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FROM HISTORIOGRAPHY TO MYTHOGRAPHY?

Myth in the Last Fifty Years of Polish Historiography

The ambiguous relation between myth and historiography is due to the many connotations of the two words. As far as **historiography** is concerned, it is of key importance whether we treat it as a domain of science or as a domain of culture (literature), that is, an area separate from science. If historiography is a science, it must be subjected to verification by truth criteria¹, irrespective of what we mean by them. If, however, it is a part of culture, such criteria may turn out to be useless for the categories of truth and falsehood cannot be applied to culture².

Truth (in the sense of concordance with reality) is one of the first questions that come to mind in connection with the word "**myth**". As a matter of fact, myth is a very expansionary name; in the last few decades it has extended, covering ever larger areas of the humanities. Things have come to such a point that the border between the unverifiable truth of a myth and the more or less verifiable truths of "scientific" historiography seems to be blurred. I will try to illustrate this trend by presenting in three scenes Polish troubles with myths: (1) **myths under a curse**, (2) **the taming of myths**, and (3) **the assimilation of myths**.

¹ Cf. J. Topolski, *Mity a problem prawdy historycznej (Myths and Historical Truth)* in: *Historia — mity — interpretacje*, ed. Alina Barszczewska-Krupa, Łódź 1996, pp. 15-27.

² *Ibidem*, p. 26.

1. Myths under a curse

It might have appeared that the end of World War II would mean a return to the normal situation in which questions of any kind of struggle (for a free Poland, for the survival of the nation, and the like) would be pushed to the background and a peaceful reconstruction in an atmosphere of softened political conflicts, social order and harmony would be an issue of outstanding importance. But reality soon gave the lie to these illusions. An internal struggle for the consolidation of communist power went on in Poland, and on the broader, international scale the military war was replaced by the cold war. It turned out that the fight went on, what is more, it was becoming more and more intense, extending even to those spheres which enjoyed comparative peace in 1939–1945.

Should a contemporary linguist try to substantiate the statement that “struggle” is the most frequently used metaphor of life, he would find a real mine of examples in the language of the ideology and politics of the countries of the communist camp at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. The newspeak of that language included hundreds of militant expressions; the main one, referring to “the intensifying struggle for peace and social justice”, gave birth to hosts of meticulous formulations, such as the struggle against imperialism, the struggle for progress, the struggle for equal rights for the oppressed classes, the struggle against the reactionary underground, against economic underground, against the Vatican, against the Americanization of life, against the international and domestic bourgeoisie, against the kulaks (well-to-do peasants whose farms the communist authorities wanted to take over), against the treacherous government in exile, and so on. It probably was not much better on the other side. The language of Senator McCarthy was equally expressive.

“Struggle against” was an expression used for almost everything that was Western, even if this was only Coca Cola or chewing gum. These slogans, which now sound absurd and incredible to the Western reader and the younger inhabitants of the post-communist countries, were in those years the most common mental pabulum fed to the “nations building socialism”. The picture of this “fighting” world, presented by means of indoctrinating formulas, was crossed by many front lines, behind

which there was no peace either, for "hostile sabotage activities" were rampant there.

In 1945, after the war conflagration, the "front line" as well as the "sabotage activities" assumed mainly an ideological character in Europe. Consequently, when at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s the communist authorities launched an offensive in accordance with the rules of newspeak and, armed with the weapon of Marxism, set to impart a scientific character to the Polish humanities, the canon of struggle embraced also historiography, which found itself "in the first rank of the ideological front". It was then that a Marxist "ideological breakthrough" is said to have taken place.

During the period of Positivism historiography was recognized as a discipline of science and this interpretation was almost generally accepted in Poland both before and after World War II. It is significant, however, that the heralds and advocates of a Marxist breakthrough asserted that only "proletarian" historians could produce scientific historiography. It was frequently repeated in the programmatic statements made at that time that while Marxists regarded historiography as a science, bourgeois (non-Marxist) historians questioned the scientific character of their profession, asserting that it was impossible to discover laws that would make it possible to predict the future. It was maintained that they were motivated by the desire to show that the Marxist historians' assertions about the inevitability of socialism and communism were not based on scientific principles, and that they wanted to throw doubt on the correctness of the road chosen by the Soviet Union and the countries of people's democracy. According to this way of thinking, Marxist "scientific" historiography, buttressed by the only correct, unfalling methodological directives, was fully reliable, unlike bourgeois historiography which itself called its scientific character in question and was susceptible to all kinds of "mythologizations".

