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Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities
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The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology
Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic

Other Peoples' Myths

The Cave of Echoes

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strangers (barbarians and foreigners), or gods, or the darker sides of our own natures. What problems arise when we attempt to understand the thoughts (myths) of animals (other people)? What problems arise when we attempt to understand the thoughts of animals who are regarded as gods?

Chapter 5 asks, What stories are told about people who enter into other peoples' myths, especially when those myths involve them in rituals? What happens when they resist? How does the myth-and-ritual force itself upon them? What are the dangers of converting, and the dangers of not converting, to a strange myth-and-ritual? Chapter 6 asks, How is the audience absorbed, willingly or unwillingly, into the story when it is enacted in the ritual of theater? How can a myth survive without a ritual, or a ritual without a myth?

Chapter 7 picks up the thread of chapter 1 by returning to examine the experience not of the people depicted within the myths but of the people who study myths. We may regard other peoples' myths as bizarre stories that have nothing to do with us, as stories about other people, as stories about how others ought to be, as stories about us, or as stories about how we ought to be. How can we find our own stories in other peoples' myths? We may find our myths now not so often in our own communal religious settings (or rituals) as in unexpected places in our actual lives. And if we are in danger of missing them or resisting them when we find them in our lives, we may recognize them and accept them better if we have already met them in other peoples' myths.

But before we begin to contemplate the possible benefits of absorbing other peoples' myths (as we shall do in chapter 7), we must face up to the three levels of obstacles that have to be surmounted on our mythical quest: the intellectual problem of sympathetic objectivity (chapter 1), the emotional problem of empathetic understanding (chapter 4), and the religious problem of conversion and resistance (chapters 5 and 6).

And we must, moreover, make certain distinctions, in order to decide what sort of use we may attempt to make of other peoples' myths. On the first, easiest, and perhaps most superficial level, we can use other peoples' myths merely as stories, as data, as a means of finding out the mysterious and fascinating ways in which other people on the planet earth think about things. This level, the travelogue level, which we shall encounter in chapter 1, is hard enough to master well. Second, we can treat them as a source of information about the human condition that we all share, as a source of data about our own lives, or, going a little bit further, we may regard them as explanations of *why* things are as they are. These approaches, which we shall examine in chapters 4, 5, and 6, still remain on the descriptive level. Third, as we will see in the concluding chapter, we may go on to a programmatic or exhortational level; we may take other peoples' myths as a source of advice about what to do about our lives.

Chapter 1

Other Scholars' Myths

The Hunter and the Sage

A myth may be, among many other things, the incarnation of a metaphor.[1] One metaphor that we often use to describe complete sympathy with or understanding of someone else is "getting inside someone else's head." This does not, to my knowledge, occur as a figure of speech in Sanskrit, but the image that it conjures up is often literally depicted in Indian mythology, where a person may "get inside" another person's head (that is, his mind, his mental software) by actually going inside the physical space of his skull (that is, his brain, his mental hardware) and indeed pervading his entire body.[2] The theme of entering someone else's body is a popular one in Indian literature; any respectable yogi can do this trick, which may lead to embarrassing or amusing situations (as when the mind of a yogi enters the body of a whore, and her mind enters his body in return).[3] I propose to use an Indian myth to dramatize our own English metaphor, in order both to demonstrate one of the cross-cultural uses of mythology (that is, to show how we may legitimately see in a myth a meaning different from what its own culture sees in it) and to create an image with which to think about such cross-cultural uses (an image about scholarship).

The Hunter and the Sage

The most striking dramatization I know of the metaphor of "getting inside someone else's head" is a myth that occurs in the *Yogavasishtha,* a Sanskrit

philosophical treatise composed in Kashmir sometime between the tenth and twelfth centuries A.D. The myth is the story of a hunter who meets a sage who has entered another man's body and lodged in his head:

> One day a hunter wandered in the woods until he came to the home of a sage, who became his teacher. The sage told him this story:
>
> In the old days, I became an ascetic sage and lived alone in a hermitage. I studied magic. I entered someone else's body and saw all his organs; I entered his head and then I saw a universe, with a sun and an ocean and mountains, and gods and demons and human beings. This universe was his dream, and I saw his dream. Inside his head, I saw his city and his wife and his servants and his son.
>
> When darkness fell, he went to bed and slept, and I slept too. Then his world was overwhelmed by a flood at doomsday; I, too, was swept away in the flood, and though I managed to obtain a foothold on a rock, a great wave knocked me into the water again. When I saw that world destroyed at doomsday, I wept. I still saw, in my own dream, a whole universe, for I had picked up his karmic memories along with his dream. I had become involved in that world and I forgot my former life; I thought, "This is my father, my mother, my village, my house, my family."
>
> Once again I saw doomsday. This time, however, even while I was being burnt up by the flames, I did not suffer, for I realized, "This is a just a dream." Then I forgot my own experiences. Time passed. A sage came to my house, and slept and ate, and as we were talking after dinner he said, "Don't you know that all of this is a dream? I am a man in your dream, and you are a man in someone else's dream."
>
> Then I awakened, and remembered my own nature; I remembered that I was an ascetic. And I said to him, "I will go to that body of mine (that was an ascetic)," for I wanted to see my own body as well as the body which I had set out to explore. But he smiled and said, "Where do you think those two bodies of yours are?" I could find no body, nor could I get out of the head of the person I had entered, and so I asked him, "Well, where *are* the two bodies?"
>
> The sage replied, "While you were in the other person's body, a great fire arose, that destroyed your body as well as the body of the other person. Now you are a householder, not an ascetic." When the sage said this, I was amazed. He lay back on his bed in silence in the night, and I did not let him go away; he stayed with me until he died.
>
> The hunter said, "If this is so, then you and I and all of us are people in one another's dreams." The sage continued to teach the hunter and told him what would happen to him in the future. But the hunter left him and went on to new rebirths. Finally, the hunter became an ascetic and found release.[4]

