

*Anthony Mountain*

## EDEN, A MODERN MYTH

Jacques Ellul says some extremely interesting things in his article on "Modern Myths".<sup>1</sup> Instead of following many thinkers in this area and asserting, for example, the historical revelation to consciousness of the truths apparently embedded in myths, Ellul approaches his subject from a much more immediate perspective. Myth, says Ellul, suggests what is profoundly felt to be true for those who actively hold to the myth. In this sense myth expresses an *hic et nunc* situation: "it is the image, deep within his [man's] mysterious self, his confrontation with a given reality", and as such, "cannot be . . . identical today and at other times" (24).

A simple way to understand this is to associate myth with deep belief or with fundamental and even unconscious assumption. By looking at myth in this way the transtemporal and transpersonal aspects of myth are replaced by considerations about the view of those in direct participation with a myth. Myth then refers to that which is actively believed in, assumed, or given unquestioned credibility to. As such it is at least partially unconscious or silent; in fact Ellul points out that when such belief is raised to the level of clear consciousness it runs the risk of critical scrutiny and may no longer remain credible. A current example of this would surely be our eroding faith in technological "progress".

Ellul's view of myth, however, need not be restricted to myths of technology, science, work, happiness, and the like. His assertion that myth expresses man's current confrontation with a given reality can be illustrated at a deeper level involving an older myth. I have in mind the myth we find in *Genesis*, the story of the Garden of Eden. On the face of it the story would appear to be nobody's myth (though we like to figuratively apply the "fall" to all sorts of situations). Yet I believe it expresses a truth which we in our

confrontation with reality find difficult to escape. What follows then is a brief analysis of that myth.

On one level the Garden of Eden story is a creation myth; what gets created is knowledge. We are told in the second chapter of *Genesis* that Adam and Eve could eat the fruit from any tree in the Garden except that from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam's primary task is to tend the Garden and he is given Eve to be a "help meet" for him. Since they are permitted to eat the fruit from the Tree of Life presumably Adam and Eve and the Garden are to endure forever (with the restriction, of course, that eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil will bring death). The situation seems to be that once creation is over then endurance in an unchanged state begins. Furthermore, Adam and Eve and the Garden exist as a piece, and even Adam's naming of the animals does not disturb this basic unity. Clearly, in a situation of changeless endurance Adam's act of naming is not an act of individuation in the sense that it allows one thing to have the possibility of changing in respect to something else. The reality of the Garden is holistic in nature; it is not piecemeal.

The story of the Garden of Eden is of course the story of the Fall. Now the Fall is always considered to be about a moral matter: man's self-willed defiance of God. And this interpretation has always restricted the theme concerning knowledge within the confines of a moral issue. To understand the story merely as illustrating the origins of the corruptibility of human nature is too make it vulnerable to all sorts of criticism, for the story appears insufficient for these purposes. One could point out, for example, that the Garden of Eden presumably operates under God's Natural Law—a Law which must also extend to Adam and Eve. And yet to insist that Adam and Eve are responsible for the consequences of a choice they alone made in eating the forbidden fruit is to insist that they enjoyed some measure of sovereignty. Further, it could be pointed out that if Adam and Eve were not fully aware of good and evil before eating the forbidden fruit then God is in the ludicrous business of tempting innocence. Clear and open choice *before* eating from the Tree of Knowledge hardly seems possible (could Eve seriously *refute* the serpent?). The issue is important in a matter regarding such large responsibility.

Such considerations become less important when the story is not read simply for the purposes of fixing moral culpability. Such a view, in fact, makes moral responsibility a highly ambiguous matter and inevitably clouds over the entire question of knowledge. When the serpent tells Eve to eat the

forbidden fruit, he explains that "in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil". The significance of the words "good" and "evil" inevitably leads us to suppose that the point here concerns a moral situation, and, as a result, we overlook the fact that the serpent is also suggesting something about knowledge: that it rests upon the significance of distinctions. To "know" good and evil is to unequivocally assert that the *difference* between them is the real issue at hand. The story tells us that when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and their eyes are "opened", they immediately see that they are different from each other. Now the story in no way suggests that knowledge suddenly "creates" this difference (God has already done that) any more than eating the forbidden fruit "creates" good and evil. Adam and Eve simply become *conscious* of difference, it becomes of immense significance; and it is this consciousness which is axiomatic to knowledge. It is its promise—or its curse.