This explanation was one of the most important elements of the "Marxist methodological breakthrough". One can hardly fail to see that the words "myth" (mythologization) were used in their colloquial meaning. "Myth" was something that gave a false, uncritical picture of reality, something to which scientific historiography should not succumb. Its connotations were legend, fairy-tale, epos, falsehood, utopia, phantasm, prejudice, irreality,

and the like. This was a conception which did not differ from the classic positivist formulas. What was new was that in this dichotomous scheme, "bourgeois historiography versus Marxist historiography", anti-scientific, myth-making qualities were ascribed to the former while the latter was believed to be endowed with fully scientific, mythoclastic qualities.

During the "breakthrough" myths were discovered in various layers of historical narrations, in events, structures, processes, and also in the theoretical and methodological "equipment" of a historian, the main target being idealism for it was "hostile to materialism". Very significant is the evaluation of an "idealist's" (Marceli Handełsman) handbook of the methodology of history. "The denial of the recurrence and regularity of the historical process, which leads to agnosticism, the anti-dialectical conception of development, the negation of the class struggle, the researcher's objectivistic stance regarded as objectivity and the deeply reactionary mythologization of history (emphasis mine — A. W.), this is the theoretical stance of "Historyka"³. The fact that mythologization could have many layers was troublesome for nearly every historian, for neither a "micrographer", nor a "synthesizer", nor a "theoretician" could escape being suspected of mythologization. It was very difficult to find a research field that would prove resistant to accusations of succumbing to, or even creating, myths. And if these accusations were levelled at professional historians, who were regarded as "soldiers of the ideological front", they carried great weight. In the repressive political system of those years it was much better to be stupid than cunning, and if Marxist critics found the presence of myths in somebody's texts, it was a real act of grace if they ascribed it to the lack of professionalism. The accusation that the mythologization was deliberate was much worse for it could be regarded as "a betrayal of the proletariat" or "ideological subversion".

In accordance with the theory that bourgeois historiography specialized in mythologization in order to conceal the truth that the victory of communism was inevitable, special attention was paid to the anti-Soviet Polish historiography of the interwar

³ I Kongres Nauki Polskiej. Sekcja Nauk Społecznych i Humanistycznych. Referat Podsekcji Historii (First Congress of Polish Science. Social and Humanistic Sciences Section. Paper of the History Subsection), Series I, N° 3. Duplicated as a script with all rights reserved for the use of participants in the First Congress of Polish Science, Warszawa 1951, p. 25.

period. It was during those years, in 1920 to be exact, that the newly reborn Poland halted "the victorious march westward of the world's first state of workers and peasants". It was said in the programmatic paper prepared for the First Congress of Polish Culture in 1951 that the historiography of those years tried to justify such political objectives of the ruling classes as Poland's expansion to the East, "servility" to the West, oppression of national minorities, and "the extermination of the revolutionary vanguard of the Polish working class". "Our official history taught at universities", went on the paper, "raises these subjects, embroidering them with pseudo-scientific myths which poison the consciousness of the masses with nationalism, clericalism and solidarism"⁴. One can hardly help reflecting that in order to fight "poisonous myths" Marxist criticism resorted to a really poisonous antidote, namely to a lie about the extermination of the "revolutionary vanguard" in Poland. It is a well known fact that the elite of the Polish communists was exterminated not in Poland but in the USSR during the purges which followed the dissolution of the Communist Party of Poland by the Comintern (the Communist International) in 1938.

Of the many myths which should be anathematized Marxist critics laid stress on the glorification of what they called "the seemingly voluntary" Polish-Lithuanian Union, which in their view was a covert way of annexation of Byelorussian and Ukrainian territories by Poland. The cultivation of this myth was to buttress the federalist concepts of the adherents of Józef Piłsudski and the "anti-Soviet missionary imperialist plans of the Vatican"⁵. Oskar Halecki was declared to be the main poisoner and myth maker, but even lower motives were ascribed to Ludwik Kolanowski who, according to Marxists, was trying to win social approval for the "insane and criminal policy of Polish fascism"⁶.

Among the most dangerous myths criticized by Polish Marxist historians was the "Occidental myth" which was always described in words of deep contempt: "The clericalism-burdened cosmopolitan myth about the Western character of Polish culture performed an analogous class function. What was left unsaid in

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

the juxtaposition of the East and West was the actual purpose of opposing socialism to capitalism, of opposing the working class to imperialist bourgeoisie. Our historical science has spared no effort to establish that our culture is of Western origin, of Italian origin according to some historians or generally of a Romance origin according to others"⁷. According to Marxists there was only one historical truth: what was the most valuable in Polish history was of a native character, and if there was some outside influence, it came rather from the East than from the West.