This remarkable story has many meanings that we may use for our own purposes, but first let us try to understand it in its own terms. In its own context, this is a myth about doomsday and ontology. An ascetic sage tells the tale of entering the body of a dreamer who is a married man—entering his breath, his head, and his consciousness. The sage inside the dreamer dreams of the same village that the dreamer was dreaming of, and becomes a householder like him. His "outer," or original, body does not simply decay in the absence of the conscious soul (as it does in many tales of this type);[5] it is destroyed by a fire that burns the hermitage in which the outer body was lodged. This is a strange fire: it came from the doomsday flames that the sage dreamed about when he was lying asleep in that hermitage (and inside the body of the sleeping man that he had entered). Moreover, whereas the first doomsday fire seemed real to him, so that he wept to see it destroy the inner world, this second doomsday fire seemed to him to be nothing but a dream, and a *déjà vu* dream at that, so that he did not feel any pain when it burnt him. Yet the first fire did *not* burn his outer body, because he merely saw it in another man's dream, while the second fire did burn his outer body, because he saw it in what had become his own dream, too. Since he had dreamed his outer body into nonexistence, he was physically trapped inside his dream world.

Indeed, the dreams within dreams in this text are even more complex than may appear from the narrative as I have just presented it.[6] For the story of the hunter and the sage is embedded in the *Yogavasishtha* in a complex web of interlocking narratives. As we read the story of the hunter and the sage, we become confused and are tempted to draw charts to figure it all out. It is not clear, for instance, whether the sage has entered the waking world or the sleeping world of the man whose consciousness he penetrates, and whether that person is sleeping, waking, or, indeed, dead at the moment when we meet the sage. But as the tale progresses, we realize that our confusion is neither our own mistake nor the mistake of the author of the text; it is a device of the narrative, constructed to make us realize how impossible and, finally, how irrelevant it is to attempt to determine the precise level of consciousness at which we are existing.[7] We cannot do it, and it does not matter. We can never know whether or not we have become trapped inside the minds of people whose consciousness we have come to share.

Inside the dream village, the new householder (*né* sage) meets another sage, who enlightens him and wakes him up. Yet, although he is explicitly said to awaken, he stays where he is inside the dream; the only difference is that now he *knows* he is inside the dream. Now he becomes a sage again, but a different sort of sage, a householder sage, inside the dreamer's dream. While he is in this state, he meets the hunter and attempts to instruct him. But the hunter misses the point of the sage's saga: "If this is so . . .," he mutters, and he goes off to get a whole series of bodies before he finally figures it out. The

hunter has to experience everything for himself, dying and being reborn;[8] he cannot learn merely by dreaming, as the sage does.

But let us now set aside the metaphysical complexities of this story, its primary locus of meaning for the Hindu reader or hearer, and extract instead a point that we can apply to a very different concern, the nature of the experience of the scholar who studies other peoples' religions.

Scholars and People

Let us attempt now to get outside the head of the author of that myth and to translate into our own terms the metaphor of the hunter and the sage as ideal types, extreme types never actually encountered in their pure form. If we return to the metaphor that is enacted in this parable, the hunter is the person who cannot get inside other peoples' heads and so is driven by his emotions to go on being reborn himself over and over again, in order to have the series of experiences that are the necessary prerequisites for enlightenment. But the sage, who *can* go inside other people mentally, mentally experiences countless lives without ever having to be reborn.[9] There are two different ways in which one can get inside another person's life: one can be reborn inside various bodies, and live many lives, as the hunter does; or one can use mental powers to get inside other peoples' heads and learn about their lives, as the sage does. Hunters and sages can be taken as two types of people, the sort who have to experience everything physically in order to understand it, and the sort who think that they can understand things merely by learning about them. Hunters are ordinary householders; sages are artists and intellectuals.[10] In Indian terms, sages are Brahmins, hunters are Kshatriyas.

To be a hunter one need not necessarily believe literally in the doctrine of transmigration; one might be able to live several lives within a single rebirth, living a life in one career and then in another, in one country and then in another, with one person and then with another. So too, to be a sage in a myth one might literally enter another person's head, as a yogi does, but to be a sage in real life one might simply enter other peoples' consciousness through some other, milder means, perhaps by entering their myths. I will use the image of the sage to denote the person who mentally enters the nonphysical essence of other people, in contrast with the hunter who physically, through his body, experiences many lives.

We are all hunters, whether we know it or not, but the ones who know what it means to be a hunter are sages. Since sages *believe* that they are experiencing many lives, they can do it on purpose; hunters live their multiple lives unknowingly, helplessly. The sage is always part hunter because he is a human being and therefore an emotional, experiential creature; but because he is a sage, he is always trying to be what he cannot be: entirely free from the hunter within him. That is, the sage has a hunter in him in addition to a sage, just as Dr. Jekyll had in him both the evil Mr. Hyde and the good Dr. Jekyll; but the hunter may not have a sage in him, just as Mr. Hyde did not have Dr. Jekyll in him.[11]

The sage in our story enters what in Sanskrit is called *manas* (translated as both "heart" and "mind," in contrast with *hridaya,* usually translated simply as "heart," with which it is cognate). *Manas* is the organ that is responsible for both reason and emotion, the place where one does algebra but also the place where one falls in love. This term provides a good example of the way in which Indian thought fails to distinguish between some of the categories that we tend to think of as inherently polarized,[12] for, as we shall see, we tend to demarcate rather sharply people who are ruled by the heart and people who are ruled by the head. Indians do not do this; the Indian sage experiences life through both the head and the heart, although he tries not to experience it with his body.

