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Interfacing Science, Literature, and the Humanities / ACUME 2 Vol. 6

Paola Spinozzi /
Alessandro Zironi (eds.)

Summary

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Origins as a Paradigm in the Sciences and in the Humanities

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Interfacing Science, Literature, and the Humanities / ACUME 2

Volume 6

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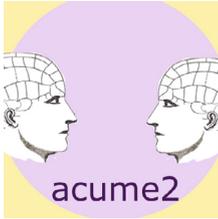
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Origins as a Paradigm in the Sciences and in the Humanities

With 8 Figures

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Socrates

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**PART III: Quests for Origins,
Origins of Narrations**

Abstracts

Marcella Farioli

The Genesis of the Cosmos, the Search for the *Arche* and the Finding of *Aitia* in Classical Greek Culture

Every archaic civilisation addressed the problem of the origins of the gods, the cosmos and man. Greek enquiries are characterised by a marked aetiological tendency, which firstly emerged in mythology and folk-tales, then in philosophy, historiography, medicine, and the natural science, and eventually, during the Hellenistic Age, in the writings of poets and philologists.

Greek representations of origins fit within four typologies. The first includes cosmogonies, that is mythological stories about the origins of the world – Hesiod's *Theogony*, Orphic cosmogonies, genealogical manuals – based on older patterns deriving from the Ancient Near East. The second typology comprises speculations about the *arche*, the first cause of the world, by Ionic philosophers. The substantial element of novelty they introduced was the idea that it is necessary to go beyond phenomena to detect, through observation of nature and abstract thought, the unifying principle of the cosmos. The third kind of representation focuses on the birth of the human race and the origin of evil, two issues very much present in Greek mythology, i. e. in Orphic thought and in the myths of Prometheus and Pandora. Surprisingly, the Greeks did not have a specific founding myth for the creation of man. Such an absence is likely due to the fact that for them the main characteristic of mankind was not its existence, but rather its mortality. The lack of a unified anthropogony is balanced by a widely shared anthropology, which explains when and why men have become what they are. Finally, the issue of origins is expressed in several aetiological myths relating to *protoi heuretai* (inventors) and the *aitia* (origins) of objects, phenomena, and institutions. The *Aitia* became an autonomous literary genre in the Hellenistic Age.

Alessandro Zironi

Searching for Origins: Indo-European Words and Nordic Representations

Indo-European words which indicate ‘origins’ evoke stasis or kinesis, call attention to the starting point or to the movement they engender, focus on the beginning or on the outcome. The double interpretation of the concept of origin can be retraced in the Nordic myth of the creation of cosmos, which narrates how the primeval void called *ginnungagap* was filled.

Old Norse cosmogony defines a model of origins which has constantly been associated with representations of Iceland. The unceasing outburst of primary elements has left deep marks and scars on Icelandic landscapes, and has prevented human beings from prevailing over, and moulding, nature’s primary manifestations. The interest for Iceland has thriven on the observation of caves, abysses and volcanoes, thus fostering speculations on what can be defined as primeval.

The connection between the Icelandic landscape and the search for origins is further examined in relation to *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (1864) by Jules Verne and to contemporary artistic representations.

Marusca Francini

Origo Gentis and Cultural Memory. The Origins of England as an Emblematic Case Study

The focus of this chapter is on the origins of Anglo-Saxon England and the narrations they elicited in the two major historical works of the Anglo-Saxon period, namely the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, written in Latin by the monk Bede in the eighth century, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a set of annals written in Old English in the ninth century.

Two different approaches to the foundation myth of Anglo-Saxon England – the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain in the fifth century – will be compared in order to demonstrate that for Bede the idea of a united England was based on his belief in the Anglo-Saxon Church, whereas patriotism in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which is a secular work, was rooted in the idea of victorious military kingship.

Marianne Børch

The Semantics of Originality as Indicator of the Cultural Paradigm Shift from Medieval to Modern

Today, the word 'original' can be regarded as a synonym for 'innovative' and 'individual'. This usage, however, is directly inverse to that of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when 'original' meant 'pristine' and 'ideal' (as in the first and total 'Original Sin'). Denoting the absolute, 'original' referred to the standard against which everything else was measured, every departure from that standard being judged by various degrees of 'lessness' or degeneration.

A focus on the works of Geoffrey Chaucer will allow for demonstrating how the apparent simplicity, occasional strangeness and referential inconsistency of early literary texts and other art forms may be explained in terms of their closeness to an absolute, original norm. For example, the cliché of romance knighthood, which seems to describe all knights as alike, reflects the attempt to depict an ideal society, where the individual coincides with the ideal. Moreover, narrative inconsistencies in characterisation (a kind husband who is nevertheless a 'demon') may be related to the difference between the character's function with regards to medieval faith in God's indulgence (which requires the 'ideal' role of a pagan) and his function in a particular story (which requires a loving husband).

The chapter finally explores how literary texts testify to the epistemological change from medieval to modern through words which originally functioned as ideal referents and later acquired socially determined meanings.

Jón Gunnar Þorsteinsson

Paradigm as an Origin: Or, Bearing Evidence to the Meaningful Logic of Cause and Effect

This chapter questions the relevance of origins as a paradigm by developing a comparison between the concept of Author in French Post-Structuralism and recent cosmological theories. The origin of a river, of cartoons and of Modernism will also be discussed in order to show that origins can be an elusive paradigm and the quest for origins a deceitful enterprise.

Searching for origins of phenomena and concepts can move us away from them, because it is usually possible to go one step further back, and from that step, another one backwards. Such process can lead any serious analysis astray.

The assumption that there is a precise beginning which is more meaningful than that which follows can undermine the chain of cause and effect. Although we can often trace the origin of phenomena much further back, the process can become pointless. Once the concept of origins is enlarged too much, meaningful relations are breached. At risk is that we get lost in arguing about definitions which are perhaps not relevant in themselves, instead of doing work on the actual phenomena. In order to avoid the risk of undermining the cause-and-effect nexus, it is important to assess when going further backwards would be irrelevant.

Marcella Farioli

The Genesis of the Cosmos, the Search for the *Arche* and the Finding of *Aitia* in Classical Greek Culture

In every archaic civilization people questioned how things had come to be as they were. The issues surrounding the origins of the divine order, of the cosmos and of man constitute the main lines of inquiry. Indeed, in every culture there are mythical stories about the origins of the universe and it is into these that different peoples and societies have introduced the elements and metaphors most representative of their world view.

Starting from 3000 BCE the first cosmogonies, theogonies and anthropogonies, which narrate the origins of the universe and are based essentially on the authority of myth, were codified and spread throughout Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Greece different theogonies and cosmogonies dating to the eighth century point to an earlier mythological inheritance, also of Eastern origin. Later, for several historical, cultural and economic reasons, the search for the *arche*, the origin and the first principle of all things, developed in Ionia, connecting the traditional tale and later philosophical conceptions.

Although the issue of origins is typical of all archaic cultures, among the Greeks it was particularly pressing and endured for centuries, even after philosophy would tackle it on rational ground. Overwhelmed by the fear of *horror vacui*, they needed to explain and define the genesis of the greatest possible number of deeds, objects and phenomena, to show their *aition*, their origins, to place them in space and in time and find a discoverer or inventor, the *protos heuretes*. The quest for origins allowed the Greeks to express a deep connection with their own roots, with the cult of memory and the excitement of the founding act.

For these reasons the inquiry into the origins of a noteworthy number of objects, phenomena, events and rites establishes and transforms itself throughout the development of Greek civilization: such marked aetiological tendency¹ is to emerge in historiography, in medicine, natural science and, eventually, in the Hellenistic Age, in the scholarship of poets and philologists.

1 See Bernhard Abraham van Groningen, *In the Grip of the Past. Essay on an Aspect of Greek*

I. Greek and Ancient Near East Cosmogonies

In archaic Greek thought the idea of cosmogony as conceived by modern science, that is to say a scientific study about the origin and evolution of the universe, did not exist. There were, instead, cosmogonies dressed up as mythological stories about the origins of the world.

The first cosmogonic treatment that has reached us in its entirety is the *Theogony* by Hesiod, a poem in hexameters written at the end of the eighth century BCE. It is also one of the few sources in our possession which expresses Greek cosmogonic thought prior to Milesian conceptualizations of *arche*. A long list of divine filiations begins with Chasm and continues with Gaia, the earth, Tartarus, the world's deepest region, and Eros, that is Love. Chasm himself generates two dark entities, Erebus, infernal darkness, and Night, whose union generates two opposing luminous entities, Aether, the bright, lit part of the sky, and Day. Even Gaia, through parthenogenesis, gives birth to a son, Ouranos, the sky, with whom she also produces Oceanus:

In truth, first of all Chasm came to be, and then broad-breasted Earth, the ever immovable seat of all the immortals who possess snowy Olympus' peak and murky Tartarus in the depths of the broad-pathed earth, and Eros, who is the most beautiful among the immortals gods [...].

