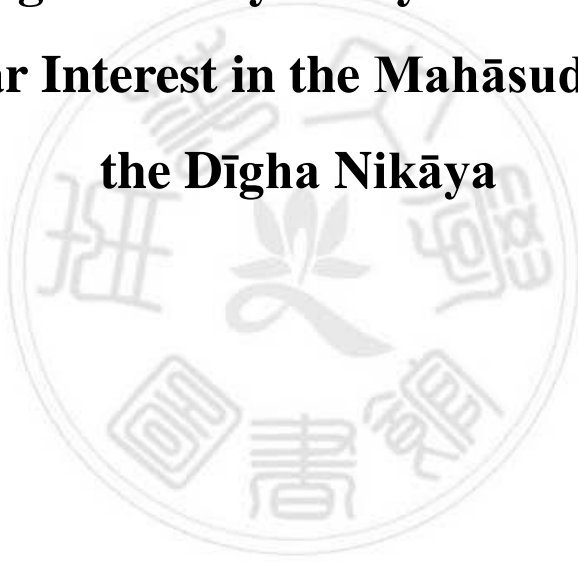南 華 大 學

宗教學研究所

碩士論文

Myth as Narrative:

Issues Regarding the Study of Myth in Buddhist Studies, With Particular Interest in the Mahāsudassana Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya

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Abstract

The problem of the definition of myth in analysis must be clearly distinguished from *the problem of interpretation of myth*, with which it is often confused. A definition of myth simply permits and allows an analysis of myth (through the identification of the object named 'myth'). However, for many years, works on myth do not effectively describe *how to identify or recognize myth*. Instead, authors use myths as a support or proof to their particular interpretations. The first question of *what is myth* (and thus how myths should be identified) is postponed as secondary, as if the answer would appear only after the particular interpretation has been confirmed. Here is where the relevance of asking again the question of 'what is myth' should start to become clear. Then, our work is concerned with the definitions of myth in myth analysis, but not with the problem of interpretation of myth. From the beginning it must be understood that this work does not intend to explain, justify, or unravel any particular myth, or its meanings, but it is solely preoccupied with the questions of '*what is myth*,' and thus with 'how to identify myth. The following content will focus on presenting the problem of the definition of myth, and thus gives an example as evidence. In other words, this work will try to prove the problem of the definition of myth while positing back the question of definition to the center of a discussion on myth.

Key words: problem of myth, myth, the definition of myth

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Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 Presentation of the problem

The reader holds in his hands yet another work with 'myth' on its title. As such, it may be bound to provoke a certain level of rejection, especially in a type of critical reader we are aiming it for. But this work follows a rather different path than most works on myth; we write it somehow starting from that exasperation (let's call it academic skepticism), that the word 'myth' often generates, especially in the quarters of a discipline so important for Buddhist studies as Philology. Thus, before we can get started, some essential clarifications ought to be made.

First of all, this is a work *on the problem of defining myth*. The need to define with precision '*myth*' arises logically in the process of the analysis of myth. To talk about myth one has first to identify clearly '*what is myth*.' Our guess is that if a definition of 'myth' presents problems, or if it is not clearly stated, the value of the analysis remains in doubt.

The problem of the definition of myth in analysis must be clearly distinguished from *the problem of interpretation of myth*, with which it is often confused. A definition of myth simply permits and allows an analysis of myth (through the identification of the object named 'myth'). An analysis is thus a first exploration into

the details, symbols and configurations of a myth, in other words a first reading into

what the myth 'says.'

Interpretations, on the other hand, are second readings that go far beyond this

first reading, towards a 'meaning' (what the myth is 'really' saying 'now'). As such

interpretations of myth have to do with hermeneutics, and are perhaps away of the

reach of Philology.[1]

Then, our work is concerned with the definitions of myth in myth analysis, but

not with the problem of interpretation of myth. From the beginning it must be

understood that this work does not intend to explain, justify, or unravel any particular

myth, or its meanings, but it is solely preoccupied with the questions of '*what is

myth*,' and thus with 'how to identify myth.'[2]

But under the weight of so many works on myth, from the widest range of

disciplines, our question already appears as strange, or worst, as unnecessary. For how

could it be that we want to discuss '*what is myth*' when most scholars are already

preoccupied with other problems related to myth, like interpretations or functions? A

definition of myth is not a necessary step before any analysis and interpretation?

Exactly, this is our main contention: that the question '*what is myth*' has been

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[1] See, for example, Paul Ricoeur's comments about the hermeneutic interpretations of myth in the Introduction to *The Symbolism of Evil*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.
[2] As we will explain later, however, in Chapter V we present a possible model for a definition of myth and how it could be used in analysis.

avoided. Let's put this in different words. In current academic parlance discussions

about *'what is myth'* are generally equated with discussions about secondary

phenomena related to myth, like the functions of myth.[3] It is thought, for example,

that one can only know what myth is when one is sure about what it does.[4]

When discourse turns to functions of myth, it already implies a previous capacity

of identification of the object that it chose to call 'myth.' Obviously, to talk about the

functions of myth it is required some kind of operable definition of myth.[5] Similarly,

in the discourse of interpretations of myth[6] a definition must necessarily be present.

Now, we believe there is a very simple problem here that has been overlooked.

Our hypothesis is this: it seems that when one turns to the methodology of theories of

myth, it is possible to notice that, in many cases, either there is no definition clearly

stated or a definition is constructed from a particular method of interpretation.[7]

Following this argument, as we hope to prove in the course of our work, one can

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[3] See Kirk, G. S. *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

[4] Function (*purpose*) and interpretation (*meaning*) are different categories, but are often considered as inter-dependant. Thus, it is thought that the purpose of a particular myth is determined by its meaning, and thus its interpretation. See Ricoeur and Kirk above. Psychological theories of myth like that of C. G. Jung start from similar assumptions. See Ellwood, Robert. *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell*. New York: State University of New York Press. 1999.

[5] That is, a definition that can recognize and distinguish myth as a unit with particular properties or characteristics.

[6] Interpretation is perhaps the central topic today for any theory of myth. We evaluate this state of affairs in a negative way. One of our hypothesis is that this obsession for interpretations of myth has naturally conduced to a situation where definitions are seen as 'secondary,' or dependant on interpretations.

[7] For our purposes, a method of interpretation involves a theoretical set of concepts.

observe how works on myth do not effectively describe *how to identify or recognize myth*. Instead, authors use myths as a support or proof to their particular interpretations. The first question of *what is myth* (and thus how myths should be identified) is postponed as secondary, as if the answer would appear only after the particular interpretation has been confirmed. Here is where the relevance of asking again the question of 'what is myth' should start to become clear.

We will try to prove this while positing back the question of definition to the center of a discussion on myth.

1.2 Myth in a particular religious tradition: Buddhism

Second, if our previous hypothesis is correct then it follows that a comparative analysis of myth is, at this point, not a good idea. If we don't know how to properly identify myth in particular traditions, comparisons between them necessarily add to the difficulties.

While many times theories of myth are developed in a broad comparative way, this inquiry will be necessarily centered on one, and only one particular religion: Buddhism.

However that won't be enough. Buddhism is a multi-branched tradition. Before talking about Buddhist myth in general, a consensus about it must be achieved first in

the entire Buddhist tradition.

Thus, merely talking about Buddhist myth won't be specific enough. Again, we are aiming for identification of myth, and thus we have to concentrate on a particular *historical* and *textual* form of the religion. Thus, we will be mainly concentrating on what is called Theravada Buddhism. This could be seen as shorthanded but we deem it as necessary.

We also chose to concentrate on Theravada Buddhism because this tradition is often singled-out as the closest to an early form of Buddhism, and as such as the most non-mythical form of traditional Buddhism. It should be easier then, on principle, to isolate myth in it. We also hope that ideological prejudices against myth can present themselves more clearly in it.

1.3 Self-criticism of our discipline

This work, then, should be understood in the context of a relatively recent self-critical tendency in Buddhist studies. As such, it is rooted on some of the conclusions drawn by the previous work of authors such as Philip C. Almond[8] and Gregory Schopen.[9]

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[8] Philip C Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
[9] Schopen, Gregory. *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected papers on the Archeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*. United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.

Almond, in his book *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, traces the development and inclinations of the discipline of Buddhist studies to the context of Colonialism and to a particular set of beliefs and ideas corresponding to it, which he identifies as 'Protestant.' This ideology can best be described as "a particular European interpretation of the Buddhist tradition, shaped by the rationalistic and anti-ritualistic ethos."[10] In other words, it posses an inherent inclination to exclude from its inquiry, the irrational, and more specifically, phenomena related to myth and ritual practice.

This Protestant ideology naturally influenced the nascent discipline of Buddhist studies in its research methods, which as a consequence became almost exclusively textual-oriented. (Almond 37) Following the tradition of protestant reformers 'the locus of true religion'[11] was to be found in scripture alone.

This was naturally followed by an *idealization through text*, that created an 'image of decay, decadence, and degeneration' for contemporary Eastern Buddhism, at the same time that it created and constructed an ideal Buddhism of the past. (Almond 40)

From the work of Almond we can presume that one of the key concepts operating for this idealization was indeed myth. It is probably through the control of

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[10] See Trainor, Kevin. *Relics, ritual, and representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravada tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 11.
[11] Schopen, p. 13.

the concept of myth, or rather, through the *negative valuation* of myth, that a pure and idealized Buddhism could be created and maintained in time. It is through a decidedly anti-mythical reading of texts that its idealization could be defended. And it is also through the criticism of myth that a factual Eastern Buddhism could be deprecated.

That was the picture of the 19th Century drawn by Almond (mainly on Theravada Buddhism). How much of this historical picture remains an issue in the 21st Century? Is the concept of myth still today somehow under the influence of that Protestant ideology? While Almond's study does not go beyond the 19th century, Schopen, in his anthology of articles *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*,[12] suggests, convincingly in my opinion, how much this Protestant ideology, in the form of textual centrism, is still present today in the history-making of the discipline of Buddhist studies.

But Schopen is only concerned with the centrality of texts (against archeology) in relation to a historical inquiry. He is not concerned with myth. It is interesting to note here, nevertheless, that myth could perhaps have something to do with the fact of textual centrism described by him.

One of Schopen repeated complains is how the finds of archeology have been often softened, silenced, or ignored by scholars of Buddhist studies, especially when

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[12] Specially in his articles "Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism" and "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit."

the data contradict the texts.[13] Considering that a great part of his articles in the anthology *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* centers on the phenomena of the stupa cult, and as such it is connected to beliefs about death and the cult of the dead, it sounds reasonable to assume that the negative valuation of myth could have something to do with this.[14]

We should regard then the concept of myth as important, since it is often closely related to many elements that have largely remained marginal and peripheral in Buddhist studies. In addition, a proper understanding of myth may help us understand better a non-idealized historical Buddhist tradition.

1.4 Main difficulties

Our intention is, then, to carefully and tentatively explore some issues regarding the study of myth in Buddhist studies, with particular attention of the Theravada tradition. However, we must recognize, from the very start, some serious difficulties inherent in such an enterprise.

Theories of myth are highly problematic and polemic, even in the older and broader field of Religious studies: the theoretical material is enormous, and many

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[13] Schopen, p. 2.

[14] Consider for example the implicit importance of myth in Schopen's article "Burial *Ad Sanctos* and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism," also from the same collection.

times confusing and even contradictory.

Probably the two most important difficulties that we will be facing are: first, the fact that there is no theory of myth developed from Buddhist studies; that is, no theory of myth has been specially made for the study of Buddhism. And second, the fact that there are few works dealing with Buddhist myth properly.

Thus, our project necessarily cannot aspire to be more than *propaedeutic*. With that in mind, we will concentrate on how *the problem of a definition of myth appears in Buddhist studies of the Theravada tradition*. Now, considering the possibility of the so called Protestant ideology in the discipline, we will be paying special attention to the negative valuation of myth, as a result of it.

Our hypothesis will be that, whenever a definition of myth manifests a negative valuation of myth (whenever it is affected ideologically in this way); the definition in question will have theoretical problems, especially in relation to its ability to distinguish myth-narratives from non-myth narratives (the object of study).

At the same time we will try to show how this problem is connected to general limitations of the methods of Buddhist studies, due to Philology's natural reticence towards theory.[15] Thus, of all the disciplines dealing with religion, Buddhist studies seems to have remained farthest isolated from the problem of the concept of myth,

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[15] Pollock, Sheldon. Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World. *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Summer 2009) p. 931-961.

thanks also to its perceived non-theism.[16] Yet, because of this, it has maintained itself dependant of other disciplines for the study of myth, and also not up to date with advancements in its study.

Thus, we are also interested in assessing how much, due to its importance in Buddhist studies, the traditional and conservative position of Philology against theory in general can conflict or harmonize with the necessity of a theory of myth. We start from the assumption that myth is narrative, and thus as an object of study it is perhaps more compatible to Literary theory than to Philology. Likewise, we expect to observe a natural tension between the limits of Philology and the theoretical requirements of Buddhist studies for understanding myth.

Our work is not, however, a direct criticism of Philology. However, it obviously stands in the hope that a criticism of its use of the concept of myth can help open Philology to other theories, for its own benefit.

1.5 Structure of the work

Our work will be divided into four main parts. As we said before, Buddhist

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[16] For the theoretical problems of considering Buddhism as a religion see the comments of Melford E. Spiro, in "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation." *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Ed. Michael Banton. London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1969. 85-126. For a thorough description of the non-theistic aspects of Buddhism, see Helmuth v. Glasenapp in *Buddhism –A Non-Theistic Religion*. Trans. Irmgard Schloegl. London: Geoge Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970.

works on myth are few, and there are no works on theories of myth specifically from Buddhist studies. Thus, we have been forced to advance from the general to the particular.

In Chapter II we will offer a brief review of the general landscape regarding theories of myth, with special attention to the issues of definition and negative valuation of myth. There we will explore with detail the problem in definitions of myths.

We will concentrate on the definitions of myth in the theories of Lévi-Strauss, Eliade, and Ricoeur, as examples. We will try to show through a brief analysis of them an important deficiency in relation to their definitions of myth.

In Chapter III we will be reviewing some works relevant for understanding the position of myth in Buddhist studies, giving some remarks regarding the use and value normally given to myth in the discipline. We will be paying special attention to connecting the Protestant ideology working behind Buddhist studies with what we observed in the first part in relation to the problems of definitions of myth.

In Chapter IV we will give attention to one of the most interesting works on myth in Buddhist studies in recent years, the article "Mythology as Meditation: From the Mahāsudassana Sutta to the Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra," by Rupert Gethin.

We will be presenting a criticism of the methods used in the article, again mainly

based on its definition of the concept of myth and its application. As expected, we will be also paying special attention to the problem of the valuation of myth in it, as well as to other matters relevant for our topic.

The purpose there will be to observe how, in a concrete case, a definition of myth operates in the analysis of Buddhist scriptures. To enrich our commentary, we will be contrasting Gethin's arguments with Richard Gombrich's ideas. Gombrich is another important author working on myth-narratives, but with a different answer to the problem of myth.

Yet, the fact that both authors are perhaps part of a more conservative side of Philology should be particularly interesting for what we noted above. We expect to show how, contrary to what is often affirmed, even Philology uses theoretical concepts taken from other disciplines, and thus require a harder critical stance towards theoretical concepts and tools, which today it does not have.

Up to Chapter IV, then, our intention is to show the coherence and extension of the problem of a definition of myth, between its general study and that found specifically in Buddhist studies of the Theravada tradition.

We believe that a criticism of the concept of myth is a necessary step before the discipline of Buddhist studies can theoretically provide a definition based on its own observations of the problem in Buddhist scriptures.

In Chapter V we will use what we have learned in the previous chapters to try to construct an outline for a definition of myth. Our intention is not to give a fully operable 'new' definition of myth, but merely to show a theoretical model of a definition, with which the avoidance of problems described in our work is possible.

Thus we will be using theoretical tools from anthropology (Clifford Geertz) and from literary analysis (Northrop Frye), to provide a theoretical example of how to build a simple model for defining myth that can help and complement the philological tools of Buddhist studies. We will be modifying Frye's model for narrative analysis of literary fiction for the identification of myth narratives.

Lastly, we will use this model of a definition of myth to analyze the Mahāsudassana Sutta one more time, in a bid to confirm whether the ideas behind its construction are practical. We hope we will get some interesting results by doing so.

All in all, the fifth chapter could perhaps appear as the most unsatisfactory, due to its extravagant and eclectic nature, but we feel the need to show in a practicable way how a definition of myth could actually be constructed following our criticism, and at the same time how theoretical tools for narrative analysis coming from outside of Philology can be incorporated to the study of Buddhist scriptures, without serious difficulties.

We agree with some scholars[17] of Buddhist studies who have began to question the limits imposed by overemphasizing Philology as unique way of approaching Buddhist texts, and in that sense, our work is oriented towards a more open future discipline, where narrative will have the central place it deserves.

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[17] See Gomez, Luis O. "On Reading Literature Literally: Concrete Imagery before Doctrine." Published in *Special International Symposium on Pure Land Buddhism*. 5-30, and McClintock, Sara L. "Compassionate Trickster: The Buddha as a Literary Character in the Narratives of Early Indian Buddhism." J*ournal of the American Academy of Religion*. Vol. 79.1 (2011): 90-112.

Chapter II: The problem of a definition of myth

2.1 The priority of the problem of '*what is myth*.'

While it would be perhaps exaggerated to suggest that nothing has been advanced for the study of myth since Lévi-Strauss published "The Structural Study of Myth,"[18] it has to be recognized that his complain about the chaotic situation in what he calls 'field of mythology'[19] remains true today. The study of myth is still considered a problematic, contested, and polemic *sub/inter-field*,[20] where, broadly speaking, consensus is hard to find.

It is interesting to note that what Lévi-Strauss describes as 'studies in the field of mythology' roughly correspond for him to theories of interpretations of myth. Thus, his complain protests the fact of the multiplicity of interpretations. Nowhere does Lévi-Strauss, in his seminal article "The Structural Study of Myth," suggests that problems in myth interpretation could be traced back to faults in definitions of myth.

Indeed, it could be argued, without a spirit of polemic, that in "The Structural

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[18] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." *Myth: A Symposium*. Spec. issue of *The Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 68 (1955): 428-444.

[19] "Of all the chapters of religious anthropology, none has tarried to the same extent as studies in the field of mythology. From a theoretical point of view the situation remains (…) chaotic. Myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetic play, or as the basis of ritual." (Lévi-Strauss 207)

[20] Often confusingly crossing over several disciplines.

Study of Myth," Lévi-Strauss does not give a definition of myth, and instead replaces it with an analysis of the structure of it.

In a previous article,[21] Lévi-Strauss had emphatically asserted that "myth *form* takes precedence over the *content* of the narrative." It has been argued before,[22] however, that for Lévi-Strauss 'structure' indeed amounts to 'content.'[23] His listing of narrative contents in columns had the obvious final purpose of establishing a new form of relational interpretation. It follows then, that in his mind, this listing of contents somehow replaces the need for a definition of myth.

But the fact that his listing is made of units of narrative contents ('Cadmos kills the dragon,' 'Oedipus kills his father Laios'), contradicts his discussion of myth in terms of comparison with Saussure's concepts of *langue* and *parole*, or with the metaphor of music. The value of his units is given by their contents, and not by their form.

An analysis of the structure of myth already presumes the knowledge of the observed object's limits. But according to Lévi-Strauss what are those? Or, in other words, how or on what principles an observer should distinguish myth from that

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[21] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Effectiveness of Symbol." *Structural Anthropology*. United States of America: Basic Books, 1963.

[22] Additionally, Lévi-Strauss study of myth has been severely criticized in part due to his wrong use of the concept of structure, which in most cases merely denotes contents (see Righter, William. *Myth and Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1975).

[23] Righter, p.19.

which is not myth? Where did he get his basic units of form/content?

When Lévi-Strauss takes the content of certain myths for analysis he has already decided that they are myth. He does not share this method of distinction or identification with the reader.

More seriously, he is not even defining them in relation to his so called structure, or in relation to any form of interpretation[24]. He has not even used the idea of structure to choose myth from other narratives, and in fact, since his concept of structure can be better understood as content, his method of analysis could be applied to any type of narrative with similar results![25]

In the end he has not provided an effective way to chose myth, and thus we have not received an answer for the question of *what is myth*. Besides the hypothetical possibility of finding a general law of the structure of myth,[26] which remains open, we are left empty handed.

Lévi-Strauss also suggests that his structural analysis is, in the end, a proper method for understanding myth. However, it is our contention here, that an interpretation cannot be accepted as a definition, and neither can it occupy its place in

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[24] Like Mircea Eliade, as wee will show later.
[25] Lévi-Strauss did not start his work from an observation and comparison of narratives. A proper structural analysis of myth, if such a thing is possible, would have required first an structural identification of myth. For example, an extensive analysis of the structure of narrative, then a selection of those narratives that, diverging similarly in structure, could be identified as myth. Only then a description would have made sense.
[26] Expressed in his idiosyncratic formula [Fx(a): Fy(b) $\sim$ Fx(b):Fa-1(y)].

a theory of myth. To detail the structure of an object somehow already identified as myth is not the same as defining myth by its structure. This is an important point.

