Part One

MYTH AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Each chapter concludes with suggestions for writing, and for readings of old, new and critical texts.
CREATION MYTHS

The Tongue of Mist (by A.M.)

Driving home at dawn
I pulled over to a lay-by
because a tongue of grey, silvery mist
was curling around the river Colne
waiting, its dark body gone with night
close by the pallid movement of cars

On cue, the sun appeared
and, having spoken its ethereal mystery
of the ordinary, miraculous day’s arrival
in a breath of light, the tongue of mist
vanished away

Who am I to deny
being bespoken fresh
in Remembrance Avenue
beside the dumb intention of traffic
on just another Monday morning?

This poem of dawn, perhaps a most obvious theme, nevertheless attempts
to give a sense of the wonder of creation, of the mystery of life itself,
embodied in a natural image. The language of creation is one of wonder, of
dark and light, of experiencing something beyond, but close to, the bounds
of normal human experience. This is the language of myth and the language
of religious myth. Writers, in their attempts to make the world fresh, take part
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in the same ritual enactment, the same ‘tongue’ which speaks the world into existence.

Listening to Leonard Cohen’s song ‘Love Itself’ (Ten New Songs, 2001) likewise gives us a sense of the wonder and mystery of creation, of life itself. Watching motes of matter in a shaft of sunlight, Cohen uses familiar words of creation stories, as he talks about light and form and naming, as if the world is again speaking itself into creation, a process which the writer shares. Creation is bringing shape from what is shapeless and identity to what is unknown, showing the mystery and the difficulty of negotiating these boundaries between what we are and how we got here. Far beyond any scientific or religious ideals, we feel the need to give voice to this first question, to acknowledge and rehearse its careful move into life and to re-enact its strangeness, and the feeling that we are in a state of continual becoming.

If that was a bit too mystical, I make no apology. Creation, despite our endless attempts, embraces and rejections of it, is what we are trying to do, and what, despite us, must retain its urgency and mystery. We want the flower to grow, the bird to sing, so we must move to the mythic tune, like it or not. Creation is both familiar, in the sense that we do it all the time, and properly strange, so that it gives freshness and wonder, even by a main commuter road, on a dull, busy morning. We are existing and creating, however small and seemingly insignificant the signs of this seem. The use for this feeling to writers is to show us how crucial attention to detail is, how we must slow down and allow things to emerge and how to see things as strange. Literary criticism calls this ‘defamiliarisation’, which is a translation of the Russian Formalists’ ‘making strange’.

Creation texts remind us too of how it is to write and know writings; both familiar and strange. In the West, this is especially true of Genesis in the King James Bible. Even if we do not know it directly, our culture is still saturated with Genesis’ imagery, so we feel we know it somehow, just as we feel we know the cadences of the wonderful use of language by the translators of the King James’ version. This is true, even if the contempt of familiarity is often more palpable than a useful possibility of wonder. If we do remember this text, we might see it merely as a kind of statement of authority, with a commanding and dogmatic tone. But the ‘in the beginning’ bit, which began, we are told, as a chant or song, is also full of a sense of goodness, fertility and the richness of life. ‘And the Spirit... moved upon the face of the waters... Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness’ (1:2–4). The wonder in
this song reminds us that, as writers, we must take it mythically, see it as strange as it is, whatever else we see or do not see in it.

Man is soon to be made as an ‘image’, in chapter one, as an idea, a likeness of creation. The whole beginning is full of a kind of innate goodness, before the creation of evil. We might feel divided in our ideas about our own, sometimes disowned creation story, but ‘division’, workable opposition is both a source of creativity and a presence in chapters one and two of Genesis. We writers need to find the tensions in our subjects.

