

Mythopathy and Natural Philosophy

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 24 Aug 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2807>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 24 Aug 2001, 12:35

Dan-with-no-discernable-last-name (and my apologies to both him and Dan Parmenter for misattributing) wrote among the usual Other Good Stuff:

I'm hacking my way through Joseph Campbell right now and wish that I had picked up Frazer instead.

I've been stalled in the middle of Volume 2 of "The Masks of God" for about three years. I wish I knew how he managed to make such interesting stuff so dull while still writing pretty well!

I keep thinking - more stories, less speculation -

... well, that's a big part of it, of course ...

Myths to Campbell seem to be primarily religio-political works; they appeal to us "universally" because and as long as we maintain our allegiance to the ideas that spawned them.

H'mmm. I wonder why the Norse myths appeal to me so much more strongly than the Greco-Roman myths, then, with the Egyptian myths somewhere in between? I can't help wondering what "ideas" I'm showing my allegiance to here.

Frankly, I think it's more because I was over-exposed to the classical myths as a kid (and especially as a student), but had to seek the Norse ones out for myself. Again, the Egyptian myths fall in between: I was introduced to them in junior high, but didn't have to deal with years of English teachers pointing out grotesquely obvious "allusions" and references on the assumption that most of the students wouldn't recognize them otherwise. I have trouble reading any Greek myth without annoying memories of pastoral poetry (for which I have not taste whatsoever -- I wish all those nymphs would just strangle all those importunate shepherds!) coming to my mind.

But, but ... I have to admit the main reason I like the Norse myths so much is the worldview. I don't know if it's anything as simple as "ideas;" it's the whole way of looking at life as a losing battle that you have to fight anyway, that chaos will win in the end, but somehow the struggle against it is not quite senseless. There's nothing in either the Egyptian or the Greek way of looking at things that moves me quite the way that does. (The world as French Foreign Legion...?)

How, if the ancients were so sold on reason, did they manage to be so ridiculously wrong about the way the world was put together? And how did the moderns manage to get everything (we hope) so right? The standard answer (and I'm inclined, personally, to think that the ancients weren't so ridiculously wrong and the moderns not necessarily spot on) ...

... I'm inclined to agree; and further to observe that a lot of the stuff the ancients are popularly supposed to be wrong about, they weren't. We all know the Greeks knew the world was round and calculated its diameter pretty accurately. Not as many people are aware that the standard

geocentric model of the earth was actually pretty right in its sense of the scale of the universe -- that is, the idea that the Earth could, for all practical purposes, be considered a geometric point wrt the larger universe.

Yes, I believe that if we go point-for-point against the ancients, where we disagree, we are (in general) the more likely to be right. But I think we'd disagree on far less than most people assume.

... is that modern science is experimental and ancient science "merely" observational.

Or, to put it even more simply: Reason does not equal empiricism.

The entire project of modern science is based on empiricism, which (a) really didn't appear as a useful model until, what, about the time of Francis Bacon, and (b) is itself based on a set of unproven and unprovable assumptions about how the world works (which I think could best be summed up as the idea that nature plays fair) -- assumptions that seem to be valid only within a few orders of magnitude of our own scale of things, but break down very small (say, around where Heisenberg and Plank get involved) and very large (say, around where Schwarzschild and Chandrasekar get involved).

In other words Modern Reason expects a certain dirty hands-on interaction with the world that probably seemed unnecessarily messy to the ancients. And this is why I think the detective story is a strictly modern fairy-tale:

Heh. Chandler's classic line, "down these mean streets a man must go," came bouncing into my head right here.

the detective has to contend with a real criminal. For all that Dupin prefers to solve crimes without leaving his smoke-filled room he still has to put the solution to the test.

Or, more Lupine: Nero Wolfe has to arrange his "capers" to prove what he already knows, to the satisfaction of the police and/or his client.

--Dan'l