But necessarily, each time an interpretation is tried, a definition must be assumed. Furthermore, it is pertinent to ask whether it is even possible to provide interpretations without knowing 'what exactly is a myth.' When we see the structural method of Lévi-Strauss, we don't see this definition. Logically there must be one that has made him choose between some units and not others, between some narrative texts and not others. It is as if Lévi-Strauss was working under such strong convictions of knowing '*what is myth*' that he simply did not need to define his object of study. This is our first important clue.

The initial problem in the theory of myths should be first not *how to interpret myth*, but *how to define* and *how to identify myth*, that is, how to distinguish the object or material that we chose to call myth. In the center of any theory of myth should be the definition of myth. That is what we understood by *what is myth*; a definition that clearly casts the observed object in a set or paradigm of theoretical delimitations.

2.2 The failure of theories of myth

In the encounter of theories of 'myth,' one gets the impression of the absolute elusive nature of the concept; 'myth' appears to be that kind of word that, despite its

extensive use, it always manages to escape from clear theoretical boundaries.

Besides the share number of different theories of myth available there may be several other reasons for this problem. For example, we have the dispersion of its study across disciplines, each discipline in its turn harboring multiple, sometimes conflicting theories of myth.[27] It is then not surprising that the concept is confusing, difficult to track, and not precise.

Naturally, theories of myth are closely dependant on the context and purpose that motivated its conceptual origin. Thus, "theories of myth are theories of some much larger domain, with myth a mere subset." (Segal 2) As such, "there are no theories of myth itself, for there is no discipline of myth in itself. There is no study of myth as myth." (Segal 2)

In other words, the study of myth has never configured a study *in itself*. This fact is important, and should be considered more thoroughly. We could put this in the following way: *myth is not the main object of any discipline*. This means, naturally, that myth is always studied in relation to something else (be it society, literature, culture, mind, art, religion, etc.), constituting a secondary object. In other words, to be qualified and quantified it is always dependent of something different from itself. Thus, myth is like a shadow that only becomes visible when something else is

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[27] See Robert A. Segal in *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

illuminated. This fact, paradoxically, could be yet another of the causes of the

concept's theoretical obscurity and a reason for the multiplicity of its definitions.

Now, the considerable amount of interpretations in addition to the lack of

specialized theories for the study of myth in-itself, almost inevitably raises the

following suspicion: does myth really exist? Does myth really correspond to a

concrete object or phenomenon? Or is it whatever we want it to be? Is it, finally, a

useful category? As one famous scholar of myth puts it, "it is essential to have a clear

idea of what myths are and what myths are not, and, so far as possible, of the ways in

which they are likely to operate."[28]

A detailed review of the definitions of myth is beyond the scope of this

short-sized work. But we can do without it thanks to the fact that there are already an

important number of book-length discussions dealing with the most influential ones.[29]

Most of these works start with an entire chapter dedicated at listing the varieties of

theories of myths.[30]

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[28] Kirk: Introduction, pg 2.

[29] For some, see in our bibliography Ken Dowden in *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, William Righter in *Myth and Literature*, Milton Scarbough in *Myth and Modernity: Postcritical Reflections*, and Robert A. Segal in *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. For examples of definitions see G. S. Kirk in *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, or for the strange lack of it see Claude Lévi-Strauss in "The Structural Study of Myth." in *The Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 68: 428-444. For an extensive anthology of theories, definitions, and methods of interpretation, see the anthology *Sacred Narratives: Readings in The Theory of Myth*, by Alan Dundes. This last one in particular is an excellent example of the multiplicity in the study of myth in the discipline of Religious studies, with several short articles discussing old definitions and presenting new ones.

[30] Righter, p. 9: "Most definitions [of myth] exist at a very high level of generality,

Due to the sheer size of the material, authors on myth commonly complement their surveys of theories of myth with some kind of categorizing schema. William Righter[31], for example, complements his general account with some of the more influential modern theories of myth, which he groups in four broad categories: *functionalist*, *psychological*, *religious*, and those of *symbolic form*.

According to him, the *functionalist* theories of myth "describe myth in terms of its operation within a social structure, often in connection with a ritual which marks a stage in the development or progress of the individual through his life cycle." (Righter 15) Bronisław Malinowski is given as an example of this category.

Psychological theories of myth trace its origins to the hidden constitution of the mind, thus establishing a causative link between the mind and myth. Righter lists under this category Sigmund Freud and Carl G. Jung, and surprisingly the work of

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and an admission of the multiple nature of the subject is built into them. (…) 'Myth is narrative, irrational… and comes to mean any anonymously composed story telling of origins and destinies, the explanation a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do, its pedagogic images of the nature and destiny of man' (Warren and Wellek). Or, 'Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories – some no doubt fact, and some fantasy – which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe of human life' (Alan Watts). Others assign such a multiplicity of causes as to be almost completely meaningless: 'Myth is a universal cultural phenomenon originating in a plurality of motives and involving all mental faculties' (David Bidney). Still others wish to establish the character of myth as an imaginative language in its own right: 'An autonomous form of the human spirit, with its own structure, function, expression … with unity of feeling' (Cassirer). Or, 'A myth … is a schema of the imagination which, (…) is capable of effectively organizing our way of viewing portions of the external world in accord with its distinctions' (Joseph Margolis)."

[31] Righter, William. *Myth and Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1975.

Claude Lévi-Strauss.

For Righter, of all the groups, *religious* theories of myth are the most ambiguous as well as the less objective. In them, myth is presented as having syncretistic and vague metaphysical or religious foundations. Here he places authors like Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, and Heinrich Zimmer.

Finally, theories of *symbolic form* describe myth as a 'self contained and self referential symbolic language.' As a form of symbolic language myth is expression of feelings (experience), thus it is understood in a much broader sense, almost as a fiction. Cassirer is the example here.

The building of broad categories for the multiplicity of myth is an ingenious way of trying to make order of an academic zone that has none. But then again, Righter is only one of several authors struggling to give some order by following a similar pattern. Segal, for example, affirms that each modern theory of myth starts from at least one of three different questions, which can be described as questions of origin, function, and subject matter.

By origin, Segal means 'why and how a myth arises.' By function, 'why and how myth persists,' by subject matter, the referent of myth. Segal affirms that the answer to the first two questions is often a need, which myth fulfills. The condition for myth existence in time is this fulfillment, thus myth lasts as long as it fulfills this need.

What this need is, according to Segal, varies from theory to theory. (Segal 2)

Notice first, however, how none of these broad categories as explained by Righter or Segal actually deal with myth in-itself. Second, all these groups or categories of inquiry clearly correspond to different *disciplinary interests* and thus methods of approaching issues related with 'myth,' like history, psychology –*origin*, sociology, anthropology –*function*, or religious studies and structuralism –*subject matter* (Righter's *religious* and *symbolic form*), etc. Indeed, it could be argued that theories of myth naturally ought to diverge because they simply start from different phenomena related to myth, but never from myth itself: they simply don't share the object of study.

At the same time, it should be evident how definitions of myth are always tied *by necessity* to particular disciplinary interpretations of myth, since each discipline has already its own object(s) of study. Then, these theories want to say something about what myth means in relation to that other object. A hypothesis could follow from this: *definitions of myth are backwardly constructed to accommodate prior assumptions of what myths must mean (interpretation).*

2.3 The construction of definitions of myth from interpretations

This is perhaps even more evident in theories inclined to phenomenology, like

Mircea Eliade's.[32] In Eliade's definition, for example, myth narrates a sacred history,[33] which likewise is defined by the terms of its content: it is a narrative 'telling' or 'description' of a creation-event of a reality in a special time (a time out of history), by supernatural beings. This he describes as an irruption of the sacred into the world of man.

Eliade's definition of myth is subsumed to a universalistic view of religion,[34] and to a way of understanding religion through a dichotomous relation (sacred/profane, supernatural/natural, primordial time/historic time, etc.).

Now, there is nothing wrong here with the definition itself. Contrary to Lévi-Strauss, Eliade does provide a definition which, at least in theory, intends to define myth. The problem, however, is that Eliade's definition is reductionist: it forces a distinction of myth only in terms of the concepts of his interpretation. Thus, it seems that his theory has started not from the observation of narratives, but from a previous selection, based on his own interpretation. It naturally leaves then an immense group

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[32] Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1998.

[33] Eliade 1998, p. 7: "(…) myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings. In other words myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth then is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. (…) In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the 'supernatural') into the World."

[34] Ellwood, Robert. *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell*. New York: State University of New York Press. 1999.

of narratives arbitrarily out of the concept of myth.

This definition of myth not only depends of Eliade's particular concepts of the *sacred*, the *profane*, and of *time*, but it also restricts myth rather subjectively to those narratives that pertain to *creation* or *origin*, themselves concepts broad and rather ambiguous. Then, irrespective of the evaluation of such a definition, we are forced to exclude a great number of narratives by a mere personal inclination posing as a real qualitative method of distinction.

In this way, the definition of myth is reduced to an interpretative theory. The 'theory' does not show us clearly how to recognize *what is myth* from what is not without an interpretation operating, forcing us also to accept the interpretation in question.

Let's put this in different terms. If we were to ask 'where are we to find myth' or 'how are we to identify it,' the following answer would be forced on us -only in those texts that presumably support the interpretation.

It might be argued, of course, that any concept inevitably has its origin in a similar accident: definitions are up to a certain extent always arbitrary and subjective, and depend on other concepts. But here the problem seems to be that a definition seems to have been backwardly constructed to accommodate, validate, and justify a particular method of interpretation, a particular understanding of what myth ought to

mean. In other words, the interpretation's concepts are responsible for determining, what is myth.[35]

It follows that the center of such an interpretation lays on the concepts which at the same time are used to delimit the object 'myth' (see 3 on Table 1). Out of this interpretative context, away from its concepts, that which has been identified as myth (see 4 on table 1) disappears completely. Thus the capacity of explanation of such a definition is problematic, since it depends on the acceptance of a very specific type of interpretation. And is not applicable to phenomena not corresponding to the interpretation, and cannot say anything of myth in general.

This method of constructing definitions from interpretations is not unique of Mircea Eliade. We have already mentioned how Lévi-Strauss replaces a definition by an analysis of 'structure' (his method of interpretation), falling in a similar kind of pitfall. But our intention here is not to reject the validity of any interpretation, but to call into question the process of constructing definitions from interpretations. Myth, in this way, is not an *observed*[36] but rather a *constructed* object, built from the requirements of a previously designed interpretation.

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[35] We provide 2 diagrams. In Table 1 we have tried to visually describe the process of the construction of a theory of myth from a previous definition, while in Table 2 we describe how the process should be, ideally.

[36] Of course every observation implies a construction, but here the important thing is whether this construction is based on phenomena observed, or merely on an interpretative theory.

The fact that interpretations have priority over definitions seems to be a particular problem of myth theories. However any interpretation requires a previous definition. An interpretation, if not on a precise definition, must at least rest on a-priori assumptions about what that object is, otherwise the object interpreted would be non-identifiable.

Thus, if we assume that definitions of myth like Eliade's and Lévi-Strauss' were backwardly constructed, their interpretations must have started from a previous definition or at the very least from assumptions working as such, based on some form of common sense understanding of what is myth (1 in Table 1).[37] This previous definition actually gives the interpretation (2 in Table 1) a provisory description of what should be myth (4 in Table 1), which is developed only after the concepts of interpretation (3 in Table 1). Thus the new definition of myth (5 in Table 1) is the last stage in this process, and as a consequence it lacks almost any relevance for the theory itself, since it has no ability to really distinguish what is myth: myth is a preselected object that does not depend of the new definition.

In such a process of construction what we consider to be the normal procedures are overridden. Normally, phenomena are observed (in this case narratives), (see 1 in Table 2) and from these observations comes a hypothesis which results in a definition

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[37] This would justify perhaps Lévi-Strauss' implicit impression that a definition of myth was somehow unnecessary in his work on myth analysis.

(2 in Table 2). This definition selects, delimits, and categorizes the phenomena. Thus,

at the same time that this definition is raised, the object appears (also 2 in Table 2).

Only then an interpretation and its concepts are produced, based in the observation of

the object, to explain what the definition has proposed.

Table 1: Diagram of the Construction of a Theory of Myth from a Previous

    Definition (SDM)
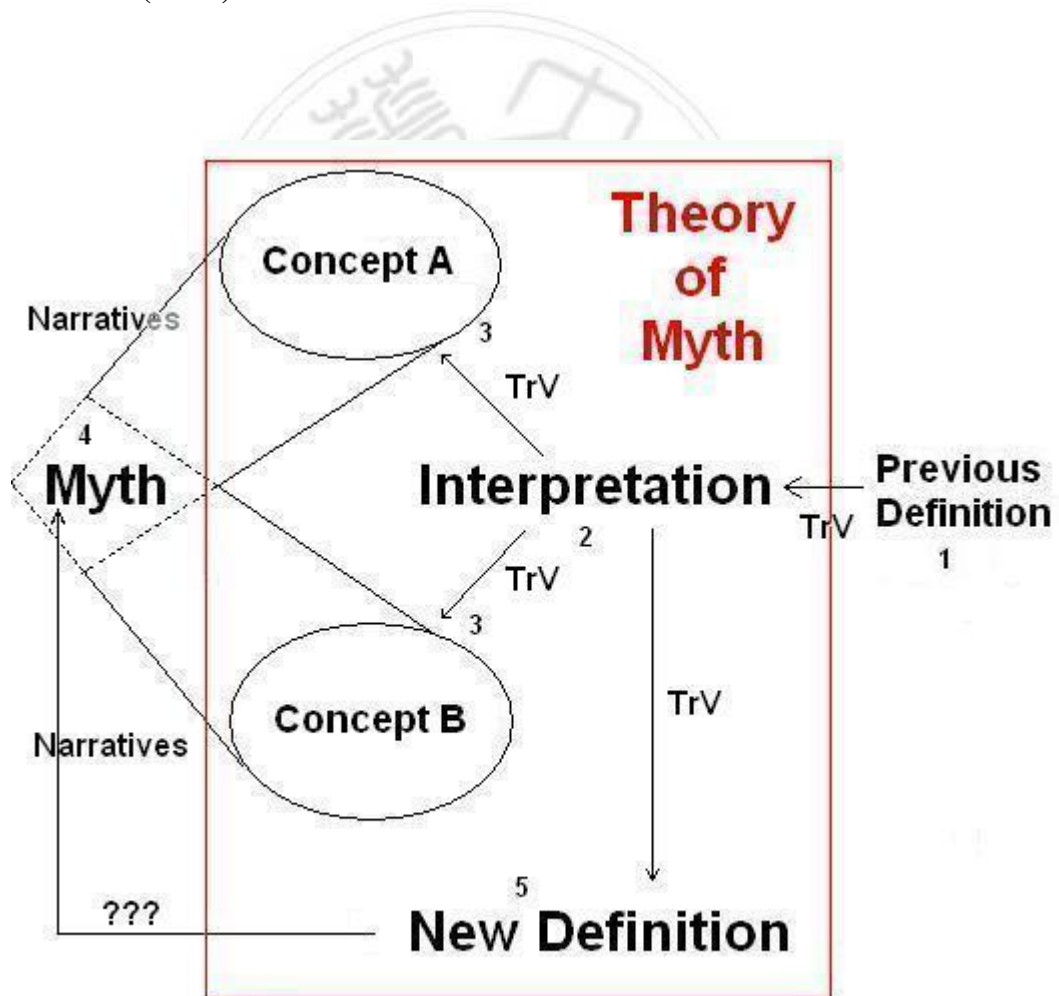
The proof of this is logical. It lays on the fact that any interpretation needs first to
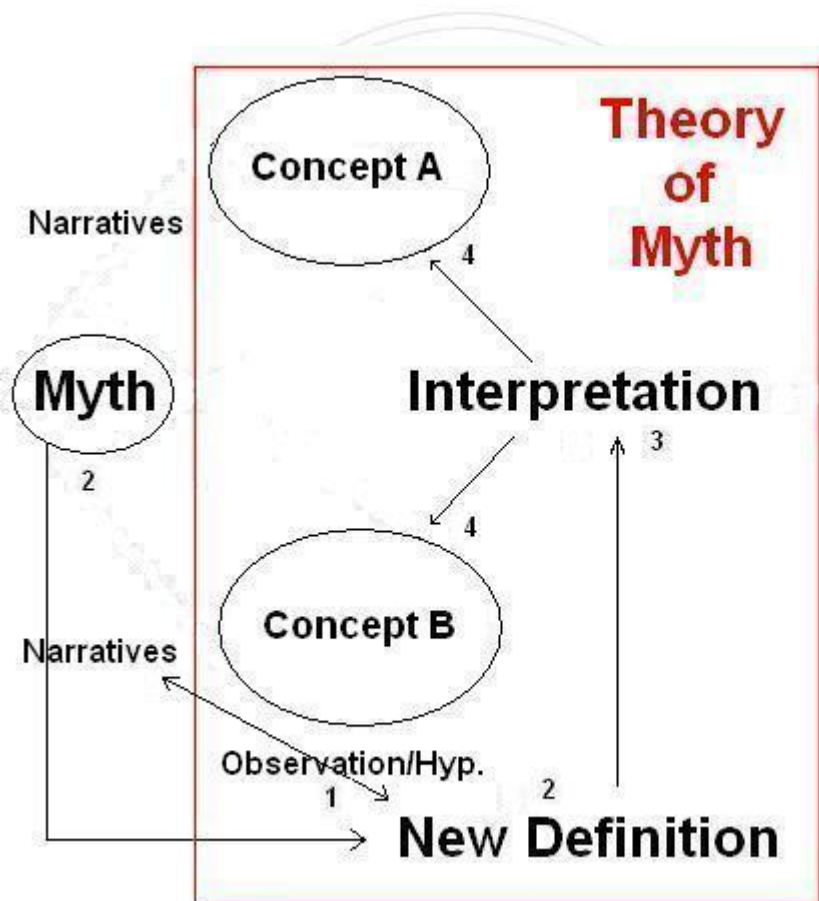
identify its object. But the problem is how to identify an object without a definition.

Thus it follows that, since the final definitions rest on a particular interpretation, a

previous definition or assumptions of what is myth must have already been in place

before the origin of the interpretation.

Table 2: Diagram of the Ideal Construction of a Theory of Myth

How can this be proved? Thanks to the fact that we know myths are found in

narratives (or at least are embedded in texts), we can answer for now with a counter

question: how and when where the narrative/texts in any particular theory of myth chosen? If there is no answer as to the how, we have a possible partial proof. If they where selected exclusively based on principles related to the interpretation we have again possible partial proof. In the case of Mircea Eliade, for example, both are true: there is no answer as to how these and not other narratives were chosen, and at the same time the contents of the myths that Eliade describe are exclusively connected to his concepts of interpretation.

2.4 True and false narratives

We should try now to reconstruct such a hypothetical previous definition by following elements that are shared by most 'interpretative definitions' of myth.

There is, as we have seen, at least one consensual element in theories of myth: myth is narrative.[38] But, while modern definitions universally recognize myth as narrative, they seldom explain the significance of this. Neither is the actual relation between myth and narrative explored. Thus, in relation to definitions of myth, *narrative* merely refers to the actual place where myths are supposedly located: texts.

In this work, by narrative it will be understood *any text (or discourse) that presents a sequence of related events, actions, characters, images, concepts, symbols,*

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[38] See Righter, pg.10.

or ideas, be it oral or written.[39] It is due to the relation between these elements that a narrative can be considered a *system.*[40]

The narrative aspect of myth seem to drift in definitions from the simple and commonsensical 'narrative of gods,' to the broader 'narrative of beginnings,' to the almost abstract 'foundational narrative.' If myth is to be something, it must be some *form of narrative*.

But with the concept of narrative comes a fragile illusion of simplicity, for we still don't know '*what is myth*'. If myth is a narrative, what *type* of narrative it is? Or, in other words, a myth is narrative of what? Evidently the problem is to determine exactly what form of narrative corresponds to myth. Even if by narrative we understand straightforwardly a story, and thus we take myth as a story of gods, the fancy of simplicity disappears quite rapidly.

In a sense, we just keep postponing an answer. If, following commonsense, we reply with confidence '*a narrative of gods*,' we now have to answer what does our category of 'god' entails to. For example, a god is only that which is *called* a god or is also that which *acts as* a god or *seems* '*to us*' like a god?

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[39] We are purposely avoiding here a definition of narrative as a mere story. Thus we include explanations or even lists of concepts and ideas as forms of narrative.

[40] We follow here the concept of system developed by Clifford Geertz. We will return to this point in our 5th chapter. See Geertz, Clifford, "Religion as a Cultural System." *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Ed. Michael Banton. London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1969. 1-46. And in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Furthermore, what are we to do with narratives of semi-divine beings? And what should we do of the narratives directly relevant for understanding doctrines or laws, but where the main character of the religion (be him god, semi-divine human, founder figure, etc.) is not even a protagonist, or worst, he simply does not bother to appear? And what are we to do of all the other narratives relating to no god, that we still intuitively and following commonsense consider myths?