From Chasm, Erebus and black Night came to be; and then Aether and Day came forth from Night, who conceived and bore them after mingling in love with Erebus. Earth first of all bore starry Sky, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, so that she would be the ever immovable seat for the blessed gods; and she bore the high mountains, the graceful haunts of the goddesses, Nymphs who dwell on the wooded mountains. And she also bore the barren sea seething with its swell, Pontus, without delightful love; and then having bedded with Sky, she bore deep-dyding Ocean [...].²

The story of Ouranos' castration, which is performed by his own son, Cronos, is then narrated and followed by further filiations, among which the birth of the Olympian Gods, whose parents are Cronos and Rhea, and the fight between Zeus and his father Cronos, who is eventually dethroned. Zeus' accession to the throne is seen by the poet as the moment of change from violence and disorder to order and justice. Afterwards, the genealogy of the Gods lists the minor gods, the

Thought (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953), pp. 30–31.

² See Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. and trans. by Glenn W. Most (Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press, 2006), ll. 116–20; 123–33, p. 13. In note 7, *ivi*, Most explains that Chasm is 'usually translated 'Chaos'; but that suggests to us, misleadingly, a jumble of disordered matter, whereas Hesiod's term indicates instead a gap or opening'.

unions between the Gods and the unions between the Gods and the mortals, which will give rise to the heroes.

The gods described by Hesiod before the appearance of the Olympians have a complex physiognomy: they are abstract, cosmological entities (the Earth, the Sky) who nevertheless behave anthropomorphically, coupling and procreating. How abstract elements and anthropomorphic behaviours intermingle is not specified: Hesiod's text, in fact, does not supply precise answers to the question of origins or to how such births happened. How was the earth formed? First there was Chasm and then there was the Earth. And Chasm, what is it, and where does it come from? ³

The *Theogony* is certainly a story and not a scientific explanation. And like most archaic mythical cosmogonies, it consists of a juxtaposition of events ('in the beginning there was [...] then something became or happened'), while others are based on a technique of subtraction ('when the sky was not yet and the earth did not exist').

The choice of the narrative pattern did not derive from a deliberate disinterest in 'scientific' subjects. Firstly, Hesiod's intention testifies to the ethical and religious need to describe the order established by Zeus; secondly, and even more simply, for Hesiod and his audience the narrative form of the mythological story was a natural way to express and understand the Universe. Listeners perceived the elements of the story as true, but they did not understand exactly what happened from a point of view that we would define as 'scientific' or 'rational'. Hesiod's perspective was not a pre-philosophical cosmogony, as some have defined it, because the poet's focus was not on the physical nature of the things in the world, but rather on their origins in connection with the gods.

A distinctive feature of the ancient mythical cosmogonies and, though with differences, of the Ionic philosophy which followed was an undefined first principle which exists at the origin of the Universe and from which successive determinations are derived: this 'concept of principle, a principle from which everything must spring, must be seen as a speculative conquest'. ⁴ It is Chasm for Hesiod, Night in the Orphic theogony, but it is often identified with the primeval waters, as in many Ancient Near East's myths and in Homer. The Homeric poems do not show particular cosmogonic interests. Only in two passages of the *Iliad* do these sort of topics emerge; they are related especially to water. In the first of the two groups of verses Hera states:

3 How Hesiod imagined Chasm we do not know exactly (a void? the place in which things came into being?). See Hesiod, *Theogony*, ed. with Prolegomena and Commentary by Martin L. West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 192–93.

4 Walter Burkert, *Da Omero ai Magi. La tradizione orientale nella cultura greca* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999), pp. 47–48.

For I am faring to visit the limits of the all-nurturing earth, and Oceanus, from whom the gods are sprung, and mother Tethys [...].⁵

Oceanus, the river god that surrounds the world, and Tethys, the female goddess of the waters (and who should not be confused with the sea goddess Thetis) would be the first couple at the beginning who begat all others. A few verses later Sleep speaks of the streams of river Oceanus, from whom they are all sprung.⁶ A nearly unknown goddess in Greek mythology, Tethys' mythical physiognomy, whatever it was, is revealed by comparative analysis. A long tradition, based on the cultural bias of Hellenic superiority over other peoples, has fuelled the belief in the originality of Greek cosmogonies; on the contrary, as shall be seen in relation to pre-Socratic philosophy, they are in large part modelled on much older prototypes which came from the Ancient Near East.

Water as a cosmogonic principle is well documented East of Greece: in the Babylonian poem *Enûma elish*, for instance, the paradigmatic text about the origin of the world, Apsu, the fresh water ocean, and Tiamat, the salty water sea, represented the father and the mother of all things at a time when the sky and the earth did not exist, yet. Just like Oceanus and Tethys in the *Iliad*: indeed, as many scholars have noted,⁷ the quoted Homeric passage testifies to the influence of Babylonian mythology on archaic epic.

The topic of primeval waters is present in different forms in Vedic literature and in Egyptian civilization. The latter began formulating a well-structured cosmogony around 3000 BCE. This had a non-uniform development and was tied to different theocratic centres. Many of these cosmogonies set water as the cosmogonic principle: Nun, the primeval abyss, the great murky lake which contained everything, interrupted its indistinct sleep at a certain point. In the Heliopolitan cosmogony, for example, Nun gives birth to the sun god, Atum, before the birth of the sky and of the earth takes place. Having climbed to the top of a hill, with his spit he creates Shu, the Void, and the goddess Tefnut, Humidity, who in turn together beget Geb and Nut, the earth and sky. From these two, two pairs of siblings were born, Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nefti, all of whom together give birth to humanity. In the Hermopolitan theology, instead, a hill of mud emerges from the water, generating eight primeval gods, four masculine with a frog head

5 Homer, *The Iliad*, 2 vols, ed. by Augustus T. Murray (London, W. Heinemann – Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1934–37), II, Book XIV, ll. 200–01, p. 81.

6 *Ibid.*, XIV, ll. 245–46, p. 85.

7 See Burkert, pp. 14–30. Analogously, in the Accadic poem *Atrahasis* (seventeenth century BCE) we find at the origin of the world the division of the cosmos in three parts attributed to three gods, just like in *Iliad*, XV, ll. 187–93, in which the three kingdoms are given to Zeus, Ades and Poseidon.

and four feminine with a snake head who would later produce the successive generations.

The unity of an undefined element at the origin is followed by separation: the first one is often light - darkness as in *Genesis* 1, in which the unformed Earth is imagined in a sort of *continuum* with murky darkness, from which the earth - sky is separated through the first act of creation. Like the Hittite myth of Kumarbi who swallows the phallus of the sky god, Anu, the Greek myth of the castration of Ouranos, the personification of the sky, practised by Zeus and instigated by Gaia, the earth, has thus the function of explaining the definitive separation of the original couple sky - earth.

After the initial separation, two possible developments, or two storytelling genres, exist in the mythical stories; they can be defined as biomorphic and technomorphic.⁸

The biomorphic pattern introduces couples of different genders who reproduce, giving life to successive generations which clash with each other, such as in the fight between Ouranos and Cronos and between Cronos and Zeus in Hesiod. Similar 'succession myths' can be found in the *Enûma Elish* and in the myth of Kumarbi.

The technomorphic pattern focuses on a demiurge who shapes matter and gives origin to things, as in *Genesis* or in many of the demiurge god figures in *Rigveda*. Nevertheless, 'the idea of a created world is untypical of early Greek thinking':⁹ at this time the idea of a creation *ex nihilo* is absent; the figure of a Supreme Creator and the problem of what existed prior to creation are also absent. The pure technomorphic pattern makes itself known only with the Platonic demiurge of *Timeus*, who actually does not create *ex nihilo*, but shapes and orders pre-existent matter.¹⁰ Before that we find, at best, a co-existence of the two storytelling frames, in various combinations, in the thought of some pre-Socratic philosophers, or, for example, in the Orphic cosmogony of Derveni's papyrus.

Dating to the fourth century, this papyrus contains a late fifth century text which itself includes the exegesis of a presumably older Orphic poem. The cosmogony of Derveni's papyrus begins with Night, followed by Ouranos as the first king, and reconnects with Hesiod by referring to the episode of Ouranos's castration. Zeus is here celebrated as the first and the last, the principle, means, aim, lord of everything: the god who creates first the gods, then the world, by

8 See Burkert, pp. 49–52.

9 Martin L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 354.

10 The same also happens in *Genesis* 1, later interpreted as creation *ex nihilo* in the light of *Genesis* 2. Furthermore, in contemporary primitive societies we find these two models and a third creationist model based on the figure of a supreme creator.

accomplishing sexual acts, as in traditional theogonies, and ‘by thinking’ (*mé-sato*). We have, therefore, a co-existence of theogony-cosmogony and creation through deliberate mental acts: this co-existence of the two models of the universe’s origins is also typical of other Indo-European cultures and is found, for example, in the *Enûma Elish*.¹¹

Another source for the Orphic cosmogonies is a famous passage in Aristophanes’ *Birds*, where the choir narrates its own origins in the so-called ‘ornithogony’:

In the beginning were Chaos and Night and black Erebus and broad Tartarus, and no Earth, Air or Sky. And in the boundless bosom of Erebus did black-winged Night at the very start bring forth a wind egg, from which as the seasons revolved came forth Eros the seductive, like to swift whirlwinds, his back aglitter with wings of gold. And mating by night with winged Chaos in broad Tartarus, he hatched our own race and first brought it up to daylight. There was no race of immortal gods before Eros commingled everything; then as this commingled with that, Sky came to be, and Ocean and Earth, and the whole imperishable race of blessed gods.¹²

Since this is a comical text, it is not possible to use the passage *in toto* as a source to retrace Orphic cosmogonic thought; nevertheless, it seems obvious that it represents a mixture of comical invention and genuine, ancient and contemporary, cosmogonic traditions wherein Orphic and Hesiodic influences can be noted.

