

Concepts in Action: Knowledge as Linguistic Practice

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The concept of *concepts* suggests a history of disembodied ideas, ideas with autonomous lives that grow, change, and wane as they pass through the minds and texts that are the media, the agar, on which they thrive. Indeed, the OED suggests a rapid movement of the meaning of *concept*, from a fleeting thought within the mind of a person to an intellectual object, where the meaning stays today. The term was first introduced into English in the sixteenth century as a general reference to an idea, a frame of mind, a fancy, or an opinion; within a century it came to be a philosophical and logical term, meaning "the product of the faculty of conception" and "an idea of a class of objects" (760). Since then, the word *concept* has pointed to an idea apart from people having or using that idea.

Concepts Disembodied and Reembodied

No wonder the concept of *concepts* should be of little interest to current researchers in human sciences who examine local interaction and the idiosyncrasy of individual consciousness located within particular moments of time, space, society, and economy. Also no wonder that the concept of *concepts* raises suspicions among cultural critics who note the play of ideology, interests, and power in all our cultural productions. The history of ideas is to them a story of the circulation of semiotic arbitraries of cultural capital. Granting autonomous status to concepts only mystifies and reifies the power relations embedded in ideology. Within the contemporary human sciences, perhaps only psychology, with its return

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from behavior to cognitive processes, provides a welcoming home for the concept of *concepts*.

The concept of *concepts* seems out of step with current concern for social belief, local practices, knowledge in action, and pragmatism. It seems too intellectualist for a time that questions the purely intellectual, logical, and rational. After all didn't Wittgenstein do concepts in by arguing that words and the associated concepts don't have any stable and identifiable meaning in themselves, that concepts cannot reside outside of practice and thus are nothing in themselves, that if we believe concepts establish our knowledge of reality we delude ourselves into aspiring to epistemic omnipotence, that concepts don't explain but only are counters in language games and forms of life?

But just because concepts can't live on their own, autonomous of their deployment in human activity, does that mean they are dead? Or does it mean we must track them down to their lair, in the practices in which they are animated, in the practices in which they serve as symbolic tools? It is this latter strategy I want to follow here, to look at concepts in action, to examine how concepts are tools for carrying out intellectual and practical work. In such an approach the history of concepts in action becomes closely tied to the history of practices of the fields within which concepts are deployed. The history of concepts then offers a view into the history of the intellectual operations carried out by symbolic manipulation in pursuit of practical ends.

But before we engage in this quest to revive the concept of *concepts* we need to caution ourselves that in pursuing concepts we will not at last get at the true meaning of concepts, get at the practical essence of ideas. No, we will only be noting how different the deployments of concepts are in different circumstances, how different the intellectual practices are that animate concepts. Noting, nonetheless, may enable us to adjust to and engage in each of the practices—that is we can find out what we can use concepts for in each domain and how to use them. By noting the practices that concepts are used in, we are also in a better position to evaluate which concepts to use in particular circumstances. But noting the deployment of concepts in practices will not get us to a heart of meaning of a concept or of a symbolic practice using that concept. We will just notice better what we and others are doing with concepts.

We will pursue our noticing of concepts-in-practice with noticing major differences in the ways the concept of *myth* tends to be used in

different disciplinary domains. This rough and dirty survey will help us see how conceptual terms not only are formally defined differently in different domains, but serve as different operators in different symbolic operations.

Myth

Our survey of the uses of the concept of *myth* draws on a series of reference books, primarily from the Greenwood *Dictionary of Concepts* series, but supplemented by several other parallel works. Such terminological handbooks nominally show how the conceptual term is defined in each of a variety of fields, but they also offer clues as to the way in which the term is used as part of a field of practices.

Myth, of course, has primary presence in classics and other traditional language studies which include those narratives we identify as myths. In such areas the word *myth* primarily refers to those specific concrete texts, written and oral, which are translated, accounted for, interpreted and otherwise commented on as part of the knowledge production activity of those specialties—preserving, making accessible and accounting for objects in those languages and cultures as well as those languages and cultures themselves. But the idea of those texts and thus the word *myth* has currency in at least four other contemporary disciplinary formations—History, Anthropology, Psychology and Literary Studies.

In history, according to the *Dictionary of Concepts in History*, the usage seems fairly limited, to invoke the kinds of accounts of historical events that predate legends, chronicles, and other more developed historical accounts (193, 310). That is, myth is placed near the beginning of an evolutionary taxonomy of historical accounts, and as such is given only the most marginal credence, although the circulation or popularity of certain myths at certain periods is taken as warrantable fact of cultural history. Myth, then, is a term of low evaluation in reconstructing the historical record.