The concept of narrative by itself, then, is not enough for constituting an assumed previous definition of myth. A second element, that should specify what type of narrative is myth, is required for an operable definition. And, considering the fact that the concept of *narrative* is consensual, this second element must also be generally accepted.

Bruce Lincoln[41], in the preface to his work *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* give us an important clue when, referring to the problem of the concept of myth, affirms that:

> (…) whenever someone calls something a 'myth,'
> powerful-and highly consequential-assertions are being
> made about its relative level of validity and authority

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[41] Lincoln, Bruce. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

vis-a-vis other sorts of discourse. Such assertions, moreover, can be strongly positive (e.g., myth = "primordial truth" or "sacred story"), strongly negative (myth = "lie" or "obsolete worldview"), or something in between (as in the mildly indulgent view that myth = "pleasant diversion," "poetic fancy," or "story for children"). (Lincoln ix)

According to Lincoln, a narrative is thus positioned in relation to other forms of narratives by its value of *trueness* or *falseness*, in other words, by the value of truth (or lie) that it seems to posses. Is this idea of truth in myth that we now want to follow.

2.5 'Truth Valuation' in a Standard Definition of Myth (SDM)

"In the language current during the nineteenth century," says Mircea Eliade in *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, "a 'myth' meant anything that was opposed to 'reality.'" This, he concluded, was yet another "cliché of Christian origin and structure" (*Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 23). But scholars of the twentieth century, he affirms, instead of treating myth as 'fable,' 'invention,' or 'fiction,' "have accepted

it as it was understood in the archaic societies, where, on the contrary, 'myth' means a 'true story' and, beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant." (*Myth and Reality* 1).

Of course, the intention of Eliade here is to re-contextualize myth in its place in a determined culture, and by doing so rescue its importance, and the seriousness which its consideration required. However, it seems rather difficult to accept the idea that myth was indeed ever understood by that generation of scholars (including Eliade himself) as 'true story,' in the sense he seems to affirm.

On the contrary, it rather seems to be the case that the problem of truth was, for all purposes, bracketed below a phenomenological apparatus, "on the grounds of selective and apparently 'essentialist' categories."[42]

When we accept myth is a *truth for others (in the past)*, we just relativize the value of truth only partially[43], implying that it is not so *in reality (our times)*. This is why Eliade's theory has to hang strongly on essentialist concepts like *the sacred*, or *time*. Thus myth is 'true' (for 'them,' in the context of sacredness and other-temporality), but still 'wrong' (for us, in our context). So whether we want it or not, we are still affirming that myth is, finally, not truth.

To affirm that in archaic or primitive societies myth is "thought to express the

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[42] Ellwood, p.107.

[43] By *partial relativization* we mean just that. An incomplete relativization of truth, only in intent.

absolute truth, because it narrates a *sacred history*" (*Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 23)

is ambiguous: 'thought to express' is not the same as affirming that 'it is.' Thus it is

only a partial relativization of truth, where truth is still placed 'near us,' and not 'close

to them.' Essentialist concepts like 'sacred history' or 'expression of absolute truth'

also show this partial relativism.

In any case, we believe Mircea Eliade pointed correctly to the importance of the

question of the value of truth in definitions of myth; he identified correctly a problem

in conceptualizing myth as a narrative opposed to reality (or truth). However, he

failed in observing how much he himself and his generation where still working under

those same presumptions.

The problem of truth in myth is still an unresolved issue. Myth, is affirmed,

cannot be true, it is false, it is a lie. But by doing so, we apparently take away from

myth all possibility of value.[44] What are we to do of all this?

Following the shift from phenomenology to hermeneutics, the bracketing of truth

was followed by other procedures, like the idea of re-valorizing myth. In the *The*

Symbolism of Evil, for example, Paul Ricoeur initially defines myth in a way that

closely echoes Eliade's; he explains myth as "not a false explanation by means of

images and fables, but a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at

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[44] Thus what is understood as demythologization. See Ricoeur.

the beginning of time and which has a purpose." (Ricoeur 5) But he has in mind something very different to the partial relativization of myth's truth. He later goes in the opposite direction, negating any possibility of recovering through interpretation myth's *original* value of truth.[45]

Ricoeur's intention is to somehow rescue myth from its devaluation for modern man. Now, this devaluation, according to him, is precisely forced by myth's etiological nature (myth as *an explanation of reality*). Thus, for Ricoeur, to rescue myth it is necessary first to destroy its etiological intention. This is what he calls *demythologization*.

But notice here how this project is also starting from a definition of myth as false narrative: he is clearly stating that myth is first and foremost not true (wrong etiology is its primary essence). So where Eliade suggested that the truth value of a myth could still be accepted in the context of *sacred time*, Ricoeur is affirming that the essence of myth itself cannot be redeemed and must be abandoned. The rest follows naturally from this premise: modern man can no longer believe in myth. Myth has to be transformed into something else to be re-valued.[46]

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[45] Ricoeur, p. 5: "For us, moderns, a myth is only a myth because we can no longer connect that time with the time of history as we write it, *employing the critical method*, nor can we connect mythical places with our geographical space. This is why the myth can no longer be an explanation; to exclude its etiological intention is the theme of all necessary demythologization."

[46] Ricoeur, p. 164: "If (…) the myth is to survive this double distinction of history and myth as well as of explanation and myth, the myth must not be either history,

There is a contradiction here. Ricoeur presented himself before as following the definition of History of Religions, described as no longer finding in myth '*a false explanation by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration.*' And yet later he is insisting that myth is in essence a false explanation. This again is indicating the conflict between a new definition proposed following and interpretation and a traditional understanding of what is myth.

Ricoeur constructs a layered hierarchy where he places symbol, myth, and pseudo-scientific myth or gnosis. In the opposite extremes of this hierarchy are experience and speculation.

Initially, man faces the experience of feelings. He then expresses this experience through symbol(s). Myth is a development and speculation of this original experience-to-expression movement. Pseudo-knowledge or 'gnosis' is one more step removed from experience, as a further speculative development from myth. Thus myth is in the middle position between symbol and irrational speculation.

Symbols are also, like myths, expressions of experience, but since they are closer to experience they are more spontaneous (pure, not contaminated by speculation). It follows that Ricoeur only values myths as a way of recovering symbol for re-constructing experience, through the analytical dismantling of myth. Once we get

happening in a definite time and place, or explanation. (…) For a critical understanding of myth it is first necessary that the myth be entirely divorced from the "etiological" function with which it appears to be identified."

rid of the etiological function (demythologization), myth can become "a vessel of meaning" (Ricoeur 349) through symbol.[47]

Here we can observe the main theoretical problem of his theory of myth. Ricoeur supposes that symbols are previous to myth, and closer to experience. But when we observe his examples of symbols (defilement, sin, guilt, and water as threat/renewal in flood/baptism) it appears problematic whether they can have any value independent of myths. In other words, symbols appear as secondary expressions originated on the context of a myth. Thus, their quality of spontaneity in comparison to myths' speculative nature is put to doubt. Symbols depend on the narrative of myth for their meaning.

The work of Ricoeur is important for us because it shows in a crystal-clear way the dual stage process of construction of definitions of myth in relation to the requirements of interpretation.

> *Previous Definition* → *Interpretation* → *New Definition*
> *(or Assumptions)*

Ricoeur wants to rescue myth from its devaluation, building a new definition (as

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[47] Ricoeur, p. 18: "(…) I shall always understand by symbol (…) analogical meanings which are spontaneously formed and immediately significant (…) I shall regard myths as a species of symbols, as symbols developed in the form of narrations and articulated in a time and space that cannot be co-ordinated with the space and time of history and geography according to the critical method."

vessel for symbols of experience). But for that he needs to destroy completely the etiological function (the value of truth) of the previous definition. Notice how his new definition is born necessarily of the requirements of his interpretation of symbol, experience, and speculation.

What is myth then? The ability to identify or distinguish myth-narratives from non myth-narratives remains as elusive as before, even though in the second part of his work Ricoeur will profusely discuss, give interpretations, and evaluate narratives that he considers myths.

We have then, yet another proof that definitions of myth are constructed backwards, from methods or theories of interpretation. By this we mean that they start from previous assumptions about what myth *should and should not* be. In that sense, they start from a previous definition (a pseudo or proto definition), which we will call from now a '*standard definition of myth*' (SDM).

But it also seems clear now that definitions of myth that are constructed in this way, based on the requirements of interpretations, present serious problems when it comes to answer the question of what is myth.

We have affirmed that this SDM is consensual, in other words, it seems to be universally accepted. It consists of two elements (or affirmations): myth is narrative, and is false narrative (truth valuation).

By 'truth valuation' (TrV) we simply mean a negative evaluation of myth, in relation to truth. That is, a myth is a false narrative, a lie. When myth is opposed to truth, it is also opposed to reason and to history. Thus, all these oppositions form the TrV of myth.

Let's repeat here one more time what this SDM involves: *myth is a type of narrative that is not true, but false.* As such, myth is a narrative that can be distinguished from history.

2.6 The Western ideology behind Truth Valuation (TrV)

Against what we have said before it could be protested that the TrV implicated in a SMD might have its natural origins in the etymology of the word 'myth' itself; in other words, that the definition of myth as false narrative is merely a fact that has always been included in the value of the word. Thus, any different definition of myth would be problematic, and would be going against the traditional and true meaning of myth.

At the same time, the opposition between myth and logos and myth and history is traditionally traced back by scholars to Greece, and Greek philosophy, since the word myth itself comes from ancient Greece. It would be useful, then, to revise briefly the etymology of myth, and thus answer in advance that complain.

Gregory Nagy[48] derives the word myth (*muthos*) from the Greek verb *muo*, "which means 'I have my mouth closed' or 'I have my eyes closed' from the standpoint of everyday situations, but 'I say in special way' or 'I see in a special way' from the standpoint of marked situations in ritual." (Nagy 3) In that sense myth would seem to mean 'special speech,' as opposed to everyday speech.

Similarly, Bruce Lincoln[49] explains that in its earliest attestations in the Greek epic, *logos* and *mythos* represented two different and opposed forms of speech. *Logos* connoted not a rational argumentation but rather 'shady speech acts' (like seduction, beguilement, and deception), which inferiors used to outwit those who held power over them, while mythos was the speech of the 'preeminent' (poets and kings), those with authority, having the capacity to advance powerful truth claims,[50] and backed by physical force. (Lincoln x) It never means 'false story,' 'symbolic story,' 'sacred story.' (Lincoln 7)

In Hesiod, for example, *mythos* represents a discourse of power and authority that has to be believed and obeyed, while in the *Illiad*, it appears as a speech of power, performed in public, by one with authority. Likewise, it forces consent from those

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[48] Nagy, Gregory. *Greek Mythology and Poetics*. New York: Cornell University Press (1992).

[49] Lincoln, Bruce. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.

[50] In the context described by Lincoln, it does not seem to me that 'truth claims' here necessarily imply TrV. Mythos would be a speech of power, a speech that *becomes* truth, not because of its content, but merely because it is backed by a figure of authority.

inferior to the speaker, and only those equal in status are allowed to oppose it. (Lincoln 7)

Gregory Nagy alternatively traces the origins of the dichotomy between *muthos* 'myth' and *aletheia* 'truth' in the context of the development of the Archaic Greek city-state and the tendency of pan-Hellenism. The 'singers' are socially mobile, and thus what they sing is conditioned by their mobility, forcing them to detach myths from ritual, since myths must be carried to different locations. What is accepted as sacred tradition in one community will be considered *pseudos* (a fallacy or lie) in another. Thus, in this tradition what is 'convergent is highlighted while that divergent shaded over.' *Muthos* becomes related with the divergences, while *aletheia* with the convergences, and 'truth'. (Nagy 30)

Be as it may, these authors agree that before Plato the word *mythos* had a higher position than the word *logos*. As a result of Plato's polemic, mythos was finally displaced in importance by logos. Under Plato, *"mythoi* were not only revised but also radically revalorized. What others had taken to be primordial revelations or undeniable truths now were treated as state propaganda, best suited for children and those incapable of adopting the discourse and practice of the ruling elite, within an emergent regime of truth that called (and calls) itself 'philosophy.'" (Lincoln 42) But even then myth was not necessarily understood as false narrative, inferior to logos,

"false on the whole but still having some truth in it." (Lincoln 43)

This is important for us, because it proves that the opposition between truth and myth that today is part of a Western ideology can be traced a long way back in time, to after Plato, but not to its origins and as a consequence needs not be so. At the same time, this can be taken as a relevant warning: the discipline of Buddhist Studies may be, in relation to myth, working under ideological assumptions that may be totally foreign to their object of study.

Chapter III: Myth in Buddhist Studies

3.1 Myth as corruption

There is a notorious lack of works dealing specifically with Buddhist 'myths.' The concept, for example, seems to be avoided from most general overviews of the religion.[51] Thus, from and academic perspective, it could be perhaps easily concluded that the concept of myth has no importance whatsoever in the study of the religion.[52] However, as we will see later, this is not the case.

In scholarly literature about Buddhism, three modes of use for myth are commonly encountered. The first, involves the use of the concept of 'myth' in an often un-technical way (generally lacking in precision). In this use the value given to the word is, generally speaking, negative, but even then, with contradictory and confusing connotations.[53] This mode often involves an apologetic discourse towards

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[51] See for example the conspicuous absence of 'myth' in Gombrich, Richard. *What the Buddha Taught*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2009, Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1998, and Warder, A. K. *Indian Buddhism*. India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000. The first two authors are important for the analysis of Buddhist mythical scriptures, yet none of them has used the concept in their 'introductory' works. Gombrich has totally replaced its use, in practical terms, for metaphor, allegory, and satire. See the third chapter of his book *How Buddhism Began: The conditioned genesis of the early teachings*. 2nd ed. USA: Routledge, 2005.

[52] One could even argue that scholars avoiding the word myth altogether are perhaps working under particular ideological assumptions (see Almond) about the Theravada form of the religion.

[53] King, p. 211: "(…) the term 'myth' would not commend itself to a Theravada (or

the religion.[54]

The second mode occupies an intermediary position between non-technical and technical modes of the use of myth. In it, myth is assumed to be somehow a metaphor or symbol for doctrine. Thus, words like *kamma*, *bodhisattva*, *māra*, are considered elements of Buddhist mythology,[55] interpreted as representations of doctrine.

The third mode of use is highly technical. In it, the negative valuation of myth is always connected with the theoretical assumptions that Buddhist studies adopts for its method of historical stratification of scriptures (Higher Criticism). In short, the presence of myth in a scripture is most of the time a strong argument against its original purity, and thus against the possibility that the text in question represents an early stage in the history of its development and transmission. In that way, the presence or absence of myth in a scripture is often considered a good indicator for dating texts.[56]

Southern) Buddhist, for two reasons: As a *fundamentalist* who prides himself on the pristine purity and authenticity of his tradition and scriptures, he does not take kindly to talk about myth, symbolism, and the like. The other reason is that the distinction in Western thought between the symbolic and literal, or the mythical and historical, is largely foreign to the Buddhist and Eastern way of thinking. (…) In case the distinction is made, Buddhism tends to regard the mental and subjective realm as the more essential and real." In a quote like this, for example, myth denotes the opposite of purity and authenticity in a tradition, and thus it has a clear negative value, while at the same time it is implicitly related with the mental and subjective realm, which, according to this author, is exactly what the Buddhist tradition considers as more essential and real!"

[54] See the rest of this chapter for some examples.

[55] For a classical example, see Carus, Paul. "The Mythology of Buddhism." *The Monist*. Vol. 7.3 Apr (1897): 415-445.

[56] For a criticism of the method see Gombrich, Richard. "Recovering the Buddha's

Notwithstanding this, and surprisingly, Buddhist studies have not developed a theory of myth. Important authors interested in the study of texts normally identified as myth pay little attention to any theoretical implications.[57] The definition used is most of the time simply commonsensical,[58] (corresponding to what we have named before the SDM).

In any case, there seems to be a consensus in the scholarly community, both East and West, that myth is a matter of secondary importance for the core of Buddhism; it is presumed that myths (or *mythical elements*) are marginal, and have no relevance to the core of the religion, or that they are merely symbols of doctrine. So if myths are studied, it must always be in relation of dependence with another element. Naturally, this other element often happens to be philosophical doctrine.[59]

The historical origins for this situation have been convincingly explained by modern scholars working on the self-critical dimension of the discipline. In particular,

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Message." *Earliest Buddhism and Madhyamaka (Panels of The VIIth World Sanskrit Conference VOL. II)*. Eds. David Seyfort Ruegg and Lambert Schmithausen. The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1990. 5-23. According to Gombrich, the method was developed by Frauwallner and we must "remember that most of that work was applied to philosophical texts which were undoubtedly written and read. (…) the kind of analysis which can dissect a *written* philosophical tradition is inappropriate for oral materials." (Gombrich 1990. p. 8).

[57] See for example the case of Gethin and Gombrich, discussed in our fourth chapter.

[58] See Waldschmidt, E. Die Überlieferung vom Lebensende des Buddha: eine vergleichende Analyse des Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra und seiner Textentsprechungen. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1944–48.

[59] A similar situation is that of Buddhist cosmology. However, works on Buddhist cosmology are more common, probably due to the fact that cosmology can be easily related to doctrine, and thus justified as metaphor or symbolical expression of philosophical doctrine. At the same time it can be discarded as an understandable pre-modern mistake.

the work of Philip C. Almond[60] in regard to the encounter and 'discovery' of Buddhism by the British Empire during the 19th century (and as a consequence the origins of the discipline of Buddhist studies), as well as several articles of Gregory Schopen[61] dealing with the opposition of archeological history against a textual history. Both scholars have made a call of attention towards what they call a Protestant ideology that has been operating behind the discipline of Buddhist studies.

For Almond, many of the foundational theoretical assumptions of the discipline, among which we found those related with myth, have been carried over from the Victorian period where Buddhism as a religion was *created* for the West, when for the first time it "*becomes* an object" (Almond 12). Chief among these is the predominance of a constructed image of Buddhism based on text[62] (pure and idealized (not mythical).

This text centrism is best understood as a continuation of the Protestant Christian ideology of the era, which had previously constructed an image of what 'true religion' should be. As such it opposed texts to tradition, history to myth, original message to

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[60] Almond, Philip C. *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

[61] See Schopen, Gregory. Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected papers on the Archeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India. United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.

[62] See Franklin, J. Jeffrey. *The Lotus and The Lion: Buddhism and The British Empire*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2008.

corruption.[63]

Almond distinguishes between two phases in the process of the Victorian creation of Buddhism. In the first phase, Buddhism remained located far away, exotic. It is only in the second phase that an appropriation really started.[64]

The successful cultural appropriation of Buddhism required a possession through texts.[65] At the same time this possession warranted the dominance and control over what Buddhism should be. This text centrism gave the discipline of Philology an enormous position of cultural power and prestige. (Almond) As a consequence, it gained a place of predominance in Buddhist studies.

Influenced by the Protestant ideology, and perhaps in imitation of the quest for the historical Jesus,[66] the textual study of Buddhism became a project for the

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[63] The SDM (also accepted in Buddhist studies) probably has its origins here.

[64] Almond, p. 13: "Originally existing 'out there' in the Oriental *present,* Buddhism came to be determined as an object the primary location of which was the West, through the progressive collection, translation, and publication of its textual *past*. Buddhism, by 1860, had come to exist, not in the Orient, but in the Oriental libraries and institutes of the West, in its texts and manuscripts, at the desks of the Western savants who interpreted it. It had become a textual object, defined, classified, and interpreted through its own textuality. By the middle of the century, the Buddhism that existed 'out there' was beginning to be judged by a West that *alone* knew what Buddhism was, is, and ought to be. The essence of Buddhism came to be seen as expressed not 'out there' in the Orient, but in the West through the West's control of Buddhism's own textual past."

[65] Franklin, p. 5: "European scholars asserted the precedence of their textualized Buddhism over the indigenous practices of actual Buddhists in Asia. This represented a form of imperial appropriation of the religious other, a form of discursive violence that supplemented the physical violence of conquest and occupation. At its farthest remove from the violence that defines it, "discovery" must be understood as "construction": the process by which nineteenth-century British culture assimilated or failed to assimilate elements of Buddhism."

[66] Almond p. 66-67: "(…) for there is a very real sense in which, especially as

reconstruction of the historical Buddha, his original teachings, and an earlier, more pure form of the religion: an idealized version of Buddhism was born.

The problem was myth. After all, the Buddha was 500 years older than Jesus (at the very limits of any possible Indian history), with more than enough time for the development and expansion of all kinds of non-historical material (myth), which now was covering the earliest, purest strata.

