Mythcon: Random Thoughts

Christine Ione Smith
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Additional Keywords
Beryl de Folo
In these letters, many written before his fame and all written confidentially, Lewis imparted a number of bosom secrets, including some details of a sexual fantasy life that hinged upon dark imaginings: chains and bondage and human pain. These obsessions passed away with other problems of his youth and Greaves, in deciding to preserve the letters, scored out and blackened these passages.

Greaves is dead, the letters have come to a repository and now Fr. Hooper, who has shown commendable diligence in transcribing them and in puzzling out their sequence and dates, has turned the same diligence to printing the screen of ink. He has given us Lewis's letters entire, the deleted passages set off in brackets.

It's hard to believe this act was necessary. We now know, I suppose, more about Lewis the man but I cannot believe we would have been much injured if we had not known it. The sentiment has been voiced that Lewis can now appear as "less of a plaster saint," that knowledge of his sadistic imaginings makes his "more human."

Well, Lewis's own church minimizes canonization; at Rome or in the East, youthful sexual irregularities might cost St. Olaf the saint and king of Norway, was succeeded on the throne by his illegitimate son. The saint has demonstrated heroic virtue; he or she is not necessarily perfect. I am suspicious anyway of people who make sin and sickness the essence of humanity; it's a comforting cop-out—how often we use it when letting someone down: "I'm only human!" The next step is that regrettable line in "The Jilted I Know," "Einstein was one of them!" (I.e., the space men). He was one of us and let's be proud of it. And sinners are "us" no doubt—but so are saints, even those whom human gratitude has commemo-
rated in plaster and wood and colored glass.

As for Lewis, a number of his flaws were already on record: the omnipresent tobacco, the streaks of intolerance (he once declared that Quakers aren't Christians, and see Carpenter's Inquisitions for his Ulster attitude toward papists), his unimpeachable testimony that the admissions in Screwtape are chronicled from within. For my money it was the countless acts of charity, the loyalty to his friends and his commitment to truth that drew him from the "more or less contented sub-humanity" to which we all tend and made him human in the fullest sense of the word.

So we return to the bracketed passages. I am not here arguing suppression; I'm willing enough that the letters exist. A transcription of the blackened passages could easily have been prepared and perhaps made available to Lewis scholars. But a man has some rights to have his secrets preserved less than twenty years after his death, secrets that he himself would have been hurt and upset to have disclosed.

We have of course in western culture pursued two separate paths on sex and its publicity: an insistence in law and politics that sex is private and no outsider's business and an insistence in literature, biography and day-to-day socializing that sex is terribly important, to be displayed, analyzed and talked about endlessly. Whereas we are and have always been contrary bent is beside the present point.

Arthur Greaves once had the letters in his power; he could have burned them. As a favor to those who are interested in his famous friend, he allowed them to pass into public view, with a reservation. He registered that reservation unmistakably in black ink. We may think that reservation prudish and Victorian, we may invoke an absolute right to disclosure for historians that deny to policemen, the fact remains that the letters were his and the reservation was his. The disregarding of that reservation strikes me as dishonorable.

Walter Hooper has been offered space to reply.

I have been to all the Mythcons except two; Mythcon III (which apparently was pretty much swallowed up by Westercon), and the Mythcon of 1978.

The pace of the early cons was frenetic. There were social gatherings, games, panels and papers, and I had to see them all. The attendees of those early cons seemed to be largely comprised of Southern Californians I'd seen at meetings every month (until the recent splittings into branches). Many of these people—most, I daresay—like me, were late adolescents sprung from very non-mythopoetic homes where an interest in things mythopoetic was not understood, or even regarded with some suspicion: "There's not going to be any pickinget, is there?" my father demanded, just before I left for Mythcon II in 1971. So arrival at a con was rather like being released from a long stretch in the slammer—but only for a four day reprieve.

