The Sacred Law of Authority

In the context of discussions about collective memory and identity, the notion of myth is not to be understood as a story that is, in any straight-forward sense, untrue. Rather, as Jan Assmann rightly observes, myth is defined by its social function:

Myth is foundational history that is narrated in order to illuminate the present from the standpoint of its origins. [...] Through memory, history becomes myth. This does not make it unreal – on the contrary, this is what makes it real, in the sense that it becomes a lasting, normative, and formative power. (38)

Myth, for Assmann, is a performative discourse that creates, rather than merely reflects, a social reality. Moreover, in addition to its foundational role, myth may also serve as what Assmann calls a “contrapresent” – a function that sometimes conflicts with myth’s foundational role because myth as contrapresent emphasizes “what has gone wrong, what has disappeared,” and the present thus “finds itself dislocated or at the very least falling short of the great and glorious past” (62). It is difficult to think of a better description of how, in The Virgin Suicides, the boys’ loss of a mythical innocence provides the basis of their collective identity even as it instills their present with a lasting sense of lack and impairment: “scarred [...] forever, making us happier with dreams than with wives” (169). The sisters’ suicides, as a foundational moment of loss, is the reason why the boys, as grown-ups, still gather in their “refurbished tree house,” where they keep the “sacred objects” that document the myth of the Lisbon girls (246). The boys’ attitude toward their collective myth of origin thus also bears out Dominick LaCapra’s observation that an extremely destructive or disorienting event may become both a founding trauma and an occasion of “displaced sacralization” (Writing History, Writing Trauma 23) – a point to which we shall return shortly.
First, however, we ought to state clearly that the narrator, as the voice of the boys’ collective identity, cannot ultimately wish to resolve the trauma of the girls’ suicides because this would unravel the myth that underpins the group’s existence. Importantly, this is not to suggest that the boys’ desire for relief from the inordinate pressures of trauma is feigned or unreal; on the contrary, there is no doubt that “[s]ometimes, drained by this investigation,” the boys long “for some shred of evidence, some Rosetta stone that would explain the girls at last” (170). At the same time, however, even in this passage the narrator uses the word sometimes to qualify the boys’ desire for a final explanation. The reason for this is that the narrator himself cannot possibly desire the boys to overcome the suicides’ negative effects because this shared experience of trauma is the only reason why the group as a community of suffering – and hence why the narrator – exists in the first place. The narrator, as a personification of collective memory, is thus caught in a double bind, for while on one level the whole purpose of the group he represents is to find collective ways of coping with trauma, he must at the same time prevent the boys from ever leaving their traumatic memories behind – for if this were to happen, then the community, and thus the narrator himself, would cease to exist. Accordingly, Rachel McLennan is right in insisting that, in the final analysis, the narrator is not truly interested in explaining or resolving the enigma of the past; instead, he wishes to legitimize his own mythical version of it: a version that sustains his identity as the personified voice of a group of middle-class, white, heterosexual American males (34).

Among the narrator’s strategies of legitimation, his recourse to two discourses of power and authority is particularly striking: the language of religion and the idiom of the law. According to the narrator, for instance, the Lisbon girls at times appear “like a congregation of angels” (25), while Cecilia’s “illuminated” diary looks “like a Book of Hours or a medieval Bible” (32). By using these and similar phrases, the narrator imbues the story of the Lisbon sisters with an aura of the sacred and thus as beyond question or close examination: “Please don’t touch. We’re going to put the picture back in its envelope now” (119). At the same time, the narrator deploys the discourse of law and legal inquiry to prevent accusations of downright mystification: “We’ve tried to arrange the photographs chronologically, though the passage of so many years has made it difficult. […] Exhibit #1 shows the Lisbon house shortly before Cecilia’s suicide attempt” (5). Referring to “documents” and “Exhibits” (e.g. 101) as well as to interviews conducted with various witnesses (e.g. 78), the narrator evokes an atmosphere of thorough investigation, trial, and judgment, with the boys meeting almost daily to “go over the evidence once again, reciting portions of Cecilia’s journal” (238).
Tellingly, in this last quotation, the rituals of law (to “go over the evidence”) and the realm of the sacred (“reciting” scripture) do not truly remain separate; rather, the narrator uses the combined authority of these two registers to bolster his own discursive authority. In this, The Virgin Suicides as a novel can in part be read as reflecting on the historical fact that the law, in ‘archaic’ societies, was indeed inseparable from the religious realm of the sacred, and that even today the law as a highly ritualized institution resembles the practices of religion (e.g. Stollberg-Rilinger 149–160; cf. Girard 24).

