

## *Likely Stories and Heroes*

*David Swickard*

"DO YOU KNOW the reason why poetry and philosophy are nothing but deadletter nowadays? It is because they have severed themselves from life. . . . Nowadays beauty no longer acts; action no longer desires to be beautiful; and wisdom works in a sphere apart." To Gide's words could be added the charge that it is because they have separated themselves from each other: philosophy makes no attempt to be beautiful, and poetry makes no effort to be truly wise. Perhaps the distinctions between poetry, philosophy and life are false in modern life, no matter what accidents of history have brought us to this point.

Poetry, from the Greek root "making," and philosophy, or "love of wisdom," throughout history have provided two alternatives in the search for rules by which men can order their lives, as citizens or as individuals — as citizens of the ancient cities and republics or as individual members of modern society. These two alternatives to the law were closely intertwined at the birth of philosophy, and they have, since its birth, competed for the affections of the very best men and women. Neither poetry nor philosophy can do without the other, yet both appear repeatedly in the history of ideas as opponents in a struggle to win mastery for claims which each denies the other. The tension between these alternatives becomes most obvious when we

examine the body of teachings collectively regarded as political philosophy. For politics is the source of man's law, and as such is a third alternative to law itself for determining the guidelines by which men order their lives.

Over the centuries, poetry and philosophy have diverged, however, as a result of profound attempts to secure for philosophy a position as the sole guide for human beings as they go about the business of politics and citizenship. This going separate ways has affected subsequent generations and has contributed to the contemporary condition: the unleashing of the most immoderate impulses of the poet and the emasculation of the most robust in philosophy.

Assigning blame for our modern predicament — the so-called "crisis of confidence" in Western civilization — to long-dead thinkers is an unwholesome business at best. On the other hand, by searching among the ruins for the sources of the crisis we may restore some perspective to our view. Thus, by looking at four major thinkers — Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Freud — we most easily see the turns in the history of ideas which have brought us here. This crisis was determined in part by the power of ideas as well as by persons, events, institutions, and social and economic forces. If it is true that the roots of this crisis can be found in the ideas of great men, by examining them we can

begin the task of freeing ourselves from the tyranny of the partial views of the whole which have been handed down to us. This freedom, in turn, is both the precondition for and the presupposition of the political freedoms to which we have become accustomed.

By focusing on political philosophy, we can most clearly see the foundation of modern man's lack of confidence in contemporary society, for it began in the conflict between the poetic myths of the ancient Greeks and the philosophers who sought to free Greek reason from these myths. This conflict has led directly to the psychological bases for the "isms" which have become the new myths of twentieth-century man. Since most great political philosophers have been great philosophers in their own right, there would seem to be a parallel interest between understanding politics for its own sake and philosophy, strictly speaking. These parallel lines, however, begin at a common starting point: the political (or as we say these days, the "social") nature of man.

However, there are fundamental quarrels between philosophers and political men, and political philosophy sits uneasily between the demands of both worlds. Indeed, its very existence is constantly endangered because of the kinds of questions it asks and the competing claims it raises against those who hold power. In modern society, these claims seem reconcilable, as each deals with different concerns — philosophy with mathematical and logical abstractions and politics with the exercise of power. What the ancients understood to be the subject matter of philosophy has now been divided, for example, into the logic underlying computer programming, the description of historical movements, or the existential substitute for understanding man as a political animal. At the same time, the empirical quality of political philosophy has been pre-empted by political science, insofar as political science attempts to imitate the methods of natural science.

Of course, politics and philosophy were always at odds, even in the writings of the

ancients. Philosophy, after all, is a private matter, whereas political life is a public one. But the two are dependent on each other, as we all — even the philosophers — begin life as members of a community. As Leo Strauss has pointed out, "Philosophizing means to ascend from public dogma to essentially private knowledge. The public dogma is originally an inadequate attempt to answer the question of the all-encompassing truth. The idea of philosophy [is] the attempt to grasp the eternal. . ." (*Natural Right and History*). Both have the same starting point: an examination of visible things. Political things can be understood only in terms of the men and institutions comprising them. The philosopher, like the man in the street, must begin with his five senses — and his sixth, or common, sense — to examine the opinions and the teachings of the past. But understanding does not come from the self; it requires causes and consequences, seeing order throughout time and space. A prudent man looks outside man-made objects to discover the essential; therefore, nature becomes the primary (or first) guide for the man forced outside himself for wisdom. Accepting or rejecting nature as that standard is the first step toward deciding whether political institutions are made or discovered by man.

