CHAPTER 6

A Collective Amnesia

> At any rate they seem to have been strangely forgetful of the catastrophe.
> —PLATO, *Laws* iii
> (transl. R. Bury)

IT IS an established fact in the learning about the human mind that the most terrifying events of childhood (in some cases even of manhood) are often forgotten, their memory blotted out from consciousness and displaced into the unconscious strata of the mind, where they continue to live and to express themselves in bizarre forms of fear. Occasionally they may be converted into symptoms of compulsion neuroses and even contribute to the splitting of the personality.

One of the most terrifying events in the past of mankind was the conflagration of the world, accompanied by awful apparitions in the sky, quaking of the earth, vomiting of lava by thousands of volcanoes, melting of the ground, boiling of the sea, submersion of continents, a primeval chaos bombarded by flying hot stones, the roaring of the cleft earth, and the loud hissing of tornadoes of cinders.

There occurred more than one world conflagration; the most horrible one was in the days of the Exodus. In hundreds of passages in their Bible, the Hebrews described what happened. Returning from the Babylonian exile in the sixth and fifth centuries before this era, the Hebrews did not cease to learn and repeat the traditions, but they lost sight of the fearful reality of what they learned. Apparently,

the post-Exile generations looked upon all these descriptions as the poetical utterances of religious literature.

The talmudists in the beginning of this era disputed whether a deluge of fire, prophesied in old traditions, would take place or not; those who denied that it might come, based their argument on the divine promise found in the Book of Genesis, that the Deluge would not be repeated; those who argued to the contrary, reasoning that though the deluge of water would not recur, there might come a deluge of fire, were attacked for construing too narrowly the promise of the Lord.[1] Both sides overlooked the most prominent part of their traditions: the history of the Exodus and all the passages about the cosmic catastrophe, endlessly repeated in Exodus, Numbers, and the Prophets, and in the rest of the Scriptures.

The Egyptians in the sixth pre-Christian century knew about the catastrophes that overwhelmed other countries. Plato narrates the story which Solon heard in Egypt about the world destroyed in deluges and conflagrations: "You remember but one deluge, though many catastrophes had occurred previously." The Egyptian priests who said this and who maintained that their land was spared on these occasions, forgot what happened to Egypt. When, in the Ptolemaic age, the priest Manetho starts his story of the invasion of the Hyksos by acknowledging his ignorance of the cause and nature of the blast of heavenly displeasure that befell his land, it becomes apparent that the knowledge which was possibly alive in Egypt in the days when Solon and Pythagoras visited there, had already sunk into oblivion in the Ptolemaic age. Only some hazy tradition about a conflagration of the world was repeated, without knowing when or how it occurred.

The Egyptian priest, described by Plato as conversing with Solon, supposed that the memory of the catastrophes of fire and flood had been lost because literate men perished in them, together with all the achievements of their culture, and these upheavals "escaped your notice because for many generations the survivors died with no power to express themselves in writing."[2] A similar argument is found in

[1] Cf. Ginzberg, "Mabul shel esh" in *Ha-goren*, VIII, 35-51.

[2] Plato, *Timaeus* 23 C.

Philo the Alexandrian, who wrote in the first century of this era: "By reason of the constant and repeated destructions of water and fire, the later generations did not receive from the former the memory of the order and sequence of events." [3]

Although Philo knew about the repeated destructions of the world by water and fire, it did not occur to him that a catastrophe of conflagration was described in the Book of Exodus. Nor did he think that anything of this sort took place in the days of Joshua or even of Isaiah. He thought that the Book of Genesis comprised the story of "how fire and water wrought great destruction of what is on the earth," and that the destruction by fire, about which he knew from the teachings of the Greek philosophers, was identical with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The memory of the cataclysms was erased, not because of lack of written traditions, but because of some characteristic process that later caused entire nations, together with their literate men, to read into these traditions allegories or metaphors where actually cosmic disturbances were clearly described.

