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MYTH'S LOSS AND THE REMYTHOLOGISERS

By Glen Goodknight

Myth might be defined in part as a process of intuition that gives to human beings a sense of meaning integrating themselves with the rest of the Universe, a sense which cannot be achieved by the intellect alone. Myth is necessary if we are to be wholly alive and relating to the Universe both on the conscious and unconscious levels. Without myth we dwindle to a mere measurable quantity.

There is a principle in psychology known as "the soggy potato chip." If a person cannot get crisp, tasty potato chips, he will take a stale, soggy potato chip. The unattractive is preferable to nothingness. For approximately the last five hundred years, we in the West have been increasing our taste for soggy potato chips. In spite of what is often consciously thought, humanity must have myth. If nourishing myth is apparently not to be had, humanity will create new ones to fill the vacuum.

The 1970's have been called the "me" decade. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Since the late Renaissance, Western man has increasingly embarked on a Faustian Enterprise. In order to do so, the older myths needed to be discredited, so the Faustian impulse could be free to operate. This impulse has drawn to it various myths that are now operating in the modern world. Of course these myths are not called such; to do so would undermine their purpose. In my own mind these substitute myths—that-are-not-called-myths include various economic theories, scientific theories, and nationalisms in forms of religion.

These would-be myths have failed because they do not (despite whatever other merits they have) ultimately nourish; they do not bring us into integration with the rest of the Universe.

Can a chicken who is hatched on a chicken farm into an environment of wire cages and controlled feeding and lighting know its environment is artificial? The same question might be asked of us who are Western moderns. Since our civilizational mind-set has been ongoing long before we were born, can we be aware of its deficiencies? I think we know the problems on the unconscious level, which surface as a Pandora's Box of ills, individual and social disjointedness and alienation.

Myth is seen as "myth" only after the reality to which it points is no longer directly sensed. The word "myth" itself shows the loss of that reality. With that in mind, and hoping not to be branded as a heretic, I conclude that Tolkien and Lewis did not, and did not intend to, create true myth. I think they had a more practical, if less transcendent, intent. They did indeed create literary myth. (I do not include Williams as a creator of myth, but see him more as an embellisher and enricher of existing ones.) Does anyone think Tolkien and Lewis intended actually to integrate the reader in their fictive worlds? Surely readers who literally believed in Narnia or Middle-Earth, and built all their lives around it, would border on psychosis.

What then was the purpose of their Literary Myths?

We moderns unconsciously desire the integration of myth, and at the same time we are unconsciously suspicious of myth, due to the ultimately non-nutritive pseudo-myths of our current mind-set. What then was the purpose of our mythopoeic writers? I think it was an attempt to remythologize (if on a partial level) the mind-frame of our demythologized thinking; to begin to give us intimations of hope that Unity is indeed possible. That is all that is needed for the "Escape of the Prisoner," as Tolkien put it, or to "awaken us from a deep spell" as Lewis would say.

In The Silmarillion the creation of the second children of Eru, and the mystery of their short life, is an example of Literary Myth, but it conveys a meaning that alters my self-perception. The creation of Laurelin and Telperion, their destruction, and the subsequent creation of the Sun and Moon, have a transcendent effect on my sensibilities that I find impossible to put into words. The correspondence of Ransom with Oyarsa at Meldilorn, and even more than that, the passage of the Great Dance in Perelandra, have power and beauty that go beyond conscious appreciation. This is myth at work.

The foregoing is only a brief sketch of a subject that needs extensive definition and development. I will be satisfied if the reader can see the basic ideas.

DOROTHY L. SAYERS AT FIFTY

(For Nancy-Lou Patterson)

O felix culpa, those German rockets falling,
which drove me like a badger underground,
for there I read of Dante's ancient haulling--
down cave, up hill, from planet to planet bound;
what narrative pace! what humour light, delightful!
what meat within that paper shell is found!--
with errors and glories of this world it's quite full.
Cuntza I pray I am, and hope to be
and may this island, from all its lessons frightful
of these four years, surviving, in its degree
then emulate the Kingdom Paradiso,
where artists serve the work in artistry--
as Dante did; as craftsmen must, a-whistle;
better the Celestial Rose, than Phlegathon's thistle.

--Joe R. Christopher