

## MYTH IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF A. F. LOSEV

EVGENIA V. SAVELOVA, Far Eastern State University of Humanities, Khabarovsk, Russia

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The article is devoted to myth as interpreted by Alexei F. Losev (1893–1988), an outstanding Russian philosopher and philologist. In his *The Dialectics of Myth* A. Losev aims at revealing the phenomenological and dialectical ways of the perception of myths. Defining the myth through negation, Alexei Losev distinguishes six characteristics of a myth which, on his opinion, give an opportunity „to dissect a myth for its essence and meaning“ and formulate its positively philosophical definition in the so called „formula of myth“.

**Keywords:** Alexei F. Losev – Myth and negation – Phenomenological and dialectical perceptions of myths – Formula of myth

In each epoch there is a different understanding of myth. In ancient times it was studied by philosophers, later on by ethnographers, linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, semioticians, philologists. Nevertheless, nowadays myth, ‘a hero with a thousand faces’, has not exhausted its heuristic potential yet. It is still in the center of active research attention. As a matter of fact, the mystery of myth is the mystery of a human being and the universe, their meaning and purpose. That is why it is like a sphinx which mystery fascinates and attracts a tireless researcher a lot more as time goes by.

The article is devoted to the issue of myth in the interpretation of Professor Alexei F. Losev (1893–1988), an outstanding Russian philosopher and philologist. His philosophic works are known not only in Russia, but also abroad (*Ancient Cosmos and the Contemporary Science* (1927, 1993), *Philosophy of Name* (1927, 1990), *The Dialectics of Number in Plotin's Works* (1928), *Essays on Ancient Symbolism and Mythology* (1930, 1993), *The Dialectics of Myth* (1930, 1990, 1994), *The History of Classic Aesthetics* (1963-1994), *Sign, Symbol, Myth* (1982) etc). After publishing his fundamental work *The Dialectics of Myth* in 1930, Alexei Losev, by that time a professor at the Moscow Conservatory, was accused of ‘militant idealism’ and arrested together with his wife. He was sentenced to labor camps where he almost lost his vision and undermined his health. After three years had passed, A. Losev came back to his research work and teaching, but still he had to lead his life under the control of Soviet authorities, unable to publish his works till 60-s. His life was constantly under the control of Soviet authorities. Although he was never allowed to get his PhD (he received his degree of a Doctor of Philology at the Moscow State Pedagogical University owing to the total number of his published works), Alexei Losev was, as he called himself, ‘a philosopher of name, myth, and number’.

In *The Dialectics of Myth* A. Losev aims to reveal the phenomenological and dialectical perception of myth, to study myth as it is and ‘the way it perceives its own wonderful and fantastic nature’ (Losev 1994: 7). It is not rare that in philosophic literature one can still come across the attitude to myth as archaic, primitive, naïve, religious, ‘pre-logical’,

‘pre-philosophic’, pre-scientific’ and even pseudoscientific knowledge. To A. Losev it is of fundamental importance that myth is not a fantasy or fiction, not a fairy tale about the creation of the universe and the human being, or a poetic legend about the deeds of supernatural creatures, gods and heroes. According to Losev, myth is ‘a logically, which means first of all dialectically, necessary category of consciousness and existence in general’ (ibid.: 9–10, 71).



*A. F. Losev*

Defining a myth through negation, Alexei Losev distinguishes six characteristics of a myth which, in his opinion, give an opportunity ‘to dissect a myth for its essence and meaning’ (ibid.: 8) and formulate its positively philosophic definition.

**1. A myth is not a fantasy, or fiction, or a fairytale.**

A myth and mythology is fiction according to science which is superficial and rational in its evaluation. A myth can be fiction if one estimates not the mythological consciousness itself but the attitude to it. For example, a lot of scientist-mythologists change the objective evaluation of a myth for their subjective attitude; thus, they characterize not a myth but themselves. But to those who have mythological consciousness

myth is ‘the most vivid and true reality’ (ibid.: 9) that contains its own, out-of-science, mythological truth and authenticity. According to Losev, that is the very essence of mythological consciousness and the perception of the world.