It is a psychological phenomenon in the life of individuals as well as whole nations that the most terrifying events of the past may be forgotten or displaced into the subconscious mind. As if obliterated are impressions that should be unforgettable. To uncover their vestiges and their distorted equivalents in the physical life of peoples is a task not unlike that of overcoming amnesia in a single person.

Folklore

> Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.
>
> —PSALMS 19:2-3

The scholars who dedicate their efforts to gathering and investigating the folklore of peoples are constantly aware that folk tales require interpretation, for, in their opinion, these tales are not inno-

[3] Philo, *Moses* ii.

cent and unambiguous products of the imagination, but veil some inner and more significant meaning.

The legends of classic peoples, first among them the Greeks, also belong to folklore. As early as pre-Christian times these legends were subjected to interpretation, many interpreters recognizing the symbolic character of mythology.

With Macrobius in the fourth Christian century, there begins a tendency to see in many gods of Egyptian and Greek antiquity the personification of the sun. Macrobius compared Osiris to the sun, and Isis to the moon, disregarding the opinion of earlier authors. He also interpreted Jupiter as the sun.

As the role the planets played in the history of the world retreated ever further into oblivion, the interpretation of nature myths as referring to the sun or the moon became more and more widespread. In the nineteenth century it was the vogue to explain the old myths as inspired by the movement of the sun and the moon, during the day, night, month, and year. Not only Ra, Amon, Marduk, Phaëthon, and even Zeus,[1] but also king-heroes, like Oedipus, became solar symbols.[2]

This exclusive role of sun and moon in mythology is a reflection of their significance in nature. However, in former times the planets played a decidedly more important role in the imagination of peoples, to which fact their religions give testimony. True, sun and moon (Shamash and Sin, Helios, Apollo, and Selene) were also numbered among the planet-gods, but usually they were not the most important ones. Their enumeration among the seven planets sometimes startles the modern scholar, because these two luminaries are so much more conspicuous than the other planets; the dominance of Saturn, Jupiter, Venus, and Mars must startle us even more as long as we do not know what was displayed on the celestial scene a few thousand years ago.

Modern folklorists occupy themselves mainly with the folklore of primitive peoples, material unspoiled by generations of copyists and

[1] In the Phaëthon story, Ovid makes it clear that Sun and Zeus are two separate deities.

[2] In a separate work I intend to trace the historical prototype of the legend of Oedipus Rex.

interpreters. Being received at its source, it is supposed to shed light not only on the mentality of these primitive peoples, but also on many problems of sociology and psychology in general.

The sociological method explores mythology for evidence of social usages. Folklorists like James Frazer expended their efforts on this aspect. Freud, the psychologist, centered his attention on the motif of father-murder (patricide), presenting it as though it had been a regular institution in ancient times. He makes it appear a general practice in the past and a subconscious urge in present-day man.

However, regular institutions and practices in the life of the family would not give rise to myths. A writer on this subject has correctly pointed out this fact: "What is quite normal in nature and society rarely excites the myth-making imagination which is more likely to be kindled by the abnormal, some startling catastrophe, some terrible violation of the social code." [3]

Even less than daily tribal life do the daily occurrences in nature give rise to legends. The sun rises every morning, it travels from east to west; the moon enters a new phase four times a month; the year has four seasons—such regular changes do not stir the imagination of peoples, because they contain nothing unexpected in themselves. Daily things do not evoke astonishment and influence but little a people's creative faculty. Sunrise and sunset, morning dew and evening mist, are common experiences, and if a single spectacle impresses itself upon us in the course of life, the many sunrises and the many sunsets in our memory pale and each looks like the other. Seasonal snowstorms or thunderstorms do not leave indelible memories. Only striking, perturbing experiences of a social or physical order are designed to stir the imagination of peoples. Seneca says: "It is for this very reason that the assembly of stars that lends beauty to the immense firmament does not compel the attention of the masses; but when a change occurs in the order of the universe, all looks are fixed on the sky." [4]

Even local catastrophes, regarded as very violent, do not serve for

[3] L. R. Farnell, "The value and the methods of mythological study," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1919-1920, p. 47.