Thus a method was developed to separate the original elements from the later corruptions or accretions. The principle involved the exclusion of the miraculous and the supernatural from what was considered historical accurate. (Almond 65)

The discussion between an idealized reconstructed Buddhism affected the way Mahāyāna Buddhism was initially perceived. Contrasting the ideal textual purity of an artificial Buddhism was the reality of the then contemporary degenerated Mahāyāna, and "a discourse of 'pure' versus 'corrupt' Buddhism was developed on the foundation of the historical priority of Pali Buddhism and the posteriority of Mahāyāna Buddhism." (Almond 95)

In relation to this, the Pāli Canon of the Theravada tradition gained a position as *primus inter pares*; it was conceived as historically closer to the supposed original doctrine of the Buddha, not only due to its presumed antiquity. It was also considered

regards its methodology, British research into the life of the Buddha paralleled that of European research into Jesus [and thus it would] not be unreasonable to surmise that, indirectly at least, there may have been some influence."

more reliable due to the apparent fewer presence of myth in it.[67]

From this apparently low proportional quantity of myth, it was possible to push for an even more original construction, leading to what was to be called Early Buddhism, and then to what was the original doctrine of the Buddha.[68]

As Schopen has shown, this text-centric method and its idealized object continue to have a position of predominance in Buddhist studies even today. Although more critical voices like Schopen have started to be felt. Trainor,[69] for example, talks about a consensus among modern Western scholars that agrees that the texts of the various Buddhist traditions "cannot provide much historically reliable information about the details of the Buddha's life." (Trainor 4)

Yet some scholars still "want to assume that accounts of miraculous occurrences and passages depicting a devotional attitude toward the person of the Buddha (…)

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[67] Reat, p. 49: "Then as now, the vast majority of Indians lived under the loft canopy of a highly sophisticated spirituality, but contented themselves with a simple religion focused upon a variety of supernatural beings believed to exert influence upon their day-to-day lives. (…) Nikaya Buddhism, by contrast, was not in a position to participate in this devotional trend. Its doctrines clearly condemn rituals and portray the various popular deities as being deluded or as being followers of the Buddha."

[68] Almond, p. 66: "Already back then there where critical voices not so optimistic. Rhys Davids himself was not immune from such criticism. Edgar Ware in *The Fortnightly Review* criticized his rationalistic approach. 'The modern system', he wrote, of rejecting whatever is supernatural, and accepting the residue as historical, gives a very charming and not improbable romance, as may be seen in Mr Rhys David's *[sic]* graceful article in the present edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. But this account is not a whit more trustworthy than early Roman history as constructed on the principle of Niebuhr or a German or French life of Jesus of Nazareth.'"

[69] Trainor, Kevin. Relics, ritual, and representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravada tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

represent later strata in the developing Buddha legend." (Trainor 5)

So at the center of the problem of reconstructing the original teachings of the Buddha is the question of the historical stratification of the Pāli suttas, and myth works as another criterion of authenticity in determining this. Likewise, the valuation of the Pāli Canon is somehow directly connected with the problem of the modern understanding of myth and its opposition to truth, in the form of a *negative relationship*: *less myth equals more historical truth*.

But then, how is it possible that considering the technical importance given to myth there is no real theory developed for Buddhist studies?

For scholars of Buddhism, the problem of myth is demanding. Myth or mythical elements in the Pāli Canon appear contradictory to the sanitized and idealized western construct of a 'hypothetical original core' of the Buddhist doctrine. If myth is present in the Pāli Canon, the question is whether it is traceable to the Buddha himself or it is a posterior development (*a corruption*). In the context of a teacher that apparently[70] discouraged his followers from useless speculations not conducing to salvation, *what are we to make of the presence of myth in the earliest scriptures*?

Thus, myth becomes useful tool when it can be trimmed. This has been the most common way of dealing with the problem of myth in Buddhism scholarship, apart

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[70] As in some, and only some texts.

from ignoring it completely. Myths cannot be traced back in time to the Buddha. Myth doesn't make sense, unless in a negative way: less myth means more truth. More myth means more development, more corruption.

Thus, myth is an almost automatic disqualifying criterion for authenticity, and when you remove it from the text (as a part or mythical elements) or we you remove an entire sutta (as a text or narrative) the rest can be restored to their original pristine form.

3.2 Hidden or disguised myth

Now we turn to TrV in Buddhist studies. Myth has such a strong negative value behind, that when it is described as an essential component of any religion there are those scholars who would want to affirm then, that, since Buddhism lacks myth, it should not be considered a religion.

Even a reputed scholar like Walpola Rahula, in his now classic introduction to Buddhism,[71] felt compelled to suggest that the religion may well deserve to be considered as something else instead. He even affirmed that whether Buddhism was part of the category 'religion' or not was irrelevant.[72]

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[71] Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. USA: Gordon Fraser, 1959.
[72] Rahula, p. 1: "Among the founders of religions the Buddha (*if we are permitted to call him the founder of a religion in the popular sense of the term*) was only a teacher who did not claim to be other than a human being, pure and simple." Also, Rahula p. 5: "(…) the question has often been asked: Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? It

The labels may well be irrelevant for a believer involved in apologetics, but doubtfully so for a scholar. The important thing is that the suggestion that 'Buddhism is not a religion' converges and is inter-dependent with the idea that there is no myth in it. For establishing the link between no-myth and no-religion, another idea closely related is brought forward: there is no place for faith in Buddhism.

For scholars fond of thinking of myth as a false narrative, and religion understood as an institution which demands belief in myths (unproven or simply false stories), Buddhism should not be considered a religion, because, as the argument goes, it doesn't demand belief or faith[73]

However, the Buddhism defended and proclaimed in such arguments is not a real, historical Buddhism; it is rather an idealized textual version invented by the West (Almond) in the age of Colonialism, under the influence of the Protestant ideology; indeed, a Buddhism without any real foundation beyond philology. As a proof, this idealized version of Buddhism contradicts a great number of real observed phenomena that has a direct connection with myth, belief, and faith in the East, whether modern or past.

And even when considering Theravada Buddhism the problem of myth is not as

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does not matter what you call it. Buddhism remains what it is whatever label you may put on it. *The label is immaterial.*"[!].

[73] Rahula, p. 8: "Almost all religions are built on faith-rather 'blind' faith it would seem. But in Buddhism emphasis is laid on 'seeing', knowing, understanding, and not on faith, or belief."

simple as it is made to appear by some scholars. Winston L King[74] has cleverly

manifested the inherent theoretical problems and contradictions of considering any

Buddhism, including Theravada Buddhism (and even Zen), as pure of myth. For King,

even a 'pure' and 'absolute' experience (that is, devoid of 'cosmic and historical

relativities') is "conditioned and formed in the matrix of Buddhist ideas about the

nature of the self, its innate capacities, and its relation to the universe about it." (King

218)

According to King it is simply impossible to escape the formative power of this

'matrix.' And he suggests that perhaps this 'pure experience' may be indeed a form of

"new super-symbolism in which psychological attitudes, their genesis, development,

and significance have become a new cosmology, a metaphysic of action if not of

concept." (King 218) And thus, we may add, a new form of myth. King calls this a

mythos in-reverse.[75]

But returning to our practical concerns, after it is affirmed that there cannot be

myth in Buddhism, what happens with all those things that under the dominance of a

SDM should be considered myth or mythical?

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[74] King, Winston L. "Myth in Buddhism: Essential or Peripheral?" *Journal of Bible and Religion*. Vol. 29.3 Jul (1961): 211-218.
[75] King, p. 218: "It becomes a mythos-in-reverse, which, instead of reworking historical and natural realities in terms of human value apprehensions in the usual religious manner, takes man's inner mental states and calls them ultimate realities. Whether a system of mythically reworked history and nature, or one of cosmologized mind-states, is the more dependent upon myth, it is impossible to decide."

Three options are commonly followed to deal with them by scholars: a. they are simply ignored, b. they are disguised as something else, or c. they are considered extraneous and posterior to the original text or doctrine in question.[76]

For the first option, which happens to be the easiest one, a scholar just needs to follow the artificial idealized Western construction of Buddhism, which we mentioned before. It is also common in the studies of Buddhism, that when cautious authors want to avoid the use of myth as a general category, they satisfy themselves with changing noun for adjective: thus, instead of a clear definition of myth we get mythical elements, mythical motifs, mythical narratives, and a great number of other. The result of the lexical transmutation from object to quality (seen as safer theoretically), however, is normally as disappointing as the definition that it supposedly avoided (we will see this in more detail in our next chapter).

In the case of the second option, those elements that ought to be identified as myth become either merely a symbol for doctrine or something else, or in a more extreme case, are defended as empirically real and verifiable. For example, David Kalupahana, in an important work[77] dealing with Buddhist philosophy, will affirm

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[76] The first two are documented by Schopen. See specially his articles "Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism" and "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit," in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected papers on the Archeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*. United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.

[77] Kalupahana, David J. *Buddhist Philosophy: A historical Analysis*. Honolulu: The

that: "*Kamma* and rebirth are two aspects of life personally verified by the Buddha through extrasensory perception." (Kalupahana 1976 44)

By arguing that the Buddha personally verified the existence of *kamma* and *rebirth*, Kalupahana tries to oppose the notion that these concepts, as common cultural beliefs current in the time of the Buddha, probably originated in that particular historical context, and where adopted by him. But notice how by doing so, he is forced to defend the reality of the supposed extrasensory experiences of the Buddha.

Thus, it can be argued, the scholar has changed his 'robes' for those of the apologetic believer. Such arguments in defense of the Buddha's supernatural cognitive powers indirectly carry the implication of his probable infallibility, and thus, are inherently connected with faith and belief in his supra-mundane condition.

In any case, *kamma* as well as *rebirth*, two concepts that should normally fit perfectly well a mythical identification (because, according to a SDM based on TrV, they cannot be accepted as true), are instead disguised as probable, possible, and scientifically sound, even though there has never been (and probably there will never be) any proof of their authenticity. Again, ironically, the experience of the Buddha is quoted as enough warranty of its reality or truthfulness.

We are not interested here in arguing against Buddhist doctrine; and it is likewise

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University Press of Hawaii, 1976.

irrelevant for us whether the Buddha invited his disciples and followers to try out by themselves any experience for confirmation. We just want to point out that many central Buddhist concepts could not avoid a negative TrV if a SDM was operating openly and objectively. But they can pass scrutiny because a SDM is never formally or officially stated.

Buddhism evidently asks for faith, and it can do that on account of its set of particular beliefs. Faith is merely the acceptance of a set of beliefs, whatever they are. Such a set of religious beliefs is probably sustained by myth. Scholars opposed to the idea of faith or belief in Buddhism, are forced to disguise myth either as reality (truth) or as symbol and metaphor. Kalupahana, independent of his qualities as a scholar, often do both.[78]

As can be seen, the second option of disguising myth as something else, is intimately connected with the third one: myth is an *extraneous layer*, a posterior accretion that covers or, as Kalupahana puts it, 'enshrines' truth.[79] Of course, the

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[78] Kalupahana 1992, p. 22: The story of the life of the Buddha has become enshrined in all forms of myths and legends, as in the case of many religious teachers of the past. Distinguishing historical facts from myths and legends is not only a difficult task but one that is generally resisted by the overenthusiastic devotee. Such resistance can seem justified if the interpreter of the myths tends to assume that they are mere imaginations of the faithful disciple. Yet a more sober and careful analysis reveals that these myths symbolize important emotional or psychological events connected with the personalities involved or with actual historical incidents that called for dramatic explanations.

[79] Notice here the intelligent play of words. 'Enshrines' reminds of the custom of building Buddhist stupas for relics. The problem of relics is closely related with the problem of myth, but we cannot develop this idea here. For a detailed account of the idealization and invention of Buddhism, and its relation to relics, see in our

suggestion implicit is that, under the uncomfortable presence of myth, Buddhist truth can be recovered by trimming myth.

3.3 Narrative appearances

In pursue of history, scholars of Buddhist studies often fall into a trap. Let us put the problem in the following words: religious narratives like those of Buddhism are today considered very differently than those of the likes of the Greeks. This distinction in appearance *seems* to be justified by the narrative contents themselves.

For scholars of religion, it seems as if the Greek myths were accepted as *pure* myths. When facing the Dīgha Nikāya, however, 'myth' suddenly loses corporeality. This can be expressed in the following way: every story of Zeus is clearly a myth, but every story Buddha is not. It is as if a Greek myth was a myth before been classified as a 'narrative,' while in the case of a Buddhist sutta it was the opposite. Why is this so?

We have seen before how idealization has been operating in Buddhist studies. This is, no doubt, one important reason. With the negative valuation of myth a series of phenomena are simply wiped out of narratives.

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bibliography Strong, John S. *Relics of The Buddha*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004, and Trainor, Kevin. *Relics, ritual, and representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravada tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

But there is more. The category of 'myth' becomes diffused or diluted when it is pushed aside by the 'appearance' of historical reality in a narrative. Every story of Zeus seems to be purely mythical because Zeus 'certainly' appears for us as not real. It is not only that Zeus was never proclaimed a man. It is also the fact that his narrative actions, and the events that surround them, also appear unreal. Apparently, *history cannot reclaim anything from a myth.*

In the opposite way, not only there is the historical probability of the real existence of a man who was called Buddha, but also of his narrative actions, which could correspond to 'real' possible actions. In addition, such a hypothetical individual may have been truly surrounded by similar events, as described in the particular narratives. We should call this general narrative phenomenon of likeness the *appearance of historical probability in a narrative.*

What exactly are these '*narrative appearances of probability*'? When we think that a character like Buddha, in a particular religious narrative, appears to be a historically probable figure (a real person), we are in some way accepting the appearance or illusion of reality that the text bestows. [80] Whom we *see* (or read) on the text, comes closer to our real world. But in reality, this character can never be anything else but an element of a narrative. In narrative terms it is not relevant how

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[80] McClintock, p. 94: "We do not often think of the Buddha as a literary character. Most of us tend to think of him instead as the founder of a religion, a historical figure who happens to appear in the religious literature of ancient India and elsewhere."

close he is to a true historical or real figure. The same happens with the actions and events surrounding such a character. They are appearances of realities in a text, and should not be confused with history or reality.

A text is a world with its own rules, and the problem is when scholars of Buddhists studies become confused by these *narrative appearances* as elements of real probability. In other words scholars of Buddhism have unconsciously blurred the lines of literature and reality. The negative valuation of myth is the result of this transgression.

Thus, in terms of narrative analysis, historical and truth valuations should never have such preeminence over a text, because, as Northrop Frye[81] puts it, "literary works do not pretend to describe or assert, and hence are not true, not false." (Frye 1957 73)

If every scholar at least agrees on defining myth as narrative why this connection has not been examined more carefully? If we are finally to take myths as narratives, we would do much good in putting aside once and for all the question of their historical reliability or value-weight. With this we don't mean to suggest that historical studies of texts should be abandoned, but just that in terms of the study of myth, Buddhist studies should give priority to the narrative side of myth. But to study

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[81] Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957.

myth as a narrative it seems necessary a theoretical apparatus that today is beyond the reach of Philology.

It seems clear at least that a scholars of Buddhist studies should avoid the confusion between a narrative analysis of myth from: a. the historical analysis of the form and content of a particular text (the history of a text itself), b. the analysis of the probability of historicity of what it records (the historicity of the events or actions a text describe), and c. the analysis of what for lack of better words we could call its metaphysical truth (the truthfulness of those transcendental axioms, doctrines, topics, or 'realities beyond' it affirms). These are the spheres of philology, history, and philosophy, respectively. The problem is that normally the category of myth is abused to conflate these three. Narrative is simple gorged up by them. Even so, none of these three dimensions correspond to a real narrative analysis of myth, and thus, none of them can really answer *what is myth*.

Chapter IV: '*What is myth doing here?*' The problem of myth in the Mahāsudassana Sutta

4.1 Rupert Gethin's question:

To better understand the problem of a definition of myth in Theravada Buddhism we should proceed now to a critical review and analysis of the use of the concept in a concrete example.

The first problem that we have to surmount is the lack of works dealing directly with Buddhist myth.[82] In addition, those that tackle with myth in a theoretical manner are unfortunately very few.[83] There is an article, however, that is particularly exceptional in its originality and the implications it presents, and we will use it to examine some important methodological and theoretical issues in relation to the study of Buddhist myth. We will also make reference to some other works related with it.

It must be remembered, however, that we will not be conducting here a detailed

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[82] This is true even for studies related to Mahāyana and Tantric Buddhism. In the particular case of Mahāyana, an exception to this would be in the study of the idea of the Bodhisattva. Indeed there are many works dealing with the conception of the Bodhisattva. However, most of the time is from the perspective of doctrine, philosophy, or historical development, and not from myth properly speaking. See for example Anālayo. *The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal*. Germany: Hamburg University Press, 2010.

[83] More common are those works that explain Buddhist symbols that can, according to the authors, are related to myth. See a typical example in Carus, Paul. "*The Myhtology of Buddhism*." The Monist. Vol. 7.3 Apr (1897): 415-445.

criticism of its philological arguments. Neither will we be arguing in favor or against its main hypothesis. What interest us here are its theoretical implications for the understanding of the concept of myth.

Our purpose here then, will be first to confirm with this example how the problem of the definition of myth materializes in the discipline of Buddhist studies. Second, to try to trace this difficulty to what we have called before SDM and its TrV. And third, to show how this problem could be influencing, directly or indirectly, the results of such an analysis.

The article in question, titled "Mythology as Meditation: From the Mahāsudassana Sutta to the Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra," by Rupert Gethin,[84] focuses on a particular text, the Mahāsudassana Sutta (MSud),[85] a text (sutta) in the big corpus of the texts of the Pāli Canon (PCan), of the Theravada tradition.

The PCan, traditionally Tipiṭaka or 'Three Baskets', is divided into 3 subsections or piṭaka: Vinayapiṭaka, Suttapiṭaka, and Abhidhammapiṭaka. The Suttapiṭaka is named after the literary form ('suttanta') prevalent in the first four subsections ('nikāya'), of the five it is composed of. The first four subsections "comprise mainly the discourses of the Buddha and his discussions with disciples and heretics alike. The

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[84] Gethin, Rupert. "Mythology as Meditation: From The Mahāsudassana Sutta to the Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra" *Journal of The Pali Text Society* 28 (2006): 63-112.

[85] Gethin's article focuses on the Pāli version, but he also compares it in some detail with the Gilgit manuscript version.

last (…) comprises a large variety of heterogeneous texts."[86] The Mahāsudassana

Sutta (MSud) is a text in its first subsection, the Dhīganikāya (DN).

As it is well known, this sutta is considered unique among scholars mainly for

two reasons. First, it is closely related in its textual genesis and development to the

important Mahaparinibbāna Sutta (MPar), the sutta of the last days and death of the

Buddha. (Gethin 2006 70) In fact, while it is found as an independent text in the DN

(that is, as a sutta in itself) following the MPar, in other traditions it is still directly

embedded inside this narrative.[87] The reasons for this, as well as its general textual

evolution are yet to generate consensus. (Gethin 2006 77)

Second, as Gethin argues in his article, it is considered 'different' from the rest of

the suttas of the DN due to its content and structure, which is often described as

mythical. Indeed, this difference appears so remarkable to Gethin that he starts his

article with the apparently simple question: "what is such a myth doing in the corpus

of early Buddhist literature"? (Gethin 2006 64) About its uncommon content and

structure we can briefly mention here its rich and colorful images, its dream-like

descriptions, its narrative simplicity, and its repetitiveness, among other details.[88]

Gethin's ingenious conclusion, as we will see later, is that the *mythic qualities* of

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[86] v. Hinüber, p. 24.
[87] For the details of the other versions see Matsumura, H. *The Mahāsudarśanāvadāna and the Mahāsudarśanasūtra*. Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, Indian Books Centre, 1988.
[88] See Waldschmidt. 1944–48.

the sutta in question could be better explained as elements that work in the manner of

proto-visualizations (in the manner of a proto-template for later visualizations) or if

one "hesitates to regard [it] as a formal visualization", in the very least it can be

considered "as a form of early Buddhist 'meditation." (Gethin 2006 103)

At the core of his argument lays the similarity between the so called mythical

elements in the Mahāsudassana Sutta and elements of later texts more explicitly

connected with visualization, (Gethin 2006 70, 94) as well as its strange and excessive

repetitiveness. (Gethin 2006 93)[89] Gethin also intends to connect the narrative

content of the sutta with the hypothetical purpose of it. He complements his

conclusion with some philological details that we will review later.

It must be pointed out, however, that the author limits himself to presenting this

as a probability, and prudently seems to shy away from a more categorical affirmation.

So much, indeed, that his final conclusion borders on the ambiguous when he affirms

that by *meditation* (kammaṭṭhāna), following commentarial literature, we could also

understand "recollections of the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha."

(Gethin 2006 103) Thus the range of his conclusions is very broad: from formal

visualization aid or template, to mere recollection (here even understood as

remembrance).

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[89] See Rhys Davis introduction to the MPar. Rhys Davids, T.W. and C.A.F, Rhys
Davids. *Dialogues of the Buddha,* Part II. 4th edition. London: Pali Text Society,
1954.

The important thing for us will be to confirm whether the initial question of *what is such a myth doing in the corpus of early Buddhist literature* has been answered satisfactorily.

4.2 A definition of myth?

Now, the formulation of the author's starting question already carries three important implications that we must examine before anything else. First, it immediately grounds the problem of 'myth' in terms of distinctions inside a group of texts or narratives, a corpus, in this case the PCan. For canon here we mean "a collection of scriptures (whether oral or written), which gives certain authority to those texts included in it."[90] The authority in them is well reflected in the fact that its content is *buddhavacana* or 'Buddha Word'[91].