If the narrator of The Virgin Suicides uses certain types of discourses to lend authority to his account, he also continually works to dismiss as insufficient all attempts by others to explain why the Lisbon sisters might have killed themselves. Journalists like Ms. Perl, for example, are portrayed as distorting and simplifying the Lisbons’ suicides:

Ms. Perl […] single-handedly initiated the feeding frenzy of speculation that continues to this day. In her subsequent articles – one every two or three days for two weeks – she shifted her tone from the sympathetic register of a fellow mourner to the steely precision of what she never succeeded in being: an investigative reporter. Scouring the neighborhood in her blue Pontiac, she cobbled together reminiscences into an airtight conclusion, far less truthful than our own, which is full of holes. (222)

Just as he dismisses other “reporters” (224), the narrator here questions Ms. Perl’s journalistic abilities (“what she never succeeded in being: an investigative reporter”) before faulting her for her “airtight conclusions.” More generally, the narrator claims that the boys are “forced to wander endlessly down the paths of hypothesis and memory” because no one has told the Lisbon girls’ story to their “satisfaction” (224) – a word that has much to do with expectations and desires, but leaves open the question of factual truth. In a similar vein, the narrator objects to other attempts at explanation:

Mr. Conley […] said, “Capitalism has resulted in material well-being but spiritual bankruptcy.” He went on to deliver a living room lecture about human needs and the ravages of competition, and even though he was the only Communist we knew, his ideas differed from everyone else’s only in degree. Something sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls. Our parents thought it had to do with our music, our godlessness, or the loosening of morals regarding sex we hadn’t even had. Mr. Hedlie mentioned that fin-de-siècle Vienna witnessed a similar outbreak of suicides on the part of the young, and put the whole thing down to the misfortune of living in a dying

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14 As Bilyana Vanyova Kostova rightly notes, “the narrative clings unto uncertainty” (53).
empire. It had to do with the way the mail wasn’t delivered on time, and how potholes never got fixed, or the thievery at City Hall, or the race riots, or the 801 fires set around the city on Devil’s night. (231)

However, even though the narrator ridicules the explanations put forward by the adults from the community (“the loosening of morals regarding sex we hadn’t even had”), he later admits that the boys are at times tempted to accept such “general explanations, which qualified the Lisbon girls’ pain as merely historic, springing from the same source as other teenage suicides” (238). Tellingly, the narrator refers to these explanations as “merely historic” (emphasis added) – and thus as inappropriate to the sacred truth of the Lisbon girls, which necessarily transcends the secular boundaries of history and reason, and which must remain forever unknowable:

In the end we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn’t name. [...] So much has been written about the girls in the newspapers, so much has been said over back-yard fences, or related over the years in psychiatrists’ offices, that we are certain only of the insufficiency of explanations. (246–247)

Not entirely unlike some proponents of postmodern theory, the narrator is “certain” that there is no such thing as an absolute or even adequate truth, and that his version of the events is superior precisely because it recognizes its own “insufficiency.”

Of course, it would be unfair to regard the narrator’s account as simply manipulative and misleading, for it clearly addresses the boys’ emotional and psychological need to find “a story we could live with” (241). Moreover, as David Kennedy notes, “elegists are always faced with unsatisfactory resurrections, unfinished and unfinishable conversations” (21). Nevertheless, we must recog-

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15 As Terry Eagleton notes, the rejection by some postmodern thinkers of the very idea of absolute truth rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of what this idea implies: “Absolute truth does not mean non-historical truth: it does not mean the kind of truths which drop from the sky, or which are vouchsafed to us by some bogus prophet from Utah. On the contrary, they are truths which are discovered by argument, evidence, experiment, investigation. A lot of what is taken as (absolutely) true at any given time will no doubt turn out to be false. Most apparently watertight scientific hypotheses have turned out to be full of holes. Not everything which is considered to be true is actually true. But it remains the case that it cannot just be raining from my viewpoint” (After Theory 108–109). Citing Bernard Williams, Eagleton adds that in effect “relativism is really a way of explaining away conflict,” for if there is no such thing as truth, “then political radicals can stop talking as if it is unequivocally true that women are oppressed or that the planet is gradually being poisoned by corporate greed” (After Theory 109).