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The Future of Mythology

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Abstract
Attempts to define mythology in a broad context. Contends that truly mythic literature is rare, and science fiction is a mythology for modern times. Offers some “guesses” about the future of science fiction and fantasy.

Additional Keywords
Myth—Definition; Mythology and religion; Science fiction; Bernia Zuber
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According to the Webster that lives on my desk, the primary meaning of "myth" is: "A story, the origin of which is forgotten, ostensibly historical but usually such as to explain some practice, belief, institution, or natural phenomenon. Myths are especially associated with religious rites and beliefs.... In general, a myth deals with the actions of gods or godlike beings; a legend, though it may include supernatural incidents, concerns human beings."

It's a rather old Webster, though. More recent usage would expand the definition. For instance, there is more to myth than narrative; there may also be such things as description and prediction. Thus the Eddas describe the abodes of the gods and, indeed, their entire universe; they foretell its end; in so doing, they express and embody a whole, fatalistic concept of the world and of man's place therein.

But all religions, including living ones, do something of the same kind. So do many systems described as philosophies and ideologies. Hence we find, as always, that reality breaks the bounds of any neat little definitions in which we try to confine it. Today most persons who use the word "myth" to mean more than just "falsehood" or "superstition" are, perforce, imprecise in their employment. They make a myth — or, perhaps better, a mythology — out to be some kind of Weltbild which, in some sense and however incompletely, organizes our thoughts and feelings. As such, it has emotional as well as intellectual content — not that those two elements are ever really separable. It can be a system in which people now believe, or one in which they formerly believed, or one in which they might conceivably believe.

In this admittedly vague sense, the most obvious mythology we have today is that set of ideas we call "science". To many among us it is the only mythology, the supreme and final explanation. Of course, they usually agree that we still have a great deal to learn; but this is essentially a matter of filling in the details of a basically understandable cosmos. The mutability of our understanding — e.g., the relativistic and quantum mechanical upset of classical physics — is no more an invalidation of science than theological disagreements have been of Christianity, in the minds of believers.

The analogy can be pursued further. Like Judaism, the core of Christian thought has held that God is not capricious. His ways may often be mysterious to us, but they always make sense (a claim which Einstein made the basis of a famous metaphor when he denied that the universe can be ultimately acasual, as the uncertainty principle suggests it is). Reason can bring us a certain amount of knowledge about the divine. Experience can too. St. Paul pointed out in First Corinthians that his faith was in vain unless the Resurrection of Christ was a historical fact — not a tale or an allegory or a symbol, but an event which had actually happened — and he went to the trouble of collecting eyewitness testimony.

Therefore no disrespect is intended when I call Judeo-Christianity one of the great mythologies. Science is another, and Whitehead was doubtless right in tracing its origins back to the religion. Societies living by different myths, wherein theory was comparatively unimportant — China, for example — never came near developing a scientific system. At most, they made various useful discoveries and inventions; their principal gifts to mankind were of other sorts.

Where reason and factual information are basic, the lack of them can have disastrous consequences. This is why Judeo-Christianity has traditionally emphasized theology; and even so, the same heresies have recurred century after century under various names. Similarly, today public ignorance of science has brought us such joys as a massive revival of that hoary old fraud astrology and a widespread hysteria about nuclear powerplants.

A mythology is, however, much more than a set of attempted explanations of phenomena we observe. On the contrary, most mythologies have made only perfunctory attempts at rationalizing the world, and some, such as Taoism, have explicitly disavowed it. Man does not live by logic alone. Science itself would not have the hold on many human minds and hearts that it does, did its findings not have the immense emotional impact which they do.

Walt Whitman's poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" is a perfect illustration of failure to perceive this impact. He describes how, after listening to a lecture full of figures, he fled from the hall into the night and "Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars." Now no doubt the astronomer was a boring speaker — many priests give dull sermons too! — but the matter he dealt with was awesome. To mention a single case, the law of gravitation is not just an equation enabling us to calculate positions and trajectories; it is an epic about worlds and stars moving in an eternal embrace.

On the other side of the coin is the village atheist who may have a sense of that but has no sense of the might and mystery and beauty in the Bible.

Somebody has said that man is incurably religious, with the implication that science is the atheist's or agnostic's surrogate faith. (In this connection, I was interested to learn, in conversation with a Soviet citizen, that, throughout his country, countless Christian heresies have appeared. It seems that you can muzzle the theologians, but you can't stop people thinking about God.) Let me propose that it would be more accurate to call man incurably mythopoetic.

Remember, most pagans looked on their gods merely as
Do we have any new mythologies to use?

Yes, we do, in abundance. Mankind keeps generating them. At present I cannot count Tolkien’s. That it depends on whether or not you own a copy of one of his books. But it is a fact that many of the new mythologies are not really designed for the use of the general public. They are designed for the use of the specialist, the scholar, the artist. They are designed for the use of the person who has some knowledge of the old mythologies.

A mythological age is an age in which the people of that age have a great deal of knowledge of the old mythologies. They can use them, they can understand them, they can appreciate them. They can use them as a source of inspiration, as a source of ideas, as a source of guidance. They can use them as a source of entertainment, as a source of amusement, as a source of joy. They can use them as a source of comfort, as a source of solace, as a source of consolation.

