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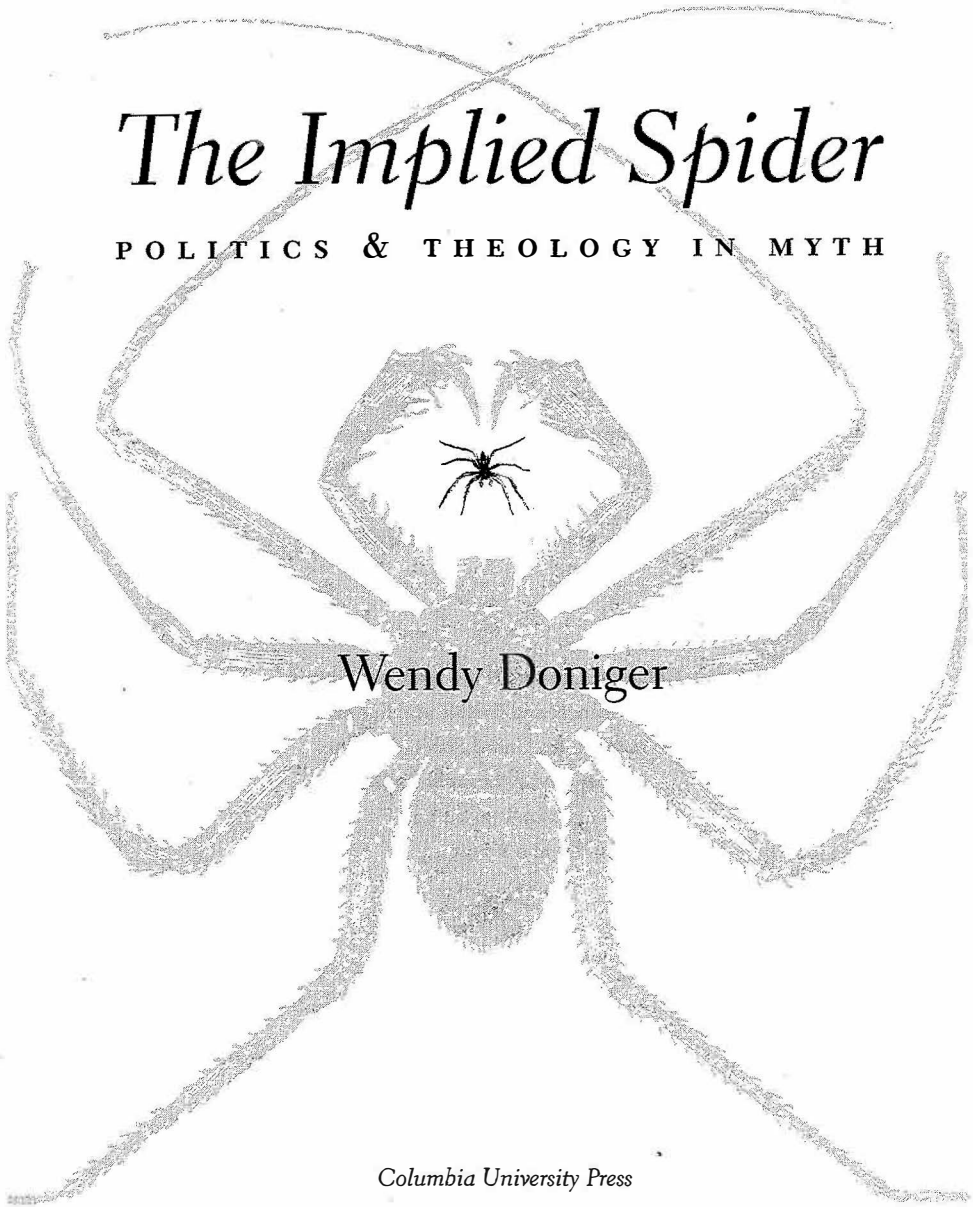
The Implied Spider

POLITICS & THEOLOGY IN MYTH



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Chapter 1

Microscopes and Telescopes

Myths as Textual Lenses

In this first chapter I will consider the metaphor of the microscope and the telescope in the functions and the analysis of myths, and will demonstrate my method by comparing texts from two traditions, the Hebrew Bible and Hindu mythology. Let me begin by arguing that the microscopic and telescopic levels are intrinsically combined within the myths themselves.

One way to begin to define myth is to contextualize it on a continuum of all the narratives constructed of words (poems, realistic fiction, histories, and so forth)—all the various forms of narrations of an experience. If we regard this textual continuum as a visual spectrum, we may use the metaphor of the microscope and/or telescope to epitomize the extreme ends of this narrative vision. The end of the continuum that deals with the entirely personal (a realistic novel, or even a diary), the solipsistic ("This never happened to anyone but me"), is the microscope; this is where I would situate a dream or the entirely subjective retelling of an experience. Some novels on this end of the continuum may be contrasted with myths in several respects. These novels depend on the individual; character is all important; these novels say, this could only happen to this one person or at least only did happen to this one person. In most myths, by contrast, character, except in the broadest terms (young or old, wise or foolish), doesn't count at all; myths say, this could happen to anyone. Yet some

novels are more like myths than others; many novels assume that the drama of a few representative men and women speaks to our condition. And while "romantic realism," a phrase denoting a detailed description of a particular event or person that simultaneously conveys another meaning, is often used to categorize some novels, it also applies to certain myths in which a detailed description of an actor vividly suggests the myths' applicability not only to many individuals but also, sometimes, to certain abstract concepts.