In anthropology, according to the *Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology*, the concept of myth is usually invoked as part of a general description of a larger cultural system and accounting for the mechanisms by which the cultural life is enacted. As such, definitions set myth against other kinds of traditional tellings such as histories and folk tales and

legends, and then is accounted for in some functional or structuralist way within the cultural system, life, and ritual of the group which rehearses the myths (192-197).

In some versions of psychology, particularly those of an experimental and behaviorist cast, the word myth does not circulate at all, and so it does not appear in the *Dictionary of Concepts in General Psychology*. Nor does it appear in the *Oxford Companion to the Mind*, which has a strong orientation to cognitive science and philosophy. Myth, however, is a conceptual landmark in the more eclectic *Encyclopedia of Psychology* which comments that "in psychology myths have been useful as a source material that enriches our understanding of human behavior, as well as increasing the validity of a psychological theory because it penetrates the mystery and increases our understanding of the myth" (Vol 2. 448). Several psychoanalytic theories of the origin and meaning of particular myths for the human psyche are then summarized. Thus for psychologists myths are data and evidence—in the form of accounts of human behavior—and puzzles—in the form of unusual products of the human psyche.

In literary studies, according to the *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory*, *myth* appears under the rubric of *myth criticism* (244-253). The emphasis is on the interpretation of non-mythic texts that can be seen to echo myths in an explicitly referential way, in an implicit cultural patterning, or in a covert psychological expression of an underlying imaginative human collective unconsciousness (itself borrowed from Jungian psychological uses of myth). That is, myth, rather than itself being explained, becomes a resource in explaining other, authored texts—and thus becomes reconfigured as part of mythic criticism.

In each of these fields, myth is located in different texts and utterances, different aspects of these different utterances are foregrounded, and the so-labeled myths are only attended to as part of different intellectual practices.

Mythic History

These issues of myth were brought together for me many years ago, when I was assigned to teach a general education undergraduate literature course for predominantly business majors. I was told I was assigned the course because of my training in Renaissance Literature, during which period the texts of Ovid, Virgil, and Homer (but not the Greek

Tragedians), were revived and widely circulated.

Actually the texts that are now counted among the transmitters of classic mythology are a strange mixture of secular, religious, nationalist, civic, wisdom, aesthetic, and other sorts of texts, arising at different times in different social circumstances and providing a range of aesthetic and communicative experiences. From a modern perspective, the only thing that makes them look at all as a single conceptual entity is their canonization as myth, formed, curiously not by anthologies of primary texts, but by modern retellings and encyclopedias that provide homogenized and rationalized pantheons of gods and lesser creatures along with their adventures (such as the various Larousse encyclopedias, the textbook *Classical Mythology* by Morford and Lenardon, or the popular perennials Bullfinch, Graves, and Hamilton.)

As I found out, myth was not a concept that during the Renaissance aggregated texts transmitting a body of stories. The various texts of classic learning, telling and retelling traditional stories, insofar as they were given generic identification, were identified under the broad term *fable*, meaning any tale. *Mythos* in Greek, moreover, means only story, not distinguishing between the true and the false, the religious or non-religious, the historic and the supernatural, the national and the personal. The modern literary category of *myth*, as quasi-religious stories of the origins of a culture rather seems to have first appeared in the eighteenth century and became common only in the nineteenth (Feldman and Richardson). Within the context of the concept of *belles-lettres* developing simultaneously in Europe, the term *Myth* provided a legitimated, but culturally distancing, literary and academic space to non-Christian texts. That is, myths were the stories embodying the religious sentiments of those people who had not had the benefit of Christianity. If their pagan origins could be clearly kept in mind, they could be studied safely and with moral benefit. From this we get the modern usage of myth as a "false belief" or an "untrue justificatory tale."

In terms of practice, what does this mean? The concept *myth* was invoked as a license and a containment. It was a license insofar as it provided a cultural and academic location in which one could read, study, and enjoy non-Christian texts and more recent retelling of tales from outside the bounds of Christian doctrine. Not just the texts and tales gained the cover of myth, but the non-Christian impulses expressed in those works, as revealed in the Victorian association of sexuality and

beauty with Greek mythology, as well as the impulse towards war and pride, whose expression were limited in Christian contexts. Setting the texts in a special category, while not proscribing their enjoyment, kept them as something other and strange, something to be considered only at a distance, and perhaps only under the guidance of proper learning and cultural understanding. Similarly, the radical political possibilities of some of the texts bearing the myths, particularly the Greek tragedies, could also be contained within the cultural practices of the socially-advantaged classes, particularly after the radical appropriation of classical myth in the American and French revolutions displayed the destabilizing dangers of pre-Christian thought. Myth as a concept assured that the enjoyment and interpretation of these texts and tales was to be marked by their clear falsity and bounded as a dominant-class cultural practice. Thus the enjoyment of myth always was flavored by the taste of the illicit and pagan, a taste only regularly available to the educated and most socially stable classes, who presumably knew how to enjoy such things without being corrupted.