Crazy conversations at all hours, hysterical laughter, tears, fervent friendships made, fights; beds were used only to fling discarded costumes on. Very few people slept, and if they did it was more often than not along with twenty others on someone's floor—even if your room was one floor above—for three hours.

Those early cons were for me, and I suspect for a large number of the rest of the attendees, mostly a social occasion. This is not to say they weren't important—far from it! Coming from a conservative background where my mythopoetic writings and books were considered a suspect cross between happiness and the sort of dull bookworm that would never attract possible husbands, the chance to associate with people like me was an emotional and spiritual high, that had me in a fever of apprehension the month before a con, and in a depression after it was over.

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In fact, C. S. Lewis has pointed out that there is an odd sense in which the myths give real trees and rocks and eagles back to us in a fresh and vivid way that we might miss if we had "only" the daily trees and rocks and eagles that we see in the rush of our workaday lives. That is, having been taken into some ancient oak grove, all cool and twilit, with gnarled roots clinging to the lichen-covered rocks—having been taken in there in some myth, we have new eyes to see the oaks and rocks around us that we probably don't see at all, left to our own unaided imagination.

Well, perhaps this brings us back around to our original question. What are the uses of myth? Myth, in our sense here, is a special kind of narrative—a narrative that evokes the high and far-off, and that gives us adventure taking place in a noble setting, among noble characters. The Greek myths do this, and the Nordic myths, and the Arthurian tales. And Tolkien has done it in our own time. But his choosing to do this was an odd thing, when we have such a rich and sophisticated literature already going in the 20th century. Why did he do this?

Besides his confessed love of this sort of thing, and his stated desire simply to tell a story, it must be said that the kind of thing he wanted to evoke for us could only be evoked via this kind of narrative. In the braying tumult of modernity, whose landscape is blasted with the ash heaps of technology and participatory democracy and the power struggle and chairpersonships and litigation and miles per hour and pragmatic banality, how do we propose to keep alive in our souls such notions as majesty, splendor, courtesy, nobility, sacrifice, renunciation, fidelity, chastity, virginity, and so forth? They don't fit in our landscape, and there are few raw materials in our landscape from which we can fashion pictures of them. Hence, somebody in there has to keep on telling tales of realms in which those things make sense. We can't win debates on virginity any more; but perhaps we can tell tales of a high and blissful order of things where virginity makes overwhelming sense.

And so with the other things that you find in myth but that you can't find in our imaginative landscape. Any Christian suspects that those things are there forever. One way or another, we have to tell the story about them.

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people passing in and out of the coffee shop to eat or sit and talk. This was the only place where the two worlds overlapped and comingled; walking into the coffee shop at any time one could see large parties of vacationing middle Americans, and businessmen, and jeweled and beringed and velvet or silk-clad cloaked figures...

Contact between this world and that was quiet, peaceful: some inquisitive stares, a few timid and very polite questions, and smiles when, after the masquerade, we paraded in our best finery through the lobby and past the bar. This hotel setting appealed to me because I enjoyed the visual representation of our relationship to the world at large. Surrounded by the mundane existance, and going into it only when we needed, we created a small universe full of laughter and dancing, music and art, and long conversations in the drowsy heat and mild evenings on books and subjects beloved to us all.

It occurred to me that Mythcon X was casually but not carelessly run. The Chairperson, Lisa Harrigan, could be seen everywhere, quietly fixing, arranging, announcing, but there was minimum of administrative fussery and of being jarred out of one event to be herded to the next. Events seldom started on time, but since most of us were at the

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6 Proofs given to Orual are:

(1) Psyche's beauty which hints of divinity (22)
(2) Psyche's and her own Suchness (23, 74, 76, 95; Ecc. 3:11, RSV)
(3) rho ("C. S. Kilby, An Interpretation of Jill We Have Faces," in P. Schakel, ed., The Longing for a Form, Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1977) (Hosea 6:13, Acts 14:17): during and after Psyche's sacrifice (92, 94), during trips to the mountain (93, 138), when Orual asks for a sign on the mountain (125), and in her room (150).

