



CAMILLA MAFFINELLI

BEGINNINGS

Narrations of Origins, Myths, and Literary Creation

ABSTRACT: Focusing on the recent critical debate on origins in general, this essay reviews the book *Myths of Origins: Literary and Cultural Patterns* (2024), edited by Emilia di Rocco and Chiara Lombardi, and underlines the manifold, extended impact of myths of origins as patterns of literary creation. Through a diachronic investigation of recurrent models of “beginnings” in philosophical and literary traditions, following the book’s structure and contributions, this essay tries to highlight the performative and metanarrative import implied in the artistic mimesis of origins, which, through the literary act, seems to produce metahistorical potentialities for renewal and re-creation.

KEYWORDS: Origin; Myth; Sublime; Creation; Comparative Literature.

“Beginning is not only a kind of action, it is also a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness. It is pragmatic [...]. And it is theoretical”, wrote Edward Said (1985 [1975]) in his volume dedicated to *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. It is precisely the semantic density of cosmogony that makes the volume edited by Emilia di Rocco and Chiara Lombardi, *Myths of Origins: Literary and Cultural Patterns* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2024), a valid investigation on the theme. Introducing a collection of various and critically complementary contributions, originally presented at the International European Society of Comparative Literature ESCL/SELC Conference, *Narrations of Origins in World Cultures and the Arts*, held at the University of Turin in May 2021, the text investigates the various relationships linking cosmogony and literary production as well as their manifold implications. Centering on the main focus of the volume, namely the universality of the myths of origins, interpretations touching different disciplines and geographical areas construct a complex and interdependent framework that demonstrates the fecundity of the theme, “a symbolic space never over-saturated with signs, full of potential creative and re-creative energy” (Lombardi 2022b, 45).¹

¹ The theme of beginnings as pattern of literary and artistic creation has also been debated in *Beginnings: Narrations and Re-Creations of Origins in Linguistics, Literature and Arts*, edited by Chiara Lombardi, in *Complit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society*, No. 3, Fall 2022. The same subject was at the core of *Questioning the Origins in European and American Culture*, edited by Paolo Bugliani and Cristiano Ragni, in *CoSMo | Comparative Studies in Modernism*, No. 21/Fall 2022.

Cosmogonic narratives have in fact constituted a constant and pervasive heritage in the history of Western thought, both as a literary subject and as the object of critical investigation. Considering the incessant human questioning and enquiring myths of origins deal with, and the abiding curiosity about the beginning and the destiny of humanity in the universe, these myths can be interpreted as “tales clearly perceived [...] as nonsecular” (Witzel 2012, 4), hence the constant topicality and the universality of their dissemination. As archaic cosmogonies have tried to understand the unknowable through the reiteration of the original act, the narrative process itself, as well as its metaliterary implications, has progressively gained critical attention.

Especially during the past two centuries, and following different approaches, many analyses have been dedicated to the meaning of mythological structures. From Max Müller’s etiological interpretation to the identification of psychological archetypes by C. Gustav Jung, not to mention the impact of functionalist and anthropological readings of cosmogonies, the history of myth criticism has shown the semantic depth of such narrative form. However, until recently, not many studies have focused on the role of cosmological myths as a landmark for cultural and literary theory and practice. It is precisely for this reason that the volume edited by Di Rocco and Lombardi constitutes a remarkable contribution to the field of comparative literature.

Myths of Origins

The volume opens with Piero Boitani’s essay, programmatically entitled “Principia”, and meant as a combination of beginning, first cause and basic constitutive element, a title which the author prefers over the more general human and natural phenomena implied in the notion of origin (2). A diachronic investigation of significant models that shaped the understanding of *principia* in the philosophical and literary tradition, from Aristotelian *Metaphysics* to the most recent cosmogonies of Raymond Queneau (*Petite cosmogonie portative*, 1950) and Italo Calvino (*Ti con zero*, 1967), Boitani’s enquiry constitutes a frame of reference for the contributions to the collection. Boitani’s overview of the traditional model of creation in Western thought particularly points out some implications of the semantic density of the notion of *principium*, as the author underlines the interrelation between the creator, the act itself, and the verbal element of mediation.