The idea of a cosmic egg from which things took their beginning is not only found in Orphism. This mytheme is actually documented in many archaic cultures, and not only: it is present in the mythology of many populations in Africa, China, India and Japan. In its cosmogenic content, it symbolizes the primeval unity of being, the perfect, undivided whole which comes before the separation of the elements and the birth of the perceptible Universe.

We also find this mytheme in the Hindu culture. The cosmogonic stories of Hinduism are many and appear in the beginning in the *Vedas*, then in the *Brahmana*, the *Upanishad*, the epics (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) and in the *Puranas*; some of these are real myths, whilst others have a more speculative and philosophical character. In great part, however, Brahma appears as a demiurge: Hindu myth did not consider creation *ex nihilo*, but rather provided a framework and organization of the elements which made up the universe.

The most widespread myth says that at its beginning the cosmic egg, Hir-

11 Burkert, pp. 78 – 86. About the co-existence of the two models see also West, *Indo-European Poetry*, pp. 354 – 59.

12 Aristophanes, *Birds*, in *Birds, Lysistrata, Woman at the Thesmophoria*, ed. by Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press, 2000), ll. 693 – 703, p. 117.

anyagarbha, floated in the primeval ocean wrapped in the darkness of non-existence. When the egg hatches, from the upper half of the shell, which is made of gold, the sky is born; from the lower half, which is made of silver, the earth is born. The internal membranes of the shell form the mountains and the external ones form the clouds; the veins and the liquids give life to the rivers and seas.

A similar tale also appears in archaic Chinese myth: it is the story of Pan Gu. At the beginning of the world, the sky and the earth formed a great egg, in which Pan Gu grew up and became a giant. He broke the shell in two parts with an axe, thereby dividing the sky from the earth. Pan Gu grew even more and every part of his body transformed itself: chest, stomach, arms and legs changed into mountains, the eyes became the Sun and the Moon, the clouds and wind were made from his breath. His fleas became men and the other four types of living beings: animals, plants, spirits and ghosts. It is evident that also in this myth the egg represents the original unity of the world, where the Sky and the Earth are still undivided.

The idea of the body which divides to give life to the elements of the cosmos is also present in Babylonian myth, wherein the goddess Tiamat is split in two either as a fish to dry or as an oyster or an egg, and from her body parts the Sky, the Earth and the other elements of the universe are made. Seen in a more general way, the idea that Creation is the result of a violent crisis, a cruel sacrifice or death is present in several cosmogonic myths, not only in the Indo-European area, as testified by the slaying of the primeval monster Vrtra, the dismemberment of Prajapati and of the giant Purusha in the *Rigveda*, and the killing and dismemberment of the giant Ymir in Nordic mythology.

The last known category of Greek cosmogonic texts from the archaic period includes genealogical manuals in prose and poetry, of which we possess only fragments. Information from later sources is also relevant, even though not always reliable, because their Neo-Platonic inspiration sometimes drove the authors to interpret the ancient texts according to later philosophical categories.

Of these authors, who can be placed between the seventh and the sixth century BCE, we know little more than the name of one, Acusilaus, who wrote prose genealogies in which Chaos was presented as the first principle. Museus also composed a *Theogony* in which the origin of things was traced back to Tartarus and Night, whilst Epimenides, author of another *Theogony*, identified it as Air and Night.

Better known is the thought of Pherecydes of Syrus (sixth century) who, it seems, created an original cosmogony from the union of Greek and Oriental elements: it started from three original gods, Zas (Zeus), Chronos (Time), and Ctonia (Earth). Zas and Ctonia merge, while Chronos reproduces without a female counterpart, creating from his own semen Fire, Air and Water. The figure of Time, Chronos (not Cronus) is without precedent in the Greek cosmogonies,

but is present as cosmic progenitor in the East.¹³ In Zoroastrian cosmogony, for example, Zurvan, that is Time regarded as a primordial entity, reproduces by having sexual intercourse with himself, just like Kâla, the Indian god of Time, does. In all three cases, Time has always existed; it is not the architect of the material world, but the ancestor of a demiurge god, namely Zas in the case of Pherecydes.

According to Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, 1091b), Pherecydes' cosmogony is characterised by a mixture of mythological language and a need to rationalize; however, such combination was not successful in later traditions, perhaps because it presents mythical stories without a real 'rational' basis just at the moment when a different need to explain the world in a naturalistic manner was being established in Ionia.

II. The Search for the *Arche* in Ionic Philosophy

The origin of Greek philosophy is traditionally placed on the Ionic shores at the beginning of the sixth century: here some thinkers, Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes would give life to speculations in materialistic, and no longer mythological, terms about the origins of the world, its founding principle and first motive, the *arche*. Aristotle himself, while examining his predecessors in Book I of *Metaphysics*, defines these thinkers as 'the first philosophers':

Of the first philosophers, then, most thought the principles which were of the nature of matter were the only principles of all things. That of which all things that are consist, the first from which they come to be, the last into which they are resolved (the substance remaining, but changing in its modifications), this they say is the element and this the principle of things [...].¹⁴

The need for such a separation from myth, even though less radical than was thought for a long time, can be attributed to several, complex and widely discussed reasons, some of which are of an economic-productive nature. In the sixth century on the Ionic shores new economic and trade models became established and, owing to the practical needs of the emerging classes, knowledge

13 Martin L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 28–75.

14 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by William David Ross, Book I, Part 3, 983b, <http://www.classicallibrary.org/aristotle/metaphysics/index.htm> [accessed 9 January 2010]. See also *The Works of Aristotle. Metaphysica*, under editorship of John Alexander Smith and William David Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908).

began to become democratic. The merchant acquired skills through observation of reality, the artisan modified nature through new materials and techniques.

Moreover in Greece, unlike in the Ancient Near East, the institutions which ought to defend myth as the foundation of authority did not exist: the priest caste, the temples and the 'house of tablets', whose knowledge rested on respect for tradition and, therefore, represented a form of power, were absent. Because these structures were missing in Greece, knowledge was transmitted in different ways, allowing for more intellectual freedom and a progressive separation from tradition. Nonetheless, the contribution of Eastern thought to Ionic philosophy was more conspicuous than scholars thought when classicist idealization of 'Hellenic genius' and its purity predominated.

The first Ionic philosopher, Thales, maintained that the generating principle, the *arche* of all things, was water; it spread throughout nature and living beings. For this reason, Thales also stated that the earth floats on water, 'getting the notion perhaps from seeing that the nutriment of all things is moist, and that the heat itself is generated from the moist and kept alive by it (and that from which they come to be is a principle of all things)'.¹⁵

A view, after all, not so different from previous mythical cosmogonies, so much so that Aristotle himself, a little further on, compares Thales' conception to that of 'the ancients who lived long before the present generation and first framed accounts of the gods', considering Oceanus and Tethys the 'parents of creation'.¹⁶ Thales looks for the supreme unity of the cosmos not in a divine power, like myth does, but in a living natural principle; this difference is not to be overestimated if we consider that in that period the separation between the natural and the supernatural world was not yet perceived very clearly. It is remarkable, however, that in order to explain the multiplicity of reality, Thales avoids anthropomorphic and genealogical representations by enunciating a single principle bound to an experimental reality.

As for the second philosopher of the Miletus school, Anaximander, the *arche* from which all particular beings come is not water, but something more indefinite, the *apeiron*, that is to say the infinite and timeless composite unity of all that exists. From its perpetual motion everything arises, marking a separation from the original indistinction. Everything pays a price for such a separation, because its individual existence entails a temporal finitude and an opposition with other individual existences. The idea of the balance of opposites introduced by Anaximander and drawn from the observation of natural phenomena (air, water, fire, earth) was to strongly influence later naturalistic thought.

Anaximenes also tries to explain phenomena by providing a general outline,

¹⁵ Ibid., ivi.

¹⁶ Ibid., ivi.

thus softening the divine component. While exploring the first unity of the cosmos, he speculates on the double meaning, both meteorological (*aér*, air) and physiological (*pnéuma*, breathing, breath of life), of air. Air seems to be the only principle able to unite heavenly and biological phenomena in a single system and to connect life with the general order of the cosmos. Air extends without any limit around the world, it is eternal and in perpetual motion. All distinct beings originate from the two eternal processes of rarefaction and condensation.