[4] *Naturales quaestiones* vii.

the creation of cosmic myths. First in power to impress the races of the earth are the cataclysms of the past, and on this we have dwelt at length. Comets, because of their causal relation to world catastrophes, and also because of their terrifying appearance, were the kind of phenomenon to kindle the imagination of peoples. But for some reason, the impression they must have made on the peoples of antiquity is not considered in explanation of myths and legends.

Since the invention of the printing press, the great agitation and mass hysteria caused by the more brilliant comets can be traced in contemporary books and pamphlets. Were the ancients immune to these feelings? If not, then why are the exegetes of the Bible and the commentators on the epic compositions of antiquity so remiss as not to think of phenomena that could not but impress the ancients? Or did no comets appear in the sky during ancient times? This, of course, is only a rhetorical question.

Keeping this in mind, we shall be able to answer the question about the striking similarity of certain concepts among peoples of different cultures, sometimes separated by oceans.

Of "Pre-existing Ideas" in the Souls of Peoples

The similarity of motifs in the folklore of various peoples on the five continents and on the islands of the oceans posed a difficult problem for the ethnologists and anthropologists. The migration of ideas may follow the migration of peoples, but how could unusual motifs of folklore reach isolated islands where the aborigines do not have any means of crossing the sea? And why did not technical civilization travel together with spiritual? Peoples still living in the stone age possess the same, often strange, motifs as the cultured nations. The particular character of some of the contents of folklore makes it impossible to assume that it was only by mere chance that the same motifs were created in all corners of the world. The problem is so perplexing to the scientists that, for lack of a better proposition, an explanation was offered according to which the motifs of folklore are a pre-existing possession in the soul of peoples; peoples are born with these ideas just as an animal is born with an urge to propagate

its kind, to nurse its offspring, to build a lair or a nest, and to travel in herds or migrate in flocks to far-away countries. But it is not so simple to explain in these terms why, for instance, the aborigines of America imagined a witch as a woman riding on a broom across the sky, exactly as the European peoples imagined her. "The Mexican witch, like her European sister, carried a broom on which she rode through the air, and was associated with the screech owl. Indeed, the queen of witches, Tlagoltiotl, is depicted as riding on a broom and as wearing the witch's peaked hat." [1] As with the witch on her broom, so also with hundreds of other odd fantasies and beliefs.

The answer to the problem of the similarity of the motifs in the folklore of various peoples is, in my view, as follows: A great many ideas reflect real historical content. There is a legend, found all over the world, that a deluge swept over the earth and covered hills and even mountains. We have a poor opinion of the mental abilities of our ancestors if we think that merely an extraordinary overflow of the Euphrates so impressed the nomads of the desert that they thought the entire world was flooded, and that the legend so born wandered from people to people. At the same time, geological problems of the origin and distribution of till, or diluvial deposit, are awaiting explanation.

The peoples of ancient times, who, like the primitive peoples of the present, lacked modern protection against the elements of nature, and who lived in the insecurity of tropical storms and tornadoes or frost and snowstorms, must have been more accustomed to seasonal disturbances than we are, and would not have been impressed by the overflow of a river to such a degree as to carry their experience to all parts of the world as a story of a cosmic upheaval.

Traditions about upheavals and catastrophes, found among all peoples, are generally discredited because of the shortsighted belief that no forces could have shaped the world in the past that are not at work also at the present time, a belief that is the very foundation of modern geology and of the theory of evolution. "Present continuity implies the improbability of past catastrophism and violence of change, either in the lifeless or in the living world; moreover, we seek to interpret

[1] Lewis Spence, *The History of Atlantis* (1930), p. 224.

the changes and laws of past time through those which we observe at the present time. This was Darwin's secret, learned from Lyell." [2] It has been shown in this book, however, that forces which at present do not act on the earth, did so act in historical times, and that these forces are of a purely physical character. Scientific principles do not warrant maintaining that a force which does not act now, could not have acted previously. Or must we be in permanent collision with the planets and comets in order to believe in such catastrophes?