A few verses into chapter two, it can be a shock to see that, despite our prejudices, we get a very different, second creation story, where man, reminding us of Cohen’s song, is made ‘of the dust’ (2:7). We are the result of division, which is the move from chaotic stasis towards the possibility of change and growth, of definite and growing existence. Like the editors who assembled Genesis from various texts, we are ‘in the beginning’ and sometimes in two minds. We are material and materialists, in ‘dust’ (second Genesis creation) and we are our story of ourselves, in ‘image’ (first Genesis creation). Our ambivalence, our comparative way of thinking and writing, our minds and our bodies, our ‘image’ and ‘dust’ are no small things. These first stories feel like all stories, full of resistance and possibility and our scepticism is part of the process. We are like the editors, trying out alternate stories. Creation might need to be authoritative for us, where we work with these wonderful ambiguities, as we split from oneness into movement, into growth. The state of continual creation is growth and rebirth.

The world is full of change, of creation and we writers must notice the continual movement away from the static in opinion and in time. Writers try to explore and explain the changes the world is full of, in its state of creation.

Looking at the less familiar, in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the Greek classic of the gods’ creation, we notice the language of creation recurs. In Dorothea Wender’s translation (*Hesiod and Theognis*, 1973), the request for a ‘sweet song’ gives the sense of goodness and richness from the first line, which asks the Muses to ‘celebrate’ the creation of the gods. We have ‘the beginning’, the ‘Night’ and ‘the Sea’. ‘From Chaos came black Night/ And night in turn gave birth to Day and Space’: this gives us the sense of division. The seventh meaning of ‘division’ in the *OED* gives a fourteenth-century musical term ‘divisions’ as being the art of variation on a theme, what we might call improvisation. This came from playing longer notes instead of shorter ones, to make playing easier, and then dividing the notes became the art of variation. The space was available to create within. This is what a modern musician
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might call ‘breaking it down’ to recreate the groove. Creation is the art of selecting, of dividing, of recombining, seen this way.

The same kind of language and divisions give us a sense of wonder through the song, the night and the sea, plus we can take from here the idea of combining strange things, with an infinite sense of possibility.

Evil soon appears in the Theogony, as it does in Genesis, but much earlier, and evil is seen as a kind of return to chaotic stasis. Giants and monsters appear, a whole other subject, but often there shortly after creation. Evil seems to be trying to stop or control creation here and the weird nature of creation myth shows itself in the harvesting of the controlling male’s genitals (misused tools of creation) and the birth of a goddess of love, the renewal of the earth and creativity. In this strange tale of innocence and experience, love and the feminine triumph and the sense of possibility is palpable, as it is in Genesis. Creation is for awe and wonder at life and its mysterious arrival. For writers, it is a reminder that to bring our work to life, we need to take part in the ritual of creation. With change, as we describe it, the possibility of evil is always present, as possible as good. Creation can give us writers the sense that innocence and evil are always near at hand, as perhaps they are. In creation, they are always there for us.

Turning to Ovid, we find that the great Latin poet’s collection of old myths also begins with a creation story. His Metamorphoses calls on the Muses, as Hesiod does and talks in the familiar language of chaotic unity. In A.D. Melville’s translation (1986), there is ‘chaos’, everything is ‘all one’ and ‘undivided’. From a writer’s point of view, negatives are used to define the great absence before life begins. Verse two of the opening of Genesis says that ‘the earth was without form, and void’, while Ovid does his ‘ex nihilo’ (out of nothing) thing too: ‘No foot could tread, no creature swim the sea.’ Imagining what is not would be a useful starting place for writing. Describing what is not is very evocative and very useful: ‘No love, no hope, no beer’, we might write. A world of stasis is a world without the possibility of change, division, creation itself.

Ovid, like us, is uncertain about gods, but names ‘whatever god it was’, using his sophisticated Latin ambiguity, before having man created as image again ‘in the likeness of the gods’, as ‘the unknown form of humankind’. The double mystery of form, as dust, and image, in ‘the unknown’ reminds us again of the dividing negotiation of creation.

As Karen Armstrong says in her exploration of Genesis In the Beginning (1996), we keep on dividing and we keep on creating in the flow of creative movement between our night of dust and our day of image. The uncertainty
is part of the movement and the process, like the uncertainty of the writer starting a new work. Writers can write usefully about the divide between conflicting states, when idea and reality conflict.