The conceptions of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes do not form a school as we understand it and do not derive directly from each other. Moreover, as has often been noted, their views are not thoroughly original: influences range from the Greek cosmogonic tradition and the wisdom literature, including the idea that the cosmic order is a form of justice, to Eastern speculation and myths, which reached Ionia through Persia.¹⁷

It is not our aim to discuss the age-old issue regarding Ionic philosophical thought, which involves assessing the degree of originality and novelty in explanations of phenomena based on the material nature of the first principle, in a systematic use of 'rationalistic' knowledge, in explanations of origins in non-anthropomorphic terms, in the emphasis on experience, or in the secularization of the creation myths. It is certain that speculations about the origins carried on by these philosophers contain a substantial element of novelty: it is the idea that we have to go beyond phenomena in order to grasp, through abstraction, a principle and a unifying framework for the cosmos. The observation of *physis*, nature, allows us to reconcile the unity of the universe with the seemingly irreducible multiplicity of human experience. As West aptly observes, assumptions about the existence of universal processes are the distinctive marks of every scientific approach.¹⁸

Though archaic and still bound to mythical cosmogonies – even if some scholars see within them the germs of specific modern scientific theories –, the Milesian doctrines attempt to offer a rational explanation for all beings and their origins through a unifying principle of the world. Greek and Eastern mythical elements, although present, are used for the first time to answer the question: what is the primary motive of reality? Moreover, ancient cosmogonies, while offering thorough clarifications about the origins and functioning of the world, did not enquire whether the cosmos they gave an account for was 'all that exists', and consequently left its time and space limits undefined. The Milesians ad-

17 On the subject see Burkert, pp. 35–37. For an examination of Eastern influence on Milesian thought see *Early Greek Philosophy*. The sixth century is actually the time of the greatest influence of Eastern thought in Ionia.

18 *Early Greek Philosophy*, pp. 80–81.

dressed this question, postulating the infinite spatial and temporal nature of the universe, seen as a whole.

The famous passage from *mythos* to *logos* attributed to the Ionic philosophers does not represent so much the dismissal of mythical categories in order to achieve a form of logical and rational thought as it is intended in the modern age, which would be anachronistic, but rather highlights the use of experience to later reach abstract thought while simultaneously departing from the unavoidable models of the origins created by Homer and Hesiod. Eventually, in the differences between the diverse theories and in the debate they fuelled we can detect early signs of philosophy and modern science.

The above-mentioned search for the causes and principles of reality through a methodical approach based on experience was carried out during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE not only in the fields of natural science such as medicine and biology, but also in the area of human science, above all in ethnography and historiography.¹⁹ In medicine – in the second half of the sixth century the Knidos school was born, and not by coincidence, in Asia Minor – empirical observation is established, although in an embryonic way, as the foundation for searching the origin of illness. This method was then improved in the fifth century by Hippocrates and the school of Kos. Similarly, Herodotus detached from the concept of history as past memory, developing the idea, peculiar to naturalistic and medical inquiry (*historie*), that the origin and the aetiology of the present can be discovered in the past. Historiography thus offers hermeneutic tools. Herodotus was not able to achieve his aetiological aims, but the very fact that he posed the question was a novelty. Thucydides' historical method, instead, is anamnestic and aetiological and as is well known has several points in common with that of Hippocratic science.

III. The Birth of the Human Species and the Origin of Evil

Hesiod's *Theogony*, well detailed on the gods' genealogy, does not give any account for the birth of the human species: in the *Works and Days* the poet only tells us that 'the gods and mortal human beings came about from the same origin'.²⁰ In the following lines he adds that 'golden was the race of speech-endowed human beings which the immortals, who have their mansions on Olympus, made first of all. They lived at the time of Cronus, when he was king in

19 For a joint examination of the development of these two scientific branches see Mario Vegetti, 'Le scienze della natura e dell'uomo nel V secolo', in Ludovico Geymonat, *Storia del pensiero filosofico e scientifico*, 9 vols (Milano: Garzanti, 1975), I, pp. 110–50.

20 Hesiod, *Theogony*, *Works and Days*, *Testimonia*, l. 108, p. 95.

the sky'.²¹ Here starts the famous 'myth of the races', which goes on to describe the five lines of mankind: the golden one, characterized by the automatism of the fruits of the Earth and by the lack of illness and old age; the silver one, which Zeus destroyed for its arrogance; the bronze one, born from its ashes, strong and war-like; the line of the heroes who shared divine ancestry: they perished in the wars and were placed on the Islands of the Blessed Ones; and eventually the descendants of the iron line, contemporaries of the poet, enduring labour and worries.

Whether the five ages foreshadow a decay, or what the chronological framework and the influences may be, are issues related to the many interpretations which this myth has fuelled: here it is worthwhile pointing out that 'how' men came to the world is a question that the Hesodic passage left unsolved.

Some traditions bind the origin of men to the Titans, Ouranos and Gaia's children, without giving, in this case as well, any detail about their genesis.²² Furthermore, different regional variations exist in Greece and in Asia Minor, often reported by later sources, of stories about the creation or the spontaneous birth of man. They usually depict a primeval man born directly from the Earth, which, therefore, turns out to be the mother of all mortals. Here is how Hippolytus of Rome (second-third centuries BCE) shows such a multiplicity of stories:

Now earth, say the Greeks, gave forth a man, (earth) first bearing a goodly gift, wishing to become mother not of plants devoid of sense, nor beasts without reason, but of a gentle and highly favoured creature. It, however, is difficult, (the Naassene) says, to ascertain whether Alalcomeneus, first of men, rose upon the Boeotians over Lake Cephisus; or whether it were the Idaeian Curetes, a divine race; or the Phrygian Corybantēs, whom first the sun beheld springing up after the manner of the growth of trees; or whether Arcadia brought forth Pelasgus, of greater antiquity than the moon; or Eleusis (produced) Dialus, an inhabitant of Raria.²³

Also Plato attributes a similar story to Aspasia, meant to give to the Athenians the attribute of *gegeneis*, 'born from the Earth':

21 Ibid., ll. 109–12, p. 97.

22 Cf. *Homeric Hymns*, trans. by Jules Cashford with an Introduction and Notes by Nicholas Richardson (London – New York: Penguin, 2003), ll. 334–36, p. 45: 'Hear me now, Gaia, and broad Ouranos above, and you Titan gods who live beneath the earth around great Tartarus from whom gods and men come'.

23 For the translation of *Refutatio omnium haeresium* by Hippolytus of Rome see *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols, ed. by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), V. *The Fathers of the Third Century*, Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Book V, Chapter 2, p. 48.

During that period in which the whole earth was putting forth and producing animals of every kind, wild and tame, our country showed herself barren and void of wild animals, but chose for herself and gave birth to man, who surpasses all other animals in intelligence and alone of animals regards justice and the gods.²⁴

In some such stories ash trees or ash tree Nymphs also appear, as in Phoroneus' case, the Argive first man, whilst the Thebans' ancestors, the Spartos, were also thought to be *gegeneis*, to have sprung completely armed from the earth, ready to fight each other, like Bronze Age men.

Only more recent stories make reference to a real creation of man. Plato says in *Protagoras*:

There was once a time when there were gods, but no mortals creatures. And when to these also came their destined time to be created, the gods moulded their forms within the earth, of a mixture made of earth and fire and all substances that are compounded with fire and earth. When they were about to bring these creatures to light, they charged Prometheus and Epimetheus to deal to each the equipment of his proper faculty.²⁵

Nevertheless, Epimetheus gives out all faculties to the animals and man is left naked and harmless. Therefore Prometheus steals fire and technical knowledge from the gods and gives them to man, thus supplying him with a means of support. Other sources say that Prometheus moulded men with water and earth.²⁶

The story about the theft of fire is also told in Hesiod (*Theogony*, ll. 535 – 616, and *Works and Days*, ll. 42 – 82). After Mecon's deceit, when Prometheus, dividing a bull between men and gods, gave the bones and fat to Zeus and the meat to the men, the latter were then deprived of fire: Prometheus thus stole it and gave it to mortals. Zeus, enraged, sent mankind a great evil, Pandora, the first woman, moulded from earth thanks to Hephaestus. As is well known, Pandora was then to open the forbidden box given by Zeus, releasing onto the earth labours, illnesses and death. By this way the stealing of fire and the origin of

24 Plato, *Menexenus*, in *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, ed. by Robert G. Bury (Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press, 1929), 237d, p. 343.

25 Plato, *Protagoras*, in *Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Eutydemus*, ed. by Walter R. M. Lamb (Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press, 1924), 320 c-d, p. 129.

26 See Apollodorus, *The Library*, with an English translation by James Frazer, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976 – 1979), I, 7, 1. Pausanias mentions great blocks of stones in Phocis which, it was told, exhaled human smell. They were the remnant mud by which Prometheus had made the man. See Pausanias *Periegeta, Description of Greece*, with an English translation by William H. S. Jones, 5 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965 – 1978), X, 4, 4.

women coincide with the origin of evil, the motive of which is another major and universal inquiry of mankind.

The relationship between the origin of man and of evil is also present in the Orphic anthropogony and is linked to an act of *hybris* of the Titans: ²⁷ after killing Zeus and Persephones' son, little Dionysos Zagreus, they devoured his flesh. Zeus strikes them down and from their ashes men are born. Thus they take part in Dionysos' divine essence as well as in brutal titanic violence.

At a first glance it is amazing to discover that the Greeks did not have a specific founding myth for man's creation. Such absence is likely due to the fact that for the Greeks the main characteristic of men is not their existence, but rather their mortality. Consequently, the lack of a structured, shared anthropogony is balanced by a widely shared anthropology which, by explaining when and why men have become what they are, is strictly connected with the myth of Prometheus. Not only does it explain the origins of sacrifice, cooking food, marriage, labour and the necessity of evil in the world, but it also offers reasons for the definitive split between men and gods and between men and beasts: the occurrence of such a split accounts for man's creation.