(4) Orual's own conscience (96) and terror of being wrong (169, 171)
(5) Psyche's miraculous removal from the chains (99)
(6) Psyche alive and wonderfully changed (123)
(7) Orual's seeing the palace (132)
(8) Psyche's prophecy come true (157)
(9) Orual's seeing the god (172)

7 Compare with Aslan's "terrible goodness" in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

8 In his letter to Professor Kilby, Lewis writes that Psyche "is in some ways like Christ not because she is a symbol of Him but because every good man or woman is like Christ." Lettres C. S. Lewis, ed. W. H. Lewis (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), February 10, 1957, p. 273.

9 Charles Williams is the originator of the term "coherence."

10 The Fox, who represents humanistic rationalism (27, 303) calls this the "god within" him (18, 180). He explains everything in terms of natural causes (10, 17, 22, 31, 85, 144).

11 See C. S. Lewis, Miracles (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1947), p. 134. The need to be born again is more subtly expressed by the priest fighting his way out of Ungit's temple every spring (272).


15 This is the final fulfilling of the god's prophecy, "You also shall be Psyche" (174). Orual is also like Psyche because she succeeds her suffering (176), shares her suffering (186, 300 304), is a "sacrifice" for Glome (216), tries to perform the same tasks (sort seeds (256), gather fleece (284), gather water from the deadlands (285).


18 Ibid., p. 7.


20 Ibid., p. 207.

21 Ibid., p. 209.

22 Throughout the story, a contrast is made between what things seem and what they really are. Things that appear to be dreams turn out to be true (see pp. 71, 109, 112, 120, 121, 137, 205, 243, 249, 276-7, 283, 285).


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late-running ones starting the next when we were ready was simply done.

This brings to mind another difference from the early days. Gone completely was the old lecture/student, performer/audience feeling. The panels were true discussions instead of merely question and answer periods. Everyone seemed to have read widely in all the related literature, historical, linguistic subjects. In fact, mythopoeic interests in general seemed to have been incorporated generally in people's everyday lives. This became obvious to me during the music program. When the planned part of the program was over, various people in the audience got up and performed, and finally the musicians just kept on playing and those of us who wished to dance got up and did so, in a variety of happy and unself-conscious styles, from belly-dancing and interpretive ballet, to bouncing, twirling and clapping.

The guests of honor, Jim Allan and Annette Harper, were not only good choosers but enjoyable people to be around and to listen to. Jim Allan, a long-time Tolkien and fantasy devotee, has published what is truly a selfless act of love; a first-rate book on the Elvish language, compiled for years and brought out only after various unpleasant setbacks, with all profits going to the charity Tolkien favored. Annette Harper's beautiful artwork is familiar to Mythlore readers. Amy and Edith, who ran the art show, spent six months that I know of writing and calling people all over the country to borrow or collect pieces of Annette's art, resulting in a breathtaking exhibition.

The art show this time seemed to be dominated by female artists. Among the many pieces that caught my eye were some of Edith's (especially one, called "tant Que Je Vivre," a particularly compelling theme running through the last of Dorothy Dunnett's Lymond series... it was coveted by nearly everyone, and ended up going for nearly what I'd brought to get me through the entire con. Drat! Double-drat!) and also Bonnie GoodKnight's. Bonnie's art, always atmospheric, has improved spectacularly... Two other highlights were the films—"Bedazzled," the Fairbanks "Robin Hood," and "The Three Musketeers," among my very favorites of all time; and Bernie Zuber's Tolkien Art Slide Show.

Any time throughout the day or night, between events or when there was a peaceful lull, music seemed to materialize, marking a counterpart to the outerworld surroundings, and invoking that sense of joy and yearning which characterizes mythopoeic books, and art, and people... At odd moments, when one least seeks it, a movement of a cloak or sword in the corner of one's eye, or a scarcely-heard pattern of melody, or a voice quoting poetry, are like glimpses into a secondary universe—all the more magical for being so ephemeral...

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