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The Language of Myth

Abstract

Guest of Honor address, Mythcon 25. Discusses the uses of language among contemporary fantasists, both invented and native, and reminds us of the mythic underpinnings of our own everyday language.

Additional Keywords

Barfield, Owen; Language in fantasy; Metaphor; Myth in fantasy



The Language of Myth

VERLYN FLIEGER

GUEST OF HONOR ADDRESS AT MYTHOPOEIC CONFERENCE XXV
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I want to tell you a story, a story about stories, about what they are and how they are made, about story-tellers and story audiences. My story starts like this:

Once upon a time not very long ago, in a galaxy not too far from here, there was a group of people who liked to eat and drink and be merry. Most of all they liked to celebrate together their common pleasure in certain kinds of stories — stories of myth and fairy tale and fantasy. They knew that a large part of their enjoyment was not just the subject matter of these stories—enchantment and adventure and the supernatural—but also the very words through which they were told, the language of myth. One of their great teachers, the wizard Tolkien, had called this language “parts of speech in a mythical grammar,” a grammar of “incantations” which cast a spell over the hearers and built a world out of words.

The people of my story wanted to know more about the words of this mythical grammar. What is the language of myth? they asked themselves. Who speaks it? Who hears it? Is it just the language of fiction? Or is it a special kind of fiction? They found these questions so engrossing that they decided to have a special meeting, not just to eat and drink and be merry, though of course they did all these things too, but to seek answers to these questions.

These questions, and some answers, make up the body of my story, the plot and characters, so to speak. I’ll start with the conflict: a pair of apparently contradictory propositions. Proposition one states that the language of myth is the heightened diction of poets and mystics, the language of metaphor and symbol through which we seek beyond manifest reality for truth, a language which, when heard, produces — in the words of another great teacher, Owen Barfield — “a felt change of consciousness.” And in changing consciousness the language of myth changes the very world which it describes.

Proposition two states that the language of myth is the language of common, everyday speech. It is the language of ordinary people, and it describes ordinary reality, the one we all live in and know and take for granted. It is our language, which Tolkien once called “a disease of myth.”

I hope to resolve this conflict, to persuade you that these seemingly opposing ideas are in reality conjoined parts of a single unified concept; that poetic diction and ordinary speech are simply the two necessary sides of the

same coin — human expression; that they are interconnected and mutually dependent, and that together they make up the language of myth.

Since the terms *language* and *myth* can mean different things in different stories and to different audiences, let’s begin with some definitions. For my purpose today, *language* is human utterance, vocal expression, both inspired by and naming the world around us. Language is words, and words are stories. *Myth*, as I will use the term, is also words, for however many meanings it may have in modern usage, it derives originally from Greek *muthos*: “a sound made with the mouth.” Myth is words in the act of utterance; it is language spoken, a story in the telling. Myth is language in action, and language is the activity of myth.

The two together are another conjoined unity, a kind of verbal yin/yang. You know the symbol, a circle divided into dark and light by an S-curve, and in the center of each curve a smaller circle containing its opposite—in the light a spot of dark and in the dark a spot of light. Just as there can be no light without dark, no dark without light, so there can be no story without language and no language without story. But there cannot be either unless there is a third element to define them and establish the relationship between them. Neither part of the circle can exist without the S-curve that simultaneously separates and unites the two halves. And the S-curve itself has no meaning except in relation to what it outlines and defines. Let that S-curve be the user of language, the teller of the story. The teller, the language, the story — each needs the other two, and all are parts of the same phenomenon.

But that is still not enough. In order to exist, a tale needs a hearer. No language, no story occurs in a vacuum, and the listener is essential to the process. And so the S-curve — a line bending in opposite directions — must stand both for the teller of the story and for the hearer. I, as a speaker, together with the story I am telling have no meaning without an audience, without you. For words to resound, someone must be listening. And you, of course, are not just any audience, but the very occasion of my story, a special, specialized group of listeners. You are part of the telling and part of the tale, for listening is not just reception, it is also creation. My story must be filtered through your consciousness, must be translated by you in order to come completely into being. We are creating together the story of myth and language, of tale-telling and tale-hearing,

