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# Review of Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths*

Peter T. Struck

University of Pennsylvania, STRUCK@SAS.UPENN.EDU

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## Review of Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths*

### **Abstract**

In this wide-ranging book, first published in German and French in 1996, Luc Brisson aims to cover two millennia of thinking on allegory in barely 160 pages. The result is a compressed overview with moments of great insight. Its strengths lie in the details Brisson is able to work into this brief treatment; its weakness lies in Brisson's failure to justify the system into which he arranges the whole.

### **Disciplines**

Anthropology | Arts and Humanities | Classical Literature and Philology | Classics | Intellectual History

## Book Reviews

rus's *The Gospel of Buddha*. First published in Chicago in 1894, the book remains in print, having gone through several million copies and having been published in various Asian languages. While having the appearance of a scholarly text, *The Gospel* is in fact a bricolage of widely dispersed Buddhist scriptures, full of selective deletions and insertions to argue that Buddhism was in fact a precursor of Carus's own eclectic form of Christianity, itself a hybrid of Christian belief and German neo-Kantianism. In an almost gleefully willful misreading, Carus even argues that Christ was in fact the Buddha Maitreya (237). A large factor in the popular success of the text was its apparent embrace by Asian Buddhists. Within a few months of its publication, it was translated into Japanese, and the English version was used as a Buddhist reader in Ceylon (258). For Asian Buddhists, the value of the text lay not in its accuracy but in the very fact that it was written by a Westerner.

Overall, the focus upon Japanese Buddhism as "an object of Western knowledge" (15) works well as it helps to bring together an enormous amount of information into a comprehensive whole. However, at times the breadth of information that the work tries to encompass, typically very successfully, causes some oversimplification. It would have been helpful, say in the discussion of missionaries in Sri Lanka, to hear elite Ceylonese attitudes toward popular practice. I suspect that like the Christian missionaries, they also saw many local practices as "superstitious." Further, in the case of Buddhist reformers such as Inoue Enryō, while he did "deploy Western knowledge" for political purposes, he also did so because he truly believed that many categories of Western thought were simply true (155). In essence, while the notion of "deployment" does restore some agency to Asian actors, more "local" voices would have made the work even more comprehensive.

JACQUES FASAN, *Chicago, Illinois*.

BRISSON, LUC. *How Philosophers Saved Myths*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. 224 pp. \$30.00 (cloth).

In this wide-ranging book, first published in German and French in 1996, Luc Brisson aims to cover two millennia of thinking on allegory in barely 160 pages. The result is a compressed overview with moments of great insight. Its strengths lie in the details Brisson is able to work into this brief treatment; its weakness lies in Brisson's failure to justify the system into which he arranges the whole.

Brisson begins by laying out his premise that a transition from oral to written culture had the effect of freezing the mythic tradition. The adaptation of tales via bardic revisionism was now no longer possible because comparison with the written record allowed for policing by the audience. This situation provoked the need for the interpretive interventions of allegory to "save" the myths by again allowing elasticity, this time through interpretation rather than bardic improvisation. The idea that the emergence of writing makes innovation by producers of myth impossible—and so creates the need for other solutions—would be more appealing if some more serious consideration were given to a rather straightforward argument against the idea: that tragedy, not to mention epic, displays the near continual appropriation and reappropriation of prior mythic answers to suit entirely new sets of cultural questions. Brisson does mention tragedy (10), but his treatment of it comes in the context

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of examining Aristotle, and he hardly considers the notion that poetic refashioning in tragedy or epic thrives without insurmountable objection from later, now literate, audiences. This means that allegory may not, in the end, have been the inevitable response and defense of myths that Brisson claims, since “myth” seems to do very well on its own. Further, the corollary implication that oral culture had no place for allegorical reading is not observable and will have to remain speculative, and one might even be tempted to see evidence against it in a dialogue such as Plato’s *Ion*, where a bard seems to present himself as being as much an interpreter as a reciter of verses—although in admittedly late evidence.

