

Mythic Sensibility and Mythopoeic Fantasy

Andrew Shamel

Lincoln College, University of Oxford

andrew.shamel@lincoln.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Myths and mythopoeic fantasy share a ‘mythic sensibility’ which structures one’s perception of the world enabling a kind of miraculous revelation. The term ‘mythic sensibility’ is adapted from Graham Ward’s studies of belief and the imagination. Ward writes that:

myth is a sensibility about being in the world registered in the awakening of the creative imagination and intensifying around objects... It invests these objects with communicative vibrations. It gives them mythic resonance. From these vibrations figures and eventually stories emerge as we *make sense* of them.¹

This *making sense* represents a seeing *as*, a dynamic by which the world is not encountered in an unmediated or uninterpreted way, but as always already having undergone a hermeneutic moment.² Engaging with a text bearing this mythic sensibility gives the mythic text a kind of presence, making sense of the world and the self. In this essay, I argue that this being-present is distinctive of the phenomenology of the mythic and that the mythic sensibility can be described as the sense of an interpretive presence.

¹ Graham Ward, *Unimaginable: What we Can Imagine and What we Can't* (London, 2018), 167.

² I would add to Ward’s account of the mythic in this sense as not only a making sense, but also a *being made sense of*. There is a sensibility or feeling in the narrative both of encounter and of interpretation: it is an encounter with that which both reveals the world as meaningful and which reveals the self as meaningful. It contains the sense both of knowing and of being known. What is more, the interpretive action of the myth takes on a life of its own: the sense of being known arrives as it were from outside as the myth structures the seeing of the world and the self.



Preliminary remarks

The terms myth and mythopoeic are so varied in their definition and application, in the first part of the essay, I attempt to stake out what is meant in this context by 'myth' and by 'mythopoeic fantasy' in order better to understand the mythic sensibility they share. This mythic sensibility has two interweaving aspects: *the structuring of perception* and *miraculous revelation*. Mythic sensibility itself is always already interpretive as it structures the perceptions of the 'mythic subject' in much the same way that a game structures the judgments and actions of the player.

In the second part, I argue that Johann Huizinga's analysis of play as employed by Hans-Georg Gadamer helps to understand this hermeneutic structuring of the mythic subject's judgment and valuing of the world and the self. Beyond revealing the world as meaningful, the mythic sensibility also intimates to the mythic subject a sense of transcendence, perceiving a higher or more real reality than 'ordinary everydayness'. This is the stock in trade both of the myth classically-understood and the otherworldliness of mythopoeic fiction: in both the world is revealed as more wonderful (or horrible) than previously appreciable.

In the third part, I engage the work of Chris Brawley, who links the effect of mythopoeic fantasy on the reader with the experience of the holy and of Rowan Williams, who describes both sorts of narratives as possessing 'imaginative structures in and through which people can think and feel'.³ Though Brawley and Williams differ in their assessment of the Christian narratives (or myths) to continue to speak to the post-Christendom West, both are insistent on the continuing capacity of mythic and mythopoeic narrative to shape our view and so our understanding of the world. I conclude by suggesting that an understanding of mythic sensibility and its role in fiction and in structuring our perception of the world offers a first step in expanding the language we have to speak about faith and about what counts as theological discourse.

I. Myth and Mythopoeic Fantasy

Myth

In choosing the word myth to describe a kind of discourse or narrative, one opens a lexical Pandora's box. Once all of the conflicting definitions of myth have escaped, one is left not with only hope but also with confusion. As Sarah Iles Johnston points out, the varied history and usage

³ Rowan Williams, "Master of his universe: the warnings in JRR Tolkien's novels", *The New Statesman* 8 August 2018. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/08/master-his-universe-warnings-jrr-tolkien-s-novels>. Accessed 4 September 2018.

of the term means that any particular usage ‘must be understood as heuristic.’⁴ That is to say, no definition has proven up to the task of exhaustively classifying the array of narrative known as mythic, as each definition is always at the service of a particular project, and so it must be understood as provisional and fitted to a specific task. While *mythos* refers in its original Greek simply to plot or story, it comes in time to bear resonances with lie, fable, and certain kinds of cultural and religious narratives. With this caveat in mind, I approach the mythic in this essay through the work of Mircea Eliade, who among the modern mythologists seems to take most seriously the *interior* qualities of the mythic. That is, he is concerned to explore what it is like to be inside a myth’s account of the world, on the myth’s own terms. Besides taking myth seriously (rather than try to explain it in terms of another, more basic genre of human expression and experience such as science, psychology, politics), Eliade’s account has the additional benefit of offering continuity between archaic and contemporary mythic experience and understanding. For Eliade, the mythic is not something that has been left behind, but rather something that has only changed with time.