E. M. Forster describes a shrine in India that was created when, according to legend, a beheaded warrior contrived somehow to continue to run, in the form of a headless torso, from the top of a hill, where he left his head, to the bottom of the hill, where his body finally collapsed; at the top of the hill is now the Shrine of the Head, and at the bottom, the Shrine of the Body.[13] This seems to me to be a useful parable for much of Western civilization, certainly for that fraction of it that studies religion. A similar metaphor is provided by the mythical beast once described by Woody Allen: the Great Roe, who had the head of a lion and the body of a lion, but *not the same lion.*[14]

If we apply our root metaphor to scholars of religion (who would be superficially classified, as a group, as sages, in contrast with people who just *are* religious, the hunters), we might further distinguish within the group of sages a subgroup of hunters, who assume that their own personal experience of religion, their own religiosity, is a sufficient basis on which to understand other peoples' religions, and another subgroup of sages, who assume that they must go *inside* other cultures (through their texts, perhaps, or through personal observation of their rituals) in order to understand them.[15] We might then further divide this latter subgroup of sages into a sub-subgroup of hunters who prefer to do their learning by going there, experiencing, doing fieldwork (the more anthropological branch of the family) and another sub-subgroup of classical sages who prefer to do their learning in their armchairs, reading texts (the more classical branch of the family). And, finally, we might go on to divide either of the sub-subgroups of anthropological or classical sages into one sub-sub-subgroup of hunters, who allow themselves to react emotionally to their learning experiences, and another of sages, who attempt to remain as objective as possible toward the people that they are studying.

Scholars of religion tend to regard themselves as Great Roes, not realizing that they have the head and the heart (the *manas,* in Sanskrit) of the same lion.[16] But this is an unfortunate schizophrenia. Good hunters *do* have sages in them, sages that bring some degree of self-awareness to the hunting; bad hunters do not. But good sages, on the other hand, always have good hunters in them. To deny the experiential component is not merely elitist; it is to deny the essential humanitarian component in the study of religion.

Indian aesthetic theory calls the sympathetic reader or member of the audience the one "whose heart is with [the poet or actor]," the *sa-hridaya*

(or sym-pathetic), whose heart melts in response to poetry or art.[17] But the narrow-minded scholar's heart is hardened and encrusted by his reading of dry metaphysical texts. The accomplished sage becomes *sa-hridaya* when he shares the heart of the person with whom he sympathizes. The narrow-minded scholar is the sage who wants to live entirely in the head and never in the heart; he is the sage who attempts utterly to deny his inevitable hunter component. The sympathetic scholar is the sage who acknowledges his need to live both in the head and in the heart; who accepts his hunter component, though he attempts to deal with that aspect of his nature with greater self-awareness than that of the hunter who lives only in the heart and never in the head. Just as there are sage hunters, there are hunting sages. The hunting sage is my idea of the right sort of historian of religions.

The Sage's Myth

Let us turn for a moment to the problem faced by sages, people who enter other peoples' heads. In India, sages are enlightened wise men, gurus or priests. In the West, sages belong to another category of professionals or specialists: scholars, humanists such as classicists and anthropologists. Classicists (by which I mean not just people who read Greek and Latin but, more broadly, all those historians, philologists, and other humanists and social scientists who deal with the past) attempt to enter a world that is perhaps as foreign and unattainable as any world can be—the lost world of people who are now dead, but who may once have lived where we live now, or have spoken ancient forms of languages related to our own. Anthropologists, who do not usually travel in time, make all the greater effort to travel far in space, to the farthest reaches of Otherness. And anthropologists are storytellers: the word for "anthropologist" in Tok Pisin in New Guinea used to be (and unfortunately no longer is) "story-master." But although anthropologists pride themselves on entering other peoples' heads (that is, their thoughts), they also pride themselves on *not* entering other peoples' hearts (that is, their emotions and their lives).[18] Malinowski once remarked, "I see the life of natives as . . . as remote from me as the life of a dog."[19] Nevertheless, sometimes anthropologists *do* enter the hearts of the people that they study, just as nonprofessionals (hunters) do.

People who study myths constitute a subcaste of historians of religion, more precisely a half-caste formed through an illicit liaison between anthropologists and classicists. Mythologists, too, are Western sages, and like other sages they are also hunters. To the extent that they are sages, mythologists may enter into other peoples' heads (that is, understand other peoples' myths). But to the extent that they are hunters, mythologists, like other sages, may also enter into other peoples' hearts and bodies (that is, *live* other peoples' myths). Like other sages, they do absorb, if only, sometimes, unconsciously, myths that become *their* myths, that become personally meaningful to them.

It may be recalled that after a while Mr. Hyde took over Dr. Jekyll's life: Dr. Jekyll could not help being Mr. Hyde, and could not get back into his

existence as Dr. Jekyll. In our Indian text, the life of the man whose mind the sage entered became the sage's life. In that story, the sage who began his scientific experiment in cold blood became drawn helplessly into the life of the man whose head he had entered (a householder, whom we may call a hunter in the broad sense in which we are using that metaphor). Once he made the dreamer's dream his own dream, he forgot that he was a sage; he became a hunter. Yet, eventually, still within that dream, he awakened to become another sort of sage, a sage inside a hunter.

What meaning does this story have for us? On some deep level, I think, all truly creative scholarship in the humanities is autobiographical, but it is particularly evident that people who traffic in myths are caught up in them, *volens nolens*. This has certainly been true for me. In 1971, when I was struggling to come to terms with the death of my father (my first major experience of inexplicable and unjust evil), I failed to draw any comfort from Jewish or Christian approaches to the problem, not through any inherent inadequacy in them but simply because they were not *my* myth; I had never had them. I had grown up with a certain number of Jewish rituals, and with a great number of Jewish social attitudes, but with no myths (unless, of course, one were to count as myths Jewish jokes, which I had in abundance).

