

Mircea Eliade

MYTHOLOGIES OF
MEMORY AND
FORGETTING

WHEN A YOGI FALLS IN LOVE WITH A QUEEN . . .

Matsyendranāth and Gorakhnāth are among the most popular master yogis of the Indian Middle Ages. Their magical exploits have brought forth a rich and extensive epic literature. One of the central episodes of this mythological folklore is the amnesia of Matsyendranāth. According to one of the best-known versions the master, traveling in Ceylon, fell in love with the queen and went to live in her palace, completely forgetting his identity. A Nepalese variant relates that Matsyendranāth succumbed to temptation in the following way: while his body remained under the guard of a disciple, his spirit entered the corpse of a king who had just died and restored it to life. (This is the well-known yogic miracle of “entering another’s body”; the saints sometimes make use of this method to enjoy the pleasures of love without polluting themselves.) Finally, according to the poem *Gorakshavijaya*, Matsyendranāth was made a prisoner by the women of the country Kadali.

On receiving news of his captivity, Gorakhnāth realizes that his master is doomed to death. He accordingly descends into the realm of *Yama* (Death), searches the Book of Fates, finds the leaf containing the destiny of his *guru*, and erases his name from the list of the dead.

Translated from the French by Willard R. Trask.

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Then he goes to Matsyendranāth, in Kadalī, in the form of a dancing girl and begins dancing, accompanying himself by mysterious songs. Little by little Matsyendranāth remembers his true identity; he realizes that the “way of the flesh” leads to death, that his “forgetting” was essentially a forgetting of his true, immortal nature, and that the “charms of Kadalī” represent the mirages of worldly life.¹ Gorakhnāth urges him to return to the way of yoga and make his body “perfect.” He tells him that it was Durgā who had brought on the “forgetfulness” that had almost cost him immortality. The spell, Gorakhnāth adds, symbolizes the eternal curse of ignorance laid on the human being by “Nature” (that is, *Durgā*).²

This mythical theme can be analyzed into the following elements. (1) A spiritual master falls in love with a queen or is made prisoner by women; (2) in either case, there is a physical love that immediately provokes a state of amnesia in the master; (3) his disciple seeks him out and, through a series of symbols (dance movements, secret signs, mysterious language), helps him to recover his memory, that is, consciousness of his identity; (4) the master’s “forgetfulness” is assimilated to death, and—vice versa—his “awakening,” or *anamnesis*, proves to be a prerequisite for immortality.

The central motif—especially the amnesia captivity brought on by an immersion in Life, and the *anamnesis* procured by the signs and mysterious words of a disciple—rather suggests the celebrated Gnostic myth of the “Saved Savior,” as found in the *Hymn of the Pearl*. As we shall see later, there are also other analogies between certain aspects of Indian thought and Gnosticism. But in this particular case there is no need to assume any Gnostic influence. Matsyendranāth’s captivity and forgetting are a pan-Indian motif. Both misfortunes plastically express the fall of the spirit (the Self; *ātman*, *purusha*) into the circle of existences and, as a consequence, loss of consciousness of the self. Indian literature uses images of binding, chaining, and captivity interchangeably with those of forgetting, unknowing, and sleep to signify the human condition; and, contrariwise, images of being freed from bonds and the tearing of a veil (or the removal of a bandage from the eyes), of memory, remembering, being awakened, the waking state, express abolishing (or transcending) the human condition, freedom, deliverance (*moksa*, *mukti*, *nirvāna*, etc.).

INDIAN SYMBOLISM OF FORGETTING AND RECOLLECTION

The *Dīghanikāya* (I, 19–22) affirms that the gods fall from heaven when their “memory fails and they are of confused memory”; on the

¹ M. Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom* (New York, 1958), p. 314.

² *Ibid.*

contrary, those gods who do not forget are immutable, eternal, of a nature that knows no change. “Forgetting” is equivalent, on the one hand, to “sleep” and, on the other, to loss of the self, that is, to disorientation, blindness (having the eyes blindfolded). The *Chāndogya Upanishad* (VI, 14, 1–2) tells of a man whom bandits carried far from his city, blindfolded, and abandoned in a lonely place. The man begins to cry: “I have been led here with my eyes bandaged, I have been left here with my eyes bandaged!” Someone removes the blindfold and points out the direction of his city. Asking his way from village to village, the man manages to reach home. In the same way, the text adds, he who has a competent Master becomes able to free himself from the blindfolds of ignorance and inevitably attains perfection.

