the mystery religions. One can follow the traces of this doubling of Greece in all of German thought from, for example, Hölderlin’s analysis of Sophocles or Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* to Heidegger, passing through Johann Bachofen’s *Mutterrecht*, Rhode’s *Psyche*, and the Apollinian and Dionysian opposition structuring Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*.

Clearly we are simplifying things somewhat: all the descriptions of this double Greece do not agree with one another—far from it—and from one author to the next the evaluative principles diverge, most often quite markedly. But if one abusively creates a kind of average (as, in fact, does ideology) one can claim that this discovery implies, in general, a certain number of decisive consequences.

We will indicate four of these:

1. This discovery clearly allows for the promotion of a new, as yet undiscovered historical model, and for the release from neoclassical Greece (the French Greece). In the same blow, it authorizes an identification of Germany with Greece. It is important to note that this identification will initially be founded on an identification of the German language with the Greek language (all this is, at first, philological).

That means that it would be erroneous to simply believe that the identification took place only with the other Greece, the forgotten, mystical Greece; there was always a little of that but, for a certain number of reasons of which we will speak later, there was never exclusively just that. The identification with Greece never privileged the form of the bacchanal.

That also means, on the other hand, that this type of identification, specifically linguistic in its origin, was joined to nothing other than the call for a “new mythology” (Hölderlin, Hegel, and Schelling in 1795) or for the necessary construction of a “myth of the future” (Nietzsche, via Wagner, in the 1880s): the essence of the original Greek language, of *muthos*, is the capacity, shared by the German language, for *symbolization*, and therefore for the production or formation of the “guiding myths” of a people, itself defined linguistically. Inden-

tification must therefore take place through the construction of a myth, not by a simple return to ancient myths. And from Schelling to Nietzsche, examples are not lacking of this kind of attempt.

Consequently, the construction of the myth will necessarily be theoretical and philosophical, conscious if you will, even if it is carried out in the element of poetry. It will therefore have to assume the allegorical mode, as in the *Ring* or in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. Thus will the opposition between the richness of primitive mythic production (which is unconscious) and the abstract universality of rational thought, of the *logos*, of the Enlightenment, and so on, be dialectically overcome. According to a schema set in place by Schiller in his essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," the construction of the modern myth (or, what amounts to the same thing, of the modern work of art) will always be thought as the result of a dialectical process. And that is exactly why what we called the "aesthetic solution" is inseparable from the philosophical and theoretical solution.

2. The same (dialectical) logic is at work in what one could call the mechanism of identification. In this instance, it is necessary to rigorously distinguish between the use made of the first and the second Greece.

What we can for brevity's sake call the "mystical" Greece furnishes in general, not directly a model, but rather a resource, in the form of the idea of an energy capable of effecting the identification and making it work. Its role, if you prefer, is to furnish the *identifying force*. That is why the German tradition adds something to the classical, Greek theory of mythic imitation, of *mimesis*—or develops, very insistently, something that, in Plato for example, was really only nascent, that is, a theory of fusion or mystical participation (of *methexis*, as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl will say),<sup>12</sup> of which the best example is the Dionysian experience, as described by Nietzsche.

But that doesn't mean that the model to be imitated has its immediate source, or is thought to have its immediate source, in an undifferentiated mystic unity. On the contrary, in the Dionysian effusion—to stay within the Nietzschean domain—and issuing forth from this absence of differentiation, what appears is a "symbolic dream image." This image is in fact the dramatic image (the character, or better yet, the figure, the *gestalt*) of Greek tragedy, which emerges "out of the spirit of music" (music being, as Diderot also believed, the very element of effusion), but which is dialectically engendered from the amorous struggle of this Dionysian principle with the Apollinian resistance. The model or the type is, therefore, the compromise formation established between the Dionysian and the Apollinian. This,