The "federalist myth" of the Commonwealth of the Two Nations (the Polish-Lithuanian Union) and the "Occidentalism myth" which negated the native sources of Polish culture were probably the gravest mythologization sins ascribed to Polish bourgeois historiography during the Marxist breakthrough. They were present in the layers devoted to processes and structures in historical narration but they concerned general trends or even the character of long-lasting, age-long periods of Poland's history. Myths on other levels of narration, myths concerning persons and events, were also tracked. It is significant that they were no less capacious than the myths from other levels. For instance, the Piłsudski legend which greatly irritated Marxist critics combined the federalist myth, whose aim was to mask Polish expansion to the East, with the Occidentalism myth allegedly directed against the USSR, communism and the working class.

When in 1952 Józef Kowalski called the Piłsudski legend "one of the most mendacious and venomous legends of our history"⁸, he did not foresee that three years later Nikita Khrushchev would tell many Marxist historians that it was they that cultivated a mendacious and venomous legend, though not about Piłsudski but about Stalin. The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which signified a political thaw and announced the end of the cult of personality, toppled down the dogma that the scientific character of Marxist historiography was an immunological barrier protecting it against myths. What is more, it turned out that the "unscientific" bourgeois historiography was more resistant to the myth of "The Leader of Nations

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13.

⁸ J. Kowalski, *Reakcyjna historiografia PPS (The Reactionary Historiography of the PPS)*, in: *Pierwsza Konferencja Metodologiczne Historyków Polskich*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1953, p. 453.

and Standard-Bearer of Peace". This was a painful lesson of humility for many enthusiasts of "the only scientific view of the world".

In Poland the "methodological breakthrough" lasted but a few years in its orthodox, aggressive version launched during the cold war. But the fact that it ended in childhood does not mean that Marxist orientation was pushed to the background. It still held, almost exclusively, a dominant position, but it became more elastic and more open to the West.

2. The taming of myths

At first not much changed in the interpretation of the concept. Myth continued to be treated as a deformation of historical truth, as an evil which should be combated by scientific historiography. But the conviction that the Marxist orientation has no monopoly of science and that other theoretical orientations may also be scientific was slowly gaining ground, and the presence of the science-hostile myth in historiography was not overcome either by the Marxists or historians of other orientations. In 1958 Witold Kula expressed the opinion that the past of historiography could be viewed as "a history of an age-long creation of myths and the struggle to get rid of them"⁹. But he did not regard the presence of myths as an inalienable feature; he believed that one day professional historiography would get rid of them. "Only history", he wrote, "can be an antidote against its own myths. There is no escape from history. A history hostile to man can be defeated only by humanistic history"¹⁰.

The "bad" myths we have discussed so far can be called subject myths¹¹. Consciously or unconsciously a researcher puts them inside his narration (his text) and consciously or unconsciously awards them the status of historical truth. On the other hand, myths which are an intended object of research into social consciousness have been for long accepted by the humanities. At

⁹ W. Kula, *Rozważania o historii (Reflections on History)*, Warszawa 1958, p. 27.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 215.

¹¹ B. Szacka has adopted a similar division of myths. She distinguishes three kinds of myths: subject myths, object myths and functional myths. According to her a subject myth is a myth examined as part of individual or social consciousness. Cf. B. Szacka, *Mit a rzeczywistość społeczeństw nowoczesnych (Myth and the Reality of Modern Societies)*, in: *O społeczeństwie i teorii społecznej. Księga poświęcona pamięci Stanisława Ossowskiego*, Warszawa 1985, pp. 479 ff.

a certain moment historiography may have been outpaced by ethnology, psychology, sociology, linguistics, theory of literature and other disciplines of the humanities, but its slack pace is rather relative. After all, already during the myth-fascinated Romanticism the view was formulated in Polish historiography that the Polish legendary history outlined the archetype of the nation's real future fate. This cannot, of course, be regarded as an anticipation of Jung's theory of archetype, but there is some similarity. "The spirit of the nation", a category very popular at that time, conceived as a semi-metaphysical force which reduces national past and future to a common denominator, may give rise to similar archetypical and mythologizing associations. According to Joachim Lelewel, the greatest Polish historian of the Romantic period, the examination of the nation's spirit meant an examination of Polish-Slav primary values, undertaken with the view of obtaining a criterion for evaluating the whole of the nation's history and setting the goals for the future. In fact this was a message addressed to future generations of Poles¹². But we have digressed too far.