Śankara’s commentary on this passage is famous. It is the same, he explains, with the man carried by thieves far from Being (that is, from the *ātman-Brahman*) and caught in this body. The thieves are the false ideas of “merit, demerit,” and the like. His eyes are blindfolded with the blindfold of illusion, and he is hobbled by his desire for his wife, his son, his friends, his cattle, and so on. “I am the son of so-and-so, I am happy, or unhappy, I am intelligent, or stupid, I am pious, etc. How shall I live? where is there a way of escape? where is my salvation?” So he cries out, caught in a monstrous net—until the moment when he meets one who is conscious of true Being (*Brahman-ātman*), who is freed from slavery, happy, and, in addition, full of sympathy for others. From him he learns the way of knowledge and the vanity of the world. Thus the man who was the prisoner of his own illusions is freed from dependence on worldly things. Then he recognizes his true being and understands that he is not the lost wanderer he had thought himself to be. On the contrary, he understands that what Being is, is the very same thing that he too is. Thus his eyes are freed from the bandage of illusion created by ignorance (*avidyā*), and he is like the man from Gandhāra returning home, that is, rediscovering the *ātman*, full of joy and serenity.³

We recognize the clichés through which Indian speculation attempts to make the paradoxical situation of the Self comprehensible: entangled in the illusions created and fed by its temporal existence, the Self (*ātman*) suffers the consequences of this “ignorance” until the day it discovers that it was only *seemingly* involved in the World. Sāmkhya and Yoga take a similar position: the Self (*purusha*) is only apparently enslaved, and deliverance (*mukti*) is simply its *becoming conscious* of its eternal freedom. I think that I suffer, I think that I am enslaved, I desire deliverance. At the moment when—having

³ Śankara, commentary on the *Chāndogya Upanishad*, VI, 14, 1–2.

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“awakened”—I understand that the “I” is a product of Matter (*prakṛti*), I likewise understand that all existence has been merely a chain of painful moments and that the true spirit was “impassively contemplating” the drama of “personality.”⁴

It is of importance to note that for Sāmkhya-Yoga, as well as for Vedānta, deliverance can be compared to an “awakening” or to a new consciousness of a situation that existed from the beginning but that one was unable to *realize*. From a certain point of view “ignorance”—which, in the last analysis, is an *ignorance of oneself*—can be thought of as a “forgetting” of the true Self (*ātman*, *puruṣa*). “Wisdom” (*jñāna*, *vidyā*, etc.), which by tearing the veil of *māyā* or overcoming ignorance makes deliverance possible, is an “awakening.” The Awakened One par excellence, the Buddha, possesses absolute omniscience. Buddha, like other sages and yogis, remembered his former lives. But, the Buddhist texts insist, while the sages and yogis were able to remember a certain number of existences, even a considerable number, only the Buddha was able to know them *all*. This is a way of saying that only the Buddha was omniscient.

“FORGETTING” AND “MEMORY” IN ANCIENT GREECE

Memory is for those who have forgotten, wrote Plotinus (*Enneads*, 4, 3, 25 ff.). The doctrine is Platonic. For those who have forgotten, remembering is a virtue; but the perfect never lose the vision of truth and they have no need to remember (*Phaedrus*, 250). Hence there is a difference between memory (*mnēmē*) and recollection (*anám-nēsis*). The gods of whom the Buddha spoke in the *Dīghanikāya*, who fell from heaven when their memories were troubled, were reincarnated as men. Some of them practiced asceticism and meditation, and by virtue of their yogic discipline succeeded in recollecting their former lives. A perfect memory, then, is superior to the ability to recollect. In one way or another, recollecting implies having forgotten, and in India, as we just saw, forgetting is equivalent to ignorance, slavery (captivity), and death.

A like situation obtained in Greece. We have no intention of presenting all the data for “forgetting” and *anamnesis* in Greek beliefs and speculation. We shall only undertake to trace the various modifications of the “mythologies of memory and forgetting.” In India, as in Greece, beliefs more or less similar to those of the proto-agriculturalists were analyzed, reinterpreted, and revalued by poets, contemplatives, and the earliest philosophers. In India and Greece, that is, we no longer have to deal only with religious patterns of behavior and mythological expressions but instead, and above all, with the

⁴ *Eliade, op. cit.*, p. 31.

rudiments of psychology and metaphysics. Nevertheless, there is continuity between the “popular” beliefs and the “philosophic” speculations. It is this continuity that is of particular concern to us.

