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The Myth of Mythology:  
a semiotic reading of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*

Master Thesis

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I hereby declare that I have written this Master Thesis myself, independently. All of the other authors' texts, main viewpoints and all data from other resources have been referenced.

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## INTRODUCTION

The title of this work is drawn from Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Overture* to that eminent work on and of mythology, *The Raw and the Cooked*. The anthropologist characterized his own book in these terms, saying "a reader would not be wrong if he took the book itself as a myth: the myth of mythology" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 12). While he intended to draw out the similarities, with respect to their relationship to language, of myth and the scientific metalanguages, I have chosen his words for a different possibility which they suggest for the representation of mythology. I refer specifically to Tartu-Moscow school text semiotics, in particular to the treatment of myth and the mythological as resulting from a distinctly *other* type of cognition—that is to say, of semiosis—than that which is today dominant in cultural texts. From this perspective, "myth" designates more than a category of content populated by incredible and obsolete explanations of phenomena. In this paradigm, myth is an entire modality which determines the perception and representation of the world according to its particular logic. Mythology produces and consists of texts in which myth is not only a kind of content but the specific way in which meaning is generated; mythological texts are defined as those which employ mythological semiotic mechanisms. Accounts of mythology which rely on non-mythological perception and representation thus submit their object to a foreign logic that reshapes myth in the image of an opposite modality. This treatment of myths has left a great deal undeciphered, and in order to access that overlooked aspect of mythological texts a representational model is needed which uses the logic native to myth to express mythology in its own terms: a *myth* of mythology. This thesis is in pursuit of such a model.

The problem of our contemporary representations of myth has been posed as a distortion of its historical peculiarity: "It is examined from the point of view of the end of the history of consciousness; it is forced and deformed; it is seen, like the moon, only on the surface" (Freidenberg 1997: 21). This is so because, even in antique literature, "we find in it an entire system of thought which no longer has active meaning for it, but which at the same time cannot be extracted without destroying the literature [...] [t]his semantically inactive system of thought is simple to point to and label: it represents mythological imagery" (Freidenberg 1997: 26). This historical approach makes of

mythology a system already inaccessible and inactive for the antique, or “classical” literature in which we usually locate it, though it remains present in ever more diluted forms. This “deformation” of myth not only prevents our understanding it with any semblance of depth or completeness, but also sharply restricts the possibility of locating its persistence in contemporary texts. Taken to its extreme, the relegation of myth to a remote historical epoch has inspired discussions of the “construction of myth” as an eighteenth and nineteenth century romanticist invention (Hendy 2001: xi), and a whole literature on the “absence of myth” as all that remains to be discussed (Heller 2006: 1). From this standpoint, myth is placed firmly outside the purview of modern culture: “What we have inherited are concepts and imaginings of myth, as opposed to the concrete, living experience of myth. [...] One can see how myth’s applicability has been whittled down to its romantic appeal and entertainment value” (Heller 2006: 1).

Although it is probably the most common, the historical perspective on myth is not the only possibility. As Juri Lotman insists, the question of myth’s textual specificity “can be posed both as a historical and as a typological problem” (Lotman 1979: 161). Typologically, mythological thought has been characterized as concrete and image-based, as opposed to the abstract conceptual thought which has come to dominate human perception and representations (Freiberg 1997: 26-31). For Lotman, this typological problem is evident in specific textual modalities, the primordial poles of which he terms “myth” and “plot”, and which are primarily distinguished by their differing relationships to time (Lotman 1979: 163). Lotman’s construct is in fact of great significance for contemporary approaches to mythology and must be considered in light of his broader semiotic theory:

It has been established that a minimally functioning semiotic structure consists of not one artificially isolated language or text in that language, but of a parallel pair of mutually untranslatable languages which are, however, connected by a 'pulley', which is translation. A dual structure like this is the minimal nucleus for generating new messages and it is also the minimal unit of a semiotic object such as culture. Thus culture is (as a minimum) a binary semiotic structure, and one which at the same time functions as an indissoluble unit. (Lotman 1990: 2).

Here we can see that not only entire cultures but any “minimally functioning semiotic structure” is a necessarily plural one, composed of and engaged with multiple modalities: no single “artificially isolated” language, semantic system, or text, can function semiotically. Thus whether we speak of “the mythological” as a semantic system, a text type, or a perceptive modality, it cannot occur in any semiotic function without, “as contracting party” (Lotman 1979: 163), a structure of demonstrably

*other* orientation. This other-to-myth is variously described as conceptual (Freiberg 1997), rational (Eco 1992), linear (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a), scientific (Heller 2006), *et cetera*, but scholars have generally agreed that it is both historically and typologically dominant, with regard to myth, today. If indeed some aspects of the mythological persist in our contemporary texts—dominantly linear and conceptual but still necessarily heterogeneous and thus possessed of some *other* semiotic character themselves—then relegating myth to the inaccessible past is to render some part of even culturally “close” texts inaccessible. This is especially true for the field of literature, which has long been associated with the preservation and imitation of myth, even without critical reflection on the matter of *why?*

“The topological world of myth is not discrete. As we shall endeavor to demonstrate, discreteness arises here because of the inadequate translation into discrete meta-languages of a non-mythological type” (Lotman 1979: 162). The inadequate translation that Juri Lotman indicts in *The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology* is the fate to which mythology and myths have often been resigned in contemporary western culture. Myths exist today either in the forms of “novelistic pseudo-myths” (Lotman 1979: 164) relegated to the category of educational children’s literature or antiquarian kitsch, or as the dubious archetypal substructures of repetitious modern character and plot types. As Sophia Heller observes, “some of the clearest expressions of *myth* are ‘found’ in fantasy fiction and film, such as the recent *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, and the comic book heroes of *X-Men*” (Heller 2006: 1). Like Lotman, Heller has perceived that these fictional pseudo-myths are inadequate to the task of generating “living myth” (Heller 2006: 1). This inadequacy is shared equally by myth scholarship, which Heller sees as the failed pursuit of living myth in another guise: “No longer content with just the phenomenon itself, the mechanics or science of the creation is what fascinates us” (Heller 2006: 1). While fascinating, this study of myth similarly fails to reproduce or replace the genuine mythological, and is bound to produce the “distortions” identified by Freidenberg (1997: 21), and Lotman’s “inadequate translation” (1979: 162). Divorced as modern culture imagines itself from the rhythms of ritual and natural cycles, any reconstruction of myth seems bound to hollow imitation or outright cliché. This, Lotman emphasizes, is a result of the inadequate translation into discrete-linear systems of essentially non-discrete texts which, “could only be described with great difficulty by means of our usual categories” (Lotman 1979: 161). Taking only these perspectives into account, myth itself, it would seem, is irrecoverably lost, and all that is left to us is a confrontation with its absence (Heller 2006: 6).

I am less pessimistic about the persistence of myth, though I realize that our capacity to



recognize and engage with it is complicated by the dominance of linear-conceptual models of representation. And while Juri Lotman's works express frustration at the most familiar (and inadequate) reconstructions of myth, he has also described the specific semiotic mechanisms which distinguish genuinely mythological texts from those of the opposing character. In explicating the semiotic distinction between myth and plot as text types, Lotman's work provides a theoretical and terminological foundation from which we can recognize more than just the modern incapacity for "living myth"; he offers an account of the meaning-generation peculiar to myth and which allows us to identify the persistence of the mythological in contemporary texts.

In his book *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Roberto Calasso dispenses with both the discrete-linear logic of the plot text as well as with the "usual categories" of narrative genre in order to represent both the structure and content of Greek mythology. Rather than producing another "inadequate translation" of myth into a more familiar form, I will argue in this thesis that Calasso's narrative operates according to the principles of the "textual mechanism for engendering myths" described by Juri Lotman (1979: 161), and that the model of mythological texts Lotman describes is evident in Calasso's book. I will demonstrate that *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is a unique instance of a contemporary mythological text which illustrates the complex of intertwined features and functions of myth which distinguish it from, rather than subject it to, the logic of linear-discrete plot texts.

The explication of these mythological semiotic mechanisms and discussion of their significance will be developed in three chapters addressing the complex of theoretical problems on which this thesis rests. In chapter one, this work will address the issue of incommensurability between semiotic modeling systems in general, with particular attention to the distinction between linear-discrete and non-linear atemporal text types as characterized by Tartu-Moscow school theorists. Narrowing the focus to one specific instance of the more general paradigm explored in the first chapter, chapter two will explore the characteristic differences between texts of the mythological type and their opposite, plot texts. In chapter three, a brief survey of Claude Lévi-Strauss's myth scholarship will draw out the specific aspects of myth as such which are apprehensible in mythological texts. The final section of part one will develop an explicit model of the characteristics in which mythological semiotic mechanisms can be located in specific texts.

Using this model, I will then analyze one such text which, although appearing in a physical form nearly always associated with plot narratives, will be shown to operate according to the

semiotic mechanisms proper to mythological texts. The second half of this thesis consist of an analysis of Roberto Calasso's book *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, divided into three chapters addressing each of the mythological semiotic mechanisms outlined at the end of chapter three. In chapter four, I will discuss the narrative peculiarities which can be seen to manifest atemporality. Chapter five will cover the formal implications of unconditional identity, as well as relevant instances of this mechanism addressed in the book's narrative content. The sixth and final chapter will describe how the semiotic mechanisms of myth deployed in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* contribute to narrative self-sufficiency at various levels of the text. The aim of this demonstration is not only to provide a rigorous and thorough description of the often impenetrable articulation of the book's narrative, but simultaneously to vindicate the suitability of the model constructed in the first half of the thesis for the analysis of texts of this type.

## MODEL

*We have lost the capacity to place myths in the sky. Yet, despite being reduced to just their fragrant rind of stories, we still feel that the Greek myths are cohesive and interconnected, right down to the humblest variant, as if we knew why they were so. And we don't. A trait of Hermes, or Artemis, or Aphrodite, or Athena forms a part of the figure, as though the pattern of the original material were emerging in the random scatter of the surviving rags. We shouldn't be too concerned about having lost many of the secrets of the myths, although we must learn to sense their absence, the vastness of what remains undeciphered. (Calasso 1993: 280)*

The first part of this thesis is dedicated to the construction of a semiotic model for describing mythological texts. Methodological tools will be derived primarily from Juri Lotman's theoretical writings on text typology, meaning generating mechanisms, and mythological semiosis. Before addressing the details of this descriptive methodology, I will first of all account for the need for a typologically specific model of mythological texts. In chapter one, I will discuss the discrete-continuous text paradigm developed by Tartu-Moscow school semiotic theorists, with a special focus on the distinct characteristics of each pole and their mutual incommensurability. In chapter two an isomorphic text typology, the plot-myth paradigm, is introduced as further support for the need to describe texts of vastly different modalities according to models which are appropriate to their specific characteristics. By way of example, I will briefly consider two different narrative modeling systems — Mikhail Bakhtin's "chronotope" and Roland Barthes' structural analysis of narrative — in order to demonstrate the critical aspects of mythological texts which plot-based narrative models are inadequate to describe. Having established the veracity of non-discrete, atemporal narrative texts, the chapter three begins with a comparison of Juri Lotman's theoretical statements about myth to those of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In this section, Lévi-Strauss's empirical research on myth as a living social phenomenon is compared to Lotman's claims about fixed mythological texts, with the aim of corroborating Lotman's theoretical construction of mythological texts' characteristic features. The second half of chapter three addresses these features directly, categorizing them according to a schema developed by myself and derived almost exclusively from

Juri Lotman's writings. Having demonstrated both the need for a specific model of mythological texts as well as the existence of a valid theoretical framework in which to employ it, the model constructed in chapter three will be applied to a specific mythological text in order to demonstrate the model's value as well as the genuinely mythological nature of the text under consideration. This is the project taken up in chapters four through six.

## 1.0 DISCRETE & CONTINUOUS

In this chapter, I will introduce the discrete-continuous text paradigm as outlined in the works of Tartu-Moscow school semiotic theory and further elaborated by specific scholars, particularly in the works of Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenski. Contextualizing this paradigm in terms of Lotman's insistence on the fundamental heterogeneity of culture, text, and consciousness highlights the importance of developing interpretive frameworks for non-dominant text types — in this case, continuous narrative texts. This chapter is intended to establish a solid theoretical background for this thesis while identifying the underexplored aspects of the textual model in which this work finds its significance.

In the *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures (as Applied to Slavic Texts)*, Uspenski, Ivanov, et al., describe a contingent system of oppositional binaries according to which cultures identify themselves internally. The authors explore the way in which, from a culturally internal perspective, the alterity and exclusion of the “non-type” against which a culture defines itself is made absolute; yet from what they term the “outer point of view”, “culture and non-culture appear as spheres which are mutually conditioned and which need each other” (*Theses* 1973: 2). The establishment of such constitutive exclusions was essential for the Tartu-Moscow school semiotic theory of this period, which was in large degree focused on typologizing and schematizing various phenomena of human culture. At its most general level, this effort distinguished two essential types of text:

The text as an integral sign; the text as a sequence of signs. The second case, as is well known from the experience of the linguistic study of the text, is sometimes regarded as the only possible one. Yet in the overall model of culture another type of text is also essential, one in which the concept of the text appears not as a secondary one derived from a chain of signs, but as a primary one. A text of this type is not discrete and does not break down into signs. It represents a whole and is segmented not into separate signs but into distinctive features. (*Theses* 1973: 4)

These two basic text-types are referred to in Tartu-Moscow school semiotic literature as discrete on the one hand and on the other, in various places, nondiscrete, iconic, or continuous (see, for example, *Theses*: 1973; Lotman and Uspenski 1978a; Lotman 1990: 151-170). The significance of these oppositional types is underscored in the *Theses*: “In the system of culture-generating semiotic oppositions a special role is played by the opposition of discrete and nondiscrete semiotic models

(discrete and nondiscrete texts)” (*Theses* 1973: 14).

For Juri Lotman, this opposition also applies to texts which he identifies according to the paradigm discrete-iconic. In *The Discrete Text and the Iconic Text: Remarks on the Structure of Narrative*, Lotman insists that the iconic character of certain texts is not necessarily associated with their being either pictorial or visual, but rather that it is the manner in which iconic texts transmit information—which is to say, how their meaning is interpreted—which distinguishes them from discrete texts.

In the discrete verbal message, the text is made up of signs; in the second case, there are, essentially, no signs: the message is communicated by the text in its entirety. And if we do treat it as discrete, and single out signlike structural elements, this is because of our habit of seeing verbal intercourse as the fundamental, even the sole, form of communicative contact, and a result of making the pictorial text seem like a verbal one. (Lotman 1975a: 335)

The “narration” of an iconic text, Lotman explains, occurs not on the basis of an increase of components—as in the case of verbal-discrete texts in which the addition of new signs (i.e. words) is the basis of narrative unfolding—but with the transformation of existing elements which are present from the beginning. In these types of texts, “which cannot be divided into discrete units, the narrative is constructed as the combination of an initial stable state with a subsequent movement” (Lotman 1975a: 336). Lotman uses a the pattern articulation of a kaleidoscope as an example of such transformations. The “unit”, or message, in terms of the iconic text is thus located at the level of the whole text, and not at the level of divisible components or identifiable elements. For a text such as a painting this is more easily understood than in the case of other kinds of nondiscrete texts, but it is essential to note here that Lotman does not restrict the category of “iconic texts” to visual ones. In fact he specifically recognizes “that the narrative text can be constructed in two ways,” one of which does *not* follow the organizational logic of natural language (Lotman 1975a: 333). This assertion, that a narrative could be constructed not in accordance with the linear-discrete principles of natural language, but according to an opposite meaning-coding mechanism, is usually explained using pictorial or musical examples (see, for instance, Lotman 1975a: 335 & 334, respectively).

Tartu-Moscow School theoreticians, especially Juri Lotman, have made a great deal of the binary paradigm of discrete and nondiscrete texts as foundational to cultural structures and processes. At its most basic, this is a recognition of the mechanisms by which the continuous, or nondiscrete, fabric of “reality” and the experience of life is divided up and re-presented in the distinct texts and models characteristic of human culture. Because an individual text can represent

the world from only a few possible perspectives at best, these are considered to be “discrete”, that is, isolated and distinguishable, with regard to the “continuous” flow of lived experience—“reality”. Whether this distinction is a matter of type or of degree remains unresolved, and is in fact not central to the typologization of texts according to the Tartu-Moscow School argument. This is because their description of a text as one or the other type is always made in *relation* to texts of the opposite variety, and it is important to bear in mind that their analyses are always of texts themselves (considered in the broad sense of the word) and never a discussion of the objects of those texts. No text or phenomenon is determined to be of an entirely discrete or nondiscrete composition in itself, but only tending toward one pole or another in the context of other texts/phenomena which are of the demonstrably alternative constitution. For the sake of clarity, I will refer in this thesis to “continuous texts” as an umbrella term for what are variously designated nondiscrete, iconic, and other such text types identified in opposition to the discrete type. This not only offers a positive term by which to define the phenomenon, but as demonstrated below the notion of “continuous” has an important affinity with the description of the topological characteristics of mythological space described by Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenski (Lotman 1979: 162; Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 216).

In addition to the relational definition of the discrete and continuous categories, their co-presence must be emphasized as essential. For Juri Lotman, this systemic plurality is absolutely fundamental:

A minimal thinking apparatus must include at least two differently constructed systems to exchange the information they each have worked out [...] The one operates as a discrete system of coding and forms texts which come together like linear chains of linked segments. [...] In the second system the text is primary, being the bearer of the basic Meaning. This text is not discrete but continuous. (Lotman 1990: 36)

This minimal dialogism is a prerequisite of “thinking apparatus[es]” which for Lotman break down into three isomorphic categories of mind, text, and culture. Each represents a different hierarchical level of information-organization, individually dependent on a minimum of two essentially different forms of meaning generation. The discrete-continuous binary is the most basic of these.

Although in-depth discussion of it is beyond the scope of this thesis, it should be mentioned briefly that the tendency toward discrete or continuous organization is identified as a characteristic of particular cultures as well as in the phenomena *of* cultures. In their exposition *On the Semiotic*

*Mechanism of Culture*, Lotman and Uspenski “distinguish between cultures directed mainly towards expression and those directed chiefly towards content” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978b: 217). A culture’s orientation toward expression is conceived of as “a consequence either of seeing a one-to-one correlation (rather than an arbitrary one) between the level of expression and the level of content, their inseparability in principle,” while an orientation toward content emphasizes precisely the arbitrariness of that relationship (Lotman and Uspenski 1978b: 217). This can be compared to the previous description of continuous texts as integral expressive wholes versus discrete texts whose articulation makes of distinct segments the essential loci of meaning. The cultural distinction can be seen to rest on whether identity is located according to “the notion of *correct* designation and, in particular, correct naming,” or if, on the other hand, identity is conceived of as an aggregation of characteristics (thus leaving some room for error/freedom in the recognition process) (Lotman and Uspenski 1978b: 218). In the former case, “the entire world can appear as a sort of text consisting of various kinds of signs, where content is predetermined and it is only necessary to know the language” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978b: 217). Because this cultural orientation is associated with the generation of primarily mythological texts, its relevance to this thesis is demonstrable and I will revisit this notion in a later chapter. For the present discussion, however, it is sufficient to note that the application of this paradigm to whole cultures underscores its essential and even ubiquitous presence in Tartu-Moscow semiotics.