Perhaps I was unable to live the Jewish myths when I needed them because I had already unconsciously replaced them with the Hindu myths in which I had been steeped from the age of twelve, when my mother gave me a copy of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India;* perhaps I simply had an innate affinity for the Hindu myths, an immediate individual response. In any case, I found that I could in fact make some sense of my father's death in terms of the Hindu mythology of death and evil—the subject of the book that I was working on at the time, and had begun some years before the onset of my father's illness.[20] In a certain sense, I had been experiencing, like a hunter, the same events that were narrated in the myth that I had been reading and writing about as a sage, though at first I did not realize that this was the myth that I was in, perhaps because I did not expect someone else's myth to be my myth.

But there was another good reason why I could not use Jewish myths to sustain me then, why, indeed, it would perhaps have been inappropriate to use them to understand my father's death: they had ceased to be his myths, too. The tendency to make use of other people's myths has long been a habit of the Jews, wandering or dispersed as they are.[21] Jews have always lived among Others—have always *been* the Others wherever they lived. Both of my parents were relentlessly assimilated, secularized, and Enlightened Jewish refugees, he from Poland (a small town not far from Cracow) and she from Vienna (she lived on the street where Sigmund Freud had lived). My father, whose father had been a Talmudic scholar, knew much of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* by heart and taught it to me. He had learned it at New York University, where he had worked his way through school as a stringer for the *New York Times,* going around to all the major churches in Manhattan every Sunday and summarizing the sermons; he was paid by the inch. Eventually it dawned on

him that it might be profitable to serve as a kind of matchmaker between those ministers who yearned to see their sermons in print and those ministers who were eager to have at their disposal every week the sermons of the first sort of ministers. Thus he founded in the late 1930s, and published throughout his life, two magazines for the Protestant clergy, *Pulpit Digest* and *Pastoral Psychology*. And from time to time, when he was short of copy, he wrote, under various pseudonyms, sermons that were preached all over America by Protestant clergymen who little dreamed that their homilies had been composed by an East European Jew. Thus my father was a (Jewish) sage who entered the heads of others (Christians) but always managed to get out again.

In a similar way, I gradually came first to think with and then to feel with the karma theory. The karma theory *tells* us that we have lived other lives, that our souls have had other bodies. But how can we *feel,* as well as accept intellectually, the reality of those other lives if we cannot remember them? Plato constructed his own version of this theory in the myth of Er in the *Republic,*[22] but Plato was not a Neoplatonist and neither Platonism nor Neoplatonism became an integral part of Western thinking about death. It is easier for Hindus to *feel* the theory of rebirth, as they feel themselves to be part of a larger human group in a way that we do not; they believe that they are joined in nature as well as in culture both with the other people with whom they have present contact and with the people in the past and future to whom they are related. But what about us who are not Hindus? For us, the previous incarnation unrecalled has no existence. For some things in life can be remembered in one's soul; but other things can only be remembered with one's body.

The body remembers some things, and the mind remembers others. But memory is not all there is; there is also a reality of unrecalled experience that gives a kind of validity to our connection with lives that we do not recall. The karma theory recognizes the parallelism between events forgotten within a single life—the events of early childhood, or the things that we repress or that (in Indian mythology) we forget as the result of a curse[23]—and the events forgotten from a previous life. It also recognizes a similarity in the ways in which we sometimes half-recall these various sorts of events, often with a sense of *déjà vu*. We remember something that we cannot remember, from a lost past, through the power of the invisible tracks or traces left behind on our souls by those events; these traces the Hindus call perfumes (*vasanas*).[24]

The karma theory tells us that we have lived lives that we cannot remember and hence cannot feel. Sages can imagine the lives of others, and so live them; and sages are rare. But for those of us who lack the imagination to perceive the infinity of our lives in time, it might be possible to perceive the infinity of our lives in human space. Again, the Indian texts tell us that we are karmically linked to all the other people in the world; they *are us*. I have known and respected this theory for a long time, though I have not always believed it.[25] But for one important moment, I did believe it. It was at a time when I was feeling rather sorry for myself for having only one child; I wished that I had had lots of children, and now it was too late. I felt that having six

children would have meant having an entirely different life, not merely six times the life of a woman with one child, and I wanted that life as well as the life that I had. This thought was in my mind as I wandered on a beach in Ireland, and saw a woman with lots and lots of children, very nice children, too, and at their best, as young children often are on a beach. Normally, I would have envied her; but this time, I enjoyed her children. I was happy to watch them. And suddenly I felt that they were mine, that the woman on the beach had had them for me, so that they would be there for me to watch them as they played in the water. Her life was my life too; I felt it then, and I remember it now. What had been an idea to me until then, the idea of my karmic identity with other people, became an experience. I was able to live her life in my imagination.

One way of interpreting my epiphany of the woman on the beach was this realization that my connection to her—and, through her, to every other woman who had ever had or ever would have children—meant that my brief lifespan was expanded into the lifespans of all the other people in the world. This is a very Hindu way of looking at one's relationship with all other people. Woven through the series of individual lives, each consisting of a cluster of experiences, was the thread of the experience itself—in this case, motherhood. That experience would survive when her children and mine were long dead.

I felt then that all the things that one wanted to do and to be existed in eternity; they stood there forever, as long as there was human life on the planet Earth. They were like beautiful rooms that anyone could walk into; and when I could no longer walk into them, they would still be there. They were part of time, and though they could not go on being part of me for much longer, part of me would always be there in them. Something of me would still linger in those things that I had loved, like the perfume or pipe smoke that tells you that someone else has been in a room before you. This is the same "perfume," the same karmic trace of memory, that adheres to the transmigrating soul. And through my connection with the woman on the beach, I would be the people in the future who sensed in that room the perfume that I had left behind, though (unless I was a gifted sage) I would not recognize it as my perfume. Perhaps, since I am not a Hindu, that is as close as I can come to believing that I can remember my other lives: remembering other peoples' lives as my life. And perhaps it is close enough.