12. See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les Carnets* (Paris, 1949).—TRANS.

additionally, is what will explain the tragic heroism of the Greeks, due in great measure according to Nietzsche (and this motif will not be forgotten) to the Nordic population of the Dorians, the only ones to show themselves capable of self-redress before the pernicious dissolution inevitably provoked by Oriental mysticism.<sup>13</sup>

3. All of which accounts for the privilege accorded, in the German problematic of art, to theater and musical drama, which is to say to the repetition of the tragedy and the tragic festival, most apt, among all the forms of art, to set the process of identification into motion. That is why Wagner, much more so than Goethe, will see himself as the Dante, the Shakespeare, or the Cervantes of Germany. And that is why, in founding Bayreuth, his aim will be deliberately political: it will be that of the unification of the German people, through celebration and theatrical ceremonial (comparable to the unification of the city in tragic ritual). And it is no doubt in this fundamental sense that one must understand the exigency of a "total work of art." This totalization is not only aesthetic: it beckons to the political.

4. Henceforth, perhaps, one will better understand why National Socialism did not simply represent, as Benjamin said, an "aestheticization of politics" (to which it would have been sufficient to respond, in a Brechtian manner, with a "politicization of art," as if totalitarianism were not perfectly capable of assimilating that as well), but rather a fusion of politics and art, *the production of the political as work of art*. As early as Hegel, the Greek world was seen as that of "the city as work of art."<sup>14</sup> But what in Hegel remains tied to the first of the two types of reference to Greece, and moreover, does not give rise to any attempt at imitation, will later pass through the second type of reference and become an invitation, or an incitation, to production. The Nazi myth, as H. J. Syberberg (without whose *Hitler, a Film from Germany* the analysis that we attempt here would not have been possible)<sup>15</sup> has so admirably shown, is also the construction, the formation, and the production of the German people in, through, and as a work of art. Which may radically distinguish it both from the Hegelian reference given above and from the simple aesthetic "quotation" proper to the French Revolution and to the Empire (where, however, this mass phenomenon was already beginning to emerge) or even from Italian fascism.

13. For the above ideas, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1968), secs. 3–4.

14. See Hegel, "The Political Work of Art," *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), esp. pp. 255, 260–61.—TRANS.

15. An English translation of the screenplay for this film was published as *Hitler, a Film from Germany*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York, 1982).—TRANS.

*The Construction of the Nazi Myth*

It is time to arrive at the content of the Nazi myth itself. In accordance with the above, what matters here will be less (or very little) the *myths* that were available for use by Nazism, than the *construction* of a new myth, a construction in which the historical configuration just discussed puts itself into operation, or more precisely, comes to propose itself as its own realization.

The construction of this myth was preceded, since the end of the nineteenth century, and not only in Germany, by the rather more than roughly hewn construction of the Aryan myth; but we cannot dwell on that here. Our affair must be the specific construction of the Nazi myth. That is to say, not what is represented by a myth *belonging to* the Nazis, but rather Nazism, National Socialism itself *as* myth. The characteristic of Nazism (and in many respects that of Italian fascism) is to have proposed its own movement, and its own State, as the effective realization of a myth, or as a living myth. As Alfred Rosenberg says: Odin is dead, but in another way, as essence of the German soul, Odin is resuscitating before our eyes.

We will try to reconstitute this construction through a study of Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. We put them in this order, despite the fact that the first appeared in 1930 and the second in 1927, because the second very clearly represents, in its most direct implications, the program that was actually put into operation. Rosenberg's book, however, constitutes one of this program's most famous theoretical accompaniments. It was not the only one, nor indeed was it entirely accepted by all Nazis (notably in its virulent anti-Christianism). But it was practically required reading, and the edition we have used, that of 1934, was the forty-second, bringing the total publication at this point to some 203,000 copies. (It is true that the edition of *Mein Kampf* we have used is, in 1936, the 184th for a total of 2,290,000 copies.)