It is hard not to suppose that at the moment in which Adam and Eve realize some significance in the fact that they are different individuals the entire Garden of Eden likewise falls into a collection of separable pieces. The story seems clearly to imply that the result of knowledge is not unity and wholeness but separation and distinction. If we take the Garden of Eden as a metaphor for a state of mind, we can say that Adam and Eve have passed from a consciousness in which they sense themselves only insofar as they are of a piece with their environment to a consciousness in which they are radically separated from their environment; it has become objective to them, reducible to parts, and so, knowable.

Adam and Eve's new form of life is now of course an altogether different one. God's curse is really the curse of knowledge, and the conditions of life outside the Garden are the conditions imposed by knowledge. The change is simply this: the condition of innocence is changeless contentment, its location is the Garden of Eden, it endures forever. The condition of knowledge is "sorrow", its location is the earth outside the Garden, and it is bound to time. Now time and knowledge have much the same character, for both are the recognition of difference, of separation. If individuation is the promise of knowledge, mutability is the promise of time. As the modern existentialists have repeatedly shown us, knowledge is the cognitive realization of separation while time is the actual experience of it.

But the analysis of the curse of knowledge goes deeper than this. Crucial to the story is the fact that the Tree of Knowledge lies within the Garden of Eden, that Adam and Eve's eyes are "opened" while they too are

within the Garden, and that God's curse is leveled upon them before they are expelled from the Garden. With all this taking place inside the Garden, the expulsion represents a loss to Adam and Eve in full awareness of what they have lost. Hence their former state clings with them even as they lose it. Because they "know" the Garden of Eden so they "know" their new, highly individuated state and, most importantly, they "know" the difference. Thus they do not fall but rather are forever falling. And it is this that makes the story a metaphor for knowledge itself. Knowledge promises to make known what is unknown, to make ours what we sense is separated from us, to make clear what is mysterious, to overcome the alienation that is inherent in an individuated world. But the promise can never be fully kept—at least on this side of Eden—for knowledge itself exists by virtue of the very breach it seeks to heal. Like Adam and Eve, we too seem always to be falling.

The point might be clearer if we take a closer look at God's curse. Obviously, knowledge complicated everything in the Edenic state. For example there is the problem of endurance. Since God had warned that death would result from eating the forbidden fruit, it is clear that He alone possesses both knowledge and immutable endurance (though the serpent had promised otherwise). For Adam and Eve then when permanence vanished, an uncertain life-time and the necessity for progeny took its place. Hence God's curse refers to three things: sex, nourishment, and death, and to these He appointed the character of "sorrow". To Eve He says, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee". Adam's curse concerns the ground which he must till for his nourishment—and eat "in sorrow"—and to which he must return at death.

We recall that the result of eating the forbidden fruit was not to make Adam and Eve different individuals but to bring about their own realization of that difference: it becomes significant to them. This engagement with the fact of difference is what makes departure from the Garden of Eden a loss: in experiencing the alteration of their living conditions they attest to the fact that that alteration matters. (After all, since the legacy of the acquisition of knowledge is the recognition of difference, it is hard to imagine Adam and Eve being oblivious to the changes in the conditions under which they must live. This is reinforced by the fact, as I have mentioned, that God spells out those changes while Adam and Eve are still inside the Garden.) The fact that they do care, cannot help but care, is the essence of the curse upon them and is what is referred to in the word "sorrow". For instance we are told that for

Eve sex is now a matter of sorrow as is the birth of her children. It is clear that unity, the condition of the Garden of Eden, is what is wished for, and separation is the condition of life; and the sense of the discrepancy between these two, the "sorrow" of life, must attend the necessary activities upon which life depends. The experience of physical union, the bliss of sexual ecstasy, is also the sure promise that it will be lost and wished for again. Eve's desire for her husband is the statement that she can only have him in order to lose him, and so also with her attachment to her children who are lost to her at birth. And Adam too is alienated from the very earth of which he himself is made, and he is forced to struggle with it to keep alive. Even nourishment reflects the grim circular dialectic to which they are bound, for hunger demands work which brings satisfaction but which itself does not exist without hunger.

The specific parts of God's curse are then but metaphors within a metaphor. They outline the details about the experience of living in a fragmented—and therefore knowable—world. The pattern is always the same: unity and separation, unity and separation. Just as knowledge depends upon the fragmentation which it seeks to bind, so unity in the experiences of life is impossible without its antithesis. This is the character of "sorrow" passed upon Adam and Eve: it is the dialectical tension which seems to be rooted in engagement with life, it is (to borrow a phrase from Camus) the state of "little ease".

We recall that Ellul pointed out that a myth expresses what seems utterly true for those who hold to that myth. Now there are those who feel that to experience most fully the tension of paradox, ambiguity, contradiction, of gain and loss, and simply the profound difference between things is most fully to experience life. For such people the story of the Garden of Eden is surely their myth. At bottom it expresses for them what the experience of life suggests to be fundamentally true; that time is irredeemable.