The goddess Mnemosyne, personification of “Memory,” sister of Kronos and Okeanos, is the mother of the Muses. She is omniscient; according to Hesiod (*Theogony*, 32, 38), she knows “all that has been, all that is, all that will be.” When the poet is possessed by the Muses, he draws directly from Mnemosyne’s store of knowledge, that is, especially from the knowledge of “origins,” of “beginnings,” of “genealogies.” “The Muses sing, beginning with the beginning—*ἔξ ἀρχῆς* (*Theog.*, 45, 115)—the first appearance of the world, the genesis of the gods, the birth of humanity. The past thus revealed is much more than the antecedent of the present; it is its source. In going back to it, recollection does not seek to situate events in a temporal frame but to reach the depths of being, to discover the original, the primordial reality from which the cosmos issued and which makes it possible to understand becoming as a whole.”⁵

By virtue of the primordial memory that he is able to recover, the poet inspired by the Muses has access to the original realities. These realities were manifested in the mythical times of the beginning and constitute the foundation of the World. But just because they appeared *ab origine*, they are no longer perceivable in current experience. J. P. Vernant rightly compares the poet’s inspiration to an “evocation” of a dead person from the world below or to a *descensus ad inferos* undertaken by a living man in order to learn what he seeks to know. “The privilege that Mnemosyne confers on the bard is that of a contact with the other world, the possibility of entering it and freely returning from it. The past appears as a dimension of the beyond.”⁶

This is why, insofar as it is “forgotten,” the “past”—historical or primordial—is homologized with death. The fountain Lethe, “forgetfulness,” is a necessary part of the realm of Death. The dead are those who have lost their memories. On the other hand, certain privileged mortals, like Tiresias or Amphiaraios, preserve their memory after death. To make him immortal, Hermes gives his son Ethalidos “an unchangeable memory.” As Apollonius of Rhodes writes, “even when he crossed Acheron, forgetfulness did not submerge his soul; and though he inhabits now the realm of shades, now that of the sun’s light, he always remembers what he has seen.”⁷

⁵ J. P. Vernant, “Aspects mythiques de la mémoire en Grèce,” *Journal de Psychologie*, (1959), pp. 1–29. Cf. also Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “Recollection, Indian and Platonic,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (Supplement), No. 3 (April–June, 1944).

⁶ Vernant, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁷ *Argonautica*, I, 463, quoted by Vernant, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

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But the “mythology of Memory and Forgetting” changes, and becomes enriched by an eschatological meaning, when a doctrine of transmigration takes shape. It is no longer the primordial past, but the series of *former personal lives* of which a knowledge is important. The function of Lethe is reversed. The soul newly freed from the body no longer finds in its waters forgetfulness of earthly life. On the contrary, Lethe blots out memory of the celestial world in the soul returning to earth to be reincarnated. “Forgetting” no longer symbolizes death, but returning to life. The soul that has been rash enough to drink from the fount of Lethe (“gorged with forgetfulness and vice,” as Plato puts it, *Phaedrus* 248 c), is reincarnated and again cast into the cycle of becoming. In the gold plates worn by initiates in the Orphico-Pythagorean brotherhood, the soul is commanded not to approach the spring of Lethe, on the left-hand road, but to take the road to the right, where it will find the spring that comes from the lake of Mnemosyne. “Quickly give me the fresh water that flows from the lake of Memory,” the soul is told to ask the guardians of the spring. “And of themselves they will give you water from the sacred spring and after that, among the other heroes you will be the master.”⁸

Pythagoras, Empedocles, and others believed in metempsychosis and claimed that they could remember their former lives. “A wanderer exiled from the divine dwelling,” Empedocles said of himself, “in former times I was already a boy and a girl, a bush and a bird, a mute fish in the sea” (*Purifications*, fr. 117). And again: “I am delivered forever from death” (*ibid.*, fr. 112). Speaking of Pythagoras, Empedocles described him as “a man of extraordinary knowledge,” for “wherever he directed all the power of his spirit, he easily saw what he had been there in ten, twenty human lives” (*ibid.*, fr. 129). Then too, memory training played an important role in the Pythagorean brotherhoods (Diodorus X, 5; Iamblichus, *Vita Pyth.* 78 ff.). This training is reminiscent of the yogic technique of “going back.” We may add that shamans, too, claim to remember their former lives,⁹ which indicates the archaism of this practice.

“PRIMORDIAL” MEMORY AND “HISTORICAL” MEMORY

In Greece, then, there are two evaluations of memory: (1) that which refers to primordial events (cosmogony, theogony, genealogy), and

⁸ Plates of Petelia and Eleuthernae. On the “Orphic” plates cf. Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1903), pp. 573 ff.; F. Cumont, *Lux perpetua* (Paris, 1949), pp. 248, 406; W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and the Greek Religion* (London, 1935; 2d ed., 1952), pp. 171 ff.

⁹ Cf. my *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York, 1961), pp. 162 ff. On the former lives of Pythagoras, cf. the texts assembled by E. Rohde, *Psyche* (trans. W. B. Hillis [New York, 1925]), pp. 598 ff.

