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On Myth

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On Myth

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ON MYTH

by Gracia-Fay Ellwood

"Everything is alive," reported a Pit Indian to his scholarly interrogator, "that's what we Indians believe. White people think everything is dead."

A myth is a story, and, in contrast to the principles that underlie the scientific world view, the prime movers of the action in a mythical world are subjects; they are alive. As Eric Bentley once said in a radio talk, "The king died, and then the queen died" is chronology; 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' is plot." To add "These deaths were the result of a terrible curse on the land, which could be lifted only by overcoming the sorcerer who pronounced it" would give myth. This is, of course, hardly the sort of explanation a modern day pathologist would have looked for, or the sort of action he would have advised.

A conspicuous characteristic of myth, inseparable from its organic unity, is clearcut valuation. This can be seen in the grief of the queen and the curse of the sorcerer. Things are seen in terms of beauty and ugliness, desire and fear, and above all good and evil.

All these categories of myth express the passion, or at least feeling, characteristic of subject, for myth not only depicts subjects in dramatic interaction, especially conflict, but also takes its form in living subjects, human beings. Of course we must be careful to avoid calling human subject simply a fountainhead of valuation, since the whole method of objective analysis and synthesis (upon which science is based) is, after all, created by subject too, and since emotions are not limited to human beings. But without doubt, the tendency to see reality in terms of an emotionally charged dramatic story derives its impetus from semiconscious and unconscious levels of human subject, just as in dreams everyday things such as a stair or a box may become the terrifying climax of a bizarre story about something apparently quite different. It is when we awake that the emotion largely melts away, and we see the stair as nothing but an object, just as it is the (primary) consciousness that in obedience to the "reality is scientific" world view often suppresses emotion as misleading. "White people think everything is dead." Deep unconscious levels of subject do not suppress emotion per se, although they often oppose one emotion with another.

It is impossible really to understand the myth-making side of human subject as long as "myth" calls up into our minds only such pictures as Zeus with thunderbolt or Isis collecting the parts of Osiris--as long, that is, as "myth" still essentially means a fiction that less advanced peoples believed to be true. Contemporary peoples live out myths (or fragments of myths) as well, for who can live a sane and meaningful life without some idea of how things got to be the way they are, what are the sources of life, what are the threats to life,

what is worth living and dying for? In short, without an orientation, some knowledge of the lay of the land around one and where to go. For many Americans, the American Way of Life has made for an effective myth: the present arises out of a heroic past, the supreme good is Freedom, the great evil is Communism (or Fascism, or British royalism). Smaller groups of Americans have found a meaningful shape to things, and meaning for their lives, in the Civil Rights movement, in Flying Saucer societies, in campaigns to prevent cruelty to animals, and many other movements. Contemporary myths, as well as ancient, may vary greatly in sophistication and elasticity.

Present-day myths may share with primitive ones the aspects of narrative and value; the chief terms are good or evil, the chief events are wrought by subjects. But they differ from primitive myths in that in most of them the powers of subject, as we have noted before, are limited to human beings, and can be exercised only through the mediation of the human body. This subordination of the subject to the objective impoverishes contemporary myths in the expression of such universal motifs as return-to-womb (or to chaos) and rebirth, but it also has several even more serious consequences, which threaten myth itself. One is that, according to it, we cannot properly speak of Subject unless we mean a mere abstraction; there are only separate subjects. Although we subjects are able to communicate with one another via objective means, the senses and inference, there are now so many of us with so many differing points of view, it is not surprising that with increasing fragmentation and specialization each one's "I" should seem to become increasingly a private world. The parts of our worlds, such as can be weighed, analyzed and synthesized, can still be public and verifiable. But a world--a myth--cannot be split without damage, as we have seen. Much less can an "I" be split and not become in part an "it". An "I" cannot be analyzed or defined. As the character in Oklahoma! said to his girl, with him it was "All Er Nuthin'"; she had to take him as he was or leave him. And if an "I" is isolated and cannot be completely confident of sharing his myth with others, no wonder if he begins to suspect that it is merely subjective--that it may die with him.

Of course, it might not die with him; other members of his group will perhaps carry it on. But still, if it was created by some human beings, how can all human beings be included within it? If, as Camus' Meursault observes, the saint, the rascal and the dog all come to the same end when their bodies stop functioning, what real difference do their lives make?

The isolation of subjects from one another, and the conflicts between their myths, are not the only reasons they are more and more losing confidence in their myths. Even if all mankind were agreed on a single myth, what good would it do if the whole of reality outside man didn't fit into it--if subjects with their unshakable habit of valuing were simply freaks in a vast cold objective multiverse?

... for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, not light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night!

People in whose minds the analytic-synthetic faculties predominate may not see anything so painful about such a situation. They may find a multiverse of neutral "its" a pleasant challenge to their own potential of mastery and creative ordering. Doubtless it is "good" that they now have possibilities open that would have been denied them in ages more congenial to myth. But even the scientist on expedition needs a secure place to go home to, and needs to know the way, just as the primitive hunter does. As Jung emphasized, no one is healthy if his mythmaking unconscious is completely dissociated from his conscious preoccupations. Most of us, if given a chance, would enjoy having communion with the supposedly "inanimate" world, as well as we enjoy gaining mastery and efficient control over it. (Of course, the evil goes along with the good; if there are Ents in the forest, there will be Old Willows too.) And there are some people, such as William Blake and Jung himself, who live intimately with the strange denizens of their unconscious, minds alive with images, minds that create by giving birth rather than by craftsmanship (or mass production). Are they hopelessly out of place in a world where their symbols and myths correspond to nothing outside themselves? Or can their intuitions of a face upon things be a perception of the real? Can a myth--any myth--be true?...

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THE COUNSEL OF ELROND, continued from page 5

I want to express acknowledgement to Bernie Zuber for his cover on the first issue of Mythlore. Bernia, who has a very mythopoeic imagination, had an extremely difficult task in doing the cover. It is a composite drawn from three different photographs, with some of the angles and positions different. Bernie set aside his creative imagination to do a technical piece requiring much hard work.

My apologies to Nan Braude for her article on "Tolkien and Spenser" not appearing in this article. It will be in the next one.

In the first issue of Mythlore and in flyers, the price of Mythlore was set at 50¢ or 4/\$2.00, however - honestly - the production costs are higher than expected - especially the postage (it was 12¢ last issue and I expect it will be 14¢ for this one). I reluctantly but necessarily announce the rise in price to 65¢ an issue or 4/\$2.50. Believe me we still won't make a profit. The alternative is to reduce the number of pages and art work. The new rates will go into effect on April 10, 1969; all subscriptions and renewals after that will be at the new rate. If you like what Mythlore is doing and want to see it continue to improve, I think this price change will not really disturb you.

On the letter column: I have kept my comments as short as possible in this issue. The readers may consider Missives to Mythlore as much "fair game" as the rest of the issue in their own letters of comment. Those who have their letter printed get a free copy. The more comment the better - except the whole hippie thing which is too complex for a simplistic pro or con attitude. I alluded to to hippies only as an illustration for a point I was making. The letters in this issue are enough on the matter; let's not get side-tracked.