



This, however, is not the way Bonnefoy, a poet and professor at the Collège de France, presents his subject. *Mythologies* is less about the relations of individuals to myths (sacred narratives) than about the relationship between societies and the mythologies (systems of myths) that sustain them. Nor do any

of the 395 articles collected here retell the familiar legends that once formed part of our cultural literacy. As Wendy Doniger, who supervised the translation, writes, "One has Robert Graves for that."

In essays that range from Africa to Lapland, from the Americas to the Near East, the interest is as much in methodology as in mythology—in, as Doniger says, "how to understand a mythology, what questions to ask, what patterns to look for." Indeed, behind the work of the nearly 100 contributors (including anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, linguists, and philosophers) lies the shadow of two figures not present: Georges Dumézil (1898–1986) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–). Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss overturned an earlier understanding of myth, shaped by Sir James Frazer and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. This older view presented mythology as a primitive mode of thinking, left behind as societies evolved and became "modern." Lévi-Strauss argued that so-called primitive and modern beliefs do not differ structurally but represent alternative ways of organizing family kinships, social life, and material production. Dumézil proposed that the almost infinite variety in mythology could be reduced to a small number of myths arranged in different combinations and that these myths reflect the laws of human mental activity in society.

Mythologies shows what happens when a younger generation of scholars apply Dumézil and Lévi-Strauss to a dazzling array of topics, ranging from the placenta in West African rituals to the significance of the number seven among the indigenous Indo-Chinese. Yet when the Swiss scholar Jean Molino discusses nationalism and socialism as mythic thinking "in

which it is no longer gods but ideas that guide," then our own supposedly demythologized "modernity" suddenly looks like a mythological creation. As Bonnefoy observes, "Myths are never recognized for what they are, except when they belong to others."

GOETHE: The Poet and His Age. Volume I: The Poetry of Desire (1749–1790). By Nicholas Boyle. Oxford. 807 pp. \$37.50

Poet, dramatist, novelist, painter, scientist, administrator—Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) has long enjoyed the reputation of an Olympian, the calm, lofty embodiment of an age that bears his name: the *Goethezeit*. But, Boyle, a professor of German at Cambridge University, reminds us of the turbulence that Goethe lived through in order to attain such classical composure. A child of the prosperous Frankfurt bourgeoisie, born almost a half-century before the French Revolution, Goethe would live to see every known certainty stood on its head. In a famous essay, "In Search of Goethe from Within" (1932), the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset argued that changing mores and social uncertainties propelled Goethe into ceaseless travel, literary experiments, and various occupations in order to find a sense of identity that always inwardly eluded him.

Goethe studied law at Leipzig and Strasbourg while earning a small reputation as a lyric poet. Then, at age 24, he became nationally famous with the publication of his play *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773), which boasts one of the most quoted lines in German literature—Götz's defiant message to the Emperor to "lick his arse." Twelve months later he published the *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), the first modern novel about an alienated youth. Overnight, Goethe became an international sensation. The Werther cult inspired countless Werther-style suicides throughout Europe as well as porcelain services decorated with scenes from the novel.

In 1775, to prove that the poet could influence events, Goethe accepted an appointment at the Duke of Saxe-Weimar's court. He soon became the second most powerful man in Weimar. The historian Herder jealously observed, "So he is now Permanent Privy Councillor,

President of the Chamber, President of the War Office, Inspector of Works . . . the principal actor, dancer, in short, the factotum of all Weimar." But in 1786, his writing came to a standstill, Goethe decided to slip away to Italy.

The journey proved decisive. Goethe had gone in search of pleasures, expecting that new literary works would ripen under the Italian sun. Instead, amid Italy's ruins and great paintings, he learned that art is more than subjective satisfaction and poetry more than the expression of desire. "He had come looking for culmination, enjoyment, and a revelatory immediacy of experience, and he had found," Boyle writes, "the need for study, informed understanding, and hard work." When he returned to Weimar two years later, he set up house with Christiana Vulpius—whom one of Goethe's earlier mistresses spitefully called "a girl who used to be a common whore"—and eventually married her. He also began to write *Faust*, which would become the most famous work in German literature. With Goethe's arrival at artistic maturity (and his 41st year), Boyle's first volume ends.

Almost a century later Nietzsche was to comment that Goethe was "not just a good and great man, but an entire *culture*." It is exactly this notion, the idea that there was a cultural *Goethezeit*, that Boyle challenges. Boyle's thesis is that it was the mature Goethe's distance from and opposition to his age—an age composed of subjective expression and the poetry of desire—that made Goethe great and makes him a modern: one of us.

REIMAGINING AMERICAN THEATRE. By Robert Brustein. Hill and Wang. 336 pp. \$24.95

Is American theater really dead? According to Brustein, the drama critic of the *New Republic*, the answer depends on where you look. Broadway may be suffocating under the weight of imported British musical extravaganzas and exorbitant ticket prices, but a network of regional (or "resident") not-for-profit theatres, from the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis to Washington's Arena Stage, have made the past 25 years "a period of theatrical renewal and change." Reworking the classics, producing new play-

wrights, and supporting innovative collaborations, the American theater today, Brustein argues, is "making history at a time when the theater is no longer thought to have a history."

Instead of pining for the "golden age" of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams, Brustein maintains that younger playwrights such as David Mamet (*American Buffalo*), Sam Shepard (*Buried Child*) and Marsha Norman (*Night, Mother*) rival the earlier masters. He praises the virtue of a "post-naturalistic" play such as Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead*, which presents realistic events on stage while characters wander through the theater haranguing the audience. "Never permitting the audience to forget it is watching an artificial rather than a real event," Brustein writes, such plays "preserved what is unique about the theater—its immediacy and danger—while fulfilling naturalism's mandate to explore the habits and habitations of an abandoned underclass." In a similar spirit, auteur-directors like Lee Breuer have adapted the classics, combining, for example, Sophocles and gospel singers to create *The Gospel at Colonus*. And even when Gregory Mosher directed that old standard, *Our Town*, he cast avant-garde performance artist Spalding Gray as the Stage Manager, thus infusing Thornton Wilder's twangy philosophy with contemporary irony. Long lines outside the Brooklyn Academy of Music's annual New Wave Festival or Brustein's own Harvard Repertory attest to the popularity of experimental theater.

Brustein concedes that there are "radical problems . . . confronting the American theater today." The founding generation of artistic directors has almost disappeared, and its successors are increasingly responsible to their boards of trustees rather than to their own artistic visions. The lines between not-for-profit and commercial have blurred, as more resident theaters plan their seasons with an eye toward New York transfers. The National Endowment for the Arts, once a staunch ally, now has to satisfy the political requirements of both the Left (for "politically correct" art) and the Right (for inoffensive, morally sound art). To Brustein, these developments are difficult to discuss: He is reluctant to admit that the American stage—having survived its own death—may now be coming down with a serious virus.