As can be told from the above, it is hard to talk about this stuff except in its own terms, but when we talk about creation myths, we talk about writing. In Dudley Young’s, *Origins of the Sacred* (1991) chapter one: 1, among other vital things, he speaks of science as being concerned with the known, while myth deals with how we work, or think, or write and ‘the intersection of the known with the unknown’. ‘Science’, he says, ‘is uneasy with beginnings’, while myth explains them in process and tells us, significantly for writers, *how* to start. Science has a problem with ending too, and the facts need their process of happening, which is their story, or myth. Scientists must respect the creating writer for asking awkward questions of it, with our older, mythic mode of understanding. ‘Once upon a time’, Young says, is our ‘way of bridging the gap between non-being and being’ and makes us wonder, as all good creation stories do, about losing our sense of wonder. Writers have to begin and end and have to feel some wonder, however ambivalent it might be. ‘Life takes on meaning and value in the light of death’, Young says and the division here is echoed in the ‘liberating’ and ‘disturbing’ qualities of science, which takes us into space and yet can take away our wonder, until we feel that ‘if “anything goes”, the nothing need do’. This kind of modern banality, or empty certainty means ‘we are encouraged to forget that we owe the gods a death’. Scientists themselves remind us now that there is a limit to our story, and that pollution, a very ancient word and one of the ‘home truths’ of the ‘primitive mind’, still counts, or even counts more today, and we need to attend to our creation of the world and to our sense of creativity.

Scientists are good characters to use to explore these creative conflicts, as much sci-fi has shown and science can show both the open mind and the closed in internal battle, which might be the battle of our time.

Before suggesting some direct ways of moving towards the creation of creation, I will leave the last word of this section to part of Tom Chetwynd’s entry on ‘Creation Myths’, full of awe and warnings, from his book *A Dictionary of Symbols* (1982), which, like Dudley Young’s work, has much to say on the subject. Chetwynd again reminds us how creation is an essential part of our being and about how we see ourselves in the world. A writer, or a character created, can seem to lose control, shrug off the stasis of pre-creation and be transformed and re-create the self. When we move to write, we move to create, to bring ourselves into being, or back into being.
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The work of bringing unconscious content into the light of consciousness also transforms man’s dark negative feelings of being lost in an alien cosmos. Man orientates himself by means of mental concepts such as order, direction, boundaries, which transform his experience of the cosmos from being terrifying, confusing, or just strange: and relate him to his environment.

But this systematising can be overdone, and it may be that modern man needs to rediscover the impact of direct experience. His conscious control is so tight that the real experience of life eludes him: he is no longer disturbed by sleep where space and time dissolve and slip away into nothing, to be partially replaced by the chaotic disorder of the unconscious otherworld of dreams. He is all too sure of his limited Ego world, and so can hardly grasp his precarious position semi-stuck to a big ball of fiery mud, spinning through endless space and time. But in reality his position is no different from that of primitive man, only his focus of attention has changed.

Creation lists

Creation is the movement from unknown to known, from unconscious to conscious.

You can use these lists as an overview, and/or in the way the italic instructions after each of the three indicate.

Types of creation myth:

1. Primary (worlds/ universes/ from chaos/ ex nihilo).
3. Creativity myths (about art/ expression/ suppression/ fertility).
5. Anti-creation myths (destruction/ Armageddon/ apocalyptic/ end of world).

Choose one, or combine two or more, to create your own creation myth.

What are creation myths for?

1. Awe: where does life come from? The World, and beyond the material.
2. Seeking meaning through stories.
4. Relation to self and other.
5. Sense of connection.
7. Enjoy and endure.
9. Imagination creating the world.
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10. Something to compare ourselves with.
11. Abstract to concrete/ division.
   Choose or combine meanings to convey through your myth.