IV. *Protos Heuretes and Aitia*

In the way described above, the myth of Prometheus is an aetiological account and the titan a *protos heuretes* of politics and *technai*. Like him, several figures of *prottoi heuretai*, inventors or discoverers of an object, phenomenon, or institution are mythological characters, ²⁸ as demonstrated by Palamedes, the *inventor* of the letters of the alphabet, the calculation of the months, the game of draughts; Aristeus, the discoverer of hunting tools and bee farming; Aminocles of Corynthus, *protos heuretes* of the triremes; Erictonius, *protos heuretes* of the quadriga; Cecrops, who instituted monogamous marriage in Athens; Dracon and Lycurgus, who established laws, and so on. As each word has its *etymon*, each city its eponymous, each rite and custom their *aition*, so each invention has its *heuretes*.

The folk-tale – not only in Greece – is in itself strongly aetiological, because among its different functions it also aims at clarifying the motive for many facts, binding the present to the past, the origin to the actual state. A tendency towards aetiology exists from the very beginning also in the literature of Greece. Overall it was meant to offer, in works of diverse nature, an explanation for myths, cults,

²⁷ See *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, ed. by Otto Kern (Berlin: Weidmann, 1922), F 140, 220, 224.

²⁸ Adolf Kleingünter, *Protos Heures: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte einer Fragestellung* (Leipzig: Akademie Verlag, 1933).

natural phenomena, and specific customs, which were often clarified by resorting to lesser known mythical stories.²⁹

Several aetiological myths are, for example, present in Pindarus: they explain the origins of games or cities, thus giving them a sort of official religious consecration and tracing human deeds back to a divine origin. In the fifth-century tragedy, mainly in Euripides, the *aition* reaches a rationalistic and cultural connotation, foreshadowing in part the scholarly value and cultural refinement that it would acquire in the Alexandrine age. In comedy, instead, it is bent to the ends of parody and becomes a real comical theme: poets invent, for example, aetiological legends to justify comical situations, or they create paraetymologies to link a proper noun to a pejorative one.

Historians and philosophers also make use of similar themes: nevertheless, the *aition* becomes a widespread theme and an autonomous literary genre in its own right only during the Hellenistic age, when an interest in ancient times, combined with a taste for scholarship, leads to the idea of telling mythical stories not only for themselves, but also as explanations for human deeds.

The *Aitia* by Callimachus are without doubt the most representative. The main topic of his collection of elegies in four books is the origin, mostly mythical, of names, customs, traditions or cults. In Book I, for example, the origin of the Lindus cult of 'Heracles who feasted on an ox' is shown, during which the hero is celebrated with insults and with the offer of a non-dis-membered ox. At Lindus, on the island of Rhodes, Heracles devoured an ox belonging to an old peasant who had insulted him, thus giving birth to the ritual. The tale of Linus then explains the Argive ritualistic killing of dogs found loose on the streets during the month of Arneios. The daughter of the Argos king, being afraid of Apollo, the father of her child, exposed him, but he was devoured by dogs: his death led to the origin of the myth. In Book II Callimachus deals with the origins and founders of Sicilian cities, whilst Books III and IV contain the *aitia* of rites, feasts and customs. Among them the famous *Lock of Berenice*, in which we trace the origin of a constellation from a curl offered to the gods by Queen Berenice to propitiate the return from the war of her husband Tholomeos III, who then disappears and appears in the sky.

29 Giancarla Codrignani, 'L'*aition* nella poesia greca prima di Callimaco', *Convivium*, n.s., 26 (1958), 227 - 45.

Searching for Origins: Indo-European Words and Nordic Representations

I. To the Origin of Meaning

What do we intend by saying ‘origin’? How many words are connected with the meaning of ‘origin’? Since words are deeply rooted in the culture of the speakers, it is impossible to suggest considerations embracing all languages. The choice to focus on the Indo-European languages is due to the extension of the territories in which Indo-European populations settled (from Iceland to south-western China), and to the antiquity of their civilization, which goes back at least to the fifth millennium BCE; possibly, following some recent theories, to 100,000 years BCE.¹ Different words used for ‘origin’ will thus be examined in relation to some representative Indo-European linguistic families, namely Indo-Iranian, Greek, Latin, and Germanic, and particular attention will be devoted to the semantic fields in which the words are collocated. The linguistic results will then be used in order to investigate a mediaeval Icelandic representation of the origin of the earth, which is connected with the reception of North. Both Old Norse poetry and contemporary artistic productions prove that Iceland has constantly been conceived of as a place which evokes origins.

II. How Indo-Europeans Say Origin

II.1 Sanskrit

In Sanskrit there are several words connected with the idea of origin:
– *prabhavá*, ‘the cause of existence’, ‘source’, ‘origin’. The verbal form is

¹ Franco Cavazza, *Lezioni di indoeuropeistica con particolare riguardo alle lingue classiche (sanskrito, greco, latino, gotico)* (Pisa: Ets, 2001), pp. 99, 195 – 96.

prabhavati ² ‘to spring up, to appear, to become visible’, and also ‘to rule’, ‘to have the power over someone or something’. ³ The word is composed by the prefix *pra-* ‘before’ (see IE **pro-*, *prō*) ⁴ and the IE root **bheu-*, *bheuə*, *bhōu*, *bhū*, which originally should have meant ‘to grow, to swell’ (P, pp. 146–47) (see Greek *fuomai* ‘to become, to grow’) ⁵, but it became one of the roots of the athematic verb to be (as, for instance, in the infinitive in English). *Prabhavá* means ‘origin as something that is grown before existing as a being, as a creature’. Therefore, the act of origin connected with this word is the moment or the will preceding the growth, the springing up of a creature.

- *utpatti*, ‘arising, birth, origin’. It shares the same composition of the verb *utpatati* ‘to rise, to originate’ (MW, p. 180). Both are composed structures, constituted by the prefix *ut-* (the same as the English preposition *out*) (P, pp. 1103–04) and the root *pat* which refers to the IE root **pet-* *petə-* *ptē-*, *ptō* ‘to fly, to fall’, like the Homeric Greek *pétomai* ‘to fly, to flee’ (P, p. 825). Origin, in this sense, is the moment in which something or someone is going out of or arising from a body, from the earth, or from something which can contain. Also the expressions *udgā*, *udgata* have a similar sense: ‘to rise, to begin’ and ‘gone up, risen, ascended’ (MW, pp. 186–87), composed with the root that generates the English verb ‘to go’; ‘to go out’ thus means that something or someone has its origin in the coming out.
- *mūla*, ‘root of a plant or tree’, but also ‘origin, commencement, beginning’ (MW, p. 826). The sense is clear. The word is composed by the IE root **mū* which means ‘mouth’ (P, p. 751). Consequently, *mūla* has the sense of ‘mouth of the tree’ and, in a metaphoric way, ‘origin’ as something that comes out from a mouth.
- *agra*, ‘foremost, first, prominent, the beginning’, also with a temporal sense (WM, p. 6). It comes from IE root **agro-*, ‘top, peak, beginning’ (P, p. 8). It is interesting to compare these meanings with the Latin personal name *Agrippa*, that could derive from a form **agri-p(e)d*, ‘footling breech’ (P, p. 9).
- *yōni*, ‘womb, uterus, origin, spring, fountain’ (WM, p. 858). It must be noticed that the IE root **jeu-* means ‘to begin a movement’ (P, p. 507). Consequently, the Sanskrit form has to do with a body that bears fruit, with a container from which something is to come out.

2 All Sanskrit verbal forms are indicated with the third person singular of the present tense. As the same person would sound unusual in English, I prefer to use the infinitive form.

3 Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit – English Dictionary Etymologically and Philologically arranged with special reference to cognate Indo-European Languages* (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995), p. 684 (hereafter: MW).

4 Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 4th edn, 2 vols (Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2002), I, p. 813 (hereafter: P).

5 The infinitive form is used also for the English translation of Greek verbs.

II.II. Greek

In Greek there are two principal forms conveying the sense of origin: *arhè* and *génos*.

- *arhè* is a substantive which means ‘beginning, origin’, but also ‘government, dominion’ and is a deverbal derivation of the verb *árhō* ‘to begin, to dominate’.⁶ Its etymological origin is unknown and disputed, as no proposed theory is completely convincing. Nevertheless, it is surely interesting to notice that the verb *árhō* has also the sense of ‘to rise over someone, to dominate’ and can be put in relation with *órhos*, which means ‘branched’, typically used for a vineyard.⁷ The two forms could be apophonically related, as *órhos* should be the strong apophonic degree of *árhō*.⁸ Even if the etymology of *arhè* is controversial, some light on this word is shed in a *Commentary on St. John’s Gospel* by Origen of Alexandria, written in the third century. Analysing the very beginning of the Gospel, *en arhè ’o lógos* (John, I, 1), Origen declares that the word *arhè* has several meanings both in the Greek language and in the Bible.⁹ The most meaningful ones can be summarized as follows:
 - 1) *arhè* is the passage from one place to another, the beginning of a process leading to the point of apocatastasis, that is the return to a primeval, pristine condition.¹⁰ In other words: even if the process seems to lead forward, it actually goes back to a pristine moment or situation.
 - 2) the beginning is the origin (*génesis*), as it comes out in Old Testament (Job, 40, 19: ‘this is the beginning of the material creation’).
- What is essential in Origen’s reflection on the word *arhè* is the semantic collocation of the term in a kinetic dimension, even if the word also continues to refer to the starting point. In other words, the idea of *arhè* is not static, is not locked in the tight mesh of a single moment. On the contrary, it interferes and goes together with the continuation of that temporal beginning. Finally, *arhè* shows possible phonological implications with the form *órhō*. There is a sufficient number of cases in Greek and Byzantine literature, both pagan and Christian, in which the birth of a great person (for instance a future king or a

6 Hjalmar Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1973), I: A – Ko, pp. 158 – 59 (hereafter: F).

7 Emile Boisacq, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1923), p. 85.

8 Eduard Schwyzer, *Griechische Grammatik im Anschluss an Karl Brugmanns griechische Grammatik. Allgemeiner Teil und Lautlehre* (München: C. H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1934), p. 685.