T. S. Eliot hoped that James Joyce would beget a lineage of mythological novelists: "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. . . . Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method."[1] To me, the mythical method *is* the narrative method, but a very special sort of narrative method, which Joyce employed not only in the obvious way of fashioning his novel after Homer's *Odyssey* (as John Updike built the double focus, contemporary and realistic on the one hand, and ancient and mythic on the other, into his novel *The Centaur*), but in constantly invoking mythic tropes, constantly fiddling with the lenses. Writing about the novels of John Dos Passos, Joseph Epstein said, "Use a wide-angle lens and you cannot expect to go very deep; use the closeup and you lose breadth of detail. It has been given to very few novelists—Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, and, at moments, Stendhal—to do both things well."[2] But in my view, it has been given to a number of mythmakers. It is in part a matter of degree: the mixture of the cosmic and the banal is different in different novels, and also in different myths.

At the other end of the continuum from the personal, the abstract end—the telescope—is the entirely general and the formal: a theoretical treatise, or even a mathematical formula. "Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare," as Edna St. Vincent Millay entitles a poem, and we might locate the barest beauty of a myth in the sort of geometrical abstractions that the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss ends up with, the ultimate algebraic formula into which he distills a myth.[3] On one occasion when scientists wished to send a message to possible life-forms on other planets, who could not be expected to know any of our languages, they sent radio waves with such data as the figure of *pi* (the ratio between the radius and circumference of a circle), which is presumably the same everywhere, without any communication. Here at the telescope end is where we might locate experiences unimaginably great ("This has happened to two million Armenians, six million Jews," or even, "This is happening every day in some one of the billions of other planets in the galaxy"). It is also where we might imagine an ideal experience devoid of any human telling, devoid of subjectivity—though this is a purely theoretical construct.

On this continuum between the personal and the abstract, myth vibrates in the middle; of all the things made of words, myths span the widest range of human concerns, human paradoxes. Epics too, so closely related to myths, have as their central theme the constant interaction of the two planes, the human and the divine, as the gods constantly intervene in human conflicts. Myths range from the most highly detailed (closest to the personal end of the continuum) to the most stripped down (closest to the artificial construct at the abstract end of the continuum); and each myth may be rendered by the scholar in its micro- or macro- form. If prose is general and translatable, poetry particular and untranslatable, myth is prose at its most general, which is one of the reasons why Lévi-Strauss was able to claim that the essence of myth, unlike the essence of poetry, is translatable.[4] And, I would add, myth is cross-culturally translatable, which is to say comparable, commensurable. The simultaneous engagement of the two ends of the continuum, the same and the different, the general and the particular, requires a peculiar kind of double vision, and myth, among all genres, is uniquely able to maintain that vision. Myth is the most interdisciplinary narrative.

The reflecting telescope uses a concave mirror as its eye,[5] and some scholars of myth have used the related images of reflection and transparency to express the ability of myth to capture simultaneously the near and far view, as in the title of A. K. Ramanujan's article about myths: "Where Mirrors are Windows."[6] Also writing about myths (though he was using the word *myth* to describe something very different from what I am talking about in this book), Roland Barthes said, "If I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparence of the glass and the depth of the landscape; but the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full. The same thing occurs in the mythical signifier: its form is empty but present, its meaning absent but full."[7]

Scholarly Lenses on Myths

Turning from the myths themselves to scholarly approaches to them, we can choose to focus a microscope on any of an infinite number of levels of magnification within any text and see something very different if we do so, from submolecular structures to large patterns that are also visible to the

naked eye. As Cyril Stanley Smith pointed out, speaking of metallurgy but also of much more, you must constantly change the scale in which you view any particular phenomenon, for there are always at least two significant levels above and two levels below what you are looking at at any given moment.[8] Through the microscope end of a myth, we can see the thousands of details that each culture, indeed each version, uses to bring the story to life—what the people in the story are eating and wearing, what language they are speaking, and all the rest. "God is in the details," as Mies van der Rohe said (though he also said that the devil is in the details). But through the telescope end, we can see the unifying themes.

We might distinguish three levels of lenses in methods for the analysis of myths: the big view (the telescope) is the universalist view sought by Freud, Jung, Eliade; the middle view (the naked eye) is the view of contextualized cultural studies; and the small view (the microscope) is the focus on individual insight. In chapters 3 and 4 I will suggest two different, specific ways in which the big view and the small view can be combined in a scholar's work; here let me approach the more general question of scholarly focus.

Where do we set the f-stop? When do we use a wide-angle lens, a zoom lens? Victor Hugo posed this question: "Where the telescope ends, the microscope begins. Which of the two has the grander view? Choose."[9] The subjective nature of this choice, and of vision through any lens, is best demonstrated, I think, by a story that James Thurber told of his youth, when his eyesight was already very poor. It seems that in botany class Thurber could never see anything through the microscope, despite the persistent fiddling of his teacher; but one day, as he stared into it and focused up and down, he saw "a variegated constellation of flecks, specks, and dots," which he promptly drew. The instructor came over hopefully, looked at the drawing, squinted into the microscope, and shouted in fury, "You've fixed the lens so that it reflects! You've drawn your eye!"[10] Annie Dillard too, in her essay "Lenses," describes vividly the difficulties in looking through microscopes and telescopes:

> You get used to looking through lenses; it is an acquired skill. When you first look through binoculars, for instance, you can't see a thing. You look at the inside of the barrel; you blink and watch your eyes; you play with the focus knob till one eye is purblind. The microscope is even worse. You are supposed to keep both eyes open as you look through its single eyepiece.[11]

You "watch your eyes," like half-blind Thurber, in the binoculars; but you must also willingly half blind yourself to see the world of a microscope.