Fire and Ice

Scholars can learn to think with the myths of other cultures. More tha
that: they sometimes learn to *feel* with them. Thinking (with the head) an
feeling (with the heart) when we confront other people's myths has seriou
implications. There are several things that it does *not* mean. It does not mea
that a scholar of religion should become an apologist for another tradition, le
alone convert to it; though conversions of this type do in fact occur from tim

to time, they are not the usual course of events, and they are hedged with problems. Nor does it mean that mythologists should proselytize for the texts that they study, using them in an attempt to cure the ills of a demythologized age. As we shall see, people other than mythologists certainly do take up foreign myths (just as they convert to foreign religions), but they do not take them up in the same way that the historian of religions takes them up, and in any case it is not the task of the historian of religions to facilitate such conversions. Nor does it imply that the way to study other people's myths is to take them into our own lives; the way to study them is to *study* them, learning the languages in which they were composed, finding all the other myths in the constellation of which they are a part, setting them in the context of the culture in which they were spawned—in short, trying to find out what they mean to the people who have created and sustained them, not what they mean to us. And this is hard enough to do.

But sometimes something happens to us when we study other peoples' myths; sometimes they enter our hearts as well as our heads. Some scholars have come to think and feel with other peoples' myths, an enterprise that always affects the construction of a scholar's personal worldview (one's life as a hunter) and may also affect one's professional scholarship (the life as a sage). What happens to the scholarship of sages who take seriously the myths that they study?

There is an entire continuum of ways of interpreting a myth. At one end of the spectrum is the scholarly attempt to find out what the myth meant to the people who created it: this is the method of learning the language and so forth that I have just described. It is also a method that takes serious account of the interpretations offered by believers within the tradition (though the hermeneutics of suspicion would also take into account other scholarly data that might contradict a statement from within the tradition). Such interpretations, based upon the unique characteristics of the particular culture that created this particular version of the myth, can be judged and criticized by the same criteria that would be applied to any academic enterprise. At the other end of the spectrum is the nonscholarly experience of the myth, which deals solely with the meaning that the myth has for the person who encounters it. Such an experience can only take place if the person who interprets the myth believes in certain universals of human experience and sees in the myth not merely a particular cultural version but also a universal theme that has some meaning beyond culture, across cultures. Such interpretations cannot be judged or criticized by any academic criteria; they are purely subjective, valuable only to the person who draws personal meaning from the myth.

But what of the middle ground between these extremes? What of scholars who see, as well as any good scholar can, what the myth means to its parent culture, and find that that interpretation also has meaning for them? Do we understand other peoples better if we *do* take their myths into our lives or if we do *not* take their myths into our lives? Do we understand other peoples' myths better if we like them, or if we hate them, or if we remain neutral?

Many scholars who have written great studies of religion have been motivated not by love of religion but by hatred of religion, or at least by anger directed against religion, or fear or loathing of religion. Freud and Marx are the most outstanding examples of brilliant haters of religion, but there are others.[26] Hate is, like love, fueled by the heart rather than the head, and emotional fuel has great staying power. Hunters *must* love and hate; ideally, sages do neither, if they remain in the cool realm of the head. But, as we have seen, they do *not* always remain in the realm of the head; they, too, hunt in the heart, and so they, too, may love and hate what they study with the head.

Robert Frost wrote of the power of hate compared with the power of desire (which is, of course, not precisely the same as love, but close enough for poetic license):

> Some say the world will end in fire,
> Some say in ice.
> From what I've tasted of desire
> I hold with those who favor fire.
> But if it had to perish twice,
> I think I know enough of hate
> To say that for destruction ice
> Is also great
> And would suffice.[27]

So hate, like desire, can destroy; and I think that, like desire, hate can create. The Hindus know that hate can even be a way of loving, particularly a way of loving a god: they speak of "hate-love" (*dvesha-bhakti*), a form of devotion in which by trying to destroy or resist a god one is drawn into an ultimately salvational intimate relationship with him. In chapter 5, we shall see some of the consequences of hating a god.

But hate may have been a more appropriate academic motivation in the salad days of the academic study of religion, when, like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, we were green in judgment, and trying to be cold in blood. Nowadays, when we can, and must, be more subtle in our criticisms of religion, hate has its limits. The attempt to sympathize is always interesting, perhaps because it is ultimately impossible; but the enterprise of killing is ultimately boring. It doesn't take very long to kill something academically—that is, to demonstrate how wrong or bad a religion, or a colleague in the study of religion, may be—but then you're finished; there is nothing left to do.[28] Killing may be amusing while it lasts, but it never lasts very long, and then you're back where you started from; there is nowhere to go *on* to. Hunters have to kill; sages do not. Sages have their opinions, of course, but they have learned to move with a careful tolerance in strange waters. Hate is creative but not generative; scholars who study what they hate go round and round, obsessively, ad infinitum, like an ouroboros biting its own tail forever—or until it burns out.

The issue of the legitimacy of affect (the heart) in the academic study of religion (a discipline of the head) has thus led us to the question of the relative validity of the two different sorts of affect, love and hate. Hate seems to provide an answer to the embarrassing problem of caring about what one teaches when what one teaches is religion. For though in the academy at large (if not in most divinity schools) it is regarded as wrong to care *for* religion, it is not wrong to care *against* religion. Criticism is more *wissenschaftlich* than praise in all academic disciplines, but particularly in religious studies. Since the Enlightenment, hatred of religion has been a more respectable scholarly emotion than love, particularly hatred for one's own religion.

