

Mystery/Metaphysics/Mythopoesis/Metaphor/Modernity

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 22 Aug 2001

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Aug 2001, 09:53

"If God chooses to be mythopoeic -- and is the sky itself not a myth? -- then can we refuse to be mythopathic?" -- CSL

Dan Parmenter emerged from the Cave, observed the True Reality, and returned to tell those who dwell among the shadows that:

Nigel Price wrote:

So: the physical world as a reflection of divine reality, myths as the recurring patterns whereby the physical world reflects that greater reality, and myths as symbolic statements of enduring psychological truths.

The way you phrased this immediately reminded me of Tolkien's idea of sub-creation: any myth-creation, by virtue of being an act of creation, must and will reflect divine reality.

It would be more accurate to add a few select adjectives to this summary: "any true myth-creation, by virtue of being a true act of creation, must and will reflect divine reality." For as sure as eggs is eggs (aching men's feet), there are false acts of myth-creation and sub-creation, against which JRRT registered the occasional protest (among those against whose allegedly false myth-making he protested we might note Walt Disney and William Shakespeare).

In fact I think Tolkien goes on record to say that reading and writing mythology is a surer way to discover the truth about the world than philosophical speculation.

Actually, I'm pretty sure it was Lewis who said this. But the real working-out of the idea would, I think, be Dorothy Sayers's magnificent book The Mind of the Maker.

As you say, myths deal with archetypes of human thought and behavior.

I think this an oversimplification. Myths deal with archetypes, whose "existence" we know primarily through their "manifestation" in human thought and behavior. The quotation marks are intended as a reminder/indicator of the over/underdetermined nature of the "meaning" of the two words thus set apart: that is, they indicate to us and remind us that the sentence so marked neither affirms nor denies the "existence" of these archetypes in any form other than what we perceive in human thought/behavior; of course, if they do not, then the word "manifestation" is -- manifestly -- inaccurate.

But to talk meaningfully about them, it seems-to-me necessary to (at least) hold open a space for the possibility that they do in fact possess some "independent" "existence" other than in

these "manifestations" -- even if that "existence" is no more than some kind of universal (or at least wide-spread) patterns in (deeper-than-surface-thought-and-behavior) human brains/minds which is not, but which manifests itself in, these thoughts and/or behaviors.

If in fact the world and human nature are created as a function of some divine principle, then a myth that accurately portrays those archetypes, that mimics the physical and psychological world, will be (a) interesting for a long period of time to a lot of people and (b) contain true insight into the more enduring causes of the universe.

And a weaker, non-religious form of this is also possible and useful: "If a myth accurately portrays [i.e., matches in some way we can consciously or, especially, unconsciously, recognize] the deeper patterns universally or broadly present in the structure of human brains/minds, then that myth will mimic the physical-psychological world of humans in a way that will (a) be interesting for a significant period of time to a lot of humans and (b) contain true insight into the more enduring causes of human behavior and personality."

In fact, I hold to the stronger form, but I think the weaker form may be more appropriate as a basis for discussion in an audience which doesn't generally hold the antecedent of the stronger form to be true or even possibly true.

And because the myth-maker in essence seizes upon the divine, creative principle in order to create the myth he (or she, more likely) has no choice but to sub-create a world that is like in nature to the greater creation.

Again, a weaker (or at least non-religion-based) form: "The myth-maker is limited to what the physical structure of a human brain-mind can imagine. The human brain-mind is in turn limited by its formation, its development, and its training, all of which take place in the single known physical universe, all of which places restraint on what it can imagine. Furthermore, the (would-be) myth-maker, in order to create a myth which will appeal to large numbers of humans, and so succeed as a myth, is constrained not only by his own imagination, but by the imaginations of those to whom he seeks to communicate the myth, and by the means (language, drawing, etc.) by which he seeks to communicate it. The result of all of this is that any truly successful myth will have some minimum basic level of congruity or similarity to the (actual) (physical) universe."

I wouldn't elaborate on this except that it seems like Tolkien's aesthetic has gotten short shrift in the archives, and since we know that Wolfe read a lot of Tolkien's friend and intellectual disciple--certainly in this area--C.S. Lewis, this is undoubtedly a source to take into consideration.

I think it too much to consider Lewis Tolkien's "intellectual disciple," even in this area. More than Tolkien, I would suggest Charles Williams as a source of Lewis' myth-making "style," and far more than either, George MacDonald. (Whose "myths" I, personally, find nigh-unreadable, but...)

And too it seems to have special bearing on Wolfe's detective fiction. I too think the detective story is a modern mythology--though I would argue, Nutria, that it's a Modern mythology that only realized an explicit Christian element under Chesterton's tutelage.

... if even there. Indeed, almost exactly to the extent that the Fr. Brown stories are Christian, they work against the basic metaphysic of the detective story, which is rationalistic and materialistic. When Fr. Brown uses the logic he's been taught in the seminary to solve the mystery, that's just a character quirk; but when he's able to solve the mystery, or bring the

criminal to "repentance," through applied Christian belief, the devoted mystery reader (quite rightly) feels that there is something not quite right here. Chesterton has violated the protocols, the readerly expectations, of the mystery. _Not_, I hasten to say, "undermined" or "subverted" -- both of these are legitimate moves -- but simply and blatantly transgressed against them.

