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BORN OF THE EARTH

Myth and Politics in Athens

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CHAPTER 3

The Politics of Myth in Athens

Let us imagine that a polis has just been founded, a group of citizens established on its territory.¹ What is the wise legislator's most urgent task? Drafting the laws, surely? If he follows Plato, he will begin elsewhere: he will create myths.

[He will persuade the citizens] that in actual fact they were formed and raised in the bosom of the earth, themselves, their weapons and all their equipment; that after they were complete the earth, their mother, gave them birth, and that now they must regard the earth they inhabit as their mother and their nurse, defend it against attack and consider the other citizens as brothers, risen from the earth like themselves.

(*Republic* 414d-e)

To create myths: according to Plato the first concern of the founder of a polis. The sophist Critias, "tyrant" of Athens and kinsman of the philosopher, expressed the same opinion when he grounded political order in the fear of the gods—the clever invention of a sage.² We may believe the philosopher of the *Republic*, who hastened to put mythmaking under the omnipotent authority of official censorship (337b-c) as soon as the foundations of the imaginary city were laid. Bad myths needed to be replaced right away by good ones, "noble lies" for the use of the community, for every Greek polis, imaginary or not, lived by myths.

Taking leave of the fiction of the first inventor and the problem of the noble lie, let us return to the "real," to real poleis with their histo-

ries and political life. Myth is already here as well: ancient history engraved in civic life, repeated daily and in the most abstruse decisions, telling tales of origin or grounding the present of the polis. It is this multiform presence that we will try to trace within the polis, a prestigious, if not privileged, example of the Greek politics of myth.

A city, then: Athens. A territory (*khôra*), and men (*andres*). At the center of the *khôra*, the urban space, the physical plane of civic life, punctuated by three summits: the Acropolis, the Agora, the Kerameikos—the hill of power and the sacred, the public square, the national cemetery. A community of citizens with their wives (who are entitled to the name of Athenians [*Athênaiai*], but not that of citizens), and two categories of noncitizens, Metics and slaves. An intense civic life, and a dynamic foreign policy dominated by an imperialistic search for power, even more than by a desire to expand.

In Athens as in the other poleis, the myths were concerned with origin, which was necessarily glorious;³ the legendary cycle of national heroes unrolled a series of exploits or solitary *erga* in which citizens saw a prefiguring of their collective enterprises.

Two myths to start with.

The Confrontation of Athena and Poseidon, and the Myth of Erichthonios

First, the quarreling of the gods and its sequel.⁴ A divinity of the polis, Athena ruled over Athens; from the beginning her temple stood on the Acropolis. From the beginning; more precisely from when the Athenians decided in favor of Athena over Poseidon. This took place in the distant period of the partitioning of the *timai* among the immortals; each god expected to receive his or her share of mortal honors, and the cities of men were fiercely disputed. In Athens, then, Poseidon and Athena confront each other. The first to arrive in Attica, Poseidon caused a sea (the *Erekhtheis*) to spring up from a hollow in the Acropolis, while Athena caused an olive tree to shoot up from the sacred rock. A judicial court, established by Zeus or constituted—already!—by Athenians, ruled on the dispute. Kekrops, the first king, half-man, half-serpent, already human but still linked to the monstrous creatures of pri-

mordial Earth, was a witness (according to certain versions, the adjudicator). His claims rejected, Poseidon was beaten in Athens as in Troezen, where Athena triumphed, and as in Argos or Delphi where he had to yield to Hera and Apollo. Thus began for the Athenian city-state the era of civilization. And if, at Athens as elsewhere, civilization and the masculine power of the *andres* were synonymous, Athenian myths illustrate this equivalence three times. To choose Athena was to choose a warrior goddess, a virgin without a mother, born of a father who was also the all-powerful father of gods and men: Athena whose "heart was all for men, except in marriage," and who at the trial of Orestes, murderer of his mother Clytemnestra, pronounced herself unreservedly in favor of the rights of the father.⁵ Witness or judge, Kekrops was also the inventor of monogamous marriage: he ended the disordered promiscuity of the sexes by instituting patrilineal descent. Finally one variant of the myth based the victory of Athena on the political exclusion of women: guilty of having aroused the anger of Poseidon by voting for the daughter of Zeus while the men voted for the god, who was beaten it is true by a single voice—the women outnumbered the men by one—women were dispossessed for all time from any power in the polis. The city of men was born: the first truly human ancestor of the Athenians could arise.