### ***1.1 Characteristics of Discrete and Continuous Texts***

While neither type of organization exists anywhere in its pure form, from a survey of Tartu-Moscow school works which most directly address the discrete-continuous text paradigm we can identify some common characteristics of each. The following section is not meant to be an *exhaustive* list of the features which distinguish primarily discrete from continuous texts, but it is hoped that it will be illustrative of their most significant structural differences. More specific instances of these distinctions will be given in the next chapter, which explores the isomorphic paradigm of “plot-myth”, but an overview of this more general typology will help to ground that discussion in terms of broader modalities.

Most simplistically, discrete texts are organized according to the structure and principles of natural language: “word-signs are joined into chains according to the rules of the given language and the content of the statement” (Lotman 1975a: 333). The ability, or ease with which we are able, to



identify and isolate individual signs, to follow them one-by-one in a linear unfolding of the content of a text's communication, their subjection to the linear uni-directionality of the passage of time—these are the features which define the so-called discrete texts with which, in the contemporary era, we are most familiar. Lotman gives the example of a page covered in Russian words:

The principle of semantic organization will be different for each word. Consequently, it would probably be impossible to formulate general rules of meaning-formation for all the words. It is assumed that the reader of the text simply knows the meaning of all the words (that is, knows to which "points" of reality outside the text they are related) or can look up these meanings in the dictionary. The function which sets up the correspondence between a given word and a given extratextual object remains implicit. (Lotman 1975a: 334)

In other words, the discrete text is made up of signs, each of which has its own correspondence to some "point of reality" and which, taken together, contribute to some kind of textual whole only secondary to their first priority of signifying individually. This is especially evident in narrative texts of the discrete type, which even in written form are essentially modeled on the verbal narratives common to speech communication. "Verbal narration is constructed, first and foremost, by the addition of new words, phrases, paragraphs, chapters. Such narration is always an increase in the size of the text" (Lotman 1975a: 335). This additive character of discrete texts is the tendency in both their construction and consumption, as evident in most readers of the modern novel, who tend to idealize reading from beginning to end without skipping ahead.

In fact, such categories of "beginning and end" are a primary characteristic of linear-discrete texts, which are frequently imposed during reception of continuous texts either intentionally, in order to make a kind of linear "sense" of them, or unconsciously due to the orientation of a culture toward such organization (Lotman 1990: 151). The predominance of this mode of text orientation can be witnessed in the tendency to treat nondiscrete texts as though they were in fact discrete ones—to "single out signlike structural elements" and to project some semblance of a linear narrative, even a plot, upon texts of a totally different organization (Lotman 1975a: 335). Despite a culture's primary orientation toward either discrete or continuous text types, Lotman emphasizes that neither exists in isolation even within an individual text; there always exist identifiable characteristics of both types, despite the tendency of one mode to dominate. Still, the types remain distinct, and essentially incommensurable:

[...] when we are dealing with discrete and non-discrete texts, translation is in principle impossible.

The equivalent to the discrete and precisely demarcated semantic unit of one text is, in the other, a kind of semantic blur with indistinct boundaries and gradual shadings into other meanings. (Lotman 1990: 37)

As discussed above, continuous texts fundamentally lack such terminal structures which correspond, in a discrete text, with the categories of beginning and end. This can be recognized in pictorial representations and other images, such as paintings, which except for a few uncommon examples do not present clear indicators for where to begin and end their reception. Such “iconic” texts do not unfold according to linear temporality, or indeed have no temporal structure at all (Lotman 1975a: 333). The absence of the categories of beginning and end should not be confused with a lack of boundaries or fixation of the text—both are essential to the definition of a text itself as a delimited object (see, for instance, Lotman 1977; and Lotman and Piatigorski 1978). Rather, the *categories* of beginning and end are absent in the sense of their relative primacy—no “part” of a continuous text necessarily or even conventionally comes “before” or “after” any other. We may even say that categories in general are absent from the continuous text, at least in the sense of any fixed grouping of its content.

This leads us to the primary characteristic of continuous texts, their resistance to discrete articulation. That is, it is difficult-*cum*-impossible to distinguish and isolate anything like a sign, so far as we typically recognize them in texts constructed on the principle of linguistic structure, within the body of a continuous text. The attempt itself, to quote Lotman, “smacks of artificiality” (Lotman 1990: 36). Where segmentation is apparent in a continuous text, it is of a wholly other order and “is not comparable with the type of discrete boundaries” observed in discrete texts (Lotman 1990: 37). This is because the semanticization of the continuous text is not based on an articulated point-to-point correspondence, as in a verbal-language based discrete text, but rather on the isomorphism of the continuous text to its object. Another way of saying this is that, where the discrete text may describe its object as a set of articulated characteristics recognizable as proper to said object, the continuous text *resembles* its object holistically. To borrow Lotman’s excellent example, “[i]n an Impressionist painting, the isomorphism is established between the object and the image, but not between a part of the object and the brushstroke” (Lotman 1975a: 334).

Having covered both the existence and features of discrete and continuous text types, a question remains regarding their specific manifestations. Given the essential isomorphism of discrete texts to the structure of natural language, are all natural language texts bound to linear-discrete organization?

While the answer to this may seem self-evidently affirmative, it becomes problematic when we consider one of the most frequently cited instances of the continuous text—myth. While expressions of myth are found in various kinds of artifacts, myth is a fundamentally verbal-linguistic phenomenon, both historically and typologically (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 12; Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 215). It thus seems strange that myth should be held up as the token opposite of linear-discrete text organization, a comparison nonetheless made with great frequency. In order to address this apparent paradox, we will have to look more closely at the paradigmatic way in which myth is defined as a fundamentally continuous structure. In the next chapters I will address two aspects of this issue, first discussing the characteristic opposition of myth and plot texts as narrative types, followed by a chapter dedicated to the elaboration of the specific characteristics of mythological texts.

## 2.0 THE PROBLEM OF PLOT(S)

In this chapter, I will discuss Juri Lotman's plot-myth paradigm as isomorphic to the discrete-continuous text typology discussed above. Addressing contemporary arguments from Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes which both support and contradict my primary argument, I will attempt to demonstrate the validity of Lotman's "primordially opposed types of text" in the context of literary theory. Ultimately, I will argue for the possibility of non-discrete, non-linear natural-language narratives—that is, those which are "not a plot-narration in our sense" (Lotman 1979: 163) and which thus show greater similarity to mythological texts in their organization.

The paradigm of discrete-continuous text types discussed in the previous chapter is isomorphic with the plot-myth paradigm outlined in Juri Lotman's writings. The opposite poles of plot text and myth are mutually defining in the same relational and mutually conditional way that the terms "discrete" and "continuous" were shown to be above. In his discussion *On the Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology*, Lotman asserts the foundational significance of the plot-myth paradigm:

To initiate our typological analysis we can presuppose the existence of two essentially contradictory types of text. At the center of the cultural massif there is a textual mechanism for engendering myths. The chief particularity of the texts it creates is their subjection to cyclical-temporal motion. [...This] mechanism could not be typologically unique. It needed as contracting party a text-generating mechanism organized in accordance with linear temporal motion and fixing not laws but anomalies. (Lotman 1979: 161-3)

This latter text type had as its content, "unique and chance events, crimes, calamities—anything considered a violation of a certain primordial order." Having their basis in anecdote, such reports constituted "the historical kernel of plot-narration [...for] the elementary basis of artistic narrative genres is called the novella, this is to say the 'piece of news'" (Lotman 1979: 163). Where myth refers to timeless, regular events and in its essential function "organizes the hearer's world," plot-texts introduce into that order "'incidents,' 'news,' various happy and unhappy excesses." "If the one mechanism fixed the principle, the other described the chance occurrence" (Lotman 1979:163).

These basic text-types differ not only in their subject matter, but also essentially and substantially in their construction. This latter concerns the manner of both generation and reception of texts, and especially for narrative texts their specific modalities are key to understanding but

difficult to conceptualize. This is because the current text paradigm is utterly dominated by texts produced and consumed according to the linear-discrete logic discussed above<sup>1</sup>. Especially in the case of narrative texts, this dominant mode “is sometimes regarded as the only possible one” (*Theses* 1973: 4) and is a result of “our habit of seeing verbal intercourse as the fundamental, even the sole, form of communicative contact” (Lotman 1975: 335). The particular characteristics of mythological texts are treated in the following chapter, but I will give a brief account of those features which mark texts of the opposite organization.

The first feature that distinguishes plot-texts is the presence (or at least potential presence) of “a great number of figures” and even “multi-heroed texts,” which are, Lotman insists, “impossible in texts of an authentically mythological type” (Lotman 1979: 174). Character doubles, which are a related phenomenon, are at once native to the plot-text and simultaneously an “obvious result of the linear unfolding of cyclical texts.” While only possible in plot-texts, the tendency to “provide the hero with a double-companion, and sometimes with a whole paradigm cluster of companions” nonetheless gives evidence of the mechanisms of texts of the opposite type, and can even be used to reconstruct them (Lotman 1979: 174). The presence of such doubles precipitates another characteristic feature of plot-texts: intrigue and “comic confusion” which we can also see as a manifestation of the plot-text’s tendency to report “incidents” and “news” (Lotman 1979: 165-66). Plot-texts have, as proper to them, sharply demarcated beginnings and endings—a fact which seems obvious to the point of banality when considering novels and other works of fiction (but which may be far more interesting in the context of non-fictional plot texts). That they move in a linear progression from the one toward the other is a feature both constituent of and dependent upon the presence of such terminal points. This is another way of saying that plot-texts start at the beginning and progress toward their end, in terms of which, Lotman states, “eschatological texts should be considered the first evidence of the disintegration of myth and the elaboration of narrative plot” (Lotman 1979: 168).

A similar division of between myth and plot texts is taken up in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*. While the specific character of mythological texts outlined in Lotman’s work bears a superficial resemblance to Bakhtin’s “adventure-time”, Bakhtin himself

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<sup>1</sup> The thresholds of this and other dominant text paradigms are uncertain, but the relative antiquity of the mythological type’s dominance with respect to today’s linear-logical dominance is recognized variously by Eco (see for instance 1992: 27-32), Lévi-Strauss (1978: 45), and Lotman (1979: 161-2). For the sake of brevity I will make recourse to the term “contemporary” to refer to this latter dominant paradigm, which in terms of this thesis should be understood as “modern” in the comparative sense and not, for example, in the sense of an aesthetic or historical periodization.

distinguishes that and other chronotopes from the properly mythological or “classical” chronotope:

This is not the place to investigate in detail the chronotopes of other genres of ancient literature, including the major genres of epic and drama. We will merely point out that at their heart lies folk-mythological time, in which ancient historical time (with its specific constraints) begins to come into its own. The time of ancient epic and drama was profoundly localized, absolutely inseparable from the concrete features of a characteristically Greek natural environment, and from the features of a ‘man-made environment,’ that is, of specifically Greek administrative units, cities and states. In every aspect of his natural world the Greek saw a trace of mythological time; he saw in it a condensed mythological event that would unfold into a mythological scene or tableau. Historical time was equally concrete and localized—in epic and tragedy it was tightly interwoven with mythological time. These *classical* Greek chronotopes are more or less the antipodes of the alien world as we find it in Greek romances. (Bakhtin 1981: 104)

Bakhtin’s admission that a mythological chronotope is excluded from his discussion is important in the context of Lotman’s theory of myth. In particular, it sheds light on Lotman’s choice to describe a *topology* of mythological texts, rather than using terminology similar to Bakhtin’s. “Chronotope” suggests, as Bakhtin says, a relation to both Einsteinian relativity and the Kantian transcendental categories, and it is also “a formally constitutive category of literature” (Bakhtin 1981: 84-85). Emphasizing as both Bakhtin and Lotman do the typological distinction between mythological and non-mythological texts based on the temporality of the latter—which manifests most obviously in the chronological unfolding of plot (Lotman 1979: 163)—it is not surprising that Lotman would have eschewed a term which emphasizes the primacy of such temporality. Lotman’s theoretical texts describe a mythological universe in which events are “timeless, endlessly reproduced and, *in that sense, motionless*” (Lotman 1979: 163, italics mine). Bakhtin’s “chronotope” classifies genres according to the density of their chronology, and describes the logic by which narratives move from one event to another. The Lotmanian mythological text is motionless in that every event is potentially simultaneous, has no prescribed syntagmatic relationship with any other, and thus requires no temporal logic to progress. In fact, it does *not* really progress, being part of a fixed and eternally repeated cycle (Lotman 1979: 162).

In this sense Lotman’s choice of “topology” to describe mythological texts evokes not only the contemporary techno-mathematical bent of the Tartu-Moscow school itself (Shukman 1978: 190), but also a perspective on the dynamics of mythological worlds which, as we will see in *Part Two*, Roberto Calasso appears to share. Topology is commonly defined as:

The branch of mathematics concerned with those properties of figures and surfaces which are independent of size and shape and are unchanged by any deformation that is continuous, neither creating new points nor fusing existing ones; hence, with those of abstract spaces that are invariant under homeomorphic transformations (“Topology” def. 1).

The spatial, rather than temporal/chronological, emphasis of the term is its most obvious advantage over Bakhtin’s “chronotope” in discussing mythological texts. Just as significant, however, is the reference to “properties of figures and surfaces...unchanged by any deformation that is continuous” which is reflected in Lotman’s description of the mythological text:

[...] owing to its exceptional ability to undergo topological transformations, [it] can with surprising boldness declare to be one and the same thing phenomena which we would have considerable difficulty in comparing. The topological world of myth is not discrete. (Lotman 1979: 162)

In his specific comments on mythological text types, it is clear that Lotman intends, or at least advocates for, not only a topological *study* of myth but a description of mythological space as inherently topological. That is, mythological space is “unchanged by any deformation that is continuous”, and due to the nature of the non-discrete mythological text type *all deformations are by necessity continuous with that mythological space*—thus myth, regardless of any superficial “deformations,” remains essentially unchanged. The radical difference in spatio-temporal logic between myth and plot-type narratives, recognized by both Bakhtin and Lotman, is the primary reason for such texts’ resistance to analysis using typical literary models.

Lotman’s statement that the inauguration of eschatology marks the “disintegration of myth” appears to contrast myth and narrative, and the question arises whether narrative itself is a subcategory of plot texts. Can there be narrative texts which conform not to the organizational principles of plot but rather to those proper to the opposite type of text? Or are all so-called mythical narratives essentially “translations of mythological texts into the language discrete-linear systems,” such as “those novelistic pseudo-myths which first come to mind at the mention of mythology”? (Lotman 1979: 164). An important insight of Lotman’s, reiterated in a number of places but most clearly articulated in *The Discrete and Iconic Text*, is that narrative texts are not automatically of a linear-discrete type (Lotman 1975a: 335). Distinguishing between what he calls “discrete and iconic texts,” Lotman notes that “[e]ach of the types of texts described above has a system of narration that is peculiar to it [...] for the internally nondiscrete text-message of the iconic type, however, narration is a transformation, an internal transposition of elements” (Lotman 1975a:

335). The ascription of a narrative capacity to “internally nondiscrete” texts allows for the possibility of narrative texts which do not conform to the principles of plot. Such narratives are based not on “the syntagmatic combination of elements in space, which necessarily entails an increase in the size of the text, but an internal transformation and subsequent combination in time” (Lotman 1975a: 335). For the present work we are particularly concerned with how this narrative operates in mythological texts, but in general, Lotman assures us, “[t]here are numerous examples of this kind of narrative syntagmatics” (Lotman 1975a: 335).

Those texts which may be narratives despite not being plot-texts Lotman most explicitly identifies as “mythological” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 211; Lotman 1990: 152). Such texts are characterized first of all by their lack of a beginning or end, in the sense we typically associate with plot texts. This is a result, Lotman says, of their subjection to cyclical rather than linear temporality, and is only the first of a number of important implications of this relationship to time. As there is no “correct” starting point for a given cyclical narrative, “[t]he story, then, can begin at any point, and that point will serve as a beginning for the narrative which itself is a partial manifestation of the Text without beginning or end” (Lotman 1990: 152). The choice of a starting point is thus not only rather inconsequential with regard to the cycle as a whole, but also tends to make that choice a highly contingent one (Lotman 1979: 162). In *The Semiosphere and the Problem of Plot*, Lotman makes a detailed investigation of the characteristics that distinguish plot-narrative from its typological opposite. Plot, he says,

is a syntagmatic concept and consequently involves the experiencing of time. So we have to do with two typological forms of events, which correspond to two types of time: cyclical and linear. In archaic cultures cyclical time predominates. Texts created according to the laws of cyclical time are not in our sense plot-texts and generally speaking they are hard to describe in our normal categories. (Lotman 1990: 151)

The contrast of these features of mythological narratives with the corresponding facets of plot-narrative elaborated above shows only their most obvious divergence, and further comparisons will be made in the next chapter.

Lotman’s confirmation of nondiscrete narrative is challenged by Roland Barthes’ assertion in the *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives*, where he insists that “[s]tructurally, narrative belongs with the sentence without ever being reducible to the sum of its sentences: a narrative is a large sentence, just as any declarative sentence is, in a certain way, the outline of a little narrative”



(Barthes 1975: 241). While Barthes here recognizes the irreducibility of narrative to the sum of its parts, its functioning “as an integral sign” (*Theses* 1973: 4), he still confers upon the category an essentially linear-discrete structure modeled on that of verbal language. Vladimir Propp’s analysis of folktales adheres to a similar principle: “to him time is the very stuff of reality and for this reason, he insisted on rooting the tale in temporality” (Barthes 1975: 251). In light of this, identifying in a narrative text a properly mythological, that is to say *continuous*, organization is potentially problematic. Barthes does note that Lèvi-Strauss made recourse to an a-temporal narrative structure in his model of myth, in which “the chronological order of succession is reabsorbed by an atemporal matrix” (Barthes 1975: 251).

Of significance here, especially for a semiotic approach to texts of a continuous type, is that non-discrete narratives should resist analyses which begin from the assumption of discrete text structure. The primary division of narrative into story and discourse, adapted from the Russian Formalist couplet *sjuzet* and *fabula*, and its cascading distinctions of nuclei and catalyses, informants and indices, and so on, ad infinitum, which allow the structural linguistic model to be applied to narrative texts, cannot be universal if the possibility of non-discrete narrative texts is admitted (see, for example, Chatman 1978: 19; Culler 2001: 189). In the case of such nondiscrete texts as myths, which we would nonetheless be hard pressed *not* to identify as narratives, such a scheme of articulation is simply inadequate. When considering Lotman’s description of nondiscrete narratives, and the identification of myth as an example of this type, in connection to Barthes’ categorization of all narratives as essentially constructed according to the principles of the sentence (that is, that all narratives are essentially linear-discrete constructions), we are faced with an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, it would seem that the only way to reconcile the two assertions is to deny all mythological texts the status of narratives; yet this is to deny the real existence of texts which are mythological and yet seem to us unmistakably narrative, regardless of their antiquity. Jonathan Culler takes up the narratological argument in *The Pursuit of Signs*, claiming that:

To make narrative an object of study, one must distinguish narratives from nonnarratives, and this invariably involves reference to the fact that narratives report sequences of events [...] narratological analysis of a text requires one to treat the discourse as a representation of events which are conceived of as independent of any particular narrative perspective or presentation and which are thought of as having the properties of real events. Thus a novel may not identify the temporal relationship between two events it presents, but the analyst must assume that there is a real or proper temporal order, that the events in fact occurred either simultaneously or successively. (Culler 2001: 190)

Any notion of a “real or proper temporal order” is totally foreign to myth, not only in terms of the “motionless” and repetitive nature of its events, but especially considering myth’s radical admission of variants (Lotman 1979: 163; Lévi-Strauss 1969: 12-13). In fact, as Lévi-Strauss insists, “a myth is made up of all its variants” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 435): specific narratives of mythological stories exist not in contradiction to but in harmony and simultaneously with the conflicting versions of other accounts. This is not so only in the abstract sense of a mythological system or story cycle as a whole, but in the mind of the audience both collectively and as individuals: “there is a kind of continuous reconstruction taking place in the mind of the listener” (Levi Strauss 1978: 49). In that sense a specific narrative with its own fixed order of events is always consumed as it were simultaneously with the alternate accounts which it evokes. No version has greater legitimacy than any other, a phenomenon which ethnographers have noted with great interest:

“The stories are told differently by every teller. The amount of variation in important details is enormous.” Yet the natives do not seem to worry about this state of affairs: “A Caraja, who traveled with me from village to village, heard all sorts of variants of this kind and accepted them in almost equal confidence. It was not that he did not see the discrepancies, but they did not matter to him.” (Lipkind quoted in: Lévi-Strauss 1969: 12)

The temporal order of a mythological narrative is not only made irrelevant but even transcended by its inseparability from an infinity of legitimate variants. In this sense, if “the analyst must assume that there is a real or proper temporal order” in order to analyze mythological narratives, then he can do so only at the expense of the logic inherent to myth. This is to admit a sad incapacity to effectively understand a demonstrably huge set of cultural texts, and calls into question whether we have access to myth, as such, at all. Indeed this is the premise of a whole literature devoted to the impact on modern culture of the “absence of myth,” and some scholars have even claimed that the total passing away of this expressive mode is prerequisite for the endeavor called “mythology” itself (Heller 2006: 1-6).