Were there time, it would be worthwhile to consider the style (if one can call it that) of these books, which resemble each other in many respects. In their composition as in their language, they proceed always by affirmative accumulation, never, or hardly ever, by argumentation. It's an often confused pile-up of the obvious (or at least of what is passed off as such), a tireless repetition of certitudes. They hammer at an idea, supporting it with whatever might seem to fit, without any analysis, without any discussion of objections, without any references. There is neither knowledge to establish, nor thought to overcome. There is only an already acquired, already available truth to declare. Already on this level, in short, they implicitly base themselves, not on a *logos*, but on a kind of mythic proffering, which is not

however poetic, but which draws all its resources from the naked, imperious power of its own affirmation.

This “style” matches the “idea” of myth proposed by Rosenberg. For him, in effect, myth is not primarily the specific formation that we designate as such, that is to say, a narrative symbolizing an origin. Mythic narratives belong, for Rosenberg, to the mythological age, an outmoded age, that of an “insouciant symbolization of nature.”<sup>16</sup> Like any good positivist, scientist, or *Aufklärer*—and here in a relatively unromantic fashion—Rosenberg judges this age primitive, naïve. Thus he criticizes those who want to go back to the Germanic sources of mythology (it’s a waste of time to desire a return to the Edda, he says on the same page). The religion of Wotan is dead, it had to die (see *M*, pp. lii, 129). Myth is not, therefore, the mythological. Myth is a power more than it is a thing, an object, or a representation.

Myth is the power to bring together the fundamental forces and directions of an individual or of a people, the power of a subterranean, invisible, nonempirical identity. This identity should be understood above all by contrast to the generalized, disembodied identity of what Rosenberg calls “absolutes without limits” (*M*, p. 2; p. 21), all philosophical gods or subjects, be they of Descartes, of Rousseau, or of Marx. Against these identities dissolved in abstraction, myth designates identity as an exclusive difference, and its affirmation.

But also, above all, it designates this identity as the identity of something which is not given, neither as fact, nor as discourse, but which is *dreamed*. Mythical power is the power of the dream, of the projection of an image with which one identifies. The absolute cannot, in effect, be something that poses itself outside myself; it is the dream with which I can identify myself. And if there is today, says Rosenberg, a “mythical awakening,” it is because “we have again begun to dream our own primal dreams” (*M*, p. 283). In the originary dream, what matters is not Wotan and Valhalla, which was only the rough mythological form of the dream, but rather the very essence of this dream. We’ll see what this essence really is in a moment, but it is already prefigured here: the Vikings “robbed like all other warriors, but they *dreamed* of honor and state, of ruling and creating” (*M*, p. 283). However, notes Rosenberg, Germany as such has not yet dreamed, it has not yet dreamed *its* dream. He quotes Paul de La-

16. Alfred Rosenberg, *Des Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der Feilisch-Geistigen Gestaltenfämpse Unserer Zeit* (Munich, 1934), p. 219; trans. Vivian Bird, under the title *The Myth of the Twentieth Century: An Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age* (Torrance, Calif., 1982), p. 129; hereafter abbreviated *M*. In cases—such as this one—where it has been necessary to provide a more literal translation than that offered by Bird, the page number to the German edition follows that of the English edition separated by a semicolon.—TRANS.



garde, "There has never been a truly German state" (*M*, p. 284), there has not yet been a mythical identity, that is to say, a veritable—and powerful—German identity.

The truth of myth, then, is bound up with two things:

1. With belief: what makes the myth true is the dreamer's adhesion to his dream. "A belief, a mythos is only real when it has grasped the entire man" (*M*, p. 326). A total belief, an immediate, unreserved adhesion to the dreamed figure is necessary for the myth to be what it is, or, if this may be said, for the form to take form. This entails the important consequence that, for "believers" in this sense, the subjection of a people to a belief, their symbolico-mythical bludgeoning, is not just an efficacious technique but actually a measure of the truth. (The pages in which Hitler exposes the necessity of mass propaganda are, of course, well known.)