The problem of affect is thornier when one is studying not the myths of others but one's own myths, a delicate enterprise that has been much discussed. If we teach what we believe in, our subconscious commitment to our own worldview may skew our supposedly innocent approach to the data; the heart may pollute the head. Teachers with such secret agendas (sometimes secret even to themselves) force their theories and their pupils onto a Procrustean Hide-a-Bed. Hunters lead dangerous lives; there are many traps that lie in wait for scholars who bring their lives into their work, who allow too many liberties to the hunters within themselves, who fall into the traps laid for them in the jungles of their unconscious assumptions.

The simultaneous use of heart and head seems to violate many of the unspoken canons of scholarship, particularly the rather nervous scholarship of those of us who study religion.[29] Scholars of religion tend to be particularly gun-shy when it comes to admitting to any sort of personal investment in the subject that they teach, and with good reason: the battle between those who believe that religion has a place in the academic curriculum and those who believe that it does not has had a long and ugly history, beginning from the time when the American Constitution banished the church from the state. Americans have generally assumed that one could not be both pious and educated; this formulation was challenged long ago by William Rainey Harper, the founder of the University of Chicago, but his challenge was never truly accepted, least of all at Chicago. The battle still rages today; die-hard creationists still rouse passions with their objection to Darwin, as do fundamentalists with their demands for prayers in schools and their claim that secular humanism is a religion. Religion remains the academic Scarlet Woman, pilloried primarily by those who react against the Reaction of the Moral Majority, but also by those who have always been, rightly, frightened by the power that religion has (like alcohol, sex, and nuclear energy—or drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll) to do evil as well as good.

Though, still in the academy at large, the love of religion is never considered as academically legitimate as the hatred of religion, the love of *other* peoples' religions is regarded as at least less illegitimate than the love of one's own. In an attempt to undo the damage done by centuries of scholarship motivated by colonial and missionary hatred (or loathing) of non-Western religions, the scholarship of recent decades has leaned over backward and [illegible] of cultural relativism.[30] Many historians of religions hope that none of the othernesses of other religions will prove so overwhelming as to prevent us entirely from understanding them. In this, historians of religions endorse Terence's affirmation that "nothing human is alien to me" and Merleau-Ponty's assertion that ethnography is a way of knowing that allows us to see the alien as our own, and our own as the alien. But though many historians of religions acknowledge the ultimate inadequacy of cultural relativism and are willing to confront the ugly shadow side of religious phenomena, I think they still maintain a covert hope of learning to sympathize with, if not necessarily to approve of, that ugliness.[31] It is surely significant that the discipline of the history of religions was born and raised in the context of the World Parliament of Religions, which spawned the still operative optimism that the more you know about other people (even when you do not like what you know), the less likely you will be to kill them. One of the results of this position is that some historians of religions have let down their guard to such a point that they have made their own academic writings about other peoples' texts into sermons for the truth values of those texts. Such scholars are sometimes accused of committing the deadly academic sin of cryptotheologizing; this is sometimes said even of Mircea Eliade.

I do not think this accusation can be justly applied to all scholars who regard other peoples' myths as potential vehicles of meaning; I think that there are ways, scholarly ways, of saying that other peoples' myths may have meaning for us without preaching them. But this must be done with great self-awareness. For if they say that other peoples' myths are good, scholars are in danger of legitimating these myths just as priests do; and it is not the job of a scholar to replicate the claims of religious believers.

The other side of the coin of cultural relativism is equally slippery. For it is also dangerous for scholars to say that other peoples' myths are *not* good, to admit to hating aspects of other peoples' myths. Bigots, who hate other peoples' religions, are not a problem peculiar to the academy; bigots may be hunters or sages. But the problem of bigotry takes on an interesting twist when it comes to the study of religions. Relativists often assume that we may say that our own myths are evil, but they tell us that we must not say that other peoples' myths are evil. It is no longer legitimate to say in print (at least in a scholarly text) that one hates some aspect of other peoples' religions, that one thinks the Aztecs were nasty to massacre all those children, or the Hindus were/are wrong to burn their widows alive. If we were to make such Eurocentric judgements, it is feared, we would be no better than the Spanish under Cortés or (perish the thought) the British in India. Yet, as Edward Said has demonstrated, at bottom we *are,* and can be, no better (that is, no fairer) than the British;[32] and, as Allan Bloom has demonstrated, relativism when slavishly pursued has profoundly disturbing effects upon our own culture.[33]

Yet I think that if we are going to take other peoples' myths seriously, we must not feel constrained to love them, or, even if we do love them, to overlook their flaws. Indeed, as with the people that we love, to love deeply is to know deeply, and to know deeply is to be aware of the shadows too. And surely if scholars are to have the right to love other peoples' myths,

they should have the right to hate them as well. There should be a place for honest affect—which must necessarily include the judgment that some myths are good and others are not—within the legitimate study of other peoples' religions, even for—or, rather, especially for—people who have made the initial judgment that mythology as a whole has meaning for us.

Thus, for instance, I find personally repugnant the Hindu tradition of *suttee* that theoretically exalts widows who burn themselves alive on their husbands' funeral pyres. But I hesitate to call the myth that establishes this tradition a bad myth, for it is a genuine expression of one aspect of a complex worldview that has complex meanings. Before making our judgments, we must first admit our personal revulsion and then attempt to transcend it. First we must find out what may be the Hindu widow's concept of what will happen to her after her death and what will happen to her if she continues to live, and her broader concept of the relationships between wives and husbands, between mothers and children, and between the living and those who have died and those who are yet to be born. Only then may we come to realize that for some women the act of *suttee* may have had a value not unlike the value that we would attribute to the self-sacrifices of heroes of the Resistance at the hands of the Nazis in World War II, or the self-sacrifices of the Christian martyrs: the willing death of the individual for a greater cause. At the same time, we must recognize that other women, who did not necessarily share this worldview, may have been forced, by moral or even physical pressure, to commit *suttee* unwillingly, and thus may have perceived it as we initially perceive it, as a murder. But so long as what the Hindu widow sees in *suttee* remains invisible to us, we have no choice but to view it as a murder; only when the broader context becomes visible are we able to choose to view it as a murder or not.