As Boitani maintains, in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the Muses of Helicon provide a foundation to the association between poetry and world creation. The two *principia* sung by the deities are echoed by the poet, who becomes the first interpreter of the performative and creative power of words. In his view, a further step is found in Plato, whose Demiurge “shaped the Western view of the cosmos” (6) as the artificer of a harmonious and good universe ruled by a mathematical structure. The creating figure

portrayed in *Timaeus* introduces indeed a fundamental consequence, that is, the ordering process leading out of original chaos often implied in cosmogonies. Therefore, Boitani's essay points out the main theoretical implications of the archetypal representation of beginning as a pattern of literary creation. The creating figure functions as a metanarrative allusion to the authorial figure, who, inspired by the wonder of the universe, similarly enacts and verbally interprets the transition from original disorder to the logical structure of the universe.

Imposing a mental design on chaotic and inert matter also lies at the core of Silvia Romani's essay, "Irrelevant Bodies: The Creation of Woman as a Model of Post-natural Creation". Romani focuses on the prototypical female figure of Greek mythology, who is nameless in Hesiod's *Theogony* and is later identified as Pandora, whose "mechanical and non-anthropized" birth (30) stands between the parthenogenetic and the corporal genesis of human lineage. By centering on "The Wonder of Creation: Robert Holcot's *Commentary to the Book of Wisdom*", Emilia di Rocco provides a further example of the pervasive dissemination of ancient models of creation in the Middle Ages. The author investigates the connections between creation, moral life and wisdom in Holcot's *Commentary*, in which Greek and Latin classics and Christian exegesis converge (40). The influence of classical tradition is evident when Holcot represents the creating God as similar to Plato's Demiurge, inspired by beauty and goodness by which men can pursue wisdom and virtue. It is only through the astonishment and wonder experienced in admiring the product of the creator, who "just as the artist, creates a work of art" (48), that man can know God. Reinterpreting Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Holcot thus recognises beauty and wonder as the "origin of philosophy", hence the philosophical nature of the author who is "at the origin of man's journey towards God" (49).

The platonic Artifex is also the underlying model of Shakespeare's Prospero according to Cristiano Ragni, whose essay "Shakespeare Demiurge: New Origins and Old Tricks in *The Tempest*" focuses on the similarities as well as on the differences between Prospero and the Platonic deity. "Confirming the potential of such heritage as a pattern for novel literary creations" (83), the essay focuses on the analogy between "Plato's Demiurge, who did not create the world out of nothing but 'took over all that was'" (80) and the protagonist of Shakespeare's play, a narration about "chaos being tamed and order being restored" (89).

If we consider Ragni's and Di Rocco's contributions, which are informed by the Platonic genetic model of an ordering artificer who shapes the pre-existing chaos, mythological tales appear as structurally reflected in the mimetic subordination of art to nature. Chiara Lombardi maintains that the Renaissance constitutes a turning point in the relationship between the cosmic, the human and the divine. In "From Chaos to Light: Creation and Re-Creation in Michelangelo, Ronsard, and Shakespeare", the author diachronically reconstructs the reciprocal influence of the creation model and the artistic

interpreter. As the “early modern notion of artist [...] will be compared either to a Platonic demiurge or to an *artisan*”, the incremented autonomy of the subject from divinity progressively defines a new aesthetic theory in which art “does no longer imitate nature by playing a subordinate role but according to a genetic process that runs side by side with nature” (55-56). Hence the new conception of authorship and the artist, the only one who can not only reproduce, but also enact the pattern of creation in the artistic process.