(2) the memory of former lives, that is, of historical and personal events. Lethe, "Forgetfulness," has equal efficacy against the two kinds of memory. But Lethe is powerless in the case of certain privileged persons: (1) those who, inspired by the Muses or by virtue of a "power of prophecy in reverse," succeed in recovering the memory of primordial events; (2) those who, like Pythagoras or Empedocles, are able to remember their former lives. These two categories among the privileged overcome "forgetfulness," which is in some way equivalent to overcoming death. The former class attain to the knowledge of "origins" (origin of the cosmos, of the gods, of peoples, of dynasties). The others remember their "history," that is, their transmigrations. For the former, the important thing is what took place *ab origine*. This consisted in primordial events, in which they were not personally involved. But these events—cosmogony, theogony, genealogy—in some way constituted them; they are what they are because these events took place. It is unnecessary to show to what an extent this attitude resembles that of the man of archaic societies, who accepts himself as constituted by a series of primordial events duly set forth in the myths.

Those, on the other hand, who are able to remember their former lives are above all concerned with discovering their own "history," parceled out as it is among their countless incarnations. They try to unify these isolated fragments, to make them parts of a single pattern, in order to discover the direction and meaning of their destiny. For the unification, through *anamnesis*, of these totally unrelated fragments of history also implies "joining the beginning to the end"; in other words, it is necessary to discover how the first earthly existence set in motion the process of transmigration. Such a concern and such a discipline suggest the Indian techniques of "going back" and recollecting former lives.

Plato knows and employs these two traditions concerning memory and forgetfulness. But he transforms and reinterprets them to fit them into his philosophical system. For Plato, learning is, in the last analysis, recollecting (cf. especially *Meno*, 81, *c, d*). Between two existences on earth the soul contemplates the Ideas: it shares in pure and perfect knowledge. But when the soul is reincarnated it drinks of the spring Lethe and forgets the knowledge it obtained from direct contemplation of the Ideas. Yet this knowledge is latent in the man in whom the soul is reincarnated, and it can be made patent by philosophical effort. Physical objects help the soul to withdraw into itself and, through a sort of "going back," to rediscover and regain the original knowledge that it possessed in its extraterrestrial condition.

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Hence death is the return to a primordial and perfect state, which is periodically lost through the soul's reincarnation.

We have already had occasion to compare Plato's philosophy with what could be termed "archaic ontology."¹⁰ We must now show in what sense Plato's theory of Ideas and the Platonic *anamnesis* can be compared with the attitude and behavior of man in archaic and traditional societies. The man of those societies finds in myths the exemplary models for all his acts. The myths tell him that everything he does or intends to do *has already been done*, in the beginning of Time, *in illo tempore*. Hence myths constitute the sum of useful knowledge. An individual life becomes, and remains, a fully human, responsible, and significant life to the extent to which it is inspired by this stock of acts already performed and thoughts already formulated. Not to know or to forget the contents of the "collective memory" constituted by tradition is equivalent to a retrogression to the "natural" state (the acultural condition of the child), or to a "sin," or to a disaster.

For Plato, living intelligently, that is, learning to know and knowing the true, the beautiful, and the good, is above all remembering a disincarnate, purely spiritual existence. "Forgetting" this pleromatic condition is not necessarily a "sin" but is a consequence of the process of reincarnation. It is remarkable that, for Plato too, "forgetting" is not a necessary concomitant of the fact of death but, on the contrary, is related to life, to reincarnation. It is in returning to earthly life that the soul "forgets" the Ideas. Here we find not a forgetting of previous lives—that is, of the sum of personal experiences, of "history"—but a forgetting of transpersonal and eternal truths, the Ideas. Philosophical *anamnesis* does not recover the memory of the *events* belonging to former lives, but of *truths*, that is, of the structures of the real. This philosophical position can be compared with that of the traditional societies: the myths represent paradigmatic models established by supernatural beings, not the series of personal experiences of one individual or another.¹¹

SLEEP AND DEATH

In Greek mythology, Sleep and Death, Hypnos and Thanatos, are twin brothers. We may note that, for the Jews too, at least from post-exilic times on, death was comparable to sleep. Sleep in the grave (Job

¹⁰ Cf. my *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York, 1954), pp. 34 ff.

¹¹ Cf. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 54–55. For C. G. Jung, too, the "collective unconscious" precedes the individual psyche. The world of Jung's archetypes to some extent resembles the world of the Platonic Ideas: the archetypes are transpersonal and do not take part in the historical time of the individual but in the time of the species, or even of organic life.