In looking at the earliest allegorists, Brisson restates an idea that lingers in allegorical studies—that allegorical interpretation had its beginnings as a defensive response to attacks against the poets. Brisson’s larger thesis that allegory “saved” myth is, of course, entirely consonant with a view of allegory as primarily a defensive tool for answering objections. But this theory of origin has problems, and one is inclined to agree with Brisson that “it is practically impossible to ascertain the origins of allegory because the accounts of its first supposed practitioners came much later than the period they evoke.” It is, however, more difficult to follow the logic of the sentence that follows: “It is nonetheless true that sixth-century criticism of Homer and Hesiod gave rise to a defensive reaction that led to a specific hermeneutic practice” (32). Indeed, the single piece of early evidence whose authority is uncompromised, the commentary from Derveni, contains not a shred of defensiveness—nor, for that matter, does “defensiveness” adequately describe most of the other surviving allegorical tracts in antiquity. The exceptions of the homeric allegories of Heraclitus and Proclus’s responses to Plato in the *Commentary on the Republic* prove the rule. Brisson’s own treatment of the Stoics, where no defensiveness is present, help make the point. Further, as was already noticed eighty years ago by Tate, the chronological picture of sixth-century attacks (from Xenophanes et al.) and fifth-century defense by allegorists is compromised by Pherecydes of Syros, who shows us that evidence of allegory actually predates our earliest evidence of attacks—and perhaps more important, that chance survivals of evidence are thin reeds with which to build a governing framework (J. Tate, “The Beginnings of Greek Allegory,” *Classical Review* 41 [1927]: 214–15).

Brisson’s rich treatment of Plato shows him at the top of his powers. He develops a notion of myth as unverifiable discourse (as opposed to *logos*) that carries forward ideas he developed in *Platon, les mots et les mythes* (Paris, 1982). Myth is a discourse whose contents are such that it is unverifiable and whose elements are linked contingently and not necessarily. Unlike many other historians of allegory, Brisson notices the value of Aristotle, particularly a passage at *Metaphysics*, 1074b, in reconstructing the history of allegory. This is a valuable thread of inquiry that has since been picked up by G. R. Boys-Stones (“The Stoics’ Two Types of Allegory,” in *Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 189–216).

Brisson’s treatment of the Stoics is compromised by his choice (inadequately explained) to focus on a single text, Cicero’s *De natura deorum*. While it is an indispensable source, some more extended consideration of Chrysippus and Cornutus in particular would have been profitable and would have forestalled a certain ease, apparent in the rest of the work, with which Stoicism elides with Euhemerism and historicism to occupy one side of the allegorical field,

with “Neoplatonic” interpretation of cult and mysteries occupying the other side. In truth, the Stoics have their own interests in cultic interpretation, and their readings are not comprehended by the tripartite division of historical, physical, or moral.

In turning to the Middle Platonists, Brisson makes a fascinating linkage of the decline of the physical locus of the schools in Athens with the rise of commentary as a form of philosophical production. But less attractive is the idea that the mystical interpreting of texts, where myths are seen as repositories of mysteries, is an invention of this period. Of course, no less an authority than Félix Buffière advanced such a thesis, but he did so before the Derveni text became available (*Les mythes d’Homère et la pensée grecque* [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956], and “Introduction,” in *Héraclite: Allégories d’Homère* [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1962]). In the face of this text, one is less inclined to accept the view that something “radically different” is afoot when Middle Platonists suggest that “poets are not precursors of Stoicism but are genuine theologians, who have reserved the revelation of truth which has been granted them to a small group of initiates, who alone can receive it” (62). Such a statement is a perfectly adequate description of the premises of the Derveni commentator, some four centuries earlier. It is also less discontinuous with the Stoics than Brisson suggests. While not inclined toward the language of the mysteries, the Stoics nevertheless had their own views of an archaic, primal class of men with their own form of uncanny insight into the workings of the cosmos (Boy-Stones, “The Stoics’ Two Types of Allegory,” and *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of Its Development from the Stoics to Origen* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001]).