As is well known, the PCan is an exceptional group of texts for several reasons. Perhaps two of the most relevant ones, are its antiquity and orality.[92] However, scholars assume that while portions of this collection can probably be traced farther back in time, in the form that we have now it was probably closed near the 6th or 7th

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[90] Norman, p. 131.

[91] v. Hinuber, p. 7.

[92] Geiger, p. 24-25: "The Buddhist canon belongs to the class of anonymous literature. It has not been shaped by one single author, but it has been growing over a long period of time. (…) The second important fact is that this literature has been handed down orally for a considerable time."

centuries.[93]

All these elements also suggest that the group of texts or corpus that forms this canon cannot be so easily taken individually: some if not most of them were probably developed from smaller units, in a process of high interaction.[94] Thus an important amount of intertextuality between them must be assumed. As such, they are interdependent parts that work as a bigger unit.[95] This particular fact, however, contrasts heavily with "the absence of any theory suiting the needs of studying and describing Pāli literature."[96]

In other words, we are forced to limit what we can say of the particularities of any text of this corpus, because we know fairly little of the formulas by which they have been shaped,[97] and we seem to lack any information about *the actual use made of them.*[98] And to make matters worse, scholars like Schopen have been consistently

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[93] Schopen, 1985 p. 24: "We know (…) that the Pāli Canon as we have it—and it is generally conceded to be our oldest source—cannot be taken back further than the last quarter of the first century B.C.E, the date of the Aluvihāra redaction, the earliest redaction that we can have some knowledge of, and that—for a critical history—it can serve, at the very most, only as a source for the Buddhism of this period. But we also know that even this is problematic since, as Malalasekera has pointed out: "…how far the Tipitaka and its commentary reduced to writing at Aluvihāra resembled them as they have come down to us now, no one can say." In fact, it is not until the time of the commentaries of Buddhaghosa, Dhammapāla, and others—that is to say, the fifth to sixth centuries C.E.—that we know anything definite about the actual contents of this canon."

[94] See Black, Brian and Jonathan Green. "The Character of 'Character' in Early South Asian Religious Narratives: An Introductory Essay" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79.1 Mar 2011:6-32. Oxford University Press. 11 Dec 2013.

[95] As a narrative system.

[96] v. Hinuber, p. 1.

[97] Geiger, p. 25.

[98] Geiger, p. 30.

insisting of the methodological problems involved in dating them.[99]

Considering the lack of a specialized theory to approach them, plus our general ignorance of their structure and use, it should be considered difficult or problematic to defend with certainty the reasons or explanations for any kind of perceived uniqueness of any text inside the corpus, without a clearer understanding of the broad system in which they are found.

It is in this dangerous context that Gethin chooses to use myth as a conceptual category to go beyond these problems and to say something about the MSud purposes.

Second, and perhaps more important for us, the author's starting question necessarily marks a distinction between the MSud and other texts inside this corpus, particularly in relation to the rest of the DN which, according to him, is apparently less mythical. This logically implies that myth is 'something' corresponding to or particular of some of these texts, and not of all, or in the very least that myth manifests in different grades or levels in the different texts of the DN. Of course in this we have to trust the author, since his article does not describe in similar terms any other scripture of the DN beside the MSud.[100]

However, even though our author has chosen to start and center the analysis of the text in this 'a-priori' assumption, he never makes any effort to explain properly

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[99] Schopen, 1985, p. 27.
[100] But in an earlier article, Gethin talks in similar terms of the Aggañña sutta, so we will use this to complement his argument.

how he achieved this distinction between texts.[101]

Besides recognizing great difficulty in identifying myth from non-myth, the author tries to avoid the issue by changing the concept of *myth* for that of *mythic qualities*.[102] For the author, these 'mythic qualities' seem to correspond to a very broad and general category in which he would include different dimensions, like language, content, and structure. Nonetheless, in the way Gethin seems to be applying it, it would mainly involve properties or elements whose presence lends narrative the function of myth.[103] In any case, this conceptual modification does not satisfy the need for a definition.

The author's definition of myth may appear confusing at this point. Nonetheless, he is working with a definition of myth, and before we can continue we should re-construct what this definition involves.

Gethin seems initially inclined to the notion of myth as 'meaning beyond'

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[101] Gethin, 2006, p. 68: "Admittedly identifying precisely what we might want to categorize as 'mythic' is problematic; in practice nearly any narrative that is suggestive of a serious underlying meaning beyond its mere recounting of events or telling of a story might have to be considered as possessing mythic qualities; and in that case, one might argue that all the narrative portions of the Pāli Nikayas have a mythic dimension. Nevertheless, some narratives stand out more obviously as mythic than others. I would suggest that ten or eleven of the thirty-four *suttas* of the Dhīga Nikāya are essentially mythic in content."

[102] Another variant of this euphemistic concept is 'mythical elements.' See King, Winston L. "Myth in Buddhism: Essential or Peripheral?" *Journal of Bible and Religion*. Vol. 29, No. 3 (Jul, 1961), 211-218. Print.

[103] For a greater detail of what the author exactly identifies as mythic qualities in a text the reader must trace the quotation to Waldschmidt, E. Die Überlieferung vom Lebensende des Buddha: eine vergleichende Analyse des Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra und seiner Textentsprechungen. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1944–48. The work of Waldshmidt, however, does not offer much more in terms of a definition of myth.

(perhaps better understood as *surplus of meaning* or *metaphor*), when he suggests that myth could be understood as *a narrative suggestive of serious underlying meaning beyond a mere recounting of events or telling of a story*. (Gethin 2006 68)

Gethin here distinguishes between two types of narratives: on the one hand, narratives that *merely* 'recount events' or 'tell a story' and on the other hand those narratives with a surplus, a *meaning beyond*. In other words, a narrative would be mythic if it was suggestive of an underlying meaning going beyond the modes or contents of history or fiction. At the same time while fiction and history are distinguished, they both can carry *meaning beyond*, and thus be mythical. Thus it follows that this first definition of myth does not appear to be necessarily opposed to history, or particularly identified with fiction.

But Gethin also realizes that if a myth is defined as any narrative which 'asks' to be interpreted beyond, then almost anything in the Pāli Nikayas *could* be considered mythic. And yet, even though he accepts that such a classification would make almost all narratives of the canon deserver of the status of mythical, he still stubbornly insists that ten or eleven are more strongly so than others.

What exactly happened here? This, as well as the method that supports his final reasons for considering those ten or so narratives as '*more obviously*' mythic, are left for the readers to guess. Furthermore, Gethin does not even give the names of those

other ten or eleven suttas that according to him should be considered mythic, thus we cannot use them or compare them with the MSud.[104]

Apparently, Gethin is moving rather ambiguously between two different definitions of myth: the SDM, in which myth is identified as that narrative which has less suggestion of *history* (historical probability) or *truth* (philosophical doctrine), and a more subjective definition, in which myth is merely a quality or qualities manifested in additional meaning present in any narrative (thus not necessarily opposed to *history* or *truth*). In the first case myth it is a type of narrative. In the second case, it is a quality or property of some narratives.

Referring to the mythic qualities of the MSud for example, he later will simply affirm that "there is nothing here that the modern mind would be tempted to read as history," (Gethin 2006 63) thus referring to a definition of myth as opposed to history. The author's basic understanding of myth is clearly operating under the old assumption that myth is *opposed to historical truth* (SDM). The real determinant for myth would not be *meaning beyond* history, as he has initially affirmed, but lack of history. Thus, there is obviously a conflict of definitions.

But it may not need to be so contradictory after all. The impasse may be corrected; the idea that myth is meaning beyond history/story juxtaposed to his

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[104] But we assume at least that one is the Aggañña sutta.

previous opinion that myth is simply distinct from history could be harmonized by understanding that 'meaning beyond' does not signify meaning behind history/story. Gethin then would be suggesting that 'mythic' corresponds to that meaning present in those narratives which cannot be *only accounted for* as history/story. In other words, those narratives which appear strange or different from the perspective of history and fiction would need special explanation.

But we may be doing too big a favor by trying to harmonize these contradictory perspectives. It is safer to assume that, since Gethin lacks proper theoretical tools for myth analysis, he is just forced, like others, to follow a SDM. Be as it may, it is impossible to not notice the lack of clarity when it comes to Gethin's concept of myth.

4.3 Functional interpretation of myth

Then how can we know when a text goes beyond events and story, or when does it really have a *meaning beyond*? In other words, when is a text mythical? In the context of the PCan, Gethin's argument naturally carries the implication that mythical properties, characteristics, or qualities, make a particular text to stand at odds with other non-mythical texts.

This, we believe, is exactly the case he wants to make for the MSud. The MSud, as a mythic text, is identified as an odd exception that demands a special kind of

explanation for this exceptionality. Thus we are in a circle: a text demands a special explanation because it is myth, and it is myth because it cannot be explained by a non-mythical explanation.

Two things should be said in relation to this. The first is that by now it becomes clear that Gethin is working based on the traditional assumption that the PCan is predominantly non-mythical (by TrV). Second, the inclusion of a text like the MSud, certainly *more* mythical for him, must be warranted by a special reason. From there, it is just one short step to the search of an explanation for these mythic properties 'out of the text', simply because there is no proper place or proper function for a mythical text inside the PCan. The concept of myth is then invoked post-facto. It is not that we identify or classify through the concept of myth. Instead it is merely a naming. Thus, a particular interpretation is invoking the SDM.

The author's initial purpose then, is to move in the direction of an explanation of the 'mythic qualities' in the MSud. At the center is the question of the external function of myth in a particular text. We will refer to this kind of inquiry as a *functional interpretation of myth*; in other words, an interpretation of the external, 'out of the text' purpose or finality of a myth.

4.4 Methodology and myth

Gethin gives a very thoughtful explanation of the reasons why he thinks myth and narrative have until recently been avoided as a direct topic of investigation by researchers of the Pāli canon.[105]

We believe that Gethin's portrayal of the reasons for an initial disregard of the mythical in favor of the 'historical' in the scholarly community is very accurate. But for us it represents just a partial account because it fails to explain the problem of TrV of myth expressed in the resulting method (i.e. the trimming away of myth).

We have to ask us why myth should be opposed to history; why myth is opposed, for example, to "those portions concerned directly and explicitly with the classic teachings." (Gethin 2006 64) Why myth cannot be part of that so called 'classic teaching'?

One could even argue that things moved in the opposite direction: the emphasis on the search for what the Buddha really taught was at least in part the result of a cultural predisposition against myth.[106] As we will see later, myth has been used as

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[105] Gethin 2006, p. 64-65: "The scholarship concerned with the Pāli Nikāyas and early Buddhist thought has paid rather less attention to the mythic and narrative portions of early Buddhist literature than it has to, say, those portions concerned directly and explicitly with the classic teachings (…). The reasons for this no doubt go back in part to a feeling that knowledge of what the historical Buddha really taught was a possibility. (…) The methods and motivations of the early scholars of the Pāli canon led them to believe that if they could trim away the mythic and fantastic from the texts, they would be left with the historical core of the Buddha's life and teachings. This resulted in an emphasis on those portions of the canon which show the Buddha to have been a practical teacher of ethics, moral training, and common sense — those portions which show him as human rather than divine or superhuman."

[106] See how well this fit with Almond's description of the Western ideological appropriation of Buddhism.

perhaps the fundamental mark of what the Buddha couldn't have taught. Thus, the predisposition against myth is not the result of a historical search, but more like the catalyst of such a search.

The problem here has much more to do with theoretical assumptions rather than practical concerns. And the assumption working here is that *myth is un-historical*; *myth is basically opposed to truth*. And thus narrative has to be peeled of it to show its muddled value.

It is interesting to note that, in an earlier article,[107] Gethin's intuition in this respect appears formulated in a different manner.[108] But even here Gethin insists in justifying the value of cosmology in relation to doctrine. Thus, in that article Gethin is subsuming and transforming myth (in this case in the form of cosmology) into something else.

At the same time, the importance of the term 'historical Buddha' appearing in this context cannot be overlooked. It points out in a similar direction, but to an issue that goes far beyond the boundaries of Buddhist studies, and thus is more properly located as part of the scope of the broader field of Philology. 'Historical Buddha' here

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[107] Gethin, Rupert. "Cosmology and Meditation: From the Aggañña-Sutta to the Mahāyāna." *History of Religions* 36.3 (1997): 183-217.

[108] Gethin 1997, p. 186: "The overall paucity of scholarly materials dealing with Buddhist cosmology would seem to reflect a reluctance on the part of modern scholarship to treat this dimension of Buddhist thought as having any *serious* bearing on those fundamental Buddhist teachings with which we are so familiar: the four noble truths, the eightfold path, no-self, dependent arising, and so on."

not only refers to the real figure of the Buddha, and thus 'historical truth' again, but it also links the issue with the similar but older problem in Biblical criticism: the so called quest for the 'Historical Jesus,' another proof perhaps that ideological influences were at work.

The search for historicity in Buddhism against myth must be contextualized in the general background of Colonialism (as we see in the previous chapter). To put it here in a different way, when scholars where pursuing historical truth de-valuating myth in Buddhism, they were at the same time bringing all the repertoire of assumptions of the Western tradition about the opposition of myth vs. historicity and truth, of that true *in* religion (historical fact) vs. that false *in* religion (myth). Approaches to myth in Buddhism where obviously not starting from an *ex nihilo*.

4.5 The replacement of myth

Our author refers to what he sees as faulty a-priory assumptions when it comes to understanding the 'mythical' portions of the canon. As an example, he presents a brief criticism of an article by Richard Gombrich,[109] where myth in the Aggañña Sutta (ASu) is explained as joke, due to its use of *nirukti* or etymology. Thus according to Gombrich, the sutta in question should e understood as a parody of Brahmanical ideas

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[109] Gombrich, Richard. "The Buddha's Book of Genesis?" *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35 (1992): 159.–78. Print.

and methods rather than a literal account of how the world and society came into being.

According to Gethin this method of explanation allows Gombrich to accept (we could perhaps better say 'replace') its myth as something the Buddha could have taught; but that with the passage of time the tradition could not understand anymore, and ended taking up literally. However, for Gethin this method presents a serious problem, which he expresses in the following terms:

> (…) it is obvious from certain portions of the Pāli Nikāyas that the Buddha was 'a reasonable sort of chap.', therefore he couldn't possibly have meant all that obviously unreasonable stuff about beings falling from higher heavenly realms and the evolution of the four classes literally. (…) There is an obvious danger of circularity here: we know that the Buddha didn't teach implausible myths because in the parts of the Nikāyas that present his genuine teachings there are no implausible myths; when we come across an implausible myth it must therefore not belong to his

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genuine teachings - unless, of course, it is just a joke.

(Gethin 2006 66)

We believe that what Gethin has named the '*danger of circularity*' could be a central term for dismantling wrong assumptions in relation to myth. However, we propose that Gethin has not pursued the critical implications of this idea far enough.

For Gethin, the danger of circularity refers to the scholarly wrong method of valuation of the suttas, by which the awkwardness and absurdity of mythical elements present in them (from a modern perspective) become evidence for either a possible corruption of the original 'pure' text, or alternatively for its probable *un-authenticity*, because the Buddha's teaching is not supposed to be awkward and absurd. Thus, scholars are forced to justify and explain these mythical elements in some alternative way: Gombrich, for example, as jokes.

While Gethin is in this argument extremely perceptive and accurate, his treatment of Gombrich here seems a little unfair. He bases his criticism in a 1992 article, ignoring a previous 1990 article titled "Recovering the Buddha's Message" where Gombrich, although by different reasons, was precisely very critical of methods related with stratifying the suttas based on inconsistencies and

incoherencies.[110]

In fact, Gombrich's argument is opposed to scholars' standard view that inconsistencies and incoherencies in Buddhist texts can easily be considered later developments and thus corruptions. For Gombrich is the other way around; inconsistencies in texts might have a better chance of been correct based on the principle of textual criticism called "(*lectio*) *difficilior potior*."(Gombrich 1990 9) Using this principle, he suggests that incoherence and inconsistencies may have a better chance of going back to the time of Buddha.

Gombrich's argument is indeed much more refined, based on a detailed textual analysis of etymologies and probable context. In "Cosmology and Meditation" Gethin recognizes that much:[111]

Thus for Gombrich, the recovering of the cultural context is an important task that allows us "to see the Buddha's message in systematic opposition to beliefs and

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[110] Gombrich 1992, p. 8: "I turn now to consider the style of argument that attempts to discern chronological layers in the texts by finding inconsistencies in them. (…) My wish is merely to expose what I see as faulty argumentation. (…) The method of analyzing Buddhist arguments with a view to establishing their coherence and development is I think largely inherited from the late Professor Frauwallner. (…) we must remember that most of that work was applied to philosophical texts which were undoubtedly written and read. I must begin my criticism by reiterating in the strongest terms that the kind of analysis which can dissect a *written* philosophical tradition is inappropriate for oral materials."

[111] Gethin 1997, p. 145: "As Gombrich so rightly says, if we want to discover the original meaning of the Buddha's discourses we need to understand the intellectual and cultural pre-suppositions shared by the Buddha and his audience. While in absolute terms this is an impossible task, since we can never entirely escape our own intellectual and cultural presuppositions and be reborn in the world of the Buddha -at least in the short term- we can still surely make some progress in trying to rediscover that world."

practices of his day, especially those of the educated class who inevitably constituted most of his audience and following." (Gombrich 1990 20) His method is somehow comparative, since "the Buddha's message is to be understood in opposition to the other articulated ideologies of his day." (Gombrich 1990 12)

It is true that, nonetheless, Gombrich wants to explain the presence of the mythical[112] in the suttas as Gethin affirms, by finding a contextual justification for them (be it humor, parody, etc.), and thus cancel their apparent awkwardness and absurdity. It is also true that perhaps Gombrich is wrong in his historical insistence on the 'Buddha's message'. We agree with Gethin in this.

But what Gethin fails to realize is that he is somehow pursuing a similar goal as Gombrich with his theory of meditation-aid or proto-visualizations. Both authors are trying to rescue myth from a de-valuation based on meaninglessness of text, by recovering a probable lost function for it. While both authors are somehow preoccupied with the problem of how to re-valuate myth, de-mythologization is the natural result of their solutions: for Gombrich some myths become meaningful when they are no longer understood as a myth, but as something else (e.g. a contextual joke, a parody), while similarly for Gethin a myth becomes meaningful if it acquires an external (out-of-text) function.

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[112] Again understood as narratives in position of oddness or incoherence in contrast with other narratives.

In a sense, both authors represent a similar tradition. Their difference is their interpretative direction: inside or outside the world of the text. Gombrich is looking for the lost meanings of the text by making it 'dialogue' with other contemporary texts, thus looking for etymological clues inside text(s) that could accuse this relation. A joke is still something embedded on the narrative after all.

Gethin instead, is trying to answer "what did those who composed it and listened to it understand by it?" (Gethin 2006 64) This question still remains in the field of interest of Philology, but the way Gethin relates it to a function involving some kind of action beyond that purely textual, makes it somehow more ambitious, perhaps pushing the limits of Philology. Gethin, of course, is also looking for clues inside the text, but I find his enterprise more difficult and thus necessarily more speculative. That, however, is not the same as to affirm that Gombrich is closer to the 'truth.'

But, in terms of interpretation and meaning, it seems that Gombrich is still closer to a search for meaning inside the text (*interpretatio*), while Gethin is displacing his argument beyond the text itself, to a social context of use. How possible is this by maintaining himself firmly on the grounds of Philology, we are not sure. This is why he, in contrast to Gombrich, perhaps requires the concept of myth.

In other words, while both authors are following a functional interpretation of narrative, only Gombrich is still concerned with textual meaning properly speaking,

for his 'use' or function is still textual.

However, for us both authors are wrong in exclusively searching for a value of myth out of myth, or for valuating myth only in a way in which myth can no longer be a myth. There is nothing wrong with a functional interpretation, as long as that interpretation does not hang on the assumption that myth has no other value outside function. Both authors are finally transforming myth into something else. For this transformation, Gombrich does not require the concept of myth. The same cannot be said of Gethin: he needs it to sustain his argument, yet he lacks the proper methodological tools.

Evidently, Gethin was hoping that he was escaping the difficulties that, according to him, scholars like Gombrich face un-successfully. In my opinion, while doing so Gethin does not realize how he has moved away from the problem of meaning *in* text.

4.6 The Danger of Circularity

Gethin's problems to avoid some of the problems that he had pointed out may have something to do with his insufficient theory regarding a definition of myth. This is a problem that can hardly be avoided, no matter how difficult and unrewarding it appears at the light of previous efforts. Indeed, Gethin's lack of a clear and straightforward definition of myth in relation to narrative stops him from realizing the

full extent of the danger of circularity; the problem is not so much in *confirming* that

myth is alien to Buddhism by re-valuating it into something else (be it a corruption, a

joke, or as Gethin himself do, a proto-visualization), but in the consensual and a-priori

de-valuation of myth, previous to any analysis.