The myth of Erichthonios tells the story of this birth and ushers the city into the time of men. Erichthonios was born from Attic soil, fertilized by Hephaistos' desire for Athena;⁶ his name was glossed by ancient mythographers as *Khithonios*, son of the Earth, and the product of the piece of wool (*erion*) with which the fleeing virgin wiped the god's semen off her leg, unless he was simply the product of the amorous struggle (*eris*) of the two divinities. But this autochthone is first and foremost linked to Athena, and in him repose all the connections between the polis and its guardian. Already in the *Iliad* (2.546–551) the roles were divided between Athena and the fertilized earth (*zeidōros aroura*): to earth, childbearing (*teke*), and to Athena the care of raising the child—here named Erechtheus—whom she made her protégé ("then Athena, daughter of Zeus, established him in Athens in her rich sanctuary"). In the fifth century, Athenian potters represented Gê handing over the newborn to Athena for her to raise—in fact for her to acknowledge.⁷ In truth Erichthonios descends from Athena as one may descend from a virgin radically opposed to childbearing: through the mediation of the earth. When he becomes king, Erichthonios repays

everything he owes to his protectress, instituting the Panathenaea and thereby associating the name of the goddess with that of her people forever.⁸ According to Herodotus (7.44) it is during the reign of Erechtheus that the inhabitants of Attica took the name of Athenians. Thus the autochthonous king inaugurates for Athens the human era of mythic history. Through his birth, he belongs to the original age of Kekrops; on the vases a man-serpent frequently assists at the "birth" of the miraculous child, and Kekrops' daughters, Aglauros, Pandrosos, and Herse, were by the will of Athena made the human nurses of Erichthonios, a weighty task which they discharged badly and which led to their deaths.⁹ The end of Erichthonios, or rather of Erechtheus, since the tradition appears to reserve this name for the old king, reconciles Athens and Athena's rival. At the price of two lives: in order to save the city threatened by the expedition of the Thracian Eumolpos, son of Poseidon, Erechtheus has to sacrifice his own daughter before being swallowed up by the ground, struck by the god's trident; his death, however, associates him with the god in perpetuity, and from now on he is worshipped under the name of Poseidon-Erechtheus. From tragedy a new divine protector for the polis is born. With Erichthonios or with Erechtheus (whether or not they are distinguished) begins the long line of Athenian kings, as for example on the Berlin vase,¹⁰ which in addition to the usual witnesses of Erichthonios' birth, Kekrops and Hephaistos, depicts Erechtheus the adult king and Aegeus, the father of Theseus.

The "Life" of a Hero: Theseus

The story of Theseus has all the ingredients of heroic saga. From childhood to coming of age, from fortune to disaster, the life of Theseus is a long series of exploits "condensing all the virtues and dangers of human action." The bringing of civilization, dueling with monsters, the transcending of the human condition: Theseus made all such examples of heroic exploit his own.¹¹ Son of Aegeus, or of Poseidon according to other versions, and Aethra, daughter of the king of Troezen, Theseus grew up in the house of his maternal grandfather, already showing numerous signs of heroism. At sixteen, the age of the ephebe, he lifted the rock under which Aegeus had hidden a sword and a pair of sandals, and armed with these tokens of recognition departed for Athens by the most

dangerous route. This was the beginning of a long initiation through which he won the status of legitimate son of Aegeus; on the way he purged the earth of a series of monsters (like the sow of Krommyon) and redoubtable brigands such as Sinis, Kerkyon, and Prokrustes (Proc[r]uste). Recognized by Aegeus, he had still to destroy the terrible bull of Marathon to prove himself a worthy son of the king, and to conquer the band of the fifty Pallantides, his cousins, who disputed Aegeus' power. But doing without rest is the mark of heroic destiny: Theseus embarks immediately for Crete in order to vanquish the Minotaur, who periodically devoured seven young men and seven young women sent by Athens. The rest is well known: his vanquishing of the monster and the Labyrinth thanks to Ariadne, whom he abandons on Naxos, and his forgetting to raise the white sail as a sign of victory, which causes Aegeus' death upon his return. He is now king of Athens. A political king, he embarked on synoecism (from *synoikismos*, cohabitation), which brought together the scattered inhabitants of Attica into one city. A warrior king, he distinguished himself in the expedition against Thebes and the war against the Amazons. The age of adulthood was for him also an age of excess, or at least of the transgression of the forbidden: with his companion Piritheus he stole Helen, daughter of Zeus, and descended to the Underworld to seize Persephone; the affair went sour and earned the hero a long captivity among the dead, waiting for Herakles to descend in his turn to rescue him. Theseus also experienced exile, and violent death on Skyros. Such was the career of the most celebrated of Athenian heroes, the only one given a complete "Life" and a complex character, the only one not completely subsumed in the myth of his birth or his death.