The Pageants of the Sky

Cosmic perturbations took place, catastrophes swept the globe, but did witches fly through the air on brooms? The reader would agree that cosmic catastrophes, if they occurred, could leave, and must have left, similar memories all around the world; but there are fantastic images that do not appear to represent realities. We shall follow this rule: if there exists a fantastic image that is projected against the sky and that repeats itself all around the world, it is most probably an image that was seen on the screen of the sky by many peoples at the same time. On one occasion a comet took the striking form of a woman riding on a broom, and the celestial picture was so clearly defined that the same impression was imposed on all the peoples of the world. It is well known how, in modern times, the forms of comets impress people. One comet was said to look like *"un crucifix tout sanglant,"* another like a sword; actually every comet has its peculiar shape which may also change during the visibility of the comet.

To illustrate what is said here by another example, it may be asked: What induced the Mayas to call by the name of Scorpion the constellation known to us and to the ancients by the same name? [1] The outlines of this constellation do not resemble the shape of this insect. It is "one of the most remarkable coincidences in nomenclature." [2]

[2] H. F. Osborn, *The Origin and Evolution of Life* (1918), p. 24.

[1] Sahagun, in the fourth chapter of the seventh book of his historical work, says that the people of Mexico called the constellation Scorpion (Scorpio) by this very same name.

[2] Seler, *Ges. Abhand. zur amer. Sprach- und Alterthumskunde,* II (1903), 622. His surmise, disagreeing with the assertion of De Sahagun, was that Scorpion

The constellation, which is not at all like a scorpion, probably was called by this name because a comet that looked like a scorpion appeared in it. Actually, we read on one of the Babylonian astronomical tablets that "a star flared up and its light radiated bright as day, and as it blazed, it lashed its tail like an angry scorpion." [3] If it was not this particular appearance of a comet that caused the constellation to be called Scorpion, there must have been a similar occurrence on another date.

Another example is the dragon. All around the world this image is prominent in literature and art and also in the religion of peoples. There is probably no nation that does not use this symbol or this creature as an important motif, yet it does not exist. Several scholars thought that possibly it represented some extinct menace that impressed mankind to a much greater degree than any other creature since it appears on the Chinese flag, and in pictures showing Archangel Michael or St. George in battle with it, in Egyptian mythology, in Mexican hieroglyphics and bas-reliefs, and in Assyrian bas-reliefs. However, bones of this presumably extinct reptile have not been found.

From the description of the comet Typhon that spread like an animal over the sky with its many heads and winged body, with fire flaming from its mouths, as described in a previous chapter by quotations from Apollodorus and others, we recognize the origin of this widespread motif.

The Subjective Interpretation of the Events and Their Authenticity

What helped to discredit the traditions of the peoples about the catastrophes was their subjective and magical interpretation of the events. The sea was torn apart. The people attributed this act to the intervention of their leader; he lifted his staff over the waters and they divided. Of course, there is no person who can do this, and no staff with which it can be done. Likewise in the case of Joshua who com-

of the ancients was more to the south. However, with the displacement of the poles, the stars acquired new positions.

[3] Kugler, *Babylonische Zeitordnung*, p. 89.

manded the sun and the moon to halt in their movements. Because the scientific mind cannot believe that a man can make the sun and the moon to stand still, it disbelieves also the alleged event. What contributes to this is the fact that least of all do we place faith in books that demand belief, religious books, though we swear on these.

The peoples of the past were prepared to see miracles in unusual occurrences; for this reason modern man, who does not believe in miracles, rejects the event together with the interpretation. But as we find the same event in the traditions of many peoples, and as each people has differently comprehended it, its historicity can be checked, and this in addition to the control offered by natural science. For example, if the geographical poles changed their location, or the axis its inclination, the ancient solar clock would not show the correct time; or, if the magnetic poles became reversed at some time in the past, the lava of earlier volcanic activity must show reversed magnetic orientation.