The danger of circularity goes beyond the scholarly play of stratification and

layering of suttas, beyond any decision of what the Buddha might or might not have

possibly said, and beyond the reconstruction of a logic by which what appears

awkward and absurd might be saved as coherent and consistent.

The problem starts (even before any analysis) with our conception of myth itself,

because we use wrong assumptions to actually *choose or select* that which is myth

from that which is not. We select all those textual portions of the scriptures that

appear awkward, absurd, or illogical (not historically probable) as myth. Then we

affirm that myth is that which we have distinguished, yet we never explain why myth

must indeed be that awkward, absurd, or illogical. We artificially complete the circle:

myth becomes a basket for the odd.

In that way, even in a work where apparently there is no definition of myth, a

concept of myth is already operating (SDM). And while it may be true that there is no

precise consensus about what exactly is myth, there seems to be a suspicious

consensus about what myth actually is not: *myth is not truth* (TrV). Thus, myth has a

consensual definition, even though is a negative one, by opposition. Myth must be incoherent and inconsistent, awkward and illogical, because it opposes truth.

Both authors, Gethin as well as Gombrich, start from the same premise, and that's why their respective thesis are at the same time alternative forms of valuation for 'something' which cannot have value otherwise. Strangely enough, it was perhaps Gombrich who was nearer in reaching a similar conclusion when he reminds us that "coherence in these matters is largely in the eye of the beholder." (Gombrich 1990 11) Indeed, modern coherence has been the key until now for understanding myth.

This is the problem then; awkwardness, incoherence, these are all subjective categories. How can we understand myth in particular religious text when our definition is already prescriptive? How can we interpret myth correctly, when we already 'expect' it to be incoherent and meaningless as myth?

When we start from myth as not truth, we start from an a priori de-valuation. This de-valuation forces us to somehow reverse this same process. Otherwise, analysis would be ludicrous: why bother to analyze something worthless from a truth perspective? Somehow value must be re-covered. Then, alternative forms of valuation appear for myth, be it as proto meditation, as textual jokes, or as evidence for historical developments. This is exactly where the field finds itself today. Myth is material for something else.

The implied question is in reality this: if myth cannot be truth, then what else can it be? We affirm that this is the real 'danger of circularity.'

4.7 Mythical Narrative of the Buddhist Path (MNBP)

Gethin's tries to support his hypothesis of myth as proto-visualization bringing forward the narrative contents of the sutta (in a very similar method to the one he used with the ASu in "Cosmology and Meditation"). But this move could be considered problematic.

For example, his suggestion that the text can be understood as a *mythical narrative of the Buddhist path* (MNBP) could point in the opposite direction of a function of visualization, towards a narrative interpretation, and it does not fit well with his argument for the uniqueness of the position of myth in the MSud. We will explain this point.

By MNBP Gethin understands a metaphor of the ideal Buddhist practice: in the narrative, one can see actions which correspond orderly to dāna and sīla followed by bhāvanā (consisting of the practice of samādhi, or samatha, and paññā or vipassanā). Thus the mythical narrative of the Buddhist path is a narrative of the stages a Buddhist practitioner must go through.

In his previous article on cosmology, Gethin affirms that the "classic Nikāya

account of the stages of the Buddhist path is found repeated in various suttas of the sīlakkhandha-vagga of the Dhīga Nikāya, and also, with slight variations, in several suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya."[113] Thus we can conclude that it is a repeated motif in the Nikāyas.

For Gethin the MNBP is another way for bypassing the problem of the value of myth. In "Cosmology and Meditation" Gethin tried to justify the double presence of cosmology and the MNBP by arguing that they converged on jhāna,[114] Thus, in ASu Gethin wants to see the contraction of a world-system as a metaphor or parallel of a meditator's progress through the successive dhyānas. For Gethin this takes the form of an assimilation of an internal world to an external world. Thus, cosmology is reduced to psychology.

But, while in principle it could be argued that cosmology and myth are close, it seems far easier to reduce cosmology as a phenomena to mere doctrine, and thus to evaluate it as metaphor of a MNBP. In the case of the MSud, Gethin wants to suggest that it is "basically a narrative of a journey out of this world." (Gethin 2006 88) And thus of renunciation, and thus again subsume myth to a metaphor of doctrine. But we doubt that the procedure can entirely explain the myth in the MSud.

But there is another problem in relation to the concept of myth and this solution.

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[113] Gethin 1997, p. 201.
[114] Gethin 1997, p. 202.

The concept of a MNBP could contradict the idea that the MSud works in the manner of visualization. Gethin's starting argument is that the MSud is special due to its mythical properties, and needs to be somehow explained in a special way. But when Gethin suggests that the MSud is a MNBP he is indirectly contradicting the very same idea.

We cannot affirm of the MSud both things, because they are contradictory; we cannot say that the MSud is saying the same, in a similar way, than other suttas, while at the same time defend its uniqueness, strangeness, justifying the giving of it of a special function.

For, if the presence of the metaphor of MNBP in the sutta is clearly pointing, like in other suttas of the DN, to a didactic function (stages to follow) why there is still a need to posit an exceptional function like visualization for the MSud? Independent of whether the MSud is myth or not, it would seem to communicate the same as other suttas. Where has its strangeness gone then?

At the same time, the schema of Gethin does not explain properly the interrelation between the character of the Buddha and that of the king. The king is after all the Buddha in his previous life. That means that he is, even in that past life, in a special position. In that sense, the entire text could not be only a simple MNBP, because its main character is the Buddha. The title is of the sutta itself is pointing to

this fact. The king is not merely a good meditator, but is the greatest ever. That is why

he is in the position of the perfect king. The text is then dealing with two planes at the

same time, not only with one (MNBP).

4.8 Speculations and philological arguments

Gethin's argument then rests in the consideration of the MSud as an anomaly.

What about his Philological arguments? Are they strong in that respect, to make the

concept of myth unnecessary for his hypothesis?

There are surprisingly not many. Comparisons with later images in texts are

suggestive, but not particular supportive of the argument. The rest of the Philological

argument lays on the word s '*māpeti*' and '*oloketi.*' The word '*māpeti*' perhaps

support more the idea of visualization, but the problem is that the context in which it

is used somehow also fits the idea of "to cause to appear by supernatural power."[115]

The way the Palace of Righteousness appears is completely supernatural. The text

may be emphasizing the over-powers of the king. Thus this goes against the need to

posit visualization or MNBP. It does not need to be referring to visualization.

The case of '*oloketi*' is less significative in terms of meaning. It has common

occurrences with their normal meaning 'to see,' 'to look at,' 'to behold,' 'to regard,'

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[115] We will refer in our next chapter to the supernatural context.

'to examine,' etc.[116] Indeed, Gethin is perhaps pushing the argument too far when he affirms that '*māpeti*' means '(mentally) create' and '*oloketi*' 'surveying.' So again, while the argument is seductive, the philological evidence is not particularly strong.

Much more interesting is the context in which the verb '*oloketi*' appears in the commentary of the MSud. But we will return to this at the end of the next chapter.

4.9 How especially mythical is the Mahāsudassana Sutta?

We have shown that Gethin's definition of myth has problems. Is our guess that the author has been pushed towards them due to the lack of a strong theoretical foundation in a definition of myth, in the disciplines of Buddhist studies and Philology. We believe we have also proved that these problems are related with the question of TrV.

The real influence and impact of these problems over the hypothesis of his work remains a question. But this is beyond the purpose of our work and we will have to leave the question open. There are, however, a couple of things we can say about it.

An analysis born in the context of a lack of a proper definition of myth replaced

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[116]See for example Pali Critical Dictionary (begun by v. Trenckner, K. R. Norman ed.). Vol.II, Fascicle 17. Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1990, p. 775. Childers, Robert Caesar. Dictionary of The Pali Language. Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 1976, p. 300. Cone, Margaret. A Dictionary of Pali, Part I. Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 2001, p. 589-590.

by an outdated model of myth against truth, together with the lack of deep narrative analysis of the relation of the suttas, does not appear as a promising way out of speculation. The combination can only invite speculations that ought to remain tentatively. But a speculation can be made without calling in the concept of myth.

The biggest problem of Gethin's argument is not that it may be wrong. In fact, Gethin may be on the right track. But the problem is how this forces a type of understanding of myth that leaves out many other narrative phenomena.

The geniality of Gethin's article remains in the provocative and stimulating nature of his hypothesis, in the outrageously courageous proposal of it without definite proofs, and in some well worked secondary and theoretical points, more than in a certain argument.

For us the biggest problem remains in how can we distinguish a narrative or its properties as a myth, when we do not know '*what is myth*.' The whole article of Gethin depends on the case of uniqueness that he tries to build for the MSud. But it is exactly this point that remains contested. In fact, in the light of the article's deficiencies, it remains probable that the MSud sutta is in the end not as odd or extraordinary in comparison to other suttas of the Dhīga Nikāya.

Again, the problem is whether, after the article, we know more or less about myth., and what it is doing in here. The answer seems to be on the negative.

Chapter V: Outline for a new definition of myth

5.1 Towards a new definition of myth

After what has been said we ought to decide between two options: either we abandon or avoid the use of the concept of myth, or we somehow try to make a new definition of myth avoiding the problems that we have pointed out.

The first option seems safer. This is the traditional position that Buddhist studies has preferred.[117] In appearance, there is not really a 'need' to talk about myth, especially when we remain in the field of 'idealized' Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist philosophy. [118] There the concept is not necessary because myth simply *should* not be there, in the first place. If there appear phenomena that could be identified as myth, it is removed as not original. This is the *danger of circularity* that we already discussed.

Such a position is naturally limiting and restrictive; it does not give importance to narrative phenomena in the texts beyond doctrine and philosophy. In particular, it makes harder the understanding of narrative mechanisms of Buddhist literature in connection with religion and belief, etc.

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[117] This is the method followed by Gombrich, for example, when analyzing the Aggañña Sutta. He replaces the category of myth by joke or parody. See Gombrich, Richard "The Buddha.'s Book of Genesis?" *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35: 159.–78. 1992.
[118] That is, a Buddhism harmonized according to Western rational modern expectations.

The second option is more risky, but perhaps more promising for the future of the discipline. The careful development of a theory of myth for Buddhist studies (compatible with Philology) could provide many benefits, and perhaps could even help stop the proliferation of theories originating in other disciplines. However, such an enterprise must be oriented to narrative theory, because myth is narrative, and not towards history, philosophy, or doctrine.

As was said at the very beginning, it remains beyond the scope of this work to give a new full-fledged definition of myth. Our main purpose was to unveil what we believe are the main problems in the study of myth in Buddhist studies: the construction of definitions of myth based on interpretations, in a priori SDM, and in TrV.

We have shown thus the difficulties and obstacles for the success of such an enterprise. We firmly believe that once the SDM is removed as set of a-priori assumptions (beyond the consideration of myth as narrative), and at the same time the construction of new definitions remain away from any form of TrV, and as long as the question of *what is myth* is repositioned to the center of the discussions for theories of myth, better and more effective definitions of myth will be, indeed, possible.

But, following our original propaeudetic intention, we believe that the task we set at the beginning would appear theoretically weak if we did not to show how this

could be done through a theoretical model. Thus, we will dedicate our efforts in this section to build an example model, and outline, so to speak, of how this could be achieved. Thus, we hope this chapter could be used as a provisory definition that can suggest a safer direction for future definitions of myth.

In a similar manner, at the end of this chapter we will return to the problem of the MSud and the question raised by Ruper Gethin, with this model, to corroborate whether anything new can be learned from it.

5.2 Myth as a narrative system

We may start by asking ourselves, against Robert Segal[119] why myth cannot be studied *in itself*. Perhaps we should approach the problem of a definition of myth just in such a manner. That is, instead of starting from other objects or phenomena, which naturally de-mythologize myth making it a secondary issue, a definition of myth may well start from a myth *in itself* perspective. But how can we achieve such goal?

We have often repeated that a theory of myth should first of all be able to answer the question of *what is myth*. But this question seems to be often confused with other questions: *what is the meaning of myth? What is the function of myth?* Thus, it could be perhaps useful to explain what kind of questions a definition of myth should not

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[119] See Segal, p.3.

pursue to answer.

First, it should not be intending answers of the origins of myth, whether in historical, psychological, or other terms. The question of origins inevitably takes myth away from itself, away from narrative, towards the world out of the text, and thus back into the problem of truth valuation. Also, in practical terms, the question of origins is perhaps the less grounded on evidence and the more speculative one.

Second, questions of the function, referents, or context of myth are very important for understanding myths, but secondary to what myth is. We believe that we must be extremely cautious here: taking these questions in very general, broad, and abstract terms also leads away from myth.

We are not saying that we reject such approaches. On the contrary, we understand their usefulness. But we also understand now its dangers. A pursue to answer the question of function, referents, and contexts, takes us away from myth in itself, and into history, philosophy, and the comparative method, thus making it more difficult for us to avoid traps such as the *danger of circularity*.

There is something more important that the external context of myth. A myth must always be understood in its proper particular narrative context. We will call this the interior textual context: a myth is encased, incarnated, in a particular textual body

(often a text or a group of texts), forming as such a system[120]

Then, our questions should be of relational character, and these relational questions should involve internal phenomena and *dynamics* or movements, instead of external (out-of-the-text) relations. This is what we mean by myth for itself.

In a similar way it may be wise to abandon the obsession with finding definitions of myth in the form of *monothetic classes*.[121] In other words, abandon the struggle to find a definition of myth which will, with its entire list of attributes or characteristics, fit every single form of the manifestation of myth. Instead, we should find a polythetic class of definition, strongly based on the careful observation of the phenomena we deem related with myth, in its particular and concrete manifestations.

Thus we are suggesting a start not from comparisons between different mythologies, but on the contrary, from specific historical traditions. In that sense, perhaps, we should abandon here the talk about Buddhist myth, until we have a clearer picture of the manifestation of its myths in its divergent historical and cultural traditions. Thus we should talk instead of myth in the DN, or myth in the MSud.

Now, we could put our questions in the following manner: First, and in this particular context, what kind of narrative is a myth? Second, how does a myth operate,

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[120] See our comments on canon in our previous chapter.
[121] See Southwold, Martin. "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion." *Man, New Series*, Vol. 13.3 Sep (1978): 362-379.

what does a myth has to do to be a myth *in a text*.[122]

The first question could perhaps be answered by bringing forward the relationship between myth and religion: a myth is always related to narrative(s) pertaining or connected to a religion. It follows that the first qualifying element or property of myth as a narrative could be in this relationship. As a type of narrative, a myth is nothing more and nothing less than a form of religious narrative. As such it is perhaps a part or sub-group of phenomena included in the broader category of religious narrative.

The second question has to do with the precise link between myth and narrative or in other words, whether a myth corresponds in limits to narratives: is a myth *the same* as a narrative or it is something else? We will answer this question later.

Before we can continue we need to answer what is a religion. Here, we will have to use the help of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who developed a theory of religion that is broad enough to be used beyond the constraints of that particular discipline. According to Clifford Geertz a religion is first of all a "cultural system." (Geertz 1969 6) Geertz describes religion with 5 interrelated points. For him, religion is:

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[122] This is not a question of origins.

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1969 4)

We don't need to go into the details of this theory here. We don't intend to define religion but merely want to find some properties or characteristic of it that could tell us something of narratives in religion.

Now, if we accept Geertz's definition of religion as a system, then we should conclude first that religious narratives should be part of a 'narrative' sub-system of religion.

However, in the systemic theory of religion of Geertz we believe we find a similar problem to the one we found before in Ricoeur's definition of symbols (see our chapter 2). Indeed, Geertz, like Ricoeur, overemphasizes the importance and autonomy of symbols. But when we read again the points 2, 3, and 4, of his 5-point definition we feel as if Geertz was actually talking about narratives, and maybe even myths, instead of symbols, for symbols define in these terms, as we explained before,

require myths.

His definition of symbols also appears too abstract when he affirms for example that "meanings can only be 'stored' in symbols" (Geertz 1973 127) or when he explains that religion as a cultural system is made of "a cluster of religious symbols, woven into some sort of ordered whole" (Geertz 1973 129) How can symbols store meaning? What is the logic and coherence of a cluster of religious symbols? Perhaps that ordered whole could somehow correspond to narrative and myth?

The question is, like with Ricoeur, if symbols can establish themselves autonomously, and if it is possible for them to spread, by themselves, 'meaning without' the context of myths; if they can actually spread meaning without the de-codifying system of myths. It is our opinion that this view is wrong because symbols depend on, hang on so to speak, from a system of narratives and thus myths.

In any case, the clue to the relation between religion and narrative (which at this point corresponds to myth) is given by Geertz's theory in point 2, 3, 4, and 5. It is, indeed, a theory of religious operation. Religion formulates, establishes, clothes, etc. In other words, it is a functional theory of religion, but one that remains grounded on the narrative aspects of religion.

In any case, we should remain away from points 4 and 5, because of their subjectivity and their tendencies of valuation ('clothing,' 'factuality,' 'seem realistic').

Point 2 is too strong, and is reductionistic, so we will remain away from it too. We do this because we have to avoid TrV; we already know that any kind of inclination towards function leads towards TrV.

Point 1 should also be changed, following our criticism of Ricoeur's theory of symbols, to 'a system of narrative(s).' Thus, point number 2 is answering the question for the relationship between religion and narrative(s).

(1) a system of religious narratives or myths (one or more) which[123]

(2) formulate conceptions of a general order of existence.

By "formulate conceptions of general order of existence" we will understand 'direction' towards certain kind of actions, preferences, and inclinations in relation to a way of life or certain forms of perspectives in the manner of understanding the world and men position in it. In other words religion, in relation to narrative, is a system that describes or explain the world and at the same time re-positions men in it.

Then to the question of "how religion formulates conceptions of a general order of existence" the answer could come naturally: by a narrative system. Without

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[123] Here we are just assuming that religious narratives and myths are equivalent, or the same thing, but we will return to this point.

religious narratives, religion would not be able to formulate conceptions of a general order of existence. Then, a religious system needs for its survival the sub-system of religious narrative(s).

What are the mechanisms by which religious narrative formulates these conceptions? We suspect that this has to do with myth properly. The relation between myth and the world of ideology have often been pointed out by scholars of myth, although in rather cryptic and un-precise words.[124]

Now, before we can continue to answer this question, it is pertinent to define further the boundaries of myth. We have to return to our second question of whether a religious narrative corresponds exactly to myth. Is any religious narrative a myth? Here is time to go to the narrative phenomena itself.

When we observe Buddhist narratives in the DN we realize that a myth cannot be equivalent to a narrative. An example will be enough: the framing of the MSud.[125] It is clear that the MSud is a narrative inside a narrative. In that case, it is impossible to defend that, if the tale of the king Sudasanna is a myth, then the framing is also part of

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[124] Slochower, for example, describes myth as a '*pictorial hypothesis*' about the nature of man, and affirms that "myth addresses itself to the problem of identity, asking 'who am I?' (…), 'Where do I come from?', 'Where am I bound?', and 'What must I do now to get there?' (Slochower 15). But we have to move very carefully here, for TrV easily appears when taking about functions of myth. For a clear example, King 211: "Myth represents an actionable orientation to truth and reality; i.e., the mythical approach invites its user to participate in active personal relationships with the mythically grasped truth or value. When pertaining to one's own faith, it contains intrinsic emotional involvement and volitional potential. It is then no longer mere myth."

[125] We will return to this framing later.

that myth. The entire MSud then cannot be a myth. But then, is the entire sub-narrative of the MSud (the tale of the king's death) a myth properly speaking? '*What is myth*'? At this point we need further theoretical help.

5.3 Secular literature and myth

In *The Secular Scripture: A Study of The Structure of Romance*.[126] Northrop Frye expands on the problem of the relationship and distinction of romance and myth, and thus between secular and religious literature.

The thesis of this work is that in every human society there is a double literary tradition. One of these traditions holds the prominent place because it deals with those things that predominantly concern that society, while the other one mainly entertains (romance). The important narratives "help explain certain features in that society's religion, law, social structure, environment, history, or cosmology." He identifies this tradition with myths.

According to Frye, the more important stories are imaginative, but that is not their main characteristic. They convey something like '*special knowledge*,' what in religion is often called revelation. Hence they are normally not thought of as imaginative or even of human origin. (Frye 1976 6)

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[126] Frye, Northrop. *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*. USA: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Frye also mentions that myths stick together to form a mythology[127] impelled by this special knowledge they transmit. (Frye 1976 12) Thus mythologies are structures of belief or social concern. And according to Frye, it is the structure of myths that makes the process possible. "A mythological universe is a vision of reality in terms of human concerns and hopes and anxieties." (Frye 1976 14)

There are some important insights here. First, Frye seems to understand myths as synonymous to religious narratives. But, because of what we said before of the MSud it would be better to consider them as not corresponding to the same kind of phenomena. What give myths their distinction in contrast to other narratives would be that they are narratives units of 'special knowledge.' But then we would have to accept that there are different types of religious narratives, only some communicating 'special knowledge,' only some then would be myths.

