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The Uses of Myth

Abstract
Attempts to give a definition of myth, and the elements necessary for a mythic tale. Concludes the mythic narrative is necessary to evoke certain “notions” that cannot be expressed in the impoverished symbolism and imagery of modern literature.

Additional Keywords
Christianity and myth; Myth—Definition; Myth—Moral and religious aspects
We very often hear discussions on the topic "Christianity and Literature." Any such discussion, if it wishes to stay on the track, has got to acknowledge some high assumptions about myth—namely that what we might call the mythic mode (that is, the mode of showing and telling, rather than of explaining and proving) is at the heart of the matter. The fountainhead of Christianity is not a moral scheme, or a book of axioms, or a set of conundrums or cryptograms, as is the case with the world's religions: it is a tale—a drama, with a sequence of events, that was played out on the stage of our real, light-of-day history, in which the truth about things was embodied and enacted for us all to see. It was all shown to us, and then to us, by that same lumen intellectus of a St. Basil the Great, a St. Thomas Aquinas, or a Pascal, down to the pieté of a Sicilian peasant woman with her beads, or the zeal of a stump preacher with his annotated Bible, all Christians are talking about a story: a myth, if you will, not in the modern sense of being a tale of marvels that never really occurred, but rather in the sense of being a narrative of events which themselves exactly embody and disclose high immensities and bright fixities.

The idea, for the Christian imagination, is that the drama, the only drama there is, really, and the drama that was guessed and strained at in the myths of the Greeks and the Norsemen and all other peoples, was, lo and behold, really played out for us in real history. This tale, or drama, is the fountainhead of all Christian thinking.

And the fountainhead of all literature is, of course, the incorrigible human inclination to take the clutter of mere experience, and to order and shape it by working it up into narratives that will embody and disclose the truth about that experience for us, and in so doing, give that experience back to us transfigured—transsubstantiated, even—into splendid and blissful forms. The literary or artistic imagination—let us call it the poetic imagination—sees that if you want to come at the hub of things you have to re-create them somehow or other in some visible or audible form (in verse or mime or fresco or liturgy or sculpture or something). Somehow, we can't get things nailed down by means of propositions, questionnaires, systems, or explanations. We must show them, exhibit them, enact them, celebrate them, recreate them. We all do it all the time, all still lives, all singing of ballads, hymns, love songs, or dirges, all fanfares, all effigies, all solemn processions, and so forth: these are cases in point of human trying to get a handle on the significance of things. They all, one way or another, will speak in the mythic mode—one mode of articulating significance by showing and telling than by explaining and dismantling.

Presumably all of us here would offer some such rationale for the mythic mode, if we were all to agree on something in its behalf. We would try to point out to our interlocutors that we are not arguing for some particular viewpoint: rather, we would urge that you can't talk about the human phenomenon at all without affirming that the whole thing is "mythic," as it were—that we are myth-prone creatures; nay, that we are not only myth-prone, but that the only option open to us at all vis-à-vis our experience of existence is to recreate, or re-present, it to ourselves mythically. Otherwise we land in sheer inanity and stultification. No doubt this would be the reason why we find a deep skepticism in ourselves about the modern reading of human existence: it is a radically analytical reading, and sooner or later that reading is going to drain the sap from existence, so that you are left with a civilization that does not know what to do about morals, or about birth, or death, or anything in between. The sap that energizes and vivifies the tree of life rises from depths beyond the reach of any analytic plumbing—depths which pagans, Jews, and Christians have always recognized as being mysterious, and which they have always approached, not with clip-boards, questionnaires, computers, and caucuses, but with incense, blood, chant, and sackcloth.

But I am straying from my topic here, which is the uses of myth. We may begin by saying that myth as we usually think of it, that is as narrative, is one of the modes that participates in this all-encompassing mode that I have been speaking of. That is, the telling of stories is itself one of many manifestations of the thing that shows up in all art, liturgy, costume, and cult. But not all stories strike us as being mythic. We feel that that term ought to be reserved for a special category of story that does not include all journalism, topical satire, popular fiction, and so forth. And so it ought. I would like, then, to mention four things that ought to be true of narrative before we call it truly mythic. I think that the uses of myth will be implicit in the discussion of these characteristics of myth.

First, when we speak of myth, we ordinarily refer to a narrative that is very remote in its setting. I was going to say that it had to be about the far away and long ago, but somebody would raise the question of science fiction and tales of the future and argue that those are mythic too, and we would get into a discussion that I don't want to get into here. So let me say that myths have to be about the very remote (and this would take in planets and galaxies, if that is your taste). And we can all agree that traditionally this remoteness has been very much in terms of the far away and long ago. "Once upon a time in a far-off land" is the perfect beginning for a mythic tale. We don't want our myths beginning "At eleven a.m. yesterday in Cincinnati," or "Alice was staring at the window at the smokestacks." That won't do. Why not? Well, because myths don't happen in Cincinnati, and they don't happen yesterday morning, or, for that matter, at eleven o'clock on any datable morning. And what's more, you can't have...
smokestacks in myths. You have got to have a noble lady waking in a palace and looking out at the rosy-fingered dawn; and never mind exactly where the palace is, or what year it is. If you nail it in to history and geography that closely, you have wrecked it somehow.