Some elements of creation myths:

1. Order from chaos/ abstract to concrete/ beginnings.
2. Division/ night and day/ earth and heavens/ seasons.
3. Grand, poetic language, repeating motifs/ phrases, invoking the Muse(s).
4. What is not there before.
5. Beings created.
7. Giants/ monsters/ evil comes into the world.
8. Perfection/ innocence at the beginning.
11. Second being/ huge being(s) divided.
   Choose or combine the elements you will use or combine to use.

WRITERS BEGINNING

Trouble’s Coming Home (by A.M.)

Hey Layla, Goddess, Princess of song
Sing me one of Trouble, the Changing Man
Big T, what a priceless bastard he was!
He went off in all directions
after he’d smashed the Troy-boys in the War
He met everyone, he knew everyone
he went everywhere. Nearly smashed himself
in the giant freak waves far out at sea
Cos he’s trying to get him and his mates
to coming home from the War
Trouble’s coming home but his mates
never made it. The mad fuckers ate
someone’s sacred cows for real and
that was them bolloxed for good
Sing us all this mad but true stuff
Daughter of God, whatever
way you want it . . .
To talk about creation is to talk about beginning to write and the writing of beginnings. How Homer begins the *The Odyssey* is a classic, epic opening, a ‘proem’, an invocation of the Muses and has many elements of a good beginning for a writer of a mythic tale, which survives even in the above, deliberately provocative version. It starts in the middle, as epics must. ‘In medias res’, from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, means ‘into the midst of things’. Odysseus (‘Trouble’ in the version above) has been away ten years and it will take him ten years to get home. Here is a character sketch of a cunning, troubled man, a build-up, a summary of the story, an indication of the themes of war, seafaring, journeying home (a creative redefining of purpose), adventures to come, trouble with the gods and with his comrades. If we can get all that in ten lines, in the original Greek, as expanded to seventeen above, we are doing well in our own start of creativity. The language and the character are obviously heroic, big, ‘priceless’, the tone of the whole is there from the first and a world is created for the reader to explore.

We must be brave and creatively bold in our creative beginnings. Practise by finding a famous beginning or classic quotation and brutally rewriting it, to see what can happen, or write a boastful, ‘who’ did this, and ‘who’ did that introduction to a character, for example.

The invocation of the Muse is a whole subject in itself, but is a feature of epic poetry. For writers now it could represent the help needed from the mysterious, for what is other to us, in creation. ‘Layla’, probably after Eric Clapton’s song, is the modern form of ‘Leila’, a dark and mysteriously inspiring Arabic muse-like figure, which seemed a current equivalent to use in the ‘Muse, tell through me’ opening, which could be a more literal translation of the start of *The Odyssey*. We summon help from the unknown, from the unconscious. This is the first connection between myth and the creative process, that of the Muses who create, metaphorically or for real, the kind of spell or trance we need to get to our creative selves. Writers can invent or include their own muse characters. We need someone who invites mystery and that could be the most unlikely person perhaps. Try inventing one for any writing being worked on, to use in creating, or within the work itself.

There are many explorations of great openings of texts. For example, David Lodge’s *The Art of Fiction* (1992) has a good section on this, and we can choose our own favourites to see what they are doing and perhaps try to emulate one (see Writing below). But it might be a useful comparison here to look at a recent novel and see how it creates its world from the first paragraphs. There is a Greek proverb which says ‘Well begun is half done’ and
UK novelist Lindsay Clarke once told me that ‘beginnings are fateful’. Doing them well is vital.


In Haddam, summer floats over tree-softened streets like a sweet lotion balm from a careless, languorous god, and the world falls in tune with its own mysterious anthems...

From this, we might think he had read my opening section here and was determined to fake it so well that I might laugh, but be impressed. Right on both counts, as he even evokes a ‘languorous god’ of suburbia to help, like a Muse summoned and a dream of ‘balm’ for every ill, which tells us, albeit so quietly, that this is a utopia or Eden, about to be undermined by evil arriving, as in all creation myths.

Sure enough, we do not have to wait long. On the second page, just like Genesis, we get a whole different creation of atmosphere, although this time we have a space to indicate a change of gear.

Though all is not exactly kosher here, in spite of a good beginning. (When is anything exactly kosher?)