3:13–15, 17), in Sheol (Eccles. 9:3, 10), or in both at once (Ps. 88 [87]). The Christians accepted and elaborated the homology of death and sleep: *in pace bene dormit, dormit in somno pacis, in pace somni, in pace Domini dormias* are among the most frequent formulas.¹²

Since Hypnos is brother to Thanatos, we see why, in Greece as in India and in Gnosticism, the act of “awakening” had a “soteriological” meaning (in the broadest sense of the word). Socrates awakens those who talk with him, even though against their will. “How tyrannical you are, Socrates!” Callicles exclaims (*Gorgias*, 505 d). But Socrates is perfectly conscious that his mission to wake people is divine. He is constantly repeating that he is “obedient” to God (*Apology*, 23 c; cf. also 30 e; 31 a; 33 c). “As you will not easily find another like me, I would advise you to spare me. I dare say that you may feel irritated *at being suddenly awakened when you are caught napping*; and you may think that if you were to strike me dead as Anytus advises, which you easily might, then you would *sleep on for the remainder of your lives*, unless God in his care of you gives you another gadfly” (*Apol.* 30, e; trans. Jowett).

We should take note of this idea that it is God who, for the love of men, sends them a Master to “awaken” them from their sleep—a sleep that is at once ignorance, forgetfulness, and “death.” The motif reappears in Gnosticism, though, of course, considerably elaborated and reinterpreted. The central Gnostic myth, as we find it in the *Hymn of the Pearl*, preserved in the *Acts of Thomas*, is constructed around the theme of amnesia and *anamnesis*. A prince comes to Egypt from the East, seeking “the one pearl, which is in the midst of the sea around the loud breathing serpent.” In Egypt he was made prisoner by the men of the country. He was given their food to eat and forgot his identity. “I forgot that I was a son of kings, and I served their king; and I forgot the pearl, for which my parents had sent me, and because of the burden of their oppressions I lay in a deep sleep.” But his parents learned what had befallen him and sent him a letter. “‘From thy father, the king of kings, and thy mother, the mistress of the East, and from thy brother, our second (in authority), to thee our son. Call to mind that thou art a son of kings! See the slavery,—whom thou servest! Remember the pearl, for which thou wast sent to Egypt!’” The letter flew in the likeness of an eagle, alighted beside him, and became all speech. “At its voice and the sound of its rustling, I started and rose from my sleep. I took it up and kissed it, and I began and read it; and according to what was traced on my heart were the words of my letter written. I remembered that I was a son of

¹² Cf. Cumont, *op. cit.*, p. 450.

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royal parents, and my noble birth asserted its nature. I remembered the pearl, for which I had been sent to Egypt, and I began to charm him, the terrible loud-breathing serpent. I hushed him to sleep and lulled him into slumber, for my father's name I named over him, and I snatched away the pearl, and turned to go back to my father's house."¹³

The *Hymn of the Pearl* has a sequel (the "luminous garment" that the prince put off when he started on his journey to Egypt and finds again when he reaches home) which is not directly to our purpose. We may add that the themes of exile, captivity in a foreign country, the messenger who wakes the prisoner and urges him to set off, are also to be found in a short work by Suhrawardī, the *Recital of Western Exile*.¹⁴ We shall not here discuss the origin of the myth; it is probably Iranian. The *Hymn of the Pearl* has the value of presenting some of the most popular Gnostic motifs in a dramatic form. Recently Hans Jonas, analyzing the specifically Gnostic symbols and images, has stressed the importance of the motifs of "fall, capture, abandonment, home-sickness, stupefaction, sleep, drunkenness"¹⁵—a list too long to deal with here. We will merely cite a few especially suggestive examples.

Turning toward matter "and burning with the desire to experience the body," the soul forgets its identity. "She forgot her original habitation, her true center, her eternal being." It is in these terms that El Chātibi presents the central belief of the Harranites.¹⁶ According to the Gnostics men not only sleep but love to sleep. "Why will ye love the sleep, and stumble with them that stumble?" asks the *Ginza*.¹⁷ "Let him who hears wake from heavy sleep." In the *Apocryphon of John* it is written: "Let him who hears wake from heavy sleep."¹⁸ The same motif recurs in Manichaean cosmogony, as transmitted to us by Theodore bar Konai: "Jesus the Luminous went down to the innocent Adam and waked him from a sleep of death that he might be delivered."¹⁹ Ignorance and sleep are alike expressed in terms of "in-

¹³ H. Leisegang, *La Gnose*, (trans. Jean Gouillard [Paris, 1951]), pp. 247–48; Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism: A Source Book of Heretical Writings from the Early Christian Period* (New York, 1961), pp. 116 ff. G. Widengren, "Der iranische Hintergrund der Gnosis," *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte*, IV (1952), 111 ff., argues for the Iranian, probably Parthian, origin of this myth.