Some of you may have had the distressing experience of whisking along the autobahn in Germany and seeing signs indicating that you were driving through the Black Forest. The Black Forest? Great Scott—the Black Forest is a dark wood with gnarled oaks stooping low over your head, and you go through it on a dim path, on foot or at best on a horse. Elves peep at you and cromes pass by muttering, and hags beckon from their hovels, and hermits say mass at tiny chapels. The Black Forest forsooth. This 1976 version is a keen disappointment. Why? Because the Black Forest of the fairy stories does not exist in terms of real estate in the Bundesrepublik Deutschlands. The same thing is true when you fly in a jet over Baghdad, or Samarkand. Alas—I wanted to arrive at Baghdad at twilight, on the back of a camel, with the sky all crimson and the turrets pointing into the deepening indigo of the dusk, and the whine of reed pipes and the waving of diaphanous veils and the smell of incense. I somehow didn't fancy myself coming into this airport. If I had to fly in, I at least might have come in on a magic carpet.

Myth has to be remote somehow. There is a reason for this, I think. It is because myth hails the deepest recesses of our imaginations, and in order to do this, it must hail us from story and picture detached from the clutter and the hurdy-burdy of daily ordinariness. Myth takes us to a distant time and place (and my own suspicion is that it has got to be the distant past because we have a memory of Eden back there) to show us the pictures and tell us the stories that are there in that distant, basic region. Tolkien could not have had his Dark Riders sputtering up in helicopters, or Gandalf arriving at Minas Tirith in a Cadillac. It wouldn't do.

Secondly, however remote the region of myth is, it has got to be rooted in the same soil that our experience here is. That is, you can't have myths about creatures who have nothing in common with us at all, or about a realm that is unimaginable to us. There has got to be time, for one thing—we can't grasp sheer eternity or simultaneity; and there has to be space—we can't grasp a realm of pure dimensionlessness. There have to be intelligent, speaking creatures—you can't have myths about geometrical points or non-beings; and there has to be good and evil in terms that we can recognize—we are stuck with ideas about mercy vs. cruelty, and veracity vs. mendacity, and cynicism vs. hope, and lechery vs. chastity, and so forth, and no matter how you stretch or reverse or manipulate the moral scale in your tale, you have got to make it recognizable to us mortal men. Otherwise, you lose us.

In the Greek myths, for example, the Medusa was a horrible monster with snakes for hair. Well, it goes without saying that Medusa was evil: you can't have snakes for hair and be good. Or again, in Tolkien, the Dark Riders first show themselves as black-cloaked figures riding huge horses, sniffing the ground, and apparently ghostlike in that there does not seem to be anything inside those black cloaks. Well, there is no way, with a description like that, that a story-teller is going to get us mortal men to believe that those creatures are good. Certain shapes and characteristics mean evil to us. So the myth has to be rooted in the world that we know, where babbling brooks and soft flutes and sunlit meadows and misty mornings and lovely maidens and clear-eyed knights mean goodness, and where stinking pools and throbbing drums and beetle-crazed crags and murky midnights and bags and leering trolls mean that something is wrong.

Thirdly, real myth has got to invoke the high things. The high things? I use that term because I am not sure what else to call them. I am referring to such high things as majesty, courtesy, nobility, splendor, goodness, courage, sacrifice, and purity. What's that list all about? Nobody believes in all that any more. And that is just my point. You can't write novels and film scripts and serious drama about majesty and purity and so forth, because you are writing for a world that thinks that business is gone with the wind, and the goner the better.

But the human imagination cannot live with this. You have doubtless read novels of the future—1984 and Brave New World: in them you can see what happens when we try to live without the high things. And any Christian affirms this: he is committed to a vision of reality that is full of majesty and splendor and purity and joy and courtesy. And so he knows that a world that scorns these things is somehow damned. He believes what the prophets and poets knew, that the cities of the plain, that get themselves emancipated from the high and ancient things are damned cities. He knows, for instance, that he be never so ferociously egalitarian, there is a majesty in the cards, for God is not the chairperson of any ad hoc committee: he is the king, crowned with gold, the Ancient of Days. And he knows full well that the mediaeval painting of God the Father as a bearded valetudinarian sitting on a throne, crowned with the tri-regnum, is closer in to the truth of the matter than any notion of him as Our Chairperson which art in Heaven, or even as the Ground of Being.
Majesty is in the cards, then; but we live in a world that knows nothing at all of this, indeed, that disavows and hates this idea. Hierarchy, the corollary to the idea of majesty, is a sincerely detested idea in our day—and sections of Christendom have run hell-for-leather to hook themselves onto the bandwagon that is rolling loudly along toward the egalitarian city of man, or rather, the city of persons. So how does this all fit together, but alas, it is called hell. And how are we to keep alive the notion of majesty in our imaginations unless somewhere in there we keep telling stories that show us majesty? When we've got all democracies, and equalized and purged and disinfected from the old idea of hierarchy and majesty, pray God that there will be some old nurse somewhere who will still tell our children stories that begin, "Once upon a time there was a great king."