For the purposes of this essay, myth is to be understood as a form of story concerned with the meaning to be found in beginnings. Though he is reticent to offer an exhaustive definition, when Eliade does attempt to draw some lines around what he means when he talks about myth, he writes:

...the definition that seems least inadequate because most embracing is this: Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the “beginnings.” In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of the Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a “creation” it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural beings. ... myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness... of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred... into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today.⁵

These origins, then, are not primarily concerned with answering the question *how* as it is posed by the empirical sciences, but rather with the *what* of human experience. It is important to note that the origin in question need not be that of the *whole world*. Myths need not be complete

⁴ Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018, 6. The term can be tracked from its introduction into scholarship in the eighteenth century by Gottlob Heyne (opposing *mythus* to *fabula* in distinguishing different kinds of classical stories), through its introduction into English in the nineteenth century by George Eliot in her translation of Strauss’ *Life of Jesus*, to the twentieth-century mythologists Campbell, Eliade, and others.

⁵ Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, London, 1963, 5-6.

cosmologies, and neither are they 'just so story' aetiologies. Rather, myths, in this sense, by narrating the origin, make available through narrative experience the meaning of the thing so originated. *Being*, in this mythical sense, is identical with *meaning*, and that meaning is experienced primarily in conducting oneself according to its account: 'Because myth relates the *gesta* of Supernatural Beings and the manifestation of their sacred powers, it becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities.'⁶ The beginning is the actions of the Supernatural Beings (or, as will be discussed below, the character of any story participating in the meaning-revealing capacities of the mythic), which establish a relationship between the subject and the world. By patterning our lives after the account of a myth's narrative of origin, we are able both to approach the supernatural and to transcend the limited horizons of strictly material reality (whatever that might be) as well as experience the world in truth. Karen Armstrong synthesises Eliade's description into the succinct formula that a myth is the story of 'something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time' and the truth of which is discoverable only by acting upon that story through what she terms a 'program of action.'⁷ What Armstrong refers to as 'once', Eliade calls *in illo tempore*, 'in that time' in which the mythic happened or happens. In Eliade's account of myth, this time outside of time is not merely in the far past. It is what Charles Taylor calls a 'higher time'.⁸ Christian theologians have referred to it as *kairos* (as opposed to everyday *chronos*), God's time, operating in tandem with, parallel to, or over against the *saecula* in which we live day-to-day. Myth for Eliade makes available *illo tempore* through its narration, and so makes available the reality operative in that higher, more real time.⁹

Mythopoeic Fantasy

Like myth, 'mythopoeic fantasy' is a term that is widely used, though often unreflectively and idiosyncratically.¹⁰ Literary theorist Marek Oziwicz defines mythopoeic fantasy as 'a unique literary

⁶ Eliade, 6.

⁷ Armstrong, *The Case for God*, New York, 2009, xi-xii.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA, 2007, 57. Some theorists, such as Robert Segal, misunderstand Eliade on this point, dwelling on the general 'pastness' *illo tempore*. (*Theorizing About Myth*, 23). Though frequently, even usually, understood as past, this 'higher time' is better understood elsewhere as in the future (the site of God's providence) or even touching the present, available through ritual, narrative, and even geography.

⁹ As will be discussed at the end of this essay, the collapse of the pragmatic world described by secular accounts of the world and the 'magical' world of the mythic is a primary characteristic of mythopoeic fantasy.

¹⁰ "Let's talk about genre": Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro in conversation' in *The New Statesman*, 4 June 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/2015/05/neil-gaiman-kazuo-ishiguro-interview-literature-genre-machines-can-toil-they-can-t-imagine>. In a broader sense, despite the dictates of genre convention, definition of any kind of 'fantasy' on literary grounds is complicated by the fact that the genre itself is most precisely understood as a marketing tool for booksellers. A book is classified as fantasy if publishers