I am more optimistic. Taking into account Juri Lotman’s unconditional insistence on the essential multiplicity of systems, and in light of his account of the primordially of the plot-myth paradigm, it seems unreasonable to discount the persistence of myth in a culture still evidently obsessed with plot. What remains to be seen is precisely where the mythological mode remains manifest. Barthes says advertising (Barthes 1972), Lévi-Strauss claims politics (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 430), and Campbell, Jung, and hosts of others make conjectures of their own (Segal 1999: 19-35).

The limits of time and space preclude a consideration of any of these here. My chief concern in this thesis is whether, given its overwhelming tendency toward linear-discrete organization, a fixed narrative text can be really “mythological” in the ways which distinguish myth specifically from plot.

As if echoing Lotman’s thought in *The Origin of Plot*, Lèvi-Strauss ventures a guess that, “[a]s a matter of fact, it was about the time when mythical thought—I would not say vanished or disappeared—but passed to the background in western thought during the Renaissance and the seventeenth century, that the first novels began to appear instead of stories still built on the model of mythology” (Lèvi-Strauss 1978: 45). With this chapter I have tried to establish the theoretical validity of the opposition of myth to plot texts, and highlighted the ensuing question of narrative texts’ capacity to operate in the mythological mode. In the terms of Tartu-Moscow school semiotics, I restate this question as follows: What are the limits of a narrative text’s capacity to model myth? Can certain narrative measures be taken to somehow accurately represent the characteristics of myth which are totally foreign to plot? Can a mythological text, as Lotman defines it, exist in the form of a fixed narrative? My answer to this is *yes*, and a demonstration of this claim is the task of part two of this thesis. First, however, I will focus more closely on the characteristic features of myth and mythological texts, and in the following chapter I will develop a model which allows these to be identified within specific texts.

### 3.0 MYTHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

Because of mythology's perceived distance from contemporary culture, there exists a tendency to approach mythological texts as though they were already "meaningful". That is, we read a myth and assume that the stories they tell don't simply, or actually, signify the objects and events described, but rather that they have a meaning beyond that; in other words, we commonly assume that myths exist for the sake of interpretation. This has led to the interpretation of myths as texts with a single stable meaning: "myths about the death and rebirth of the god of vegetation [...] are merely symbolic descriptions of the annual death and rebirth of vegetation itself" (Segal 1999: 12). Such interpretations gloss over the effects of the re-location of myths, from dynamic so-to-speak "living" cultural entities into the fixed, linear forms in which they are most familiar today (Heller 2006: 12-13). This perspective also, and perhaps more significantly, disregards the profound influence of imposing a metalanguage of description upon texts which are, as we will see, "fundamentally monolingualistic" (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 212).

In this chapter I will review Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural description of myth, not only because its influence on Juri Lotman's notion of mythological texts is demonstrably significant and thus highly relevant to this thesis; but also in order to establish the salient structural similarities between the socio-cultural phenomenon of myth as explored by Lévi-Strauss and the characteristics of mythological texts outlined by Juri Lotman. The aim is to ground the fundamentally continuous—that is, non-discrete and non-linear (even *atemporal*)—organization that Lotman claims for texts of the mythological type, in the empirical research made by Lévi-Strauss, justifying Lotman's typology and further specifying the characteristic features that we should expect to find in a text organized according to the structure proper to myth.

#### ***3.1 The Structural Study of Myth***

Claude Lévi-Strauss's application of structuralism to mythology, based primarily on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, begins with his assertion that the relationship between Saussure's notions of *parole* and *langue* are mirrored in the relationship between the individual telling of a mythic story, or variant, and the system of relationships between the elements of which it is composed (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 430). It is the integral structure that determines the meaning of a myth—particular manifestations, subject to the mutability of expression, are secondary to the

relatively stable and self-sufficient structure of binary oppositions constitutive of a myth. “[Myth’s] *growth* is a continuous process, whereas its *structure* remains discontinuous” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 443).

Like language, the meaning of a myth lies not in the individual units that compose it, but in the way they are combined and determined by relationships of binary opposition (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 440). Unlike language, myth is fundamentally asyntactic; it is not the order in which elements are organized in the story that determines its meaning, but the presence and juxtaposition of complementary and opposed elements. These elements he terms, “gross constituent units” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 431), or “bundles of relations” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 433), which in myth are structurally coherent unities at the level of the sentence: “Oedipus marries his mother, Jocasta”, “the Spartoi kill one another”, and “Oedipus kills the Sphinx” are examples of such agglomerates. An important point made by Lévi-Strauss is that while linguistic structuralism identifies three levels of meaning—phoneme, word, sentence—the organization in other systems based on the paradigm of language is not necessarily the same. For music, he states, “you have the equivalent to phonemes and the equivalent to sentences, but you don’t have the equivalent to words”; mythological structure has, by analogy, “an equivalent to words, an equivalent to sentences, but you have no equivalent to phonemes” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 53).

The application of structural linguistic principles to myth is warranted by the fact that myth is a verbal-linguistic phenomenon, but Lévi-Strauss also highlights the ways in which the structure of myth *differs* from that of natural language. As K.R. Walters points out in his discussion of Lévi-Strauss, myths do not refer to actual people and events—even their complex and intertwined genealogies are *pseudo*-genealogies: “There were no real causes, nor any real effects.” (Walters 1984: 349). Unlike natural language, myth is earnestly and self-consciously non-referential, as Walters emphasizes: “Myths, however, do not refer to events that happened; hence, there is no external reality against which they can be read and found in line or else wanting.” (Walters 1984: 342). Myth’s independence of the syntactic organization and referential functions of natural language, combined with its equal applicability to past, present, and future, inspires Lévi-Strauss to comment that in myth “meaning succeeds practically at ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 431). Unlike natural language, myths do not pretend to refer to any reality at all, and this justifies the abstraction from specific variants of Lévi-Strauss’ constituent units, as well as their freedom from the rules of causality. Thus myth, as defined by Lévi-Strauss, is particularly susceptible to structural analysis, which seeks to identify in its objects underlying structures which generate the significance of their various elements by the operation of binary

oppositions. According to Lévi-Strauss, this is exactly how myth itself operates, and unlike language it is not hampered by the need to (or to appear to) represent some reality.

There are other ways in which the structure of myth diverges from the model of natural language from which structuralism is derived. As a part of language, myth exhibits certain properties “only to be found *above* the ordinary linguistic level, that is, they exhibit more complex features than those which are to be found in any other kind of linguistic expression” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 431). This can be inferred from the structure of its basic unit, the bundle of relations, which is already (being based at the level of the sentence) more complex than the basic unit of natural language. Increased complexity at higher levels of the myth structure is a result of what, according to Lévi-Strauss, is myth’s primary function: “the purpose of a myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction” (Lévi –Strauss 1955: 443). The relational bundles that form the content of myths are organized as reciprocal binary oppositions, which serve to generate differential meaning (as in the signs of language) and a tension of incompatibles within myths. Lévi-Strauss gives the example of “overrating of blood ties” and “underrating of blood ties” in the Oedipus myth as typical of this elementary mythological situation (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 437). The function of a myth is to overcome this contradiction of irreconcilable incompatibles by uniting the opposing mythemes as a kind of situation, which can be compared to another situation of a similar contradiction. In the Oedipus myth this second structural opposition is found in the “denial of man’s autochthonous nature” and “persistence of man’s autochthonous nature”. While the two situations can never be reconciled, the presence of a complementary opposition allows unity to be established at the level of the binary opposition between the set of situations.

According to Lévi-Strauss, the asyntactic nature of myth is intimately connected to the stability of its identity despite frequent translation and the occurrence of numerous variants. This fact of mythology depends on a structure whose integrity is not challenged by the caprice of language— “On the contrary, we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such” (Lévi –Strauss 1955: 435). Here emerges Lévi-Strauss’ most radical assertion about the nature of a myth, that is its inclusion of, and definition by, all of the variants which can be considered transformations of one and the same story. “There is no one true version of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth” (Levi-Strauss 1955: 436). K.R. Walters points out that, while “many critics inveigh against Lévi-Strauss’ method as ‘artificial’ and ‘contrived’, the application of such a historical method as the search for some distant proto-myth sanctified by its position on a time line is just as contrived”

(Walters 1984: 346). The introduction of this inclusive definition of myth had distinct and profound implications for contemporary mythological studies.

[I]t is a well known contribution of Levi-Strauss' theory that it posits the myth to be the summation of all its variations, even the most contradictory or superficially unrelated. This technique relieves us of the unwelcome burden of arbitrarily choosing a "correct" account and discarding or undervaluing the rest. In other words, it enriches rather than impoverishes our data base. (Walters 1984: 342)

A result of the timeless and inclusive nature of myth is that it subsumes variants regardless of the temporal and cultural context in which they arise. Commenting on his own analysis of the Oedipus myth, Lévi-Strauss writes, “our interpretation may take into account the Freudian use of the Oedipus myth and is certainly applicable to it [...] not only Sophocles, but Freud himself, should be included among the recorded versions of the Oedipus myth” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 435). This raises immediate questions about the delimitation of “a” myth, and Lévi-Strauss does not address at what point, if any, a myth is transformed by translation or variation into something so different from the “source” story as to constitute something wholly different. But it is clear that for Lévi-Strauss, a myth is not limited to its native cultural context, just as no individual story-teller can claim authorship of a myth despite his alterations to it.

Here we return to the question posed at the end of Chapter I: how can myth be at once a linguistic phenomenon—both actually and, as Lévi-Strauss shows, structurally—and yet be held up as a prime example of the opposite to those linear-discrete texts constructed on the model of natural language? Lévi-Strauss begins his description of myth from a premise that would seem to contradict Lotman’s characterization of mythological texts: the comparability of myth to natural language, which operates according to a linear-discrete logic, is seemingly incompatible with Lotman’s assertion of the mythological text’s fundamentally continuous character. But a typological distinction between myth and linear-discrete texts is stressed by Lévi-Strauss himself:

[w]e should be aware that if we try to read a myth as we read a novel or a newspaper article, that is line after line, reading from left to right, we don’t understand the myth, because we have to apprehend it as a totality and discover that the basic meaning of the myth is not conveyed by the sequence of events but—if I may say so—by bundles of events even although these events appear at different moments in the story [...] we have to read not only from left to right, but at the same time from top to bottom. We have to understand that each page is a totality (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 45).

Here we find confirmation of both the distinctly non-linear structure of myth as well as its

necessarily holistic communication. Frederic Jameson expresses this second aspect of Lèvi-Strauss's notion of myth both succinctly and uncannily in line with the Tartu-Moscow text-typological distinction: "the myth for him [Lèvi-Strauss] is not so much a sentence as a single sign" (Jameson 1972: 112). The similarity between this characterization of myth and the Tartu-Moscow school description of nondiscrete texts is striking: "A text of this type is not discrete and does not break down into signs. It represents a whole and is segmented not into separate signs but into distinctive features" (*Theses* 1973: 4). Jameson's further elaboration reinforces the connection: "In its original state, however, the myth did not so much narrate (or constitute a sentence) as it did convey a message or value system (and function as a single sign)" (Jameson 1972: 118). As Jameson highlights, even the apparently sentence-like structure of myths was for Lèvi-Strauss evidence of the influence of non-mythological "narratives of more sophisticated and historical (or temporally conscious) societies" (Jameson 1972: 118). The subjection of myths to "temporally conscious societies" finds a strong parallel in Lotman's description of the historical "unfolding" of the primordial mythological singularity along the lines of a linear-discrete narrative (Lotman 1979: 164).

Lèvi-Strauss's inclusive definition of myth—his incorporation of mythical variants irrespective of their antiquity or provenance—also resonates from within Lotman's discussion of mythological texts. In particular, Lotman's claim that, "it is not so vitally important what we use for the reconstruction of the mythological prototype of the text—ancient retellings of myth or nineteenth-century novels," (Lotman 1979: 164) seems a direct inheritance from Lèvi-Strauss: "we define the myth as consisting of all its versions" (Lèvi-Strauss 1955: 435). Indeed, myth "is the part of language where the formula *traduttore, traditore* [translator, traitor] reaches its lowest truth value" (Lèvi-Strauss 1955: 430)—a fact greatly elaborated on by Lotman and Boris Uspenski, who deny mythological consciousness the capacity for translation at all (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 212). Both Lèvi-Strauss's and Lotman and Uspenski's comments are integrally related to the capacity of myth to indiscriminately subsume even the most divergent variants—a central feature of mythological texts which will be discussed in detail below.

In addition, we might add that Lotman and Uspenski's bold claim "of the *impossibility of poetry at the mythological stage*" (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 224), while enigmatic, finds another parallel in Lèvi-Strauss's work, which places myth "in the whole gamut of linguistic expressions at the end opposite to that of poetry" because, in radical opposition to myth, "Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions" (Lèvi-Strauss 1955: 430). The implications of these last statements are primarily for logic and linguistics, and thus are not



specifically relevant to the present work. Still, they are included here to reinforce the theoretical similarities I have set out to establish between Lèvi-Strauss and Lotman. Many more examples of this theoretical and methodological overlap could be given, but for the moment these instances will suffice to substantiate the connection. As this analysis continues on to a detailed discussion of the features of mythological texts, references will be added which highlight its Lèvi-Straussian debt in greater specificity.

### ***3.2 Features of Mythological Texts***

Having established the grounds of Lotman's characterization of mythological texts in Lèvi-Strauss's myth theory, we can move on to a question that is central to this thesis: What are the features that we should expect to find in a text organized according to mythological semiotic principles? Another way of phrasing this is to ask how the general principles of mythological text structure are manifest in a particular text of this type. In this section I will outline the specific features that should be evident in a mythological text. It is important to bear in mind that, as with the discrete-continuous paradigm discussed in the first chapter, I do not intend to suggest that a text of either "pure" type—in this case, the mythological or plot text—exists or could be described as such. As Lotman stressed in his own discussion of text typology, these extreme poles are purely ideal and every real instance is bound to display a combination of the features of both types. In describing the characteristics of a text which make its mythological semiotic mechanisms evident, I mean to demonstrate that these features are to be found in greater concentration and with more frequency in texts which have more in common with continuous-mythological organization than with linear-discrete plot structure. I do not wish to suggest that texts characterized in this way—regardless of their concentration of mythological features—can in anyway be substantively or functionally identified with myth *as such*. Rather, such texts manifest principles which are easily overlooked and tend to provoke frustration or confusion in receivers accustomed to texts which obey linear-discrete organizational principles. It is my hope that by outlining the characteristics of these mechanisms, I can offer an appropriate model according to which mythological texts may be more effectively and profoundly understood.

For the sake of clarity, I will classify the characteristics of mythological text mechanisms under three headings: atemporality, unconditional identity, and narrative self-sufficiency. However, as indicated in various places in Lotman's writings and additionally borne out by my own research, the latter categories are in fact implicit in the first; all the features which we can identify as proper to

mythological semiosis are direct results of “their subjection to cyclical-temporal motion” (Lotman 1979: 161).

I have titled this first category of features “*atemporality*”, which is slightly different from Lotman’s own terminology in the previous quote, in acknowledgement of Bakhtin’s discussion of myth as well as some of Lotman’s later statements. As discussed above, Bakhtin’s ascription of chronotopic organization to narrative does not extend to “folk-mythological time” which is of a radically different type. Lotman notes that mythological narratives are “part of a chronologically secure ritual, conditioned by the course of the natural cycle,” and that they deal specifically with “events which were timeless, endlessly reproduced and, in that sense, motionless” (Lotman 1979: 162-3). Lèvi-Strauss gives a similar description of myth’s peculiar relationship to time:

On the one hand, a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages—anyway, long ago. But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future. (Lèvi-Strauss 1955: 430)

These characteristics of myths conspire to generate the sense that, in myth, everything is happening all at once. Liberated from the constraints of linear causality—or perhaps antecedent to it—mythological narratives have no regard for the chronological, that is to say *syntactic* or *syntagmatic*, order of the events which comprise them. Obviously for the actual expression of a narrative some chronology must be chosen, but no specific order precludes or has precedence over any other possible organization of content. Any event in myth can take place at any moment, before, after, or simultaneously with any other event; specific chronology is irrelevant, both in terms of the events of a particular story and in the broader scheme of a story’s placement within a larger cycle. Thus Lotman’s statement of the “timeless” quality of mythological narratives is more than a kind of nostalgia for the universal, but an important comment on their structure.

That mythological narratives are “endlessly reproduced” is evident on two levels. First, on the level of the particular story or cycle, myth’s allowance of infinite variation ensures a constant stream of variants: these may be either novel rearrangements of the mythical events or the recovery of forgotten antique versions. To quote Lèvi-Strauss, “a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such” (Lèvi-Strauss 1955: 435). In terms of a mythological narrative’s accordance with “the course of the natural cycle” (Lotman 1979: 162), the story as it were never ceases, just as the seasons do not cease to change, and the sun does not stop its course through the sky (figuratively speaking). Paired

with its infinite acceptance of variations, this gives myth the peculiar ability to exist as a ceaselessly revolving narrative which may be begun at any point by any narrator at any time: every mythical event is potentially happening at the same time—*ceaselessly*. This has the effect of collapsing time, at least so far as we commonly conceive of it, and this is the source of the third cyclical-temporal feature of mythological narratives identified by Lotman, that is, the sense that they are essentially “motionless”. This is an essential structural principle that has significant implications for the identification of mythological texts, primary among them being myth’s *narrative self-sufficiency*. It will thus be addressed in detail in the corresponding section below.