I myself find the Hindu worldview as a whole both beautiful and meaningful, and I have been able to make many Hindu myths my own myths, to use them to construct my own meanings. But my personal resistance to the institution of *suttee* means that I cannot use the myth of *suttee* as *my* myth. This poses a further limitation for the goal of "getting inside the head" of a Hindu: there are parts of that head that I don't want to be inside. Moreover, it is evident that the myth of *suttee* has several different meanings for the lives of the people who tell that story—some for those Hindus who approve of *suttee*, others for those who disapprove, and still others, perhaps, for the willing or unwilling widows. And if there are (and there are) Hindus, too, who have not taken *suttee* into their heads, I reserve the right to avoid that particular part of the Hindu head, myself.

The ambivalence that I and other Western historians of religions have experienced in confronting such phenomena as *suttee* is in part a reflection of the fact that it is harder to accept other peoples' rituals (*suttee*)—or, even more, other peoples' realities (the woman who is burned alive)—than to accept other peoples' myths (the story that tells how Sati, the wife of Shiva, established this custom; see chapter 5). In the first case, *moral* relativism [illegible] from making essential decisions about the one

way in which we can act in a given situation (or, in its more extreme form, the way in which anyone should act in that situation). In the second case, *ontological* relativism, relativism about ideas, does not necessarily involve a yes/no decision about any particular action; it merely allows us to consider all the options. Moral relativism does expose us to serious dangers, but these dangers are not necessarily attached to ontological relativism. Ontological relativism is neither cowardly nor inconsistent with the pragmatist position: when forced to make a decision, one does so, but when not forced to do so (and one should not be forced to do so), one does not.

Within all the options that we may consider, we have the right to love some myths and to hate others. By and large, I regard the myths that I have told in this book as laden with perceptions that have meaning for me; this is why I have allowed them to speak for me, to express my opinions about the meaning and use of the telling of myths.

Academic Hardware and Religious Software

Thus historians of religions must fight a war on two fronts. The first battle is against the covert truth claims of theological approaches to religion that masquerade as nontheological approaches, whether these be self-justifying at the expense of other peoples' religions (bigotry) or self-denegrating at the expense of one's own religion (mindless moral relativism or promiscuous conversion). But the historian of religions must also be on guard against the overt objections of superrationalists, who oppose the study of religion in *any* form or would allow it to be studied only within the sterile confines of an objectivity that is in any case impossible and probably not even desirable. It is a razor's edge not at all easy to tread, but it is the Middle Way for the humanistic study of religion.

Scholars of religion are not unique in caring about the personal implications of what they teach, but their commitment is usually more vulnerable than that of many of their colleagues in other fields. For though the personal commitment of scholars engaged in the teaching of Marxism, women's studies, black studies, and even regional studies (Chinese, Middle Eastern) is often just as intense and just as potentially disruptive of academic objectivity, scholars of religion have made the most self-conscious effort to be more objective than the chemists, *plus royaliste que le roi*—or, in Martin E. Marty's formulation, "more secular than thou." This is all well and good; if one is going to teach a highly charged subject like religion, one must be more aware, not less aware, of the impossible goal of pure objectivity. It behooves us, even more, perhaps, than it behooves anthropologists or classicists, to play by the rules of the game of scholarship—to learn languages, read commentaries, examine firsthand reports, and take into consideration the various biases of the many people in the chain of transmission that ends with us. Clifford Geertz has stated the problem well: "I have never been impressed by the argument that as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one

might as well let one's sentiments run loose. As Robert Solow has remarked, that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer."[34]

We tell ourselves (and others, particularly our colleagues in the "harder" disciplines) that we study our texts from the outside, in the approved manner of the head, like sages, cool and objective, while we deal with the religious affairs of the heart, if we deal with them at all, from the inside, like hunters, with passion and commitment. We maintain an objective interest in one sort of religion and a subjective faith in another. For historians of religions, the "objective" religion may be obviously other—Hinduism or Islam—, but even if we are dealing with our "own" tradition we are prey to a kind of schizophrenia in artificially defining it as "other" for the duration of the period in which we have it under the academic microscope. That our stock-in-trade is ideas about gods rather than ideas about electrons or phonemes is not supposed to bother anyone. The same basic rules should apply; the mental computer follows the same synapses, and we merely change the software to *very* soft software.

But in making such assertions, in attempting to play the game of objectivity with the Big Boys on the playing fields of the harder sciences, we often tend to play down the more subtle but equally genuine sort of objectivity that good scholars of religion can and do bring to their discipline, a critical judgment that allows them to be critical even of their own faith claims. And leaning over backward is not always the best posture in which to conduct a class; it is a posture in which one can easily be knocked over by any well-aimed blow from the opposition (indeed, from either of the two oppositions). Moreover, this pressure often makes scholars of religions deny that they care about religion, which is untrue; we do care, which is why we have chosen this profession, instead of becoming lawyers and making lots of money.