The unbracketed sentence here, separated from the previous sentences by a space in the text, is not even a whole sentence, as if it connects, which it does by the ambiguity and division of creation, to the opening. This is an irrevocable fall, a fall from grammar, and a Fall from innocence. The use of ‘kosher’ also gives us a hint of Old Testament beginnings, as does the bracketed, extra caveat of divided double-think, which invites modern scepticism in early and with an emphasis on the imperfect world and the impossibility of anything being ‘exactly’ innocent anywhere. Creation of innocence and the breaking of it is a classic creative beginning for writers. Creation myths are great for satire too, as you will by now have realised.

Ford has also introduced us to the mind of his hero/ narrator, Frank Bascombe, in his ‘off in all directions’ mind-split of the ex-writer determined to be a realist and not quite making it. He also, like Trouble, the name for Odysseus in the poem above, wants to find his home and is stuck halfway: halfway between Eden and irony. This is the comedy, as well as the division, of the struggle for creation. Comedy and creativity, absurdity and expectation, dust and images are meat and drink for writers.
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Every time we write, from whatever materials we make our new creature out of, we are engaging in the same task as the writers and imaginers of new worlds and new works. We work with our own images and our own dust.

The creation game

This game can be played alone, but works best in a round-the-room form, adjusting the number for extra group members via the years, minutes, seconds, nanoseconds section at the end. The intention is to lighten the weird and weighty elements of the subject, explore some of the tropes and language in a silly way, and ‘play God’, as writers must do. Read out (omitting the numbers, left here as a guide to how far it will go in a group) and ask the group to add a word in turn. Creative laughter is the aim.

1. ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A WORLD CALLED *****
2. AND THE GREAT GOD ****
3. CREATED THE WORLD FROM ****
4. AND ****
5. AND THEN SHE ADDED SOME ****
6. THEN SHE DIVIDED THE ****
7. FROM THE ****
8. AND THE FIRST OF THESE SHE MADE EVIL AND THE SECOND SHE MADE ****
9. SHE TOOK FROM THE GROUND SOME ****
10. AND MIXED IT WITH HER ****
11. AND CREATED THE FIRST BEING WHOSE NAME WAS ****
12. THEN SHE THOUGHT SHE MIGHT ALSO NEED A MALE BEING, BUT
13. SHE DECIDED TO ****
   BUT SHE MADE ONE ANYWAY
14. SHE TOOK SOME ****
15. AND, FROM THE FIRST BEING, A PART OF ITS ****
16. AND CREATED A MALE CALLED ***
17. AND THEY MATED, BY JOINING THEIR ****S TOGETHER, AND ALL THE ANIMALS AND SEASONS WERE CREATED, INCLUDING THE STRANGE ANIMAL CALLED ****
18. AND ANOTHER ONE CALLED **** (add more if needed)
19. AND THE NUMBER ****
WAS THE NUMBER OF YOUR EARTH (YEARS/ MINUTES/ SECONDS/ NANOSECONDS etc.) THE WORLD LASTED TILL IT VANISHED INTO THE MYTHS OF TIME . . .

Writing (see also the creation game)

Write, in any genre, something inspired/ derived from some element(s) of creation mythology (see creation lists). Examples: you could write a lyric poem about the darkness of chaos, or create a sci-fi new world’s myth of origin, or a comic sketch of how an imaginary being was created and its dialogue with a god.

Write a list of absences, before creation: for example, ‘No walk, no bones, no best friend, no pet, no greeting at the door, no wet nose . . . no dog.’

Choose a beginning of a text you admire and copy the way it is done to make a beginning of an opposite or vastly different world from the one created therein.

Write with a fresh eye and a sense of wonder about something which seems ordinarily mundane.

Reading

Old: Genesis, King James, or Authorised Version of the Bible; Hesiod’s Theogony in Hesiod and Theogonis, translated by Dorothy Wender (1973); ‘Creation’, in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, translated by A.D. Melville (1986); Homer, The Odyssey, first lines.