In the 1960s, contacts with the "Annales" milieu, started during the political thaw, increased interest in the history of mentality. On the other hand, as a result of ideological and political conditions, historians were turning away from economic history, which was a fetish during the previous period, and were taking an increasing interest in the history of social consciousness. The Marxist dogma that existence (the base) determines consciousness (superstructure) was still in force, but it was becoming more and more indefinite. It was becoming clear that consciousness not only can have a secondary effect on existence but that its link with existence can be reversible. In the sphere of ideology there was a clear ennoblement of consciousness and in consequence research on it began to be appreciated by the government and decision-makers. The secrets of psychotechnology and sociotechnology attracted more attention than economic laws. In the years that followed the authorities thought they would derive greater advantage from the consolidation of such specific creative myths as "The Pole can manage" than from

¹² I discuss this question more extensively in: *Historiografia polska doby romantyzmu (Polish Historiography during the Romantic Period)*, Wrocław 1999, pp. 123 ff.

a sound balance of economic assets and liabilities. The old dogma seemed to have been turned upside down; the influence of consciousness on existence was greater than the influence of existence on consciousness.

Naturally, this turn towards consciousness was accompanied by an increased interest in myths. The classics of mythology were revived and the works of the most prominent myth experts attracted attention, especially those representing structuralism, which was officially regarded as an orientation opposed to Marxism. Roland Bartès, Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bronisław Malinowski, and also Roger Caillois, Emile Durkheim, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and George Sorel were the authorities most frequently referred to in discussions on the relationship between myth and history. It turned out that myths can be viewed in various ways and that what can be called the classic Eliade model had not made use of all possibilities. Some authors wrote about myths which did not concern the earliest beginnings, did not refer to the Holy Times and transcendence, did not contain eschatological themes and dispensed with elements of sacrifice. Myths of this kind did not have to use archetypal symbols, they owed their mythical status mainly to their axiological character and their message to the future. This was enough, for even such myths expressed a belief in some hidden order and the "overcoming of transitoriness" or, to use Leszek Kołakowski's words, the conviction that "what is not transitory grows and is preserved in what is transitory..."¹³.

Although Polish historians availed themselves to quite a large extent of the achievements of Mircea Eliade, this almost mythical mythologist, they felt (and still feel) that their ideas were closer to those of George Dumézil, according to whom myth was the basic form of interpreting the world, a form which conveyed the patterns and behaviours shaped in social practice. The triadic model of social functions (1 — legal and magical-religious, 2 — military, 3 — nourishing) which Dumézil evolved by comparing the languages of myths of Indo-European peoples inspired Aleksander Gieysztor's research on Slavic mythology¹⁴. It also

¹³ L. Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu (The Presence of Myth)*, Paryż 1972, p. 14.

¹⁴ A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian (Mythology of the Slavs)*, Warszawa 1982. In this and other cases I mention only one publication of each author because of space restrictions.

inspired the studies conducted by Janusz Tazbir¹⁵, Henryk Samsonowicz¹⁶, Czesław Deptuła¹⁷, and recently also Jacek Banaszkiwicz¹⁸, but their studies go beyond the sphere of religious myths. It has turned out that we had an abundance of myths, even where we did not notice them. Apart from the classic myths concerning our beginnings and archaic myths, we began to construct various typologies and speak about "contemporary myth-like structures"¹⁹ and also about myths concerning culture, social relations, religion, ideology, characterology, ethnicity, class, eschatology, catastrophes and many other spheres²⁰. We began to distinguish "political" myths (general ones) from myths of "political significance" (detailed ones)²¹, and also "political" myths from "historical" myths²². We have noticed at last that myths may coexist peacefully or wage dramatic struggles, real myth struggles, to use Erazm Kuźma's expression²³. Moreover, we could examine and classify all myths in a vertical or horizontal²⁴, structural or functional, synchronic or diachronic

¹⁵ J. Tazbir, *Polskie przedmurze chrześcijańskiej Europy. Mity a rzeczywistość historyczna* (*The Polish Bulwark of Christian Europe. Myths and the Historical Reality*), Warszawa 1987.

¹⁶ H. Samsonowicz, *O "historii prawdziwej". Mity, legendy i podania jako źródła historyczne* (*On "True History". Myths, Legends and Tradition as an Historical Source*), Gdańsk 1997.

¹⁷ Cz. Deptuła, *Galla Anonima mit genezy Polski* (*Gallus Anonimus' Myth about the Genesis of Poland*), Lublin 1990.

