

Article

Myth, Religion, Imagination, and (Virtual) Realities

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Abstract: This article provides a way to think through the division between religious and secular approaches to contemporary society through the use of rival myths. Myths are narrative structures that invite the interplay of language and the imagination, resulting in the creation of virtual realities and social imaginaries. Strong virtual realities were once premised on myths that guided the imagination to embrace an openness to mystery and the unknowable; however, current technological culture is predicated on a closed imagination that has led to worldwide despair. Religion was originally grounded in the virtual reality inspired by language and the capacity of language to distill and extract the “virtual” from the real. The ability of language to create a virtual reality created the capacity to think of a soul, as well as destinations for the soul. In the twentieth century, Freud found that the notion of “God” that was created had become problematic for humans and so created a modern myth that would provide a secular substitute. After providing a close reading of Freud’s governing myth for modern culture, showing how it inspires the imagination and the ways in which it falls short, this article concludes with an alternative myth—that of the Invisible City—proposed to inspire faith, hope, and love in our modern world. My approach relies on a depth psychological framework, which was formed to interrogate the nature of reality (relative to individuals and culture) at the intersection of myth, religion, language, and imagination. Throughout, I use a hermeneutic methodology, which is consistent with the initial mode of depth psychological exploration as well as the central role language plays in revealing the truth of a reality. This orientation enables an exploration of a deeper sense of virtual realities than what is deployed through current technology.

Keywords: myth; virtual reality; Freud; theology; depth psychology; religion; fiction; secularism



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1. Introduction

In this article, I examine the relationship between language and the imagination in constructing virtual realities that unfold into myths and religion. By contrasting strong virtual realities from weak virtual realities, based on whether language opens the imagination toward a new depth of experience (strong) or limits experience to what exists only in language (weak), I wish to imagine a new social myth that creates a strong virtual reality as an alternative to traditional religions. Creating a new myth—rather than a new religion—provides a way to reinspire the imagination of those who are trapped in weak virtual realities, feeling disconnected and disengaged from life.

Religions, especially Western religions, have clearly outlived the secular prophets who predicted their demise, but they seem to serve a different function today than generations or centuries ago. One lens that offers clarity on this change is that of myth, understood through the framework of depth psychology. Speaking of religion in terms of myth contextualizes belief systems and ontologies into an originary relationship between language and imagination. Framing religion as myth also allows an evaluative conversation to explore which myths are effective at helping people participate meaningfully in their lives. In addition to this, focusing on myth, language, and imagination also provides a new way of evaluating religious and secular mythic alternatives as comparable rather than oppositional.

I adhere to a depth psychological framework throughout this paper. Depth psychology is grounded in an appreciation for myth and religion, as Freud and Jung each drew

from a variety of mythic and religious sources in creating their understandings of the Unconscious. I will largely be using a hermeneutic methodology, which is also at the heart of depth psychology, to invite what has been unknown in language and existence (and their relationship) to come to the surface.

In Section 2, following this introduction, I provide an outline of the four functions of myth to reveal a foundational distinction between open (traditional) and closed (contemporary) versions of myth, the latter of which functions at the heart of the secular Western world. This section introduces how disenchantment leads to a lack of narrative traction in individual lives and an overall sense of fragmentation in contemporary culture. The next section uses the language of virtual realities as a contemporary way of describing the effect of myth. Section 4 offers examples of how language and the imagination interact to create two kinds of virtual reality. After this, I explore the work of Freud, whose discussion of the Oedipus complex and superego provide an example of the best-known contemporary myth—which has clear and dangerous limitations. I conclude with Section 6, offering up a version of a new myth that could work within the contemporary social world to create a strong virtual reality capable of renewing a sense of narrative traction.

2. Myth

Taylor (2011) offered a way of thinking about cultural change that has resulted in a secularized understanding of religion. Discussing the emergence of Western secularity from its religious context, he claimed “Modern Westerners have a clear and firm boundary between mind and world, even mind and body. Moral and other meanings are ‘in the mind’; they cannot reside outside” (p. 40) due to a work of separation that Taylor called “the process of disenchantment”. Disenchantment results in what Taylor called “buffered” selves, “a change in sensibility” that opens us “to different things, yet one has lost one important way in which people used to experience the world” (p. 39). In other words, Taylor named a historical process that has resulted in a change to the fundamental structure of the self and society. This change has enabled people to live in a “social order, sustained by a social imaginary that had a purely immanent character, which we see arising, for instance, in the modern forms of public sphere, market economy, and citizen state,” creating a Deist template of true religion that is “rationally defensible and that generates a morality that is endorsed by reason” (p. 51). Put otherwise, the new experience in modernity arises by using the imagination to support social institutions that operate within the boundaries of reason.

While Jung and Jaffé (1963) would agree with Taylor’s description of the modern situation, they would argue that real problems arise from the imagined advantages of the buffered self. Their argument shifts from describing the relationship between religion and secularism to how each are grounded in myth. Jung wrote, “Our myth has become mute and gives no answers. The fault lies not in it as it was set down in the Scriptures, but solely in us, who have not developed it further” (p. 332). In other words, myths became unresponsive because humans no longer approached them creatively. Jung also suggested that the experience of “loss of myth” leads to an “attempt to dominate everything by the intellect,” creating a “safe distance . . . from real experience, and of substituting for psychic reality an apparently secure, artificial, but merely two-dimensional conceptual world” (p. 144). Losing contact with myth correlates with a left-brained tendency to replace embodied awareness with definitional terms. This creates a situation in which the imagination no longer expands how reality might be experienced but is now limited to intellectual concepts, which Taylor deemed to be “rationally defensible”. To use the terminology more fully developed in the next section, the difference is between weak (limited by reason) and strong (open beyond reason) forms of virtual reality.

Jung’s claims require nuance. Although the term “loss of myth” is evocative and gestures toward something that feels true of our culture, the term also features a lack of specificity that characterized some treatments of the demise of religion from secularist authors. I thus agree with Rowland (2005): “Postmodern critics have pointed out that

modernity's mythlessness is essentially narrative: grand narratives of the progress of science and of human emancipation are its necessary 'foundations'," advocating that we "speak of a myth of mythlessness rather than just an absence of myth" (p. 29). Rowland additionally built on Lawrence Coupe's work on myth (Coupe 1997) to describe the importance of openness, arguing "myth can be a dangerous narrative method if it entails closure, leaving some 'outside' or 'other' body" (p. 30). In other words, narratives that create separation, rather than being open and integrating, are problematic because (as Jung suggested above) they end up obtaining illusory security through closing off vital potential dimensions of experience. In this case, Rowland's "myth of mythlessness" diagnoses a closed myth that cuts off the living mythic potential in order to reduce reality to an often unacknowledged myth of progress. This myth of progress, in turn, supports a world such as that described by Taylor, in which intellectual domination provides illusory security. Rowland's argument about the relatively open or closed nature of myth provides a criterion for evaluating the extent to which a myth is desirable.

In order to understand why the myth of mythlessness and narratives of progress are problematic, it is necessary to appreciate the value of myths. Campbell and Kennedy (2001) described myth as having four basic functions. The first function of myth, which Campbell described as religious or mystical, is to reconcile "consciousness to the preconditions of its own existence" (p. 2) by introducing a sense of awe and guiding audiences in one of three directions: "the affirmation of the world as it is, the negation of the world as it is, or the restoration of the world to what it ought to be" (p. 3). This function provides an orienting direction in terms of creating in collaboration, contradiction, or reconstruction of reality. Campbell described the second function of myth as "interpretative" and argued that its role was "to present a consistent image of the order of the cosmos" (p. 3). The third and social function of myth is to "validate and support a specific moral order, that order of the society out of which that mythology rose" (p. 5). The final and personal function of myth is "to carry the individual through the various stages and crises of life . . . to help persons grasp the unfolding of life with integrity". Together, these functions allow people to undergo important moments, "from birth through midlife to death," in ways that harmonize with self, society, the universe, and with "that *mysterious tremendum* beyond themselves and all things" (p. 6). In other words, a mythic structure provides a framework open to the mysterious that integrates the personal, cultural, and natural worlds.