expression of a worldview that assumes the existence of the supernatural.¹¹ This definition is unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. First, what counts as 'supernatural' depends strongly upon what one considers 'natural', which is neither obvious nor incontestable. Second, from the perspective of the fiction itself, what is considered 'natural' and 'supernatural' is also often blurred or effaced all together, as will be discussed below. Chris Brawley offers a more useful definition, commendably self-aware in its local application. For Brawley's work on mythopoeic fiction and ecological politics, it is understood as the work of 'authors who are employing fantasy as a subversive mode of literature to revise our perceptions of the natural world; and, the distinguishing feature of these authors is... an inculcation of a certain religious or mystical "feeling" of the numinous in the reader.'¹² Brawley's definition is helpful inasmuch as he specifies that the mythopoeic is related in some sense to the power of certain kinds of narrative to re-frame our perceptions and that it works by evocation of an unspecified 'numinous' feeling. I hope to offer more specificity to the experience of the numinous than Brawley is able to in his reliance on Rudolf Otto's *Idea of the Holy*. It would be circular reasoning to define for the purposes of this essay mythopoeic fantasy as that which carries the mythic sensibility under consideration. However, as Oziewicz' and Brawley's definitions suggest, the mythic sensibility of interpretive structure and miraculous revelation is intertwined in the genre. I will thus define mythopoeic fantasy as that concerned with the making and operation of mythic consciousness, whether within the narrative or as the narrative itself. Concerned as they are with myth, such narratives bear the mythic sensibility under consideration in this essay.

The best-known work of mythopoeic fantasy today must be J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, given a new currency and visibility by Peter Jackson's film adaptations. The force with which *The Lord of the Rings* originally struck the public imagination and which it continues to exert on novelists, film makers, game designers, and visual artists testifies both to the potency of Tolkien's creative vision as well to an underlying hunger for the mythopoeic in the public's imagination. The seeming miracle of Tolkien's Middle Earth, a new world whose interior reality, providential resonances and characters' sacrifices confront the reader with all the force of an ancient 'organic' mythic narrative represents the origin not only of a new genre but of a new way of appreciating and approaching the world in which we live. The arrival of Jackson's films in 2001 inaugurated a new era of fantasy film making, bringing audiences not only the Harry Potter films, but also more emotionally and psychologically ambiguous films such as Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* and Dave McKean's

think that doing so is the best way to sell more copies. As Neil Gaiman quipped, 'Genres only start existing when there's enough of them to form a sort of critical mass in a bookshop.'

¹¹ Marek Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People: The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle, and Orson Scott Card*, Jefferson, NC, 2008, 4.

¹² Chris Brawley, *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy*, Jefferson, NC, 2014, 9.

MirrorMask, all reveling in what Neil Easterbrook calls the ‘shamelessly fictive’.¹³ Since the stories and myths of the Old and New Testaments no longer structure the imaginations and hermeneutical vision of many (most?) in post-Christendom Europe and North America, the increased visibility of the shamelessly fictive and the rise of the ‘shamelessly mythic’ invites consideration. The hollowing out of trust in the institutions of religious life has become a byword, and yet the avowedly theological character of Tolkien’s writing¹⁴ puts into question claims that the public has grown quite apart from the questions and the desires with which they once turned almost universally to the Church. This ‘mythic turn’ represents a shift in the public’s relationship to questions of faith and opens new questions about what makes for religious discourse at all.

With these understandings of myth and mythopoeic fiction in mind, we can begin to examine the phenomenological sensibility shared by myth and the mythopoeic fiction enjoying a contemporary renaissance: a narrative, interpretive presence characterised by *structuring perception* and *miraculous revelation*.

II. Structuring Perception

The mythic sensibility which is shared by proper myths and mythopoeic fiction first entails a structuring of one’s interpretation and judgment, in much the same way as a game does. That is to say, as the rules of a game structure the judgments and actions of the players, mythic sensibility structures the understanding and even behaviour of the ‘mythic subject’. In the midst of the Second World War, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga undertook the unusual task of producing a study of play, which would prove to offer new insight into the dynamics of this seeing *as*. Our perception of the world is always already mediated by our past experiences, the language(s) we speak, our mental state, and so on. All of these priors determine not only how we react to new circumstances and new stimuli, but also how we perceive any given stimulus or situation: an assemblage of wood is seen *as* a table or an altar or a workbench. A congregation of people is seen as a rock concert or a brawl or an initiation. In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Huizinga anatomises the ways in which this ‘play-element’ structure a great deal of otherwise disparate aspects of human culture. He describes how, when playing a game, the rules of the game structure players’ actions. The intentions, goals, rules, and scope of the game dictate what the players want, how they go about trying to achieve it, and the space in which they pursue these aims: ‘Inside the

¹³ Neil Easterbrook, “The Shamelessly Fictive: Mimesis and Metafantasy” in *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 2012, Vol. 18, No. 1, 199.