9 Origene [Origen], *Commento al Vangelo di Giovanni*, ed. by Eugenio Orsini (Torino: UTET, 1968), I, XVI, 90, p. 143.

10 Domenico Pazzini, *In principio era il Logos. Origene e il prologo del Vangelo di Giovanni* (Brescia: Paideia, 1983), p. 39.

saint) is foretold by the vision of a tree which grows out of a female body. In many of these cases the tree is a vine tree.¹¹ Therefore, *arhè* and *órhō* are perhaps more interconnected than it could seem at first glance. Consequently, words such as tree, dominion, beginning and origin seem to be interrelated.

– *génos*. It derives from the verb *gígnomai* ‘to bear, to become’ (F, pp. 297, 307–08). It is a very old Greek verb that can be compared with to IE root **gen* (P, pp. 373–74). The word is near to the sense of *arhè* where the latter means ‘beginning’, but it differs from *arhè*, as it testifies more precisely to the sense of birth, of beginning of a life, also from a typological point of view. The use of *génos* allows for identifying race, genre, family as a uniform group of living beings or inanimate things, without implying a kinetic denotation: *génos* is static, rigid and in this sense it is a sort of counterpart of *arhè*.

II.III. Latin

Obviously, the Latin word is *orīgo*, a deverbal noun coming from *orior*, which means ‘to raise, to come up, to bear’.¹² It goes back to an IE root **er-*, **or-* **r-* meaning ‘to set out, to excite, to provoke’ (P, pp. 326–30), and it can also be found in the Greek *érnos* ‘bud, sprout, shoot’.¹³ Correspondences are also possible with the Germanic languages, where the word is connected with trees and their growth: OIcel. *rinna*, ‘to grow, to come up’,¹⁴ OHG *rono* ‘base of a tree’.¹⁵ Otherwise, in the Germanic languages, the IE root **er-*, **or-*, **r-*, in this case from the form **re-nu-ō*, implies the idea of running, above all with reference to liquid substances: OIcel. *rinna* ‘to flow, to run’, OHG, OS, OE *rinnan* ‘to flow, to run’. Therefore, Latin and the Germanic languages have preserved the primeval meaning of the IE root, expressing the growth of trees, flowing waters, etc., and from there derives the meaning ‘origin’, as something or someone that sprang up or flew. The Romance languages have carried on the Latin word, while the Germanic languages (with the exception of English which received the word from Old French) have discarded it. There is only the noteworthy exception of

11 A list of passages can be recollected in Alessandro Zironi, ‘Il sogno premonitore dell’albero nella tradizione germanica medievale’, in *Filologia romanza, filologia germanica: intersezioni e diffrazioni*, ed. by Anna Maria Babbi and Adele Cipolla (Verona: Fiorini, 1997), pp. 343–65 (pp. 349–51).

12 *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, IX, 2 fasc. VII (Leipzig: Teubner, 1990), coll. 981–1007.

13 Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1980), p. 374.

14 Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William A. Craigie, *An Icelandic – English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 493 (hereafter: CVC).

15 Rudolf Schützeichel, *Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, 4th edn (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1989), p. 214.

Icelandic, which uses the composed word *uppruni* to mean ‘origin’ (CVC, p. 656): *uppruni* is something that runs up, that grows in a vertical way, as trees effectively do.

II.IV. Germanic

The most ancient Germanic word for ‘origin’ is the Visigothic **frum*, transmitted through the fourth-century translation of the Bible.¹⁶ We encounter twice – in John 15,27 and John 16,24 – the expression *fram fruma*, translating the Gospel’s text *ap’ (ex) arhēs*. Greek *arhè* is therefore Gothic **frum*. This fact demonstrates two issues:

- 1) the Germanic languages and Latin do not have a word meaning ‘origin, beginning’ which can be etymologically related to Greek *arhè*. Actually, *arhè* could be a non-Indo-European word.
- 2) Gothic **frum* and Greek *arhè* have substantially the same meaning. We cannot doubt it, as the Gothic translator was very acute in every part of his work and, moreover, he was surely a perfectly fluent bilingual speaker of Greek and Gothic by birth.

Gothic **frum* comes from the IE root **prmo-* (from which the Latin *primus* derives) (P, 813 – 14). The same word appears in Old English as *fruma* and *frymð*, also in the Gospel’s passages in which the term is *arhè* in Greek and *orīgo* or *principium* in Latin (from which the Anglo-Saxons translated the Gospels in the tenth and eleventh centuries). For Germanic people, therefore, the origin is the beginning, it marks the very first moment or accident from which the other things (or living beings) descend. It defines the starting point: there is no interest in growing, flowing and, consequently, in the kinetic idea that emerges from *orīgo* or *arhè*.

The idea of growing or movement is given in Germanic by the IE root **sprengh-* (P, p. 998), the same of the English verb ‘to spring’. It must be observed that the German word for ‘origin’ is now *Ursprung*, which refers to the point of beginning or the moment from which something or someone has begun to rise, to grow.

It is possible to argue that the Germanic languages need two forms in order to express the concept of ‘origin’:

- 1) a word which focuses on the starting point;
- 2) a word which highlights the kinetic movement from a starting point. Origin, in this way, is perceived in its continuous springing and growth: it is not a

16 Winfred P. Lehmann, *A Gothic Etymological Dictionary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), p. 129.

moment of the past but something present, because it has been springing or growing.

II.V. The Indo-European Lexicon for Origin

The study of Indo-European linguistic families shows that the idea of origin is explained in two different ways:

- 1) Origin is described as 'growth, springing'. It is not important to identify or focus on the exact moment in which something began; on the contrary, the Indo-Europeans look at the development produced by that beginning, as they are more interested in the kinesis that characterizes the thing or the living being. No difference emerges between stones and trees, animals and human beings. To this conception words as Sanskrit *prabhavá*, *utpatti*, Greek *arhè*, Latin *origo*, Icelandic *uppruni*, German *Ursprung* can be referred. The key-word explaining this idea of origin is 'to spring': in a fountain we do not pay attention to the exact point from which water springs out, but to the water's jet and its route in the air.
- 2) The other area covered by a lexicon for origin is more interconnected with the place or the moment in which something or someone has its beginning: Sanskrit *mūla*, *apra*, *yóni*, Greek *génos*, Gothic **frum*, Latin *primus* have to do with the place where someone is born, with the coming out of something or the idea of being the point of departure. Calling again to our mind the image of a fountain, we are now looking at the mouth from which water goes out, as we are not interested in water itself. To this idea English words such as *pristine* and *primeval* refer, being very different in meaning from *origin*. Thus, *primeval* or *pristine* are not synonyms of *origin*: *origin* shows the movement, *pristine* the stasis.

III. *Ginnungagap*

The contrast between stasis and kinesis connected with origins can be gathered from *Völuspá*, the cosmogonic poem which opens *Edda*, a collection of Nordic mythological and heroic poems. A prophetess born before the gods narrates to Wodan, the Head of the gods, the origin of existence. The god is trying to obtain from the seer not only prophetic knowledge about the earliest past but also the capability of foretelling the future. Wodan's request is only a literary expedient in order to explain the origin of the earth and cosmos and their final destiny. *Völuspá* was conceived at the very end of the tenth century, or at the beginning of the eleventh century. Nobody knows if the poem had an original oral compo-

sition, but surely it was offered for oral circulation. Owing to the different directions the text took, it has been transmitted in six manuscripts copied in different centuries. Some Christian references in the poem have fuelled the hypothesis that it was composed after the christening of Iceland, which happened in the year 1000. Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that the millenarianism which characterizes some strophes can be connected with a religious initiative carried on in Nordic countries by the Norwegian king Ólafr Tryggvason during the latest part of the tenth century.¹⁷ The most ancient copy of *Völuspá* was presumably transcribed about the year 1270 in the so-called *Codex Regius* 2365 4¹⁰. In that manuscript the poem is composed by 66 strophes organized in a sort of tripartite structure. The first section focuses on the creation of earth and firmament; the second deals with the narration of the world, the gods and man; the third and most famous section is about the *ragnarrök*, ‘the destinies of the gods’, the pagan end of the world. The poem is concluded by strophes related to a new birth, a new creation. The third strophe is particularly interesting:

Ár var alda. Þat er Ymir bygði,
 vara sandr né sær né svalar unnir;
 iorð fannz æva né upphiminn,
 gap var ginnunga, enn gras hvergi¹⁸

In earliest times did Ymir live:
 Was not sea nor land nor salty waves,
 Neither earth was there nor upper heaven,
 But a gaping nothing, and green things nowhere.¹⁹

The expression *Ár var alda* can be also translated ‘At the beginning of times’, the moment of the origin of creation. In the following lines a creation *ex nihilo* is actually presented, as was the case in Christian tradition: a series of negations (*né*) excluded the existence of sea, waves, land, heaven, grass and trees.²⁰ Only a place existed, *ginnungagap*. The *gap* [...] *ginnunga* that appears in the seventh line is unanimously considered coincident with the form *ginnungagap* transmitted in the *Gylfaginning* by Snorri Sturluson, a sort of poetic manual written during the twelfth century. In *Gylfaginning*, *ginnungagap* is described as follows:

17 *Völuspá. Un’apocalisse norrena*, ed. by Marcello Meli (Roma: Carocci, 2008), p. 17.