We are always in danger of drawing our own eye, for we depict our own vision of the world when we think we are depicting the world; often when we think we are studying an other we are really studying ourselves through the narrative of the other. Our choice of lens level is arbitrary, but not entirely so, for it is circumscribed by certain boundaries that we ignore to our peril. The choice is heuristic: we choose a specific level in order to make possible a specific task. Where we focus depends on the sorts of continuities we are looking for; in all instances, something is lost and something gained. One particular focus lets us ask just one set of questions, but does not stop other people from focusing in other ways. Taking the two extreme ends as I propose to do, the microscope and the telescope, at the cost of the middle focus (or the focus provided by normal human vision), is another way of expressing my choice to focus on the individual and the human race in general, at the cost of the focus on any ethnic group or historic moment or cultural milieu, a choice I will defend in chapter 3 and apply in the micromyth and the macromyth in chapter 4. My choice of these two extreme points of focus is sustained, though hardly validated, by the tendency of the myths themselves to maintain these polarized foci—though always, of course, with the mediation of culturally specific materials. Let us therefore turn to the myths, to see how they do it.

Myths as Theological Lenses in Job and the Bhagavata Purana

How do texts provide us with microscopes and telescopes? Why do we need them? I will approach these questions first by taking a look at two texts from two different cultures, the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible and the Sanskrit text of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and then by considering the role of the double focus in human life.

When, in the Book of Job, Job confronts God, the level of focus of the text changes, and that changes the level of focus of the text's readers or hearers. What precedes this transitional point in the text is Job's sufferings, not the sufferings of a Greek hero or a Shakespearean king, but everyday sufferings (admittedly raised to the nth degree), "the heartaches and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to":[12] the loss of our possessions (the destruction of Job's livestock), the deaths of those we love (friends and parents, Job's children), physical illness (cancer and heart disease, boils), injustice. Job tries, in vain, to deal with these problems in the normal human way, with words—words of acceptance, words of denial, arguments with his friends, arguments with his wife, arguments with God. That is, he naturally enough confronts the problem on the plane on which he experiences it, the plane of human experience, human injustice, human grief.

Instead of giving a direct answer to any of Job's arguments—for they cannot be answered—God sends him the voice from the whirlwind. Refusing to deal on the level of argument, of *logos*, on which the problem remains insoluble, the text catapults Job out of the plane of his existence onto another plane altogether, that of *mythos*. It whips the microscope of self-pity out of his hand and gives him, in its place, a theological telescope. The voice of God begins at the beginning, with cosmogony, the making of the world: "Where were you when I planned the Earth? Tell me, if you are so wise. Do you know who took its dimensions, measuring its length with a cord?" This image of the measuring cord holds out a transitory hope of returning us once again to the comfortable and comforting scale of human actions, human trades, something that can be counted, counted on, comprehended, encompassed, measured. But that personal image is immediately swamped by the spectacular, impersonal image of cosmic power: "the morning stars burst out singing and the angels shouted for joy." We are robbed even of the comfort of an everyday metaphor.

The juxtaposition of the comforting image of the measuring cord and the overpowering riddle of creation also occurs in another of the great cosmogonies of the world, the one in the *Rig Veda*, composed in the mountains of northern India about a thousand years before the common era: "The measuring cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it?"[13] But the comfort of this metaphor is undercut by two verses that frame it; for the hymn begins, most confusingly, with the statement, "There was neither existence nor nonexistence then," and it ends, most unsatisfyingly, with the suggestion, "Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know."[14]

And when the image of measuring recurs in the *Rig Veda*, again it is submerged in cosmic splendor, and again it is undercut by the unanswered cosmic question: "He by whom the awesome sky and the Earth were made firm, by whom the dome of the sky was propped up, and the sun, who measured out the middle realm of space—who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?"[15] Later Hindu tradition was troubled by this open-ended refrain and invented a god whose name was the interrogative pronoun *ka* (cognate with the Latin *quis*, French *qui*), Who. One text explained it: The creator asked the sky god, Indra, "Who am I?," to which Indra replied, "Just who you just said" (i.e., "I am Who"), and that is how the creator got the name of Who.[16] Read back into the Vedic hymn, as it was in some of the Vedic commentaries,[17] this resulted in an affirmative statement ("Indeed, Who *is* the god whom we should honor with the oblation") somewhat reminiscent of the famous Abbott and Costello routine ("Who's on first?").

In the Book of Job, too, God poses riddles: "Does the rain have a father?" Stephen Mitchell, the author of the beautiful translation that I am using, comments on this in his introduction: "*Does* the rain have a father? The whole meaning is in the *lack* of an answer. If you say yes, you're wrong. If you say no, you're wrong. God's humor here is rich and subtle beyond words."[18] Beyond words, indeed. The power of the passage lies not in its arguments, its words, but in its images, more precisely in the dizzying way it ricochets back and forth between images of cosmic machismo and of familiar, treasured things. First, the cosmic (though even here connected to the personal, for the great constellations are called by their nicknames): "Can you tie the Twins together or loosen the Hunter's cords? Can you light the Evening Star or lead out the Bear and her cubs? . . . If you shout commands to the thunderclouds, will they rush off to do your bidding? If you clap for the bolts of lightning, will they come and say, 'Here we are'?" Then, in contrast, familiar things evoke family and human reproduction, viewed in the mirror of animal metaphor: "Do you tell the antelope to calve or ease her when she is in labor? Do you count the months of her fullness and know when her time has come? She kneels; she tightens her womb; she pants, she presses, gives birth. Her little ones grow up; they leave and never return." This passage—which repeats the motif of counting and time, measuring again—sets up a tension in the outer frame of the story too, for Job has lost the one thing that is most precious to him of all: his children, his posterity. And is God mocking this value in Job when he tells him of an ostrich who has lost her offspring and does not care?