With the rise of nationalist sentiment, myth also became a category allowing the recovery of pre-Christian and mixed pagan-Christian materials of early northern European society. Germanic, Celtic, Viking, Arthurian, and other tales and texts were taken as expressions of the various folk that were now embodied in the nations of Europe. The concept of *myth* transformed to suggest that the primal tales of a people reflected their native genius and spirit, the spirit of a nation. Such a concept of myth in turn provided a license for the broad circulation of the stories of each nation throughout all levels of that society and its schools, thus making certain myths available in popular, rather than elite, culture.

As imperial contact with non-European peoples provided knowledge of non-European cultures and brought about wider circulation of non-European traditional stories, myth also became a rubric for circulating selected texts and tales from Africa, South Asia, and indigenous peoples of North America, although largely again within privileged circles. The primary circulation of these myths was among scholars of such fields as philology, philosophy, anthropology, and theology. It is interesting to note that Chinese and Japanese traditional tales, the products of cultures that retained some autonomy throughout the period of imperialism, have largely not been designated as myth, but rather tend to be cast under religion, legend, or folktale. Similarly it is interesting to note that Islamic religious texts, as they are post-Christian

and are thus a rejection of an available Christian belief, have largely not been brought into the canon of myth, and have been viewed more as heathen blasphemy than pagan, exotic myth.

While certain Europeans and Americans might wander into the exotic realms of Asian, African, and Native American myth for reasons of aesthetics or personal quest, these boundaries remained well in place through mid-twentieth century and shaped my own education. And they also shaped the ways in which various academic studies developed their own practices of invoking myth.

The Classics department remains the primary academic home for myth, but as the attention is on the detailed study of individual texts and language, and on the particularities of cultural practices, the concept of myth and mythology tends to dissolve, except as a popularization. Similarly the few departments of African, East Asian, South Asian, and Native American studies are the home of traditional texts and tales, but again with a particularity that tends to dissolve the broad cultural category of myth.

History, in discounting myths as bad proto-history, simply adopted the false-story view of these cultural productions.

Historical literary and art scholarship, in tracing the visible marks of non-Christian tales on the cultural practices, until very recently largely attended to the reincarnation of classic tales within Renaissance, Baroque, and Romantic works of art, with some attention to the reappearance of northern European tales within the literature and art of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The "exotic mythologies" were too exotic to have worked their way much into mainline criticism of mainline culture, despite the periodic cultural fads of Chinoiserie and Japoniserie, and despite the Asian spiritual quest of many European authors going back at least as far as the eighteenth century. Only the recent prominence of multi-cultural literatures and arts in the last few decades has brought about some concerted attention to the non-European sources of contemporary cultural productions.

Anthropology, in granting cultural credibility to each of the cultures it has studied, suspended the falseness doctrine along with the notion of cultural evolution towards Western Christian culture. It also dropped some of the romantic notions attached to national genius. Nonetheless, it collected traditional and religious stories, identified as myths, and took seriously the role of those myths in the way of life. The relativizing of culture and the concern with culture as an object of study turned myth

into a kind of charter for society, to be studied as a set of orienting beliefs with practical consequences for a way of life.

Depth psychology concerned with the contents of the unconscious draws on the romantic view of myth as the repository of our natural genius, although seeing psychology as universal, transcending national boundaries. For them the designation of myth located stories, images, impulses of a general power that revealed the nature of our individual and communal beings—even to the point of Jung's identifying the myths of the world with a collective unconscious. While proscribed by much other psychology, that would view myth at most as a curious human behavior needing psychological explanation, Jung's view of myth worked its way back to literary studies, for those scholars and writers who felt that literature tapped those same deep wells of the unconscious that myth did. Mythic criticism, in contrast to historical literary scholarship on mythic sources in literature, became a way to explain the deep psychic meaning and function of texts. By extension, any text perceived to tap these sources gained the force of myth.