Brisson’s treatment of Plotinus on myth is more rich and extensive than one usually finds in treatments of allegory—where the later figures tend to occlude the founder of the school. Brisson rightly points out the ease with which Plotinus engages in interpretation of myth as a mode of exposition of even his core philosophical ideas. Myth gives Plotinus the means by which he can express synchronic realities in a diachronic narrative form. In the context of Plotinus’s work, this is not the simple idea that a story might capture an abstract idea—since at the heart of his corpus Plotinus struggles with the idea of translating the utter transcendence on which his world centers into the discursive sequential logic of language. Brisson’s schematizations of the later Neoplatonists show his vast learning in full flower and will be of great benefit for all readers.

The three short chapters that close the work treat allegorical reading in Byzantium, the Western Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. Dozens of figures are covered in each. Inevitably, such a compressed treatment of so broad a menu leaves one’s appetite more often whetted than sated. But as a kind of prosopography of allegorical readers over the stretch of a thousand years, Brisson puts on display a vast learning, not to mention bibliography, that is simply not at the fingertips of any other specialist in the field. Brisson’s suggestion that the end of allegorical reading was provoked by the discovery of the New World (and the subsequent proximity between “myth” and the “savage” in European minds) is no less fascinating for being only tantalizing.

The breadth of topics on which the book touches—from the transition between oral and written traditions of poetry, to Platonic uses of myth, to Stoic physics, to Byzantine pedagogy, to Ficino’s Florentine Academy (and this is only a ladleful)—indicates the reach of the concept of “allegory.” In fact, the

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notion can legitimately be extended to cover so broad a set of phenomena in antiquity that one has a difficult time distinguishing it from “interpretation.” And if that is the case, then Brisson’s positioning of allegory as an exotic tool put to use out of defensiveness (and always reactively) comes across as somewhat reductive—since interpretation is surely to be counted among the root processes of human cognition.

PETER STRUCK, *University of Pennsylvania*.

BARBER, ELIZABETH WAYLAND, and BARBER, PAUL T. *When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. xxi+290 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

For several decades I have taught an important volume on the shaping of myths of and in America. In its first edition, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor-Doubleday, 1977), and in the third edition (*The Myth of the American Superhero* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002]) authors Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence chose to include a glossary at the back of the book for some terms they crafted as analytical tools of some power. One example was “mythic cuing” to describe “the communication of mythical content without direct verbal articulation through the juxtaposition of visual and aural fragments.”

The authors of *When They Severed Earth from Sky* also use technical terms—over fifty of them—although they almost never explain why quite ordinary phrases are worthy of being capitalized in the text and placed in bold type in the index. Neither “Class-Action Corollary” nor “Environmental Clue” strike me as needing uppercase treatment, nor does “Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc,” defined as “because one event occurs soon after another event, the prior event is taken to have caused the later event” (249). One hardly needs a foreign-language guide for such familiar concepts. An appendix provides summaries of many of the terms: “Stockpile Effect,” “Centaur Syndrome,” “Bumping Upstairs,” and “Class-Action Corollary,” to cite just a few entries.

If many of these “myth principles” seem rather self-evident, it becomes obvious that the authors are attempting to strengthen a particular kind of mythological hermeneutics, one that primarily proposes that one must learn a series of “decoding” procedures (154)—as in much of Michel Foucault’s discourse analysis or Roland Barthes’s semiotics. The process here is named the Stripping Procedure, according to which one recognizes accretions to whatever happened originally. And that turns out in most of their examples to have to do with volcanism of one kind or another or to refer to astral “data.” Customary scientific findings are reinterpreted by attending to multiple layers of analogical, semantic, and syntactic patterning and by noticing the Restructuring Principle, according to which cultural change leads to restructuring or reinterpreting of the data that myths—according to Barber and Barber—purposely seek to convey.

Obviously, then, to these writers “‘myths’ were not intended [aboriginally, I assume] as fiction in [the usual] sense, but as carriers of important information about real events and observations” (244). Rather, the authors suggest that myths provide resilient transmitters of cultural information over literally thousands of years (hence the frequent reference to archaeological data; Ms. Barber is a professor of both linguistics and archaeology).