When, in the end, God has the last word, it is the word beyond words. He mocks Job—"Has my critic swallowed his tongue?" And Job replies, lamely, "I had heard of you with my ears; but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust." This is a comfort that renders words irrelevant; Job says, "I am *speechless*: what can I *answer*? I put my hand on my *mouth*. I have said too much already; now I will speak no more." But this vision, and its brand of comfort, is of course expressed in words, the words of the text, the words of the myth—*mythos*, not *logos*.

Does Job forget the image of the beast who "chews clubs to splinters and laughs at the quivering spear"? We are not told, but it is clear at the end of the story that Job is caught up once again in the snug and smug world of material wealth and family pleasures, the world in which we first encountered him: "So the Lord blessed the end of Job's life more than the beginning. Job now had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a

thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters"—and a partridge in a pear tree. We are back in the world of account books and dowries, business as usual. We have moved back from the cosmic measuring cord to the cash register. But we have also moved back to a world in which God has restored to Job what is most precious to him in real life: another set of children, his posterity.

There are many who find this ending a rather lame afterthought, like the second endings that Orson Welles and F. Scott Fitzgerald were asked to write for their Hollywood screenplays, or the Hayes office endings in films where the audience knew that they really did get away with adultery or murder, or the happy endings that Melina Mercouri tacked on to the Greek tragedies in the 1959 film *Never On Sunday* (Medea and the children all went to the seashore).[19] In fact, we have been prepared for this ending by the prologue, in which God and Satan look down through their telescopes and decide to use Job as a pawn in a test of their own powers, much as the Greek gods manipulate men in their own quarrels (as Gloucester says in *King Lear*: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport"[20]). It has not been a game to Job, of course, but at least he does not die at the end, like Lear or a Greek tragic hero; the final restoration attempts to make the story, retroactively, a kind of game to him too, as if he were being invited to see through the divine telescope, to see the god's-eye view of his own sufferings, to torment himself for his own sport. Many readers refuse to accept this invitation. For them, if they identify with Job, it is certainly not a game—it has real consequences in their lives. For the author, perhaps, who kills Job (a fictional creation, after all) for his sport, and more than sport, and who moves the reader for his sport, and more than sport, it is a very serious game indeed.

The trick of undoing it all at the end ("It was all a dream") is not typical of the Hebrew Bible, and so its appearance at the end of the Book of Job adds yet one more puzzle to this puzzling book. (The trick is also used at the end of the story of Abraham and Isaac, when God at the last minute allows Abraham to sacrifice a ram instead of his son. Woody Allen's version of this myth has God answer Abraham's complaints by saying, "I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it." And when Abraham protests, "I never know when you're kidding," God replies, "No sense of humor."[21] Or, as Stephen Mitchell argued of the Book of Job, "God's humor here is rich and subtle.")

But the "it was just a dream" ending is a staple of myths enacting Hindu theories of illusion, and it makes sense in Hindu mythology, where the idea that evil itself is an illusion is widely accepted.[22] Let us consider two Hindu parallels that use this trick of the illusion-shattering epiphany and thus shed light on the dynamics of the Book of Job. One of these is the *Bhagavad Gita*, a text composed in Sanskrit in the centuries before the common era, in which, on the eve of the great battle in the great epic the *Mahabharata*, the hero Arjuna asks the incarnate god Krishna a lot of difficult, indeed unanswerable, moral questions about the justice of war.[23] Krishna gives a series of rather predictable answers, a bit too glib to satisfy Arjuna's doubts, and then Arjuna asks Krishna to display his true cosmic form. Krishna shows him his doomsday form, the form that J. Robert Oppenheimer recalled when he saw the first explosion of an atomic bomb.[24] And Arjuna cries out, "I see your mouths with jagged tusks, and I see all of these warriors rushing blindly into your gaping mouths, like moths rushing to their death in a blazing fire. Some stick in the gaps between your teeth, and their heads are ground to powder."[25] And right in the middle of the terrifying epiphany, Arjuna apologizes to Krishna for all the times that he has rashly and casually called out to him, saying, "Hey, Krishna! Hey, pal!" And he begs him to turn back into his pal Krishna, which the god consents to do. Again the worshipper is comforted by the banality, the familiarity of human life. Outside the text, however, the reader has been persuaded that since war is unreal, it is not evil; the warrior with ethical misgivings has been persuaded to kill, just as God kills. And this political message is made palatable by the God's resumption of his role as intimate human companion.