¹⁸ J. Banaszkiwicz, *Polskie dzieje bajeczne mistrza Wincentego Kadłubka* (*Master Wincenty Kadłubek's Legendary History of Poland*), Wrocław 1998.

¹⁹ M. Czerwiński, *Magia, mit, fikcja* (*Magic, Myth, Fiction*), Warszawa 1975, pp. 130–143.

²⁰ For a survey of opinions on this question see: Grzegorz Markiewicz, *W kręgu badań nad mitem historycznym. Stan badań i postulaty badawcze* (*Research on Historical Myths. State of Research and Research Proposals*), in: *Historia — mity — interpretacje*, pp. 73–88.

²¹ T. Biernat, *Mit polityczny* (*Political Myth*), Warszawa 1989, p. 122. A different attitude, opposed to an arbitrary separation of "political myths", has been taken by Sławomir Filipowicz in: *Mit i spektakl władzy* (*Myth and the Spectacle of Power*), Warszawa 1988, p. 79.

²² M. Jaskólski, *Historia i mit historyczny w doktrynie politycznej* (*History and Historical Myths in Political Doctrine*), "Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne", 1984, vol. 14, pp. 49–66; J. Maternicki, *Structure des mythes historiques: historiographie, conscience historique, mémoire*, in: *L'Histoire en partage. Le récit du vrai. Questions de didactique et d'historiographie*, eds. H. Moniot, M. Serwański, Paris 1994, pp. 72–81.

²³ E. Kuźma, *Mit Orientu i kultury Zachodu w literaturze XIX i XX wieku* (*Myths of the Orient and of Western Culture in 19th and 20th Century Literature*), Szczecin 1980, p. 6.

way. There were countless possibilities, so it is not surprising that the researchers' interest increased. This was manifested by, among other things, the establishment within the work of the Thirteenth General Congress of Polish Historians (Poznań 1984) of a separate section *Myths and Stereotypes in Poland's History* and also by the fact that great attention to myths was paid in the work of the *Theory and History* section (papers by Jerzy Topolski and Hanna Imbs-Jędruszczałkowska). But the researchers' increased interest was not accompanied by the adoption of a relatively unified interpretation of what myths are. The placing of myths alongside stereotypes, correct on the whole, revealed fundamental controversies over the relationship between these two categories. Maria Janion has questioned Jerzy Borejsza's view that myth is a rationalized stereotype²⁵. In her opinion it was the other way round: myth was less rational and earlier than stereotype. The latter, permeated by pragmatism, absorbed a part of an earlier myth and subjected it to the process of rationalization²⁶. A similar stand was taken by Janusz Tazbir who, defining myth as a "philosophy of life based on irrational principles, a philosophy which usually meets with a strong social response", was ready to include "the stereotype of the West", discussed by Jerzy Jedlicki during the 13th Congress, in the category of myths²⁷.

The dispute over the genetic relationship between myth and stereotype and over the question which of them refers to reason and which to the imagination revealed the obvious amorphism of the connotations of myth (and also of stereotypes) and made it clear that it was futile to hope that these connotations may be scientifically codified by one theory. According to Czesław Dep-

²⁴ There is quite a large degree of freedom in the use of analytical patterns. For instance, the "vertical pattern" used by Erazm Kuźma in his analysis of myths is completely different from the "vertical pattern" used by A. F. Grabski. Cf. E. Kuźma, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 ff; A. F. Grabski, *Historiografia — mitotwórstwo — mitoburstwo (Historiography — Mythmaking — Destruction of Myths)*, in: *Historia — mity — interpretacje*, pp. 4–6 and 33 ff.

²⁵ *Pamiętnik XIII Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków Polskich. Poznań 6–9 września 1984 roku (Diary of the 13th General Congress of Polish Historians. Poznań 6–9 September 1984)*, Part I, Wrocław 1986, p. 202.

²⁶ M. Janion, *Polski korowód (Polish Pageant)* in: *Mity i stereotypy w dziejach Polski*, Warszawa 1991, p. 188.

²⁷ J. Tazbir, *Stereotypu żywot twardy (The Hard Life of Stereotypes)*, in: *Mity i stereotypy*, p. 21.

tuła, the theory of myth differs, depending on whether it is applied to isolated cultures, the great antique civilizations or the mythologies of modern and contemporary times. There is much truth in this statement, but will not this train of thoughts end with the assertion that there should be as many theories as there are myths?

