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Letters

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Nancy-Lou Patterson has been far too kind and uncritical in her article about me— but I was much impressed and think I must be a delightful person! No, I'm elderly, 56 now, and certainly not willowy; not too much hair either. As for drawing tiny, same size, or meticulously, I'm afraid this, too, is out of date. My eyes are not as good and I don't do as much detail. Alas.

About the illustrating, or, non-illustrating of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien did mention that he was working on this book and would I be interested in illustrating it. (At that time he visualized something with a nature of marginal illustrations, on the tops of pages embellished.) But when it finally came to printing, the book had grown somewhat! The publishers realized, quite rightly, that illustrations would not be feasible, and the whole idea was dropped. I would like to put this right, because there was no ulterior motive, as suggested by Mrs. Patterson. Indeed, the very next book Tolkien did was "Bonadill"; he at once asked me to do, and was charming and most complimentary over it. He told Rayner Unwin that he considered he and I were the only people who could illustrate his work. We remained very good friends for the rest of his life. Indeed, he was to have come and stayed with us the fortnight after he died. I wouldn't like a wrong impression to appear in print. I have actually illustrated the new deluxe boxed edition of the Poems and Stories that Allen and Unwin have just brought out, which includes old drawings, redrawn old ones (to a new size) and some entirely new ones.

Please thank Mrs. Patterson for all the extremely nice and encouraging things she wrote about me, though I must say I find it all a bit embarrassing! I'm not used to being written about!

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Kudos to Nancy Lou Patterson for her masterful tribute to Pauline Baynes. Readers may enjoy the following little comedy of errors.

Pauline sent me a gift copy of her beautiful COMPANION TO WORLD MYTHOLOGY (text by Richard Barber) with a rueful remark about disappointment in the work of the printer. She was, in fact, referring to how many of her designs run off the side of the pages. But I searched every page for a specific error that I mistakenly thought she referred to other than the cropped edges.

Eventually my head was reeling because the book contains hundreds of vivacious illustrations of myths, many bizarre, in styles appropriate to all kinds of cultures. I stopped a long time trying to link one highly decorative illustration to one of the nine entries beside it, ranging from Phoebe to Polyneices. I was stunned.

Finally I realized that this was a depiction of Pillan, fire-god of the Araucanian Indians of South America, but that the entire 8-inch-tall illustration was printed upside down: I wrote to Pauline and said I had found the error that displeased her, the inverison on p. 213. She wrote back and said that not even she had noticed it before! (What tipped me off was the upside-down volcano at the top.) No one at the publishing company, no reviewer, and not even the artist herself had noticed, in that array of splendors, this major misprint. And the only reason I found it was that I erroneously thought that there was an error Pauline expected me to notice.

Maybe two wrongs don't make a right, but in that case my misguided effort was fruitful and might lead to correction in a future edition. The book is like a chest of jewels anyway. My only complaint is that the lovely two-page full-color fantasy landscape in the appendix would be more visible as a frontispiece.

Following is Pauline Bayne's statement at the beginning of the book:

It seemed right to try to depict the gods and mythological characters of this book as they had been imagined by the people of the countries concerned over the years rather than to draw upon my own ideas. So, where possible, I have used the earliest references available and when, with my limited time and resources, no pictorial references could be found, I have used the earliest art-style of that particular country. I hope this has made for pictures that are not merely decorative, but also interesting and informative. Sometimes, of course, no picture reference of any kind was available, and in that case I had to fall back on imagination.

Where there are several well-known depictions of a god, I have tended to superimpose them in order to convey a general impression of how he was imagined. Some gods came to be represented by objects, as Thor by his hammer, and I have included examples of this. Finally, I have tried to resist the temptation of making all gods look like weird monsters with huge eyes and long teeth: to the people who worshipped them they were in the main perfectly ordinary-looking people, not bigger in stature or odder in appearance but with strange attributes and gifts and with overwhelming magical powers.

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Let me draw your attention to the curious syncretism of Christianity and polytheism represented by the Ainur.

As a literary construct, the Ainur are obviously derived from the ancient Greek, and to a lesser extent the Norse pantheon. Yavanna is Aphrodite, Aule is Hephaestus, and so on. Some of the minor figures have no classical original,
and two major figures, Elbereth and Morgoth, are of Christian inspiration. The others come directly from classical mythology, virtually unchanged.

However, as a story, the very opposite is true. We are asked to believe that the classical gods are derived from the Valar. The Elves and Men of prehistoric times rightly worshipped these demiurgic angels. They knew them as holy and powerful protectors, even though they recognized that the Valar were subject to The One. But by early historic times, this worship had degenerated to an ignorant worship of the Valar under other names, and without recognition of the one true God.

Tolkien intends that we should say "Of course! That's where the Greeks got their idea of Zeus. From his recollections of the real Manwe!" In the same way he intends us to say at the end of the Akallabêth, "Atalante. So that's where Plato got his notion of Atlantis! Avalonne! So that's the truth behind Malory's Avalon."