Two myths, one heroic legend. A rigorous selection procedure was necessary to isolate their main features; yet if these three tales were chosen out of the rich Athenian tradition, it was because in them the Athenian polis read (or inserted?) much of itself.¹² These are important, even exemplary, tales, whose position and influence within the life of the polis we will try to elucidate.

Social Functions of Myth: Athenian Autochthony

A discourse on the origin and organization of the human *kosmos*, myth tells the story, for the polis and in the name of the polis, of the ad-

vent of culture. In every Athenian it nourished the representation of Athens which it was convenient to create or bestow on others: that of a polis "beloved of the gods" (*theophilês*) and doubly and foundationally anchored in the direct link to the divine attested to by the quarrel of Athena and Poseidon as well as by the circumstances of Erichthonios' birth: "sons of the blessed gods, issued from a sacred and unconquered land, the Erechtheids were ever prosperous."¹³ The mythical origins of masculine democracy, the legendary war against the Amazons who would be men and ended as damsels in distress, established the civic order of the *andres* in opposition to women, the passive "half" of the polis.¹⁴ The Amazon story is even doubly exemplary, for it also tells of the victory of civilization over barbarism, of the polis over the foreign: in the *Stoa poikilê* (the Painted Portico), where citizens could contemplate the noble deeds of Athens painted on the walls, legend sidled up to history, and "on the middle wall one saw the Athenians and Theseus fighting the Amazons, then the Greeks after they had taken Ilium [. . .], and, at the end of the tableau, those who fought at Marathon."¹⁵

Celebrated in word and image, referred to in public speeches, represented on the tragic stage, frequently illustrated on vases or temple pediments, the myth is in serious danger of being worn out through rhetorical commonplaces and conventional scenes. Its polysemy, reinforced in tragedy, comes apart when it penetrates the prosaic *logos* of politics or when potters choose to illustrate one of its sequences—always the same one. But it gains in being, in political terms, a necessary mediation between Athenians and Athens.

One example will suffice to illustrate the numerous functions and multiple levels of social experience assumed by the myth: that of Athenian autochthony. Official religion held to the strictest orthodoxy concerning the birth of Erichthonios, and the history of this prestigious ancestor was an integral part of the *hieros logos* (sacred discourse) of Athena, which occupied such an important position in the mystic watch of the Panathenaea.¹⁶ Tragedy did not choose between the son of the gods and the autochthone, born from the soil of the fatherland, in the representation of Erichthonios, and when the tragedians extended the name of Erechtheids to the whole civic body, they made Athenians both divine offspring and autochthones. But rhetoric went one step further, and, as if the story of Erichthonios was too well known to be evoked yet again, public orators, as for example those who delivered funeral orations (*epitaphioi logoi*) for the glory of citizens fallen in battle,

generally avoided mention of the national hero and the divine couple who presided at his birth, in order to attribute the privilege of autochthony to all *andres Athēnaioi* collectively. It is not surprising that this generalized autochthony became a central theme of the ideology of Athenian democracy: not only did it serve to justify Athenian militarism—champions of the right (supposedly), Athenians were so by virtue of their status as legitimate sons of the soil of the fatherland¹⁷—but orators went so far as to deduce democracy from autochthony, or, to put it in Platonic terms, political equality (*isonomia*) from equality of origin (*isogonia*).¹⁸ Thus law (*nomos*) was founded in nature (*phusis*), and the power of the *dēmos* achieved its title therewith: endowed collectively with high birth (*eugeneia*), autochthonous citizens were all equal because they were all noble. One step further, and the speeches contrasted Athens with all other poleis, heteroclitic assortments of intruders established like Metics on foreign soil. Have we lost the myth along the way? We must not forget that in the religious calendar as well as in civic terms, in daily life as well as festivals, each Athenian encountered the myth of Erichthonios on numerous occasions: at the Acropolis and the celebration of the Panathenaea, on the Agora, illustrated implicitly by the presence of Athena next to Hephaistos in the temple of the Craftsman,¹⁹ on the tragic or comic stage, in the potter's workshop where vases, kitchenware, or *objets d'art* endlessly repeated the gesture of Gē handing the infant to Athena, and in the works of art with which their city was embellished.²⁰ And if the myth was weakened by the rhetoric, we may still assume that Athenian audiences were prepared to refer the general propositions of the speeches to the living context of the myth. Unless Athenians really heard something else in the speeches on autochthony: the *muthos* of Athens. . . .