Unconditional identity is the label I have chosen for what Lotman recognizes as:

the tendency to make different characters unconditionally identical [...] Characters and objects mentioned at different levels of the cyclical mythological mechanism are different proper names for the same thing. The mythological text, owing to its exceptional ability to undergo topological transformations, can with surprising boldness declare to be one and the same thing phenomena which we would have considerable difficulty in comparing. (Lotman 1979: 162)

Of the three categories of mythological text characteristics, unconditional identity is the most explicitly detailed by Lotman and (perhaps for that reason) the easiest to recognize in actual texts. Lotman and Uspenski explain in *Myth—Name—Culture* that unconditional identity arises as a result of the monolingual nature of mythological description: “the objects of this world are described in terms of *the same world* constructed in the *same* manner” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 212). This monolingual organization is juxtaposed to the polylingual organization of non-mythological description, with which we are more familiar in both contemporary texts and in our own thought processes. From a logical perspective, the most significant result of this distinction is the incapacity of mythological description to make recourse to any metalanguage or metalinguistic function, thus rendering processes of translation (which are foundational for information generation in non-mythological texts and consciousness) impossible (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 212). Changes in the mythological text-world are thus expressed as transformations of pre-existing essences which remain identical regardless of their superficial alteration (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 211-13).

The difference between meta-linguistic reference and meta-textual reference is one of both simplification and significance. In meta-linguistic signification, *information* is generated by making reference to a system which is meaningful by virtue of its simplicity in relation to the object (Lotman 1975b: 199). This means that the importance of the connection of, say, “a white birch” with the

category of “trees”, lies primarily in the explanatory richness of the latter category by virtue of its reduction of the particular to the general. But in the meta-textual reference, there exists no such hierarchy of significance. The transformation of Ariadne into the constellation *corona borealis* moves the object from one level (that of quasi-historical narrative) to another (that of astronomical observation), but does not confer on either system a kind of explanatory preeminence. The significance of their connection lies precisely *in that connection*, that is to say the mythological account is enriched by its increase of meta-textual connections, but not by reducing objects of one system to the categories of another<sup>2</sup>.

A thorough analysis of this argument’s logic in terms of its reliance on various theoretical models is unfortunately wanting, and is also beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can hope to recognize in specific texts the mechanisms indicated by Lotman and Uspenski as implicit in the transformation-identity paradigm, which relates most directly to mythological *objects*:

The world presented through the eyes of a mythological consciousness should seem to consist of objects:

- (1) that are the same rank (the concept of a logical hierarchy exists, in principle, beyond a consciousness of this type);
- (2) that cannot be broken down into markers (each thing is regarded as an integral whole);
- (3) that occur only once (the notion of the recurrence of objects implies their inclusion in certain common sets, that is, the presence of a level of metadescription).

(Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 211-13)

This highly technical account of mythological objects (or, to be more specific to this thesis, the objects of mythological texts) can be clarified by two general examples. The first is found later in the same text, when the authors present the instance of two superficially similar but semantically opposite statements: “*John is a Hercules* and *John is Hercules*” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 214). In the first instance the inclusion of the article “a” indicates a comparison of an individual “John” with the mythical Hercules on the basis of a shared trait or traits, something like “prodigious strength”; this is a fundamentally non-mythological operation, for it clearly has recourse to both a set of categories of traits abstracted from the holistic being of an entity as well as to a metalanguage of description which makes use of such categories. The latter statement, on the other hand, establishes

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<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the typological and historical character of these “interpretive attitudes”, see Eco’s discussion of the principles of identity and non-contradiction in *Interpretation and History* (Eco 1992: 27-32).

a total identity between the whole being of “John” with the entirety of the mythical Hercules—presumably this includes not only the demigod’s physical prowess but also the circumstances of his birth, his famous labors, etc. This example also sheds light on the metatext/metalanguage distinction Lotman and Uspenski explore at the beginning of their paper. “John is a Hercules” necessitates certain “markers” that, like the units of natural language, are abstracted from the holistic entity-message to facilitate description and comparison of particulars; “John is Hercules” treats both John and Hercules as complete texts to be identified with one another as integral wholes—here the “text” of Hercules’ myth acts as a meta-text according to which the “text” of John’s life and being (fictional or otherwise) can be understood.

The second clarifying example is found in *The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology*, and is perhaps more basic. Of the essentially mythological situation, Lotman writes:

Looked at typologically, the initial situation is that a certain plot-space is divided by a single boundary into an internal and an external sphere, and a single character has the opportunity to cross that boundary [...] the more noticeably the world of the characters is reduced to singularity (one hero, one obstacle), the nearer it is to the primordial mythological type of structural organization of the text. (Lotman 1979: 167-8)

In this sense, even the meta-textual identifications discussed earlier are not precisely of the “primordial mythological type”, which is why the terminology “unconditional identity” is used here and meant to be taken to its logical extreme. Mythologically, John *is* Hercules precisely because the essentially mythological situation admits of only a single entity, a single event, a homogenous space of cyclical action. Such identification is not only evident among personalities and characters of myth, but between any and all mythological objects.

This means that such cycles as the day, the year, the cyclical chain of life and death of man or god, are considered as mutually homomorphous. Thus although night, winter and death are in some respects dissimilar, their close identification is not a metaphor as the consciousness of today would interpret it. They are one and the same thing (or rather, transformations of one and the same thing). (Lotman 1979: 162)

Finally there are the characteristics of “narrative self-sufficiency” which, as I indicated above, is all of a piece with the previous categories. The simplest explanation of this aspect of mythological texts is that their narrative worlds are both *closed* and *complete*. The first of these can be associated with the cyclical nature of both mythological time and story narratives, wherein the same events occur with

regularity and repetition despite variations in the storytelling (which can be seen as a result of unconditional identity on the level of story variants). The *completeness* of mythological worlds results from their closedness, which prevents—by not seeking or needing—“new” elements from intruding on the eternal narratives, or by subjecting them to interpretation according to an existent meta-text and thereby suffusing any novel addition into a pre-existing unconditional identity. All that appears or occurs in the mythological text is, as it were, present from the start; nothing truly novel or unexpected is introduced from outside the text conceived as an integral whole. As Lotman says, “Such a narration does not aim to inform any particular reader of something of which he is unaware” (Lotman 1979: 162). This has the additional effect of making the mythological world, and thus the mythological text, an extremely *bounded* one. Lotman indicated this principle in his recognition of the “stability of this mythological model” (Lotman 1979: 168) as well as the fact that this “central text-forming mechanism fulfils a very important function - it constructs the picture of the world, establishes unity between its remote spheres” (Lotman 1979: 162).

From this outline we can produce a résumé of the characteristics that contribute to a text’s organization according to non-linear, continuous mythological structure. Under the heading of atemporality there should be evident a potentially infinite variation in the chronology of stories: the events of a single story may occur in any order, and the stories themselves exist without a specific, necessary chronological relation to one another. Unconditional identity is evinced in the single-level (as opposed to metalinguistic) description of narrative objects, their treatment as integral wholes whose particulars cannot be abstracted and categorized, and their subjection to a transformational identity which subsumes individual objects under pre-existing (because eternal) identities. The mythological text’s narrative self-sufficiency manifests in the closed, isolated, and complete nature of the narrated world as well as in the textual wholeness and independence of a particular narrative text. On the level of the narrative world this is shown in its robust boundaries and resistance to change, in other words the stability and stabilizing function of the mythological text. In terms of particular instances of mythological narratives, this self-sufficiency is more complex and will be addressed in the next part of the thesis.

Having offered an explicit (though by no means exhaustive) list of characteristics, I will move on to the object analysis which forms the second part of this work. There I will explore specific manifestations of the mechanisms described in this chapter, with the aim of simultaneously demonstrating the mythological organization of my object as well as the actuality of the features I

have derived from purely theoretical texts.

## OBJECT

*His sense of simultaneity would, of course, be illusory, for he would still be tied down by the order of the narrative. Yet a close equivalent could be hinted at through alternation of a lengthy discourse with a diffuse one, by speeding up rhythms which had been slowed down, by heaping up examples at some points and, at others, by keeping them separated. (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 15)*

Roberto Calasso's book *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is as resistant to unproblematic interpretation as it is to clear description. The most that can be said in either case with any certainty is that the work is "about myth". This statement itself has many intended meanings and possible interpretations, none of which is necessarily more or less correct than any other. Even classifying the book's content according to familiar categories, to say nothing of genre, is fraught with issues. But we will try.

First of all—and I say "first" in a purely chronological sense for, as discussed below, the establishment of any hierarchical relationship between "types" of content is nearly impossible and is to do senseless violence to the work—the book contains concise versions of some well known, and other less familiar, episodes of Greek mythology. Multiple versions, or *variants*, of the stories frequently appear either in close succession or are scattered throughout the book according to what must be assumed to have been authorial expediency. These stories can be divided into those which are (apparently) Calasso's own narrative constructions and those which come (whether properly referenced or not) from other texts both antique and modern. Frequently stories of both kind appear in close proximity and no authoritative distinction is made between them. In addition to—and often in the middle of—the stories occur passages which, in terms of the stories themselves, provide a kind of meta-commentary. This commentary may concern specific stories, contiguous with the commentary passage or otherwise, myths or "myth" more generally, philosophy, history, language, art, culture, etc, whether Greek or otherwise, and like the stories may be quoted from other works or be (apparently) the author's original thoughts. A peculiar feature of these



commentaries is their egalitarian treatment of their objects: commentary passages contemplate with equivalent seriousness, for example, the function of particular symbols in Greek culture as well as the feelings and motivations of specific mythical characters as if possessed of a deducible psychology.

“He tells the stories, and tells about the stories, and suggests many rich patterns of interpretation before boiling it all down to a set of logical symbols” (Doniger in Lévi-Strauss 1978: xiii). This quote, a summary of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s writings on mythology, could aptly describe Calasso’s project in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, if the final clause were excised. It is perhaps the book’s most fascinating aspect that the author, in what is more likely a show of restraint rather than of incapability or disinterest, “suggests many rich patterns of interpretation” without taking the work to the reductive stage of “boiling it all down to a set of logical symbols”. And as we saw in Lotman’s explication on mythological structure proper, it is precisely such “translation into the discrete metalanguages of a non-mythological type” which obscures and in the end makes inaccessible myth’s native mechanisms of meaning production (Lotman 1979: 162).

From a formal perspective, and in terms of the typology explored in the first part of this thesis, the most interesting feature of Roberto Calasso’s *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is that it forces a cyclical-continuous text type (myth) to conform to the logic of a linear-discrete text (in this case a fixed narrative—also known as a book). As we shall see, this occurs in a process which ultimately deforms the properties of both types of structure and which tends, in my opinion, toward the preservation of one type at the expense of the other.

### ***Review of the Relevant Literature***

The various reviews of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* share a similar incapacity to provide more than a general classification of its content and highly emotional reactions to the author’s style. Of the former, Verlyn Klinkenborg writes in *SMITHSONIAN*, “It is partly a retelling of the central Greek myths, partly a meditation on their fluidity, their extraordinary capacity to change shape, as well as the art and literature by which they are represented, and partly a reflection on the mythic, and by implication, the nonmythic mind” (Klinkenborg 1993: 166). Peter Green is less positive in his characterization: “All we get is his [Calasso’s] playful rehashing of various well-known myths as pseudo-fiction, interspersed with obiter dicta on the human condition” (Green 1993: 51). Popular reviews of the book tend to be more enthusiastic about it, though no more insightful with regard to

the subject matter. Publisher's Weekly explains that Calasso "revisits the theogonies set forth by Hesiod, Homer, Ovid et al. and then recasts them for a postmodern audience. Gods and men enact the cosmic mysteries as the narrator comments aphoristically on the progress of ancient and divine history" (Publisher's Weekly 1993). The London Review of Books takes a generic approach to describing the book, with Patrick Parrinder contrasting Calasso's work with that of Robert Graves: "Graves's indispensable reference-work could not be more different from Roberto Calasso's elegiac and evocative reinterpretation of the myths and their world." Parrinder takes a stab at classification, noting that, "*The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is not a work of reference" (Parrinder 1993: 15). This is perhaps more helpful than Klinkenborg's insisting, "I can't give you any generic equivalents for this work" (Klinkenborg 1993: 165).

Concerning style, reviewers tend to be as polarized as they are ambiguous when describing Calasso's prose. "Calasso has two styles: jocose but leaden narrative fiction when retelling the myths themselves, and explicatory discourse heavy with assertive aphorisms" (Green 1993: 51). "The densely-woven prose and elliptical narrative make this a difficult book to read" (Parrinder 1993: 16). Mary Lefkowitz praises the "vivid and entertaining narration" (Lefkowitz 1993) which another reviewer calls "a superbly casual tone" (Kord 1994: 171), and which yet another finds "elegiac and evocative" (Parrinder 1993: 16). Evaluations of Calasso's style are perhaps the least interesting and relevant aspects of the literature directed at his book, but it is hoped that this brief review helps to clarify the ambivalent image of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* which arises from even a cursory investigation of its reviews.

The structure of the book is less frequently addressed by reviewers than its language, but most judgments range from hesitant intrigue to outright negativity. Thomas J. Sienkewicz is one of the few to directly and explicitly note that, "The structure of the book is not linear but tangential" (Sienkewicz 1993). Others are less neutral in their appraisal. "[I]here is a kind of perception at work here. But is it random, arbitrary and self-indulgent" (Green 1993: 52). "[I]he narrative follows the whimsical preferences of the author in elucidating his ideas [...] retelling seemingly random selected myths" (Thomas 2010). Some reviewers have argued that in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, "Calasso uses the story of Cadmus and Harmony as the framework for his own extensive retelling of the Greek myths" (Shorrock 2003: 88; see also Warner 1993, and Lefkowitz 1993). If this were the case, then description of the book could begin with that particular story as a kind of arch-myth forming the backbone of the often tangential and rambling digressions characteristic of the work as a whole. This would make the analytical enterprise somewhat easier, or at least more easily grounded

in established literary models; unfortunately it would also be incorrect. In fact, as I will argue below, this absence of any single, central story, or rather the resistance to promoting one to such a preeminent position, is one of the primary manifestations of the book's mythological semiotic mechanisms. The tendency of reviewers to identify the story of Cadmus and Harmony as such a framing device is understandable: Calasso opens the book with the story of Europa's abduction, which motivates the quest during which her brother finds and marries Harmony, and ends it with Cadmus and Harmony's elderly departure from a Thebes reduced to ashes. However, the radical divergences and tangential movements between stories, genealogies, critiques, quotations, and general etcetera—within only the first chapter—quickly make it clear that in this work any semblance of linear progression is simply (perhaps even unfortunately) a consequence of our contemporary book-reading conventions. I am not prepared to dismiss claims of a central organizing storyline, but I must admit that if they are in any way accurate then I have not, after many readings, found evidence of them myself.

Of the few scholarly treatments of the book, Robert Shorrock's *The Artful Mythographer* most explicitly treats its problematic composition. Addressing past reviews whose authors "read on unsure of whether the primary purpose of the book is a truth-telling one or an aesthetic one" (Shorrock 2003: 84), Shorrock first discusses the book's uncertain orientation to its sources. He notes that, while much of the book appears to be the product of its authors' own learned but still amateurish musings on the subject of myth, in fact a surprising amount of the book is not in the strict sense original:

References in the main text and appendix give the reader no indication that chapters 2 and 12 are constructed almost entirely out of Nonnian material. In chapter 2 not only the story of Aura, but also the stories of Pallene, Ampelus, Erigone, Icarius, and Semele all follow closely the narrative of Nonnus; in chapter 10 the story of Zagreus; in chapter 12 the story of Cadmus, his fight with Typhon, and marriage with Harmony are similarly modelled in scenes from the *Dionysiaca*. Most striking of all, chapter 1 opens with a scene that is virtually a translation of the opening scene of Nonnus' own epic narrative; a scene that readers have no reason to suspect is not Calasso's own narration. If this were a novel that owed a large, and largely unacknowledged, debt to an obscure modern work, then the word 'plagiarism' would have now begun to raise its head. (Shorrock 2003: 89).

Shorrock's counter accusations of plagiarism is in some respects similar to my own project, in that he attempts to describe Calasso's peculiar relationship to his mythological sources as one that is

proper to the mythographer as such. His argument is based on the content of Calasso's sources themselves, which are "obsessively focused on themes of deception, revelation, and the authorizing power of knowledge." Shorrock invokes the mythographer's traditionally "privileged access to the pathways of knowledge," his "absolute power over his audience" and the fact that, as of right, "[t]he audience flounders because only the mythographer can know if the mythographer is telling the truth" (Shorrock 2003: 89). Shorrock's paper attempts to justify the book's seemingly irrational (not to say illegitimate) appropriation of content in terms of the proper paradigm of mythical dissemination. Shorrock quotes Calasso himself on the subject of mythography, the writer of which "rewrote them, in a different way each time, omitting here, adding there [...] so each writer would build up and thin out the body of sources" (Calasso qtd. in Shorrock 2003: 94). Shorrock's argument is that this building up and thinning out of sources is precisely what Calasso does in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, and that he does so in a way sanctioned because practiced by the authors of his sources themselves.

What I will attempt in this thesis is similar, though of a vastly different trajectory and scope than Shorrock's argument. In a way our works can be seen to supplement each other, for where Shorrock defends Calasso's tactics as proper to the role of mythographer, I will defend the structure of his book as organized in accordance to the semiotic mechanisms proper to the mythological text. Shorrock has already noted that Calasso structures his mythic narrative according to the principles of mythography he himself describes in the book. With regard to the previous quote in which Calasso describes how the writer "would build up and thin out the body of sources," Shorrock notes that:

It should now be apparent that this is precisely the same strategy employed by Calasso in the construction of his own work of literature. As a part of his widespread selection and refinement of mythological sources [...] Calasso has chosen to rewrite Nonnus' account of the abduction of Europa and has added his own "rare and unobtrusive" variant to the story[...]. (Shorrock 2003: 95)

More than just the literary strategy of a self-reflexive author, this recursive implementation of the text's content in the construction of its form resembles the closed, self-sufficient character of the mythological itself—as defined by Lévi-Strauss, Lotman and Uspenski, and not least significantly by Calasso himself.

A second, more expansive discussion of the book can be found in Laura Fiorani's paper *Roberto Calasso – Deconstructing Mythology*. In light of the myth-plot text paradigm in which I have grounded my own work, Fiorani's project might be considered the opposite of mine: is focused on

drawing out a representation of literature, and a distinctly (post)modern one, from the same work in which I find so much of the antique mythological. Fiorani argues that, “through his act of re-writing these stories, he was not making a commentary on Greek culture as such, but on its reception by contemporary readers and writers, and what this reception revealed about the current state of literature” (Fiorani 2009: 9). In fact, as she (I think rightly) concludes, “Calasso’s choice of re-writing Greek mythology could be read as an attempt to deconstruct its traditional readings. (Fiorani 2009: 12). That the same book could be the subject of separate analyses with such different, apparently contrary aims indicates more about the object of those analyses than it does the relative correctness of either analytical effort. As Umberto Eco has noted, “most so-called ‘post-modern’ thought will look very pre-antique” (Eco 1992: 25), and in this sense the coincidence of an ancient and a postmodern description of the same work may essentially be an indication of the aesthetic similarity of the descriptive categories. There is not space here for a full comparison of my work with Fiorani’s—hers being the more extensive, broader, and polylingual of the two—or of the potential harmonies and conflicts of Tartu-Moscow school text semiotics with Derridean deconstruction. Suffice it to say that I think the similarities each has with the others are both obvious and significant, and their coexistence poses no threat to the integrity or value of each separate endeavor.

While Fiorani’s project differs a great deal from mine, intending as it does to prove that “Calasso actually inscribes Derridean *différance* at the core of *Le nozze*,” she recognizes the significance of certain characteristics of the book which are central to my own thesis (Fiorani 2009: 168). On the chronologic disorder of the book’s “events”, much of what Fiorani has to say confirms my own assessment despite the divergence of our theoretical foundations and hypotheses.