¹⁴ Tolkien wrote to a Jesuit friend, “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion,’ to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.” (Zaleski, 412).

play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. ... Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it “spoils the game”, robs it of its character and makes it worthless.¹⁵ Play is also inherently imaginative and creative. Not only are the rules in play fictive, in the sense that they are contingent to the game and not necessary to human existence, but games themselves almost always involve a further imagined component.¹⁶ Whether it is the importance or value placed on the goal (within the horizons of the game itself, the outcome is of utmost importance and is unrelated to any external reward or profit to be had) or it is an imagined world of faeries and wizards which constitutes the game’s setting, a certain playfulness with the conditions of reality is necessary for the game *as game* to function. Within the boundaries of the game’s order, the world is to be discerned in a certain way.¹⁷ Certain places are taboo, whether they be beyond the boundary lines painted in the grass or behind the doors of the Holy of Holies. The rules of the game structure our interpretation of the phenomena we encounter.¹⁸

Hans-Georg Gadamer takes up Huizinga’s theory of play into the development of his hermeneutics. Drawing on Huizinga’s discussion of how games structure behaviour, he observes how the game, in fact, *plays* the players. The game itself takes on the status of a subject: ‘all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game is the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players. ... Whoever “tries” is in fact the one who is tried. The real

¹⁵ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, New York, 1950, 10. The spoil-sport, in fact, illustrates the game-like, fictive nature of myth as it appears in wider cultural frames. For example, regarding the Houses of Harry Potter, to mock a spellbound fan by telling them how childish it is to identify so deeply with a children’s book or simply to dismiss their affection and affiliation out of hand on the basis of the whole construct being fiction ‘spoils the game’ (and likely would lead to hurt feelings). Similarly, to view the ritual acts of the Christian liturgy outside the ‘rules of the game’ by which they are played is to spoil it. Demanding to slice into the Host in order to find the flesh inside is a violation of the rules and a spoiling of the game. As Huizinga points out, conscientious objectors spoil the game of noble warfare and revolutionaries spoil the game of a changeless social order. However, it is not only the order created by the horizons of the myth that render it game-like.

¹⁶ Play is vital to the concept of myth in more ways than discussed in this essay. The playfulness with ‘reality’ exhibited both in traditional mythic narratives (the combination and re-combination of species and natural forms, creative and inventive magics, etc.) and in the being-played aspect of being ‘subject’ to a myth.

¹⁷ In the game of faith, this imagined component is understood not as imagined but as a clarity of sight.

¹⁸ This hermeneutic structuring runs counter to certain theories of ‘reader response’, such as that of Stanley Fish, in which the interpreter’s situation is the ultimate condition on the meaning encountered in a text/work of art. The interpreter’s situation and interpretive community are important components of the hermeneutic moment, but the structure of the ‘game’ is external to the interpreter in a way not captured by the radical, even solipsistic situated-ness of Fish’s theory. See Paul Noble, ‘Hermeneutics and Post-Modernism: Can we Have a Radical Reader-Response Theory?’ in *Religious Studies* 30.4 & 31.1.

subject of the game... is not the player but instead the game itself.¹⁹ The subjectivity of the game is of crucial importance in the development of our concept of the mythic sensibility. Gadamer is primarily concerned with play as it is 'transformed into structure' in the form of a work of art.²⁰ The play so transformed becomes accessible to the viewer through participation via interpretation. The work of art and its interpretation entail the viewer/interpreter's participation in a game structured by the work of art's self-presentation. For instance, appreciation of a stage play requires that the viewer participate according to the rules of the game the play represents: the actors are to be taken for the characters they portray, the set is to be taken for the setting of the story, and the world of the play itself is (usually) to be taken as entirely distinct from the world outside. The game of 'play-watching' is the necessary condition for understanding what the play means and what it is saying, and once one is playing, the 'subjectivity' of the game of play-watching becomes the viewer's interpretive guide through the world of the play. While watching Ralph Feinnes and Sophie Okonedo play the title characters in *Antony and Cleopatra*, I cease seeing Feinnes and Okonedo on stage and instead see the Consul and the Queen: the game of the play structures my sight in such a way that I see them *as* the fictionalised characters in much the same way that as a literate person, I cannot see letters on a page as anything but letters. The game of reading has structured my seeing in this way.

As Huizinga demonstrates, by observing the game-like structures to be found throughout culture, from the competitive 'game' of the capitalist economy to the international 'game' of global politics and even the 'game' of war, the judgment and behaviour-structuring dynamics of the game are a basic part of human interaction with one another and with the world. By structuring our perceptions according to its rules, the game conditions what Merleau-Ponty calls 'operative intentionality', that which is 'apparent in our desires, our evaluations and the landscape we see, ... [rather] than in objective knowledge... [furnishing] the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language.'²¹ The rules of the game provide the ground both of *what* can be considered and *how* it can be considered. This dynamic is not restricted to the football pitch or the theatre, however. Though play as defined by Huizinga entails an arena apart from 'ordinary' life²², he is quick to point out that there is a sense in which the logic of the game extends beyond distinct playgrounds, or that the whole of social life can be considered such a ground.²³

The rules of these games are part of the fabric of our social life and they are embedded in and communicated through culture, most notably in narrative, the cultural form most conforming to

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, 2004, 106.

