What is Myth?

Reminder: Why do we bother?

No westerner unfamiliar with Greek myth can seriously claim to be an educated person (1.1)

Answers?

Word/story (*muthos*)
Teaching > history

Genuine conception of the ancients (Vico) >> a category of the human mind?

Myth and Ritual
Myth and Society
Myth and the Mind

Creation / transformation / metamorphosis / metaformation

Gods:
- Apollo: The Mind of Zeus
- Demeter: food and death: nursing (im)mortality
- Hermes: boundary trespass
- Prometheus: trickery
- Dionysus: nursing immortality
  - Theban instability: Violence and Change

Heroes:
- The Tragic Moment: Tragedy and the Athenian Polis
  - Oedipus and Thebes
  - Herakles
  - Alcestis, Admetus and the comic aspects of premature death
  - Iphigenia: Sacrificing one’s daughter for one’s brother honor
  - *Iliad* and the heroic code
  - Trojan Women on the Border
  - Nostoi: Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and the *Odyssey*
  - Troubled daughters: Electra
  - Mythic enchantment: Odysseus’ tales

Mere mortals
- Who are we?
  - Identity and threats on identity:
    - Losing shape

Ideology: Rome

Making sense of what one is and what one becomes

**PENELOPE’S SONG**

Little soul, little perpetually undressed one,  
do now as I bid you, climb  
the shelf-like branches of the spruce tree;  
wait at the top, attentive, like  
a sentry or look-out. He will be home soon;  
it behooves you to be  
generous. You have not been completely  
perfect either; with your troublesome body  
you have done things you shouldn’t  
discuss in poems. Therefore  
call out to him over the open water, over the bright water  
with your dark song, with your grasping,  
unnatural song—passionate,  
like Maria Callas. Who  
wouldn’t want you? Whose most demonic appetite  
could possibly fail to answer? Soon  
he will return from wherever he goes in the meantime,  
suntanned from his time away, wanting  
his grilled chicken. Ah, you must greet him,  
you must shake the boughs of the tree  
to get his attention,  
but carefully, carefully lest  
his beautiful face be marred  
by too many falling needles.

**TELEMACHUS’ DETACHMENT**

When I was a child looking  
at my parents' lives, you know  
what I thought? I thought  
heartbreaking. Now I think  
heartbreaking, but also  
insane. Also  
very funny.

**TELEMACHUS’ GUILT**

Patience of the sort my mother  
practised on my father  
(which in self-absorption he mistook  
for tribute though it was in fact  
a species of rage—didn’t he  
ever wonder why he was  
so blocked in expressing  
his native abandon?): it infected  
my childhood. Patiently
she fed me; patiently
she supervised the kindly
slaves who attended me, regardless
of my behavior, an assumption
I tested with increasing
violence. It seemed clear to me
that from her perspective
I didn’t exist, since
my actions had
no power to disturb her: I was
the envy of my playmates.
In the decades that followed
I was proud of my father
for staying away
even if he stayed away for the wrong reasons;
I used to smile
when my mother wept.
I hope now she could
forgive that cruelty; I hope
she understood how like
her own coldness it was,
a means of remaining
separate from what
one loves deeply.

From *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985)

In the story of Patroclus
no one survives, not even Achilles
who was nearly a god.
Patroclus resembled him; they wore
the same armor.

Always in these friendships
one serves the other, one is less than the other:
the hierarchy
is always apparent, though the legends
cannot be trusted—
their source is the survivor,
the one who has been abandoned.

What were the Greek ships on fire
Compared to this loss?

In his tent, Achilles
grieved with his whole being
and the gods saw

he was a man already dead, a victim
of the part that loved,
the part that was mortal.

MYTHIC FRAGMENT

When the stern god
approached me with his gift
my fear enchanted him
so that he ran more quickly
through the wet grass, as he insisted,
to praise me. I saw captivity
in praise; against the lyre,
I begged my father in the sea
to save me. When
the god arrived, I was nowhere,
I was in a tree forever. Reader,
pity Apollo: at the water’s edge,
I turned from him, I summoned
my invisible father—as
I stiffened in the god’s arms,
of his encompassing love
my father made
no other sign from the water.


Actaeon

I, me, am de-
tested: won, lost, my
head for you. Your way I follow,
fell, cruel. On my desires:
where art (they) the little beasts
the little beasts are ripping me.
Come dog: of my bones I leave
Little: to touch, to take, make me
twelve again: with you frosting
my cake: your cool hands, your
cool hands dripping.