¹⁴ Henry Corbin, "L'Homme de Lumière dans le Soufisme Iranien," in the collective volume *Ombre et Lumière* (Paris, 1961), pp. 154 ff., with bibliographical references to his previous works.

¹⁵ *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1958), pp. 62 ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁸ Jean Doresse, *Les Livres secrets des Gnostiques d'Égypte*, I (Paris, 1958), 227.

¹⁹ Cumont, *Recherches sur le manichéisme*, Vol. I: *La cosmogonie manichéenne d'après Théodore bar Khôni* (Brussels, 1908), pp. 46 ff.; Doresse, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 235 ff.

toxication.” The *Gospel of Truth* compares one who possesses Gnosis to “a person who, having been intoxicated, becomes sober and having come to himself reaffirms that which is essentially his own.”²⁰ And the *Ginza* tells how Adam “awoke from his slumber and lifted his eyes to the place of light.”²¹

Jonas rightly remarks that, on the one hand, earthly life is defined as “abandonment,” “fear,” “homesickness,” and, on the other, is described as “sleep,” “drunkenness,” and “forgetfulness”: “that is to say, it has assumed (if we except drunkenness) all the characteristics which a former time ascribed to the dead in the underworld.”²² The “messenger” who “wakes” man from his sleep brings him both “life” and “salvation.” “I am the call of awakening from sleep in the Aeon of the night,” is the beginning of a Gnostic fragment preserved by Hippolytus (*Refut.* V, 14, 1). “Waking” implies *anamnesis*, recognition of the soul’s true identity, that is, re-cognition of its celestial origin. It is only after waking the man to whom he has come that the “messenger” reveals to him the promise of redemption and finally teaches him how to act in this world.²³ “Shake off the drunkenness in which thou hast slumbered, awake and behold me!” says a Manichaean text from Turfan.²⁴ And in another we find: “Awake, soul of splendor, from the slumber of drunkenness into which thou hast fallen, . . . follow me to the place of the exalted earth where thou dwelledst from the beginning.”²⁵ A Mandaean text tells of the celestial Messenger’s waking Adam and continues: “I have come and will instruct thee, Adam, and release thee out of this world. Harken and hear and be instructed, and rise up victorious to the place of light.”²⁶ The instruction also includes the injunction not to succumb again to sleep. “Slumber not nor sleep, and forget not that which thy Lord hath charged thee.”²⁷

Of course, these formulas are not used only by the Gnostics. The Epistle to the Ephesians (5:14) contains this anonymous quotation: “Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.” The motif of sleep and waking recurs in Hermetic literature. We find in the *Poimandres*: “O ye people, earthborn men, who have abandoned yourselves to drunkenness and sleep and to ignorance of God—become sober! cease from your intoxication, from the enchantment of irrational sleep!”²⁸

It is significant here that overcoming sleep and remaining awake

²⁰ Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 27 f.; Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

for a long period is a typical initiatory ordeal. It is already found on the archaic levels of culture. Among some Australian tribes novices undergoing initiation are not allowed to sleep for three days or are forbidden to go to bed before dawn.²⁹ Setting off on his quest for immortality, the Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh comes to the island of the mythical ancestor Utnaphishtim. There he must stay awake for six days and six nights; but he does not succeed in this initiatory ordeal and so loses his chance for immortality. In a North American myth of the Orpheus-and-Euridice type a man whose wife had just died managed to make his way down to the Underworld and find her. The Lord of the Underworld promises him that he may take his wife back to earth if he can stay awake all night. But the man falls asleep just before dawn. The Lord of the Underworld gives him another chance; and in order not to be tired the following night, the man sleeps all day. Nevertheless he does not succeed in staying awake until dawn, and he has to return to earth alone.³⁰

We see, then, that not sleeping is not merely conquering physical fatigue but is above all a proof of spiritual strength. Remaining "awake" means being fully conscious, being present in the world of the spirit. Jesus never tired of exhorting his disciples to watch (cf., e.g., Matt. 24, 42). And the Night of Gethsemane is made particularly tragic by the disciples' inability to watch with Jesus. "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me" (Matt. 26:38). But when he came back he found them sleeping. He said to Peter: "What, could ye not watch with me one hour?" (26, 40). "Watch and pray," he bids them once more. But in vain, for when he comes back he finds them "asleep again: for their eyes were heavy" (26:41-43; cf. Mark 14:34 ff.; Luke 22:46).

This time, too, the "initiatory watch" proved to be too difficult, beyond human capacity.