Myths, then, do not die from politicization. How could they, when they endow the polis with its own identity, establishing the eponymy of Athens or watching over the *paideia* of the defenders of the fatherland? For this reason the oath taken by the Athenian ephebes invoked Aglauros, child-rearing maiden of bloody destiny, at the head of the list of religious powers called to witness the irreversible engagement of the citizens. For this reason also Cleisthenes, establishing in 508 the ten tribes that would constitute the politico-military framework of Athenian life, put them under the patronage of ten national heroes—the ten *Epōnumoi*, among whom are found unsurprisingly Kekrops, Erechtheus, and

Aegeus, and whose deeds the citizens were invited to repeat in an endlessly renewed *mimēsis*.²¹

Between gods and heroes, between the original kinship that linked them collectively with Athena and the classificatory kinship that separated them into ten tribes, Athenians had no lack of models, inscribed in the civic and temporal space of the polis, to incite them to found their actions in myth.

Myth: In the Space and Time of the Polis

Myths are present everywhere, punctuating the space of the polis where they indicate pathways and form constellations, complex knots of tensions and relationships.

In the second century of our era Pausanias Periegetes, the indefatigable wanderer and even more indefatigable collector of mythical traditions, visited Athens, inaugurating a series of scholarly promenades through the Greek poleis: entering through the Gate of Dipylon, which gave access to the Agora from the cemetery of the Kerameikos, he crossed the Agora, climbed the Acropolis, returned to the Agora, and left the city by way of the Kerameikos. This touristic as well as scholarly tour provided opportunity for his antiquarian skills; but Athens was already merely a museum of the past.²² Let us imagine for a moment what an Athenian of the fifth or fourth century would have seen or described, following the same itinerary (here simplified). From the Kerameikos to the Acropolis and from the Agora to the Kerameikos two processions intersect—assigned different portions of the year by the calendar, but along whose routes a timeless impression still lingered: that of the Panathenaea, rising toward the sacred hill where Athena's olive tree grew, where the goddess received Erechtheus in her ancient temple, where the virgin daughters of Kekrops danced at night, "trampling the green ways before the temples of Pallas";²³ and that of public funerals, which passed from the Agora, where the national heroes stood guard, to the official burial site of those fallen in combat, worthy imitators of the *Epōnumoi*. On the Agora, the center of political life, dominated to the southeast by the Acropolis, to the south by the hill of the Areopagus where Athena one day convened the first tribunal, and to the northwest by the temple of Hephaistos, the twelve Olympian gods rubbed elbows with Athenian

heroes: to be brief we will mention only the ten *Epōnumoi*, whose monument played an essential role in the military and political life of the polis, and Theseus, whose exploits were pictured on the interior frieze of the Hephaisteion and the *Stoa poikilē*—in the Hephaisteion, *sub specie aeternitatis*; in the Stoa, in the context of Athenian history, from the war with the Amazons to the battle of Marathon, when the hero intervened accompanied by Athena and Herakles. At every step stood heroic figures, in every corner tales of myth; in fact going for a relaxing stroll was probably not a city thing to do, because no space is less neutral than that of the city. Perhaps it is necessary for the person wishing to take a walk without encountering the polis, omnipresent in its myths, to leave the city walls?²⁴ A naive hope: beside the river Ilissos, Boreus carried off Oreithuia, the daughter of Erechtheus; at Marathon the memory of Theseus lingered, as well as by the banks of the Cephisos; at Eleusis one saw the tomb of Eumolpos, killed by Erechtheus, and so on.²⁵ In the country as in the city, myths spoke to the citizens of the polis.

Let us return to the Agora, or rather to the hill of the Pnyx where the assembly met, where Athenian policy was decided all year long. Here more than anywhere else, myths spoke of the present and the past of the polis. Or at least politicians and orators were engaged in making them speak.

Myths and heroic legends were part of the fabric of Greek historical consciousness; this is a given which needs no emphasis.²⁶ We will concentrate instead on the relationship established within the political sphere between repetition and event, when event took account of myth. This "very ancient history" was history that was used and reworked. History, also, that informed the actions of the present.

Each polis brandished its myths and heroes in the faces of the others. No doubt Theseus owed his great good fortune to what the tyranny of the Peisistratids needed to oppose: the tales the Peloponnesians told of their hero, Herakles. The hero's story gave a prefiguration and a legitimacy to all territorial expansion. Theseus chose the most dangerous route from Troezen to Athens, passing through Megara and Eleusis, because it enabled him to vanquish the enemies of civilization, and because Athens desired to legitimize the conquest of these cities, before or after the fact, whether such conquest was uneasily maintained or merely wished for. When the hero stopped off to dance at Delos en route to Athens from Crete, the dance was certainly a celebration of victory over

the Minotaur, yet it also had its function in the polis of the Peisistratids: a below-the-surface justification for its designs on the Aegean. As for Ion, eponymous ancestor of the Ionians and minister of war under Erechtheus (or the king's successor), his appearance in Athens and in Athenian myths was only to make the polis of the olive into the metropolis of Ionia. A maritime empire, too, has need of myths. What about autochthony then, major weapon in the rivalry of the city-states, brandished by Argives against Athenians, by Athenians against Tegeans?²⁷