18 *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, 5th edn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1983), *Völuspá*, III, 1–8, p. 1.

19 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), p. 2.

20 *Völuspá*, pp. 60–61.

Ginnungagap, the part that faces in a northerly direction, was filled with the weight and heaviness of ice and rime and there was vapour and a blowing inwards from it. But the southerly part of Ginnungagap cleared up in the face of the sparks and molten particles that came flying out of the world of Muspell.²¹

Snorri Sturluson is explaining that there were two material entities. The first one, *Niflheimr*, was collocated in the North. It is a place where there is a source, *hvergelmir*, from which hot waters (*hverr*, ‘thermal water’ in Icelandic) come out, forming eleven rivers. These rivers take with them material that, flooding away from the hot source, becomes solid and cold, covered by ice and frost. At the other side, in the South, Snorri Sturluson collocates *Muspellheimr*, a place from which sparks come out. Iced material and sparks arrive at an intermediate area, between North and South, which is called *Ginnungagap*. *Ginnungagap* is the melting area of two opposite materials and two opposite temperatures, but what it is exactly remains vague. There are two main theories about the interpretation of this composed noun. The first one sees *Ginnungagap* as a metaphoric expression, a *kenning*, for ‘the hawk’s cavity’: Old Norse *ginnungr* also means ‘hawk’, and *gap* is cavity. The cavity where the hawk can fly is obviously the sky, contained by the heavenly vault.²² In this case, the poem *Völuspá* would lead us to believe that only the air existed between *Niflheimr* in the North and *Muspellheimr* in the South. The second interpretation of *Ginnungagap* compares Old Norse *ginnunga*, a plural genitive form, to the Old High German *ginunga*, a word that glosses the Latin *hiatus, rictus*, which is a caraic cavity in the ground.²³ Old High German and Old English also have the verbs *ginen* and *ginian* respectively, meaning ‘to open wide’. These linguistic and semantic correspondences between Old High German and Old English cannot be easily discarded. Moreover, in the eleventh-century work *Gesta Hammarburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (*Deeds of Bishops of the Hamburg Church*) by Adam of Bremen, a *scholium* to the text alludes to the northern part of the Atlantic ocean beyond Iceland, the *Ultima Thule*, where there is a *ghimmendegop*, an abyss in which waters fall:

Qui latitudinem septentrionalis oceani perscrutatus navibus tandem caligantibus ante ora deficiens mundi finibus inmane baratrum abyssi retroactis vestigis pene vix salvus evasit. [Istud eciam dixit quidam notabilis Carthusiensis presentium scriptori, et est verum. Dicitur istelocus in eorum ydyomate Ghimmendegop.

21 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. and ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1997), p. 10.

22 *Völuspá*, pp. 61–62.

23 *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Ursula Dronke, 2 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1997), II. Mythological Poems, pp. 112–13.

Miles vero capitaneus regis dicebatur Olyden Helghesson, nauta vero Gunnar Raswen.] (Scholium d66, mss. A3a, A3a')²⁴

The Indo-European languages imagine origin as the moment in which something comes out, or like a womb, a cavity where life begins. *Ginnungagap* is thus imagined as a place filled by all elements necessary to life, hot and cold, moist and dry. Origin is consequently the abyss, the cleft, the gap, where the void is finally substituted by the creation of the earth. Ice and hot waters which enable creation remind of the natural Icelandic environment, where the primeval condition of the world is still visible.

Ursula Dronke stressed that *ginunga* should be the heathen Germanic word for chaos.²⁵ Icelanders reinforced this term by adding the tautological expression *gap*, a sort of gloss to *ginnunga*:²⁶ chaos and yawning emptiness. This narration has parallels in Indo-European culture: it could be sufficient to compare it to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [I, 430–37] and to the cosmogonic Zoroastrian text *Bundahishn*.²⁷ This last text, written in Persian in the eighth or ninth century, has been compared to the embryologic theories, in particular the ones in which the union of female and male gametes creates a zygote.²⁸

As a sort of provocation, it is interesting here to remark that there are two kinds of gametes: the first one, the male gamete, is more movable, kinetic; the female gamete is more static. Perhaps it is not by chance that the words denoting 'origin' in a static way are connected to the female reproductive apparatus, while the kinetic words for 'origin' also enclose the idea of a vertical growth, which can also be interpreted in a symbolic or totemic way.

In the abyss of *Ginnungagap*, the meeting of the two parts, one hot and dry, the other cold and moist, produces the filling of the gaping maw and the creation of the first being, Ymir. The primeval creature, the giant Ymir, will be thrown into *Ginnungagap* after having been killed by three gods, Oðinn, Vili and Vé. The corpse of Ymir is then dismembered by them. The correspondence with the Indo-European tradition is evident: the divine triad substitutes a previous belief, the dismembering of a corpse is the founding moment of creation. From the corpse of Ymir, we learn from various Old Norse texts, the world draws all its elements: blood → sea; flesh → land; bones → mountains; teeth → stones; hair

24 Adamo di Brema [Adam of Bremen], *Storia degli arcivescovi della Chiesa di Amburgo*, ed. by Ileana Pagani (Torino: UTET, 1996), p. 498.

25 *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Ursula Dronke, p. 113.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

27 Bruce Lincoln, 'The Center of the World and the Origins of Life', *History of Religions*, 40 (2001), pp. 311–26 (p. 312).

28 Clarisse Herrenschmidt, 'Entre Perses et Grecs. I. Démocrite et le mazdéisme: Religion, philosophie, science', *Transeuphratène*, 11 (1996), 115–43.

→ trees; brain → clouds; skull → vault of heaven. The earth is actually created in *Ginnungagap*, the place where the oppositions are solved. Cosmos and earth have consequently a double syncretistic origin: an empty place which becomes the meeting point of opposite substances and conditions. After blending these materials, the earth and heavenly vault are created from the corpse of Ymir by the divine triad.

IV. Iceland, the Craters, the Abyss

Iceland has always been considered primordial and primitive in its nature. One of the most famous writers of the Nordic Middle Ages, Saxo Grammaticus, who lived at the end of the eleventh century, wrote a historical work, *Gesta Danorum*, about the kings of Denmark. Like the majority of historical works of late Antiquity and Middle Ages, also the *Gesta Danorum* begin with a geographical preface in which the places where the subsequent events will happen are described. The description of Iceland is particularly interesting:

On the west of Norway comes the island called Iceland, with the mighty ocean washing round it: a land very squalid to dwell in, but noteworthy for marvels, both strange occurrences and objects that pass belief. A spring is there which, by the malignant reek of its water, destroys the original nature of anything whatsoever. Indeed, all that is sprinkled with the breath of its vapour is changed into the hardness of stone. It remains a doubt whether it be more marvellous or more perilous, that soft and flowing water should be invested with such a stiffness, as by a sudden change to transmute into the nature of stone whatsoever is put to it and drenched with its reeking fume, nought but the shape surviving. [...] In this island there is likewise a mountain, whose floods of incessant fire make it look like a glowing rock, and which, by belching out flames, keeps its crests in an everlasting blaze. [...] a land lying close to the extreme of cold can have such abundance of matter to keep up the heat, as to furnish eternal fires with unseen fuel, and supply an endless provocative to feed the burning.²⁹

The volcanic lapilli and the siliceous hot waters which cause the formations of rocks are compared to the two elements, the first coming from *Muspellheimr*, the second from *Niflheimr*, that meet in *Ginnungagap*. Iceland seems to be the place of *Ginnungagap*, the actual place of the origins.

Saxo's image of the island does not derive from insular writers, who never described Iceland as an impervious or infernal place, but it reflects the common

²⁹ Saxo Grammaticus, *The First Nine Books of the Danish History*, trans. by Oliver Elton (London: David Nutt, 1894), Preface, p. 10. See also <http://omacl.org/DanishHistory/preface.html> [accessed 3 September 2009].

idea of Iceland as a primeval country. This statement, which was born outside the island, became more and more vigorous through the centuries.

V. Jules Verne: Origin from the Abyss

Although some interesting publications appeared during the modern age in Scandinavia and France, the interest in Iceland increased towards the end of the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century, when travelogues about Iceland became copious and constituted a literary sub-genre.