On the other hand, both philosophy and politics are united in their inherent hostility toward poetry. Often either seems willing to sacrifice the poetic impulse to appease the other. A philosopher as sympathetic to the Romantic spirit as Rousseau could argue for censorship in his ideal republic, to assure civic virtue (or stability in society), while twentieth-century tyrants abuse poetry by turning it into empty propaganda. The philosopher and the politician regard the poet as a potential but weak claimant for the supreme position for which they both vie — and each is suspicious of the other as one accedes to the other's claim over poetry.

The politician, especially, cannot help being uneasy around the poet, for poetry

is an artifact of human existence alien to the political and closer to those self-sufficient joys which look down on glory and the other rewards of political life. As such, the poet raises fundamental questions about the nature of man's relationship to social institutions — which the average citizen rarely does. By presenting a different order of belief, by revealing certain truths which might prove dangerous, and by criticizing beliefs necessary for the survival of the polity, the poet puts doubts in the citizen's mind. So he is a dangerous adversary for the politician — as dangerous as any philosopher.

For the philosopher, on the other hand, the poet is an effete but seductive opponent. Philosophy as political philosophy is concerned with argument, with the examination of fundamental concepts (virtue, the good, justice, and the polity) and with applying these concepts to the regimes, actual and theoretical, which make up the philosopher's world. Political philosophy must use empirical evidence to develop a realistic view of man and his relationship to the community, using the instruments of reason and logic. Poetry, on the other hand, depends on the tentative acceptance of the world the poet creates, suspending belief in what one knows empirically. The poet depends on particular images to reveal the general; empirical political analysis depends on the same heaping up of particulars but according to strict laws of probability, not through artistic intuition.

In this light, the philosopher may be justified, in part, in his hostility to the poetic art. The unruliness of the poet's tools, the beauty of his creation, and his prophetic and often apocalyptic vision of the meaning of life can easily obscure his view of the truth, even to himself. And in its most popular form, drama — which in contemporary society includes film and television — poetry can become an opiate which deadens the nerves with which we touch reality.

Rousseau is only partially wrong when he states, "The heart is more readily touched by feigned ills than real. . . . In

giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything of ourselves. . ." (*Letter to d'Alembert*). The emotion released by poetry can become an obstacle to experiencing life. We can pay the cheap price of lip service to humanitarian goals and civic virtue. The poetic mode of discourse seems to require little in the way of close self-examination.

On a closer look, poetry does demand self-examination, both of itself as an art in relationship to life, and of the reader, as he seeks to understand what the poet has to say about this relationship. Even in his hostility to the poet as such, Plato teaches that the art of poetry appeals "to the immortal element within us" (*Laws*, 714) which makes men submit to the rule of the good. Even discounting Plato's irony, it becomes clear that he understands the poet's potential for creating the context of morality in the community. The poet has the power to motivate men to attain those things valued in a society and to teach what should be valued.

Restricted either by economies of time and wealth or by their natures, most people find it difficult to judge these things and value them properly through reason alone; the poet can serve as arbiter, translator, and authority for a virtuous life. Men are impelled toward the good, perhaps before they realize it, when they take seriously stories and lyrics about courageous men and great deeds, and they commit themselves to it before the potential for evil is clear to them. In this formulation the metaphors and stories of the poet teach the truths of philosophy and habituate the discipline required for the survival of the polity.

On the other hand, poetry can motivate the citizen to seek the truth. Philosophy and poetry are alike in their eternal preoccupation with finding principles, or first things. The poet can suggest the beginning point from which to initiate the search for truth: in the actions of men, in man's relations to the gods, and in nature. And the poet is a mediator between the philosopher and the polity, as the creator

of new myths which sustain philosophical truths within practical political contexts or as the interpreter of traditional myths in novel ways. In fact, the veil of the poet's myth can obscure and make less offensive the philosopher's dangerous questioning of the way most men live their lives. Plato's poetic presentation of a mythical Socrates has protected the Socratic teaching.