These four functions of myth are useful in understanding the difference between Taylor and Jung relative to the question of disenchantment, or what Rowland called the myth of mythlessness. Jung's lament of the loss of myth highlights the loss of the first and fourth functions—there is no longer a sense that humans can actively develop myths forward in collaboration with (or even resistance to) reality, which has been reduced to a flat, conceptual existence. Jung's well-known larger project of helping to establish a treatment for the second half of life suggests that nothing in the myth of mythlessness has replaced the work of providing a meaningful arc of a life narrative. Taylor would point to the successful work done with the third and social function of myth, supporting an ethical structure reflective of the culture. But Campbell and Kennedy (2001) might well argue that this work is unbalanced, as they warned of the danger that occurs "when social institutions press on people mythological structures that no longer match their human experience," giving the example of "when certain religious or political interpretations of human life are insisted upon" (p. 5). This danger takes the form of "mythic dissociation," when "persons reject or are cut off from effective explanatory notions about the order of their lives" (p. 5). This situation would occur with closed myths; in our contemporary world, for those whose experiences do not align with the myth of progress or the rational limits placed on the imagination.

When people experience mythic dissociation, lacking a sense of mythic structure to guide them meaningfully through life stages, it can result in a lack of narrative traction. D. Miller (2022) built on Pascat's definition of narrative traction, "when we get interested in a story and lean in to see what happens" with an existential twist: "Most people do not have

narrative traction in their own lives. They find their lives boring and uninteresting” (p. 59). Miller here described a state of apathetic disengagement, where people do not invest in what will happen to them. Miller then added, “in order to experience narrative traction in our lives, we have to want something” (p. 60). In other words, to gain a sense of narrative traction requires that people develop a sense of desire or an investment in their lives. The alternative is living in a “narrative void” wherein the plot is “hijacked by distractions,” which happens when people surrender “their personal agency to outside forces rather than determining their own story” (p. 77). Miller here indicates that when people are not leaning into their own life stories, it creates a space filled by distractions, allowing external influences to drive lives. Taylor (2011) named some of these influences, each of which have become more polarized due to a combination of social media, the COVID pandemic, and violent upheavals. At best, even if ideally the public sphere, market economy, and citizen state might have been an adequate substitute for the third function of myth mentioned by Campbell, it seems safe to say that the myth of mythlessness does not allow for meaningful lives of integrated wholeness. But, rather than moving back to explore Taylor’s question of religion and secularism, this paper will instead move forward into discussing myths in terms of the virtual realities they support.

3. Virtual Reality

The term “virtual reality” is in vogue, given the new technological headsets that feature new ways of interacting with unreal worlds, consistent with contemporary uses of the term virtual that designate fantasy terrains of non-reality. The rise of technology and AI to create virtual spaces and connections is a source of ongoing scholarly research (Alkhouri 2024); however, these recent developments are grounded in long-ranging historical contrast. This current, conventional, and technological use of the term virtual gestures to the weak sense of the term: the virtual is less than what appears. The strong sense of the virtual, through the term “virtue,” gestures to a lingering sense of moral goodness as well as causal and generative potency by virtue of which something can occur. The strong sense of a virtual reality introduces a qualitatively important, unseen factor, the effective strength of which aligns with the good—what Campbell identified as an ordered universe. This second, strong sense of virtual gestures to a slumbering potential that is inherently unexpressed within material things, which allows observable reality to be more than what appears. Despite differences, these two senses share awareness of an observable non-reality.

It seems responsible to understand the strong (and currently neglected) potential of virtual in a culture increasingly determined by digital technologies. Hayles (1999) defined “virtual” in its activated, contextual form, as a “cultural perception,” and described how technologies developed after WWII installed a notion of the virtual based on the idea that “material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns,” patterns that can be abstracted (pp. 14–15). In her definition, material things are real and informational patterns are virtual. The patterns become the “observable non-reality” that entail the essential, extractable element of the material. A virtual reality is information extracted from materiality and repurposed. A value shift occurred through what Hayles described as the condition of virtuality, where “. . . the impression is created that pattern is predominant over presence. From here it is a small step to perceiving information as more mobile, more important, more essential than material forms. When this impression becomes part of your cultural mindset, you have entered the condition of virtuality” (p. 19). From the perspective of virtuality, what we imagine through information patterns becomes more “real” than materiality—which increasingly becomes thought of as unnecessary. Matter no longer matters. The process of extraction, in which information is lifted out from its connection to materiality, seems to parallel the process of disembedding that Taylor described.

Not all information patterns are digital: myths and stories, for example, provide audiences with an information pattern that inhabits the imagination, inviting a temporarily altered sense of reality. In printed form, “literary texts give these ideas and artifacts a local habitation and a name through discursive formulations whose effects are specific to that

textual body” although an “abstract pattern can never fully capture the embodied actuality, unless it is as prolix and noisy as the body itself” (Hayles 1999, p. 24). Hayles seems here to indicate that printed articles provide a temporary, transmittable form for ideas—although they are more fully housed within a reader’s present, embodied self. This kind of incorporation of textual material would seem to align with the ways in which traditional myths have provided narrative traction. Hayles also offered a depiction of the alternative way that information is processed. Once information becomes seen as essential and patterns are embraced as real, the lack of noise becomes seen as a virtue: the pattern is contrasted to outliers, such that they are “not so much opposites as complements or supplements to one another. Each helps to define the other; each contributes to the flow of information through the system” (Hayles 1999, p. 25). People tend to believe information that conforms to familiar patterns, ignoring as noise whatever inconvenient perceptions or ideas contradict the pattern. The virtual pattern, once part of reality, becomes the only reality we inhabit. Hayles (1999) interpreted this “as an epistemic shift toward pattern/randomness and away from presence/absence” (the former binary appealing to patterns that align with Taylor’s “rationally defensible” standard, the latter suggesting the metamythic distinction of open and closed myths), and argues that it “affects human and textual bodies on two levels at once, as a change in the body (the material substrate) and as a change in the message (the codes of representation)” (p. 29). Cohesion becomes increasingly important as we invest more time in non-physical spaces and realities: information that confirms our sense of a rational reality satisfies our sense that we are at home. Information that would disconfirm our understanding of reality becomes more important to ignore. The term virtual helps to define the shift from an epistemology of presence to an informatic epistemology. In the former, “virtual” values moral goodness as a generative power below the surface, allowing a sense of openness and containment that would accompany Campbell’s four functions of myth. In the latter, mastering patterns generates the power to define goodness, changing the constitution of reality by altering the base rules informing the social imaginary. When the base rules change by closing off potentials that are seen as undesirable, the resulting virtual reality is weak—less than what is truly there.