2. With the idea that the nature and the finality of myth, or of the dream, is to incarnate itself in a figure, or in a *type*. Myth and type are indissociable. For the type is the realization of the singular identity conveyed by the dream. It is both the model of identity *and* its present, effective, *formed* reality.

One attains, in this way, an essential sequence in the construction of myth:

Rosenberg declares: "Freedom of the soul . . . is always *Gestalt*." ("Gestalt" means form, figure, configuration, which is to say that this liberty has nothing abstract or general about it; it is the capacity to put-into-figure, to embody.) "The *Gestalt* is always plastically limited." (Its essence is to have a form, to differentiate itself; the "limit," here, is the limit that detaches a figure from a background, which isolates and distinguishes a *type*.) "This limitation is racially conditioned." (Thus one attains the content of the myth: a race is the identity of a formative power, of a singular type; a race is the bearer of a myth.) "Race is the outward image of a determined soul" (*M*, p. 331; p. 559).

This last trait is a leitmotif in Rosenberg and is also found, more or less explicitly, throughout Hitler's writing: a race is a soul, and in certain cases, a *genial* soul,<sup>17</sup> in the sense that German romanticism gave to the word, within which individual differences remain, as well as individual geniuses, who better express and form the *type*. Which very clearly means, therefore, that a race is above all the principle and the locus of a mythical power. If the Nazi myth was initially deter-

17. See Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (1925; Munich, 1938); trans. Alvin Johnson et al., under the title *Mein Kampf* (New York, 1940), pp. 403–4; hereafter abbreviated *MK*. Again, where a more literal translation is required, a page number to the German edition is included in the citation.—TRANS.

mined as the myth of the “race,” it is because it is myth of Myth, or the myth of the creative power of myth in general. As if races were themselves, above all, the *dreamed types* of a superior power; Rosenberg again quotes Lagarde: “Nations are ideas of God” (*M*, p. 284).

This principle of the *type* as an absolute, concrete, singular identity, as the fulfillment of the myth, in reality, is what Hitler justifies laboriously—and yet very rapidly, because ultimately he scorns any veritable, positive justification—with the example of animal species who only couple within the same type, compared to bastards who are “degenerate.”

In this respect, it’s essential to point out that the Jew is not simply a bad race, a defective type: he is the antitype, the bastard par excellence. He has no culture of his own, Hitler says, and no religion of his own, because monotheism predates him. The Jew has no *Seelengestalt*, therefore no *Rassengestalt*: his form is formless. He is the man of the universal abstract, as opposed to the man of singular, concrete identity. Thus Rosenberg takes care to point out that the Jew is not the “antipode” of the German, but his “contradiction,” by which he no doubt very clumsily means to say that the Jew is not an opposite *type*, but the very absence of type, a danger present in all bastardizations, which all are parasitic.

Thus is put in place a mechanism that can be described in the following way:

1. The power of myth must be reawakened, in opposition to the inconsistency of the abstract universals (of science, of democracy, of philosophy) and in the face of the collapse (fully realized in the war of 1914–18) of the two beliefs of the modern age: Christianity, and the belief in humanity (which, therefore, even though Rosenberg doesn’t say it, are no doubt degenerate, perhaps “Jewified” myths, bloodless myths in any case, appropriate to an epoch that has lost the sense of race, of myth).

2. The power of the race or the people, the *völkisch* power, which will be characterized precisely as the productive or formative power of the myth and as its fulfillment through the active adhesion of the people to their myth, must therefore be reawakened. This adhesion will henceforth be termed “mystical,” by which Rosenberg seeks to designate, beyond a simple belief, the total participation in the type. Thus, for example, Rosenberg writes: “The life of a race, of a people, is not a philosophically logical development, nor even a process which unfolds in terms of natural law. It is the formation of a mystic synthesis” (*M*, p. 63).