Plato was a master of the written word. We feel we understand many things from reading his words, as well as seeing them realized in the form of his works. As Richard Crossman has argued, however, it is Plato who remains a mystery, while Socrates teaches in the dialogues (*Plato Today*). Plato seems to deny himself self-realization.

This denial takes two forms. He explicitly denies in his *Seventh Letter* his realization as a philosopher independent of Socrates. Ironically enough, this is both a humble and an overbearing haughty position for him to take, as Kierkegaard points out in *The Concept of Irony*. Second, Plato denies that which his writings make apparent: the poetic impulse essential to his nature. In his hands poetry becomes a tool rather than an essential aim of his endeavor. He forcibly alienates his poetry from the thought which stands behind it, and he manipulates it as a device to further his teaching. However, he does provide the reader with a beautiful — if unequal — partnership between the two, as his student Aristotle does not.

Plato, the poet, is a myth-maker. The entire *Timaeus* is a myth, or "likely story," about the ultimate nature of things, revealed in the form of an extended metaphor. Plato, the poet, is never shy in his use of metaphor: the statesman as physician, the corrupt city as a diseased body. And the lessons Plato teaches are not explicitly stated; these dialogues are not treatises. His teaching emerges from the interaction of the word and the poetic (or dramatic) form acting on the intellect and the emotions of the reader. Sophocles teaches by the examples of Oedipus and Antigone; Plato teaches with Socrates and

Thrasymachus.

Finally, Plato, the poet, emerges in the sheer beauty of the products of his making. Intellectually and esthetically, the union of content and form make a harmonic whole. On a strictly emotional level, we take pleasure in the depth of his characters, the internal and external tensions of his drama, and the great power of his use of word and metaphor. However, Plato becomes the poet's enemy in the process of securing a place for philosophy in the political world. Allan Bloom makes this point clearly in his interpretive essay on *The Republic*: "Poetry is the opponent, and there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy. . . . Socrates does not wish to destroy poetry; he only wishes to judge it, rather than be judged by it." Poetry is not to be entirely banned from the republic, but it must be reformed. Otherwise, "pleasure and pain will jointly be kings. . ." (*Republic*, 607a).

In this manner, poetry is made subject to political philosophy by Socrates' reordering of the traditional Greek formula, "the beautiful and the good." The beautiful must be subject to the good, even in the best of regimes, for justice ultimately rests on the harmony and order within society rather than on the beautiful and the good within the individual soul, because the laws of the city are more sure than the moral sense of most men most of the time (even though the laws may ultimately depend on a widespread acceptance of the good as a product of the education of the citizen). In the *Phaedrus* this is clearly stated: the poet may be a philosopher if he has a "knowledge of the truth . . . and can demonstrate the inferiority of his writings out of his own mouth. . ." (278). The philosopher, on the contrary, will never limit himself to poetry.

For Plato's student Aristotle, poetry is not an art to be practiced by the philosopher. As the scientist-philosopher, he examines constitutions and constructs tough-minded ethical systems. He relegates poetry to the status of an object of study — not as an alternative to be taken seriously as an opponent. For Aristotle, the wellspring

of poetry is a collection of instincts in human nature itself, the instincts of imitation and harmony and rhythm. In this concept philosophy is solely an intellectual pursuit, while poetry depends on the passions. However, he realizes that, in human life as well as in tragic poetry, action motivated solely by the intellect is impossible. *Praxis* is never totally devoid of *pathos* (*Poetics*, XVIII). Passion is reduced to an object of scientific inquiry; through examination, poetry is judged by science. In Aristotle we see a type of man increasingly familiar down through the ages: the prototype of the contemporary social scientist. The philosopher bereft of poetry turns to the science of the possible; he turns away from constructing salutary myths which approximate a vision of the truth, toward counting constitutions and counseling nascent emperors like Alexander.