An informatic epistemology that explores patterns to determine meaning is a contemporary analogue of the psychoanalytic hermeneutics of suspicion. Guided by a desire to discern virtual meaning from manifest noise, the virtue of nonapparent reality is often practiced in terms of predicting and replicating desired outcomes. This approach determines and controls the future in terms of the present known, creating a closed system. On the other hand, the epistemology of presence, which guides most theological reflection, explores the virtue of nonapparent reality in ways that prize the unknown or unknowable in an open fashion. This approach often associates virtual reality with the hopeful promise of religion. This hope uses the subjunctive, the grammar that explores what “might be” true, the unripe potential that has yet to become. Unlike wishes, the fantasies that defy the surrounding material reality by remaining closed to disconfirming information, hope is pregnant but unripe within the material world. In other words, the subjunctive describes the world, not as it is, but as it might be. This “might be” is the root of religious world construction through theology, myth, and ritual. Subjunctivity uproots the world the way it has been and plants new possibilities in its place. The world becomes meaningful through subjunctivity (J. E. Miller 2019, p. 19).

Orienting to the language of uprooting and planting gives a place for human work as a mode of helping to bring the observable non-reality of the virtual into being, guided by intimations of a desirable future through the presence of what a phenomenology of religion might call the sacred. Such symbols traditionally arose in relation to the world of myth, informed by grammar and language.

4. Language and Virtual Reality: The Birth of Soul

This section explores the ongoing potential for an open mythic structure suggested by how the combination of language and material reality can forge a symbolic union

that humans can use to begin exploring the unknown, generating an expansive image of the universe. This would reignite the potential for collaborative stories that would drive narrative function, aligning with Campbell's four functions of myth. I will show how the sense of a strong virtual reality was the foundational understanding of the convergence of language and material reality, and that it, in turn, was disembedded to allow a solely intellectualized use of virtual realities that are held only in the mind.

Historically, the contemporary Western technological creation of virtual realities builds on a capacity to imagine and relate to observable non-realities that evolved through human interactions in language. In early Greek culture, qualities like "justice" or "beauty" were vocally identified as they manifested in a situation, although these lacked any sense of enduring beyond a brief appearance: "they were inseparable from the particular persons or actions that momentarily embodied them" (Abram 1996, p. 110). Once named, these *virtues* could be imagined as possessing certain recognizable qualities, properties, or patterns. As written terms, however, such virtues "acquired an autonomy and a permanence" and an "unchanging, visible form independent of the speaker—and independent as well of the corporeal situations and individuals that exhibited it" (Abram 1996, p. 111). In this way, the Greek alphabet enabled "the abstraction of previously ephemeral qualities from their inherence in situations, promoting them to a new realm independent of the flux of ordinary experience" (Abram 1996, p. 112). Recognizing qualities provided an initial way to imagine a virtual reality. Imagining a virtual reality enabled the expression of experiences that ranged from the material to the spiritual, from the temporal to the eternal.

Literacy itself became a portal to virtual realities as readers became equipped to imagine a permanent, unchanging realm beyond material texts. For Abram (1996), the fact that the alphabet provided visible shapes that invoked eternal essences provides an originary connection between two forms of *eidos*—a term that means both the abstract Idea and visible appearance. Not only do both written letters and Platonic Ideas avoid the cycles of change that affect most living things but writing itself "deflects our attention from its visible aspect, effectively vanishing behind the current of human speech that it provokes" (p. 112). Written words enable learning the movement from the material to the spiritual, from the linguistic to the mental.

Familiarity with virtual realities enabled the birth of soul. The act of reading also gave birth to the first conception of the *psyche*. In Greek philosophy, the term *psyche* shifted from Homeric ghosts into the "aspect of oneself that is refined and strengthened by turning away from the ordinary sensory world in order to contemplate the intelligible Ideas"; more specifically, psyche became "the literate intellect . . . born and strengthened in relation to the written letters" (Abram 1996, p. 112). The initial spoken power to name ephemeral qualities in a situation and the written power to imagine its enduring potentiality as distinct from local appearance (a virtual reality) were experienced as foregrounding a previously unavailable element within a reader's person—one that remained disconnected and abstracted from the living and vibrant external world that had previously engaged the senses. Once language becomes forgetful of its meaningful connection to nature as providing a limitation on the imagination, weak virtual realities gain increasing influence over human experiences. Civilizations enter a "new order of participation" with the world, marked by a "self-reflective mode of animism, or magic" that gives rise to previously unknown forms of tension between a virtual sense of an imaginable self and the temporal, fluctuating local conditions of what appears as an outer world (Abram 1996, p. 132). Over time, as the imagination becomes fascinated by the limitless fantasies available in the inner world, the uninhabited outer world appears strange and frightening. Ultimately, withdrawing the imagination into the inner world means that the natural world appears bereft of soul. As Taylor argued, the buffered self emerges. Idolatry occurs in religious traditions where this imaginary idea of a weak virtual reality becomes worshipped, closed to information inviting the potential for active co-creation relative to a stronger virtual reality that inheres within the surrounding environment.

Language offers the potential to identify the virtual reality of self as a separable, eternal entity. Benjamin (1978) argued that this equation of mental and linguistic beings forges an intimate connection between language and religion, even as it also creates a conflict between the expressed and the inexpressible (p. 320). An inverse relationship between mind and reality emerges, whereby “the more real” a mind is, “the more it is inexpressible” (p. 321). This suggests that the ineffable remains an inescapable, innate feature of existence. Problematically, rather than honoring the ineffable, humans tend to inhabit a more limited, literal existence in which what can be expressed and experienced in language determines the boundaries of reality. Benjamin puts this in the context of the Biblical myth: after the Fall in Genesis, humans forgot the potential of language to name a virtual (material) reality in ways that would foreground otherwise ephemeral qualities (p. 327), as Abram described above. Instead, humans prioritized the power of language to create virtual (mental) realities by using words as instruments, creating signs rather than symbols, and creating judgments and morality with no standpoint in or relationship with the harmony of things that anchor a given reality (p. 328). The resulting God imagined in the linguistic abstraction that followed was created apart from the creation. In this way, language created a weak virtual reality that exists only in an imagined, mental fashion.

Nonetheless, language retains its capacity for imagining a strong virtual reality that names a latent potential occurring in material reality. Rilke named the poet’s task as finding language that can “unify the inner and outer worlds,” a process that becomes enhanced by incorporating external things (Zhang 1992, p. 77). Poets gestate the union of worlds. Although this enriched language now requires interpretation, the resulting words possess great power and depth. The need for interpretation—the integration of noise beyond pattern—once again invites a collaboration with mystery, which is important to mythic function and narrative traction. Poets have two primary tools: on the one hand, they can use “the magic of incantation in which the ordinary word takes on the great evocative power to summon the invisible” (Zhang 1992, p. 85). On the other hand, speaking gains more power, or force, newly conceived as “intensely ontological,” as demonstrated by “the naming of simple things . . . that brings things into existence” (Zhang 1992, p. 87). In this way, poets create bridges that use language to invite the imagination back into reality from where it had been constrained in the mind. This reinvests the natural and social world with the virtue of human imagination and creates a strong sense of virtual reality, where what appears contains greater reality than it seems.

5. Freud’s Modern Myth: Virtual Reality as Wish Fulfillment

Having discussed the origin of virtual reality in a mythic description of how language created soul and imagined a way to participate with reality, I now turn to a modern myth that helped to forge the process of disenchantment that Taylor described. I turn to Freud as a mythmaker, rather than as a psychologist, for a few reasons. Freud’s myth remains important to consider because—despite his psychological assumptions being widely questioned—it retains a deep and widespread grip over the imagination. His cultural critiques remain taught to undergraduates in the humanities. Beyond the general awareness of the Oedipus complex and the importance of trying to interpret dreams, many people also remain informed about the importance of the ego and the projection of sexuality onto other objects. Even if Freud as a thinker has been largely discredited, these kinds of arguments have not weakened the force of the myth he created. His sense of the Unconscious opened the door to what remains one of the most widespread and influential versions of a strong, modern virtual reality. Freud’s method also depended on language and reading to create its virtual reality, but, as I argue, his suspicion of religion led him to create a closed myth of progress that emphasized the potency of reason over the vagaries of the mythic imagination.