GNOSTICISM AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

There is not room here to discuss the entire problem of Gnosticism. We set out to trace the "mythology of Forgetting and Remembering" in some higher cultures. The Gnostic texts that we have quoted stress, on the one hand, the soul's fall into matter (life) and the mortal "sleep" that ensues, and, on the other hand, the soul's extraterrestrial origin. The fall of the soul into matter is not the result of an earlier sin, as Greek speculation sometimes explained transmigration. The Gnos-

²⁹ Cf. my *Birth and Rebirth* (New York, 1958), pp. 14 ff.

³⁰ Cf. my *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris, 1951), pp. 281 ff.

tics imply that the sin was committed by someone else.³¹ Since they are spiritual beings of extraterrestrial origin, the Gnostics do not admit that their home is “here,” in this world. As H. C. Puech notes, the key word in the Gnostic technical language is the “other,” the “stranger.”³² The crowning revelation is that “though he (the Gnostic) is in the world, moves in the world, he is not of the world, he does not belong to it, but he comes and is from elsewhere.”³³ The Mandaean Right-Hand *Gīnza* reveals to him: “Thou art not from here, thy root is not of the world” (XV, 20). And the Left-Hand *Gīnza* (III, 4): “Thou comest not from here, thy stock is not hence; thy place is the place of Life.” And we read in the *Book of John* (p. 67): “I am a man of the *Other World*.”³⁴

As we have seen, Indian philosophical speculation, especially Sāmkhya-Yoga, takes a similar position. The Self (*purusha*) is essentially a “stranger” and has nothing to do with the World (*prakṛti*). As Īśvara-kṛishna writes (*Sāmkhya-kārikā* 19), the Self (the Spirit) “is alone, indifferent, a mere inactive spectator” in the drama of Life and History. Indeed, he goes even further: if it is true that the cycle of transmigration is prolonged by ignorance and “sins,” the cause of the “fall of the Self” into life, the origin of the relation (which is, however, illusory) between the Self (*purusha*) and Matter (*prakṛti*) are insoluble problems, or, more precisely, insoluble in the present human condition. In any case, just as for the Gnostics it is not an original (i.e., human) sin that precipitated the Self into the round of existences.

For the purpose of our investigation, the importance of the Gnostic myth—and, with it, the importance of Indian philosophical speculation—lies primarily in the fact that the myth reinterprets man’s relation to the primordial drama that brought him into being. As in the archaic religions so for the Gnostic it is essential to know—or, rather, to recollect—the drama that took place in mythical Times. But, unlike a man of the archaic societies—who, learning the myths, assumes the consequences that follow from those primordial events—the Gnostic learns the myth in order to *dissociate himself from its results*. Once waked from his mortal sleep, the Gnostic (like the disciple of Sāmkhya-Yoga) understands that he bears no responsibility for the primordial catastrophe the myth narrates for him, and that hence he has no *real* relation with Life, the World, and History.

The Gnostic, like the disciple of Sāmkhya-Yoga, has already been punished for the “sin” of *forgetting his true Self*. The sufferings that

³¹ Cf. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York, 1959), p. 188, n. 16.

³² In *Annuaire du Collège de France*, 56. année (1956), p. 194.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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constitute every human life vanish at the moment of waking. Waking, which is at the same time an *anamnesis*, finds expression in an indifference to History, especially to contemporary History. Only the primordial myth is important. Only the events that occurred in the fabulous past are worth knowing; for, by learning them, one becomes conscious of one's true nature—and awakens. Historical events proper (e.g., the Trojan War, the campaigns of Alexander the Great, the murder of Julius Caesar) have no significance since they carry no soteriological message.

"ANAMNESIS" AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

For the Greeks, too, historical events carried no soteriological messages. Yet historiography begins in Greece, with Herodotus. Herodotus tells us why he went to the trouble of writing his *Histories*—so that the deeds of men should not be lost in the passage of time. He wishes to *preserve the memory* of what the Greeks and Barbarians did. Other historians of antiquity will write their works for different reasons: Thucydides, for example, to illustrate the struggle for power, a trait which he considered characteristic of human nature; Polybius to show that the whole history of the world converges toward the Roman Empire and also because the experience gained from studying history can be the best education for life; Livy in order to find in history "models for ourselves and for our country"—and so on.³⁵

None of these authors—not even Herodotus, with his passionate interest in exotic gods and theologies—composed his history in the way that the authors of the oldest historical narratives in Israel did—in order to prove the existence of a divine plan and the intervention of the Supreme God in the life of a people. This does not mean that the Greek and Roman historians were necessarily unreligious. But their religious conception had no place for the intervention of a single and personal God in history; hence they did not give historical events the religious meaning they had for the Jews. Then too, for the Greeks history was only one aspect of the cosmic process conditioned by the law of becoming. Like every cosmic phenomenon, history showed that human societies are born, develop, decay, and perish. This is why history could not be an object of knowledge. Yet historiography was useful, for it illustrated the process of eternal becoming in the life of nations, and especially because it preserved the memory of the exploits of various peoples and the names and adventures of outstanding personages.