The Fr. Brown stories are excellent stories.

But some of them are lousy mysteries.

It's a mythology unique to modernity in particular, I think, because the most important element is the "decypherability" of the crime. Usually by the tools of Reason, and Reason, personally exercised reason--whether you are a layman with your own Bible, a (Baconian) scientist, a voter, a consumer--is the *raison d'etre* of modernity.

Shhh! Don't tell Aristotle. He thought it was the *raison d'etre* of (classical) philosophy.

Reason and what I have to call Unreason (but I mean it in a broader sense, as I do Reason -- one with neither an intrinsically good nor an intrinsically bad connotation) have existed in a kind of seesawing balance/imbalance since human thought began, or, certainly, since it began to be recorded. Another word for "Unreason" in this context would be "Passion," but in the modern, not the classical, sense -- being moved by powerful emotion: the true Romanticism. Most "philosophies" seem to insist on the primacy of one over the other, as do most "religions." In fact, Reason is barren without Passion, and Passion is hideously destructive without Reason (Passion without Reason produces the Third Reich; Reason without Passion produces Mutually Assured Destruction.) -- but even combining the two fails to guarantee results. Each must be trained to act as a check upon the other.

(Damn, I'm talking like some kind of newage guru here -- and I _don't_ mean to. It's not as if I'd achieved the kind of balance I'm talking about! But I want to defuse the dangerous idea that there is anything particularly modern, or modernistic, about Reason.)

And of course as we got increasingly gloomy about Reason the myth took new forms: Kafka, for instance, turned the tale on its head with _The Trial_, gave us guilt with no crime and thus no solution.

... intended, of course, as a metaphor for the entire "human condition;" it is a religion-free description of the phenomenon traditionally called "original sin." K cannot be saved until he acknowledges that he is guilty, even without having understood his crime; but having acknowledged it, there is no salvation for him but execution. A grim (and surprisingly theologically accurate) picture of the "fallen and unredeemed human" in Christian terms.

But while Wolfe seems to like Kafka (_There Are Doors_ -- people objected to the unbelievability of C-5 or whatever the alternative universe was called -- made a lot more sense to me as a Kafkaesque fairy-tale and something of a rebuttal to _The Castle_)

Also, "Westwind" and -- oh, hell: the story about the sentient septic germs? -- have always seemed very K-esque to me also. And "The Detective of Dreams" is almost a perfect inverse-Kafka story.

I don't think he shares Kafka's gloominess. The detectives, professional and amateur, have problems that they solve, usually with a combination of reason and metaphysics, and so of course Wolfe is trying to tell us that our own universe is similarly tractable.

I think a better word would be "negotiable." (Like terrain, not like money.) Wolfe seems to hold forth the idea that the Universe is, in principle, fully capable of intellectual comprehension -- even if we, in practice, are not capable of fully comprehending it; that it is negotiable, and our failures to negotiate it are due to our limits and not to its fundamental irrationality; that the universe is, in fact, surd.

But the real genius of his sub-creation is that he doesn't only *tell* us that but presents us, his readers, with our own puzzles to work out, giving us -- as Nigel pointed out earlier -- exactly as much information as we need to do so.

Sometimes I think he overestimates readers' ability to work it out, or, perhaps, their patience to do so. Certainly he knows that the difficulty of his texts exceeds the patience of some (probably many, maybe most) readers to play his games out to the end. And it seems clear that he's quite comfortable with this.

But really, he's just taken one of the basic aesthetic principles of modern(ist[ic]) prose to a kind of terminal point. Strunk said it best. "Rule 17: Omit needless words." Compare some texts of the last few centuries and see how writers gradually become terser and terser, and Wolfe, for all his occasional gorgeousnesses, emerges as a paragon of verbal economy. His basic principle would seem to be: "Never give any information that isn't needed for the whole effect of the story, and never repeat anything unless there is a sound reason for it to be repeated -- and emphasis, in and of itself, is not a reason for repetition."

Is this a Platonic exercise? With my limited experience with Plato I am inclined to say no--Plato, for instance, thought poets and their shady (shadowy?) lyricisms should be banished from the Republic.

His attitude in the Laws, a more "realistic" approach than the Republic (which is, after all, "idealistic") is more moderate; and in one dialogue -- whose title I'm blanking on -- he has Socrates quite clearly conclude that poets -- actually, not poets but the performers of poetry -- speak for (indeed, speak under possession of) the gods. (This dialog is, if not the source, then certainly

a source, for the modern word "inspiration" as relates to an artist's impulse to create.)

I suppose it all depends on whether Wolfe thinks his stories are good, qua ipso, or merely tools to describe some higher reality -- whether that be our own "real" world or something higher still. I certainly think the stories good in their own right.

I would deny this opposition as unnecessary and artificial. Whether the stories are good as stories is one question; whether they are tools to describe some higher reality is another. (And whether being effective tools for the description of a higher reality does or would make them better stories is a third.)

--Dan'l

Jim Collins — 23 Aug 2001, 08:41 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan wrote:

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and Jim, unlurking, responds:

It's *Ion*. Socrates quizzes Ion, a rhapsode (professional performer of epic poetry), and develops the thesis that poets create their best work when they have been bereft of their reason by the gods, and that when the rhapsodes are really cookin' (good Socratic term), they are carried out of themselves, and do the same for their audiences.

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