Despite acknowledging that Io’s tale sets all subsequent tales into motion, thus making it a ‘first’ from a chronological perspective, the narration suggests that from the god’s and reader’s perspective, between Europa and Io’s tales there is no temporal or representational hierarchy [...] The tales of the two princesses are not narrated orderly, according to chronological succession, but by alternating a scene of the tale of one of them with a scene of the tale of the other. (Fiorani 2009: 165)

Fiorani’s “challenge [to] Calasso’s self-representation,” (Fiorani 2009: 10) her argument for the enormous impact on the style and subject of his writing of the postmodernism and poststructuralism which he publicly ignores or eschews, makes a fascinating contrast to Shorrock’s defense of Calasso’s techniques. For while Fiorani makes of him a postmodern, Shorrock locates Calasso’s authorial practice in antiquity, his borrowings legitimated by the antique privilege

conferred upon the mythographer (Shorrock 2003: 89). Is the author of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* an ancient, or a postmodern? Answering this question is not within my capacity, not does it fall inside the boundaries of this thesis, but it is curious to note that a single author's technique should be associated with such chronologically distant paradigms.

It is in the context of this variety of efforts to grapple with Calasso's book that my own analysis finds its significance. As an enthusiast of the book, I have found such treatments of its peculiar style to be wanting, for they rarely address the aspects of the work that I find most intriguing. In the next three chapters I will identify and discuss the features of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* which correspond to the three categories of mythological semiotic mechanisms that I outlined at the end of Part One. Each chapter will be dedicated to a distinct category of these features, though I would like to stress that this model is employed for methodological purposes and for the sake of clarity. As I hope to demonstrate, the book, like myth, is constituted in such a way that deriving such categories and types of characteristics is in a sense foreign to the subject matter at hand. However, I take Juri Lotman's encouragement to heart:

[A]ny logical model is known to be poorer than its object and can be an instrument of knowledge only under this condition. 'Poorness', a greater degree of abstraction than the object, can be regarded as an insufficiency when applied to scientific theory only through a lack of comprehension. As to considerations which hold that a research structure cannot replace the immediate enjoyment of a work of art, this remark is of a purely dilettantish character. A scientific model does not 'replace' the object at all in the sense that it can be used instead of that object in practical life - this exchange is implemented only for the process of cognition. (Lotman 1975b: 199)

I do not mean to 'replace' *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* with this model of its structure, but rather to add something to its presence in the literary corpus by demonstrating that its author is doing more than just "retelling seemingly random selected myths" (Thomas 2010). The organization of the narrative which has alternately confounded and enthused its reviewers demonstrates semiotic mechanisms which are specifically in line with its subject, myth. By organizing the characteristic appearances of those mechanisms in the book into a systematic model, I do not intend to *reduce* the work to the mere operation of those narrative techniques, but to enhance the understanding and appreciation of the work in light of them.

## 4.0 ATEMPORALITY

As noted above, all of the phenomena according to which a text can be identified as mythological follow from the fact of its “subjection to cyclical-temporal motion” (Lévi-Strauss paraphrased in Lotman 1979: 161), that is, its peculiar relationship to time. For this reason selecting features which correspond to this first category alone, or at least more so than to either of the others, is somewhat problematic. I will respond to this difficulty by first covering some general aspects of this first category, returning to it periodically as it becomes appropriate in my discussion of the other categories in the chapters that follow. Thus exclusive coverage of this aspect of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* will be the briefest of the three, but its discussion will be woven throughout the other sections that follow.

For both Lévi-Strauss and Lotman, the “chief peculiarity” (Lotman 1979: 161) of mythological texts is their relationship to time. While Lotman emphasizes the cyclicity of mythological time, Lévi-Strauss in his *Overture* gives a more detailed account of the radical divergence from linear time that myth shares with music. For though myth, like music, “requir[es] a temporal dimension in which to unfold [...] this relationship to time is of a rather special nature: it is as if music and mythology needed time only in order to deny it” (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 15). Although Lévi-Strauss’s contemplation on the nature of myth’s temporality is more sustained, he and Lotman come to similar conclusions about the role of mythological texts with regard to time. For Lotman, mythological texts deal “with events which were timeless, endlessly reproduced and, in that sense, motionless” (Lotman 1979: 163), while Lévi-Strauss similarly declares mythology to be an “instrument for the obliteration of time” (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 16). It should be noted here that for both scholars temporality in this context is equated with *linear* temporality—the fully cyclical eternity of myth-time is in this sense not “time” at all.

It is in light of these discussions of myth’s relationship to time that I have chosen to treat what is often considered to be a cyclical temporality as, rather, *atemporality*. Especially when investigating a concrete mythological text, the mechanisms through which that text—despite the fact that it requires a temporal dimension to manifest—in fact *denies* or renders impotent its own temporal dimension, is of utmost significance to its semiotic particularity. In the case of the text at hand, this leads my analysis to focus rather on the narrative techniques which impose atemporality

rather than on the book's more obvious implementation of cyclicity. This should not be seen to confer an artificial sense of primacy on the former phenomenon (for the two are really indivisible), but the comparative difficulty of implementing atemporality in a linear text form like a book makes of it the more remarkable of the two. Both cyclicity and atemporality are indeed evident in the book, and as I have shown their simultaneity is indispensable in mythology and mythological texts.

In this chapter, I will address the most general and obvious structural peculiarities of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* exhibited at the formal and content levels of the book. First I will outline the book's nonlinear organization of content, that is, the narrative presentation of stories and histories which may have a discernible chronology but which are presented without regard to any prescribed order of events. Although this is not a unique or even uncommon narrative technique in contemporary literature, I will demonstrate that the particular implementation of atemporal narrative structure in Calasso's book is specially suited to the representation of myth. I will then address the author's use of what I call "narrative segmentation" as the essential structuring principle of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. While the division of a narrative into discrete segments might undermine the continuity of a different kind of work, I will show that Calasso's segmented organization actually reinforces the continuity and unity of the book as a whole. The scattered arrangement of these narrative segments constitutes the most evident structural peculiarity of the book, and it will be shown that this choice is appropriate to the book's subject matter, which does not easily submit to fixation in a linear chronology.

#### ***4.1 Nonlinear Organization***

*The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is a book divided into twelve chapters. Although it is not apparent at the outset, this division comes to seem almost entirely arbitrary in the course of reading. Unlike the chapters of a typical novel, these do not begin by relating a chronologically specific event and moving successively "forward" according to the logic of linear time. Unlike the chapters of a typical treatise, these do not start from a specific hypothesis and move successively "forward" building an argument according to the logic of linear reasoning. The chief peculiarity of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is that its content is scattered throughout and often across the chapters in such a way that interpreting their twelve-fold division of the text as a meaningful categorization is a vain endeavor. No single chapter maintains the chronological thread of a single story from beginning to end, and all are interspersed with philosophical statements of Calasso's, quotations



from ancient and contemporary authors, and commentary from both kinds of sources on subjects that at times seem far removed from the topic of Greek myth:

The divine craftsman of Plato's *Timaeus* composed the world and brought it into harmony; Lycurgus was the first to compose a world that excluded the world: Spartan society. He was the first person to conduct experiments on the body social, the true forefather all modern rulers, even if they don't have the impact of a Lenin or a Hitler, try to imitate. (Calasso 1993: 253)

Chapters often start with events that take place chronologically after the events which occur at the chapter's close. Events which explain or cause later events often only appear hundreds of pages after their effects. What is most striking about this latter phenomenon is that the author frequently makes no explicit connection between the one and the other, leaving it up to the reader or, as I will explore in the chapter on narrative self-sufficiency, making assumptions from the start about the reader's familiarity with the events. In addition to his disregard for chronology in retelling the stories, Calasso shows a similar indifference toward the temporality of his subject matter when he introduces material from a wide swath of history. The quote above, which references Hitler and Lenin in a comment upon Sparta, is an example of Calasso's frequently employed technique of, counter-intuitively, using the recent to shed light on the ancient. As if, rather than looking to the past for causes, he were appreciating more recent events as repetitions of the antique. In an echo of Lévi-Strauss's description of myth as "consisting of all its versions" (Lévi-Strauss 1955:435), Calasso deems all comments on the myths as legitimate contributions to his representation of them:

"Huge, pale figures, tremendous, lonely, dark and desolate, fatal, mysterious lovers condemned to titanic infamies. What will become of you? What will your destiny be? Where can you hide your fearful passions? What terrors, what compassion you inspire, what immense and awesome sadness you arouse in those mortals called to contemplate so much shame and horror, so many crimes, such great misfortune." So said Gustave Moreau. (Calasso 1993: 9)

I already have noted that the division of the book into chapters seems to have been an authorial whim, based perhaps in the desire to reflect in the narrative's division the twelve deities with which it is primarily concerned. This should not be confused with a thematic organization *based* on those deities: the chapters do not deal exclusively or even primarily with any specific deity, character, or situation, and most contain only a part of the story of each of them. Efforts to derive any kind of thematic unity to the chapters, which are unnamed and distinguished only by successive roman numerals, have been determinedly unsuccessful. They do not even necessarily follow any

chronology, as for example chapter I, which begins with the abduction of Europa and ends with the story of Zeus's romance with Io—her grandmother. In fact, the chapter seems to mock the notion of “beginning” (and thus, of linear time) in and of itself.

Calasso opens his book “[o]n a beach in Sidon”: the site of Europa's abduction by Zeus (Calasso 1993: 3). The story narrative is straightforward, concise, and colorful, with dialogue and thoughts attributed to the characters. “Tell my father Europa has been carried off by a bull,” Europa shouts to the wind and water as she is carried off (Calasso 1993: 3). The story ends just as Europa, resigned to her fate, decides to stick with her abductor rather than call upon another deity for help (Calasso 1993: 3). “But,” the text demands after a large space that separates the first paragraphs from the next, “how did it all begin?”. In answer to this question a new narrative of the events begins: “A group of girls were playing by the river, picking flowers” (Calasso 1993: 4). In this version of Europa's story more attention is paid to Zeus-the-bull's amorous gestures, some details of the scene are changed, and it ends like the first re-telling with Europa helpless on the back of a bull in the sea, followed by another large space between text blocks (Calasso 1993: 4). “But how did it all begin?” begins the paragraph that follows: “Shortly before dawn, asleep in her room on the first floor of the royal palace, Europa had had a strange dream” (Calasso 1993: 4). This narrative segment is split evenly between the details of the dream and then the abduction, which again finds Europa at the end sailing into the distance on her mount. After a space, the next block starts, “But how did it all begin? Europa was out walking with her friends, a shining gold basket in her hand” (Calasso 1993: 5). The basket has its own story, and shifts the focus to Europa's ancestor Io, who also crossed the sea because of Zeus—and she in the form of a cow, no less. Io's story ends up embossed on a basket in the hands of Europa, who, “carried it along, without thinking” (Calasso 1993: 6). End of story, then a space followed by a new text block that begins, predictably, “But how did it all begin?”. The fourth story offers “a history of conflict” between Phoenicians and Argives, Europe and Asia, that ends in the labyrinth with the Minotaur, and again a space separates that story from the one that follows (Calasso 1993: 7). “But how did it all begin?” asks the fifth version. This beginning begins in Argos, where Phoenician merchant-sailors carry off a bunch of women, including Io. Or Io falls in love with their captain and leaves willingly. Either way, “a call to arms goes back and forth between Asia and Europe”, and the narrative leaves off at the fall of Troy, since which time “the war between Europe and Asia has never ceased” (Calasso 1993: 8).

Calasso offers us five beginnings, in what seems like reverse chronological order, oddly segmented into separate stories which at times contradict each other, and sometimes even

themselves. This arrangement suggests Lotman's determination that, in telling a myth, "the choice of one or another plot episode from the text as the beginning and content of today's narration does not belong to the narrator"; in myth, the narrative selection is connected with ritual, itself "conditioned by the course of the natural cycle" (Lotman 1979: 162). In a nod to the atemporal structure of his subject, to which the notion of linear chronology is wholly foreign, Calasso offers what seem a rambling handful of colorfully narrated potential starting points and confers primacy on none of them.

As with its "beginning," *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony's* relationship to chronology continues to be atypical, as evinced in the organization of its chapters, individual narrative segments, and in the unfolding of the whole book. The first chapter is again a good example: between the beginning that opens the chapter and the beginning at the end of it, Calasso tells of the naïveté of Cretan civilization, the nameless gods that didn't make it into the Olympian pantheon, the complex and intertwined adventures of Theseus, Dionysus, and Ariadne—including all her many deaths. In vignettes separated by blank spaces Calasso tells parts of stories that are brief, yet complete and self-contained:

All around Athens, before it was called Athens, the country was full of brigands and wild beasts who attacked and tormented travelers. One day a herald arrived from the sea with the news that a young man had made the rounds of all the roads and slain all the troublemakers: Sinis and Phaea, Sciron, Cercyon, and Procrustes, to name but a few. But what was this young man like? people asked. He had a sword with an ivory hilt slung over one shoulder and two shining javelins, one in each hand. He wore a Spartan cap over tawny curls and a purple jersey on his chest under a woolen cloak from Thessaly. A wicked light flashed in his eyes. (Calasso 1993: 15)

This passage, which is presumably about the beginning of Theseus's career as a hero, appears in the narrative *after* the stories of Theseus's abduction of Helen, his unsuccessful raid on Hades, and ultimate rescue by Heracles, have all been recounted. Even Ariadne, whose story is set in motion by Theseus's appearance in Crete, is carried off and abandoned in the narrative before this story of Theseus's beginnings occurs. The book's warped chronology and peculiar organization into narrative segments (addressed in detail below) works to liberate the story-scenes from the physical coercion of the book's linear form, resulting in an arrangement that foregrounds the freedom of myth from the constraints of linear time—its *atemporality*. The atemporal arrangement of stories is a feature that persists throughout the book, so that the body of mythological stories is made to reflect, despite their representation in the linear form of a written book, "events which were timeless, endlessly

reproduced and, in that sense, motionless” (Lotman 1979: 163).

Calasso’s out-of-order story scenes constitute one of the “clearly manifested features of topological organization” (Lotman 1979: 162) which establish the mythological nature of the text of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. Stories are arranged in narrative segments, driving the reader to revisit pages past and make connections between characters, events, and family trees. Unlike a linear-plot text, this narrative is not driven by a causal chain of events or even a rearranged linear chronology; rather it is as if everything were happening outside of time itself. Calasso hints at this phenomenon of not only his text, but of myth itself, in his quoted epigraph:

These things never happened, but are always

Saloustios, *Of Gods and of the World*

This is not to say that there is no identifiable order of events, for there is a logic to the way the individual stories unfold. A kind of chronology can be constructed from the events narrated in the first chapter, which begins (at the end of the chapter) with an angry Hera persecuting a desperate Io (who might also have just run away with a sailor), grandmother of Europa who is an ancestral cause of the Trojan war. But this timeline is vague, and in order to piece it together in the first place the chapter has to be re-read and the “order” consciously reconstructed. Again, this is a characteristic of mythological texts anticipated by Lotman: “In cyclical myths arising on this basis it is possible to determine the order of events, but not to establish the temporal limits of the narration.” Events in myths have their order, often varying in different versions, but the mythological narrative is not restricted by any absolute delimitations of its beginning or end. It can start or stop anywhere, because it is conceived of as eternal and unending and therefore to be outside of time itself. *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* self-consciously reflects and integrates this essential feature of myth, resisting the linearity imposed, as discussed earlier, by the predominance of plot-type texts—as well as by the medium of the book itself.

We have seen Calasso introduce five distinct variants of one story, each beginning with the question, “But how did it all begin?”. At first glance the author’s obsessive search for a beginning might seem genuine, but under scrutiny the repetitiveness of his question, which recurs six times in the first chapter alone, comes to seem not only playful but mocking. Needless to say, no answer to it is given. Rather, the stiff contrivance of the question itself is stressed by its repetition, foregrounding the nonlinearity of a book that asks questions about origins after it’s already got started. This resistance to linear temporality is maintained throughout the book, and, as I will demonstrate below,

facilitated by the narrative's segmentation.

## 4.2 Narrative Segmentation

Below the chapter level, the book's only apparent organization must be discussed in terms of the "narrative segments" which I mentioned above. This aspect of the book, overlooked by most who

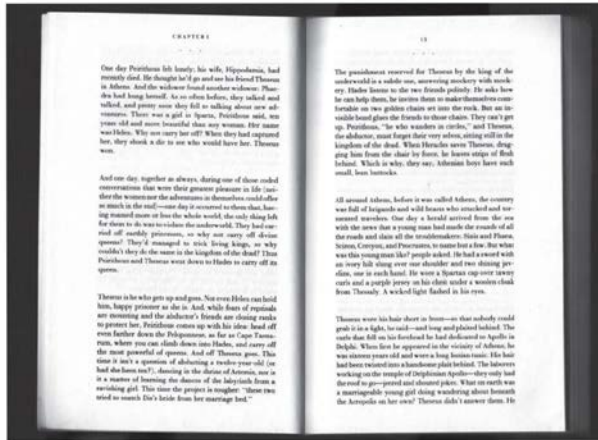


Figure 1

have discussed it, is perhaps its most distinctive formal feature and also that which most clearly demonstrates the work's refusal to cooperate with plot-based narrative structure. For the content of the book is organized as a collection of blocks of text—some only a brief paragraph, others spanning several pages without interruption—separated from one another by a space (see figure 1). Because of this peculiar structure, Calasso is able to move from topic to topic, introducing a great variety of content without confusing the narrative to the point of unintelligibility. On page 8, for instance, a segment picks up the story of Europa and Zeus, left off pages before, under a tree at Gortyn where Zeus leaves his lover under the protection of the guardian bull Talos. The single-paragraph segment ends and after a space a new segment begins which pairs a meditation on the female descendents of Io with a Gustave Moreau quote (see above, pg. 44). That brief segment gives way, after a space, to a paragraph-long segment which quotes Diodorus Siculus on Cretan culture. The four narrative segments that follow contain, in order: the author's (apparently) personal opinion that "Crete had something childish about it, something elusive, something below par"; reference to the Linear B tablets and their documentation of now-forgotten gods; "pots of grain, [...] delicate frescoes, ivory knots, lists of offerings, honey, inscribed poppy pods, ox skulls, double-edged axes"; another authorial meditation, this time on how "Stories never live alone: they are the branches of a family that we have to trace back, and forward" (Calasso 1993: 8-10). All of this, and more, in the span of less than three pages, poses a challenge to the reader but does not seem willfully disorienting. Because the narrative segments are not arranged in, and do not even refer to, a linear chronology of events, they could theoretically be read in any order without risking the integrity of the book. Rather

than unfolding a story that progresses, starting in one place and time and ending at another, it is as if Calasso sets self-contained chunks of content—they might be called ideas, “facts”, or trains-of-thought—before the reader, perhaps to be considered as members of a set.