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"When the morning stars sang together — " The stars, we now believe, are fiery nuclear furnaces, and any songs they may sing are borne on the winds driving forth out of them; unless the phrase means the planets Mercury and Venus, that use the solar wind itself as their throats, or else sing by their light low in our eastern skies....

--- and all the sons of God shouted for joy — " Who were they? What do they mean? In this single line, if you think about it, lies an entire universe of concepts, questions, emotions, and therefore stories. There are many more such phrases, more facts and myths and possibilities, than any one of us can ever know.

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GLEN GOODKNIGHT

THE COUNSEL OF ELROND

FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH TOLKIEN

GLEN GOODKNIGHT

Each one of us has memories of what it was like to read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings for the first time, especially if that experience was a number of years ago. Part of that remembering involves a contrasting of our own lives then and now and also the state of Tolkien appreciation.

I encountered Tolkien as a high school student in the very late 50's. My only real experience into private reading for pleasure had been Science Fiction, besides a good assortment of children's books in childhood. I owe much to Science Fiction; on it I cut my intellectual and imaginative eyes, but only to a certain point. When the other students in my high school Science Fiction club discovered Tolkien with fiery enthusiasm, I was reluctant. First, I was told I should read a book called The Hobbit, a "children's book." This was mildly offensive and demeaning. At that age, one took their reputation in hand to be seen entering the children's section of the public library, opening themselves to open division and silent opprobrium. Yet this was only the preparatory initiation for the next and, it was reported, a greater experience. Second, I was told I could then read something called The Lord of the Rings, a story so long it took three volumes to tell. This appeared as a heavy charge — I usually limited myself to short stories, anthologies, and novellas — but the unabated enthusiasm and ongoing conversation of my fellows impelled me to take the plunge.

To recall my initial reactions to The Hobbit is akin to retelling a long, detailed dream heavy with unconscious implications after one has been awake for several hours. Not since the uplifting to a new consciousness and appreciation of life, nature, aesthetics and the life of ideas at around the age of 14, had anything so gripped me. I was fired by both the desire to exercise the imagination and a feeling that life might hold more than I had scarce dared hope before. Here was nourishment to the character, romance, the deep abyss of time, and a feeling that life held real meaning — though hidden for the time being — beyond the tumulo and chaos that so many experience in adolescence.

Now, the three volumes, even with the detailed appendices, did not seem nearly enough. I was hungry for more. I tried several other fantasies: The Wall of the Unicorn and The Norn Ouroboros, but they were hardly the same. They certainly had imagination, but little warmth or satisfaction; I found no hint of joy "beyond the walls of the world." After the Feast Tolkien provided, Science Fiction generally was like saltine crackers. About a year later, I did discover C. S. Lewis. Perhaps there was more Tolkien hidden away in the Public Library. After exhausting the card catalog, I turned to the Reader's Guide and other similar reference guides.

"Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" was discovered, which was mostly over my head, although I certainly wouldn't admit it. Further delving brought me at last to something called "Leaf by Niggle" in the Dublin Review, January, 1945. By great good fortune, the Los Angeles Central Public Library had this arcane volume. It was on "reserve," but I was able to take it out to the patio next to the children's room. There in the gathering twilight, with sparrows contesting and singing in the shrubbery and trees, and traffic noises muffled by the surrounding walls, I read of Niggle's adventure for the first time. Its eucatastrophic joy intrigued and puzzled me, but its appeal and implications has never escaped me.

Thus my early experience with Tolkien was before the pop-culture explosion of the mid-sixties, the availability of paperback editions, ongoing organizations, publications, and the myriad of critical and reference books. Then, far more than now, one felt he knew a secret that could be shared with very few others. It was a wistful, lonely feeling, that in my case eventually led to the formation of The Mythopoeic Society in 1967.

Whether one has encountered Tolkien with these adjunct and multifaceted resources or not, I believe the primary and most fundamental interaction is with the imagination of the individual and the profound vision Tolkien has given. Without that, the other things serve as an elaborate frame around an empty center.

After the first encounter many do return repeatedly, even though we have not forgotten the original impact, for refreshment and to discover new things. This is the case for myself with The Silmarillion. In 1978, after twenty long years of false rumors and waiting, I eagerly read it in a short time. For many, this work has proved nearly indigestible read at a fast pace. It needs slow, careful reading several times to savor this very bitter-sweet book. Now that Unfinished Tales has been printed, I find myself going back to The Silmarillion for more relaxed reflections and clarifications. What an amazingly rich book it is. I missed much of its import in that first hurried, impelled reading.

I think it is fairly certain that The Lord of the Rings will always be the most popular of Tolkien's works. It is far more like a novel than anything else, its drama and dialog draw the reader into a more personal interaction; one feels one is participating with the action and unfolding plot. The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales generally read more like ancient historical accounts, surely as Tolkien intended.

Years ago I made the analogy that whereas The Hobbit was like looking through a keyhole onto Middle-earth, with The Lord of the Rings it was like opening the door for a much more comprehensive view. To extend the analogy, now with The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales, we are provided a startling mountain-top panorama.

I am fairly sure we may see more Tolkien fragments published in the future. What new riches and insights will be found? The waiting will surely be vexing, but what new encounters will meet and interact with our enlarged vision then?