The Fathers of the Church mostly agreed that the pagan gods were angels, but they took it for granted that they were fallen angels -- that is, devils. Tolkien tells us that (in the Secondary World of the Story) the gods were the good angels, erroneously worshipped. He may even have believed (or suspected) that this was true in the Primary World. He may even have been right. The idea is certainly unusual, but it does not contradict any Christian doctrine. It is certainly more pleasant to suppose that God mediated to the pagans such truth as they could absorb through the agency of His angels, than to suppose that He abandoned them (like orcs) to the service of devils.

That the Ainur are angels is a fact that has been often noted, but there is one point of resemblance I have not seen mentioned. The angels are traditionally classified into three hierarchies, each constituting three classes; thus the "nine choirs of angels". Tolkien has retained the threefold division while rejecting the ninefold one (or at least telling us nothing about it.)

The first hierarchy consists of those who adore and serve God directly, having little or nothing to do with material Creation. Of this sort are the Seraphim and Cherubim. Tolkien does not give them a name, but refers to them as those who "abode still with Ildvatar beyond the confines of the World".

The second hierarchy is responsible for the government of the universe, from keeping the stars in their courses to overseeing the fate of kingdoms: they administer the divine providence. These in Tolkien are the Valar.

The third hierarchy are the messengers of God to men, in intimate contact with men. These are the Malar, such as Melian or Gandalf in Tolkien, or Raphael in the Book of Tobias, or Gabriel in Matthew.

In fairness, I should point out the differences between Tolkien's angels and the real angels. The Malar, at the lower end of the spectrum, are far more material than theologians allow any real angel to be. Tolkien's angels sin and repent and are forgiven (e.g., Aule the Smith in the making of dwarves); real angels are either forever damned or forever saved, since angelic psychology does not allow of changing one's mind. Lastly, Tolkien's angels are much more interesting. But this, we must suppose, is an accident of preservation.

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In the opening paragraphs of her review (Mythlore, Summer 1980, pp. 34-35) of Peter Schakel's Reading with the Heart, Nancy-Lou Patterson makes an important point regarding the sacramentalist nature of Lewis's fiction. I would not want to be thought unappreciative of her position, with which I agree far more than I disagree. My few comments may in fact seem rather picky, and have the review appeared in a different journal I might well have passed over it in silence. But Mythlore readers are a special breed and would want, I think, to be exact even on seemingly small matters.

What mainly needs to be corrected is the impression conveyed by the review that the tendency to interpret Narnia allegorically is nothing to be concerned about and that Schakel's superb achievement is somehow diminished by the fact that he is concerned about it.

The belittling isn't done in so many words. In fact, when Patterson finally, in the last paragraph, begins to talk about the book being reviewed, she calls it "a very good study" and cites, in particular, two "extremely important contribution(s)" which it makes. Prior to that, however, eight per cent of her review has consisted of all-documented and largely accurate argument that the Chronicles are symbol, not allegory: an argument which is relevant in this context only if (as is implied) Schakel thinks otherwise. As I read him, he does not. Patterson takes exception to Schakel's statement that the Chronicles "are not dependent on Christianity." This must involve a sort of quibble on the meaning of "dependent," which as Schakel is using it has to be compatible with his statement earlier in the same paragraph (p. 132) that "Christianity was so deeply and fully a part of Lewis that his faith would inevitably infuse whatever he wrote." Patterson's objection seems off the point: her pancake analogy offers two alternatives -- that the Chronicles might have an existence apart from their Christian element (the syrup) or that Lewis used Christianity as an ingredient in the recipe for their making (the flour) -- neither of which fits the actual case.

But the other misapprehension of this review is, I think, of wider significance. Patterson faults Schakel's book for a "faintly combative (sic) tone" directed against a "straw critic." She writes, "I can't think of anybody who has given the Chronicles an allegorical reading in the strict sense of the word." Well, that may be so on some rarefied plateau of literary criticism, as the final qualification implies, but it is also true that there are hundreds of less sophisticated readers who read -- or, worse yet, who are taught to read -- the Chronicles allegorically and thereby forfeit a rich imaginative experience for a pot of message. For there are indeed critics whom Schakel is out to correct, and rightly, though one book alone will not do the job. Not persons trained in criticism, who would of course be aware of the fine distinctions made by Patterson, but professionals in other fields -- educators and ministers for example, whose approach to the Chronicles appears to be largely utilitarian. And the job needs to be done because these well-meaning people are doing a lot of damage.