A mediating role in the changing and new interpretations of the figure of the poet is to be found in the semantic core of the sublime, as investigated in “Origins, Authorship, and the Sublime Between Late Antique Theory and Renaissance Hexameral Poetry” by Irene Montori. Focusing on Renaissance literature, she identifies, in the re-discovery of Longinus’s text *Peri hupsous* in sixteenth-century Italy, one of the elements contributing to the development of a new poetic individuality. Commenting on the *Fiat lux* in *Genesis* (I.III), Longinus stages the divine power: “God said -what? ‘Let there be light’ and there was light, ‘let there be earth’, and there was earth. (*On the sublime* 9.9)”. The biblical reference represents the archetypal convergence of poetic word and divine word in becoming a creative act, which constitutes the novelty of Longinus’s contribution, namely the suggestion of “the extraordinary creative power of the ingenious artist” (95). By analysing two case studies, Tasso’s *Il mondo creato* (1594) and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), the essay reconstructs the “shift in the source of poetic inspiration: from being universal and located outside the author [...] to the claim that the source and meaning of the literary text lie in the originality of the poet” (96). Despite the differences between Tasso’s and Milton’s poems, the main point emerging from the interrelation between the classical sublime and the early modern author is the role of the unrepresentable in poetic activity. Synthesising the impossibility of representation and the simultaneous desire for conceptualisation, the sublime conveys and mediates the two moments experienced by the artist facing God’s creation. In facing the wonder of the cosmos, the poet is subjected to the “emotional experience that fills [...] the poet [...] with astonishment”, which Tasso defines *meraviglia* (101). According to the Italian author, the poet’s peculiar ability is to reproduce the wonders of creation and let the audience perceive them through his work of art. Milton further develops the authorial features and represents himself as a proper “poet-prophet”, an authentic and original interpreter who is inspired by the biblical creation and can re-enact it (114-115). The progressive autonomy of the modern author is thus asserted in the power of original and personal re-creation by which he can come to terms with the unknown of origins.

The reference to *Paradise Lost*, and in particular to Milton’s focus shift “from the divine origins of the world to the artist’s creation of the poem” (116), introduces the premises to Riccardo Antonangeli’s essay, “Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* and the Origins of Creation: Fiery Aether and the Examples of Dante and Lucretius”. A

diachronic review of the Prometheus figure through the ages, the essay suggests his archetypal connecting role between mythical narrative and creation (123), and shows the differences ascribable to diverse cultural climates and metaphysical frames of reference. Published in 1820, Shelley's version of the myth stages the coincidence between the experience of wonder generated by the miracle of cosmos, and modern poetry's "potential to re-create the universe and revive Creation, not as a mere repetition of God's act but as a new veritable, absolute origin" (127). The sublime and the creative and re-creating autonomy of the human artist in the age of progress, therefore, collaborate in reintroducing the process of genesis in the immanence of science to the detriment of metaphysics. Influenced by Bacon's interpretation of the myth of Prometheus as an allegory of progress, Shelley definitively replaces the divine figure with the poet-creator, removing the creative and tyrannical Zeus of Aeschylus' original version (*Prometheus Bound*) and transforms it into mundane natural principles.

Shelley's example of creation increasingly acquiring human features, as further developed by his wife Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), is a manifestation of the cultural season dominated by scientific thought, in which the traditional "Creationist *imaginaire*" will be irreparably challenged by the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) (Boitani, 16). Despite competition from branches of science "in the search for the principle of life" (121), in the modern world, myths have maintained a relevant though paradoxical status, as explained by Riccardo Capoferro in his essay "The Shade of Mr. Kurtz: *Heart of Darkness* as (Modern) Myth". In analysing Joseph Conrad's literary work, the author provides an interpretation of the role of mythical tales in contemporary culture as "archaeological objects", considered as "vestiges of earlier stages of culture" (166). Obsolete as objects of belief in the "logical thinking and empirical knowledge" modernity is based on, mythical thinking survives and adapts to the novel historical awareness as a new form of narrative (166). Not only myths survive as an answer to shared needs (169), but they are also "built into our knowledge of the world and find new incarnations in imaginary figures" (170). Capoferro introduces Mircea Eliade's metahistorical theory to suggest the metaphorical essence of modern myth, as well as its memorial and linguistic implications.

In "The Myths of Origins in Hegel and Heidegger", Paolo Diego Bubbio precisely investigates the shift produced by Hegel and, later, by Heidegger, as to the message conveyed to narrative structure. Despite the differences between the two philosophers' approaches to mythological tales, they both interpret them as concerning the relation between nature and history, and as a way of manifesting the experience of subjectivity (180). In their examinations, they concentrate on the "historicity of the sign [...] and the historicity of what it signifies" (183), interpreted as "not mere 'inventions', but 'products of a thinking which is not pure thinking but uses imagination as its tools'" (181). Reactivating the traditional opposition between *logos* and *mythos* in relation to the notion

of truth, Hegel recognises in myth a figural truth, which consists in the mediating manifestation of the early activity of “reason on its way to self-knowledge” (182). Heidegger similarly connects myths of origins with “the primordial struggle of human beings with nature” (188), acknowledging their mythological truth in the “pre-philosophical account of the world that is neither objective nor subjective, and that can therefore work as a model for a post-metaphysical way of thinking” (189). Hegel’s and Heidegger’s interpretations are the centre of some of the main implications of myths of origins as a pattern of literary creation, among which the metaphorical and metahistorical meaning of the mythological tale takes its place.