Polish historians have realized that the undefinedness of the concept of myth can also be seen in its relation to such a form of historical message as a legend. It was known that the two are related but what is the difference between them? According to Franciszek Ziejka "an historical legend is turned towards the past" while "a myth turns towards the future"²⁸. The criterion of time was simple but it was difficult to identify and make use of it, for a skilful interpreter can in almost everything find references to the past and the future.

The criterion of time was also used in another proposal for distinguishing the two categories, but it was treated differently and was not regarded as the only criterion. According to this proposal what distinguishes myths from legends is that myths refer to events outside the historical time and are not connected with a definite place. But many doubts and reservations were raised. In this connection Henryk Samsonowicz found a pragmatic way out, writing: "Nevertheless, one can presume that it is more useful for a historian not to separate the two categories"²⁹.

In the 1980s and 1990s the question of myths was a popular subject not only in research on common social consciousness (unconsciousness) but also in scientific reflection on professional historiography. It attracted an increasing interest of historians of historiography as well as of theoreticians and methodologists of history, as is proved by the work of the Interdisciplinary Team for Research into the History of Tradition and Historical Myths which was set up in Łódź under the leadership of Alina B a r s z c z e w - s k a - K r u p a. In connection with the work of this team Andrzej Feliks G r a b s k i outlined a richly documented conception of historiographic myths derived from cultural myths. We will discuss this later. However, the most spectacular symptoms of

²⁸ F. Ziejka, *W kręgu mitów polskich (In the Circle of Polish Myths)*, Kraków 1977, p. 8.

²⁹ H. Samsonowicz, *O "historii prawdziwej"*, p. 9.

changes in the interpretation of the relationship between myth and historiography were the publications by the prominent Polish historian and theoretician of history, Jerzy Topolski, which showed the way from the cursing of myths to their acceptance. But were the cursed myths the same as the accepted ones?

3. The assimilation of myths

As late as 1976 Topolski expressed the conviction that myths and various forms of religion (primitive and developed) were the main "ahistorical intellectual attitudes"³⁰. He noticed that myths contained fragments of historical thought but in his opinion these thoughts were subordinated to a main ahistorical idea. He wrote that "a myth always reflects a story which does not correspond to the actual course of events or state of things, or it reflects an idea (emphasis mine — A. W.) which functions as a form and also as an element of social consciousness"³¹. He adopted a very broad interpretation of the word "myth". This allowed him to place, alongside clearly religious archaic myths, myths formed in later and even recent times which, like "the myth of a thousand-year Third Reich", were a product of wishful thinking and were sanctified not so much by religion as by ideology. However, irrespective of how capacious this broad interpretation was, the directive stemming from it was obvious: in order to identify a myth, it is necessary, first and foremost, to establish that the story it contains does not correspond to "the actual state of things". This was relatively simple in many cases. But how to establish whether there is a lack of correspondence with actual facts in ideas, especially those which, like the Icarian myth about man floating across the sky, have with the passage of time clearly changed their relationship to the "actual state of things".

However, we shall have to put aside the doubts that may arise, all the more so as in Jerzy Topolski's later publications the capacity of "myth" increased still further, both with regard to common consciousness and to what was the main subject of his interest, that is, the canons and practice of professional historiography. As early as 1983, in his *Theory of Historical Knowledge*, Topolski produced a typology of four pairs of myths, built partly

³⁰ J. Topolski, *Świat bez historii (A World without History)*, Warszawa 1976 (2nd ed.), p. 62. The same in the first edition of 1972.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

on the basis of opposition, "myths which direct historical research". These were: "(1) myths with a broad scope which become part of a historian's outlook (the so-called organizing myths), and myths of a smaller scope, concerning a more limited set of phenomena; (2) myths which cannot be verified (of the type of classical mythology) and those which can be verified; (3) myths derived from a scientific theory or a scientific establishment of facts (...) and myths having their genesis outside science, and finally (4) myths which reconstruct some events or processes or explanatory myths, it being obvious that these two types may occur jointly as a single myth"³². Owing to this broad interpretation, neither the thematic scope of a myth, nor its sources, nor its verifiability make it possible to distinguish it from a scientific theory. Drawing attention to this fact, Topolski concluded that the basic difference lay in the fact that an "ideal" or "genuine" myth immobilizes (dogmatizes) knowledge while an "ideal" theory is devoid of this characteristic. But according to Topolski, a "genuine myth" and a "genuine (ideal) theory" are only the extremes of a *continuum*; between them is an infinite number of intermediate forms which contain elements of a myth and a theory, and it is these "mixed", frequently undetectable forms, that occur in historiographic practice. By using the term "myths which direct historical research" and speaking about "scientific myths"³³ Topolski blurred the difference between historical (scientific) thinking and mythological (unscientific) thinking, a difference which he had previously strongly emphasized.