For this reason, because it is beyond philosophy and knowledge in general, mystical recognition is less an *Erkenntnis* than a *Bekanntnis*, less an act or product of cognition than a “recognition,” insofar as the

word can apply to a confession of faith. In the same way, and with the same opposition to philosophy, Hitler declares that what matters is the production of a *Glaubensbekenntnis*, a profession or an act of faith (see *MK*, p. 678; p. 508).

3. This act of faith bears, for every people, on its own myth, that is to say on the originary projection and project of its identity (consequently, for Germans, on Germanic identity). But this act of faith is very much an act. It does not consist only of a spiritual attitude, at least not in the sense one ordinarily gives to the word. The “mystical” relationship to myth is of the order of lived experience (*Erlebnis*). There is a “mythic experience” (*M*, p. 81), which means that the myth is only true when it is *lived*. Even as it must form an effective type, the act of faith must immediately be the “life” of the “type.” (For this reason the symbols of a mythical order, uniforms, gestures, parades, the enthusiasm of ceremonial, as well as youth movements and all sorts of other associations, are not only techniques but ends in themselves: the finality of a total *Erlebnis* of the “type.” The symbolic is not only a kind of guidepost but also a realization of the dream.)

However, for this outline to be complete, it is necessary to arrive at the specificity—indeed, the privilege, the absolute privilege—of a race and a type. For that, two supplementary determinations are needed:

1. The race, the people, is linked to *blood*, not to language. This affirmation is repeated ceaselessly by Rosenberg and Hitler: blood and soil—*Blut und Boden*. (Hitler illustrates the point by explaining that he can’t turn a black into a German by teaching him German.) In many respects, this affirmation breaks with the tradition (in particular, the romantic tradition) of a quest for, or recognition of, identity in language. The myth called on by the tradition is often identified with *mythos* as the original language, as opposed to *logos*. Here, on the contrary, myth in some sense becomes blood, and the soil from which that blood ultimately springs. This displacement probably has several causes:

The first is that Germany, as a not-yet-fulfilled myth of the twentieth century, is no longer a problem of language, as it was until the eighteenth century, but of material unity, a problem of territory and state. It is the soil, the immediate *nature* of Germany that must be dreamed and “typed,” and with it the German blood.

Additionally, if the Aryan myth is recognized, as we will see that it is, in other linguistic territories (in Greek above all, but also in Latin and in Nordic), then it is another identity than that of language which is to be grasped in this myth.

Finally, despite its specificity, a language belongs, spontaneously, to the element of the universal. Or at least, if it is not nourished with blood, it always risks appearing in the company of that which remains

formal and insubstantial. Blood, on the contrary, is nature, it is natural selection (with a certain Darwinism in the background), and is thus the material sign of a "will of nature" (*MK*, pp. 390, 581), which is the will to difference, to distinction, to individuation. (It is therefore nature itself that engenders the process of identity formation through myth: it is nature that dreams and dreams itself in its types.)

There is in particular, therefore, an Aryan blood, which Rosenberg traces back to Atlantis.

2. Why the Aryans? Because they are the bearers of the solar myth. They are the bearers of this myth because, for Northern peoples, the spectacle of the sun is impressive in proportion to its rarity. The Aryan myth is the solar myth, as opposed to myths of the Night, to chthonic divinities. Whence the solar symbols, and the swastika.

Why the solar myth? It would not be at all gratuitous to say that, for Rosenberg, this myth of clarity produces the clarity of myth in general. He claims, for example, that the "mythic experience" is "as clear as daylight" (*M*, p. 81). The myth of the sun is nothing less than the myth of that which causes forms to come forth as such, in their visibility, in the contour of their gestalt, even as it is also the myth of the force or heat that permits the very formation of those forms. In other words—and without returning to what has been said about the cult of light and of the South—the solar myth is the myth of the formative force itself, of the original power of the *type*. The sun is the source of typical distinction. Or again, the sun is the *arche-type*. The Aryan is not only one type among others, he is the type in which the mythic power itself, the mother-nature of all types, presents itself (dreams itself, incarnates itself). This privilege is developed along three principal axes:

1. The Aryan is the founder of civilization par excellence, the *Kulturbegründer* or the *Kulturschöpfer* as opposed to the simple "bringer of civilization" (*Kulturträger*). "Often, in the course of a few millenniums or even centuries, they create cultures which originally completely bear the inner features of their character" (*MK*, p. 400). This people is the people, or the blood, of the immediate (and essentially genial) creation of realized forms.