Luigi Marfè’s contribution, “Following the Songlines: Myths and Creation in Bruce Chatwin’s and Wim Wender’s Works” connects back to the semantic core of the performative linguistic recreation of the world. Focusing on Bruce Chatwin’s *The Songlines* (1987) and Wim Wenders’ *Until the End of the World* (1987), the author reconstructs the Australian aboriginal affinities between creative and narrative power as materialised in their “dreaming tracks” (197). As the actions of singing and creating attests to the meta-poetic analogies “between cosmogonic myths and the process of artistic creation” (207), testified by the fact that “no one knows whether the Ancestors first sang what they created or first created what they sang”, Wenders’ movie unrolls a ‘vertical’ travel toward a metaphysical dimension, where the ‘end’ of the title and the ‘origins’ of the myth seem to find a sort of fleeting compromise” (207). Therefore, the persistent liveliness of mythology can be identified in the historical subversion, namely in the actualizing ability of the creative process. As Chatwin recognises, “by singing the world into existence, the ancestors had been poets in the original sense of *poiesis*, meaning creation” (202).

A linguistic confirmation of the performative potentiality of language is advanced by Marianna Pozza’s linguistic analysis. In “Transparent Words: The Multidimensional ‘Myth of Origin’ of Naturalness in Ancient Indo-European Languages”, the scholar historically investigates ancient Indo-European and Semitic languages to highlight how the verbal forms of the origins attempted to make language itself accessible and comprehensible through figurative transfiguration. Linguistic signs, not motivated by referent-signifier ontological ties, were thus clarified through structures that practically showed how they function, while at the same time thematizing the metalinguistic value of expressions. Hence the proliferation of practical definitions, conceptual metaphors that could compensate for the arbitrariness of the earliest linguistic correlation to reality (247-248). These premises lead to two interrelated consequences emerging in Pozza’s essay. “The notions ‘speak, say’ and ‘enlighten, shine’ constitute [...] a homotopic semiotic-semantic field in which the word is derived from light and the ‘saying’ [...] consists in the act of making the referent shine, giving it life, putting order into chaos” (248). Explicating its shared semantic core, the analysis thus reconstructs the analogy

between the performative power of language, which creates reality, and the cosmogonic process of getting order out of chaos (251).

Mirko Lino's contribution is located at the intersection of the two essays previously mentioned. "The Cave and the Mirage: Mythologies of the Origin of the World and Cinema in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and *Fata Morgana* by Werner Herzog" analyses the suspended time in which "genesis is mirrored by the myth of the apocalypse" in Herzog's visual "dialogue with anthropological structures, presenting the endurance of the cults, rites and myths on the plane of continuity[...] in their precarious nature facing the passage of the time" (255). Highlighting the symbolic form of the director's cinematic image, the author reconstructs Herzog's archaeological investigation of the link between the genealogy of cinema and the Platonic myth of the cave. The creative and re-creative potential of artistic activity, aimed at "mimetically represent[ing] reality in order to control rather than sacralise it" (262), is therefore at the origin of the chronological circularity in which beginning and end concur.

The duality between mimetic representation and aesthetic artifice is also the thematic core of the following essay, devoted to Cesare Pavese's interpretation of mythical poetry. Starting from the idea that rewriting myths is "the only way to re-create the feeling experienced in childhood, i.e. the meaningful origin of both interior life and literary imagination" (212), in "Monstruous Origins: Pavese, Hesiod and the Power of Monsters", Salvatore Renna re-reads *Dialoghi con Leucò* (1947) through the hermeneutic key figure of Prometheus. The reference to Hesiod's hero is relevant not only to demonstrate its diffusion in the literary history of Western thought, but also to outline the interpretative malleability to which it can be subjected. Pavese's reception of Prometheus' myth transfigures the scientific framework implied in Shelley's version, in order to address the deep nature of humanity, which is portrayed as a melancholic and tired resignation facing up to Fate. Nevertheless, the author resumes the eternal return of the original narrative just to maintain and explicate the hidden titanic chaos affecting human destiny (217). Therefore, once again mythical language is the only medium to understand and vehiculate the eternal "deep nature of humankind, both ancient and modern", namely "a nature never fully separated from its ancient, savage and Titanic side" (220).