It is not within the scope of this essay to examine the various philo-

³⁵ Cf. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1949), pp. 6 ff.

sophies of history, from Augustine and Gioacchino da Fiore to Vico, Hegel, Marx, and the contemporary historicists. All these systems set out to discover the *meaning* and *direction* of universal history. But that is not our problem. What is of interest to our investigation is not the meaning that *history* may have but *historiography* itself—in other words, the *endeavor to preserve the memory* of contemporary events and the desire to know the past of humanity as accurately as possible.

A similar curiosity has developed progressively ever since the Middle Ages and especially since the Renaissance. Certainly, in the time of the Renaissance ancient history was studied primarily for the sake of finding models for the behavior of the “perfect man.” Indeed we could say that, by supplying exemplary models for civic and moral life, Livy and Plutarch played the same role in the education of the European élites as myths did in traditional societies. But it is from the nineteenth century on that historiography has been led to play a role of primary importance. It seems as if Western culture were making a prodigious effort of historiographic *anamnesis*. It seeks to discover, “awaken,” and repossess the pasts of the most exotic and the most peripheral societies, from the prehistory of the Near East to that of “primitive” cultures on the verge of extinction. The goal is no less than to revive the *entire past of humanity*. We are witnessing a vertiginous widening of the historical horizon.

This is one of the few encouraging syndromes of the modern world. Western cultural provincialism—which began history with Egypt, literature with Homer, and philosophy with Thales—is being rapidly outmoded. But that is not all: through this historiographic *anamnesis* man enters deep into himself. If we succeed in understanding a contemporary Australian, or his homologue, a paleolithic hunter, we have succeeded in “awakening” in the depths of our being the existential situation and the resulting behavior of a prehistoric humanity. It is not a matter of a mere “external” knowledge, as when we learn the name of the capital of a country or the date of the fall of Constantinople. A true historiographic *anamnesis* finds expression in the discovery of our solidarity with these vanished or peripheral peoples. We have a genuine recovery of the past, even of the “primordial” past revealed by uncovering prehistoric sites or by ethnological investigations. In the last two cases, we are confronted by “forms of life,” behavior patterns, types of culture—in short, by the structures of archaic existence.

For millenniums man worked ritually and thought mythically concerning the analogies between the macrocosm and the microcosm. It was one of the possible ways of “opening oneself” to the World and,

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thereby, sharing in the sacrality of the Cosmos. Since the Renaissance, since the Universe proved to be infinite, this cosmic dimension that man ritually added to his life has been denied to us. It was to be expected that modern man, fallen under the domination of Time and obsessed by his own historicity, should try to "open himself" to the World by acquiring a new dimension in the limitless realm of Time. Unconsciously, he defends himself against the pressure of contemporary history by a historiographic *anamnesis* that opens perspectives he could not possibly suspect if, following Hegel's example, he had confined himself to "communing with the Universal Spirit" while reading his newspaper every morning.

To be sure, this is no new discovery: from antiquity, man consoled himself for the terror of History by reading the historians of past times. But in the case of modern man there is something more. His historiographic horizon being as wide as it has become, he is able, through *anamnesis*, to discover cultures that, though they "sabotaged History," were prodigiously creative. How vitally will it affect the life of a modern Westerner when he learns, for example, that though the Indian peninsula was invaded and occupied by Alexander the Great and though his conquest had a capital influence on its history, India has not even remembered the great conqueror's name? Like other traditional cultures, India is concerned with exemplary models and paradigmatic events, not with the particular and the individual.

The historiographic *anamnesis* of the Western world is only beginning. At least several generations must pass before its cultural repercussions can be gauged. But we may say that, though on a different plane, this *anamnesis* continues the religious valorization of memory and forgetfulness. To be sure, neither myths nor religious practices are any longer involved. But there is this common element: the importance of precise and total recollection of the past. In the traditional societies it is recollection of *mythical events*; in the modern West it is recollection of *all that took place in historical Time*. The difference is too obvious to require definition. But both types of *anamnesis* project man out of his "historical moment." And true historiographic *anamnesis* opens, too, on a primordial Time, the Time in which men established their cultural behavior patterns, even though believing that they were revealed to them by supernatural beings.