To return to the theme: before digital technologies, the imaginative power to create virtual realities through language created myths—stories that were told and retold, gaining reality through the creation of rituals, practices that culminated in religion. Myth also

provides the foundation of much of contemporary, secular Western life, especially in societies influenced by the observable non-reality described as the “Unconscious” most famously popularized by Sigmund Freud. Freud’s relationship with myth provides an important, influential example of how myth directs the imagination to create virtual realities—one that notably reinforces the connection to literacy. It is also notable as an example of an attempt to change a myth. Paris (2008) offered three important attributes of myth. First, she defined myth as “*a fantasy, a preferred lie, a foundational story, a hypnotic trance, an identity game, a virtual reality, one that can be either inspirational or despairing. It is a story in which I cast myself*” (p. 211). She also offered a simple method from depth psychology that enables an awareness of when myth has changed: replace the question *why*, which looks for motives and causes, with other questions: *who, what, when*, and *how* (p. 215). Finally, she advised that successfully transforming a myth requires undertaking a two-step process: “not only the construction of a new myth but the deconstruction of the old one” (p. 216).

Constructing and deconstructing myth are central to Freud’s two primary passions expressed throughout his career: promoting the theory of infant sexuality and proclaiming the inadequacy of religion. Between these themes, the Oedipus complex explains a child’s ambivalence and aggression toward the father (or mother), offers a source for experienced guilt and remorse that lack cause, and grounds a rational explanation (sublimation) for the emergence of art, religion, and culture. Freud was not alone in wanting to turn to reason, rather than religion, as a foundation for morality, but his psychology, symbolized by Oedipus, offered the best foundation for a true alternative. Showing the mythic quality of Freud’s Oedipal complex along the path Paris revealed means defining the cultural context of *when* Freud wrote, which relates to *who* Freud was when Oedipus appeared. This enables an exploration of Freud’s style to understand *how* his writing could create myth, demonstrated through exploring *what* resulted—especially its implications for religious myths and a shift in virtual realities.

5.1. The When: Myth as a Foundational Story, a Story in Which I Cast Myself

Freud’s career writing psychology began with case histories of hysterics for whom he created treatments. These histories involved “a new questioning of how life stories go together, how narrative units combine in significant sequence, where cause and effect are to be sought, and how meaning is related to narration” (Brooks 1984, p. 268). Freud’s use of a talking cure to understand patients’ stories, like the studies produced afterward, were themselves embedded in another recent cultural phenomenon: reading literature. Freud thus benefitted from a cultural context of readers whose familiarity with new narrative forms opened new opportunities and the potential for fictional, virtual realities.

Novels provide new plots, arousing new expectations. Reading alters you: imagining the actions of a character as you read makes it easier to imagine yourself as a character in a story . . . or the author of your own. The sudden flood of stories developed readers’ “literary competence . . . training as reader of narrative” in “the possibility of following a narrative and making sense of it,” until “the reader is in this view himself virtually a text, a composite of all that he has read, or heard read, or imagined as written” (Brooks 1984, p. 19).

Different genres change readers’ psychologies in different ways. Giddens (1992) connected the rise of romantic love in the nineteenth century and novels with marriage plots into which readers could cast themselves. Romantic love presumed “a psychic communication, a meeting of souls” in which the lover “answers a lack which the individual does not necessarily recognize,” a lack directly related “with self-identity: in some sense, the flawed individual is made whole” (pp. 40–45). Readers who learned the pattern of a romantic plot could use it as a mirror that amplified their emotional literacy, providing new nuance to feelings. Imagining this way of relating through reading also enabled Freud to undertake this work with his patients.

The era also birthed detective stories, the plots of which implied a causal order of motivations and reactions. Freud was an avid reader of Doyle's detective, Holmes, and understood the analogy between detective stories and his psychoanalytic investigations. "The detective story exhibits a reality structured as a set of ambiguous signs which gain their meaning from a past history that must be uncovered" so as to recreate a "chain of events, eventually with a clear origin, intention, and solution, and with strong causal connections between each link" (Brooks 1984, p. 270). Freud's method of treatment reflected these plots. He realized that uncovering a primal scene or foundational story in the past would often create relief for patients in the present.

One final sociological factor is the advent of secularism, the transition from a society in which belief in God shifted from assumed to intended (Taylor 2007, p. 3). Brooks (1984) interpreted the "enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century" as arguably motivated by "the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one can no longer look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world" (p. 6). With these symptoms that old myths were in flux, the era itself opened the transformative potential of creating a new cultural origin story. Freud could see this.

5.2. *The Who: Myth as Preferred Lie, an Identity Game*

In 1895, Freud launched his career by publishing *Studies on Hysteria* (Breuer et al. 2000). In it, Freud found himself fascinated by "the strange state of mind in which one knows and does not know a thing at the same time" that emerged from his study of Lucy R., who described her reluctance to reveal that she loved her employer: "I didn't know—or rather, I didn't want to know. I wanted to drive it out of my head and not think of it again; and I believe latterly I have succeeded" (p. 117). Freud affixed a footnote that added his personal experience of the phenomenon: "I saw something which did not fit in at all with my expectation; yet I did not allow what I saw to disturb my fixed plan in the least, though the perception should have put a stop to it," describing himself as "afflicted by that blindness of that seeing eye which is so astonishing in the attitude of mothers to their daughters, husbands to their wives, and rulers to their favourites" (p. 117). The cases of knowing while not knowing differ: Lucy represses from fear, Freud from desire—a myopic preference guided by fixed anticipation. He overlooked what he did not want to see.

On 21 April 1896, Freud gave a lecture entitled "The Aetiology of Hysteria" sharing his "seduction theory". Masson (2012) argued how Freud's eyes had been opened to the fact that "women were sick, not because they came from 'tainted' families, but because something terrible and secret had been done to them as children" (p. XVIII). In the lecture, Freud referred to "seduction" as "a real sexual act forced on a young child who in no way desires it or encourages it . . . an act of cruelty and violence which wounds" children who lack the physical and emotional capacity "for the immediate impact of the sexual passion of the adult or for the later inevitable feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear". The lecture resulted in Freud's exile (p. 5).

On 23 October 1896, Freud's father died. Freud dreamt the nights before and after the funeral. In them, Freud visited his barbershop, seeing a notice stating, "You are requested to close an eye/the eyes". Closing one eye winks at a situation; closing both overlooks it. For Rieff (1979), the dream is the "negational image of looking away," through the "secret and painful resolve of mind, repression," which keeps "secret from itself what it most wants to know" (p. 366).

Autumn, 1897. Freud awoke from a dream "knowing 'I am Oedipus'". Downing (2000) emphasized that Freud never stopped identifying with the blind exile because "he was rediscovering what myth-oriented cultures have always affirmed: we find our identity through discovering a mythic model". Fittingly, Freud identified himself with a tragic hero who embodied the mind that simultaneously knows and does not know. Downing added that "for Freud Oedipus was not an illustration or clever designation for an insight which might have been articulated otherwise but the *medium of discovery*" (pp. 66–68). Seeing

himself as Oedipus affirmed his experience of knowing and not knowing at the same time, opening a new route to thinking.