The casual intimacy of that brief passage is enhanced by the reader's (or listener's) memory of a kind of fun house mirror image of the *Gita* that occurs in the epic just two books earlier: Arjuna is living in disguise as an impotent transvestite dancing master, who offers his services as charioteer to a certain young prince, Uttara, giving as his reference none other than Arjuna himself, for whom, he says, he used to serve as charioteer. As the battle approaches, Uttara gets cold feet and doesn't want to fight; Arjuna tries to talk him into it, with a kind of parody of the speech that Krishna will give to Arjuna in the *Gita*: "People will laugh at you if you don't fight." Reflexively, in the *Gita* Krishna begins his exhortation by saying to Arjuna, "Don't act like an impotent transvestite; stand up!"[26] (a line whose sexual double entendre was almost certainly unintended but may have operated on a subconscious level). In this proleptic parody, Prince Uttara jumps off the chariot and runs away, and Arjuna, in drag, his skirts flapping, runs after him (people who see him run say, "Gosh, he looks more like Arjuna than an impotent transvestite; that *must* be Arjuna"). Arjuna catches Uttara by the hair and says, "If you won't fight, why don't you at least drive the chariot." And the prince (whom the text describes as "witless and terrified") agrees to this.[27] So the initial apparent inversion of power and status is

turned right side up after all; Arjuna is the warrior, and his inferior is his charioteer. Finally Arjuna reveals himself to the prince, who doesn't believe him at first and asks him to recite, and then to explain, Arjuna's ten names (which Arjuna does); then Uttara is convinced, and Arjuna wins the battle. When Arjuna finally reveals his true identity to the king, Uttara's father, the king says, as Arjuna says to Krishna in the *Gita*, "Whatever we may have said to you [when we didn't know who you were]—please forgive us."[28] As Arjuna was to Prince Uttara, so Krishna in the *Gita* is to Arjuna: a creature of great destructive power who velvets his claws for the sake of human affection. (Another brief satire occurs elsewhere in the *Mahabharata*, when Arjuna's blustery brother Bhima meets the great monkey Hanuman [hero of the other epic, the *Ramayana*] and tries in vain to lift his tail; when he asks Hanuman to expand to his full form, Hanuman stops halfway, saying, "This is about as much as you can stand." Bhima agrees that he can't stand to look at Hanuman in this form, any more than he could stare at the sun.)[29]

The passage in the *Gita* is about war and destruction, the passage in Job about creation and destruction. And there are other differences: the illusion in Job has just happened (God "unsays" the sufferings, the deaths), while in the *Gita* the illusory battle is about to happen. But the parallels between them are rightly noted by Stephen Mitchell:

> The only scriptural analogy to God's answer (the other Biblical examples, except for the burning bush, are of a lesser god) is the vision granted to Arjuna in chapter 11 of the [*Bhagavad*] *Gita*. . . . But Job's vision is the more vivid, I think, because its imagination is so deeply rooted in the things of this world.[30]

Mitchell is certainly right about the *Bhagavad Gita*. But there is a second Hindu text that, like Job—perhaps even more than Job—takes refuge "in the things of this world." This is the *Bhagavata Purana*, composed in Sanskrit in South India probably during the tenth century of the common era, which tells a story about the same incarnate god Krishna, but when he was still a little boy with his mortal mother, Yashodha:

> One day when the children were playing, they reported to Yashodha, "Krishna has eaten dirt." Yashodha took Krishna by the hand and scolded him and said, "You naughty boy, why have you eaten dirt? These boys, your friends, and your elder brother say so." "Mother, I have not eaten," said Krishna. "They are all lying. If you believe them instead of me, look at my mouth yourself." "Then, open up," she said to the god, who had in play taken the form of a human child; and he opened his mouth.
>
> Then she saw in his mouth the whole universe, with the far corners of the sky, and the wind, and lightning, and the orb of the Earth with its mountains and oceans, and the moon and stars, and space itself; and she saw her own village and herself. She became frightened and confused, thinking, "Is this a dream or an illusion fabricated by God? Or is it a delusion in my own mind? For God's power of delusion inspires in me such false beliefs as, 'I exist,' 'This is my husband,' 'This is my son.' " When she had come to understand true reality in this way, God spread his magic illusion in the form of maternal love. Instantly Yashodha lost her memory of what had occurred. She took her son on her lap and was as she had been before, but her heart was flooded with even greater love for God, whom she regarded as her son.[31]

What could be more personal, more "deeply rooted in the things of this world," more literally *down to earth* or *earthy* than a small, dirty boy lying about *dirt*? But taking off from this modest moment the myth plummets down and turns the universe inside out, shifting gears entirely, into the warp speed of *mythos*. It is surely relevant that this cosmic vision takes place inside the child's *mouth*, the place of useless words, the place of *logos*, now silenced by the wordless images of the myth—images conveyed, as always, by words. For death, as well as words, comes out of the mouth of God. Yashodha, like Arjuna, like Job, cannot sustain the vertiginous vision of the world beyond the world that she has always regarded as real. T. S. Eliot pointed out (in *Burnt Norton*), "Humankind cannot bear very much reality"; apparently, humankind can't bear very much *un*reality, either, or very much of what the text presents as an alternative reality.

The myth returns the mother to what the text regards as the level of comfortable illusion. She forgets that her child's mouth is the mouth of God, just as Job, perhaps, forgets the image of the beast whose mouth "chews clubs to splinters" and Arjuna forgets the beast whose teeth ground the heads of warriors to powder in his mouth. Indeed, later in the *Mahabharata*[32] Arjuna reminds Krishna of the time right before the battle when Krishna revealed his divine form, and he adds: "But I have lost all that you said to me in friendship, O tiger among men, for I have a forgetful mind. And yet I am curious about those things again, my lord." Krishna, rather crossly, remarks that he is displeased that Arjuna failed to understand or grasp the eternal secret, and he adds, "I cannot tell it again just like that." Like Arjuna, Yashodha has a forgetful mind, but in this instance Krishna himself gives her that forgetfulness as a gift.