Ellul's article is entitled "Modern Myths" and it has perhaps seemed incongruous to use a discussion about "modern" myths as a starting point for an analysis of such an old story as the Garden of Eden. Ellul's perspective is, after all, pointing toward beliefs which are "current", and it is no wonder that much of his attention is concerned with myths of technology, work, science, and the like. But Ellul himself does not say that myths of this nature reflect beliefs which merely come and go with the passage of time. Rather he feels that they are particular manifestations of beliefs which, at their deepest level, mingle with more traditional mythical elements. Specifically, and to the point

here, he states: "The myth of Paradise Lost, which we will discover at the end of time, is directly related with the myths of progress and happiness" (p. 40).

I think Ellul's point that "modern" myths have a basis in older mythical belief is an interesting one, but it raises the problem of just how myths are linked together. Does some form of belief in Paradise Lost automatically ensure some form of belief in Paradise Regained? If we look at the matter in a linear perspective—are willing, with Carl Jung, for example, to see myth in a large space-time continuum—we will probably answer in the affirmative. Our approach will be less particular and individual and more "symbolic" and theoretical. But if we look vertically, "down" so to speak, as Ellul suggests, and grasp at myth from the view of active participation then the answer is more uncertain. Yet we gain an advantage from the vertical perspective for it breaks up the synthesis-making habit of mind which is the character of the linear, historical point of view.

Now it may be true to say that a scientist pursuing his profession is really acting out the ancient belief in a future regainable Paradise and that this is in no way disturbed by the fact that he is also acting on the belief that science in a very immediate way can benefit the world. But this in itself strikes me as a myth expressing our desire not only to be an integral part with our view of the reality around us but with the race of man at all times and even with the cosmos. We wish our connections not only to be immediate and particular but simultaneously vast, inclusive, and elemental. (And it is exactly *that* synthesis which is the real myth of Paradise Regained, of redeemable time.) My point is that such a synthesis might come about at the expense of the view of myth which Ellul's "vertical" perspective affords us. If our consideration is the entire race of man we are almost irresistibly drawn to feel that the myth of Paradise Regained (i.e., all our various myths of "progress") must respond to the myth of Paradise Lost. But if our consideration is more immediate and entails what is drawn from direct experience with reality, our conclusions are altered. If the story of the Garden of Eden is the myth of irredeemable time then it cannot be synthetically linked with myths of Paradise Regained: indeed that is its very point. When we face it directly as expressing some truth drawn from our confrontation with reality, the story of the Garden of Eden tells us that yesterday is forever gone, that change is simply "there" and inexorable, and that death (like a candle which merely goes out) irrevocably awaits us all—and that, in our "sorrow", we cannot help but wish and imagine it to be otherwise.

One thinks of writers such as Hume and Nietzsche or Dostoyevsky,

Sartre, and Camus when one thinks of the subject of irredeemable time, but most western thinkers have been on the other side. After all, the Judaic-Christian tradition has had pervasive influence on the matter. One need only point out that beginning with chapter four of *Genesis*—the advent of the generations of man—and running throughout both Old and New Testaments is the repeated assertion that time is purposive, directive, redeemable. And there are of course other than religious teleologies. For example Erich Neumann—a follower of Jung and the theory of “the collective background as a transpersonal reality”—feels that man is moving “in a direction fixed from the very beginning: toward the emancipation of man from nature and consciousness from unconscious”. Says Neumann, “the responsible *rapprochement* of human consciousness with the powers of the collective psyche, that is the task of the future”.<sup>2</sup>

The point is that Jungian psychology, religious and profane views of purposive time, idealist philosophies, ancient myths (such as myths of eternal return, birth and death of the Hero, seasonal and fertility myths), and even recent views on the integrated personality (Maslow’s “self-actualization”) all have the common character of being holistic in nature. As such they reflect a deep and abiding optimism, a belief in the truth of redeemable time. This nevertheless makes them the antithesis of the truth about knowledge reflected in the story of the Garden of Eden, for the latter knows unity only as the fleeting, if necessary, promise of fragments. It is tempting to feel that on some yet broader scale the story of the Garden of Eden embraces as well this last sorrow, the tension between redeemable and irredeemable time.

#### NOTES

1. Jacques Ellul, “Modern Myths”, *Diogenes*, 23 (1958), 23-40.
2. Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. F. R. C. Hull (New York: Pantheon, 1954), pp. 382, 393, resp.