Plato and Aristotle have thus set the stage for the emergence of the modern philosopher's disdain of poetry. Plato makes his poetry a medium to teach philosophical truths esoterically, but in the process he denies the possibility that poetry can teach in its own right. Aristotle carries the process one step further and severs the higher from the lower. Poetry is not even a surface adornment for him, let alone part of the philosophical method; poetics is a theory to be dissected but not an art to be used. Consequently the uneasy equilibrium among politics, philosophy, and poetry which Plato managed in his dialogues is destroyed. This theoretical fragmentation parallels a practical problem in Aristotle's search for beauty and truth. His philosophy emerges lacking human warmth and tolerance for imperfection. It has neither esthetic appeal for the few nor emotional appeal for the many. Philosophy becomes bloodless. The beautiful, the particular joy of ugly old Socrates, is left to languish.

It was Niccolò Machiavelli — philosopher, poet, and political man — who recovered the myth; but his focus is on the deception, on the surface lie, not on the revelation of truth that it potentially con-

tains. His play *Mandragola* is regarded a masterpiece of Renaissance drama; it demonstrates all the Machiavellian themes by example: men gain by force and fraud, deception is the core of the art of statesmanship, the Church is the practitioner *par excellence* of that art, and the character of its teachings gravely undermines the potential for civic virtue which ancient myths encouraged. He is a poet of subversive irony.

Machiavelli is a myth-maker as well. In his two greatest books, *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, he constructs a myth parallel to that noblest noble lie of Plato, by which the city fathers of his republic teach the youth to accept appropriate positions in the government of the city (415 ff.). Plato's city teaches its youth to believe that some have been given souls of gold, some of silver, and some of bronze and that the offices and responsibilities are to be distributed in accordance with the nature of their being: the philosopher-king, the guardians, and the citizens. Machiavelli, too, posits three classes: the advisors, the princes, and the people. The nobles do not consist of a class by themselves; they are of the people, although superior to them by convention, and they provide the pool of new princes. The prince and his people look at each other from the mountains and the valley; only the advisor, Machiavelli, can understand the nature of both, and so he is of neither (*The Prince*, Dedicatory Epistle). And in some fashion he is superordinate to them both, for he who gives advice must be superior to him who takes it.

Machiavelli's classes differ in name and function from the three types of soul in Plato's republic. Obviously the advisor is no philosopher-king, because he cannot look to philosophical ends to guide the prince, even when these ends are most laudable. He needs time to contemplate; Machiavelli himself had time to write his books only when he was kept from service to his city by the ill winds of fortune. Certainly the advisor is no king; fortune alone is the guarantee that his advice will eventually be taken, and there is no guarantee

on the outcome. However, as Machiavelli's example demonstrates, the advisor may be a philosopher.

On the other hand, the prince will never be a philosopher, Marcus Aurelius notwithstanding, although he can be king. And because he can act independently of his advisor, he is no guardian. Both advisor and prince functioning together correspond to the philosopher-king, but by necessity they function at the lower level of the guardian. Very rarely does the prince understand for himself his actions (*The Prince*, chapter 2), nor does he need to. Machiavelli does not rely on the coincidence of philosophers becoming kings to establish his republic, but he, in effect, lowers the aim of philosophy to politics: the good is that achievable by political action, political action which of necessity involves the use of force and fraud. This view has the disadvantage of making the political man who actually rules shortsighted, as he is concerned constantly with means rather than ends. As an added danger, he may be easily deceived by his advisor, who may smuggle in his own ends.

The third class, that of the people, does not, for its own sake, serve as the ultimate object of the prince's concern. It is the source of his glory, as he who rules prudently will be renowned throughout history. However, the virtue of the citizenry is of interest to the prince only as it contributes to the preservation of his estate. Ultimately, the result is that attention is diverted from the higher to the lower, as the good becomes merely the protection of life, rather than living to realize man's highest capabilities. And protection of the state is the goal, whether done with glory or shame (*Discourses* III, 40-41). Apparently, Machiavelli chooses to join the camp of the rulers; thus, there are only two classes, the princes and the people.