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[127] A good example of how the content of a narrative should not be equated with myth is in the narrative of *Barlaam and Josaphat*. The narrative was originally about Buddha, yet it was transformed to suit the needs of the Christian myth. The core of the narrative (defense of asceticism) is still the same. But the myth is completely different. Frye 1976, 10: "The fact that myths stick together to form a mythology is clearly shown in an explicitly Christian story, such as the Barlaam and Josaphat romance, which comes from about the eighth century. This is said to be a Christianized version of the story of the Buddha, though there is hardly enough story for many specific parallels to emerge. Prince Josaphat is kept in seclusion by his father, who hates Christianity: the hermit Barlaam gets through to see him on the pretext that he has a precious jewel to show him. The jewel turns out to be an interminable sermon in which Barlaam sets forth the entire structure of Christian mythology from creation to last judgment, with appendices on the ascetic life, the use of images in ritual, the necessity of baptism, and the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. What makes so long a harangue possible-its plausibility is another matter-is simply the interconnection of the individual myths in the total Christian mythology: every concept or doctrine involves all others (…)."

What we want to suggest is this: myths are encased in narratives, but are not equivalents to religious narratives themselves. They would be the mechanism by which religious narrative 'formulates.'

But what are they then? Following the conception of units of 'special knowledge' we could speculate that they are more like special narrative units that carry, and only carry this 'special knowledge.' Consequently, they would be smaller than normal narratives because they have to be simple and precise to carry this 'special knowledge' (perhaps with less narrative details). But, at the same time, because this 'special knowledge' is more important than the 'normal knowledge' of other religious narratives they could gather together, across different narratives, to form bigger units pertaining to that 'special knowledge.'

To prove this we need to find a way to identify them.

5.4 Frye's *Theory of Myths*

We can find help again in Frye's insights, this time in his most influential and important work: the *Anatomy of Criticism* (AoC).[128] In it, the author presents four different methods to approach the analysis of literature. One of these methods is called '*Theory of Myths*,' which provides a model that we can modify and use to

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[128] Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957.

identify myth.

In AoC Frye pursues the idea that the structure of myths provides the basis of a typology for literature, and thus the foundation for a concept of order for literary analysis. (Frye 1957 66) Thus in AoC myth is presented as the origin-model for every form of secular literature.

Frye is only interested in presenting a typology for secular literature. Thus myth or religious literature has only a secondary theoretical importance in AoC. However, because in the AoC the Bible is constantly referenced as a common example for different mythos, the model can operate backwards also with religious literature.

Contrary to what anyone would expect by reading its title, however, this theory is not properly speaking a theory of myths, but rather a theory of the dynamics of narratives, a theory for the system of myths in secular fiction. Thus, the so called Theory of Myths is rather a systemic method for approaching literature from the perspective of myths.

The purpose of the Theory of Myth is for classification. While it was not made for religious narratives, it is in design broad enough to allow the classification of myths, and in fact Frye used it in that way for the Bible several times. Our idea is to modify it so we can use it first to locate myth in a narrative like the MSud, and thus to somehow illuminate the process of classification of Buddhist texts.

Frye's Theory of Myths starts with his considerations of the tension between the dichotomy *lifelikeness* or verisimilitude (what we sometimes call mimesis, or realism) and *stylization* (which involves structural emphasis, abstraction, and conventionalization), somehow corresponding to the content/subject and form/structure dichotomy. Thus, at the extremes of his paradigm, Frye places naturalism and myth. These are the two main forces at work in literature: the displacement of structure into human direction (content/realism) or to conventionalize content in an idealized direction (form/myth).

He explains that "in terms of narrative, myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire." (Frye 1957 136) For Frye, in myth we see the same structural principles as in realism, but while in myth they are isolated (pure), in realism they are fit into a context of plausibility. Between the two extremes of literary design, lays the whole area of romance, or literature properly speaking.

For Frye there are four types of categories of literature or generic plots that are broader than or prior to literary genres. Frye calls them *mythos* (plural *mythoi*). Thus each mythos corresponds to a different season and to a different type of literature type (spring-comedy, summer-romance, autumn-tragedy, and winter-irony).

The theory of myths is a general typological model of narratives. It is basically composed of a structure of four main divisions or parts (see below Table 3). Each of

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these four parts corresponds to a type of narrative. The system is made to represent

the movement upwards (comedy) towards idealization/desire (romance), and the

movement downwards (tragedy), towards experience/aversion (irony).

**Table 3 Frye's System of Mythos**
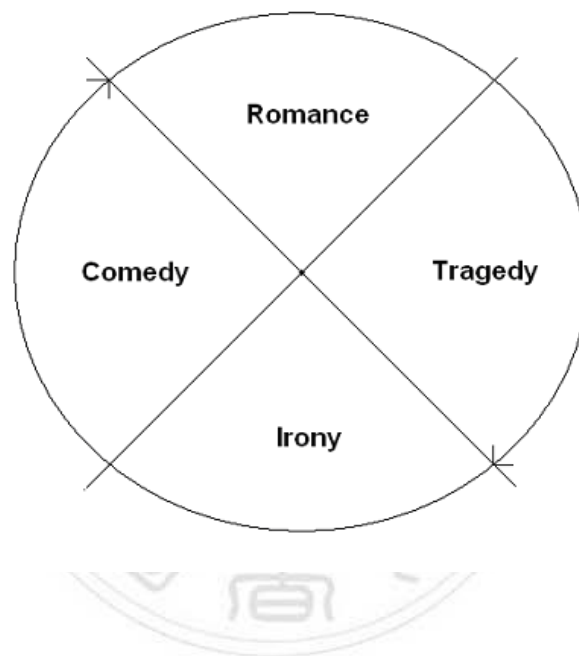
Romance is related to the sphere of desire, where the individual has greater

attributes or power than normal humans, and thus has some level of control of nature

that other men lack. Irony is related to aversion, and in it the individual finds itself

ridiculed, powerless and defenseless against the world.

Tragedy is coordinated with the movement away from desire towards aversion,

the inevitable fall of man in front of forces stronger than him, while comedy is

coordinated with the movement away from aversion towards desire, normally

representing the struggle within society between two factions –often the old and the

young- and the re-harmonization into a new ideal society.

Table 4 Stylization and Mimesis

Myth
↑
Stylization

Romance

Society | Comedy — Tragedy | Individual

Irony
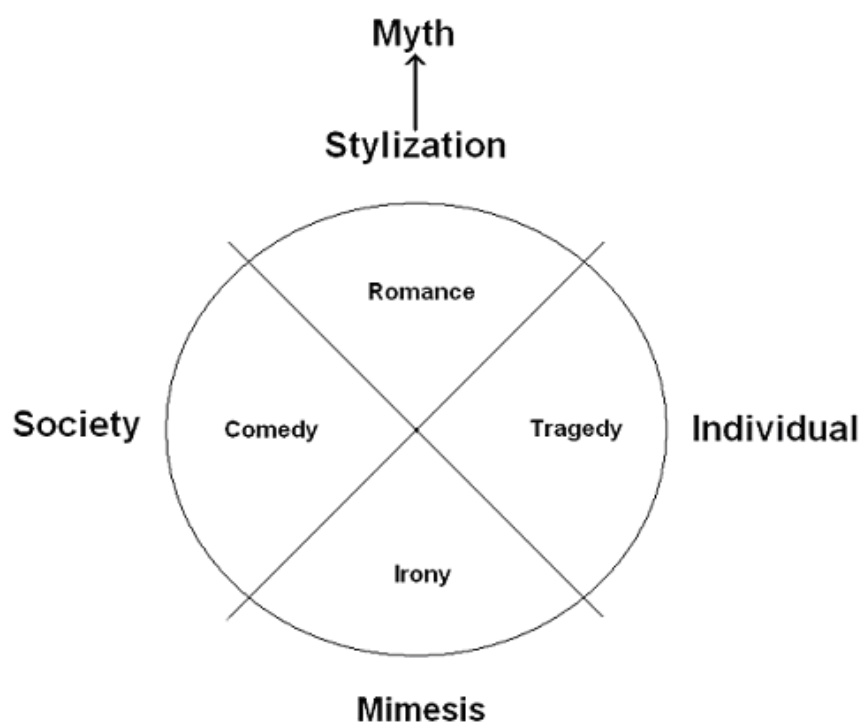
Mimesis

Frye relates the pole of desire and aversion with stylization and mimesis (see

Table 4). Thus, more stylization in a narrative would go in hand with a movement

upwards towards idealization, and a displacement towards realism implies a fall into

aversion. Myths are placed on the apex of the model, because they traditionally

possess (according to Frye) high levels of stylization, and their characters move in the

plane of absolute desire (their powers excel ours and the laws of nature).

Similarly, comedy and tragedy are connected with the pole of society and individuality respectively. Thus, if the narrative concentrates on the individual struggles the movement will be towards tragedy, and if it does on the community struggles the movement will be towards comedy (see Table 4). One has to imagine the four categories as somehow interrelated or permeable in their boundaries, and so not as clear cut definitions.

All these concepts may appear daunting and ambiguous for our purposes, and the way Frye exemplifies them is indeed often confusing. So we need to simplify this schema for our use. We will first ignore the seasonal symbolic value of the model (and its clockwise 'natural' movement). We will retain the poles of aversion (down) and desire (up), while tragedy will still mean the motion towards aversion and comedy towards desire. But obviously we will not be connecting the categories with particular forms of literature.

A criticism that we will have to face somehow is that the system of the *Theory of Myths* was created for the study of the Western literary tradition, and this could be problematic when trying to apply it, for example, to Buddhist narratives. This is true, but one should not forget that Frye's system started from the presumptions that myth is the first model of every literature, and thus it has, at least theoretically, a universal

applicability.

The first thing to notice in relation to this is the connection between myth and stylization in Frye's model. Myth appears connected with the field of desire. Obviously, Frye has in mind the absolute power of the Western God/gods to control or surpass the normal laws of nature. But the placing of myth up beyond romance (Table 4) should not be taken for granted, as it contradicts some examples where Frye places the myth of Jesus near Tragedy or even Irony. Myth permeates all four sections equally.

There is another problem to be faced. First is the position of mimesis and irony downwards, and their relation to aversion. An increase in realism and in irony do tend to go in the direction of aversion (I am thinking here of the insistence, on some Buddhist scriptures, on the reality of death and decay). But to put them downwards would not sit well with the idea of realism of Buddhism, which is empirical and factual, not necessarily (at least not always) negative towards the world.

At the same time, Buddhist scriptures can be ironic about the dimension of desires and pleasure (exactly like in the MSud), forcing a change of the paradigm. We have to bear in mind here the criticism of Frye's model by Todorov,[129] who was concerned that the model was not open to every possible theoretical combination,

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[129] Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Cornell university Press, 1975.

only to combinations that where observable then (in the literary tradition of the West),

and thus that the model was not theoretical but prescriptive. We take this criticism

seriously, because if Buddhist scriptures are different, we need a bigger range of

flexibility. We need the model to be fully theoretical.

Also, we believe that the pole of stylization and mimesis in the same direction of

desire and aversion may have perhaps something to do with TrV in myth. Although

Frye insists that literature is not about truth,[130] stylization and mimesis tied to desire

and aversion seem rather arbitrary.

Table 5 Unbalanced Model
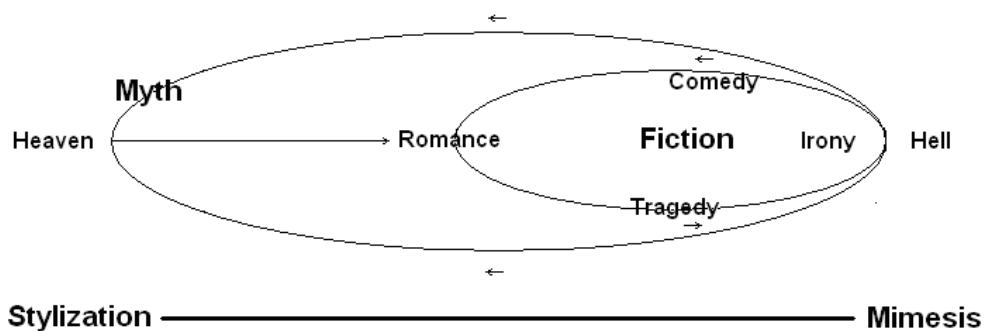
Additionally, as we mentioned before, Frye connects myth almost exclusively

with the realm of desire, but then this leaves us the problem of what to do with

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[130] Frye 1976, 13: "(…) imaginative structures as such are independent of belief, and it makes no difference to the structure whether the implied beliefs are real, pretended, or denounced as demonic (…).

narratives that point towards aversion (like the travels to hell, etc.) without been ironic. And if hell is 'below' in the model, how can we connect it with stylization (see Table 5).

The first important change for the use of the model in religious narratives and the identification of myth would be to make the representation of the theoretical boundaries between the world and the otherworld balanced and visible. With this we also solve the problem of hell and irony (see Table 6).

Table 6 Re-Balancing the Model
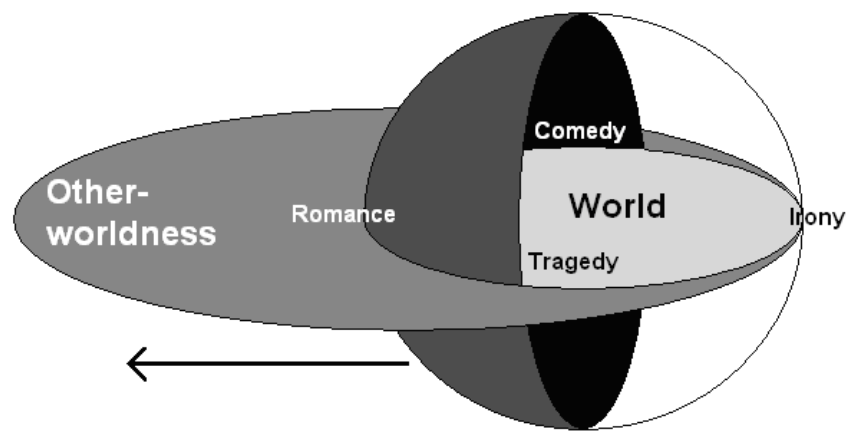
The second change is related to the representational location of mimesis and stylization. We don't want them in the same pole as desire and aversion. Since we have distinguished now the World of man as inside or surrounded by the 'beyond' of

the supernatural world, it is just natural for us to posit an increase in stylization

moving towards the outer border of the Other-worldness. But some forms of

stylization can still be found inside the World sphere, although they will be fewer. The

inverse can be said of mimesis. And increase of stylization in a sutta should indicate

an emphasis in the Other-worldness, while an increase in mimesis would be indicating

a concern in the affairs or situation of this World (see Table 7)

**Table 7 Mimesis and Stylization**
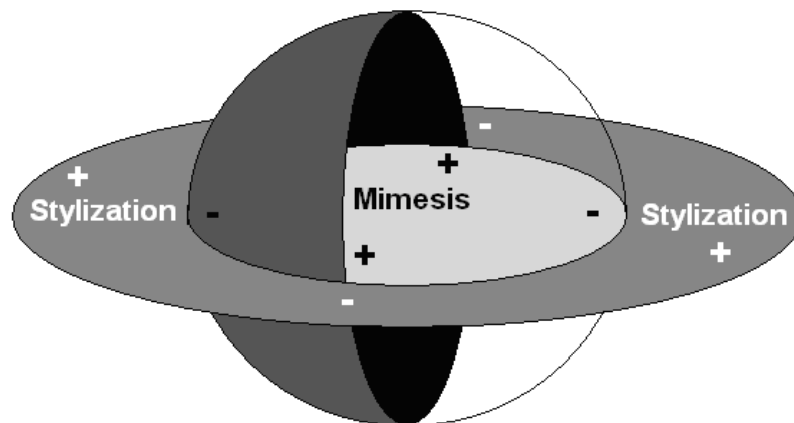
Our finished model would then have a central part or disk of World-likeness is

placed. By this we mean the space of narratives with mimetic properties. The main

characteristic of it is more mimesis and less stylization. At the outer boundaries of it

lays the forces of the movements down and upwards, towards desire and aversion, as

well as the poles of the individual and society. Nearer the hypothetical core of the disk of the world would be less movement and action, and perhaps more description. Surrounding this first disk is the 'sphere of secular narrative,' because generally, literary fiction will roughly correspond to this sphere (see Table 8).

Surrounding the Disk of the World there is a second disk, which we named the disk of myth. It is divided into two different colors, representing the antagonistic forces of desire and aversion. In the section of the disk near desire typical non-complex myths (like the Greek myths, etc.) could be placed.

Table 8 Entire Narrative Model
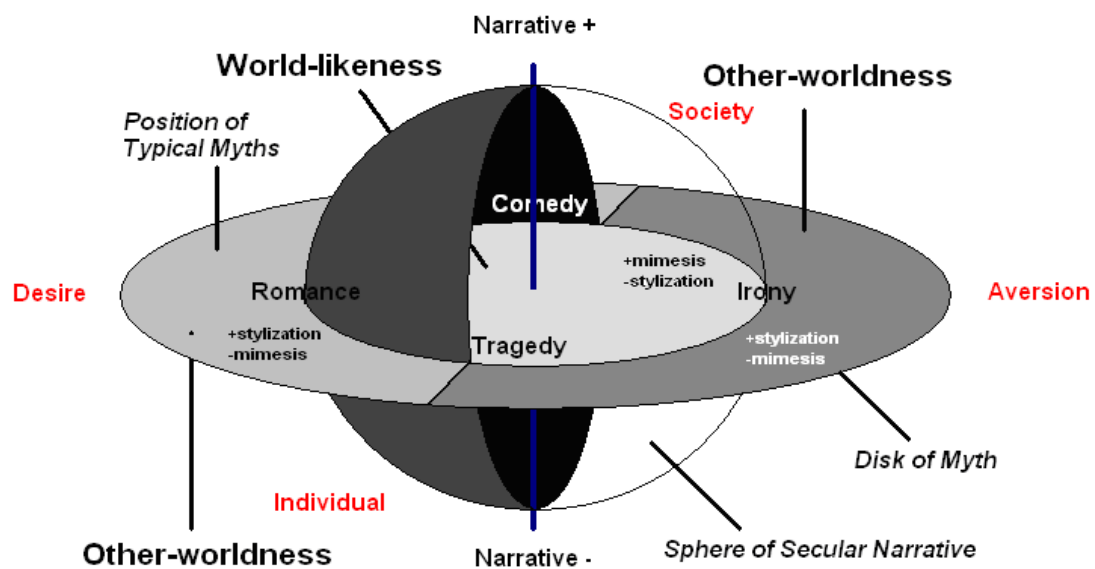
The entire model has to be imagined as enclosed by a sphere that corresponds to

the totality of possibilities of narratives. From the plane of the disks upwards, we will find complex narratives (with many plots, characters, actions, etc.). This is marked by 'Narrative +.' From the disks towards below, the opposite is implied. It corresponds to those narratives that are simpler (list of words, ideas, simple dialogues, etc., like that find in Abhidhamma literature). They are marked logically like 'Narrative –.'

The model is pointing to our idea that myth can be found not only in the Disk of Myth, but actually in any place in the system of narrative. Traditionally, we are used to relate myth with just a zone of the narrative model. We are unable to see it operating in other zones.

But since myth is embedded in religious narratives, and these can move across the model, decreasing in stylization but increasing in mimesis, decreasing or increasing in narrative, going from aversion to desire, etc., it follows that myth can potentially be everywhere in the model.

Frye never really intended his model as a static system. He insisted that it was made to capture the dynamics of narratives. For Frye, every narrative was in reality a lose combination of the four mythos. A scholar was supposed to use the method to observe movements, tendencies, displacements, and relationships. And it is in this way that the system really blooms.

It rests now to show to how it can be used to identify myths.

5.5 Narrative Details of the MSud

We have our model ready. Before we can identify myth with it in the MSud, we need to pay attention to some of the most relevant narrative details of the scripture.

5.5.1 Summary of the sutta

The sutta starts with the Buddha in Kusinara, in the Upavattana grove, between the twin sala trees, just at the time of his death. Ananda goes to his side to protest that the Buddha cannot die in such a miserable and insignificant town, in the middle of the jungle. He wants the Buddha to die in a big city, where the remains of the Buddha could be properly honored.

Not surprisingly, the Buddha rebukes Ananda. He further corrects his ignorance by informing him that in the past, in that same spot, there was a great royal city, Kusavati, which was governed by the great king Mahā-Sudassana.

The sutta then moves to the description of the marvels of the great royal city, composed of seven concentric circles, beautifully and richly adorned by all sort of objects. Similarly, the king possessed seven precious gifts: the Treasure of the Wheel (with which he extended his power conquering neighboring kingdoms), the Elephant treasure, the Horse Treasure, the Gem-Treasure, the Woman-Treasure, the Wonderful

Treasurer, the Wonderful Adviser. Likewise, Mahā-Sudassana, he possessed Four Marvelous Gifts (handsomeness, long life, freedom of disease, beloved and popular with priests and laymen.

The sutta then describes how Mahā-Sudassana devoted to the beautification of his city, dedicating at the same time his efforts to the construction of hospices, an other such buildings for the benefit of the poor and dispossessed. Seeing his generosity, his people wanted to give him wealth, which he refused. They then decide to build a mansion for him.