Using Myth as a Curricular Category

The notion that it was appropriate to offer a university level general education, cultural-enrichment course in myth drew on both the cultural bounding of these stories outside the Christian tradition and on the Romantic psychological valuation of these stories as reaching to the very core of literature and our personal beings. As a teacher of literature, I needed to find within these various congeries of texts, cultural practices and academic inquiries some resources and orientation to create an engaging reading and writing environment for business students at best marginally interested in a required course. I hoped to exercise their imaginations, extend their cultural horizons, and increase their range of literacy. I was also trying to teach an assigned course in a way that would not totally bomb.

At first thinking of myth as a body of beliefs embodied in stories, I turned to the modern scholarly and popular compilations. I found them pale taxonomic representations, reifying plots apart from their artistic expression and cultural power. Bullfinch and Hamilton were definitely not the way to go. Then, since I was after all trained in the Renaissance, I thought of looking at how classic stories worked their way into more recent cultural expression—but since the literature of the 16th, 17th, and

18th century Europe were not part of the daily cultural landscape of most of my students, it seemed hardly likely that they would be engaged in exploring the roots of something they weren't concerned with. I do not say this at all in a disparaging way. The students for many good reasons did not affiliate with the cultural system of the upper-middle class educated white professional world and its cultural icons. We did get some amusing mileage out of the appearances of classic and northern European myth in modern cartoons, comic books, and movies, as well as in the statuary and architecture of New York City, where we all lived. But this provided only limited interest for us.

Given the bleakness of a direct assault on myth and the mythic sources of Western culture, it didn't take me long to rediscover the license within the word myth to teach some of the classic texts that I found more interesting—*The Odyssey*, Sophoclean tragedy, and the *Metamorphoses*. So the course became in part a version of classics in translation. But it only took one glance at the class to realize that it was as appropriate to teach the *Mwindo Epic* and the *Ramayana* as the *Orestia*. Since this was the early seventies, it seemed only natural to use myth as a license to explore the cultural backgrounds of the students and to explore the diversity of beliefs and tales that inhabited the world. In trying to get students to take the stories seriously I encouraged the students to suspend the "false story" implication of myth, and rather to think what it would be like to grow up hearing such stories.

Having globalized the curriculum, it seemed only a natural move, with enough transgression of expectations to keep the class lively, to then teach selected books of the Old and New Testament, along with other near eastern texts like *Gilgamesh*, as part of the myths of the world. For my own self-protection, I now had to insist on the total suspension of the truth or falsity of myth and emphasize the impartiality of the Greek term *mythos*—and to talk about culture as an environment of stories we were surrounded with.

Given the relativist moves I was making towards literature and culture, it seemed appropriate to explore with the students what anthropology had to say on the subject—but that bombed. The difficulty of Levi-Strauss was only symptomatic of the problem of anthropology at that time, keeping the cultures studied at a distance, as an other, to be studied as an object. As a literature teacher I was seeking student engagement with the texts, not cultural distancing.

Jungian archetypes, as far-out as they sounded to students, still made

sense in the context of engagement—to see how these stories might reflect issues in their lives and how they might provide different kinds of resources for seeing themselves and seeing their way through life problems. Trickster, individuation, and anima-animus integration provided a vocabulary that helped students identify with the texts.

In the last few years I taught the course, the concept of myth was getting pretty fuzzy, as the concept of *myth* served to identify any text that was an important part of our cultural landscape and that helped frame our self-conceptualizations. We moved from stories of the Buddha to *Frankenstein* and *1984*, and even tales of the American Revolution and the Long March of Revolutionary China.

The various concepts of myth and the various kinds of work we had put those concepts to were moving us towards what from the retrospect of the 1990's we might call a concept of cultural studies, but could also be described as a practice of examining the way of life through the texts and images that are part of the construction of that way of life. So now I have no more concept of *myth*. I don't know what a myth is. But I don't need to since I don't teach the course any more and don't need to justify the presence of any text on the syllabus or to develop a way to teach that text as myth. But still I can refer to a many concepts of *myth* if I need to. It just depends on the kind of work I am doing, such as trying to discuss how concepts are used within activities.

Useful Concepts

Where does this odyssey of the concept of *myth* leave us with the concept of *concepts*? That concepts are useful from time to time and place to place. Some of those uses are psychological, some are pedagogic, some are theological, some are political, some are ideological, some are personal. We cannot understand what those concepts are in any time and place until we have some idea how they are used and by whom, because we only use words from time to time, place to place, and from purpose to purpose. Otherwise words that name concepts just sit in dictionaries, where they have no meaning except as resources to regulate behavior or to help orient us (and students) when we find ourselves engaged in some activity with others who find some concept useful.

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