This partiality has an air of deception about it, however. A new myth underlies all that Machiavelli knows: a "noble lie" of eternal glory in this world. It is a lie to deceive those nobles who hunger for

power, rather than the Platonic noble lie to commit men of different interests and capabilities to the good life before they reach the fulfillment of their understanding of that good. In Machiavelli's hands, the salutary myth becomes a functional or utile myth, and it aims to found a political order based on deceit and cunning. The mythology of the perfect city, which even the philosopher-kings "believe" as a metaphor for the truth, is reduced to a purely instrumental lie whose truth or falsehood is of less importance to the princely advisor than its effectuality. In this way deception and strength become the marks of *virtù*, while wisdom (at the level of prudence) derives virtue second-hand from its successful alliance with strength and courage.

It cannot be denied that all this deception has a certain implicit end, meritorious in itself: the rediscovery of the ancient concept that the republic is the best possible form of government, albeit modified for modern conditions. Machiavelli can become the founder of many new regimes through his deception of the princes who follow his advice. By his own testimony, this is more deserving of praise than his literary output (*Discourses* I, 10). However, this joking self-praise may cover the extent of his true ambition, for it is even more praiseworthy to found a new religion. To avoid "infamy and universal execration," he cannot appear to have destroyed the Christian religion; however, as he states clearly, it can fall of its own weight and corruption.

Our concern with Machiavelli's myths becomes more understandable, for, in his philosophy, religions are merely elaborate myths which justify past crimes. In this teaching, politics itself becomes a new religion, but it is a politics which looks away from soulcraft and toward encouraging partial interests within the regime. In the end, politics is completely separated from philosophy. Ideologies, as new religions, have become reality, while the philosopher's deeper questioning has been lost from sight. Machiavelli, the philosopher, does not teach eternal truths

but longs to establish an eternal political order. He brings Plato's republic from the heavens and founds it in the practical politics of partial interests. Conflict, not harmony, is the right ordering of politics: there is no other. Partiality and the successful subordination of one part of the polity to another becomes the way to political order. Poetry, at best, is just one tool in the conspiracy of deception to destroy the power of the Roman Church. The poet Machiavelli does not write tragedies — he merely parodies the clergy and undermines the tragic — for the noble grandeur of tragedy is inimical to the future he works toward.

Freud was a believer in reason and an enemy of religion, and in this way was a true child of Machiavelli. Through the creation of the psychoanalytical method, he revealed the primitive and infantile roots of human behavior. This new view of man ultimately made him appear blameless for his actions, and it shifted the responsibility for moral choice to a much shakier foundation. At the same time, by focusing on the individual, Freud created an environment in which the natural narcissistic impulse found the freedom to emerge unashamed.

In Freud's mythic view, human nature is essentially irrational. While his discoveries seem to support Plato's Socrates' Diotima's assertion that love is the motive force of all life, Plato's first rung becomes Freud's last. Eros is reduced to sex. And through the trickling down and vulgarization of Freud's ideas, a new mythology became the central belief in contemporary society. Common opinion accepts the notion that human behavior is predicated on deep and mysterious forces within, which, in fact, absolve the individual from blame and which ultimately can justify any action. Blame, however, can be fastened on parents or on society for creating the individual's problems. As an exploration of the psyche, the psychoanalytic technique reveals the relative impermanence of what appears stable and orderly and the amazing longevity of what seems transient in one's

experience. Freud demonstrates in his *Origins of Psychoanalysis* a new world of the soul, which underlies human behavior. The personality is developed beyond the control of the individual and thus he is excused. Man becomes excusable.

The individual can become rational, however, at least to the point of functioning within the limits of rationality prescribed by the cultural mores of the society in which he lives, by an intellectual recognition of prior experiences and emotions. Intellectual acceptance of the self as a product of earlier experiences effectively exorcises the devil within. The freedom gained through this process contradicts the deterministic impact of much of his theory, and so Freud attempts to renew individual responsibility. But the rub is terror: total individual responsibility is an awesome prospect for even the most confident of men. There are few eternal restraints on behavior, since the secular society has triumphed in Western civilization; yet every man feels guilty for his deeds. To paraphrase Tillich's *Courage to Be*, God is both silent and demanding.