2. The great Aryans of antiquity are the Greeks, that is to say the people who produced myth as *art*. The Greeks put their soul (their blood) into form; they produced its *Darstellung* or *Gestaltung* precisely in the absolute distinction of form, in art. The experience of Greek art is that of *Formwillen*, of the will to form or the form-will. Thus art, since the Greeks, is for Europe an end in itself, a religion in itself. This does not at all mean "art for art's sake," but rather what Rosenberg calls "an organic art which produces life" (*M*, p. 274). Wagner counts for a great deal here, of course, but even more important is the understanding of *life* as art, the understanding of the body, of the

people, of the state as works of art, that is to say, as fully realized forms of will, as completed identifications of the dreamed image.

3. The great Aryans of the modern world are the German mystics, and above all Meister Eckehart (we'll skip over the incredible solicitation of his texts and his life history that Rosenberg indulges in). For Eckehart opened the resolutely modern possibility of myth by making of it the myth of the *free soul*. The pure interiority of the soul (of which race is the exteriority) feels itself, in mystical experience, to be larger than the universe itself, and to be free of everything, especially of God. Here the myth articulates itself in all its purity: what matters is to form *oneself*, to *type oneself*, and to type oneself as absolute, free creator (and consequently, as *self-creator*). Rosenberg writes: "Odin was and is dead, but the German mystic discovered 'the strong one from above' in his own soul" (*M*, p. 130).

The soul, or the "personality," or the "genius," finding itself in itself as its own most proper "myth," or, again, the soul engendering itself from its own dream, is finally nothing more than the absolute, self-creating Subject, a subject whose essential property is not solely cognitive (like the subject of Descartes), nor solely spiritual (Eckehart), nor solely speculative (Hegel), but which somehow groups together and transcends all these determinations in an immediate and absolutely "natural" essence: that of blood and race. The Aryan race *is*, by this account, *the Subject*; within it, self-formation is realized and incarnated in "the sacred collective egoism which is the 'nation.'"<sup>18</sup>

Thus the central motif of this "soul" and its *Gestaltung* can finally be summed up as this: first, creation and civilizing domination through blood; second, the preservation of that blood, which is to say, *honor*. There is ultimately only a single possible mythical choice, which is the choice between *love* and *honor* (see *M*, p. 81). The Aryan's ordinary choice, or the choice that makes him an Aryan, is the choice of the honor of the race.

Most of the fundamental characteristics of this construction can be found in Hitler's writing, as one has already been able to see. They are found there, however, in what could be called the wholly modern version, the secularized, politicized, and technologized version of the construction of the myth.

In other words, *Mein Kampf* presents the resolutely "practical" version of the construction of the myth. Henceforth, though, we will understand that "theory" is not *followed* by "practice": the second activity is, if one may say, inherent in the first, if in fact the logic of myth is the logic of its total self-fulfillment, which is to say, of the self-fulfillment of the Aryan race as the self-fulfillment of civilization in

18. *The Speeches of Adolph Hitler*, trans. and ed. Norman H. Baynes (London, 1942), p. 867.—TRANS.

general. The myth fulfills itself, quite rigorously, as National Socialism. This implies a few supplementary determinations, which, in conclusion, we will enumerate:

1. The combat that is necessary today is above all a combat of ideas, or a "philosophic" combat (Hitler doesn't speak of myth; he speaks the language of modern rationality). "Brute force" can do nothing if it isn't based on a great idea. Now, the sorrow and the evil of the modern world is the double, abstract, disembodied, powerless idea of the individual and of humanity: in other words, Social Democracy and Marxism. In 1937 Hitler told the Reichstag, "The mainstay of the National Socialist program is to abolish the liberal concept of the individual and the Marxist concept of humanity and to replace them with the concept of the *Volk*, rooted in the soil and bound together in blood." The combat must be a combat for the effective realization of this concept, which is nothing other than the concept of myth.