While this structure endows a relative autonomy on the individual narrative segments (this will be covered in detail in the third chapter of this Part), it does not necessarily indicate a break in the continuity of content. Calasso ends one segment with a quote from the *Iliad*:

As the battle approached, “Athena and Apollo, with their sliver bows, alighted like vultures on the tall oak of Zeus, who holds the aegis, and enjoyed the sight of the men in their serried ranks, a shiver trembling across shields, helmets, and javelins.” (Calasso 1993: 101)

The subsequent segment, though still separated by a space, seems entirely continuous with the preceding narrative. It begins, “The Achaean warriors advance, legs and thighs white with dust. The heavy hooves of their horses churn up clouds of it into a bronze sky” (Calasso 1993: 101). This continuity of content, even of chronology, makes the division of narrative content into separate segments appear unnecessary. It is surely not out of a desire to separate the quotation from Homer from Calasso’s original writing, for as we will see in the next section such distinctions are frequently effaced and are in fact inimical to the book’s mythological structure. Such arbitrary isolation of narrative segments can be seen as a way of preserving their autonomy, and foregrounding the existence of mythological “facts”—stories, objects, characters, situations—in relation to one another but by no means in any kind of causal-chronological continuum. This characteristic of the book can be seen to resemble the capacity of myth-units (objects, characters, events) to be removed from the context of particular stories and recombined *ad infinitum*. Like myth, the book itself could probably be divided up along the boundaries of its narrative segments and rearranged, with little or no damage to its integral meaning or to the experience of reading it—so long as it was read in total. This is what is meant by atemporality, in essence: the integrity of the narrative irrespective of its chronological distribution. Calasso’s technique of segmenting the narrative into separate, independent pieces thus has the paradoxical effect of lending it a greater dependence on its own wholeness, for the pieces can be rearranged *ad infinitum* but are senseless in isolation from the rest of the totality.<sup>3</sup>

This section has covered the most general characteristics of atemporality evident in *The Marriage of*

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<sup>3</sup> The striking resemblance of the book, described thusly, to the structural model of natural language is not lost on the author of this thesis.

*Cadmus and Harmony*, which I have identified at the levels of the narrative segment, chapter, and book as a whole. As indicated above I will continue to refer to this aspect of mythological organization where it is relevant in the following sections.

## 5.0 UNCONDITIONAL IDENTITY

Unconditional identity is the operation by which myths, to use Lotman's phrasing, "declare to be one and the same thing phenomena which we would have considerable difficulty in comparing" (Lotman 1979: 162). The homology of birth, springtime, and dawn, like that of death, winter, and midnight, is a very basic example of this logic. In its more complex forms, as discussed above, the mechanism of unconditional identity helps to preserve the mythological text from radical changes brought about by the introduction of novel characters, situations, and objects, which in myth are identified with the preexisting and eternal objects already present in the stories. This is the principle at work that allows Lévi-Strauss to declare that "a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such" (Lévi –Strauss 1955: 435). In both the form and content of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Roberto Calasso evokes the three aspects of unconditional identity outlined in *Part One* of this thesis. *Single-level object description* and *integral wholeness* can be observed in the treatment and arrangement of various types of content, while the narrative content itself often consists of explicit contemplations on *transformational identity* among objects and between mythical variants. In this section I will first address instances of *single-level object description* and compositional *integral wholeness* in the formal structure of the book, followed by a discussion of the most relevant instances of *transformational identity* as it appears in the content of the narrative.

### 5.1 *Single-level Object Description*

One of the most problematic aspects of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is its author's use of other texts. Robert Shorrock has described the content of the book as consisting of:

numerous references to, and quotations from, a wide range of classical writers (together with more modern references). Numerous words and phrases in Greek and Latin are found alongside quotations translated from French and German. The *pièce de résistance* of Calasso's scholarship is an appendix of "Sources" (*Fonti*) that runs some twenty-five pages in the first Italian version. (Shorrock 2003: 84)

This is in addition to Calasso's re-telling of the Greek mythological stories, which the reader is encouraged to consider original but that, as Shorrock explains, may indeed be "sourced" as well (Shorrock 2003: 94-95). As I discussed in the previous chapter with regard to the content of the book's narrative segments, material of different kinds and which comes from a wide variety of



sources is scattered through the chapters with an apparent disregard for any sort of typological organization. This has the effect of frustrating any attempt to confer upon the book's eclectic content a hierarchy of significance. The quotations and etymological investigations which frequently occur along side or even interrupt the stories are not explicitly used in order to interpret them—nor is the reverse the case. Thomas Sienkewicz claims that:

In order to capture the drama preceding Pelops' memorable chariot race, [Calasso] describes the pedimental sculptures from the temple of Zeus in Olympia, Greece. In order to illustrate the religious feeling of the ancients, he recreates in words Pheidias' lost statue of Zeus at Olympia, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. (Sienkewicz 1993)

However, Sienkewicz's characterization of Calasso's use of extra-mythical content in order to enhance or elaborate upon the stories or "feeling of the ancients," presumes that those stories and feelings are in some way the primary content of the book. The assumption that *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony's* non-story material exists only to support or enhance the re-telling of Greek myths imputes a hierarchical structure which the composition of the book does not support. In fact, as I will show, Calasso's use of narrative segments and his stream-of-consciousness style allows the book not only to convey a great variety of content with surprising clarity, but it also facilitates the presentation of what would normally be considered different orders of informative material without subjecting that content to such an organizational hierarchy. The resistance of the book's content to stratification is a manifestation of *single-level object description*, an essential feature of the unconditional identity mechanism characteristic of mythological texts.

In the previous chapter I outlined the organization of the book in terms of its division into chapters and what I termed *narrative segments*. The essential autonomy of those narrative segments is one way in which Calasso composes his representation of the stuff of Greek myth on properly mythological terms. As noted above, there is no thematic cohesion which explains the division of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* into chapters, but that is not to say there are no thematic groupings of any kind. While the structure of the narrative suggests rather than declares thematic continuities, they are of course necessary to the coherence of the work as a whole despite the vagueness of their boundaries. One such thematic set begins on page 133, where a pair of ellipses indicate clearly its span, which runs through page 135. Such explicit demarcation is uncommon in the text, where most thematic associations between segments are for the reader to distinguish, and their boundaries are nebulous at best. Though the instance that occurs between pages 133-135 is not

typical, its clear demarkation by the author allows for a more objective demonstration of the thematic association of narrative segments, one that is less dependent on my own semiotic inclinations. For these reasons I will use it as an example of a phenomenon universal to the book but which is generally more ambiguous than in the case at hand.

After an ellipsis at the top of page 133, a narrative segment begins “These were the last years of freedom for Athens.” The segment addresses Isocrates’ speech on Helen of Troy and his self-inflicted death by starvation. The subsequent segment begins, “Behind what the Greeks called *eidolon*, which is at once the idol, the statue, the simulacrum, the phantom, lies the mental image.” It continues for two paragraphs with a highly abstract account of the mental image, or *phantom*, and its incommensurability with appearance and form. The segment ends with Calasso’s assertion that, “For the Greeks, Helen was the embodiment of that vision, beauty hatched from the egg of necessity.” The next segment discusses Helen’s physical body, quoting Stesichorus, Homer, Euripides, and citing the persistence of Helen’s story “right up to Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Hofmannsthal-Strauss’s *Die Frau ohne Schatten*”. The final segment in the set describes Helen’s beautiful face, her “simple spirit”, quoting Horace and Euripides in the midst of Calasso’s own description, which climaxes with this contemplation:

[...] Helen nevertheless remains the least virtuous of beings one could imagine. Maybe she had no psychology. And maybe it was impossible for her to have one. If she weeps, as she does on the Scaean Gate, a veil, dazzling as Zeus’s thunderbolts, hides her tears. The only thing she cared about was appearance, and hence poetry too. When she arrived in Mycenae with Menelaus and found the corpse of her sister, Clytemnestra, throat freshly slashed by Orestes, Helen did, as a sign of grief, cut the ends of her hair, but not so much as to risk making herself ugly. (Calasso 1993: 135)

After another ellipsis, the next segment begins narrating Nemesis’s attempt to outrun an amorous Zeus, a story begun earlier in the chapter and left off on page 127, signaling the start of a different thematic set.

This set of narrative segments contains a variety of topics—the historical decline of Athens, simulacra, the dialectics of image and object, beauty and necessity, the Trojan war, even mention of Napoleon—which all seem connected to Helen of Troy, if only implicitly, by the fact that she is mentioned in every segment. At no point does Calasso “sum up” the collection of segments and state the purpose for their identity within a set indicated by ellipses. The segments are not subsumed under any explicit heading, at this point or any other in the book, and though it may be tempting to take the most abstract segment on *eidolon* as explanatory of the others, this is only due to a

conventional attitude toward greater abstraction as possessed of increased informative value (Lotman 1975b: 199). In the text itself, there is no justification of such a hierarchy—although its content appears to be the most abstract, the *eidolon* segment is neither the first presented in the set, nor is its subject matter discussed or referenced in any of the other segments. This is not to say that Calasso’s meditation on *eidolon* cannot be a lens through which to interpret the other content of the thematic set, or even the entire book; only that such a hierarchical significance is not inherent in the narrative itself, which makes no such stratification of content at any level of the text.

This undifferentiated content structure has been treated as whimsical, lazy, or downright maddening by various reviewers of the book (Shorrocks 2003: 86). In terms of the unconditional identity mechanism of mythological texts, Calasso’s treatment of material can be seen to concur with Lotman and Uspenski’s statement that “The world presented through the eyes of a mythological consciousness should seem to consist of objects [...] that are the same rank (the concept of a logical hierarchy exists, in principle, beyond a consciousness of this type)” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 212). We can see that this is exactly the effect of Calasso’s content organization, which at once prevents the book from being considered either properly academic or purely fictional. The narrative of myth, composed of a collage of information types, resists what Lotman calls “the inadequate translation into discrete meta-languages of a non-mythological type” (Lotman 1979: 162). Here we can consider that for the author of this text, the “objects” of his description are not only the deities, events, and items that occur in Greek myths, but also the strata of documents and artifacts where that stuff of myth is, today, located. In fact in the course of the book it seems as if it is the entire discourse on Greek myth that Calasso takes as his object. These, his mythical sources (or perhaps *resources*), are presented indiscriminately in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*: none is treated as of greater or lesser significance, and no relative accuracy or historical precedence is either sought or claimed for any of the book’s material. Every type of content—from original story-telling to the cited quotations of ancient authors to the facts inscribed in the archaeological record—is presented in the narrative as being of “the same rank,” equivalently relevant to the book’s unfolding representation of Greek myth.

This single-rank presentation of content applies to the individual narrative segments as they relate to one another, and is also evident in the internal organization of the segments as well. The following excerpt is typical of the segments’ heterogeneous content:

It was a place where dogs would lose their quarry’s trail, so violent was the scent of flowers. A stream

cut deep through the grass of a meadow that rose at the edge to fall sheer in a rocky ravine into the very navel of Sicily. And here, near Henna. Kore was carried off. When the earth split open and Hades' chariot appeared, drawn by four horses abreast, Kore was looking at a narcissus. She was looking at the act of looking. She was about to pluck it. And, at that very moment, she was herself plucked away by the invisible toward the invisible. Kore doesn't just mean "girl" but "pupil" too. And the pupil, as Socrates says to Alcibiades, "is the finest part of the eye," not just because it is "the part which sees" but because it is the place where another person looking will find "the image of himself looking". And if, as Socrates claims, the Delphic maxim "Know thyself" can be understood only if translated as "Look at thyself," then the pupil becomes the sole means of self-knowledge. Kore looked at the yellow "prodigy" of the narcissus. But what is it that makes this yellow flower, used at once for the garlands of Eros and of the dead, so marvelous? What sets it apart from the violets, the crocuses, and the hyacinths that made the meadow near Henna so colorful? Narcissus is also the name of a young man who lost himself looking at himself. (Calasso 1993: 209)

The first five sentences of this paragraph consist of fairly straightforward story-telling, a description of the circumstances surrounding Kore/Persephone's abduction. The sixth sentence acts as an elaboration or contemplation upon the description offered in the previous one, marked by the repetitiveness of the phrase "looking at the act of looking". The seventh sentence begins as though the story-telling were uninterrupted, but ends with the curious assertion of Kore's being "plucked away by the invisible toward the invisible," which again appears distinct from the other story-telling sentences thanks to its odd repetition of "invisible". The etymological content of the subsequent sentence, and the Socratic quotation that follows it, are embedded within the narrative of the story—though it might be just as accurate to say that the story is embedded within the philosophico-etymological musing that forms the bulk of the paragraph as it alternates between Socrates's contemplations and Calasso's own. The paragraph culminates in a pair of questions which are answered by a reference back to myth, to the story of Narcissus. What is significant for my point—that is, the single-rank of Calasso's narrative content—is that there is no formal distinction like a new paragraph or parenthetical insert to separate the story from the authorial contemplation from the extratextual references. They are all present in a kind of mythological stream-of-consciousness which seems to progress "as if by association" (Lefkowitz 1993: 12).

## ***5.2 Integral Wholeness***

The second aspect of unconditional identity evident in the formal organization of *The Marriage of*

*Cadmus and Harmony* is its treatment of objects as *integral wholes*. While this feature is also evident in the narrative content, which will be addressed below, here I am referring as objects to the as-it-were physical units of the narrative—so far as such can be identified. Again I mean the narrative segments, which have already been discussed as essential to the book’s particularity and to the logic of its strange but not incomprehensible unfolding. After single-rank description, the second characteristic Lotman and Uspenski specify as proper to mythological objects is that they “cannot be broken down into markers (each thing is regarded as an integral whole)” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 212). The literal isolation of the narrative segments from one another, and the role of that independence in the book’s organizational logic, has already been addressed but bears repeating here. The result of this organization of content into discrete units of narrative compels their interpretation as not only distinct from one another but whole, that is, complete, in themselves. With regard to Lotman and Uspenski’s definition, here the “thing [...] regarded as an integral whole” is the narrative segment itself, which is easily identified but not easily characterized—that is, we can locate individual segments, distinguish their boundaries easily, and even develop a thematic description of each one; but we cannot classify or even identify units of content below that level. The following narrative segment illustrates this well:

Myths are made up of actions that include their opposites within themselves. The hero kills the monster, but even as he does so we perceive that the opposite is also true: the monster kills the hero. The hero carries off the princess, yet even as he does we perceive that the opposite is also true: the hero deserts the princess. How can we be sure? The variants tell us. They keep the mythical blood in circulation. But let’s imagine that all the variants of a certain myth have been lost, erased by some invisible hand. Would the myth still be the same? Here one arrives at the hairline distinction between myth and every other kind of narrative. Even without its variants, the myth includes its opposite. How do we know? The knowledge intrinsic in the novel tells us so. The novel, a narrative deprived of variants, attempts to recover them by making the single text to which it is entrusted more dense, more detailed. Thus the action of the novel tends, as though toward its paradise, to the inclusion of its opposite, something the myth possesses as of right. (Calasso 1993: 281)

Like all the narrative segments in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, this one is separated from the text around it by a large space before and after, ensuring its unity and distinction. It consists of a single unbroken paragraph of 14 sentences. The segment could be classified as addressing themes of “opposition,” “variant inclusion,” or, in an interesting parallel to this thesis, “myth vs. novel”. More generally it could be categorized as “commentary,” in relation to other narrative segments which

may deal more or less with either “story-telling” or “quotation”—though pure examples of any of those types of segments are in short supply. This narrative segment is remarkably consistent, comprised of a single kind of content (authorial commentary) which runs fairly persuasively from its opening assertion on the nature of myth to its conclusion on the implications of that nature for narrative genre.

Unlike the segment itself, its constituent parts cannot necessarily be distinguished from each other or from the parts of other segments thematically. And while the clauses, sentences, and words which comprise this segment might fit aptly into other segments, or other books, or in some cases even serve as segments of their own, Calasso’s construction of a coherent narrative—in this case we might even say an argument—binds together the various linguistic elements into an integral whole which would be absent from the book were it not structured just so. Even if every sentence were maintained intact and rearranged, either in the segment itself or elsewhere throughout the chapter or book, the specific interpretive potential—the *meaning*—of the narrative segment would be lost.

It is interesting to note in connection to this point about integral wholeness that Calasso makes frequent use of very short sentences which are utterly senseless outside the context of their narrative segments. In the previous quotation the sentence “The variants tell us.” is an example, as is the book’s second sentence, “It was Zeus.” (Calasso 1993: 3). Particularly illustrative is the following example, in which a series of short (and some grammatically incorrect) sentences could easily have been composed as a single (correct) sentence construct: “The bargaining and buying went on. Until all of a sudden, the seafaring merchants leaped on the women. Some of them managed to escape. But Io and a number of others were carried off.” (Calasso 1993: 7). While this is almost certainly a stylistic issue (that is, a matter of the author’s taste), the frequent use of markedly short sentences at once reinforces the necessary wholeness of narrative segments (as the short sentences are senseless outside of context), and also mimics the punctuated stylistic effect of that segmentation at a lower level. The particular sense of self-sufficiency that these techniques lend to the narrative at various levels is significant to both the style and logic of the book, and will be covered in detail in the next chapter.

### ***5.3 Transformational Identity as Narrative Content***

As Robert Shorrock notes, in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* we are “invited to make connections between events, characters and objects, as though they belonged to one and the same

story” (Shorrock 2003: 95). This invitation to make connections is in fact a key feature of mythological texts which seek not merely to connect but to *identify* mythological objects—single-rank and integrally whole—“that occur only once (the notion of the recurrence of objects implies their inclusion in certain common sets, that is, the presence of a level of metadescription)” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 213). This third characteristic of mythological objects identified by Lotman and Uspenski gives rise to the mechanism of *transformational identity*, perhaps the most familiar way in which myths, in contrast to other text types, “declare to be one and the same thing phenomena which we would have considerable difficulty in comparing” (Lotman 1979: 162). It is also the most obvious manifestation of unconditional identity in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, for the persistent identity of deities and other mythical characters despite total and mutually contradictory transformations is frequently the subject matter of the book.

The first sentence of the book has Zeus in one of his archetypal transformations: “On a beach in Sidon a bull was aping a lover’s coo. It was Zeus.” (Calasso 1993: 3). Bovine transformations are typical of the first chapter, being visited upon man and woman, divine and mortal alike. But the discourse on transformation is not limited to fairy-tale style depiction, and becomes itself the subject of deeper narrative contemplation, as in this passage on the “developing history of metamorphoses”:

Forms would become manifest insofar as they underwent metamorphosis. Each form had its own perfect sharpness, so long as it retained that form, but everybody knew that a moment later it might become something else. At the time of Europa and Io, the veil of epiphany was still operating. The bellowing bull, the crazed cow, would once again appear as god and girl. But as generation followed generation, metamorphosis became more difficult, and the fatal nature of reality, its irreversibility, all the more evident. (Calasso 1993: 12)

Not only the author but the characters who populate his stories reflect on the nature and logic of transformational identity. Calasso has Ariadne wonder: “Theseus was the bull. but Theseus had killed the bull, her half brother, and killed him with her help. So had she been helping Theseus to kill himself?” (Calasso 1993: 18). And later, “Hadn’t she realized yet that Dionysus and Theseus were not really enemies? Those two opposed figures were both manifestations of the same man who went on betraying her,” (Calasso 1993: 19). Transformational identity is not only evident in coexisting and therefore parallel characters, but brings together all of the objects in the mythical world and suffuses them with the recognition of sameness. In this passage, Dionysus is the identity that subsumes all others, “the total bull”:

He encompassed all things: he was in the honey and blood offered to the gods, he was in the slender horns at each side of the altars, in the ox skulls painted along the walls of the palace. Youths with armbands, loincloths, and wavy hair gripped him by the horns at a run. (Calasso 1993: 12)

Not only living beings but inanimate objects are subject to transformational identity in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. “Crown, necklace, garland: they all have the same shape, and often the one will become the other” (Calasso 1993: 112). While the logic of myth, and thus of transformational identity, may be so foreign as to be inaccessible today, it is yet possible to recognize in these quotations Calasso’s attempt to represent the essential sameness of “phenomena which we would have considerable difficulty in comparing” (Lotman 1979: 162).