More than that: it is unlikely that anyone, even a Vedantic Hindu, could believe for long that her life was totally unreal.[33] Most people's gut

reaction to such stories, as to the end of Job, is that the banal is the real, and the astronomical vision is just so much cosmic bullshit. But the myth as a whole offers a way of balancing the two views so that the reader is not in fact forced to accept either one, or to choose between them.

The threat posed by the combination of the telescopic and microscopic view is well expressed by the eponymous hero of Saul Bellow's novel, *Henderson the Rain King*:

> Being in point of size precisely halfway between the sun and the atoms, living among astronomical conceptions, with every thumb and fingerprint a mystery, we should get used to living with huge numbers. In the history of the world many souls have been, are, and will be, and with a little reflection this is marvelous and not depressing. Many jerks are made gloomy by it, for they think quantity buries them alive. That's just crazy.[34]

Just as the earth mediates between the sun (seen through a telescope) and the atoms (seen through a microscope), so the myth allows us to ground the "huge numbers" in such a way that we do not go crazy or get "gloomy."

There is an old story about a lady who went to a lecture and heard the lecturer say that the universe was going to self-destruct in five billion years, at which she fainted. When they asked her why she was so upset at an event that was five billion years away she heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Oh thank God. I thought he said five *million* years." (Annie Dillard once remarked about such figures, "These astronomers are nickel-diming us to death."[35] And a boy in her novel, *The Living*, feels as if "The spaces between the stars were pores, out of which human meaning evaporated."[36]) The enormous scale of the theological visions in Job and the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana* would, if accepted on their own terms, threaten to dwarf human enterprise. But the myth does not demand that we accept the theological vision; even within the text the actors end up in the everyday world. On the other hand, the myth is not necessarily saying that the ending is more real than the vision that precedes it. On the contrary, its purpose is to challenge us simultaneously to see that our lives are real, and to see that they are unreal. To the question, "Which is the reality?" the myth replies, "Yes."

Myths as Political Lenses

We have seen how myths use different scales of words, different verbal lenses, to link theology with daily reality. The abstract end of the textual continuum may be antipolitical (though certainly not a-political) if it withdraws the gaze from human affairs entirely, to a life of philosophical contemplation or renunciation—religious or other—or eschatological expectation. But the process of generalization, of abstraction from local detail, has a political aspect as well: it is where we begin to look beyond our selfish personal concerns and think globally, environmentally, think of the future, think of what is happening elsewhere on the planet earth, think of the consequences of what we say and do and write for people in political circumstances very different from our own. The wide-angle lens can be political and theological simultaneously, as when we realize the political implications of our own theological assumptions or begin to respect the humanity of political others by appreciating their theologies. And myth is particularly qualified to forge these links. Using microscopes and telescopes to link daily reality with global—indeed, galaxial—politics, myth enables us to do what the bumper sticker urges: think globally, act locally.[37]

The human instinct, the common sense, that resists the theological argument that we are unreal is a political instinct; but there are also ways in which political narratives offer us a telescope not to turn us away from our own lives but to turn us toward the lives of others, including political others. Just as our theological vision is opened up by myths like those discussed above, so too our political vision may be opened up by our own myths; by the juxtaposition of certain texts with the events of our lives; by the comparison of myths from other cultures; and, most of all, by the interaction of political and theological texts acting as lenses for one another. In such texts, theology and politics become lenses for each other; we see each differently, better, through the insights of the other. Here again, if one should ask of politics and theology, "Which is the reality?" the answer is "Yes."

In Thomas Keneally's book *Schindler's List* (and in the film),[38] the hero stands on a high hill, mounted on a high horse, and views, as if through a telescope, the panorama of the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto. Amid all the carnage he sees one little girl, in a red coat, and follows her as she wanders through the scenes of horror, a red thread through the genocidal murder mystery, like the inevitable red dot in a landscape by Corot. (The red dot is the only piece of color in this part of the black and white film, producing a genre shock akin to the sudden burst of technicolor in *The Wizard of Oz*).[39] By seeing her, Schindler sees what he must do. Here, switching from a telescope to a microscope is the move from indifference to compassion; for Job, the move in the other direction is the move from self-pity to something more than indifference—resignation, perhaps, or acceptance. Myth here is a narrative that employs, and demands, radical shifts in perspective.

A fine example of this mythic scope, and an image beyond words (though I must use words to tell about it), occurs in a film about World War I, *Oh What a Lovely War* (1969).[40] This film ends with a kind of quotation of the end of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930),[41] the classic film about that war, in which we hear a shot, our hero falls, and we see, against the background of a field of white crosses, a line of soldiers marching away, each turning and staring into the camera for a moment, accusingly, before turning back and fading into the field of graves. At the end of *Oh What a Lovely War*, the hero whom we have come to know and care about in the course of the film—through the cinematic microscope—is fighting in the trenches. He is shot, the movie shifts into slow motion and silence, and we see him sitting on the grass at a picnic on a hill in England with his family, full of the mellow drowsiness of sunshine and wine. He leans back against a tree to take a nap, but the tree becomes a white cross that marks his grave, and he vanishes. As the camera zooms back farther and farther from the cross, enlarging our field of vision, we see that the cross on the grave of the soldier we know is just one cross among the millions of crosses marking the graves on the battlefields of France, one small white tree in a great forest of death. For a second, or perhaps ten seconds, we are able to experience, simultaneously, the intensity of personal grief that we feel for that one soldier and our more general, cosmic sorrow for the astronomical numbers of young men who, as we have long known and long ceased to notice, died in World World I. A similar double vision of another war, the American Civil War, is achieved in the scene in *Gone With the Wind* (1939)[42] when Scarlett O'Hara's horror at the suffering of one soldier is suddenly magnified as the camera zooms back to reveal the horrifying dimensions of the full slaughter, the enormous Atlantan square full of wounded and dying soldiers.