I'm going to drop this yin/yang metaphor before it collapses under the weight of all this meaning, and turn from theory to practice. I'm going to give you some examples of the language of myth, and let's see how they translate. Here they are: *The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, The Sword in the Stone, One Ring to rule them all.* Each phrase contains an image conveying a meaning greater than itself, pointing through itself to the myth from which it derives. The reality manifest in each of the specific images invoked — *Tree, Sword, Ring* — is a metaphor for a concept: *tree* — original sin, *sword* — kingship, *ring* — power. The words in themselves are ordinary. It is the way they are put together that makes them extraordinary. Trees do not commonly bear knowledge; swords are not usually sheathed in stones; rings do not ordinarily exert power. By their context the words are lifted out of the realm of ordinary speech and made metaphoric, outright symbolic. This is poetic diction, the language of poets and mystics. It produces in each of you (if not now, at least the first time you read or heard those words) Barfield's "felt change of consciousness." And each time you hear the words again, the meanings multiply as your changed consciousness changes yet again, enriching not just your experience of the words, but their very meaning in your mind.

Now let me give you some more examples of the language of myth, more words we all have in common: *weekend, 1994, Friday, goodbye.* Here, I hope, is where my original two opposing propositions come together. For my second set of examples I have deliberately chosen words that are so common, so ordinary, so familiar, so much in daily use that we take them for granted. We are in danger of no longer *hearing* them truly, no longer being fully conscious of what they really mean. Each of them is both ordinary and extraordinary, both mundane and mythic. They are so familiar to you and me that we have almost forgotten their original meanings, but those meanings still inhere. "Words," says Barfield, "owe their very substance, [their] 'meaning' to the generations of human being who have previously used them. No poet, therefore, can be the creator of all the meaning in his poem." Nor, I would add, can any hearer. We use the words, but the words also use us.

Let's take a look at the mythic value of this second set of phrases, the inherent, buried meanings in which you participate, whether you are aware of it or not. *1994*, a date which we all write on checks and at the head of letters, a date by which we all realize that we have grown another year older, denotes the passage of one thousand nine hundred and ninety-four years since the advent of Christ. That is what it means, and that is all that it means. Whether you are believer or unbeliever, Christian or Hindu, Muslim or Wicca, when you use that dating you are invoking and acknowledging the myth from which it derives. Could anything be more ordinary and more mythic?

The same is true of so mundane a word as *weekend*, for all that its significance has largely been reduced to "thank

God it's Friday," (but note the address). *Weekend* marks a break in day-to-day activity originating in a God's command, telling his people how to count their days, when to work, and when to stop work and turn to praise of God. The counting of time, which governs all our lives, has all sorts of mythic meaning. *Friday* itself, which in Christianity signals the end of the work-week, is really *Frigga's Day*, a pagan consecration to Frigg, the hearth and marriage goddess of Norse mythology. Friday's French equivalent, *Vendredi*, is *Venus's Day*, dedicated to Frigg's sexy Mediterranean alter ego. Perhaps we should all be saying "Thank Goddess it's Friday." And of course, as you all know, *goodbye*, whether in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese is simply the shortened form of "God be with you," an invocation of divine protection in a dangerous world.

What these phrases demonstrate is that the world of myth and the words that belong to it are not just the words of poets and mystics, they are not just heightened experience, but also the simple matters of everyday. They are the numbers of our years, the days of our weeks, the blessings we give one another. They are not outside us. Rather, they are us, part and parcel of who we are, how we live, how we consciously and unconsciously order and name our world. But we have lost sight of this. Except when we are being deliberately mythic, when we are reading or imagining a fairy tale or a myth or a fantasy, we lose touch with that mythic awareness in which the name really does point to the thing named, so that we see the interconnectedness of the two, and know that to speak the one is to invoke the other.

Re-awakening that mythic awareness was the impulse behind the writings of those authors we are here to study and discuss, writers who used language to invent myth, and used myth to generate new language. You know the names — Tolkien, Lewis, Herbert, Hoban, Eddison, L'Engle, and a myriad others. You know the languages. What were these authors doing? They were not simply giving imagination free rein, not embellishing a world by frosting it with language like icing on a cake. They were using language to make the world, using the world to generate the language.