As I noted in Part One, unconditional identity is both the result and evidence of mythological texts’ tendency toward singularity. To reiterate, Lotman insists that, “the more noticeably the world of the characters is reduced to singularity (one hero, one obstacle), the nearer it is to the primordial mythological type of structural organization of the text” (Lotman 1979: 168). This specifically mythological characteristic is, like the logic of transformation, also a recurring narrative subject in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. Calasso seems to echo Lotman’s description of the “primordial organization” when he explains that originally “hierogamy and sacrifice were the same thing.” “In the course of history, this unnameable unity gradually split into two. In the beginning, the primordial god would copulate and kill himself at the same time” (Calasso 1993: 106). In Calasso’s narrative the primordial Greek deity is Phanes:

four eyes and four horns, golden wings, the heads of a ram, a bull, and a lion, and a snake spread across a young and human body, a phallus and a vagina, hooves. [...] He didn’t need to look at anything but the light, because everything was in him. Copulating with himself, he impregnated his own sacred belly. (Calasso 1993: 200)

Being an “unnameable unity,” the life of Phanes is not conducive to narrative. Yet the existence of the primordially undifferentiated is not absent from the text, and Calasso’s Zeus reflects that, since that unity had broken down, “events had begun to resemble one another” (Calasso 1993: 203). Indeed, all “[t]he sovereign gods suffer from a nostalgia for the state of their forerunner, Phanes. And they try to return to it” (Calasso 1993: 203). This suggests an explanation for why, as Calasso insists, “[r]epetition, for a god, is a sign of majesty, necessity’s seal” (Calasso 1993: 33). For the primordial unity toward which mythological texts tend must be resisted for the sake of communicating them, but that “unnameable unity” is the necessary content of the properly



mythological text (Lotman 1979: 164). Thus, “whenever his adventures are too grand, Zeus allows them to be repeated with variations, so that each version may possess a shining fragment of the truth” (Calasso 1993: 126).

While *transformational identity* is an essential characteristic of myth, Calasso’s treatment of metamorphosis shows certain iconic Greek mythological figures, like the Minotaur, to belong to a less than primordial stage of development. In an early passage, Pasiphaë pursues her lust for a white bull: “And from their union was born a creature who would never be able to go back to being either beast or man. He would be a hybrid, forever” (Calasso 1993: 12). Here the hybrid monster of the labyrinth, and indeed the labyrinth itself, are portrayed as evidence that a primordial order had already begun to break down. The very clichés of Greek mythology result from the transition to a novel state of affairs, in which “Humans could no longer gain access to other forms and return from them” (Calasso 1993: 12). This passage out of metamorphosis left the Greeks with “no alternative but to invent objects and generate monsters,” and thus “out of these events history itself was born” (Calasso 1993: 7). Here we can see content-level meditations on the primordially of metamorphosis, which for Lotman reflects the mythological text’s tendency toward singularity: “the more noticeably the world of the characters is reduced to singularity (one hero, one obstacle), the nearer it is to the primordial mythological type of structural organization of the text” (Lotman 1979: 168). In Calasso’s narrative total metamorphosis, like Lotman’s primordial singularity, gives way to “the fatal nature of reality, its irreversibility” (Calasso 1993: 11). Calasso’s myth is overtaken by history, as Lotman’s mythological text is overshadowed by the domination of plot texts: in both cases transformational identity, according to which “characters and objects mentioned at different levels of the cyclical mythological mechanism are different proper names for the same thing,” is essential to myth and yet already evidence of its subjection to an inimical regime of meaning (Lotman 1979: 162).

*Transformational identity* is not only a mechanism at work within myths, operating on the objects and events in stories, it is also an central feature of the relation of myths to one another which specifically distinguishes them from other types of texts. As Lévi-Strauss observed in his research on myths, the proliferation of the variants of even a single story is potentially infinite (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 12). That mythologies are disposed to assimilate variants of even the most contradictory nature is primary among the features that distinguish myths from other text types. This can be seen as another manifestation of transformational identity, which identifies the most divergent and seemingly incompatible arrangements of mythical events as, nonetheless, the “same” myth. It is characteristic of Lévi-Strauss’s structural analysis of myth that all variants, regardless of

age or provenance, are considered as constitutive of a myth as such. It is not my purpose to defend or scrutinize Lévi-Strauss's theories in this thesis, but his aim, to "define the myth as consisting of all its versions" (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 435), is clearly evident in Calasso's treatment of Greek myth, and it is thus highly relevant to this thesis regardless of its theoretical soundness.

We have already seen that *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* opens with a series of variant re-tellings of Europa's abduction by Zeus, establishing from the beginning of the book the significance of variants in the narrative. Multiple versions of events occur frequently throughout the text, sometimes in separate narrative segments, as in the Europa example, and sometimes conflicting versions inhabit the same segment, as in this example:

When Alexander arrived in Gordium, he went to the acropolis and found the cart that was tied with a knot that no one had been able to undo. "[...] Unable to untie the knot and not wanting to leave it as it was, in case his failure should spread disquiet through his army, some say that he sliced the knot cleanly with his sword and then claimed that he had untied it." But there's another version to the story, according to which Alexander "removed the belying pin from the drawbar [this was a wooden pin forced into the drawbar and around which the knot was secured] and thus removed the yoke from the drawbar." (Calasso 1993: 98, bracketed text in the original)

Calasso's acknowledges "another version," which he places side-by-side with the more familiar variant of the Gordian knot, without conferring greater legitimacy on either. Both variants contribute to the myth, which Calasso seems to define, like Lévi-Strauss, as "consisting of all its versions" (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 435). In a later passage, Calasso discusses the similarities that the mythical figures of Achilles and Iphigenia share, both having been lured to their deaths on the false pretense of marriage (Calasso 1993: 106). Here the simultaneous presence of conflicting versions is acknowledged in a concise and direct fashion, which accepts the paradox without seeking to resolve it: "One writer even claims they [Iphigenia and Achilles] had a child. If so, they must have had it without ever having been together, except in the sense that they were both lured into the same fatal trap" (Calasso 1993: 106). In this example two incompatible mythical "facts", that Iphigenia and Achilles never actually met and that they had a child together, sit side by side as if, despite their mutual incompatibility, both were equally valid. Thanks to the operation of *transformational identity*, which subsumes all variants as "different proper names for the same thing" (Lotman 1979: 162), in the mythological text contradictory versions *are* equally valid.

Not only the stories themselves are subject to this variant-inclusivity, but also the artifacts which evince and illustrate them, as in the account of a statue of Nemesis:

When the inhabitants of Rhamnus decided to consecrate a sanctuary to Nemesis, they commissioned Phidias to sculpt a giant statue of the goddess. Some claim that the Rhamnus Nemesis was in fact an Aphrodite sculpted by Agoracritus, Phidias's pupil and lover. Others say that Phidias allowed the sculpture to be passed off as the work of his lover. Either way, the statue would be famous for centuries. (Calasso 1993: 137)

Here the inconsistency of conflicting accounts of the statue's origin is dismissed with Calasso's casual, "either way," indicating with a playful tone the irrelevance of such concerns. The author's inclusion of such incompatibles, only to dismiss them, highlights the very significance of that dismissal for the narrative itself. It comes to seem as if the disregard for origins, rather than the origins themselves, are the subject matter of the book. Calasso suggests his reasons for this technique, foregrounding as it does the fact of mythical variation rather than the specifics of the variants themselves:

Myth, like language, gives all of itself in each of its fragments. When a myth brings into play repetition and variants, the skeleton of the system emerges for a while, the latent order, covered in seaweed. (Calasso 1993: 136)

This inclusivity is an essential characteristic of myth according to Lévi-Strauss and, as we have seen, Calasso implements this definition of myth in his narrative representation of it. Like Lotman, Calasso distinguishes mythological texts from their typological opposite not only in light of their Lévi-Straussian inclusivity, but even in the *absence* of it. Calasso claims that even a myth that survives in a single version, bereft of recorded variants, still persists in its mythological nature because, "Even without its variants, the myth includes its own opposite" (Calasso 1993: 281). Again like Lotman, for whom the linear unrolling of a primordial mythological singularity was evident in the character doubles and situational parallels of plot texts (Lotman 1979: 164), Calasso finds evidence of the inherent variety of myth in texts of the opposite type:

The novel, a narrative deprived of variants, attempts to recover them by making the single text to which it is entrusted more dense, more detailed. Thus the action of the novel tends, as though toward its paradise, to the inclusion of its opposite, something the myth possesses as of right. (Calasso 1993: 281)

The relationship between different versions of a myth is therefore essential to its definition *as myth*, and the nature of this relationship as represented in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*—in terms of how variants are treated in the narrative and according to Calasso's explicit statements about the

nature of myth—can be seen to echo Lévi-Strauss directly: “we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 435).

In terms of the semiotic mechanisms of mythological texts which I have defined in this thesis, this inclusive definition of myth, “as consisting of all its versions,” can be seen to operate according to the principle of unconditional identity which has already been described as operating among the objects internal to myth. Just as this mechanism establishes as homologous entities “phenomena which we would have considerable difficulty in comparing” (Lotman 1979: 162) *within* mythical narratives, so does it work to establish even the most contradictory variants as versions of the same myth. Lotman notes that “[t]he first and most perceptible result of such a translation [of mythological texts into plot-text forms] was the loss of the isomorphism between levels of text.” In its manifestation of unconditional identity both within and between myths, that is between the objects *of* mythological narratives and between different mythological narratives themselves, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* can be seen to have recovered an aspect of that mythological isomorphism which subjects every level of the text to the same principles.

The logic of unconditional identity is key to mythological texts, and this is a fact which Calasso seems self-conscious of in his narrative representation of Greek myth. Robert Shorrock has even seen a similar phenomenon at work in the complex of relations that bind author, reader, and text in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. Referring again to Calasso’s “deceptive” use of source material, Shorrock says:

In certain important respects, Zeus’ deceptive form and function within the narrative complement Calasso’s own role as artful mythographer. Where Zeus appropriates the form of a bull in order to seduce Europa and carry her off over the sea, so Calasso appropriates the narrative of Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* in order to seduce his readers and carry them along through the text. A majority of readers do not notice the deception and are carried along in ignorance. The knowing reader, by contrast is invited to become a willing participant in the seduction, to play the part of Europa, while fully aware of Calasso’s deceptive ploy. (Shorrock 2003: 92)

I quote Shorrock at length here because his synopsis of the complementarity of roles at various levels of the narrative—Calasso imitates Zeus’s imitation, the reader imitates (complicitly or unknowingly) Europa’s deception and carrying-off—because it illustrates succinctly the principle of unconditional identity which is both proper and essential to the semiotic mechanisms of mythological texts. I

would even say that Shorrock's capacity to see such a role replication, which may be totally unintentional on the part of the author, is evidence of the mechanisms of the mythological text at work, influencing the reader (in this case the reviewer) to see "connections between events, characters and objects, as though they belonged to one and the same story" (Shorrock 2003: 95). Furthermore, this quote illustrates the recognition of the mechanism of unconditional identity on an entirely different level: in this case the narrator is identified with the deceptive-transformative Zeus, while the reader is unconditionally identified with the "deceived" Europa. The latter identification is perhaps the most striking, for the identity is asserted regardless of the relative naïveté of the reader: they are "deceived" either actually or playfully, but are carried along by the deception either way—*unconditionally*.

In this chapter I have demonstrated unconditional identity at work in three essential ways: in the *single-level description* and *integral wholeness* according to which content in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is formally organized and related, and in the *transformational identity* that establishes continuity between the objects within myth and between different versions of the myths themselves. Connecting this characteristic of the book to *Part I* of this thesis, I have shown how the various manifestations of unconditional identity are not only characteristic of myth but distinguish it—according to Lévi-Strauss and Roberto Calasso—from those texts which are myth's typological opposite according to Juri Lotman and Tartu-Moscow school text typology. In this next chapter, I will show how both unconditional identity and the atemporality discussed in the previous chapter contribute in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* to the narrative self-sufficiency which is the third characteristic of mythological texts.

## 6.0 NARRATIVE SELF-SUFFICIENCY

In this chapter I will describe the narrative self-sufficiency evident at multiple levels of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. As with the other mythological semiotic mechanisms described in this thesis, the isomorphic operation of this semiotic mechanism at various levels of the narrative is in line with my description of Calasso's book as an essentially mythological text. This chapter in particular will aim to demonstrate that *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony's* expressions of narrative self-sufficiency bring it into close accord with the topological nature of properly mythological texts, as well as with the peculiar semiotics of the mythological universe.

Speaking about *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* in comparison to his other books, Roberto Calasso has said,

The concept was that everything should be clear within the Greek system, which is quite self-sufficient. The reader could enter knowing nothing at all about Greek mythology. (Calasso qtd. in Lee 1993: 51)

Here the author suggests an intentional mirroring of the self-sufficiency of Greek myth in his construction of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, which is exhibited to the reader in the book's accessibility despite their "knowing nothing at all about Greek mythology". Based on the preceding discussion of the book's content, organization, and stylistic tendencies, Calasso's statement should seem immediately paradoxical. For *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* does not provide anything resembling an introduction to its content which is—according to Calasso himself—"everything [...] within the Greek system" (Calasso qtd. in Lee 1993: 51). From the outset of the narrative, it is tempting to interpret this lack of prefatory material as an authorial assumption of the readers' knowledge beforehand. But as Calasso insists, the book, like the "Greek system", is self-sufficient. As I will demonstrate in what follows, this self-sufficiency is inextricably linked to the other mythological semiotic mechanisms already discussed, as well as being the aspect of Calasso's book that most clearly illustrates how "[t]he cyclical world of mythological texts creates a multi-layered mechanism with clearly manifested features of topological organization" (Lotman 1979: 162).

Once again we may return to Lévi-Strauss to find description of this mythological semiotic mechanism, which the anthropologist underscores as a primary distinguishing feature of the phenomenon. "Mythology makes demands [...] because of the length of the narration, the

recurrence of certain themes, and the other forms of back references and parallels which can only be grasped if the listener's mind surveys, as it were, the whole range of the story as it is unfolded" (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 16). What is important for this part of my discussion is that not only must mythology be taken in, as it were, all at once, but in an important sense nothing *outside* the mythology at hand is required in order to understand it<sup>4</sup>. As an essential property of myth, this characteristic must therefore be evident in texts considered properly mythological. In the case of a textual form which physics and convention conspire to force linear-discrete reception of—in this case, a book—implementing the circular self-sufficiency of myth in a fixed narrative appears particularly problematic.

This self-sufficiency, or self-containment, of myth corresponds to the “content oriented” cultural type Lotman and Uspenski's describe in their paper “On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978b). The mythological understanding of culture conceives itself as a totality, even *the* totality, against which what is outside its boundaries is constructed as its radical opposite: non-culture.

Within the conditions of a culture chiefly oriented towards content and represented as a system of rules, the basic opposition is ‘organized-nonorganized’ (and this opposition can be realized in particular cases as ‘cosmos-chaos,’ ‘ectropy-entropy,’ ‘culture-nature,’ and so on). (Lotman and Uspenski 1978b: 219)

If we take the Greek culture represented in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* to be a mythological one, or in Lotman and Uspenski's terms a “content oriented” one, then the book can be seen to replicate the oppositional-exclusive orientation of its subject matter in its authorially asserted self-sufficiency. This self-sufficiency is reinforced, in fact, by the same features of the book which have seemed to demand extra-textual knowledge. The strangeness of its organization, discussed in this thesis in terms of the non-chronological arrangement of events and narrative segmentation, as well as its content, cuts the book off from both the scholarly and fictional corpuses to which it might be compared. As the reviews discussed in section 2.0.1 suggest, from the standpoint of genre the work is already self-sufficient in that nobody has been able to classify or compare it with anything else. The reader's approach to the book, the technique of reading it, must be derived from within the work itself as no precedent exists from which to derive an interpretive strategy. Calasso's treatment

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<sup>4</sup> I feel compelled to reiterate that, when I refer to “mythology” as in this statement, I do not mean to indicate in any way “mythology as such,” but rather the notion of myth and myth-logic as established by Lévi-Strauss, elaborated upon by Lotman and other scholars, and evident in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*.

of its content, his compilation of quotations and story-telling and philosophical reflection, is so specific to this book as to render even the most familiar clichés of Greek myth unfamiliar in the light he sheds upon them. The effect of this is to tempt even the reader well-acquainted with Greek myth to disregard extratextual information on the subject—somehow, in the context of this depiction of the Greeks, other discourses on the topic seem inapplicable. Though much of the book, as Robert Shorrock demonstrates (Shorrock 2003), is borrowed, which is to say *not new*, and its subject matter is among the most well-trodden ground in western history, nothing outside the book itself is apt to prepare the reader to approach it. As Joseph Brodsky professed, “It combines—well, God knows what!” (Brodsky qtd. in Grossman 1993: 33).

To begin my discussion of the book’s narrative self-sufficiency, I must return once again to the narrative segments. I have already shown how these blocks of text form the basic, which is to say smallest isolable, constituent unit of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. That their isolation from one another (by spaces in-between) is not always compelled by narrative expediency or convention—as in my earlier example of the division of a continuous story narrative into separate segments—only highlights the significance of the segmentation itself. Some have referred to Calasso’s “aphoristic style” by way of explaining this structure (Bremer 1993: 338; Green 1993: 51; Publisher’s Weekly 1993), and this is not an inaccurate characterization—“aphoristic” underscores the stand-alone character of the book’s separate and independent segments, and suggests the self-sufficiency of their expression. And although I have explained previously that the individual segments are, for the most part, nonsensical outside the context of the book taken as a whole, the sometimes questionable but always intentional spatial isolation of the narrative segments forces upon them at least an *appearance* of self-sufficiency. In many cases this self-sufficiency may be so purely formal as to seem superficial, as if the author had written the work as a more typical chronological unfolding of mythical events and then cut his narrative in pieces and rearranged them. I do not exclude this as a possible explanation. However, what I am after is the *effect* of this arrangement and isolation of segments, and that is in a paradoxical relationship with the aforementioned “integral wholeness” of the book’s narrative. This excerpted passage is a whole narrative segment occurring in the midst of Calasso’s retelling of Jason’s collusion with Medea:

Graddaughters of the sun, it was immediately obvious that Ariadne and Medea were related. They both had a sort of golden light spreading outward from the eyes. They were born far apart, in the far south and the far north of the earth. Both helped a foreigner, were carried off by him, by him abandoned. They never met. But they touched each other through a fabric. Each had fingered that



purple tunic, woven for a god and still fragrant with his vanished body. (Calasso 1993: 328)

Although this segment stands isolated from the surrounding text like all the others, its content requires familiarity with a number of stories scattered throughout the book in order to understand who Ariadne and Medea are, or the foreigners they helped, or how the women helped, and were carried off, and abandoned, why the parallel trajectories of their stories should be significant, and whose fragrant purple tunic it is that Calasso uses to connect them.

One element of this segment in particular illustrates an important point about the logic of self-sufficiency at work in the book, which simultaneously makes it accessible without prior knowledge while also requiring, for comprehension of each moment of its content, *full* knowledge of the book itself. That is the reference in the segment to Medea's abandonment by Jason, an event which at the point in the narrative when this segment occurs has not yet been disclosed. Three possible strategies for interpreting that detail exist: either the reader already knows the story of Medea and recognizes the allusion, or the reader is unfamiliar with the story and cannot fully comprehend, or the reader doesn't know the story and takes Calasso's word for it. In both of the latter situations, the segment cannot be fully understood, and thus if "everything should be clear" in the book then the reader must already be aware of the event that has not yet been related—but Calasso has also said that readers need know "nothing at all about Greek mythology" (Calasso qtd. in Lee 1993: 51). A fourth possibility exists, which is that in order that "everything should be clear" the content of the book must be taken as a totality, which in this case means *read more than once*. We have seen that the simultaneous awareness of multiple variants and associated constellations of stories is, for Lévi-Strauss, a primary characteristic of myth itself, and thus it is not unreasonable to assume that Calasso has implemented the same assumption of total familiarity into his self-sufficient narrative—though in this case it is "total familiarity" with the book which is required. In other words, the reader can rely solely on the content of the book in order to understand that content (the reader need "know nothing at all about Greek mythology" (Calasso qtd. in Lee 1993: 51)), but only by simultaneous awareness of the entirety of that content can any part of it be fully understood. Calasso has constructed his book in such a way that there is, in a sense, nothing beyond the text: it is "self-sufficient, [...] self-contained," like myth itself (Calasso qtd. in Lee 1993: 51).