Some scholars—I think of Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy—do manage to accomplish the rapprochement from the heart to the head, using their own religious commitment in their academic study. But others take the safer path, using their academic study of other peoples' religions in their private religious understanding (the approach from the head to the heart). This latter approach, the way of the sympathetic sage, is, as we have seen, more easily achieved, though it is less often discussed. To write about a religion that one cares about may be academically unfashionable; but to let what one reads and writes affect one's personal religion is academically irrelevant. The assertion that critical objectivity makes it possible for a scholar to deal even with his or her own faith claims in an academic forum demands a far more delicate defense than the assertion that a scholar may derive new faith claims from the subject matter that is first taken up with critical objectivity.

A cynic might view this second process as merely a disguised form of the first, achieving the same end through a means less susceptible to criticism. I am reminded of the Jesuit who was informed that he was not permitted to smoke while he meditated. Quite right, the Jesuit replied; but surely no one would object if he were to meditate while he was smoking. In fact, I think the [...] that I have outlined are truly distinct, though my justification

for both admittedly rests upon my conviction that it is not necessary for the head and the heart of the scholar of religion to answer to two different masters, that the head and the heart can nourish rather than sabotage one another.

It sometimes seems to me that we arrange our talents and weaknesses like the foolish blind man and lame man in the old story: they agreed to team up, but the lame man carried the blind man on his shoulders. If the blind but physically whole man is the hunter, the experiencer, surely we should let him be led about by the lame sage, the *see-er,* the scholar. As we have seen, though a hunter is basically limited to one side of experience (the physical and emotional), a sage is not necessarily limited to only the other side of experience (the intellectual). In any case, since it is ultimately impossible for the sage to deny the hunter within him, it is best for him to come to terms with his hunter. But more than that; the sage who acknowledges his hunter aspect is a better sage, the sage whose heart melts (in the Indian example) rather than the one who is dried up by his books.

If we return now to the metaphor of "getting inside someone else's head," we realize its more complex implications. For me, it implies the (ultimately unreachable) goal of cross-cultural studies. In attempting to understand Hinduism, I would want to get inside the head of a Hindu, to become in a way a kind of ersatz Hindu. But then, one might say, why not just talk to a Hindu and find out what is inside his head? (This is the "Take-a-Buddhist-to-dinner" approach to the comparative study of world religions.) There are a number of reasons why this is not a satisfactory equivalent for getting inside the head of a Hindu oneself. (1) There are many Hindus, and the one that I talk to might be as ignorant of or mistaken about her own tradition as a Jew or Christian chosen at random might be wrong about her own tradition. (2) There are so many Hinduisms that no single Hindu could speak for the entire tradition. (3) In many ways, a Hindu is the very worst person to ask about Hinduism; he is so bound up in it that he is blind to many of its aspects that an outsider might see.[35] (4) A Hindu would not ask of Hinduism the sorts of questions that I might want to ask of it, might leave out of his necessarily selective summary precisely the sorts of things that I would want to know.

This last objection, in particular, reveals the fact that when I say that I want to get inside the head of a Hindu I really mean that I want to get inside it *but to remain, at the same time, inside my own head.* The sage, at a certain point, realized that he was a sage inside a hunter, that he was running both systems of perception at once. Thus, the ideal scholar at this point is two-headed: he has his own head and the head of the Other. But if we look closer, we see that such a scholar must, in fact, have more heads than the most capitally extravagant Hindu deity. For there are many heads of the Other (many different sorts of Hindus, all of whom one hopes to understand) and, of course, many heads of Us. For each scholar is not only simultaneously hunter and sage but often also simultaneously superstitious and a secular humanist, and many other things. Freud once remarked that when two people made love, there were four people in the bed (the two there, and the two being fantasized); in the study of comparative religion, when we attempt to penetrate

not the body but the head of the other, there are always hundreds of people in the head.

Eclecticism in personal cosmologies may be too elusive and idiosyncratic to be subjected to the structures of a public, communal, academic discourse. But eclecticism does have a legitimate place in the evolution of private universes. Eclectics make better hunters, people who use their academic discoveries to enrich their personal worldviews; they embody the positive side of Socrates' famous dictum that the life that is unexamined is not worth living. And I think that they are better sages, too, scholars whose sympathy gives them greater understanding of the subject that they teach; for it is also true that the life that is not lived is not worth examining.[36]

Yet "eclecticism" may be too arrogant a word, implying, perhaps, that we decide what myths are true or make up gods that suit our moods. Perhaps we should find some more modest, passive word to describe what we do in receiving and accepting the myths from other peoples' religions. Perhaps our myths, like greatness in Shakespeare's formulation,[37] are not something that we are born with, or achieve, but something that we have thrust upon us, to confront not only with our heads but with our hearts.

Chapter 2

Other Peoples' Lies

The Cave of Echoes

It is impossible to define a myth, but it is cowardly not to try.[1] For me, the best way to not-define a myth is to look at it in action, which is what I have tried to do throughout this book: to see what myth does, rather than what myth is. It seems to me that by the time you've defined your terms in an argument, you've lost interest in the problem. But at this point, as we begin to reexamine our own assumptions about myths, it might be useful to list some things that I think myths are *not:* myths are not lies, or false statements to be contrasted with truth or reality.[2] This usage is, perhaps, the most common meaning of myth in casual parlance today.[3] Indeed, other cultures, too, call myths lies. The Malagasy end the recitation of any myth with a traditional tag-line: "It is not I that lie; this lie comes from olden times."[4] In our culture, in particular, myths are often given the shadowy status of what has been called an "inoperative truth,"[5] when in fact they might better be characterized as operative fictions. Picasso called art a lie that tells the truth, and the same might be said of myths.

What a Myth Is and Is Not

The desecration of the word "myth" to mean "lie" began with Plato, who contrasted the fabricated myth with the true history.[6] It is, I think, an irony that our word for myth in most European languages, together with our basic attitude to myths, comes from ancient Greece, one of the very few culture