The obsession with the knowledge of Iceland was particularly strong in Victorian Britain, but it also spread to the other side of the Channel.³⁰ In 1861, Jules Verne voyaged through Scandinavia, visiting only Denmark and Norway. Three years later his second novel, *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*, appeared in France. The protagonist, Otto Lidenbrock, a mineralogist and professor in Hamburg, casually discovered in a manuscript of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* a leaflet written by the seventeenth-century Icelandic alchemist Arne Saknussemm. It is a cryptogram in runic characters revealing the point from which the centre of the earth can be reached. Professor Lidenbrock, his nephew Axel and the Icelandic servant Hans will reach the centre of the earth beginning their voyage from a crater situated in the Icelandic glacier Snæfellsjökull. They will emerge two months later from the Mediterranean volcano Stromboli. The impressive massif of the Icelandic volcano surmounted by the glacier is the place where the abyss is open. In the novel, the young Axel Lidenbrock declares his deep attraction towards the abyss:

Now began our real journey. [...] I had not yet ventured to look down the bottomless pit which I was about to take a plunge. [...] I approached the central chimney. I have already mentioned that it was a hundred feet in diameter, and three hundred feet round I bent over a projecting rock and gazed down. My hair stood on end with terror. The bewildering feeling of vacuity laid upon me. I felt my centre of gravity shifting its place, and giddiness mounting into my brain like drunkenness. There is nothing more treacherous than this attraction down deep abysses.³¹

Why must the centre of the earth be searched for starting from Iceland? The abyss over which the Snæfellsjökull crater leans out, the way that leads to the

30 Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), pp. 283–311.

31 Jules Verne, *Journey into the Interior of the Earth*, trans. by Frederick Amadeus Malleon (London: Ward Lock & Co., 1877), chapter 17, <<http://jv.gilead.org.il/wolcott/CE-all/17.html>> [accessed 3 September 2009].

heart of the globe could not be placed in another country. It is not only a question of reminiscences caused by the recent travel of Jules Verne to Scandinavia. At the end of the novel, in the second-last chapter, Axel sets Stromboli against Iceland:

What a journey we had accomplished! How marvellous! Having entered by one volcano, we had issued out of another more than two thousand miles from Snæfell and from that barren, far-away Iceland! The strange chances of our expedition had carried us into the heart of the fairest region in the world. We had exchanged the bleak regions of perpetual snow and of impenetrable barriers of ice for those of brightness and 'the rich hues of all glorious things'. We had left over our heads the murky sky and cold fogs of the frigid zone to revel under the azure sky of Italy!³²

The loneliness of Iceland and its grey landscape are here opposed to the luxuriant Mediterranean island. Origins are in a certain sense connected with absence of life. Where flora can be contemplated, it is not possible to imagine origins, because they are to be found where nothing exists before the beginning. Origins are at the same time the vacuum, the abyss. Iceland in European culture answers the need to identify a primeval place where the origins of the world can be imagined.

VI. Artistic Representations of Primeval Iceland

The penetration into the earth from the place where the landscape reveals its pristine condition and the way into the volcano symbolically intended as a sort of back-journey into the uterus where the earth was generated are in my opinion also expressed in *Cave* (2003), a short film by the Finnish artist Salla Trykkä. Trykkä puts at the centre of her narration a woman who leaves a house and enters a cave. After having plunged her fingers into a little puddle of water blended with grey dust, she finally runs out from the cave through another mouth, different from the one she penetrated. The landscape in which she finds herself is rocky, probably lavic: maybe Iceland?³³ We can compare this short film with the photograph taken the same year by the Italian artist Walter Niedermayr, *Leihrnjúkur I*. *Leihrnjúkur*, a lava field in the Krafla volcanic area located in the north-eastern part of Iceland, was generated in 1984.³⁴ Consequently, the surface is still thin, the air is sulphurous; in few words primordial, primeval. The

32 Ibid., chapter 45, http://jv.gilead.org.il/wolcott/CE_allc/45.htm [accessed 3 September 2009].

33 *Northern Lights. Reflecting with Images*, ed. by Filippo Maggia and Silvia Ferrari (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2007), pp. 27–33.

34 Ibid., pp. 70–71.

same idea of Iceland as a primeval land which overcomes the human being also emerges from the recent film by the German artist John Bock, *Skipholt* (2005).³⁵ For Trykkä, Niedermayr and Bock the rocky and volcanic landscape is the representation of a world in which man is marginal and insignificant, a little figure contemplating the vastness that has been filled by new rocks created by the meeting of incandescent lava and cold air.

VII. Apollo 11 and Pierre Huyghe's *One Million Kingdoms*

The representations of origins from *Völuspá* to current artworks seems to converge in the Icelandic landscape. Interestingly enough, scientists have considered Iceland as a privileged place for investigating the origins. It is here necessary to recall the first travellers who went to Iceland at the beginning of the nineteenth century, driven by the desire to find uncorrupted and, consequently, original material for the development of scientific research.³⁶ It would be superficial to consider such an attitude as a perception of the world resulting from a romantic sensibility. In the twentieth century, at the end of the sixties, the NASA Apollo program contemplated the landing of the man on the lunar ground. A series of tests for equipments, LEM and astronauts were planned. The place that was considered congenial for those scientific simulations was the Eldhraun lava field in South Iceland. Its name means 'fire-lava':³⁷ it is surely a matter of chance, but nevertheless it is surprising that fire and solidified rocks are again melted in a place-name, as they were in the original fusion of elements in *Ginnungagap*. Eldhraun, a meaningful name for a cultural meditation, was chosen by scientists as the place for a new beginning, for the adventure of man on the lunar surface.

The implications between Iceland and the Apollo mission were explored by the French artist Pierre Huyghe in his short animated film *One Million Kingdoms* (2001). The core element is a manga character named Annlee. The film begins with an image which evokes the 1865 descent from Snæfellsjökull to the centre of the earth described by Jules Verne, then the moon test area collocated at the left of Snæfellsjökull. A vertical line joins Iceland with a dark moon, next to which 1969, the year of the landing of Apollo 11, is indicated. Finally, at the level of the equator, the words 'expedition departure 1998' are reported and a line connects this point with Iceland on the top. Then the animation begins. Annlee, the

35 John Bock, *Skipholt* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008); Marco De Michelis, *Il sublime è ora / The Sublime is Now* (Milano: Skira, 2008), p. 37.

36 Wawn, pp. 283–311.

37 Ennio Cavalli, *Il divano del Nord. Viaggio in Scandinavia* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2005), pp. 81–82.

manga-character, walks in a lunar landscape while an off screen voice is speaking. Only afterwards does one perceive that it is the same Annlee who is speaking. The voice is a rearrangement of Neil Armstrong's recording during the Apollo 11 expedition. The voice of Armstrong is the meta-structural component which connects Jules Verne, Icelandic tests and lunar expedition:

The *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* by Jules Verne begins in Iceland in the Snoefells Jokull crater at the north of the island. The conquest of space starts there on that desert of lava. The first images of Neil Armstrong hopping in his space suit in the middle of a desolated landscape were shot there. This is an expedition through territories that are topologically similar.³⁸

The description of a desolate landscape is reinforced by Armstrong's voice remarking that the tests in Iceland prepared mankind for the 'spectacle of desolation' the moon would offer:

The conquest of space, which was a dream until now [...] had become an illusion. We want to enter the unknown, when the greatest mysteries are right here [...] Here under our steps [...].³⁹

The disillusion towards lunar expeditions and the dismissing of lunar exploration projects with the Apollo 17 in 1972 are evoked in the words chosen by Pierre Huyghe. While Annlee walks, the mountains around her peak and collapse following Armstrong's voice. We immediately understand that the landscape is the graphic realization of the sound-waves of the voice. The narration is intermingled with words from the real record of the lunar landing, but the final part is taken from the seventeenth chapter of *Voyage au Centre de la Terre* by Verne:

The real journey was beginning.
 Fearful dangers lurked. I had not yet looked down into the bottomless pit which I was about to plunge into.
 I was ashamed to step away. Now the time had come.
 I leaned over a projecting rock and looked down [...] My hair stood on end [...].
 The fascination of the void took hold of me. I felt my centre of gravity moving, and vertigo rising to my head like intoxication.
 There is nothing more powerful than this attraction of the abyss.⁴⁰

38 Pierre Huyghe, 'One Million Kingdoms (2001)', in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Pierre Huyghe* (Skira: Genève-Milano, 2004), p. 359.

39 Ibid., ivi.

40 Ibid., ivi.

VII. Searching for Origins

The conclusion of the animated film reports the desolated reflection of Pierre Huyghe about human solitude faced with the uncertainty of what surrounds the earth. Lunar expeditions gave no answer to the loneliness of man in creation and were also unable to explain the origin of existence. Only the human voice pronouncing the name of the narrator is audible in the void and unknown space:

Nothing [...] with the possible exception of [...] the state of weightlessness.
For a moment I was afraid that their words might be my own, brought back to me by an echo.
I listened once more, and this time I clearly heard my name thrown through the space.⁴¹

Like in the *Völuspá*, nothing exists except the void that preceded creation. The search for origins is a way to make up for that void, those abysses which from the craters of Iceland have been transferred to cosmic dimensions and proportions: thanks to scientific progress, men have enlarged the boundaries of their celestial vault, but not solved, as yet, the need to find out the starting point, the origin of all.

41 Ibid., ivi.