It is not my intention to argue that the book is "self-sufficient" in the sense that its consumption confers upon the reader anything like a complete knowledge of classical Greek culture, or even of Greek mythology. My point is that by treating his material in a unique way Calasso forces

the reader to derive a strategy for its comprehension from within the work itself, and a part of that strategy seems to be rereading the work itself to comprehend its content fully. This can be seen as a manifestation of the cyclical nature of myth, evidence that like mythology *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is “a constantly recurrent cycle” (Lotman 1979: 162). It is also a reflection of the heavily bounded nature of the “world presented through the eyes of a mythological consciousness” (Lotman and Uspenski 1978a: 212), in which the boundary between the world-defined-as-culture and the as-if-nonexistent externality is extremely rigid. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this self-sufficiency is supported and reinforced by the mechanisms of unconditional identity, which transform even the incursions of genuine novelty into recurrences of preexisting mythological facts. In *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* these mythological semiotic mechanisms are deployed in such a way that the text becomes self-contained and self-sufficient in a way that resembles the rigidly bounded, circular completeness of the world as perceived mythologically. This resemblance between levels, here of content, or subject-matter, and form, generates the “isomorphism between levels of text” which Lotman identifies as proper to the mythological text type (Lotman 1979: 164).

The effect of this self-sufficiency which seems to require multiple readings for full comprehension helps to illustrate Lotman’s enigmatic statement that a mythological text “does not aim to inform any particular reader of something of which he is unaware” (Lotman 1979: 162). That is, in many ways the book unfolds in such a way that it seems to presume the reader’s preexisting familiarity with *its* content (and not just with the Greek myths). This aspect of the narrative is most evident in Calasso’s introduction of the stories—or rather, his disregard for anything resembling an introduction. We have already seen that this is a feature of the book as a whole which rather thrusts the reader straight into the midst of the already occurring action: “It plunges at once into the middle of things” (Griffin 1993: 25). This is also the tendency with each story, which often has little contextualizing information surrounding the complex genealogies and registers of offenses and injustice spread over incestuous generations of characters. Calasso’s recounting of the Pelopids exemplifies what appears to be an authorial assumption of the reader’s familiarity with his subject matter: despite the enormously tangled history of crimes and retribution that pass back and forth across the generations of Pelops’ descendants, Calasso never untangles the confused storylines and either makes a summation of the action or states their general significance for Greek history, culture, or tragedy. The characters of Atreus and Thyestes enter the narrative suddenly, and Calasso comments on their history in general, as though the reader were already familiar with the specifics:

They are brothers and enemies, like so many one comes across in myths, in history, in the street. But in comparison with those of all other analogous pairs, their quarrel is a little more cruel, more comic, more abstract, if by comedy and abstraction we mean an algebraic elevation of horror to a far higher power. (Calasso 1993: 184)

The author addresses the finer, even obscure points of specific vendettas as though the reader were already possessed of a detailed knowledge of the profusion of events—a knowledge which would make both interesting and relevant the author’s pursuit of mythological minutiae. This detail of the book’s content evokes the problematic question of intended audience which *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* has provoked in many of its reviewers. Rather than speculating as some have done about the author’s intent, I think it is more useful to analyze the effects of this tendency. All questions of why aside, the fact is that Calasso *does* introduce stories, historical anecdotes, and other kinds of content often without any context whatsoever. The book starts out this way, not with an in-the-beginning description of the creation of the cosmos, but simply, and without preamble, “On a beach in Sidon...” (Calasso 1993: 3). In some cases, as with the story of Europa, pieces are strewn throughout the book which contribute, eventually, to something like the “whole story”. Eventually we learn the sordid details of Atreus and Thyestes’ quarrel, its legacy in the murder of Agamemnon, his son’s matricidal revenge, and the end of a generational curse at the Areopagus, where “the grim mechanics of the Pelopids seems to break down” (Calasso 1993: 189). But, characteristically, the details of these events are scattered through the chapters, emerging sometimes in long, sustained narrative segments, while other details are present as tangential decorations on other stories.

As discussed above, two possibilities for understanding Calasso’s narrative emerge from this diffusion of its content. It seems that the reader must, upon approaching the book, have either some familiarity with Greek mythology, or, paradoxically, have *already read the book before*. The following example, which at first seems to contradict the self-sufficient character I have attributed to the book, will in the final analysis be shown to support it in an remarkable way. I refer back to a passage already quoted in the previous chapter, which begins, “It was a place where dogs would lose their quarry’s trail...”, and ends with a series of questions about why the narcissus, of all flowers, is so special (Calasso 1993: 209). As discussed above, Calasso answers his own question about the narcissus with reference to another Narcissus: “a young man who lost himself looking at himself” (Calasso 1993: 209). This single sentence is the only mention of Narcissus (the boy) in the entire book. Calasso therefore answers a question about the specificity of a flower with reference to a myth which he does not include in his narrative. It seems obvious that the reader, in order to interpret this

passage, must depend on extra-textual information—that is, already be familiar with the story of Narcissus from Greek mythology. Such instances are rare, for in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* characters and their stories recur with great frequency, interrupting and offering parallels for other characters and other stories and almost never, as in the case of Narcissus, appearing only once and never to be mentioned again. In these few cases only a reference to the stuff of Greek myth which exists beyond Calasso's text, it seems, can illuminate the reference. While this may seem at odds with the self-sufficient character of the book, Calasso has included his own explanation of such singular and undeveloped references, saying first, "There is no such thing as the isolated mythical event [...] Myth, like language, gives all of itself in each of its fragments" (Calasso 1993: 137). A later elaboration on the theme addresses such singular instances, or "fragments", specifically: "Even without its variants the myth includes its own opposite" (Calasso 1993: 281). In this light, even the singular and unexplored reference to the story of Narcissus, as a fragment of myth, both "includes its own opposite" and "gives all of [the myth]" simply by its presence in this mythological text.

The diffusion of stories across the book, as with the history of the Pelopids discussed above, is more typical of Calasso's work, although one can only be sure of this after having finished it. With its wealth of stories and variants, readers are unlikely to notice that Narcissus's story is mostly absent from *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* unless they read it more than once. Likewise, those without prior knowledge of the myths are unlikely to grasp the complex genealogy diffused throughout the tangents and digressions of the first chapter, without re-reading it. Nonetheless, exceptionally rare instances like that of Narcissus aside, the book contains within itself enough information for the reader to piece together accounts of the lives and adventures, and the variants thereof, of most of its characters. But since these events are not presented in chronological order, and events which might form a narrative continuity are often presented non-contiguously, a complete account (in the sense of understanding of a causal order of events) of even *one* of the myths present in the book is unlikely to be grasped from a single reading. In fact, the interconnected contingencies and contradictions Calasso weaves into the narrative through his use of variants makes deducing a single chronology impossible, at least insofar as contemporary readers are accustomed to finding such trajectories in plot texts. This, of course, is essential to the book's mythological structure, which as discussed above depends on a relationship to time which is not linear.

Lotman states that the first characteristic of the mythological text's "subjection to cyclical-temporal motion" is the absence of a beginning or end—"The story can start from any point which fulfils the role of beginning for the given narration" (Lotman 1979: 162). One aspect of *The Marriage*

of *Cadmus and Harmony* that has been little discussed, but which I find to be a significantly atypical feature of the book, is its lack of typical framing devices<sup>5</sup>. Despite the difficulties noted by scholars and reviewers of orienting oneself, as a reader, among the book's bricolage of stories, quotations, and contemplations, the author provides no introductory brief as an entry into the work. No preface, introduction, or "note from the author" sets the stage, as it were, for what unfolds in the body of the text. Even the translator is silent about what must have been a great undertaking. Nothing like the "once upon a time" of fairy and folk tales announces the beginning of the narrative. It begins, simply, "On a beach in Sidon," and ends "where the winds had brought [Cadmus] in his quest for Europa carried off by a bull that rose from the sea" (Calasso 1993: 3 and 391). That the "beach in Sidon" was the site of that same abduction of Europa whose mention closes the book is a manifestation of mythological cyclicity: it literally ends where it began. But, contrary to what some have claimed, the reader would be hard-pressed to describe this or any other story as the "frame" (see for example Bremer 1993: 338) within which the rest of the narrative unfolds or finds significance. The primary reason for this is the diversity of types of content in the book, which are presented as of equivalent significance despite their varying provenance and factuality (as explained in the previous chapter). Because no single type of content, to say nothing of a single *story*, can be identified as primary or perhaps "archetypal" to the work, the coincidence of the book's terminal scenes is more an homage to mythical cyclicity than a "framing device" in the contemporary sense of the term. Just as the lack of introductory material refuses an easy transition into the universe of the Greek mind, no concluding remarks, afterword, or summarizing statement of the book's totality guides the reader out of it. As with its beginning, there is no announcement of the narrative's end, no "happily ever after" or "the end". Only the author's strange list of sources, organized bewilderingly like a cipher (Shorrock 2003: 85), indicates anything like a customary terminal structure. In comparison to other books, then, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* can be seen to have no conventionally delimited beginning or end, at least insofar as those terminal points have traditionally been indicated by the framing structures common to other works.

This is the most literal way in which the "absence of the categories of beginning and end" (Lotman 1979: 161) is evident in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, but it also alludes to another aspect of mythological self-sufficiency which is essential to myth's representation of the world. That

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<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to indicate by this the absence of *any* framing devices, for as I have stated the book is in fact a heavily bounded one; I emphasize here the lack of framing devices *typical* to books with similar subject matter, whether fiction or non-fiction, such as historical contextualization or any other such "scene setting" material, in addition to the examples of framing devices I have given.

is, once again, that the boundaries of the world-perceived-by-the-mythological-consciousness (the mythological world) are so firmly established that it is as if that which is beyond them does not exist. Another way of saying this is that the mythological world is a totality: what is represented in the mythological world is conceived of as everything that exists, and what is not is effectively non-existent. The atemporality of myth, its eternal and thus “motionless” (Lotman 1979: 163) world of objects that are unconditionally identical to each other at different hierarchical levels, has no “beginning” or “end” in the sense of transitional spatial or temporal points. Such a world had no beginning, as it is eternal, and for the same reason has no ending: in its most radical form, the mythological world is totally cut off, that is, self-sufficient, from anything else (which it conceives of as nothing) precisely by virtue of its refusal of terminal/transitional points. We have already noted Lotman’s insistence that such an extreme pole of the myth-plot paradigm is purely ideal: such radical isolation is in principle impossible, and I do not mean to suggest that it exists in the form of this book. But there is evident at least an allusion to this self-sufficient character in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*’s lack of terminal structures. Most significantly, the author provides no transitional introduction to the world the reader enters in the book, and no transitional conclusion which allows him to take abstracted summaries or “morals” from it. In this way, the world of Greek myth contained in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* exists in itself, for itself, and by itself, and cannot be easily described in or to the world beyond. This is borne out from the contradictory accounts of its reviewers, as explored above.

The semiotic mechanism which I have described in this chapter as *narrative self-sufficiency* is not only a primary characteristic of mythological texts, but is, as I have shown, one of the most peculiar aspects of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. The book’s self-sufficient character is acknowledged by its author and evident, first of all, in its resistance to generic classification according to traditional categories of writing. This mythological characteristic is also evident in the work’s completeness—recognized in Calasso’s comment that readers can “enter knowing nothing at all about Greek mythology” (Calasso qtd. in Lee 1993: 51)—and, paradoxically, its arrangement of content which seems to assume familiarity with stories and topics by a reader who is simultaneously expected to know “nothing at all” about them. In this chapter I have tried to show how this counterintuitive logic corresponds to an essential property of myth, which reinforces its own self-sufficiency and self-containment in much the same way that Calasso’s book establishes those properties for itself.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed in the introduction to my object, Juri Lotman notes, quoting Claude Lévi-Strauss, that the semiotic specificity of mythological texts is essentially a result of their “subjection to cyclical-temporal motion” (Lotman 1979: 161). In terms of this thesis, the semiotic mechanisms described under the categories of atemporality, unconditional identity, and narrative self-sufficiency, have a dual function. On the one hand, they are evidence of the mythological text’s subjection to cyclical-temporality, that is, they allow us to identify a mythological text as such. On the other hand, these mechanisms *produce* in the text the cyclical-temporal logic which distinguishes mythological phenomena from the phenomena of the linear-temporal textual norm. Describing the former, the mechanisms as evidence, has been the task of the first part of this thesis; identifying the latter, the effects of those mechanisms at work, has been the endeavor of the second.

In an important sense, this division is arbitrary. The Lotmanian model of mythological semiotic mechanisms has not before been specifically articulated, and neither has there been an analysis of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* which investigates the mythological semiotics by which it operates. I did not come to either project independently, and it is important for me to state that the elaboration of the one was very much supported by my work on the other. Many of the details of Lotman’s mythological mechanisms only became clear in specific textual moments of Calasso’s book, and a great deal of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*’s semantic structure I could only articulate in the terminology found in Lotman’s work. In the process of developing this thesis, insights from both works were reciprocal and recursive: they shed light upon each other.

In this thesis I have shown how, within the discrete-continuous text paradigm established by Tartu-Moscow school semiotic scholars, myth and plot are the opposite poles of a necessarily heterogeneous semiotic environment. I have drawn out the features of mythological texts which act as semiotic mechanisms to produce the semiosis peculiar to myth, and demonstrated how this differs radically and essentially from the semiotics of linear plot texts. Taking Roberto Calasso’s *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* as an example and a guide, I have shown those mythological semiotic mechanisms at work in the text, and demonstrated the value of a mythological text model for understanding the atypical organization of the book’s narrative. My aim has been to demonstrate

that the structure, in addition to the content, of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* contributes to its representation of Greek mythology by employing narrative techniques consistent with the semiotics proper to mythological texts. In this way, the book represents mythology in the mode of mythology, and could be considered, along with Lévi-Strauss's *Overture* and this thesis as I have characterized it, *a myth of mythology*.

As I insisted at the end of chapter three, this thesis and the model it employs are not intended to replace or reduce *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* with a simplified and essentializing description of its semiotic machinery. Calasso's book is an enormously complex artistic text in which many and diverse modes of representation, expression, and evocation—often simultaneously—shape a narrative that is highly resistant to abstraction. The book's specificity is, paradoxically, its dominant characteristic. Acknowledging this, I have risked a model necessarily poorer than its object but undertaken from a perspective particularly appropriate to this project. I refer to my use of an explicitly semiotic approach to this work, which finds justification within *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* itself.

Throughout the book, Calasso contemplates a shift in the order of the Greek universe which manifests itself in every aspect of its organization. In the first chapter he explores the decline of metamorphosis, the loss of a primordial fluidity of identities and forms. Over the course of the narrative, the once absolute boundary of life and death becomes vague, the singularity of heirogamy and sacrifice splits in two, exchange becomes a principle that threatens sovereignty, and deities are born whose character is that of distance and abstraction. Near the center of the book Calasso juxtaposes the aesthetic and meaning as enemies, vague conceptual representatives of a cosmic shift whose human avatars are witnesses at the eponymous marriage. "The gods didn't realize, nor did men, that that wedding feast in Thebes was the closest they would ever get to each other." Along with the gods' departure comes Cadmus's gift of those signs *par excellence*, the alphabet. The many faces of this fomenting revolution show it to be a semiotic one, upending the mechanisms that generate, organize, and indicate meaning. Just as part of Calasso's endeavor was to explore the semiotics of the Greek myths, mine has been to explore the semiotics of his account of them.



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## Resume in Estonian

Müüt mütoloogiast: romaani „Kadmose ja Harmonia pulmad“ semiootiline käsitlus

Mittemütoloogilisele tajule ja representeerimisele toetuvad lähenemised allutavad mütoloogia võõrale loogikale, mis kujundab müüdi ümber talle vastupidise modaalsuse põhjal. Selline müüdikäsitlus jätab paljud asjad arusaamatuks ja selleks, et käsitleda seda märkamata jäänud mütoloogiliste tekstide külge, on tarvis representatsioonilist mudelit, mis kasutab müüdile omast loogikat, et mütoloogiat selle enese terminites kirjeldada: *müüdi mütoloogiast*.

Esimeses peatükis käsitletakse semiootiliste mudelite probleemi, keskendudes eristusele lineaarse-diskreetse ja mittelineaarse-atemporaalse tekstitüübi vahel, nii nagu Tartu-Moskva koolkonna teoreetikud seda kirjeldavad. Teine peatükk keskendub üldisema paradigma ühele erijuhtumile - erinevusele mütoloogilist tüüpi tekstide ja nende vastandi - süžeeiliste tekstide vahel. Kolmandas peatükis toob ülevaade Claude Lévi-Straussi müüdiuurimustest välja müüdi kui sellise eriomased küljed, mis on mütoloogilistes tekstides hoomatavad. Kolmanda peatüki viimases osas pakutakse välja mudel nende tunnuste põhjal, mille abil võib tuvastada semiootilisi mehhanisme konkreetsetes tekstides.

Magistritöö teine pool on pühendatud Roberto Calasso romaani “Kadmose ja Harmonia pulmad” analüüsile. Kolmes peatükis käsitletakse vastavalt neid kolme mütoloogilist semiootilist mehhanismi, mida kolmanda peatüki lõpus käsitleti. Neljas peatükk kirjeldab narratiivseid veidrusi, mida võib pidada atemporaalsuse väljendajateks. Viies peatükk annab ülevaate tingimusteta samasuse formaalsetest eeldustest nagu ka selle mehhanismi relevantsetest juhtudest, mida romaani narratiivses sisus on käsitletud. Kuues ja viimane peatükk kirjeldab, kuidas müüdi semiootilised mehhanismid, mida raamatus “Kadmose ja Harmonia pulmad” kasutatakse, teksti eri tasanditel narratiivse eneseküllasuse loomisele kaasa aitavad. Selle analüüsi eesmärgiks pole mitte ainult romaani narratiivi tihtheale läbitungimatu väljendusviisi täpne ja põhjalik kirjeldamine, vaid ka magistritöö esimeses pooles välja töötatud mudeli sobivuse demonstreerimine sellist tüüpi tekstide analüüsiks.

Roberto Calasso romaani “Kadmose ja Harmonia pulmad” materjalile toetudes näidatakse, kuidas mütoloogilised semiootilised mehhanismid konkreetsetes tekstis toimivad, näidates samas ka mütoloogilise teksti mudeli väärtust raamatu ebatüüpiliselt korrastatud narratiivi mõistmisel. Magistritöö näitab, kuidas sisu kõrval ka raamatu struktuur esitab kreeka mütoloogiat, kasutades narratiivseid tehnikaid, mis on eriomased just mütoloogilistele tekstidele. Sel moel esitab romaan mütoloogiat mütoloogia modaalsuses, moodustades seega, koos Lévi-Straussi tekstiga “Ouverture” ja käesoleva magistritööga, nagu seda on siin iseloomustatud, müüdi mütoloogiast.

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