**2. A myth is not an ideal existence.** Alexei Losev understands ideal existence as concept existence, an abstract notion, and an abstract idea. In this context a myth is not an object or work of abstract thought, but it is always an expression of these or those vital needs and efforts. Mythological consciousness is not much of intellectual and thought-ideal consciousness. Alexei Losev writes, “When some barbarians color a dead person or their own faces red before a battle, it is clear that it is not the work of an abstract thought, but something different which is a much stronger, almost affective consciousness verging on magic forms” (ibid.: 12). Thus, a myth is not ideal existence but, according to the phi-

losopher, ‘vividly felt and created material reality and physical reality, very brutal one’ (ibid.: 14).

**3. A myth is not a scientific or primitively scientific structure in particular.**

A. Losev studies the correlation between myth and science and comes to the following conclusion, “Science does not come from myth, but it does not exist without myth. [...] Science as such can not destroy myth. Science just realizes it and uses some rational, for example, logic or numerical ‘color’ ” (ibid.: 20–22). Therefore, from his point of view it is senseless to insist that science comes out of myth and then, while developing, destroys it. Science and myth are simply different functions of life. They are not successors to each other though there is an interaction between them. This interaction is based on the fact that science is mythological and this is true not only for primitive science, but also for contemporary one. That is why the struggle between science and mythology is always in essence the struggle between two mythologies.

In this connection it is noteworthy that a famous German philosopher-existentialist K. Jaspers in his works also comes to the conclusion that science is nothing else but a modern myth which is imperfect by its nature because science, in his opinion, can answer the question ‘How?’, but to the question ‘Why does this or that happen?’ it does not give any answer (Jaspers 1994: 99–140).

**4. A myth is not a metaphysical structure.** For mythological consciousness as such a myth is neither fantastic existence nor even transcendental one. Myth is ‘the most real and lively, the most ingenuous and even emotional existence’ (Losev 1994: 31). Despite its undoubtedly spiritual character, an Indian, Egyptian, Greek, or Christian myth does not have any metaphysical intuitions though such philosophically metaphysical structures might have appeared and they did appear on its basis.

However, according to A. Losev, though myth is a practically, materially and emotionally created reality, at the same time it stands aloof from the usual meaning of objects and it is to some extent hierarchical that makes it stand out against other phenomena of existence as something superior and fundamental. In a myth objects get a very peculiar meaning, obey a very peculiar idea which makes them aloof. For example, ‘one can not help seeing the difference between stearin and wax [...] There is something about stearin that is applied and subordinate, dirty and greasy, impudent and conceited. Wax is, on the contrary, something sweet and warm. It has gentleness and love, soft-heartedness and purity. It is the beginning of an intelligent prayer longing for calm and warm-heartedness’ (ibid.: 65–71). In both cases the matter concerns a thing but the thing which is given a particular mythological meaning with poetically symbolic reality.

**5. A myth is not a scheme or an allegory.** According to Losev, a myth is not a diagram, or a metaphor, or an allegory, or a personification, but a *symbol*. It is a symbol that has a balance of ‘internal’ and ‘external’, of idea and image, of ideal and real. Being a symbol a myth can contain everything that is in reality not a part of it – schematic, allegoric, metaphoric and other ‘life symbolic layers’ (ibid.: 45, 57). For example, the philosopher writes that *The Blue Flower* to Novalis is a mystical symbol; to an ordinary flower lover it is just a plant; in a story where it is one of the more or less symbolic char-

acters it is an allegory; to a botanist it is a scheme. That is why a myth, studied from the point of its symbolic nature, may seem a symbol and an allegory at the same time; it can have dual and even triple symbolic layers. These very features of a myth bring about its integral connection with all artistic outlook and creative work of a human being, with the world of art.

