3 Belief in Anarchy: Robert Graves as Mythographer

I. MYTHOGRAPHY IN THE MODERN AGE

In the latter part of the seventeenth century an obscure but learned English parson described for his readers a pleasant garden. Walking in it, a sequestered homo beatus may, unawares, activate a hidden device and, to his delight, watch an elaborate machinery depict mythological characters and events before his eyes. He is charmed and appreciative of the ingenuity and pleasant digression.

The devout author of the book in which this description occurs was John Norris of Bemerton, a reclusive Cartesian philosopher dedicated to promoting in England the new critical method which was fast providing for Europe a persuasive, mechanistic interpretation of nature. At the same time, as a sincere country parson, Norris sought earnestly to demonstrate how the human soul remained mysterious, thereby distinguishing mankind from all else in the lower creation, and how the soul’s intuition of divine ideas is necessary to all that we know of nature. Predictably, Norris’ epistemology left him easy prey to the more sanely rational community of political arithmeticians headed by Locke and Newton, whose emphasis fell not on transcendent philosophy, but on empirical descriptions of human experience.

This out-of-the-way passage on John Norris’ garden puts clearly the problems facing any modern and post-Cartesian mythographer. The crucial point is Norris’ separation of mythology from nature, and his presentation of myth as a pleasant digression dictated and controlled by technology. Even an acute spiritual sense such as Norris enjoyed can find no real place for myth in nature regarded primarily as object and machine. Not surprisingly, the twentieth-century authors of *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680—1860* begin at the
period when John Norris was writing, for in England between 1600 and 1680 mythography turned decisively away from a universe of poetry (to adapt Robert Graves's distinction) to a universe of prose. Today, if he is to speak with authority, the mythographer must first face the critical world of scholarship and seek to epitomise his materials in relation to the findings of archaeologists, historians, etymologists, folklorists, antiquarians, and sundry experts whose technical vocabularies are the fruit of patient research based on scientific methods. Conscious of so much expertise, scholars have grown generally suspicious of the diverse universal theories and ‘exciting’ interpretations of myth which have burgeoned so variously in this century. Even the simple reporting and collection of myths, they point out, can reflect a compiler’s latent theoretical prejudice. Consequently, a rigorous scholar who puts a premium on fidelity and accuracy will tend to favour the ‘reliable’ account tramelled with circumspection. A good example is the influential work of H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London: Methuen, 1925: 6th ed., 1964). Rose claims his book supplies ‘an accurate account of Greek mythology, in accordance with the results of modern research’ (Preface, vii), and his careful weighing of evidence and tentative conclusions (stories of Triton’s body perhaps concern ‘large dried sea-beasts of some kind, probably improved by the addition of artificial parts’ [75]) are a model of positivist restraint and discrimination. Yet to maintain his stance as critical assessor, Rose must be content merely to ‘wish well to those who study the imagination’ (10), for he cannot himself indulge in speculations upon its workings.

In a brief but sharp review of Robert Graves’s *The Greek Myths*, Rose clarifies his position by complaining that Graves includes ‘sentimentalities of his own devising, legitimate enough in a work of the imagination, but quite out of place in a handbook of mythology, where a story should be told as the authorities tell it, or epitomised from their account.’ Although the word ‘imagination’ recurs here, its use in this and in the earlier passage is not quite identical: in the first instance Rose means by ‘those who study the imagination’, psychologists, and in the second, artists. Graves and Rose disavow psychologism in mythology — one of the few views they share — and maintain that the sublimed yet persistent spiritual, banished from nature by the scientific revolution, has nowadays reasserted itself widely as ‘archetype’ or interior drama, but remains uncomfortably separate from the world of nature outside the waking mind. Rose dislikes this because it is not objective, and Graves because it separates