²⁰ Gadamer, 110.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London/New York: 1945/62, xviii.

²² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, New York, 1950, 9.

²³ Huizinga, 30-31.

human experience.²⁴ In ancient Greece, for example, the myth of Demeter and Persephone shaped the perceptions of both the natural cycles of the seasons as well as salvation from death. The effect of the mythic sensibility on individuals is most famously demonstrated in the Eleusinian Mysteries, a mystery cult centred the myth in which, initiates found their perception of the world radically changed through participation in the rituals of initiation which allowed a deep identification with the narrative.²⁵ Their understanding of their own lives was changed as they understood themselves to participate in the life-death-resurrection related in the myth. They began to see the world and themselves *as* something other than they were before their participation in and identification with the myth. Having been brought into the myth, they see themselves and the world through the myth, as the myth would have them see. Being in the world according to the rules of the Eleusinian game, devotees see and act along its lines. In another, more contemporary example, having been baptised into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (itself a myth in this sense), all strangers, and especially all who suffer, are seen and cherished as Christ himself. Having lived for one's life in the sacraments of the Church, any bread and wine become imbued with more profound significance and are seen to be at least potentially holy.

And it is here that I suggest there is a bridge from myth to the mythopoeic. This same perspective-shaping sensibility is part of the mythopoeic in fiction. Having read and been moved by the novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*, all sea-battered islands share something of the quiet power of Gont and Roke. Having recognised something powerfully true in *The Lord of the Rings*, all forests partake something of Fangorn, and the fortunes and burdens of the very small take on new value and meaning. In a more visible example, the very real anxiety experienced by some fans of the *Harry Potter* series over to which of the Hogwarts houses they belong²⁶, might be construed as an expression of this same effect. Having found themselves compelled by the rather straightforward classifications of the houses, they now see the world in those terms: she is a Ravenclaw, he is a Hufflepuff, that one there is a Muggle. Though these 'shamelessly fictive' stories do not pretend to aspire to structure the perception to the same degree or extent as the Eleusinian Mysteries or the Anamnesis of the Eucharistic Prayer²⁷, they nonetheless participate in the same phenomenological structuring of the imagination and judgment. For readers captured by the

²⁴ Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience" in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 39, No. 3, September 1971, pp. 291-311.

²⁵ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987, 11.

²⁶ Cari Romm, "The *Harry Potter* Personality Test", in *The Atlantic*, 22 June 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/06/harry-potter-house-personality-study/396491/>

Though often masked by lashings of irony, the amount of time spent discussing the outcome of such quizzes belies a certain investment in the outcome and the proper assignment of identity.

²⁷ The part of the prayer consecrating the bread and wine of the Eucharist during which the priest recounts the saving work of God in history, culminating with the Last Supper and the death and Resurrection of Christ, making that history present to the congregation and in the Eucharistic elements.

mythic sensibility in these fictions, the world is read differently than it was before, and the works speak the world to them in a way that had previously been unavailable.

The idea that myths structure our perception of the world is not new. In his famous study of stories that structure our understanding of the contemporary world, Roland Barthes rightly identifies such stories as *myths*.²⁸ Barthes continues the strictly pejorative sense of the word, insisting that myth is a kind of deferred or obfuscated kind of speech having ‘the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal.’²⁹ Observing the ideological force of myths such as those perpetrated by advertisers and ‘Ornamental Cookery’ as manifestations of the ideas controlling twentieth-century French citizens (and one could add in an American context the myth of the American Dream), Barthes rejects mythic sensibility *tout court* insisting that all such discourse is fatally ideological. While I depart from Barthes in his strictly negative assessment of the capacity of the mythic to speak in contemporary life, I share his judgment that myths continue to surround us and to pervade our language and our understanding of the world. Barthes correctly identifies the hermeneutic operation of myth, but by insisting on the strictly obfuscatory character of modern myths, he misses the possibility of a transcendent or even revelatory capacity for the mythic sensibility. Gadamer hints at a kind of *presence* in the mythic which speaks in the myth in his assessment of the subjectivity of the game: the game *acts* on the player according to its own sense of right and wrong. Philosopher Aleksei Losev argues that this presence enables the myth to carry the subject across the gap from particularity to the transcendent in what he calls the miraculous. The mythic sensibility of seeing *as* opens in Losev into a mythic phenomenology or mythic consciousness which is operative in the human approach to the world.