In a *Star Trek* episode,[43] the half Vulcan Mr. Spock, who has the ability to "bond" with other minds, suddenly experiences agonizing pain when he senses the death screams of four hundred Vulcans on a star ship some distance from him. When Dr. McCoy expresses his amazement, Spock says, "I have noticed this insensitivity among wholly human beings. It is easier for you to feel the death of one fellow-creature than to feel the deaths of millions." And when McCoy asks if Spock would wish that empathy upon humans, Spock replies, "It might have rendered your history a bit less bloody." Our myths allow us "wholly humans" a glance through the telescope of Vulcan vision.

"One man's death is a tragedy; the death of a million is a statistic," said Joseph Stalin (who knew whereof he spoke). The myth turns the statistic back into a tragedy, turns the telescope back into a microscope. But sometimes, like Job, we need to change the lens in the other direction. In fury and despair, Job gazes through the microscope at the millions of tiny gnats that are gnawing away at his peace of mind. And the poet magnifies them for us, magnifies the banality of human suffering, the banality of evil, as Hannah Arendt put it. "A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye," as Horatio says to Hamlet,[44] speaking of the way our own eyes magnify the small things that trouble us. This same mote, as Matthew tells us (7.3), is the sign of our selfishness, our inability to see ourselves in proper proportion to other people: "Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?"

Whenever the microscope of our ego rivets our gaze to the minutiae of our daily lives, myths may catch our eye and make us see with our telescopes, make us think about the stars and the galaxy and how small the planet earth is. And it is difficult for us to think like this for long. It is difficult for us to go on living with care and concern and at the same time to stay fully aware that "Our lives don't really amount to a hill of beans," as Rick (Humphrey Bogart) says at the end of *Casablanca*[45] when his own love affair, which had seemed all that mattered in the world, is dwarfed by the giant reality of the Nazi threat, seen through the political telescope. But just as Job and Yashodha could not believe for long that their lives were unreal, so we can't live our lives if we think only about the galaxies, or the Nazis, or the children who are dying of starvation or disease or gunshot wounds on the streets of our own cities as well as in wars and famines throughout the world. We can't think about those things for long because we are human and we care about *our* lives, about what video we're going to watch tonight. Yet at the same time we know that there are all those galaxies out there, and all those children. We never entirely forget. This tension in us, in either direction, haunts us and threatens either to dim the intensity of the pleasure that we rightly take in our lives or to weaken our commitment to causes beyond our lives, causes that we undertake for the sake of those who will inhabit this planet hundreds of years after all of us have died.

The difficult choice between the two foci is captured in Reinhold Neibuhr's prayer (now best known as Alcoholics Anonymous's "Serenity Prayer"), which asks for the serenity to bear the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to tell the difference. But wisdom more often nudges us in the direction of "serenity" or acceptance of other peoples' lives, which we can simply ignore. The sorts of stories I have been discussing—myths like the Book of Job and the story of Krishna and other sorts as well—may inspire a number of different reactions in the reader—regret, guilt, rage. Too often they fail to produce com-

fort. But sometimes they may shake us out of whatever focus we happen to be stuck in. The tension gives rise to the myth. And this tension may affect us in many different ways, of which one, perhaps the most idealized but very real nevertheless, is to inspire us to strive to keep both of these levels of political vision, the microscopic and the telescopic, alive in us at the same time. But how?

The myth offers a fictive solution to the problem that it raises, but we may carry it back into our lives to make it real. The myth balances simultaneously the conviction that each of us is such a tiny part of the universe that nothing we do is real (in the sense that the Buddha taught, that nothing is permanent); and the conviction that a picnic with our friends and family is a great thing, not a small thing. Myths form a bridge between the terrifying abyss of cosmological ignorance and our comfortable familiarity with our recurrent, if tormenting, human problems. Myths make us reverse the focus, viewing through the telescope of detachment the personal lives that we normally view through the microscope and viewing the cosmic questions through the microscope of intimate involvement.

In the theological myths of Job and Krishna, it was the telescope that provided the shock of another reality. But in political myths, as in *Schindler's List*, it may be the microscope rather than the telescope that gives the shock, when a myth balances simultaneously the comfort of an ancient, general, commonplace truth and the surprise of totally new, totally specific details. In fact, the myth can work in either direction, both in theology and in politics. Lévi-Strauss used the idea of an optical image (a kind of crude microscope) to describe the process of inversions in myths:

> Similar inversions occur in optics. An image can be seen in full detail when observed through any adequately large aperture. But as the aperture is narrowed the image becomes blurred and difficult to see. When, however, the aperture is further reduced to a pinpoint, that is to say, when *communication* is about to vanish, the image is inverted and becomes clear again. This experiment is used in schools to demonstrate the propagation of light in straight lines, or in other words to prove that rays of light are not transmitted at random, but within the limits of a structural field. . . . The field of mythical thought, too, is structured.[46]

One such inversion is precisely the ability of "the field of mythical thought" to translate a microscopic image into a telescopic image, to move us from the infinitely small to the infinitely large. The myths suggest that if your microscope is powerful enough it turns into a telescope, that things really deep down and really far away become one another.