Now let me come back to the interdependence of poetic diction and ordinary speech. Those authors I've cited knew how to manipulate this interdependence to create a double vision, how to play the ordinary against the extraordinary to produce that felt change of consciousness that Barfield described. For characters inside the story — whether the language is Tolkien's Quenya or Lewis' Old Solar, whether it is the Arabesque language of Frank Herbert's Arrakis, the convoluted Jacobean English of E. R. Eddison's Zimiamvia, or the fractured English of Russell Hoban's post-nuclear Inland — this is their ordinary speech, the disease of their particular mythology. For readers outside the story it is odd, foreign, ringing strangely in the ear. This is more than the language of myth, it is the language of particular myth, and the par-



ticularity produces exactly that effect of strangeness which Barfield called "the very moonlight of our experience."

Tolkien, of course, could do this with one hand tied. When on the road to Woodhall Frodo shows off his Elvish by saying to Glidor "*Elen síla lúmenn' omentielto*," our felt change of consciousness is doubled. Already in a fictive world whose very ordinariness makes us see its strangeness, we suddenly have revealed to us, along with Sam and Pippin, an even stranger world, and it is language which has both revealed it and placed us outside it. Tolkien has put us not one but two removes from "ordinary" reality, and even though the next words are a translation of the phrase into the Common Speech, the effect, the double strangeness, remains with us.

But Tolkien is not the only one who can do this. When on Malacandra Ransom begins taking linguistic notes on the language of the hrossa, he is in two worlds at once, the world of his own English language and the new world whose words he is trying to understand. Both experiencing and assimilating the felt change of consciousness, he is trying to bridge the worlds. And we, neither philologists nor Malacandrans, must follow in his footsteps. And when he has to make phonetic adjustment for the different pronunciations of the *sorns* and the *pfifltriggi*, our changing experience changes lags just a beat or two behind his.

Nor is the idea of a whole language necessary to produce change. One word can do it, if it is the right word. When the children in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* learn what a tesseract is, and that it has a verbal form, "to tesser" — I tesser, you tesser, he, she, or it tessers — both they and we her readers have added a new word to our vocabulary, a new part of speech to our mythical grammar and a new, if theoretical, category to our experience.

While in itself it is mythic, invention isn't always nec-

essary for the language of myth. E. R. Eddison built the world of Zimiamvia out of the archaisms and obsolescences of the English language, plundering dictionaries and old texts to keep his reader just slightly off balance. When he describes the Vicar of Rerek as having "skin fair and full of freckles," we know and yet don't know what he means. "Freckcons" are not freckles, they are something at once daintier and more ominous, a clue to the contradictory psychology of this particular man. When sunset is "the glare of settle-gang," or a cuckolded husband is "a miserable young raw puttock," when a beautiful woman is dressed in scarlet sendaline and wears smaragds and escarbuncles in her ears, Eddison is changing our experience of sunset, unhappy husbands, beautiful women.

Russell Hoban accomplished the same thing in modern English. Where Eddison used archaisms, Hoban used British street slang and typography, with a consistency that even Tolkien might envy. He played with spelling and word breaks, making adverbs into new verbs by separating together into to *gether*, re-forming *excited* into as *cited* deliberately confusing minute and minim and thus retaining the meanings of both, invoking multiple meanings For words like *heart* and *would* by spelling them phonetically. And Hoban learned his technique from that old wizard James Joyce, who showed us in *Finnegan's Wake* that we have been speaking the language of myth all along; we just weren't listening it.

These are only a few examples — and you could add many more — of the change of consciousness which I believe these mythmakers and others like them were trying to bring about in their audience. That we are here today is the measure of their success

By now I should be getting to the end of my story, and telling you what happened to the people who came together to eat and drink and ask questions about language. Shall I say, like Bilbo "And they all lived happily ever afterward to the end of their days"? Alas, I can't do that, for my story hasn't ended yet. As Frodo told Sam, the great tales never end, though the people in them come and go, and I will go in just a minute, and then we can all go for coffee.

The real end of my story is the beginning of this conference. It is, I hope, the realization among all of you that the language of myth is our shared possession. It is English and Spanish and Old Norse and Old Solar and Quenya and Sindarin. It is high speech and low speech, poetic diction and slang. It is all the languages we have read, the language in which I am speaking to you now, and the inner language into which each of you is translating my words. It is the language you will hear again and again over the next days — in the conference rooms and in the halls, over coffee, during dinner, in those late night arguments when our tongues run away with us and the words take on a power of their own. The language of myth is our joint possession, and we are both its makers and its instruments. Listen to it. Use it. And as you hear it and as you use it, be aware that it is using you.