In his later publications Topolski developed a theory about the place of myths in historiography. It replaced the "theory of knowledge gained outside sources" which he had formulated earlier. He presented this theory in full in 1996 in his study *How History Is Written and How It Is Understood. The Secrets of Historical Narration*. He ascribed great importance to the question of myths, as is proved by the fact that he dedicated to them one of the four parts into which the book is divided, namely the part entitled *Myths and Theoretical Concepts in Historical Narration*. It is this part that contains words which perturbed many historians: "Let me state at the very beginning that myth is inseparable

³² J. Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej (Theory of Historical Knowledge)*, Poznań 1983, p. 169.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 170.

from science, just as it is inseparable from culture and from human thinking. From the existing definitions of myths that have been discussed here I take the one which says that myth is sanctified, immobilized knowledge, not subjected to criticism, a knowledge which in the opinion of those who refer to myths, reflects reality in some way. I do not think that there is a gap between myth and science. In my view the matter is more complex than we are frequently told it is. A myth can be something opposed to science (or to knowledge acquired through the use of scientific methods or methods recognized as scientific at a given time) and also something that functions in science (in any case up to a time)³⁴.

According to Topolski, attention should be focused on "fundamental myths"³⁵, that is myths which being deeply rooted in consciousness or unconsciousness (being epistemic "prisms" of a kind or "points of view") prefigure historical cognitive process and exert influence on historical narration. The author of the study *How History Is Written* has established seven such myths, namely: 1 — myths of evolution (progress), 2 — myths of revolution (which divide history into stages and breakthroughs), 3 — myths of sublimity (which make the past more sublime than the present), 4 — myths of coherence (which treat elements of the past as parts forming semi-logical wholes), 5 — myths of causality (everything has its cause), 6 — myths of activism (human actions are of decisive importance in history), 7 — myths of determinism (forces outside man's control are of decisive importance in history). According to Topolski, these fundamental myths are not necessarily separate. There can be other relations between them. For instance, myths of revolution can be treated as a specific subclass of myths of evolution (progress) and these in turn may be based on myths of determinism.

What can we do with these closely related fundamental myths? How should we treat them? Should we eradicate, tolerate or cherish them? Perhaps we should regard history not as a science but as literature, in which the presence of a myth is

³⁴ J. Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię. Tajemnice narracji historycznej (How History Is Written and How It Is Understood. The Secrets of Historical Narration)*, Warszawa 1996, p. 204.

³⁵ In his earlier publications Topolski called them "large-scope myths", "organizing myths" (after I. Wallerstein) and also "profound myths".

fully legitimate, but perhaps — and this attitude is recommended by Topolski for “practising historians” — we should try to identify all myths with a view to eliminating or neutralizing them? If so, the question arises whether the seven “fundamental myths” should not be regarded as the seven mortal sins of a historian. Topolski has not given a clear reply to this question. “Attitude to them should vary”, he wrote. “Some (as for instance myths of coherence) provide historians with the benefits of an historical method different from annals and chronicles, others prefigure the cognitive process and it is worth while to be aware of them, although it is not yet known whether it is worth fighting against them. Everything depends on our understanding of historical science and its aims”³⁶.

The road which Topolski followed in discovering the relation between *myths and historical thinking (historical science)* was symptomatic of the changes which were occurring in the understanding of myths and historical science. It is worth recalling that whereas in 1976 Topolski thought that myths occupied the main place among all “ahistorical intellectual attitudes”, twenty years later he held the view that some myths make part of the professional historical method, and expressed doubt about the sense of eliminating them. He looked at the problem from the new perspective established, to a large extent, by postmodernist perplexities, without noticing “the gap between a myth and science”. But this was no longer the same myth and the same science.

It cannot be excluded that political changes, of which the most important was the crisis and then the dissolution of the bloc of the socialist countries and the USSR, influenced the change of attitudes in this matter. It is worth recalling that what integrated this bloc from the point of view of ideology and world-view was Marxist historical materialism which included nearly all the “fundamental myths” mentioned here, even those which, like determinism and activism, were, to a greater or smaller extent, in conflict with each other. Is it therefore not possible that the insistence on the presence of myths in historiography was due not only to purely cognitive reasons but also to the intention of squaring accounts with the past? But this is an issue which requires a separate study.

³⁶ J. Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię*, p. 216.