Blameless men and women and the ever-present sense of responsibility put on our shoulders by the acceptance of this new mythology of salvation through grappling with the unreasonable: this combination is the root of contemporary malaise. The demand that every person must understand his own feelings and construct his own value system creates an environment in which one is constantly preoccupied with the self, with the need for self-expression, for self-analysis, even for self-delusion. However, those who fail to create this independent position have been given an excuse for failing completely. It is society's responsibility to rectify the ills which create undesirable patterns of human behavior, although no one individual has the power to make much of an impact on society.

Freud succeeded in creating a new mythology, appearing in history as a science, populated by new monsters but no rescuing heroes — a world of darkness corresponding to the most secret in men's

hearts. His myth lacks beauty, by intention. As he makes explicit in the preface to the first edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he sees the difference between his myth-making and the craft of a poet. By calling it science and getting the common man to recognize it as such, he creates a world of ultimate horror. While we now have a perverse curiosity about the inner struggles of the psyche, there is no beautiful myth to attract us toward the good. Man becomes a spectator on his inner life, with no motivation for good deeds on behalf of the community. Love is recognized for its power — which Freud considers almost evil — while he justifies the subjugation of eros for the sake of social ends. Freud, in this way, reveals himself to be more a product of Machiavelli's new world than "Machiavellian."

Plato's dialogues clearly established the priority of philosophy over poetry, setting the stage for Aristotle's clean division of philosophy from the poetic impulse — seeing poetry as an object to be studied rather than an art to be practiced. Machiavelli's superordination of political action over moral philosophy meant the transformation of philosophy and the subjugation of the philosopher's concerns to political interests. Finally, Freud's cutting individual responsibility from social activity transformed politics, subjugating the citizen to unconscious desires. That these desires may be mythic in substance, but very real in consequence, implies that we have returned full cycle to the pervasive power of the myth in our society — a myth bound neither by the intellectual discipline of the philosopher nor by the esthetic concerns of the poet.

Each of these partings of the way, developed in theory by profound shapers of the traditions of our civilization, has had a very practical result: the lowering and narrowing of vision of what is possible, accompanied by false expectations of the impossible. The original choice between poetry and philosophy is refined and revealed most clearly in the contemporary choice between reason and unreason, blamelessness and guilt, which

Freud's new myth creates for us. While Freud himself opted for reason, his teachings have unleashed an irrational view of human nature — and a destructive backlash — which leaves us on the edge of a chasm.

Standing here looking into it, we are forced to consider whether these parings from an initial whole are as satisfying as the whole once was. Presumably, most of us would answer no. That answer, in turn, suggests that the solution to our problem lies in reuniting myth-making, which has power over a great part of our human creative force, with philosophical inquiry, to explore anew the foundations of political things. Only in this way will we understand the roots of our dilemma and find radical solutions for it.

In a sense, we must retrace our steps through history, attempting to "forget" that these divisions have taken place and that these distinctions are now part of the modern temper. By recapturing the fundamental unity of poetry and philosophy, which even at its culmination in the work of Plato sowed the seeds of its destruction, we might revive the comprehensive and spiritual understanding of the relationship of man, the city, and the gods which characterized the foundation of Western civilization. This will not be easy, however, since both the poet and the philosopher must tame the excesses within themselves before they begin to make myths. The task is made even more difficult given the atmosphere of despair which arises from overlaying the liberal optimism of the late 1960s with the 1980s' sensibility that "all things are not given to man" and that therefore one must struggle mightily to get the material pleasures of contemporary society.

This myth-making will not necessarily take place within the form of "the poem" as we know it today. The novel, the film, the television epic, the newspaper comic strip, even the revival of the epic poem for performance on stage all have inherent possibilities for becoming the modern medium for teaching political truths. With regard to the content, both philosophers

and poets have the grave and common responsibility to go back to the roots of our civilization and reconstruct the myths of our modern age on philosophical grounds. For Americans this means an understanding of the sources of our national heritage, the issues which divide us, and the forces which keep us together, with constant reference to the ideas and the writings of the best of those who have preceded us.