On 21 September 1897, Freud (1989) wrote to his friend Fleiss, reporting “he could no longer sustain the ‘seduction theory’ of the neuroses on which he had founded his hopes for fame”. Freud explained that it was improbable that cases of perversity (sexual assault of children) could exceed the numerous cases of hysteria. Freud also refused to accept that “in every case the father, not excluding my own, had to be blamed as a pervert”. Freud concluded with ambivalence, describing a remarkable “absence of any feeling of shame . . . in your eyes and my own I have more of the feeling of a victory than of a defeat—and, after all, that is not right” (pp. 112–13). Ambivalence suggests that “what Freud had uncovered in 1896—that . . . children are the victims of sexual assault and abuse within their own families—became such a liability that he literally had to banish it from his consciousness” (Masson 2012, p. XXII).

In 1905, Freud publicly retracted the seduction theory. The choice proved fruitful. “The original existence and persistence of psychoanalysis are, by universal agreement, linked to the abandonment of the seduction theory” (Masson 2012, p. 189). Freud afterward dogmatically insisted that his theory of infant sexuality was the dividing line separating real psychoanalysis from knockoffs. The theory, part of the Oedipal complex, holds that children fantasize about having sex with their parents. Children’s fantasy becomes an approved explanation for why Freud’s patients reported being sexually assaulted and raped by their fathers. It created a virtual reality as an information pattern that allowed society to turn a blind eye to the widespread terrors visited on children by fathers.

In 1924, *An Autobiographical Note* was published. Here, Freud (1989) reflected on his discovery of the Oedipal complex. He described how “the majority of my patients reproduced from their childhood scenes in which they were sexually seduced by . . . their father. I believed these stories”. Freud even stated that his “confidence was strengthened” by cases where abuse “continued up to an age where memory was to be trusted”. Without a transition, Freud added: “If the reader feels inclined to shake his head at my credulity, I cannot altogether blame him,” explaining that he kept his “critical faculty in abeyance”. He then wrote, without giving a cause of change, that when he “was at last obliged to recognize that these scenes of seduction had never taken place . . . I was for some time completely at a loss”. Not mentioning identifying as Oedipus, he continued: “I had in fact stumbled for the first time upon the *Oedipus complex* . . . which I did not recognize as yet in its disguise of phantasy” (pp. 20–21). It was a mythic error: “my mistake was of the same kind as would be made by someone who believed that the legendary story of the early kings of Rome . . . was historical truth . . .” (p. 21). The final word of Freud’s rewritten history is a virtual reality that associates “Oedipus” with the conjunction of truth and fantasy, myth and fact. Unable to turn a single blind eye to wink at widespread abuse, Freud closed both eyes. He repressed the truth of his blindness. His writing career created a new myth grounded on reason that, unlike religious myths, could perhaps protect children. Oedipus provided the foundational story that displaced the old myth of religion, creating a virtual reality created subjectively but lived objectively. Knowing how the mind can know and not know and how guilt over past sacrifice causes blindness of the seeing eye prepared Freud to present the Oedipal complex.

5.3. The How: Myth as a Fantasy, Hypnotic Trance

Facts are fixed. Myths move. Paris (2008) defined myths as “fantasy” and “hypnotic trance” (p. 211), arguing that they occur when “objective reality confuses itself with a subjective reality” (p. 216). This is possible because, per Lacan, “the unconscious is structured like a language” (p. 219). The unconscious grammar shapes experiences into memories that alter when present circumstances recall them to mind. Speaking to the unconscious, rather than to the more limited logical mind, blurs the boundaries that generally separate objective and subjective realities.

Freud knew this well. His training as a hypnotist, creation of the talking cure, fascination with the occult, and captivation with questions of how the mind could simultaneously know and not know something gave him a powerful appreciation for the intersection of language and reality. Freud (1920) explicitly associated language and magic: “words were originally magic, and the word retains much of its old magical power even to-day . . . by words the speaker sweeps his audience with him and determines its judgments and decisions. Words call forth effects and are the universal means of influencing human beings” (p. 3). Freud made myth because his writing did more than just convey facts to the conscious mind. Creating the Unconscious caused readers to imagine a mind that would receive his words in powerfully transformative ways.

Fantasy is the weakest form of imagination because what is imagined lacks a quality of substance associated with natural reality. Fantasy is too subjective, too much under conscious control. Somehow, reading inspires the creation of inner images that rivals external perceptions. Choosing to read suspends your control of the imagination. What comes to mind, imagined, seems given, not chosen. The “constrained imaginative acts occurring under authorial direction . . . comes about to suppress our own awareness of the voluntary” (Scarry 1999, p. 31). As Abrams noted above, you do not see what you read (black marks on white backgrounds) but imagine what you are told. Picture the world: the word disappears.

After successfully following instructions, the imagination can easily find and follow the inner pattern of the connections it created. When readers are directed to imagine something more than once, a more vivid, realistic image results (Scarry 1999, p. 94). It is fascinating how this feature of following written instructions works to blur subjective and objective realities. “This sense of ‘givenness’, the sense of something received and simultaneously there for the taking, is descriptive not only of perceptual objects but of imaginary-objects-specified-by-instruction and hence arriving, as it were, from some outside source” (Scarry 1999, p. 34). Part of Freud’s *how* occurs by frequently compelling readers to imagine the structure of an unknowable Unconscious. Each time Freud induces us to imagine the Unconscious, each time words call it to mind, makes it more like a given reality within the self. Subjective and objective realities blur. Myth occurs.

Hypnotic induction adds a deeper level of intention to authorial instruction present whenever we read. Descriptions of modern trance states, building on the work of legendary hypnotist Milton Erickson, are frequently described as being characterized by narrowed attention, as happening to someone, and attended by various hypnotic phenomenon, including age regression, dissociation, hallucination, and time distortion (Wolinsky and Ryan 1991, pp. 10–14). This is why choosing to read, like going to a hypnotist, makes it easy to enter a trance state. Reading creates the perfect conditions of susceptibility to trance: a state of narrowed focus that blurs the boundaries between what is given and received in the imagination. Trances become easier to activate after distinguishing between the conscious and unconscious mind (Wolinsky and Ryan 1991, p. 25), often supported by the generation of confusion at the conscious level of the mind (Wolinsky and Ryan 1991, p. 164). Freud believed conscious confusion (inspired by joke or paradox) lowers the level of consciousness in a way parallel to the distortions of displacement or condensation created in the dream work.

5.4. The What: Myth as Virtual Reality

Paris provided a simple method for depth psychological analysis: inquire after who, what, when, and how. The *who*: Freud’s initial identification as Oedipus before he closed both eyes to the widespread violent incest that caused hysteria. The *when*: It is important that Freud’s writing began at the end of the nineteenth century in terms of both literary competence and narrative expectations, as well as how the unraveling of the providential plot signaled an openness to a new governing myth. These contexts meant Freud had practice relieving symptoms by creating corrective foundational stories, primal scenes in a personal prehistory. This suggests *how* Freud’s writing held the potential power for creating

a new myth (the *what*) that could occur in the minds of readers as they were reading as experienced truth. Based in fantasies constructed from a trance state, these involve the *weak* sense of virtual reality, one divorced from any natural or cultural material occurrence.