III. Miraculous Revelation

From within mythic consciousness, myth offers access to a transcendent sort of knowing. As suggested by Graham Ward’s ‘mythic resonances’ which radiate from prehistoric cave paintings and petroglyphs³⁰, the mythic offers access, on its terms, to a way of knowing that is different from the way of knowing described by the scientific method or by dialectical argument. We sometimes speak of this way of knowing as ‘otherworldly’, as it seems to come to us from outside, and it seems to intimate a different plane of being. The ‘perennial philosophy’ of spirits and enchantment could say that it consists of intimations of the spirit world. It is a truism of fantasy literature that, at best, it offers imaginative access to a more wonderful (or at least more enchanted) world, and

²⁸ Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, London, 1972.

²⁹ Barthes, 142.

³⁰ For an exceptional reflection on this aspect of the mythic, see *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, dir. Werner Herzog, IFC Films, 2011.

at worst, it offers escapism, veiling the real world in all its irreducible complexity. The same has been said of the mythic: every criticism of myth that suggests it is obfuscation or disingenuous is an accusation of a kind of escapism. I would suggest, however, that the mythic sensibility, shared by mythopoeic literature (that sort of fantasy most concerned with Eliade's 'account of a creation') and by proper mythology, offers the reader the possibility of seeing the world not only in a new (and otherwise inaccessible) way. Far from frivolous escapism, mythic sensibility in this regard offers what J.R.R. Tolkien calls the 'Escape of the Prisoner' as opposed to the 'Flight of the Deserter'.³¹ Departure from the sensible world can offer a new and perhaps more accurate perspective.³² Indeed, phenomenologically, for the mythic subject, the world so-revealed is truer. This is the meaning of mythic consciousness and the mythic sensibility itself.

That mythopoeic fiction can participate in this kind of 'higher' understanding is also not a new idea. Not only did Tolkien intimate in his essay 'On Fairy-Stories' that the perspective-shifting potential of the fairy tale can have a revelatory character ('eucatastrophe'),³³ Chris Brawley examines mythopoeic fantasy fiction and its participation in the transforming power of the mythic in his *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature*. Brawley explores the potential of mythopoeic fantasy to enable readers to shift their perspective on and understanding of the world they inhabit. For Brawley, a myth is primarily a story that has the power to condition or even to alter our perceptions of the world. It operates in a way similar to the perspective-framing and meaning-engendering experience of religious faith, Otto's 'feeling of the numinous'. According to Brawley, the imaginative worlds of Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, and others have superseded the imaginative world described in the Christian Bible, and his aim is to describe how, following the failure of Christianity to prevent ecological catastrophe, the public has sought to 'scratch the itch' of religious 'feeling' in the context of mythopoeic fantasy, and to examine how, in ways analogous to religious myth, it serves the subversive, frame-shifting function once performed by Christian myths and explicitly religious culture. Otto's reliance on emotion, however, limits the capacity of Brawley's schema to take account of the revelatory capacity of the mythic sensibility. Otto's Romantic privileging of the emotions as a source of knowledge does not do justice to the cognitive component of mythic consciousness, its ability to speak the world to what philosopher Aleksei Losev calls the 'mythic subject'.³⁴

In his phenomenological study of myth, Losev argues that from within the experience of being 'subject' to a myth, the myth speaks only what is true. And what is more, as the mythic subject perceives the world in the light of the myth, her life will become informed by it such that when

³¹ J.R.R. Tolkien 'On Fairy-Stories' in *Tree and Leaf*, London, 1975, 56.

³² This is not to say that Barthes is entirely wrong and that myth cannot be used to obfuscate and lie. It merely means that it need not.

³³ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 62ff.

³⁴ Aleksei Losev, *The Dialectics of Myth*, trans. Vladimir Marchenkov, London, 2003, 5.

her history or her experience of the world coincides with the ideal form of the myth, it is received phenomenologically as a wonder, Greek *thauma*, or Latin *miraculum*. For this reason, Losev refers to myths as 'miraculous'.³⁵ Losev gives the example of the supplicant who comes to the temple of Asclepius in ancient Athens for healing. Having offered prayer and slept the night, when healing is received, it is experienced as a miracle, even though no natural laws need have been violated. The physical/material causes are not the question in the miracle. Rather it is the interpretation and meaning of the event.³⁶ More than a feeling of the numinous, the mythic encounter with the world on the terms of the myth's revelation of it is received by the mythic subject as a miracle, as an opening of the world to a higher or more potent reality, a 'rightness' or even a 'wrongness' in the case of the inverse experience: the radical disjuncture from the mythic account is experienced as a shattering experience of the void, a meaninglessness mirroring the meaningful revelation of the affirmative miracle. C. S. Lewis describes this experience in terms of how a myth 'gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles our oldest certainties till all questions are reopened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives.'³⁷ This awakening, seeing the world more truly, what Losev calls a mythic union of person and history, dismissed by positivists as 'magical thinking' is the very material of mythopoeic fantasy.