**6. A myth is not a work of art.** Looking for the delicate correlation between a myth and art, Alexei Losev says that though a myth stands aloof from the meaning and the idea of everyday life, it is always real. Saying that a myth is a reality, it is necessary to note that this reality is of special kind, but, according to Losev, it is genuinely real, genuinely material and at the same time more or less poetic and emotionally perceptible reality. A myth and poetry (art) are connected but not identical, they are independent and self-sufficient. For example, Losev takes poetry as ‘a sheer pleasure’ that arouses feelings not to things as such but to their certain meaning and form. In a myth ‘centaurs and a hundred-handed giants are the very true reality’ (ibid.: 60–62). People *live* a myth like their life, but they just *contemplate* a work of art.

**7. The formula of myth.** Therefore, after telling what not myth is, A. Losev starts to determine what a myth is and what makes its unique semantic character. The first element in the so called ‘formula of myth’ is the category of *personal existence*. Personality is a certain self-consciousness, self-manifestation, deepening into oneself, dialectical overcoming of antithesis of object and subject in itself. Personality is always life but not a purely speculative notion. And at the same time personality is always corporeal, but its body is animated, meaning-bearing, and symbolically revealed. The philosopher writes, “It certainly means something when one scientist from Moscow is like an owl, another like a squirrel, another like a mouse, another like a pig, another like a donkey, another like a monkey... A body is not just fiction; it is not a lifeless mechanics of some atoms. A body is a lively face of soul”. Personal perception penetrates into any minor act of our consciousness. Personal existence leaves a mark on every object. That is the reason on why every living personality is a myth, ‘it is understood and formed from the standpoint of mythic consciousness’ (ibid.: 75–77).

A famous Russian philosopher Nikolay A. Berdyaev says, “The history of the world and mankind happens objectively not only in macrocosm, but also in microcosm” (Бердяев 1990: 21), in other words it happens in the personal world of a human being. That is why there is no wonder that one of the most important postulates in A. Losev’s myth theory is that ‘myth is personal existence or, to be more precise, the image of personal existence, personal form, the face of personality’.

To provide a further argumentation of the detailed definition of myth Alexei Losev turns to the problem of correlation between myth, religion and history.

The problem of differentiation between myth and religion as well as life realities that stand behind them is very complicated. Losev’s logical reasoning leads to the thought that there is a certain dialectical interdependence, but at the same time these two phenomena are not identical. There is no doubt that both religion and mythology ‘exist owing to the personality’s self-affirmation. In religion a person seeks consolation, justification, forgiveness, and even salvation. In a myth a person also tries to prove himself, to express

himself and to have his own story.’ (Losev 1994: 98). However, if religion always deals with such questions as the fall of man, salvation, sin, justification, forgiveness etc, myth exists without them. Losev notes that ‘in a myth a person does not necessarily live by self-affirming himself in the eternity’ (ibid.: 98). He says that ‘mythology [...] is impossible without religion, but it is not religion by itself’. To put it in a different way, there is an absolute beginning in myth, but myth by itself is just the meaning, idea, image and face of this absolute beginning, but not it itself. Thus, Alexei Losev makes a more precise understanding of personal existence in a myth with regard to religion, the sphere closest in its meaning to mythology.

On the contrary considering the correlation between myth and history, the philosopher states that myth is very historical. Unlike dogma which is ‘the absolutization of historic facts of personal existence’, myth is ‘just history of this or that personal existence’. Myth is historical, but it is ‘historical in possibility’, in the becoming, in self-consciousness. As the result of personal existence being historic, myth itself becomes ‘fluctuating/unstable and mobile’. It means that myth does not die; it changes constantly together with personality and with its temporal and spacial development (ibid.: 108).

At the same time the philosopher warns that myth should not be identified with a historic event or fact as such because ‘history is always the history of facts understood or being understood’. One can understand it with the help of *a word* because it is a word that is able to bring an event to self-consciousness. That is why myth is ‘always a word’, as mythic consciousness should give words about historic facts, stories about the life of people, but not just their silent pictures. Without a word myth would never reach a person’ (ibid.: 150–151). Therefore, the second and the third elements in Losev’s definition of myth are history and a word.