This is not an argument for a revival of the Parson Weems school of history nor for a Pollyanna view of the behavior of men in political life. On the contrary, great political responsibility and the mustering of character to meet the challenges it imposes are very real themes which a new mythology should explore. In a sense, I am arguing for a revival of the elements of the great tragic masterpieces of the past. As A.C. Bradley points out in his classic work on Shakespeare, "The story of the prince, the triumvir, or the general has a greatness and dignity of its own. His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense [of awe]. . . which no tale of private life can possibly rival" (*Shakespearean Tragedy*).

In this way, political leaders are given their traditional place of honor. The qualities to be admired in historical figures should provide the stuff of heroic stories about them, while their flaws of character should be revealed as either the source of great calamity or the ironic backdrop to achievement, rather than as mean-spirited gossip about their personal lives. The new myths should dare to present standards of excellence, rather than to present rulers

and ruled as less than they are. Admittedly, poetry in this sense must reconcile most men to checking rulers rather than ruling, but it gives them a sense of community through a common body of beliefs, heroes, and stories of courage.

This melding of the poetic and the philosophical has the potential for making attractive, and even glorious, certain unpleasant truths: for example, the quality of the pleasure which comes from taking responsibility for political leadership. Of course, the poet should remain silent, of his own accord, about other truths which might not inspire confidence on the part of the people or encourage the best to aspire to positions of political leadership.

To be successful, that is, popular and effective, the new myths must be rooted in the concerns of the common man. These concerns are fundamentally political and moral: crime in the streets, the decline of public civility, the bankruptcy of a corrupt legal system, the accumulation of great wealth in the hands of apparently irresponsible private citizens while public needs are unmet, the need for alternatives to the extended family for the care of the young, the aged, and the ill. As the circulation figures for the *New York Post* demonstrate, this concern can be mobilized and brutalized — eventually even made callous and uncaring — but it remains with us, given our nature as political animals.

However, in the final analysis, these new myths should not be sugar-coated justifications for the exploitation of the people by their rulers. If anything, poetic myth of this type "exploits" the rulers by forming shared expectations that their deeds should measure up to the best deeds of the past.

## *A Grecian Trinity*

*Anne Husted Burleigh*

GREECE SPELLBINDS ITS VISITORS. In its enormous variety Greece is many things — the flowers, the churches, and the Venetian ruins of Naxos; a thunderstorm boiling and crashing over the jagged peaks of Mt. Parnassos at Delphi; a whitewashed fortress of a twelfth-century monastery carved from the side of a cliff at Amorgos; the wind-whipped Cyclopean walls of Mycenae; or an ancient Christian altar casually imposed upon a crumbling pagan temple of the Asclepion at Kos.

The American traveler, finding himself bewitched by the rich complexities of an ancient culture set against a spare landscape of land and sea and light, tries to sort out what Greece means to him. The Henry James-Henry Adams dilemma of how to combine the best of both European and American traditions plagues him even yet; consequently, he looks at Greek culture for ties to his own. From earliest school days he has been taught that American traditions of freedom, of democracy, of order, of respect for the individual and for law extend backward in a direct line to Greece and, more specifically, to Athens. If Greece has been depicted to him as the source of all western greatness, of all the best of European and American civilization, then he wants to discover whether that traditional assumption is more than a myth. What does the Greece of antiquity mean to his own

life as a twentieth-century American?

For this inquiring American, Greece may be many things, many places. But after the swirl of impressions has settled into manageability, Greece comes into focus in three particular places: the Cycladic island of Delos; the Parthenon of the Athenian acropolis, and the isle of Patmos. These provide three signposts that link Greece to some characteristics an American can recognize as part of his own inheritance. Delos serves as a microcosm of the ancient pagan world; the Parthenon at Athens symbolizes the immersion of life into the political arena that marked the Greek classical age; Patmos stands for the new culture that erupted when the Greek mind encountered the ideas of Judaeo-Christianity. A look at each of these sites teaches the visitor a little about whence he comes, what he has given up, and what he may have retained.

Delos today is a ghost island. No one has lived here, except an occasional French archaeologist, for nearly a thousand years. One treads reverently through silent ruins, chastened not so much by their historic significance as by the cries of ancestors one expects any moment to hear call forth from the earth. Immense graveyard of dead stones, Delos is somber even in May, softened only then by bright anemones that tumble over toppled stones. One imagines what it will be in