A short example of *how* Freud (1989) created myth occurs at the conclusion of 1913's *Totem and Taboo*. He described a Greek play in abstraction, noting how tragic heroes (symbolizing primal fathers) redeem the Chorus by acquiring guilt before they are sacrificed. He then claimed, "The scene upon the stage was derived from the historical scene through a process of systematic distortion" (p. 510). The sudden shift from the staged scene to a distant historical scene, as though from play to reality, masks the fact that the historical scene Freud suggests is just as imagined as the play—and its stage. Readers reimagine the stage for the beginning of the next short paragraph, which anchors a shared kind of virtual reality on which two kinds of plays could be performed: known myth (Dionysius) and historical religion (the Passion of Christ in the Middle Ages). A kind of equality is thereby established that lets Freud begin the next paragraph by introducing a new foundational story that generates both myth and religion. "I should like to insist that [the outcome of *Totem and Taboo*] shows that the beginning of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex . . . the nucleus of all neuroses . . ." (p. 510). At a deep level, guided by the buried hypnotic cue "*insist*", readers imagine Freud's preferred lie as the foundation and origin of myth, religion, and (thanks to the terms "nucleus" and "neuroses") science. The presence of such a suddenly forceful verbal cue, "*insist*," enables the "sheer surprise and assertive thrust of the instruction [that makes] us at once carry it out" overcoming "our ordinary resistance to imagining" (Scarry 1999, p. 105). The suggestion that the Oedipus complex is the foundational truth and source of all myth negates the old (religion) in favor of the new (reason). It does so by using the capacity of language to induce the imagination to create a weak (mental) virtual reality, filled with judgments that separate readers from material reality.

Freud deployed the same techniques in 1923's *The Ego and the Id*, reinforcing and developing this new myth by invoking fantasy, preferred lie, foundational story, hypnotic trance induction, and a plot inviting readers to cast themselves into the story (Freud et al. 1960). The first sentence sets the scene: "In this introductory chapter there is nothing new to be said and it will not be possible to avoid repeating what has often been said before" (p. 1). The imagination thus anticipates that what it creates under Freud's guidance is familiar. By stating "there is nothing new to be said," Freud invokes a sense of reality concerning what follows: it proactively instructs the imagination to digest the words as though they are established or certain. The "it will not be possible to avoid repeating" uses a double negative (confusing the conscious mind, now deprived of an idea to fix upon other than pure repetition), while the final "what has often been said before" is a repetition that reinforces the trance state. Only three paragraphs later, Freud invites a deepened trance:

Experience goes on to show that a psychical element (for instance, an idea) is not as a rule conscious for a protracted length of time. On the contrary, a state of consciousness is characteristically very transitory; an idea that is conscious now is no longer so a moment later, although it can become so again under certain conditions that are easily brought about. In the interval the idea was—we do not know what. We can say that it was latent, and by this we mean that it was capable of becoming conscious at any time. Or, if we say that was unconscious, we shall also be giving a correct description of it (p. 4).

Freud requested that readers attune to their felt sense of experience before conjuring a "psychical element," an abstraction further defined only by "idea," without any content. The "not as a rule conscious" invokes "un-conscious," associated with the inability to focus on the idea of an idea. The "on the contrary" is a negative negating the "not as a rule," a negative that agrees with the first statement, with the characteristic of transitoriness. Confusion occurs. Reading these words grants Freud the power to make an idea appear, disappear, and reappear. Experiencing the felt confirmation while reading permits a deepening trust of being guided. Freud graphically indicates the repressed idea with an

em dash before offering three different correct answers (do not know, that it was latent, that it was unconscious). Three different correct answers induces confusion. Experiencing confusion is proof of the Unconscious, thus deepening a trance state.

Part II induces a trance, or deepens an existing one, through a different means: the description of “preconscious” undermines an ability to distinguish being conscious of ideas from the inside and awareness of perceptions from the outside (Freud 1989, p. 633). This confused state is then explicitly associated with language: Freud (1989) describes how “word-presentations” transform thought processes into perceptions, signaling readers to experience how, when “the process of thinking takes place, thoughts are actually perceived—as if they came from without—and are consequently held to be true” (p. 634). Freud induces a deeper trance state with the penultimate paragraph of part II, describing the ease with which difficult concepts can be managed by the preconscious without becoming conscious, explicitly invoking “the state of sleep” that leads to a solution immediately after waking (p. 637). In lieu of a solution, the section concludes with “a new discovery” of an “unconscious sense of guilt”. The startled reader likely becomes aware of this unconscious guilt suddenly, just as described.

Part III instructs the imagination on how to create a superego that readers can then discover, which repeats what readers may have found familiar from *Mourning and Melancholia*. First, Freud (1989) deepens the trance state by confusing the inner/outer distinction: we create identities by internalizing what we love. Age regression and time dilation follow when reading “the first identifications made in earliest childhood” as “general and lasting”. Next comes uncovering “the origin of the ego ideal; for behind it there lies hidden an individual’s first and most important identification, his identification with the father in his own personal prehistory”. The return to the timelessness of a prehistory opens the curtain to a state of mythic awareness. Then, readers find how identifying with the father is importantly unlike other identifications because “a direct and immediate identification and takes place” before awareness of objects or an outside. Then, readers appreciate how subsequent sexual object choices is related with an infant identifying “to the father and mother,” which would thus “reinforce the primary one” (p. 639). The sudden obedience summoned by “insists” is echoed by “direct and immediate identification,” which here guides the Unconscious to imagine that this has always been true: a virtual reality.

The stage is now set for the introduction of the superego, the culmination of Freud’s myth. After showing how to imagine a mythic father figure, anchored in a personal prehistory, Freud (1989) summons ambivalent feelings toward this father, invoking a basic, foundational contradicting imperative. A deeply felt ambivalence invites the repressed into awareness, which feels cathartic and true. Freud’s writing is unusually emphatic, using second persona address and quotation marks, suggesting a potent scene. The imagined superego proclaims, “‘You ought to be like this (like your father)’” and also “‘You may not be like this (like your father)—that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative’” (pp. 642–43). Combining repetition with contradiction makes the phrase “you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative” stand out, forming a deep impression on a vulnerable imagination. This suggestion installs an inner mythic father figure who would forbid following in a father’s footsteps, halting the cycle of sexual assault. Identifying with Oedipus, willing to explore what was known and unknown at the same time, let Freud create a myth capable of replacing religion.

The superego (ego ideal) is a triumph for Freud. As “the heir of the Oedipus complex,” which it has successfully deposed, the superego overcomes ambivalence, functioning as the new site of conflicts between internal demands and the outer world. Having instructed readers on how to create a superego, Freud (1989) discusses how the superego provides a better mythological masterplot: “as a substitute for a longing for the father, it contains the germ from which all religions have evolved”. Each description is imagined as a command: the father is replaced “by teachers and others in authority” whose “injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful” and “continue, in the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship”. The punishment for not heeding these inner prohibitions is guilt.

Further, Freud argues that “social feelings” rest on “identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal,” which allows the superego to remain the source of “religion, morality, and a social sense” (p. 643). The superego serves as the source for “the chief elements in the higher side” of humanity. To at least some extent, Freud successfully installed a new foundational story, a myth built on reason, within readers’ imaginations.

This work enacts a repetition of Freud’s personal experience. In 1897, Freud sacrificed the seduction thesis for the Oedipal complex as a way of heeding the dream associated with his father’s death. In 1923, the Oedipal complex was sacrificed and repressed using the strength of the introjected father. If the Oedipal complex purchases a feeling of victory over the father at the expense of retaining ambivalence, repression of the Oedipal complex—like Freud’s own repression of the trauma endured by his female patients—allows life to move forward with less ambivalence. The Oedipal complex is eliminated from consciousness—although the prohibition against behaving like the father remains. Freud (1989) instructs the vast bulk of guilt to “remain unconscious,” repeating the Oedipal archetype that insists on becoming blind to guilt (p. 654).