Alexei Losev names one more element of myth which is *a miracle*. To him a miracle in myth is not just an effect of higher forces, or violation of nature law, or fiction, or fantasy, or the result of hypnosis. According to Losev, a miracle is a complex phenomenon that seizes and synthesizes personality, history, a word and peculiar mythic aloofness of a symbol. A miracle happens and is experienced in a very specific way, ‘within two or more personal layers’ (ibid.: 161). However, it is not just the influence of one personality on the other (‘a smart person teaches a fool, a literate person teaches an illiterate one, a scholar teaches a student... Here there is nothing specifically miraculous’ (ibid.: 162)).

Thus, there is a necessity of some special interaction or correlation of two or more personalities. For example, the ability of one to turn into somebody else is a variant of such a miracle, but it happens within one and the same personality. By two or more personal layers Alexei Losev means ‘an outer historical and inner designed layer that is in a way something given, intentional and directed at the aim’ (ibid.: 162). The outer history of a person, as it was said, is possible and it exists due to its becoming in time and space and its self-consciousness; ‘it always flows, changes and takes its shape’. Personality *by itself*, without changes and out of its history, is according to Losev ‘a personality as an idea, principle, invariable rule which is followed by real life’ (ibid.: 163–164).

Dialectical solution of a miracle is in the coincidence between the *becoming* personality and the personal *idea* in the result of which something third appears: it is ‘a true prototype, paradigm, and an ideal realization of an abstract idea’ (ibid.: 165). While comparing we can see just a partial coincidence between an inner, archetypical ‘task’ of per-

sonality and its real ‘accomplishment’, realization in empirical history. But for a miracle it is important that this connection was vivid, demonstrated and *miraculous*. Alexei Losev makes an example of healing of sick people at the shrine of Asklepius in Ancient Greece. Why is such healing a miracle if ancient Greeks knew that Asklepius always helped them at that place? He is the God of health and this is his work. Even if nobody prayed, he would help anyway. Yesterday and the day before when the sick did not get better, he helped as well. And today when the sick is healed at last, the miracle has happened. The philosopher asks, “Why?” and answers, “Because it became *vivid* that Asklepius helps sick people” (ibid.: 167).

According to A. Losev, a miracle is not a cognitive synthesis, aesthetic synthesis, logical purposefulness, or the result of volition actions of a human being. It is based on ‘mythic or personal purposefulness’. It means that a person gets his original and blissful state of soul, ‘returns to Eden’, experiences initial but lost harmony and wholeness of the world. Mythological perception of the world can interpret any object as a miracle; that is the essence of universal mythological aloofness. ‘The whole world and all its components, animated and inanimate, are equally myth and a miracle’ (ibid.: 177–183).

Thus, after distinguishing and analyzing thoroughly all four elements of a myth structure: (1) personality, (2) history, (3) word, (4) miracle, Alexei Losev interprets myth as ‘in words of the miraculous personal history’. Then after a series of semantic changes/transformations this notion becomes more unusual and original: ‘myth is a unfolded magic name’. According to the philosopher, ‘this is the last core of a myth, other transformations and simplifications should not take place any more. This is the simplest and the richest formula of myth’ (ibid.: 196).

Nevertheless, the one who wants to agree or disagree with such a conclusion, to understand the whole conception of the Russian philosopher and his argumentations of philosophic theory of myth, and to appreciate his creative intuition should read the whole work *The Dialectics of Myth* seriously and thoroughly, and he will surely open a new world of mysterious and multifaced world of myth.

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Dr. Evgenia V. Savelova  
Associate Professor  
Theory and History of Culture Department  
Far Eastern State University of Humanities  
Khabarovsk  
Russia  
e-mail: asav@vth.ru