According to the conventions of the fantasy genre, what would be considered the stuff of myth or faith or metaphor or symbol in the 'primary world' becomes material and pragmatic in the fantasy or 'secondary world'. What is transcendent-symbolic in myth is collapsed into the pragmatic-physical. This collapse of the transcendent into the material is especially typical of mythopoeic fantasy. As Sam and Frodo lie in a hollow awaiting night and reflect on their place in the long history of Middle Earth, they find their story is mythically bound up with the tale of the self-offering of Eärendil, who risked everything to journey into the uttermost West on behalf of all of Middle Earth, culminating in his transcending the mortal world with a Silmaril to become a wandering star in the heavens. On finding himself embedded in this ancient story, Sam exclaims, 'Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?'³⁸ It is historically and literally a continuation of that history-myth. The downfall of Sauron is the final historical event in the long history of the Silmarils, and Sam and Frodo's own journeys into the West complete that history. Likewise, in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* novels, when wizards claim that the language of magic is the language of Segoy, who raised the islands from the sea, who created the world itself, they are not speaking metaphorically or 'just' symbolically; they are speaking practically and historically. When he is encountered in *Tehanu*, the Creator is found to

³⁵ Losev, 158.

³⁶ Losev, 157-158.

³⁷ C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, London, 2016, xxii.

³⁸ Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, London, 2005, 712. 'Tales' are the word used in Middle Earth in place of 'myths', neatly blurring the boundaries between history and fabulation.

be materially and literally present in history in a way that is not typically to be found in real-world history. Through narrative sympathy, readers find themselves not only observing, but imaginatively participating in the mythic *on its terms*. As Losev put it, within the mythic consciousness, the magical is *real*.³⁹ This participation in the myth opens the reader to the revelatory potential of the myth, to see the world as the myth understands it.

This encounter or combination of myth and history is a characteristic of the mythic sensibility as it is found in mythopoeic fantasy. Some theorists of myth note that characters in myths do not typically have much of an inner life: myths deal in the concrete and the experiential, not the psychological and interior. Fantasy's collapse of the symbolic into the pragmatic reflects this aspect of myth and can be folded into a sense of how contemporary literature can bear out the mythic sensibility while still reflecting the expectations of contemporary readers. Historical knowledge in this way blends into mythic or symbolic knowledge. Sam and Frodo know themselves to be part of a greater shape to history and to have a place in the unfolding of that mythic-into-historic narrative. The reader is implicated into this process of recognition and perspective-framing, and it offers the reader a sense of the transcending quality of the mythic even in a 'realistic' or 'pragmatic' mode within the fantasy world. The affective qualities of fiction, drawing the reader into its world and shaping his perceptions through it, help define what Rowan Williams calls 'imaginative structures to think and feel with.'

In his essay on the Bodleian Library's 2018 exhibit of J. R. R. Tolkien's letters, paintings, and manuscripts, Rowan Williams conducts readers through the imaginative *copia* of Tolkien's 'legendarium' toward urgent critiques that might shed light on the crises of the present age. Williams notes that in spite of some of Tolkien's conservative or even 'bourgeois' positions in life, *The Lord of the Rings* nevertheless speaks in radical form to the wounds inflicted on the common good by 'unexamined power and the tyranny of profit' and the perils of the relentless drive of modernity towards the spoiling and wastage of what cannot be shared and so must be bought and sold.⁴⁰ Far from representing an escapist fantasy, Williams reminds us that Tolkien's masterpiece is not unlike the great mythological narratives that are woven through human culture: 'The narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* and the "legendarium" of *The Silmarillion* and other writings are presented as a set of imaginative structures in and through which people can think and feel with the same consistency, intelligence and growing wisdom as they did through the stories of Olympus, Troy, Asgard or the Arthurian cycle.'⁴¹ Tolkien himself made his intentions clear in a

³⁹ Losev, *The Dialectics of Myth*, 7.

⁴⁰ Rowan Williams, "Master of his universe: the warnings in JRR Tolkien's novels" in *The New Statesman* (8 August 2018). Accessed online at <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/08/master-his-universe-warnings-jrr-tolkien-s-novels> on 4 September 2018.