Jerzy Topolski was not the only historian to have doubts about the purpose of fighting against myths. Many other historians were equally sceptical. But we will confine ourselves to presenting the views of only one of them, namely, Andrzej Feliks Grabski. This prominent historian has openly joined the group of those contemporary theoreticians who maintain that even a scientific historical knowledge "cannot fully free itself once and for all of mythologization"³⁷.

In an intentional analogy to the concept of Fernand Braudel, Grabski distinguished three levels, or three spheres in which myths are created and manifest themselves in historical science; 1 — the "cultural" level (long-lasting myths), 2 — the "structural" level (myths of medium duration), 3 — the level of "events" (myths of relatively short duration, but with many deviations from the rule). Myths of the first level which make part of and define the "system of culture" are the most profound myths; they are created by a definite idea of historical time and in turn generate the myths of the other levels. Their scope is determined on the one hand by the cyclic and on the other, by the lineal understanding of changeability in time. The second level consists of myths referring to social structures, such as nation, state or class (there can be more structures). Myths of the third level, myths of events, (the equivalent of what Topolski called "factual myths") may refer to any episode of history, even the smallest one.

This outline of Grabski's concept is undoubtedly excessively condensed but it should be sufficient to understand the attitude which in his opinion a historian should adopt to the specific myths of each of these three levels (spheres). In Grabski's opinion, the principle of immunity should be obligatory with regard to the "cultural myths", for a demand to "demythologize the most profound cultural level of historical knowledge is a call for mankind's cultural suicide"³⁸. What should be demythologized are myths of events, but care should be taken not to confine oneself to an apparent demythologization for this would simply be a mythologization *à rebours*. But what to do with myths of the middle, structural level, that is, ethnic, political and class myths? According to Grabski, it would be difficult to give an unequivocal

³⁷ A. F. Grabski, *Historiografia — mitotwórstwo — mitoburstwo* in: *Historia — mity*, p. 32.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

reply to this question. "There is no doubt", he wrote, "that every man has the right to be proud of his nation, state or social class and that consequently it would be extremely difficult to demand that he should get rid of all structural historical myths which refer to them for they define his social roots. At most one can propose that he should be aware of their mythologized character and consequently try to neutralize them"³⁹. Grabski's general directive on the attitude which a historian should adopt to "historical myths" is as follows: "Instead of following the example of Don Quixote and declaring war on all historical myths at once, it is better to find out first what they are and where they function and only then work out an effective strategy of fight against those which should be defeated, restricted or ... left in peace"⁴⁰. In other words historiography includes a sphere of myths which can be used by a historian, though he should restrict them, and a sphere of untouchable myths which contribute to the system of culture of which the historian is part.

The phenomena I have tried to outline by citing examples from the history of Polish historiography have, of course, a much broader, supra-Polish and supra-continental scope. Polish historiography is but a small part which, although it has its own specific characteristics, absorbs everything that was and is taking place "outside". There is no cause for worry, but...

The acceptance of the presence of myths in historical writings is, as has been said above, a result, on the one hand, of the postmodernist attempt to descientize historiography in the belief that it is part of literature and on the other hand, a result of new meanings being given to the old name, which broadens its connotations. What was formerly called lasting ideas, concepts, theories, hypotheses is now readily classified as myths, and what was once called theoretizing or modelling procedure is now frequently regarded as mythologization⁴¹. In consequence, as was the case with Topolski's fundamental myths (in particular the

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p.61.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

⁴¹ As early as 1953 Eliade came out against widening the concept of myth and including in it such ideas as, for instance, the idea of a general strike. He wrote that a general strike could be an instrument of political struggle but it lacked mythical precedents and that was enough to exclude it from mythology. See M. Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Paris 1989.

myths of coherence), myths become an indispensable part of a professional historian's cognitive equipment. Practising historians will find it difficult to accept this stand. Would it not be better therefore to follow in the footsteps of those who, like Wojciech Wrzosek, prefer to speak not about "fundamental myths" but about "historiographic metaphors"⁴²?

It is not clear whether there is a prospect of myths continuing their existence in historiography. But one thing is certain: if the word continues to extend its meanings and multiply its connotations, it can melt in the sea of indefinableness in which historiography and mythography merge into one whole.

(Translated by Janina Dorosz)

⁴² But Topolski himself frequently pointed out that "fundamental myths" are called "fundamental metaphors" by other historians and theoreticians of knowledge. Cf. W. Wrzosek, *Historia — kultura — metafora (History — Culture — Metaphor)*, Wrocław 1995, pp. 13 ff.