The monumental decision to sacrifice the Oedipal complex also invokes a repetition of the tragic drama imagined in *Totem and Taboo*, in which the father is sacrificed to provide redemption. If eliminating the Oedipal complex was a step forward, it also meant taking a step away from the reality that Freud repressed. Perhaps his description of the plight of the ego allowed Freud (1989) to relieve some of his inner pressure without knowing what he knew: “In its position between the id and reality, [the ego] only too often yields to the temptation to become sycophantic, opportunist and lying, like a politician who sees the truth but wants to keep his place in popular favour” (p. 657). Given how he was dismissed after his 1896 lecture on hysteria, it is unlikely that Freud would have found a platform for psychoanalysis and his new myth had he insisted on exposing perverse fathers. All the same, both the repeated sacrifice and repression and the description of the Ego indicates the ongoing presence of the repressed in Freud.

Given rising antisemitism in the 1920s, it is unsurprising that Freud (1989) revisited how the old myth of religion was related to issues of guilt and hostility. *Future of an Illusion* offered a vision for the central importance of the superego, not only in repressing incestuous wishes, but also in creating the path of sublimation (p. 690). Civilization offers the creation of beauty and advances that benefit the whole of humanity—unlike the more limited narcissism provided by nationalistic identification (p. 692). Freud risked psychoanalysis’ reputation (p. 708) to critique the dogmatic foundation of religious culture (pp. 700–1). His prescription: to “no longer attribute to God what is our own will” (p. 711) and recreate the sacrifice of the father (p. 712) in a way that would allow religion to have the same fate as the Oedipus complex (p. 713). The best road to the future is by focusing all resources on the present without speculations about an afterlife (p. 717). Religion and nationalism become illusions, the sacrifice of which would permit human progress to a future where the intellect would become responsible for itself (p. 722). Having created an inner virtual reality (with the Unconscious), Freud began depicting a new strong cultural virtual reality focused on a potential social order without religion.

Civilization and its Discontents was published a year later. Freud (1989) starts by reattuning readers to past trance inductions and the preferred lie of his foundational story, now contrasted against the “oceanic feeling” that seems religion’s most benign gift (p. 723) but too easily entangles with nationalism. Freud’s primary target was the guilt caused by combining the superego with religion. He interpreted Christ’s commandments to love—neighbor and enemy—as amplifying guilt by creating impossible demands (pp. 747–50). After rehearsing his own myth, inviting readers to cast themselves in his story, Freud offers the Oedipal complex as a new basis for community: “what began in relation to the father is completed in relation to the group” (p. 763). Overwhelming guilt becomes less monolithic, broken into feelings of “malaise or dissatisfaction” (p. 764), as well as a sense of remorse that also “can be older than conscience” (p. 765). Freud’s Eros is not an oceanic love, but it does prevent a cultural superego from overstepping boundaries, causing guilt that could

create a neurotic civilization (p. 771). Freud did not succeed in preventing war, and the virtual reality he tried to name never came to pass. Nonetheless, his myth can be seen as a success: he created a rational inner deity as sovereign over Campbell's third mythic function of social morality, separating this function out from a larger potential whole.

Religions endure. Abuses occur. Freud's alternative myth thrives, having seeped into the collective unconscious. Even those who have not read Freud still feel the presence of a superego creating a sense of guilt, compelling obedience. Freud's Oedipus remains a virtual reality that still influences everyday lives. Although we hear about creation myths, we do not often hear of the creation of myth. Like mythical heroes who arrive without history, seemingly as ever-present as stars in the sky, myths seem given constants. We learn myths and create stories. Stories bring the power of narrative connections to life. If myths offer mirrors that reflect raw experiences in powerful ways, stories express the transformed results. Stories are made from the myths we are given, into which we cast ourselves. Perhaps Freud remains memorable for having remade an old myth into a new mirror.

Nonetheless, the limitations of Freud's virtual reality remain apparent. We are confronted by the rise of nationalistic tendencies based on myths that ostensibly justify violence against others—even in societies that are no longer dominated by Christian myths. Freud's attempt to mitigate the imagined influence of guilt and the cruelty of the superego through the creation of community was perhaps well intentioned but ultimately flawed. It was based on an isolating fantasy, wish fulfillment, a closed myth. Fortunately, this means that the hopeful potential of creating a virtual reality remains unexhausted.

6. Creating a Strong Virtual Reality

Section 5 not only showed how to successfully create a modern myth, but also how Freud's myth—based in a weak virtual reality—was ineffective at providing a robust alternative to religious and nationalist myths. This section attempts to imagine a new way of attempting to imagine a new myth capable of opening Taylor's immanent social reality and supplying a way of empowering readers to lean into their own lives, generating narrative traction, and reintegrating a sense of mythic potentiality. The context for this, again, is the idea that many people now live in a secular age disembedded from a world connected to natural and supernatural realms (Taylor 2007, p. 3). The goal is to imagine toward an open myth that fulfills each of the four functions described by Campbell: narratives that prompt a sensitivity to the numinous and inexplicable, provide an open and relational image of the surrounding world and social order, and offer a model that speaks to psychological development (Campbell and Kennedy 2001, pp. 3–10).

Given the context of an imminent social reality that Taylor offers, it makes sense that Kimbles (2014) would build on Hillman's claim that "The Gods live in the *polis*" by interpreting these gods as "background narratives" in the collective unconscious, narratives that "connect deep underlying patterns of belonging," allowing individuals to connect to groups as a way to fulfill the need for psychic belonging once shouldered by natural and supernatural worlds (Kimbles, p. 32). What Kimbles here identifies as latent potential stories that provide connections in the city seems a parallel concept to Taylor's sense of social imaginary discussed above. Problematically, in practice, these narratives are closed myths. Many modern tribal myths that invite people to identify with the names of groups tend to exclude others, especially at the violent expense of those depicted as enemies. When not creating violent animosity, these myths also tend to reinforce conventional hierarchies that often privilege a solitary white man above all—including women and people of color. The background narratives that implicitly guide and direct our sense of individual meaning and personal belonging tend to limit the imagination to a weak virtual reality. The detrimental nature of these divisive background narratives becomes visible when contrasted against the function of traditional myths. The prevalence of these closed myths as guiding influences or unrecognized determinants provides a partial explanation toward the current epidemic of loneliness.

One contemporary way to think of how a myth functions is as a “reality-system”. Following the work of [Campagna \(2018\)](#), reality-systems occur at a metaphysical level, where, through historical decisions about the world’s composition, “it is implicitly decided what kinds of things can or cannot take place in that world” (p. 2). The resulting “reality-system shapes the world in a certain way, and endows it with a particular destiny” (p. 5). The principal distinction between the two reality-systems that Campagna explored, which he named “Technic” and “Magic,” involves the attitude toward language. Technic presupposes the existence of absolute language that attempts to filter away anything that cannot be measured and known within rational systems: it parallels the fallen language depicted by Benjamin. It also aligns with the logic of disenchantment described by Taylor. Because its grounding principle is that language is absolute, it creates a closed system: “Language creates the world in its own image, and when it becomes absolute, suddenly there is no longer anything outside the world” (p. 66). Mystery is excluded, as is any sense of particularity or difference: homogenous time and space constitute what Hayles would recognize as a virtual reality defined by pattern/randomness that discounts the unknown and emphasizes what can be understood through reason and language—a weak virtual reality. Theories of society that emphasize a single myth of how things should be tend to emerge from this kind of absolutist logic. Like conspiracy theories (which focus on a master myth of how it came to be this way), exclusive and isolating myths tend to summon closed, weak virtual realities in which all can be known. The promise of connection that they offer tends to result in lonely despair. Additionally, this sense of lonely impoverishment is all too often descriptive of addictive virtual realities enabled by technology.