But there is also a check by folklore. Isaiah foretold to King Hezekiah, probably a few hours before the event, that the shadow of the sundial would return ten degrees. (As we know now, the planet Mars was at that moment very close to the earth, and Isaiah could make an estimate based on experiences during previous perturbations of the earth by Mars.) The Chinese explained this phenomenon as having occurred to help their princes in their strategy, or to settle a quarrel among them. The Greek people thought the phenomenon was an expression of heavenly wrath at the crime of the Argive tyrants. The Latins thought the phenomenon was an omen associated with Romulus, son of Mars. In the Icelandic epos the same event has a different purpose, in the Finnish epos another, and yet others in Japan and Mexico and Polynesia. The American Indians say that the sun went backwards several degrees for fear of a boy who tried to snare it or because of some animal that terrified it. Precisely because there are great differences in the subjective evaluation of the causes or purposes of the phenomenon, we can assume that the folklore of different peoples deals with one and the same factual event, and only the magical explanations of the miracle are subjective inventions. Many accompanying details are preserved in the variants

of different peoples, which could not have been invented without an adequate knowledge of the laws of motion and thermodynamics. It is inconceivable that the ancients or the primitive races would, for instance, by sheer chance invent the tale that a huge conflagration enveloped the American prairies and forests as soon as the sun, frightened off by the snarer, returned a little on its way.

If a phenomenon had been similarly described by many peoples, we might suspect that a tale, originating with one people, had spread around the world, and consequently there is no proof of the authenticity of the event related. But just because one and the same event is embodied in traditions that are very different indeed, its authenticity becomes highly probable, especially if the records of history, ancient charts, sundials, and the physical evidence of natural history testify to the same effect.

In the Section "Venus in the Folklore of the Indians" a few illustrations were offered to illuminate this thesis. In order to illustrate it with additional examples, we choose the nature-folkloristic motif of the sun being arrested in its movement across the firmament in the tales of the Polynesians, Hawaiians, and North American Indians.

The best known legend cycle on the Pacific islands is that which has for its hero the semigod Maui.[1] This cycle comprises a trilogy: "Of the many exploits of Maui three seem to be most widely spread: they are fishing up of the land, snaring the sun and the quest of fire." [2] There are two versions of this cycle, one in New Zealand and one in Hawaii, but both are variants of a common tradition.

The Hawaiian version of the snaring of the sun runs thus: "Maui's mother was much troubled by the shortness of the day, occasioned by the rapid movement of the sun; and since it was impossible to dry properly the sheets of tapa used for clothing, the hero resolved to cut off the legs of the sun, so that he could not travel fast.

"Maui now went off eastward to where the sun climbed daily out of

[1] "Of all the myths from the Polynesian area, probably none have been more frequently quoted than those which recount the deeds and adventures of the semi-god Maui. The Maui cycle is one of the most important for the study of this whole area." Dixon, *Oceanic Mythology*, p. 41.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

the underworld, and as the luminary came up, the hero noosed his legs, one after the other, and tied the ropes strongly to great trees. Fairly caught, the sun could not get away, and Maui gave him a tremendous beating with his magic weapon. To save his life, the sun begged for mercy, and on promising to go more slowly ever after, was released from his bonds."

The "fishing up of islands" or the appearance of new islands took place at the same time; the causal relation to the cosmic change in the sky is evident. In one of the versions told in Polynesia about the fishing up of the islands, it is said that a star was used as bait.

The following is a tale told by the Menomini Indians, an Algonquin tribe.[3] "The little boy made a noose and stretched it across the path, and when the Sun came to that point the noose caught him around the neck and began to choke him until he almost lost his breath. It became dark, and the Sun called out to the ma'nidos, 'Help me, my brothers, and cut this string before it kills me.' [4] The ma'nidos came, but the thread had so cut into the flesh of the Sun's neck that they could not sever it. When all but one had given up, the Sun called to the Mouse to try to cut the string. The Mouse came up and gnawed at the string, but it was difficult work, because the string was hot and deeply imbedded in the Sun's neck. After working at the string a good while, however, the Mouse succeeded in cutting it, when the Sun breathed again and the darkness disappeared. If the Mouse had not succeeded, the Sun would have died."

The story about snaring the sun associates itself in our mind with one of the occasions when the sun was disrupted in its movement across the sky. The story contains an important detail and enables us to understand a natural phenomenon.