Lévi-Strauss's image of inversion is an inversion of the use of the same image by Marcel Proust:

> Soon I was able to shew a few sketches. No one understood a word. Even those who were favourable to my conception of the truths which I intended later to carve within the temple congratulated me on having discovered them with a microscope when I had, on the contrary, used a telescope to perceive things which, it is true, were very small but situated afar off and each of them a world in itself. Whereas I had sought great laws, they called me one who grubs for petty details.[47]

The "world in itself" inside each "very small" thing, each "petty detail," is the grand vision, the panorama of "great laws," of a great novelist, a mythological novelist.

As we have seen, the microscope too can be an instrument of empathy, but as Andrew Delbanco points out: "If a man surrenders to his designated function, his victims will be no clearer to him than microbes smeared on a slide as seen with the unaided eye. He will not see beyond the blur to the lives consumed—each singular, each a world unto itself."[48] The world within each life is precisely what is embodied in the Hindu image of the world that the mother sees inside the mouth of her child, and that Proust saw in each "very small thing."

Annie Dillard, in her essay on lenses, describes the experience of looking at whistling swans through binoculars, and the experience of coming back out of the world of the binoculars afterward:

> As I rotated on my heels to keep the black frame of the lenses around them, I lost all sense of space. If I lowered the binoculars I was always amazed to learn in which direction I faced—dazed, the way you emerge awed from a movie and try to reconstruct, bit by bit, a real world, in order to discover where in it you might have parked the car.[49]

To find our place in the world after we emerge from the magnified mythological vision, the world of the truly wide screen; to avoid getting the metaphysical equivalent of culture shock or a deep-sea diver's "bends" from coming up (or down) too fast, or from awakening too fast from that other world that we also enter sometimes when we dream but usually forget; and to find our car in a different place from the place where we parked it—that's the trick, and myth is the key.

Sometimes the myth is formed not within a text, but rather in the intersection of our own lives with a text,[50] a telescope that provides a political as well as a theological shock. Delbanco writes of the time when Roosevelt discovered Kierkgaard and understood, for the first time, the Nazi evil; it was "a moment at which this feeling of theatrical distance was obliterated by a shock of recognition."[51] The double vision of a dead philosopher writing about the human condition in general and the immediate problem posed by totally new, totally specific human details produced this particular shock of recognition: Kierkegaard's general insights into human nature allowed Roosevelt to understand not *that* the Nazi evil had occurred (which, by then, he knew) but *how* it could have occurred.

Delbanco also wrote about the effect of the publication of John Hersey's *Hiroshima* in a 1946 *New Yorker* magazine:

> Hersey gave the anonymous victims of the nuclear firestorm faces and names. He showed the citizens of Hiroshima in the kitchen, on the porch, putting their children in pajamas in the moments before the bomb fell. He showed them blown about like tossed debris amid window shards and the splinters of what had been roofs and walls. He made it difficult to represent them with a number (70,000 or 100,000, depending on whether one took account of post-blast radiation effects) and a dismissive name (Japs).[52]

Sometimes only fiction can make reality real. A radio advertisement for the play *Miss Saigon* declared, "Saigon: it used to be just a name in the news, but now it's real."[53] The mythic drama claims to make the war real, implying that the "name in the news" was *not* real because it was just a name, not a story. Here I am reminded of the epilogue of George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan*, when Cauchon asks, "Must then a Christ perish in torment in every age to save those that have no imagination?"[54]

But sometimes life itself is the text in which we read the myth of double vision. On the wall of the central room in the house in Amsterdam where Anne Frank and her family hid from the Nazis, two charts are preserved, side by side. One is a column of short, parallel, horizontal lines by which Otto Frank marked the growth of his children over the years, as my father used to mark mine, and I marked my son's. The other is a map of Europe with pins marking the advance of the Allied forces—too late, as we now know, to allow that first chart to grow more than a few poignant inches. They are roughly the same size, those two charts, and they represent the tragic intersection of the tiniest, most banal personal concern and a cataclysmic world event. For me, they are the microscopic and telescopic view of the Holocaust, side by side.

We can use these lenses either to see or to blur a world that we cannot fathom. In great myths, the microscope and the telescope together provide a parallax that allows us to see ourselves in motion against the stream of time, like stars viewed from two different ends of the earth's orbit, one of the few ways to see the stars move. And when we take into account myths not, perhaps, from different ends of the earth's orbit, but at least from different ends of the earth, we have made our mythical micro-telescope a bit longer than the one provided by our own cultures, and we can use it to see farther inside and also farther away—a double helix of the human paradox. To jump ahead to the argument that I will make in subsequent chapters, not just for myths but for comparative mythology, the individual text is the microscope that lets us see the trees; the comparison is the telescope that lets us see the forest. The myth allows us to look through both ends of the human kaleidoscope at once, simultaneously to view the personal, the details that make our lives precious to us, through the microscope of our own eye and, through the telescope provided by the eye of other cultures, to view the vast panorama that dwarfs even the grand enterprises of great powers, that dwarfs the sufferings of Job and of ourselves. Every time we listen to a story with mythic dimensions, about human beings in crisis, and really listen and think about the ways in which it is telling us the story of our own lives—and *not* the story of our own lives—we see for a moment with the double vision of the human microscope and cosmic telescope.