[Campagna \(2018\)](#) argued that Magic, the alternative reality-system, is predicated on preserving the ineffable within language, keeping the unknown as an essential gift (p. 10), valuing the “primacy of ineffable existence over linguistic essence, while not denying legitimacy to the latter” (p. 186) and seeing the ineffable as akin to life itself. It provides an open structure and invites its adherents to open as well. As such, everything in Magic’s world becomes a symbol, an invitation to move from what appears to what remains unknowable (p. 164). Each thing “is structured as a centre . . . necessarily traversed by an ‘axis’ connecting the ineffable with the linguistic dimension of existence” (p. 167). It is an active relationship that creates a coincidence of the linguistic and ineffable, essence and existence, imaginable and real, while remaining continually aware of the momentary and fleeting nature of the created connection. So potentiated, Campagna allowed that a person becomes capable of accepting linguistic descriptions of the world with the knowledge that they conceal as much as they reveal, thus knowing that “we must always make up fictional concepts and notions that we employ to navigate the world, while treating them ‘as if’ they were ‘real.’ The point of this fictional endeavor . . . is that such fictions are useful to us” (p. 218). Relative to the language of myth, the utility of magic would arise in creating an inspirational virtual reality, a story that offers an alternative into which audiences could cast themselves ([Paris 2008](#), p. 211), providing a sense of narrative traction in a framework capable of supporting wholeness. It suggests a world in which our naming can create new ways of imagining a virtual reality as once again something potent and meaningful. In such circumstances, “to speak a true word is to transform the world” ([Friere 2018](#), p. 87).

Building on the insight that “the Gods are in the *polis*” ([Kimbles 2014](#), p. 32) and remaining oriented toward imaginative engagement with modern myths suggests finding an archetypal understanding, a strong virtual reality, of a city as an initial point of focus. This idea of a city would allow the meaningful development of spontaneous relationships with others (through love) and the world (through work). Currently, cities are often epicenters of conformity where people increasingly identify with their role as employees and seek ways to ascend within social hierarchies. [Collins et al. \(2012\)](#) wrote that “the one-dimensional mode of modern consciousness,” caused by a compromised relationship to more dynamic and diverse models of reality, “recognizes the need for change and transformation, yet cannot free itself from the self-perpetuating binds of its own creation” (p. 165). This indicates the presence of a closed myth. The authors noted that “the development of awareness”

would “go beyond competitiveness and personal gain to the ‘collective well-being of all life’” (p. 171). A few relevant propositions they mentioned include: *deep citizenship*, defined as the “discovery about what it is to be human, as well as having concern for self, others, and the world” that “allied to the politics of everyday life, between the inner life of people’s private world and the outer life of public engagement”; *deep democracy*, which “encourages dialogues and interactions between diverse viewpoints”; and *deep occupations*, which occurs when “active participation in daily life contains the possibilities for evolving . . . consciousness and awareness” (p. 173).

Even if these qualities are fictional, they nonetheless indicate something potential and vibrant that could be lifted out of a city’s streets and sidewalks to engage meaningfully with the environment. In the same way that audiences in earlier eras could imagine the presence of the Kingdom of God (or City of God) at hand, knowing that their acts of love would knit together the divine and mundane worlds, so also is it possible—and delightful—to imagine the Invisible City, a community filled with people who have the capacity to live with grace, generosity, and kindness. The inhabitants of the Invisible City look like everyone else—they might be any one of us—and only those who remain vigilant for glimpses of integrity and courage can glimpse it as it becomes expressed in everyday interactions. It may be seen in a warm gesture that reduces anxiety, an appreciation for a moment of beauty, a caring word that lets another feel appreciated. Because the inhabitants of the Invisible City inspire a sense of true belonging and seem possessed of a deeply meaningful life, a pure desire to become an inhabitant—or even mistaken as an inhabitant—can become an ever more conscious goal and intention. Focusing on maintaining a sense of equanimity and confidence, preserving space to allow others to feel uplifted even in minor interactions, remembering to stay connected to a sense of peaceful joy, feels liberating to everyone. Guards drop, worries ease, laughter erupts. Confidence inspires confidence, making it easier to trust an innate sense of what is best in each situation, acting spontaneously with others. Expanding a sense of the Invisible City—even if nobody else knows it by this name or believes that it exists—becomes a lifetime vocation. Like a confidence man who inspires belief, or a prophet who points to reality as it is as an expression of its marvelous potential, those inspired by the vision of the Invisible City expand the imaginative capacity of those they speak to about it (Hyde 1998, pp. 295–96, 330). This kind of belief reconceives of the city as an open world, filled with fresh potential waiting to be birthed into existence. One person’s faith in the potential of the Invisible City is all that is needed for the whole of the world to become inspired; anyone who lacks faith that it exists might benefit from becoming suspicious that everyone moving along the sidewalks *is* an inhabitant of the Invisible City—that everyone around you secretly hopes that you will join. The inhabitants of the Invisible City express the qualities of deep citizenship, democracy, and occupation. Anyone who would be taken for part of the Invisible City would provide the kind of external figure and permission to play that would invite people to move from stuck systems and suspended symbols.

One modern version of the Invisible City was described by Martin Luther King, Jr. using the language of the “Beloved Community”. This ideal community is “dedicated to the cause of loyalty and truth” through a type of “love that can transform opposers into friends” and “the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age”. Contemporary versions of the Beloved Community extend the “love which will bring about miracles” to include the more-than-human world of plants and animals, as well as the overall habitat and environment (Pollack 2023). Each thing that inspires hope and everything beautiful that can be imagined becomes welcomed into the Beloved Community. Recognizing our capacity to notice, to invite, to love, and to imagine provides a way of appreciating the interconnected depth of our relationships—a cure for the ailment of loneliness and one dimensionality that plagues contemporary civic life. King’s use of the Beloved Community, a metaphor that seems to have inspired a nationwide movement toward social change, provides a demonstration of how the myth of the Invisible City could be put into practice.

The myth of the Invisible City works within the framework of Taylor's immanent, secular world of a public sphere, free markets, and citizen states—but by making explicit use of the imagination, it is not limited to the weak virtual reality that rationality constructs. The structure of this myth is one of invitation and openness, rather than separation. Inhabiting this myth, as with King's Beloved Community, would reawaken awareness of the importance and beauty of the surrounding natural world and generate a rekindled love for all things in the greater ecological sphere. The movement from longing for the Invisible City to feeling a sense of belonging would provide a narrative framework that would reconceptualize birthright, midlife, and death in the context of a meaningful harmonization with self, society, the universe, and the mysterious or unknown. The myth offers a strong virtual reality in which those who integrate it into their lives find language to add a dimension of ineffable enchantment to otherwise mundane activities.

Kimbles (2014) indicated where unthought contemporary myths contribute to fractious and fragmented polarizations of society. Paris (2008) described the importance of deconstructing old myths before creating a new one (p. 216). Becoming aware of modern myths—especially closed myths that support weak virtual realities—allows them to be discarded as inadequate. New virtual realities—inclusive and open—can be constructed along the alternative reality-system that Campagna (2018) described. Thoughtfully constructing alternative myths grounded in your social context and personal life experience in ways that summon you to a strong virtual reality opens you (and probably those with whom you interact) to a more meaningful, engaged, and connected way of living.

Hope imagines, faith creates, love expands. Myth opens. Soul deepens. Rather than the limiting cultural ideal that creates conflict and opposition, what is deeply known but has become unthinkable in contemporary culture—the interconnectedness of all life—persists in a worldview open to Magic (rather than Technic), and in an imaginable virtual reality like the Invisible City. Appreciating how faith, hope, and love appear as virtual realities, the potential of which lies waiting in the background narratives of contemporary urban environments, provides a way to find and experience the gods of the city within and among us all. This is the form of a strong virtual reality: imagining it names the greatest potential in each situation and allows for a fulfilling and meaningful mode of engagement.

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