In a previous section we discussed the various versions of the annihilation of Sennacherib's army and the physical phenomena which caused it. According to the Scriptures, in the days of Isaiah the sun was interrupted in its course, turning back ten degrees on the

[3] Hoffman, *Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, XIV, 181, reproduced by S. Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians* (1929).

[4] Ma'nido is "a spirit or spiritual being; any person or subject endowed with spiritual power."

sundial. That night the army of Sennacherib was destroyed by a blast. In Egypt this victory over the common enemy of the Jews and the Egyptians was observed in a festival at Letopolis, "the city of the thunderbolt"; the holy animal of the city was a mouse, and bronze mice inscribed with the prayers of pilgrims are found in its soil. Herodotus saw there a statue of a god with a mouse in his hand, commemorating the annihilation of the army of Sennacherib. The story he heard gave as the cause of the event an invasion of mice that gnawed the strings of the bows. He also told the story of the changed movements of the sun directly following the record of the destruction of the Assyrian army. We recognized that the image of the mouse must have had some relation to the cosmic drama. The best we could do was to interpret the mouse as a symbol of a simultaneous plague, exemplified by the illness of King Hezekiah.

The tale of the Indians that combines the snaring of the sun with the deed of the mouse explains the relation of these two elements to each other. Apparently the atmosphere of the celestial body that appeared in the darkness and was illuminated took on the elongated form of a mouse. This explains why the blast that destroyed the army of Sennacherib was commemorated by the emblem of a mouse. The Indian tale grew from the picture on the celestial screen where a great mouse freed the snared sun.

Thus we see how a folk story of the primitives can solve an unsettled problem between Isaiah and Herodotus.

A four-legged animal in the sky approaching the sun was visualized as a mouse by the Egyptians and the Menomini Indians. In the tale of the southern Ute Indians, the cottontail is the animal that is connected with the disruption of the movement of the sun.[5] He went to the east with the intention of breaking the sun in pieces. There he waited for the sun to rise. "The sun began to rise, but seeing the cottontail, it went down again. Then it rose slowly again and did not notice the animal. He struck the sun with his club, breaking off a piece, which touched the ground and set fire to the world.

[5] R. H. Lowie, "Shoshonean Tales," *Journal of American Folk-lore*, XXXVII (1924), 61 ff.

"The fire pursued Cottontail, who began to flee. He ran to a log and asked if it would save him if he got inside. 'No, I burn up entirely.' So he ran again and asked a rock with a cleft in it. 'No, I cannot save you, when I am heated I burst. . . .' At last he got to a river. The river said, 'No, I cannot save you; I'll boil and you will get boiled.'"

On the plain, Cottontail ran through the weed, but the fire came very close, the weed burned and fell on his neck, "where cottontails are yellow now."

"From everywhere he saw smoke rising. He walked a little way on the hot ground and one of his legs was burned up to the knee; before that he had been long-legged. He walked on two legs, and one of them burned off. He jumped on one till that also burned off."

In this version of the attack on the sun, two points worthy of mention are the world fire following the disruption in the movement of the sun, and the change in the world of animals accompanied by strong mutations. In the section, "Phaëthon," we wondered how the Roman poet Ovid could have known of the relation between the interrupted movement of the sun and a world fire unless such a catastrophe had really occurred. The same reasoning applies to the Indians. The story of snaring the sun or attacking the sun is told in many variants, but the world fire is a consistent result. Forests and fields burn, mountains smoke and vomit lava, rivers boil, caves in the mountains collapse, and rocks burst when the sun peeps above the horizon and then disappears and again comes over the horizon.

There is one instance more in the Indian story of the sun being impeded on its path and the ensuing world conflagration. Before the catastrophe, "the sun used to go round close to the ground." The purpose of the attack on the sun was to make "the sun shine a little longer: The days are too short." After the catastrophe "the days became longer."

The ancestors of the Shoshonean Indians, a tribe of Utah, Colorado, and Nevada, appear to have lived in the days of Sennacherib and Hezekiah at such a longitude that the sun was just on the eastern horizon when it changed its direction and went back and then came up again.