1984

The Outer Dimension of Myth: Guest of Honor Address

C.S. Kilby

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol10/iss4/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
The Outer Dimension of Myth: Guest of Honor Address
The topic I wish to suggest is our need to recognize a significant difference between stories and mythological stories. The difference may be as great as that between level fields and the breathless wonder of the Grand Canyon. I have read Dickens' David Copperfield many times and been intrigued and amused and at times emotionally involved, but David Copperfield is not a myth. Neither is Tom Jones nor Wuthering Heights nor Tess of the D'Urbervilles nor Nineteen Eighty-Four nor The White Hotel meaningful as these are. In such works as The Lord of the Rings and Till We Have Faces or Perelandra or such a story as William Morris' The Well at the World's End we find something which may begin to strike us like the initial motif of a Beethoven symphony. A new and quietly meaningful experience takes hold of us and in some mysterious manner restructures our inner parts. We say, perhaps unconsciously, "Yes, this is the way things ought to be."

You are probably sitting here because you have yourselves had this experience of what we call myth. Congratulations. You have felt the aridity which slips into our lives, and you have also experienced at least a partial antidote to it. I urge you to continue reading myth, epic, legend and poetry. You must live in the modern scene, but if you are to remain alive and well you need often to seek the healthful "escape" which Tolkien urges upon us.

The two most basic characteristics of man, beyond his mere physical needs, are to know and to worship. The great German psychologist Carl Gustav Jung believed that the urge toward knowing is so persistent it actually brought about his birth and thus his consciousness. "Meaninglessness," he said, "inhibits fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to disease." The more we know the more we wish to know.

Our present age is, knowingly or unknowingly, committed to the belief that the best way of knowing is by means of the making of statements. Yet all statements whatever, indeed all systems, in becoming statements and systems, become self-destructive. One is at sixes and sevens to translate a language of one hundred thousand words into a language of one thousand words. This is man's predicament. What man is, what he feels himself to be, makes a wasteland of language. Yet because of man's insatiable desire to know he requires some sort of verbal actualization. He is like the old woman who said, "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?" Yet the more he defines the more he abstracts, the farther flies satisfying reality. A young professor of philosophy said to me, "I feel I must write my own philosophy, yet by the end of the twenty years required to do the job, it will be so insufficient as to make the whole task rather foolish."

We intellectualize in order to know but, paradoxically, intellectualization tends to destroy its object. The harder we grasp at the thing, the more its reality moves away. Scientists have pointed out that any problem which they solve automatically opens the way to two other unsolved ones.

So what is to be done? Man finds in himself a third characteristic called imagination by which he can, in great measure, transcend statements and systems. By some magic, imagination is able to disengage our habitual mind and send us on a journey toward gestures, pictures, images, rhythms, metaphor, symbol and myth. Jung speaks of "the slender hints of the knowable" and the need to discover mythic means of bringing these hints together. Systemizing drives essentiality away, but successful creativity attracts it. While the basic requirement of systemizing is abstraction, myth is concerned not with parts but wholes. Myth is necessary because reality is so much larger than rationality. (Not that myth is irrational but that it easily accommodates the rational while rising above it.)

Systemizing flattens, but myth rounds out. Systemizing drains away color and life, but myth restores them. Myth is necessary because of what man is. The Roman poet Ovid in the first century said that man was formed in the image of the gods, and, unlike animals, was given "a lofty countenance and ordered...to contemplate the sky and to raise his erected face to the stars." The finest explanation of myth is a remark of long ago that man shall not live by bread alone. The truth is that man is less fact than he is myth. Owen Barfield thinks that man did not make myth so much as myth made man. In a review of Barfield's Orpheus, R. J. Reilly says that this drama "proceeds on the assumption that myth is an imaginative depiction of meaning, not by a single mind but rather by the imagination of the race....the imagination of man brooding on the world, dreaming of events and relationships occurring between the natural
and the supernatural, between the human and the divine, whose meaning may only crudely be reduced to rational statements.

Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them, and added, "Whither I go you know, and the way you know." But the rationalist Thomas promptly retorted, "Lord we know not whither thou goest, and how can we know the way?" Thomas, now doubt trying very hard to learn the truth, wanted the greatest Reality of all to be pinned down to rationality and a flat map. The answer of Jesus was, "I am the way." A great living whole is always the answer of essentiality. The Green Lady in Perelandra discovered that "the going is the path."