And nobility and sacrifice and high courtesy and purity are all in the cards, but there is no imagery in the modern world by which we may speak of these things, or keep them alive. So we have to have old tales that bespeak a world in which those things make sense. Our democratic landscape furnishes us with nothing that will enable us to keep keen and bright in our souls the vision of what any Christian suspects the City of God is like. Somebody has to be telling stories about these things, since you can't argue for them on the TV talk shows and in the columns of the popular magazines. A stiff challenge for a writer of fiction nowadays might be to write a story for us about a modern, liberated woman, and to make her one half of a splendid and mighty and ravishing and feminine and free as Tolkien's Galadriel, or Sophocles' Antigone, or Dante's Beatrice, or Shakespeare's Portia. Or again, to tell us a story about heaven, but instead of making it that of the Great King with towers and jewelled gates and thrones, to make it a commune with a rotating chairpersonship.

You may have read C. S. Lewis' space trilogy. At the end of the first story, when the hero comes back to the planet earth, he is talking with his friend about his extraordinary and glorious and blissful experiences on the other planet, Malacandra. Naturally the idea of telling about his adventures comes up, but he demurs: what good would it do? Nobody would believe such things. No, says his friend; but we must tell them anyway, since, although we may not get a believing audience, we will at least have a body of people who have heard a story like yours. That is, there will now be people familiar with certain ideas, and with certain ways of looking at things.

And, fourthly, real myth stays very much in the realm of externals. That is, the stories don't impress you as being "deep" in psychological or moral "insights," or in character development, or in subletties of plot and so forth. It is all quite straightforward adventure, with one event following another, the hero moving from this ordeal to this one, and from this adventure to the next one, the landscape changing all the while from deep glades to caves to rocky defiles in the mountains to dappled meadows and so forth. Very childish, apparently. And a lot of attention is given along the way to plain things like rocks and trees and moss and water and crusts of bread and flagons of wine and bowls of thick cream and velvets and homespuns and brocades, and iron and steel and wood and earthenware. What's all that about?

We do not see here a tremendously important thing—a thing, actually, that all of our lesser arts strain to get at one way or another, namely, the expression of the successful fusion of idea and image? That is, rather than the author having to talk to us, as it were, and lead us to the depths of sig-

ificance in his work by what he interjects into his tale, we have instead the phenomenon of the "externals" of the story—the rocks and fabrics and scenes and situations—carrying on their own shoulders, sans any "authorial" assist, the entire burden of significance. So that it becomes, not a matter of any deep or heavy passages in myths, but rather of our mind taken into a landscape where the scenery and situation is itself an exact map, or pattern, of the reality being talked about—a reality that we lesser men have to come at by writing moral or psychological, or philosophical essay or moral stories or psychological novels. Or, put it another way: the spectacle is all you have, and all you need have. In Perseus fighting the Medusa, you have a perfect and complete picture of a kind of struggle with evil that a thousand essays on evil don't give you quite so vividly. Or in the heroic and lonely stand of Gandalf before the gates of Minas Tirith, against the massed hosts of the Nazgul and their minions—do we not have there a picture which drives straight to the center and wellsprings of our beings and opens up to us more vividly than a thousand meditations can, just what heroism and purity and authority are?

I think we can see an attempt at the same thing at work in the visual arts. Take a painting of the Annunciation from the Middle Ages: here is the Virgin, crowned and sitting under gilded gothic arches, with the winged angel approaching her. Do we not suppose thatFra Angelico or Roger van der Weyden thought that it might have looked like this in first century Nazareth? Not a bit of it. What, then, were they trying to get at? Was it not that they were trying to get a picture or significance—that all glory is here when God comes to his handmaiden? Here is the transaction where our poor flesh is raised to the pinnacle of glory. How do we propose to visualize this to ourselves? Well, crowns and gothic arches are one way of coming at the mystery.

But I would be giving a wrong impression if I seemed to be arguing that all the rocks and trees and scenes in mythic tales are supposed to suggest some sub-surface allegorical significance to us. They are not puzzles or conundrums, where we end up with little charts interpreting the myths for us, with rocks equaling obstacles in our allegorical gloss, and water equaling refreshment, and swords equaling conflict. Instead, the items in a mythic tale don't equal anything else: they are themselves. The point about them is that we can see, visibly and vividly in them, situations which echo unmistakably moral and psychological situations that we know about from our own experience.
In fact, C. S. Lewis has pointed out that there is an odd sensus 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 tumble 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 existence, 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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