Sakka the king of the gods, similarly decide to build him a divine mansion, called Righteousness. The king proceeds to complete the marvelous structure. Once it is ready, he enters into it. While in the Great Complex, he decides to renounce lust, ill-will, and hatred, putting away all passions and unrighteousness. He subsequently enters into a sequence of raptures.

But after many thousand years, the Queen of Glory decides to pay him a visit. Bothered by the noise, he wait her outside, under the grove trees. Seeing him the queen realizes that the king might be dying. Thus she tries to awaken desire for his possessions in him. Yet the king rebukes her, arguing that her words are unpleasant, disagreeable, not to be desired.

When the Queen ask him for the proper way to address him, he tell her to repeat

to him phrases such as "do not pass away with longing in your heart," and "sad is the death of him who dies longing," etc. One by one the Queen helped him to cast away desire for his royal possessions, while crying. Then the king died.

The Buddha then tells how after his death the king came to life again in a sequence of happy rebirths, finally entering the world of Brahma. The Buddha confess to Ananda that he was the great king Mahā-Sudassana. Thus the Buddha explains to Ananda how all things are transitory, impermanent, and untrustworthy.

The Buddha finishes by recalling how in that same spot he has been buried six times before, and how as Mahā-Sudassana he was buried a seventh. And after this eight time, the Buddha will no longer come back again.

5.5.2 Framing

Although Gethin talks about the textual relation between the MSud and the MPar, he has ignored the importance of this relation for an analysis of the MSud.

The MSud is, in fact, a narrative inside a narrative, even when extirpated from its hypothetical original 'framing' in the MP. At the beginning and at the end of it we find a conversation between the Buddha and Ananda that frame the story of the king Sudassana.

In the beginning portion Ananda is trying to convince the Buddha that it is not fit

for him to die in a small insignificant town, and thus communicating his anxieties in the matter (probably representing the anxieties of the tradition). Ananda, it must be said, is not only concerned about the importance of the place of the death of his teacher. He also shows concern of practical funerary matters.[131]

In a sort of rebuke, the Buddha replies that this insignificant town was not so before. It was a great city, Kusavati, its king was Sudassana.

In the ending portion, after the Buddha has finished relating the death of the king, he affirms that he was in fact the king in his past life. As a conclusion, Ananda should understand by this that all the possessions that the Buddha had at the time were finally impermanent, doubly so because at death they were left behind, and now they were not visible there anymore. But, in this ending frame the Buddha also explains that was his sixth death, and after this new one, he will never be reborn again.

Although the framing is not 'mythical' in the terms of Gethin (and there is no stylization in terms of Frye) and is rather real-like (mimetic), it is not taken as an important clue for its historical importance due to what the Buddha is affirming. But, one wonders why the tradition behind the development of the MSud would have made

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[131] Dialogues of The Buddha II, 200: "Let not the Exalted One die in this little wattle-and-daub town, in this town in the midst of the jungle, in this branch township. For, lord, there are other great cities, such as Champa, Rajagaha, Savatthi, Saketa, Kosambi, and Benares. Let the Exalted One die in one of them. There there are many wealthy nobles and brahmins and heads of houses, believers in the Tathagata, who will pay due honour to the remains of the Tathagata."

the connection between the great king and the Buddha if there was no insinuation of it in the original 'pure' story.

Be as it may, the important point is that the framing is an integral part of the narrative, and should be taken as saying something important about the sutta. The framing, in other words, should not be used as a mere confirmation of the mythical properties of the MSud, but as a clue of the seriousness of what is been said, and also, that it is saying first, something about the Buddha.

5.5.3 Duality Buddha/Practitioner

When Gethin follows the idea of a MNBP he seems to ignore a soft tension in the text. The King is not any character. He is the Buddha, before becoming the Buddha, and thus the MSud is describing his last life/death previous to this. That previous life must have prepared him for enlightenment in the last one.

Gethin suggests that for the MNBP the most important element is meditation. But meditation is something that the Buddha himself ought to do continually even in this life, so this makes the other attainments of the Buddha in the past (like been a great generous and wise king) to have more relevance for enlightenment in this life.[132] In the MSud meditation only comes after the Buddha has carried a glorious life as a

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[132] Thus connecting the MSud with the ideal of the Boddhisattva.

king.

The achievements of the king in the MSud are not really oriented towards aversion. They are not shown negatively, but more like a necessary process for the kingly status, in preparation for the life as Buddha that awaits him in the future. The entire chain of his actions appears as almost consecrated.

This is a very special and important matter. The MSud cannot be a mere didactic metaphor or description of the ideal Buddhist practitioner. It must have been obviously meaningful as a detail or record of the Buddha's last life before. It was in a sense his last step before becoming a Buddha.

Thus, if we chose to accept Gethin's MNBP portraying an idealized Buddhist path, we have to accept at the same time that the MSud is also showing the previous exceptional life of the great teacher. In other words, there is an interesting and perhaps conflicting duality in the scripture, between the king been extremely exceptional and thus having meaningful actions, and his meditation practices representing any Buddhist practitioner of meditation, which connect better with the idea of impermanence apparently defended in the sutta.

Both appear contradictory, especially if we consider the MNBP. If we take the MSud as an example of the Buddhist path, then the actions of the King appear, from a narrative perspective, rather pointless. His actions are not purely generous, in a

Buddhist moral sense. He has beautified his realm. And at the end he must abandon the materiality which he has centered as his kingly activities. But it is not so if we remember that the king will be the Buddha.

We would dare to suggest that the MNBP is actually a stock description that is secondary in importance to the main narrative of the king. Just a detail of what he does in the Palace of Righteousness, important, but not as important as the entire narrative of his life. It must be remembered how at the start of the sutta he is already famous for been wise and consulted by others. So somehow his perfection does not hang from meditation.

In our view the MNBP is just a necessary step for the king to be able in the end, to die without lusting desires. Gethin again provides the clue for this when he affirms in "Cosmology and Meditation" that the MNBP is repeated in several other scriptures. Thus, this would not be the unique core of the MSud.

Again, the importance of this sutta is in the fact that the king is not any practitioner, but the Buddha himself.

5.5.4 Repetitiveness?

Gethin has given great importance to the fact of the repetitiveness of the details in the MSud. Using the model of Frye, however, we find it necessary to do the

opposite: rest relevance to it.

First is important to ask, why the repetitiveness? To answer, we need to focus again on the text. What is the text saying when repetitiveness appears?

Gethin would want to somehow relate the repetitiveness with what he called the MNBP, and more properly with the function of *kasiṇa* in meditation (especially because of the colors). The commentary, according to Gethin, clearly recognizes the meditation process that the king is going through when entering, and in the Palace of Righteousness. But, this does not mean the commentary supports a hypothetical use of the text itself for that.

While it is true that there might be some validity in the argument, we believe that it does not explain properly why the author(s) of the sutta chose the entire city for that schema, even in some of its insignificant details. If the Palace of Righteousness is more properly connected with meditation why he/they did not save repetitiveness for the moment when the king was actually doing that. In other words, why use repetitiveness in the description of the city itself when it is not representing the inner world of meditation, but the outside world of the senses?

Why did the author(s) choose to put all the narrative of the King Suddasanna under the effects of repetition (and additionally the ending frame where the possessions are listed by the Buddha himself as been his in the past)? The

repetitiveness in the ending frame is also part of the meditation? And if it is like Gethin says, why did the author connect repetitiveness with meditation-visualization in this text in the first place? These questions cannot be replied with Gethin's perspective.

But, following our model we don't require this jump. Repetitiveness is simply a form or method of stylization. And stylization is always related with a movement beyond the world of man, normally a transcendent or supernatural world, or a world of just different rules from our daily one.

Now, where is the supernatural world here? Simple: in the past. The past life of the Buddha (when he was king) appears as a space beyond the world. A place that is no longer accessible by normal ways of cognition. It can still be reachable, but only through unconventional ways (like observation of the past through meditation). Strangely, Buddhaghosa's commentary, as quoted by Gethin, would better support this idea rather than Gethin's own.

The elders have different views about how the city, and the configuration of its walls is seen in 'perspective,' and Buddhaghosa, as he usually does, let all the conflicting views there to be expressed evenly. We can assume that the views are probably not just 'opinions' based on hearsay, but are probably based on some form of cognition of the city of Kusavati. Thus this implies that the text was taken seriously,

as real (at least in the older tradition), but not fundamentally as a metaphor of meditation of the MNBP, as Gethin's would like to believe, but as a sort of imprint, guide, or visual map, to factually observe the wonderful city in the past. The MSud would not be a metaphor of Buddhist practice, but more like a mental picture, which one can use to corroborate the wonders of the last-last life and death of the Buddha, just before he was born to be enlightened.

Thus it would seem probable that stylization is used here to increase the sensation of the marvelous, to distinguish this particular discourse/space (Kusavati, previous past life of the Buddha) from normal discourse (this time, last life of the Buddha).

In that sense stylization here (in the form of repetition) is just another narrative mechanism that myth can use for its purposes, but it is not in anyway a defining aspect of what is myth.

5.5.5 Death

The movement of the narrative itself, it must be said, turns around death. So death is the first point we can use to position a probable myth.

There is an initial movement towards aversion of death. The queen and Ananda represent the same type of character, in this sense. They are somehow working as

unwillingly tempters or opponents of a good death. They are asking the dying

king/Buddha character to pay attention to matters that are, in the view of the sutta, to

be averted.

The Queen reminds the King of his possessions. Ananda worries the Buddha

about funerary honors, and the dignity that he will not receive by not dying in a better

place.

Thus we can easily establish two opposite movements. One is the 'this world'

view represented by the Queen and Ananda, identified very warmly as the loving and

painful concern for the dying character. This, the text may be suggesting is the attitude

that the reader or listener of the sutta will normally have. Apparently it is a movement

oriented to desire, because it is born of preoccupation and caring, something we

normally like to be given by those around us.

The sutta, then, changes the initial orientation of the movement radically, and

makes what was desire into aversion, and what is aversion into desire. This kind of

concern for the dying king/Buddha, reflected in the Queen and Ananda, should be

avoided. The MSud invites to a warmly correction. Thus, what it was desirable for us,

becomes something dangerous, to be averted, because it does not help the dying in

leaving desires at the moment of death.

But the Queen and Ananda are not only interrupting any moment. They are doing

so in an essential moment: in death. Death appears not as a violent moment of struggle, but as a peaceful opportunity for rapid improvement.

Also death is not presented as a process that the individual must go through alone. It seems to be a process that requires company. Thus, is a process of opportunity for the dying, as well as for the wife and the disciple. The King somehow asks the Queen for help, when he instruct her with what she should say to him. This instruction may be taken as a help (lesson) for her. The same is the case of Ananda, who receives a corrective lesson initiated by his comments.

Thus, through this new positioning the reader (us) is told where he stands in relation to the moment of death, and with a subtle criticism it re-orients the reader to the opposite direction, changing the values, towards what direction he should be moving from now on.

What was a normal response based on love and desire is no longer such. The sutta seems to be saying "if you care about death, let the dying die a good death without pulling him/her towards desire. Help him." Or "if you care about death strive to die without desires. Help yourself."

Thus, the text suggests a repositioning for the reader. This is where the myth should be searched.

At the center lays death. And the idea that during death someone must die

without desires, to, either get a better next life closer to achieving the Buddhist goal, or perhaps a time in heaven. However, we have to also remember that this in not any death but the previous death of the Buddha himself.

5.5.6 Impermanence

In the MSud impermanence is affirmed. However, this impermanence is not really presented in terms of aversion, and it becomes necessary only when death is near. The king has dedicated his life to grandiosity, generosity, and beauty. The MSud gives the strange and contradictory impression that this grandiosity of material achievements is somehow necessary part of the attainment of the highest level as a human, just prior to achieving enlightenment. Thus the Buddha affirms that the things are impermanent, but it is as if the grandiosity of the things he did in his past life are transformed in him. Thus materiality has some form of transformative value, which remains with the individual (the King Sudassana), to his next life.

One can not do more than remember here Schopen's suggestions in relation to the connection between 'monks' and the possession of money. Is then the message of the MSud (in terms of impermanence) like this because of the sutta's original audience were people of important economic power? Was this sutta originally produced with Buddhist kings, merchants, or rich monks in mind? We can not say for

sure, but the idea may deserve further investigation.

5.6 Positioning

Until here, we have been talking about the MSud narrative. We have said nothing of its myth. Now is time for us to use the model adapted from Northrop Frye, to identify it in the sutta.

First, we should give a provisory definition in accordance to what we have learned preparing the model:

Provisory definition: A myth is a special narrative unit, which places the reader in a position in relation to an aspect of the world, saying something about it.

We will use two concepts for identifying this type of unit: *positioning* and *movement*.

Positioning will refer to the placing of the reader, by the text, in some form of relation to an aspect of the world.

Movement will be relating this unit with the four poles of the model: Desire/Aversion, and Individual/Society.

Following the movements for orientation between desire and aversion, and the individual and society, and the positioning of the reader, we can conclude that this narrative possess more than one myth. This are:

a. **The Myth of the Buddha**

In his last past life before enlightenment, the Buddha was a great king, who did a marvelous city, had many possessions, and who, just before death, renounced everything. That was his 7th time to be reborn, and after the 8th as the Buddha he will never be reborn again.

Positioning: The myth is suggesting the high hierarchy and status of the Buddha, because he was a great king, he is now not only comparable, but superior to a king. Thus the myth is asking the reader to put the Buddha in the highest position of the realm of the humans. It is also indirectly opening a similar road for the reader. The reader can follow 2 (when his death come), or follow the Buddha now, since, after such a glorious life, he chose to be an ascetic, indicating that this must be even better a life than that of a king. Or, perhaps, the reader could imitate the Buddha and dedicate his life to generosity and beautification of its environment. Isn't it here perhaps an invitation to those who have money (kings, merchants, monks), to have generosity, and only renounce things at the end of life?

Movement: Towards desire, the Buddha appears as the pinnacle of status, and

towards society[133] and its harmony, when putting emphasis on generosity and artistic

beautification and adornment of the environment, as a supreme king.

b. **The Myth of the Good Death**

There is the impression that the king (like later the Buddha) willingly died, suggesting

that he had the ability to escape death, since the Queen is asking him to do exactly this

(similarly as how the Buddha's death is portrayed as something avoidable in the

MPar). But just like the Buddha rebukes Ananda for his 'material' concerns, the

Queen is rebuked by the wise King. The one around the dying should support his

struggle for renouncing things, not block it. With the successful renouncing *at death*,

great benefit is achieved.

Positioning: Death is seen almost as in the field of desire (as something controllable

and acceptable). It is not only natural, but acceptable. Those who reject death are

presented in relation to aversion. The king died, the Buddha will die, but there is no

expression of aversion or anguish in the MSud towards dead (only those of the Queen

and Ananda, which are shown to be not desirable). The myth is suggesting that in

death there is opportunity for advancement on those dying, as well as on those

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[133] In Frye's terms, towards a new society.

observing the dying.

Movement: Towards desire, and harmony with those around (society).

c. The Myth of the Impermanence of Things

It is not good to cling to things when dying. The king Sudassana had it all, but still renounced all at the time of death. The king is greatly exalted for his material achievements during the entire sutta. The renouncing happens only at the end of his life. The Buddha also argues for the impermanence of all things with Ananda. The idea of the impermanence of things is strengthened by the fact that Kusavati is long gone.

Positioning: It is ambiguous. Things are proclaimed impermanent, but appear as important and magnificent as well. It does not appear that the MSud can be considered to be making a strong argument against things, or the early renouncing of things, in any case. The king has decided to renounce everything just before death, and this is strange. It could be argued as the result of meditation. Be as it may, it is obviously not the same as to renounce in death than during lifetime. Indeed, the myth seems to be reluctant to talk about renouncing the material during lifetime. Either it is

worried to disturb its reader, or it is formed in the belief that things must be indeed renounced near death (old age?), and not too long before. It could be that this myth is putting a patron, through generosity, in a position closer to the Buddha before his last birth, and thus making a call for donations.

Movement: Ambiguous, both towards desire and aversion. There is emphasis on the individual, pointing to the greatness of the material achievements of the king, and at the same time to the importance of renouncing material things before death.

There is a complementary coordination between these three myths. They are related and connected. But in their present form, in their brevity and lack of development or sophistication, they appear as incomplete. They require to be completed with similar special narrative units (myths) from other scriptures of the DN. Thus we can make another hypothesis.

Hypothesis (Alternative Definition of Myth):

These special narrative units are perhaps too small. They may be parts of a bigger unit, which could be the actual myth. Thus, for example, the entirety of the small special units pertaining to what we called the Myth of Good Death would in

reality form the True Buddhist Myth of (Good) Death. In this sense we will have here

only parts of myths, fragments, so to speak, and we would need to complete them

with those fragments from other scriptures.

But if our previous definition was correct, and these are indeed complete myths,

then:

Final Provisory Definition:

1. *A myth is a special narrative unit, which places the reader in a position in relation*

to an aspect of the world, saying something about it.

2. It is usually smaller than a narrative, and can share its place with others similar to it

in the same narrative (thus in one narrative there can be many).

3. They may, with other similar special units or myths, form part of a bigger system,

which would finally correspond to the entire mythology of a particular textual

tradition of a religion.

Chapter VI: Conclusions

6.1 Confirmation of SDM and its TrV

We have traced the problem of a definition of myth in three phases: the first one, in general theories of myth, outside the boundaries of Buddhism; the second one, in the general use of the concept in the discipline of Buddhist studies; the third one in a particular work, itself dealing directly with the problem of myth in a Buddhist scripture. In all these phases, we have identified a negative valuation of myth in terms of truth (TrV), coming from the unrecognized previous acceptance of a standard definition of myth (SDM).

We believe we have demonstrated that, in all three phases the panorama is the same: definitions of the concept are problematic. But our point is not that definitions designed are faulty. The problem with them is that they start from a SDM, carrying a default form of TrV. Furthermore, they are not constructed based on observations of narratives, but on their own interpretations based on a SDM. Thus the problem is how they were constructed backwards, not from observed phenomena, or objects, but from the requirements of interpretation.

The question remains open as to how much their results are affected by such problems. But we contend that as theories they fail in their universal applicability.

They cannot, finally, explain '*what is myth*' because they cannot distinguish myth-narratives from non-myth narratives. They all simply assume that myth is clearly distinguishable from other narratives.

We hope we have successfully shown how:

1. A definition of myth cannot be based on truth valuation.

2. Myth cannot be identified in opposition to history in the text.

3. The possible interpretations of myth should have no relevance for the construction of a definition of myth.

4. The first purpose of a definition of myth should be the easy and clear identification of myth itself.

5. A definition of myth should start from the fact that myth materializes in narrative, but is not the same as narrative.

6.2 Without a precise definition myth remains a useless concept

'Myth' is undoubtedly a rich word. As Righter puts it, myth:

> (…) has become a kind of intellectual shorthand which has gained acceptance as standing for an elusive, almost

unanalyzable amalgam of beliefs, attitudes and feelings. The

very unapproachability of the content of myth has created

the utility of the term and guaranteed its widespread

usefulness. With no theoretical implications the term is taken

as given." (Righter 9)

The problem is whether this richness does not translate to confusion for a

discipline with aversion to theory, like Philology. The normal utility or usefulness of

the concept seems to be, up to now, inversely proportional to its concrete theoretical

applicability. The lack of a precise definition transforms myth into a wild animal

when applied *in* analysis. We have struggled in this work to show this.

6.3 Philology should not use myth as a concept unless it has properly defined it

We are conscious of the limitations of our work: we would probably require a

much bigger number of examples to prove with absolute certainty what we have

proposed in these pages. Yet, as we affirmed at the beginning, our intention was

merely propaedeutic. We believe we have presented a first critical guide or a mode of

how to identify the problem of truth valuation in a clear an easy way.

That perhaps would be enough for now, for those who might find themselves

interested in further testing our hypothesis. The question will remain open as to how it fares against more examples. Yet we are confident that we have painted successfully in the very least an approximate landscape.

One of the main questions that we have tried to raise in this work is whether it is possible for a discipline like Buddhist studies to lack a stable definition of myth. How can Philology use myth as a category of stratification or classification and analysis if it does not identify clear boundaries in narratives?

The answer appears simple. Until there is no proper definition of myth, it is better to remain away from the concept. The problem is then, that we cannot say anything about all that narrative phenomena that we 'believe' correspond to myth. At the same time the lack of a proper method of identification of myth seems to affect adversely the stratification process of the suttas.

6.4 There may be nothing to call myth

If we, at the end of these pages, have left in the reader the impression that there may not be anything to call myth after all, we would still have done our job well. We believe that a fair amount of doubt must be faced and resolved before any further discussion of what myth is. If myth is nothing, or if it is so diffuse an object that any hope to effectively single it out should be abandoned, so be it.

7. Abbreviations

AoC   Anatomy of Criticism

ASu   Aggañña sutta

DN   Dhīganikāya

MNBP   Mythical Narrative of The Buddhist Path

MPar   Mahaparinibbāna Sutta

MSud   Mahāsudassana Sutta

PCan   Pāli Canon

SDM   Standard Definition of Myth

TrV   Truth Valuation

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