All statements, including the ones I am now making, are unsatisfying because man is fundamentally mythic. His real health depends upon his knowing and living his metaphysical totality. In myth man discovers and affirms not his disparate nature but his cosmic. In that excellent film *From Mao to Mozart*, Isaac Stern goes to China to give some hints to the best violinists in that land. I was much impressed by one remark he made to such a violinist: "Don't play the notes, play the music." It is a lesson desperately needed today in all our lives.

To define myth, as to define any other ultimate, is partly to destroy it. Myth is as indefinable as man, life, reality. To search for definitions is less to define than to discover the paucity of words. It has been said that the only good definition of poetry is a poetic definition. So with myth. Myth is a way of going out into metaphysical space and finding one can there look back and see those mountains, those rivers, those great blocks of land that only now can ever be seen. A myth is a cosmic pattern which permeates man by some osmotic chemistry. Myth is one of the few means by which to understand and possess the blue flower, Sehnsucht, infinitude.

A blade of grass really seen, anything really seen (for most of us are blind most of the time) suggest the transcendental nature of myth. Myth is the dull name of a way of seeing, a way of knowing in depth, a way of experiencing—a way that in being disinterested contains the freedom of unending and vital interest. Mythic insight may tell us that plants and animals have "all the rights and privileges thereunto appertaining." It causes an inevitable distinction between "thou" and "it." Lewis points out that enchanted trees give all ordinary trees a measure of enchantment. Myth is vision.

Jung makes much of consciousness. It has been pointed out that consciousness and conscience are from the same root and coincident in time. In man there is the exercise of consciousness toward knowing the exercise of conscience toward worship. Myth is, in Mercea Eliade's phrase, "the nostalgia for eternity." Man's concept of the absolute, he adds, "can never be uprooted: it can only be debased." He points out, for instance, that sex was originally "a ritual with transcendent meaning at every point." Those who indulge in promiscuous sex perhaps know best the sordidness of its unritual and animal uses. Our world is dispossessed of hierarchy.

Myth is like the green-belt of the world without which, as the great British historian George Macaulay Trevelyan noted, man is brutish. Myth is a lane down which we walk in order to repossess our soul, our essentiality. Myth, said Charles Williams, consists of "patterns of the Logos in the depth of the sun." Coleridge said that symbol, myth's twin, is marked by "The translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal." Myth is ageless. Yet it may be experienced in some everyday act or thought suddenly alive with universal meaning. A friend asked William Blake, "When the sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire something like a guinea?" to which he replied, "Oh no, I see an immeasurable company of the heavenly host crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'" Jean Cocteau said that poetry is "a machine that manufactures love." Myth also manufactures love and truth and essentiality, or rather reveals them.

A perfect good, as well as a perfect anything-else, is mythlike. The call toward perfect goodness is a mythic call lying beyond the best possible set of rules and regulations. All systems are no more than statemental pointers and insufficient to the reality toward which they point. "Ah, how sick I am of 'therefore' and 'since,' and 'because'!" says a character on Gide's *Theseus*. Sick of inference, sick of deduction. On their horizontal plane I have wandered all too often. The infinite calls me! I cannot define what it is that summons me, but I know that my journey can have only one end: in God." C.S. Lewis began a letter concerning *Till We Have Faces* by saying, "An author doesn't necessarily understand the meaning of his own story better than anyone else." That would be an almost insane remark except that his story is a myth, and in good myth an author puts not simply what he know but what seems to have come to him from another world.

Let me in closing present to you two pictures of man and then make a recommendation. The first is that of the unborn "Adam" on the glorious mountaintop in Perelandra. So right, so utterly perfect, was this man that Ransom at first was inclined to bow down and worship him. He then remembered that this Adam was only a man, yet a man "like Him within and without, made by His own bare hands out of the depth of divine artistry. His masterpiece of self-portraiture coming forth from His workshop to delight all worlds, walked and spoke before Ransom's eyes....an echo, a rhyme, an exquisite reverberation of the uncreated music prolonged in a created medium." Lewis is here pointing out what every one of us was intended to be before paradise was lost and the vestige of which, however little we take note of it, is as built into our being as consciousness itself.

Next I refer you to a conversation with Norman Mailer under the title, "Something has been stolen from us that we can't name." (U.S. News and World Report, May 23, 1983.) The present time, says Mailer, shows lives "leched out" and at the same time eager "to feel more alive." One sad turn of events he identifies as an addiction to interruption. "If we are interrupted every 10 or 15 minutes, we feel alive for at least 2 or 3 seconds." Such an interruption may irritate us but it also stimulates us. "One of the reasons television is so enormously popular is the interruption it provides. One knows that one is going to have an experience filled with absurdity and abrupt changes. That is a stimulation we cannot do without.