The final section of *Myths of Origins* is devoted to the most recent manifestations of the mediating role of cosmogonies as a pattern of literary creation. Francesca Medaglia's "Mythology in Transmedia Storytelling" concentrates on the *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) film series to highlight its potentiality to re-elaborate mythological models. Focusing in particular on the permanence of religious, traditional and literary archetypes in the saga, Medaglia dwells on the semantic possibilities implied in transmedia narratives, in which the intersection of the media can reflect and reinforce the "fluidity of contemporary storytelling" (223).

In the end, Elena Spandri devotes her contribution to “The Story that Gave His Land Its Life: The Legend of Bon Bibi in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sundarbans Trilogy*”, a tale in which climatology, nature, history and origins are intertwined in a folkloric and symbolic narrativization. Ghosh’s book functions as a modern myth. In responding to the challenge of redefining the terms of coexistence between humankind and nature, it represents the “parable for contemporary worlds” through the disruption of “traditional Western distinctions between subjects and objects, human and non-human” (281). Introducing Ernesto de Martino’s notion of “progressive folklore”, by which he means the “subaltern and creative set of beliefs and social practices that resist hegemonic worldviews and mediate the terms of the relationship between nature and culture” (278), the author summarises and highlights some of the most relevant theoretic implications of the cosmogonic narrative.

In conclusion, a plurality of temporal and typological tensions animates the myth of origins the volume investigates, suggesting not only its semantic and historical density but also the plurality of features that define the archetypal fecundity of the theme. The creation narrative in particular demonstrates its potential as a pattern of literary composition. The performative and metaliterary possibilities grant artistic mimesis a re-creative circularity that finds constant actualisation in the origin, as the chaos of origins becomes the starting point for staging creation and at the same time re-creating it. The collection therefore investigates the potential renewal of the present performed in the ambivalence between beginning and end, specific to the artistic act, following Shelley in suggesting that “poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors, and musicians, are in one sense the creators, and in another the creations, of their age” (134).

REFERENCES

- AESCHYLUS. 2008. *Prometheus Bound*, ed. A. H. Sommerstein. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press: Loeb.
- ARISTOTLE. 1989. *Metaphysics*, ed. H. Tredennik. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press.
- BUGLIANI, P. RAGNI, C. (eds.). 2022. "Questioning the Origins in European and American Culture." *CoSMo | Comparative Studies in Modernism* 21/Fall. Turin: Centro studi "Arti della modernità".
- CALVINO, I. 1967. *Ti con zero*. Turin: Einaudi.
- CHATWIN, B. 1987. *The Songlines*. New York: Viking/Penguin.
- DARWIN, C. 2008 [1859]. *On the Origin of Species*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DI ROCCO, E., LOMBARDI, C. (eds.). 2024. *Myths of Origins: Literary and Cultural Patterns*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- HESIOD. 2006. *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*. Ed. G. W. Most. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- LOMBARDI, C. (ed.) 2022a. "Beginnings. Narrations and Re-Creations of Origins in Linguistics, Literature and the Arts." *CompLit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society* 1, 3.
- . 2022b. "The Origin is Sublime!" *CoSMo | Comparative Studies in Modernism* 21/Fall: 37-51. Turin: Centro studi "Arti della modernità".
- LONGINUS. 1995. *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe, rev. D. A. Russel, Loeb Classical Library 199. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MILTON, J. 1998 [1667]. *Paradise Lost*, ed. A. Fowler. Harlow: Longman.
- PAVESE, C. 1999 [1947]. *Dialoghi con Leucò*. Torino: Einaudi.
- QUENEAU, R. 1950. *Petite cosmogonie portative*. Paris: Gallimard.
- SAID, E. 1985. *Beginnings. Intention & Method*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- SHELLEY, M. 2018 [1818]. *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*. Ed. N. Groom. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SHELLEY, P.B. 1968 [1820]. *Shelley's Prometheus Unbound. The Text and the Drafts*. Ed. L. J. Zillman. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- TASSO, T. 2006 [1594]. *Il mondo creato*. Ed. P. Luparia. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.
- WITZEL, M.E.J. 2012. *The Origins of the World's Mythologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.