For the record, let me mention a few examples. David C. Cook Publishing Company makes the following statement in its catalog description of the seven-week curriculum unit "Voyage to Narnia": "This fantasy (The Chronicles of Narnia) is an allegory of Christ and His redemptive work." Paul A. Karkainen, Narnia Explored (Old Tappan, N. J.: Revell, 1979), is momentarily careless when he says that The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe "tells an allegorical tale of the death and resurrection of Christ" (p. 11) in his fuller discussion of that tale he is content to speak of "symbols" and "parallels." The carelessness recurs repeatedly, however, as when he says that the story Lucy especially loved in the Magician's book "is, of course, an allegory of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection" (p. 77, emphasis mine), and then goes on to reduce the cup, sword, tree, and green hill to the level of mere code. Charles Brady's early and influential article "Finding God in Narnia" (America, 27 October 1956) develops the statement that "allegory is strong in Narnia"; Brady was probably not using "allegory" in what Patterson would call

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Other examples could no doubt be cited. However, the most telling proof of the need for Schakel to have done what he has, is not found in print at all. It is the casual assumption, which we have all heard on the lips of many readers, that their enthusiasm for Narnia can be accounted for by working out "what the allegories mean." Patently, each time, we explain that there's more to it than that.

It is quite clear (as I began by saying) that Nancy-Lou Patterson realizes there's more to it than that. The task of explaining so would be made easier, however, by recognizing that there is a job to be done and granting something more than faint praise to the scholars who are doing it.

NOTES
1 In the light of the millennia of Narnian history before the first visit of the Pevensie children and then between that and their second visit (Lewis's chronology, cited by Walter Hooper in my Imagination and the Spirit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 298-301), I can't understand what it means to say that "its (Narnia's) premise includes continual contact between England (our world) and Narnia."

2 Another possibility is that Patterson and Schakel are simply using "Christianity" in two different senses: respectively, as a synonym for the whole truth on religious and philosophical questions, and as the name of a particular religion which did not exist before the first century, and, of course, does not exist on other planets or in other worlds.

A reply to Charles Hutter's letter:

I am both touched and honoured by Charles A. Hutter's meticulous and entirely just correction of my review: his clarifications help me to understand the "negative tone" I detected, and his detailed account of the "critics whom Schakel is out to correct" is an important contribution to the discussion. 1 I'm delighted that so eminent and graciously a commentator has read and improved upon my efforts!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

1 Hutter writes in his footnote that he "can't understand what it means to say" that there was "continual contact between England . . . and Narnia." Perhaps he should have written "intermittent" instead of "continual." But what I meant (and what I understand the dislocation of time between the two worlds to suggest) is this: there are humans present at the creation of Narnia, not only Digory (whose wardrobe becomes the wardrobe) and Polly, but the baby and his wife, who become the first rulers there. Again, the Telmarine are humans who have come "hither, certain generations ago, out of that same world to which the High King Peter belongs." (Prince Caspian, 1951, Chapter XV) Narnia was thus visited twice (at least) by humans, that is, persons native to Tellius/Earth, before the visits of the Pevensie children, Eustace, and Jull. Digory, Polly, three of the Pevensies, Eustace, and Jill are present at the end of Narnia. Now, Narnian history may compass millennia, but there is a sense in which the whole of Narnian time is compressed in English time within the context of a life-time, that of Digory and Polly (or the author, whose Edwardian childhood these stories reflect). From the human point of view, the contact is so frequent as to merit (maybe) my word "continual." At least I thought so when I wrote it. But my efforts to explain that I meant suggest that my critic is right about this too! Mea culpa.

John Pivovarnick

See that the mythnicity, as it were, of Sir Edward depended on your (and my) definition of myth, I sat down and tried to figure out what I regarded as myth. Define and defend, that's my motto. Then I discovered that my concept of myth (or Myth, or even MYTH) was so amorphic and general that it didn't bear (no pun) defining. Armed with this knowledge (or lack of knowledge) I sought out my old friend, Mr. Webster, and looked up myth. He defines it four ways:

1. myth (mth), n. 1. a traditional story of unknown authorship, serving usually to explain some phenomenon of nature, the origin of man, or the customs, institutions, etc. of a people: cf. legend.
2. such stories collectively: mythology.
3. any fictitious story.
4. any imaginary person or thing.

The first definition, I suppose is the most readily accepted one and it effectively rules out Pooh as myth, but, unfortunately, it also rules out Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, Sayers, Baum, or anyone else you care to name because you can name them.

The second definition doesn't apply, and the third is the one that seems to fit our circumstance. It allows you, say, Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, Sayers, Baum, ad infinitum, are myths, what do I do that's wrong? No. Number four only strengthens the argument in Pooh's favour, because he is definitely (no matter how painful the realization may be) an imaginary being or thing.

All in all, this brings me right back to where I started. I say that Pooh can be considered myth, you say that he can't. I, being a writer of Very Little Brain, am forced to place the burden of proof by asking, "Why?"

I realize this sounds like I'm picking a fight, but I guess I am, I enjoy a good argument--just ask anyone who knows me. I've also been told by some that my tone when I pick a fight is all the more irritating because I really mean it to sound mean, it just comes out that way--three years of no-holds-barred debate is hard to erase without a full scale brain-wipe. I am also serious about writing the paper on the similarities between Winnie-the-Pooh and The Hobbit, if you're interested, I'll send it when finished (I thought I'd sworn off writing papers as a Senior in High School--Sr. Patt would be proud).

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