⁴¹ Williams.

letter to a friend — part of his ambition was to provide something like a corpus of mythic stories for England:

I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (As an ingredient) in legends of other lands... Do not laugh! But once upon a time... I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story... which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country⁴²

A valid question could here be raised over the difference between legend and myth. 'Legendarium' itself refers literally to something to be read, as distinct from the cultural embeddedness of the myth and its universal hold on the subject's imagination. Likewise, myth-ritual theorists will insist that myths are only told in the context of certain rituals or liminal moments.⁴³ This tradition of mythological understanding will deny the 'true' mythicity of the 'literary myth', 'trapped' in the pages of a book rather than alive in the oral tradition and interpretive frames of a culture. In *The Story of Myth*, Sarah Iles Johnston makes a persuasive case for the literariness of Greek mythology at least, communicated by the Classical period at the latest by way of highly refined literary texts such as that of Homer and Hesiod. Though it is lacking the ceremony of a 'true' mythic re-telling, as in the sweat lodges and ritual fires of archaic societies, the number of fans of *The Lord of the Rings* who feel compelled to take out their battered volumes in the Autumn, to re-enter the enchantment of Middle Earth is nonetheless suggestive of this heightening of experience, placing the reading of the text within a kind of ritual year. If Williams is right that the legendarium is not so different from classical myths and medieval legend, then it does not seem inappropriate to speak of it in mythic terms. Tolkien's work is mythic at least in part as a function of its ability to show the world in a certain way and to structure the reader's imagination both inside and outside the text. And it is the very heightening of the sense of the reality of the world *inside* the text which highlights the mythic sensibility. In spite of its manifest fiction, Middle Earth nevertheless *seems real* in a very present and powerful way.

Conclusion

Williams notes in his essay that 'myths have no authors,' and this may be true for the 'proper' myths of history and the present day: composition has come in the re-telling, and no single *auctor* can claim ownership of the Greek myths any more than any one person can claim authorship of the myth of the American Dream or the creation narratives of Genesis. However, the mythic

⁴² Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (New York, 2015), 125.

⁴³ For example, and perhaps most famously, see Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Others include Jane Ellen Harrison's *Mythology*, Samuel Henry Hooke's *Myth and Ritual*, the anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski, and Walter Burkert's *Structure and History in Greek Myth and Ritual*.

sensibility outlined in this essay nevertheless continues to present itself even in authored fiction. This mythic sensibility ties together the interpretive presence that illuminates the most ancient myths and cultural narratives that continue to give (or to withhold) meaning with the shamelessly fictive mythopoeisis of the contemporary mythic turn. Coleridge famously called the experience of dwelling within the account of the world offered by a work of fiction a kind of 'poetic faith', what Michael Tomko persuasively describes as not merely 'a begrudging toleration of the fabulous', but rather akin to the 'hard-won understanding of a religious faith that awakens all the human faculties, prompts reason to ascend to its greatest capacity, and educes meaningful experience not otherwise available.'⁴⁴ As Graham Ward notes of literature's inability ever to be entirely secular⁴⁵, so, too is mythopoeisis, however pedestrian or fantastical, never wholly distinct from faith, poetic or otherwise. The form is irredeemably bound up in the seeing *as* that is faith's hallmark.

Mythic sensibility is not miles distant from the sensibilities of religious faith. The myths that reside in the holy texts and traditions of contemporary faiths structure the perception of the faithful and reveal the world as meaningful according to their account of what is true. By attending to the mythic sensibility in mythopoeic literature and understanding it in relation to the mythic sensibility of classical or 'proper' myths and the myths of religions as they are practiced today, we are able to understand something of the way that this sensibility is 'baked in' to the human way of approaching the world. The methods of knowing inherent to scientific and dialectical reasoning are important tools used by human beings to learn about the world and about the architecture of the human mind. However, I suspect that the knowledge so produced is always folded into an ongoing narrative appraisal of the world, even if the story in question is one that goes, 'Practitioners of the experimental testing of hypotheses learn what is true in the world' or is related in the stories of the achievements of great scientists. The story shapes what we understand by words like 'learn' and 'true' and 'world' and so teaches us how to evaluate the 'facts' revealed by experiment. Likewise, the narratives that shape the way that we understand the world always come from somewhere and are always articulated by another human being with his or her own ideology and agenda. If mythic sensibility offers continuity not only with proper myths and mythopoeic fiction, but also with the seeing *as* that is the way of being called faith, then it is possible that theologians might be able to employ the idea of mythic sensibility to bring the lively faith of religion into fruitful dialogue with the 'shamelessly fictive', even ironic 'faith' of mythopoeic fantasy's revelation of the world as numinous, magical, and full of wonder.

⁴⁴ Michael Tomko, *Beyond the Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Poetic Faith from Coleridge to Tolkien* (London, 2016), 2, 145.

⁴⁵ Graham Ward, "Why Literature Can Never be Entirely Secular", in *Religion and Literature* (Summer 2009), pp. 21-27.

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