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C.S. Lewis and Myth

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Starr, Charlie W., *The Faun's Bookshelf: C.S. Lewis on Why Myth Matters* (The Kent State University Press/Black Squirrel Books, 2018).

What is myth? And what role does myth or, more broadly, story, poetry, or fiction play in human knowledge and communication? Though none of these literary categories is simply synonymous with myth, they share certain elements in common, including the understanding that human language is not merely propositional or informational. In coming to know another person, we often rely in a significant way on the stories they tell about themselves; in studying a culture or civilization, we look to the stories it tells about its origin and understanding of the world. In both of these ordinary examples, we see the foundational role that story and myth play in conveying meaning.

In approaching the question of myth, the writings of C.S. Lewis form a particularly rich source of insight. As a professor of literature, Lewis spent a lifetime in formal study of myth and story as a source of meaning. As an author of world-building fiction (in the Narnia books and his space trilogy) and more explicitly apologetical Christian tales (e.g., *The Great Divorce* or *The Pilgrim's Regress*), he was himself a creator of myth. Lastly, in his own life of faith, he considered ancient myths, both pagan and Christian, to have been crucial in his conversion, or reversion, to Christianity as an adult. All three of these elements play a significant role in Charlie W. Starr's *The Faun's Bookshelf: C.S. Lewis on Why Myth Matters*.

Starr takes his title from a small incident in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*: Lucy Pevensy's perusal of Mr. Tumnus's bookshelf when he brings her to his home for tea during her first visit to Narnia. She notices four titles in particular: *The Life and Letters of Silenus*, *Nymphs and Their Ways*, *Men, Monks, and Gamekeepers: A Study in Popular Legend*, and *Is Man a Myth?* Starr argues that these (fictional, which is to say, non-existent) volumes are an interpretive and organizational key to understanding Lewis's use of and thought about myth. Although initially a pleasing idea, Starr's reliance on sometimes tortuous speculation as to the

contents of these titles can obscure what Lewis has said explicitly about myth. When Starr allows Lewis to speak for himself and Starr's own evident breadth and depth of study in Lewis's writings to draw connections among Lewis's personal experience and fictional and non-fictional work, this small volume offers substantial insight into its title's question: why does myth matter?

For Lewis, a concrete and deeply personal reason that myth matters is the role it played in his Christian conversion. Beginning as a small boy, Lewis was conscious of a "desire for some nameless thing" beyond everyday experience, a "longing accompanied by such intense, sweet pleasure that Lewis named it 'joy.'" As a boy and young teenager, he was "stabbed with joy" upon reading the Norse tales of Baldur and Siegfried, and "experiencing [that joy] again became the most important desire of his life," pursued through nature, romance, and literature as a young man. If experience of the "worshipful awe" inspired by the myths of the Norse gods helped to open Lewis to the transcendent, it was an intellectual encounter with myth that helped him to believe in God and then assent to the Christian faith. On the brink of accepting Christianity as a young adult, Lewis experienced the pagan myths of the "dying and rising god" in the stories of Adonis, Osiris, and Baldur as a "delight to the imagination" and "suggestive of meanings beyond [his] grasp," but did not experience the same depth of meaning in the Gospel narrative of the crucified and risen Jesus. Starr recounts that it was only when Lewis came to understand (through a lengthy, late-night conversation with J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson) the story of Jesus as a "true myth," in which "God [is] expressing Himself through what we call 'real things'"—in contrast to the images and stories of pagan myths that were "'lies, though lies breathed through silver'"—that Lewis was able to come to accept the Christian faith.

Unusual an experience as it may be for "near paganism" to play a foundational and explicit role in conversion to Christianity, Lewis's understanding of the origin and function of myth illuminates the relationship between the two. Especially in the face of the modern reduction of nature to "mere machinery," the trappings of myth—the naiads, dryads, and gods of nature—open human perception to the possibility of a "world of abundant life" and of personality "behind all living things." Moreover, Starr observes, Lewis sees in the actual content of ancient myths "'gleams of celestial strength and beauty'" through which "God spoke to pagan peoples" about the truth, even though the pagan gods are false. These stories allowed glimpses, though often distorted and darkened, into what is true about the world and the divine and inspired a longing for beauty until God spoke his own "story" through salvation history.

Alive as he was to the ability of myth (either traditional myths or story-telling more broadly) to communicate truth and shape the imagination, Lewis reflected deeply on the way myth works as a mode of knowledge. To know something discursively requires us to "withdraw ourselves from reality," to stand alongside what is real to speak abstractly about it. What is said may be true, but it is not the same as reality. Lewis proposes that "what flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality" because myth gives us an experience of "being caught up in the real." Myth "acts on our imagination like an experience" rather than a proposition, and it may get us closer to reality itself: in receiving a myth "you were not knowing, but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle. The moment we state this principle, we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely." Thus, Starr concludes, myth can work on the imagination and sentiments in a way that opens human understanding to meaning and

transcendence in a more direct way than propositional truth. In his own mythical invention for example, Lewis's *Perelandra* offers both a riveting adventure in interplanetary travel to an unfallen world and a depth of experiential knowledge of the beauty and wisdom of innocence, the profound loss entailed in disobedience, and the providence of God over creation even beyond our own world.

Starr unpacks these and other insights into myth at greater length and also offers a helpful discussion of Lewis's fellow Inklings, specifically J.R.R. Tolkien on creating myths and Owen Barfield on language. Starr also sheds light on Lewis's understanding of the meaning of sexual difference, the relationship between Lewis's own mythical writings and the ancient myths he loved, and Lewis's reckoning with the possibility that myths can also *deform* our imagination and experience, if they are not transparent to what is really true (or truly real).

In Starr's estimation, Lewis helps us to see that myth matters because it can form us to perceive reality truly, which leads us to the moment when "myth *becomes* fact—the most real thing there is," the Incarnation.

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