More complex but just as real is the effect of myth and heroic legend on internal political life: here the give-and-take between former and present time is constant. The present remodels the legendary past, and at the beginning of the fifth century, in the polis which had been definitively freed from tyrants, representations of Theseus on Attic vases suddenly began to reproduce the attitudes of the Tyrannoktones (murderers of the tyrant), as two famous sculptors had immortalized them for the edification of the *dēmos*. Likewise Pericles' law of citizenship may have given renewed authority to the myth of autochthony around 450. But inversely, the present may imitate the legendary past: when Kimon brought the "ashes of Theseus" back from Skyros, in order to install them ceremoniously at the heart of the polis, at the foot of the Acropolis and near the Agora, it was an opportunity for the politician who saw himself as a new Theseus to slip into the figure of the hero.

Theseus' was a strange destiny within the democratic city. A story whose peaks and troughs correspond to fluctuations of Athenian policy from the sixth to the fourth century. The tyrants glorified him; Cleisthenian reform downplayed him, which set him apart from the *Epōnumoi* his father Aegeus belonged to.²⁸ The aristocratic reaction that followed the Persian Wars made him a dominant figure once again, the very incarnation of Athenian pride; did he not fight on the Athenian side at Marathon? Thus Theseus occupied a prominent place on the monument to the *Epōnumoi*, erected by Athens in the Panhellenic sanctuary of Delphi to commemorate the victory of Marathon (and its own glory): an aberrant *epōnumos* who ousted Ajax, whose principal failing was to have reigned at Salamis. In the civic space of Athens, such a substitution was impossible; here he was honored everywhere, in his own sanctuaries and the temple friezes of the Olympian gods. No doubt he again suffered an eclipse when democracy returned, although his links to Peisistratus and Kimon were themselves sufficient to make him suspect. But

starting from the fifth century he is no longer contested, and bit by bit he takes on a new and final appearance, on the tragic stage and under the influence of political moderates: that of the democratic king, of the ancestor who in the beginning gave power to the people, or, less compromisingly, that of founder of the ancestral constitution (*patrios politeia*). Henceforth, who will be able to tell legend from history?

Thus in perpetual reactualization, the tale of distant *erga* weighs on the actions of the present, whether it inspires them directly or whether it plays for the agents of history, for their own use or that of others, the role of an interpretive model to be projected onto the action.

In order to characterize this overlapping of repetition and event, perhaps we might say, parodying Claude Lévi-Strauss, that nothing resembles ideology more than myth when it becomes political.²⁹ Perhaps also, refusing to start down the slippery path of resemblances, one might observe that there are no "noble lies" in which the liar is not himself implicated, particularly when the storyteller merges with the audience, when the polis tells stories to its citizens.

CHAPTER 4

An Arcadian in Athens

A jamming of indicators, a loss of meaning, an abolition of signs: these signal the presence of the god Pan. Snow falls: tracks disappear before the straying shepherd, who recognizes too late the power of the god. So when a sudden, fair-weather squall arose, scattering flocks of oligarchs in 403 B.C., it was to Pan that the Athenian democratic resistance, holed up in the fortress of Phyle, owed their rescue. Pan rescues and leads astray; sometimes he prefers to lead astray; other times he brings safety, at the price, always, of derangement.¹

Madness and fear, derangement is panic. The faltering of the solitary pedestrian who loses his footing at the edge of a cliff, the collective disarray of the army that precipitously raises a siege, assayed by a disastrous confusion of signals indecipherable in the night. On the mountain as on the battlefield, Pan is always elsewhere, ungraspable, never next to those with whom he allies himself by inciting disorder in the enemy camp. God of the inexplicable (p. 143), master of the echo—that disarticulated sound, that bodiless voice, that distant music, absent yet irremediably there—this is Pan, who "makes nothing seem like something" (p. 181), and who introduces inextricable confusions between the same and the other. For example the "error" of the Gauls who, defeated before Delphi and prey to sudden panic, lost all sense of common identity to the point of massacring one another, over-full of a desire whose erotic object was fragmented and dissolved by violence. Whether he acts at a distance or takes possession of a body, Pan manifests himself in disquieting epiphanies, outbreaks of the supernatural, and moments of discontinuity which overturn the times of men.