The antidote to this need for abrupt change and constant stimulation is quietness and contemplation, and what is better than a good book to gain that condition of mind and body. I think there is nothing
better than well-told myth to turn you into a real person. Lewis's definition of myth falls into two thoroughly contrasting parts: "gleam of celestial strength and beauty"—that is the first part—"falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility." Lewis in this second portion is speaking of the jealousies, angers, brutalities and adulteries contained in ancient myth as it has come down to us through fallen men who, precisely as we ourselves, violate the same gleams in every generation. Every day of your life this is your condition, and mine, and, as we know, it is so much easier to give up than to set the determined will against it.

Read myth and go also and read, or more likely re-read, the episode in The Silver Chair in which Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb shift from their normal state of wholesomeness and sanity to the subtle hypnosis of the Green Witch and notice how pessimistic old Puddleglum at the last moment, with his bare feet, stamped out the Witch's paralyzing fire and saved them. Filth and imbecility were subtly hidden in the soft music and sweet-smelling odors of that fire. As we all know, great numbers of young people, in particular, are taken in by such things. I hope all of you are, and will always remain, heroes like old Puddleglum—heroes of the Order of Burnt Feet.

The 1984 Mythopoeic Conference

"The Wood Between the Worlds" refers not only to that wood which is the transition between worlds in C.S. Lewis' The Magician's Nephew, or to the book by William Morris, but to all forests which haunt the human imagination in legend and literature, from Charles William's Broceliande and Tolkien's Fangorn and Lothlorien to Sherwood Forest and the Hundred Acre Wood. We will dwell in this forest for a little while, exploring its secrets. Papers, art, masquerade costumes, and other contributions inspired by this theme will be especially welcome at Mythcon XV.

Join now and receive the detailed progress reports.

The 1985 Mythopoeic Conference

Mythcon comes to the Midwest! The Council of Stewards of the Mythopoeic Society has accepted a Mythopoeic Conference bid from a Chicago group. Mythopoeic Conference XVI will be held in July, 1985, on the campus of Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. This is the first-ever Midwestern conference, which also provides easier access to attendees from the East Coast.

Wheaton College is a pleasant setting in a small Chicago suburb. It is particularly suitable for a Conference because it houses the Marion Wade collection of Inklings books and papers. The collection includes most of C.S. Lewis' and G.K. Chesterton's papers, as well as many papers from J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, Owen Barfield and George MacDonald. The Wheaton College library also houses Madeleine L'Engle's complete papers.

The Committee advisory board includes many local authors, such as Lyle Dorsett and Alzina Stone; scholars, such as Joe McClatchey and Richard Woods; and members of the Mythopoeic Society.

A Masquerade, a Revel and films are planned, as well as a full slate of papers and panels. The Committee also plans some very special art displays.

Guest(s) of Honor, exact date and membership fees for Mythopoeic Conference XVI will be announced. For further information, write to Mythcon XVI, P.O. Box A3120, Chicago, IL 60690.

Submissions

Mythlore welcomes submissions of articles, art, reviews, poetry, and other material. See page 2 for the address of the appropriate Editor. Contributors of articles, cover and back cover art, should also submit a short biographical paragraph for publication in the Contributor's section.

The preferred style for articles is the MLA Handbook. To save space, please restrict the use of footnotes by incorporating "ibid." and "op. cit." citations in your text in parenthesis. Please submit two copies.

Full page art should have an image area of 7 1/2" x 10". Art for a single column should be 4 1/2" wide. Art for double column width should be 9 1/2" wide.
The Fifteenth Annual Mythopoeic Conference

August 10-13, 1984
Mills College
Oakland, California

Author Guest of Honor, Jane Yolen
Author of Dragon's Blood and other novels

Scholar Guest of Honor, Paul F. Ford
Author of A Companion to Narnia

Posthumous Guest of Honor, George MacDonald

Theme: "The Wood Between the Worlds"

- Papers, send proposals to Glen GoodKnight,
  740 South Hobart Blvd.,
  Los Angeles, California 90005

- Panel discussions
- Art show, dramatic production, and more

Membership: $15 (to May 16)
$20 (to August 1)
$25 (at the door)

(Room and Board Package $120.75, Feast $12.00)

Mythcon XV, 6017 Avila, El Cerrito CA 94530
checks payable to Mythcon XV