2. The combat is therefore a combat over something for which Hitler borrows the term from the philosophical tradition and its language, and which in his discourse takes the place of myth: the *Weltanschauung*, or "the vision of the world" (there was an official bureau of the *Weltanschauung*). Nazism is above all "construction and conformation of its vision of the world" (*MK*, p. 881; p. 680), that is to say, a construction and conformation of the world according to a vision, an image, the image of the creator of forms, the image or the type of the Aryan. The "*weltanschaulich* combat" (*MK*, p. 881) is not just any enterprise of domination: it is an enterprise of the *conformation* of the world (like those of Alexander and of Napoleon, invoked as models). The Aryan world will have to be much more than a world ruled and exploited by the Aryans: it will have to be a world that has become Aryan (thus it will be necessary to eliminate from it the nonbeing or nontype par excellence, the Jew, as well as the nonbeing or lesser being of several other inferior or degenerate types, gypsies, for example). The *Weltanschauung* must be absolutely embodied; thus it "requires that the entire public life be completely readjusted according to its own views, its own *Anschaungen*" (*MK*, p. 675): the *anschauen*—"seeing" as vision and intuition piercing to the heart of things and *forming* being itself, the "seeing" of an active, practical, operative dream—is the heart of the "mythicotypical" process, which thus becomes the *effective* dream of the "thousand-year Reich."

3. That is why the *Weltanschauung* is absolutely intolerant and cannot figure as a "party among others" (*MK*, p. 675). It is neither a philosophical option nor a political choice; it is the very necessity of creation, of the creative blood. Thus it must be the object of a belief, and must function as a religion. The belief does not spring forth itself; it must be awoken, mobilized in the masses. "The most sublime theo-

retical insight has no value and no purpose unless the leader moves the masses towards it" (*MK*, p. 849), given that the masses are open to sentiment, and have need of affective motives.

(This manipulation of "weltanschaulich" belief would call for an additional study, to show how difficult it is to distinguish between conviction and ploy in Hitler's writing. At one and the same time, Hitler both develops in all its consequences a belief all his own [and to which he subordinates himself] and brutally exploits the resources of that belief for the benefit of his personal power. But this exploitation itself remains within the logic of the belief: for it is necessary to awaken, or to reawaken the Aryan dream in the Germans. Hitlerism could perhaps be defined as the exploitation—lucid but not necessarily cynical, for convinced of its own truth—of the modern masses' openness to myth. The manipulation of the masses is not only a technique: it is also an end, because in the last instance it is the myth itself that manipulates the masses and realizes itself in them.)

We have only sought to unfold a specific logic, and thus we have no other conclusions to draw. We wish only to underline just how much this logic, with its double trait of the mimetic will-to-identity and the self-fulfillment of form, belongs profoundly to the mood or character of the West in general, and more precisely, to the fundamental tendency of the *subject*, in the metaphysical sense of the word. Nazism does not sum up the West, nor represent its necessary finality. But neither is it possible to simply push it aside as an aberration, still less as a past aberration. A comfortable security in the certitudes of morality and of democracy not only guarantees nothing, but exposes one to the risk of not seeing the arrival, or the return, of that whose possibility is not due to any simple accident of history. An analysis of Nazism should never be conceived as a dossier of simple accusation, but rather as one element in a general deconstruction of the history in which our own provenance lies.