Theologians today exercise almost zero public influence. And yet, through the medium of children’s literature and fantasy literature generally, a public theological debate of a kind continues to be conducted. From George Macdonald in the Victorian era through G.K. Chesterton to the Inklings, an attempt has been made to re-present Christianity in the mode of what Macdonald already called the fantastic imagination. If one judges by book sales figures, the avid readership of this literature must extend well beyond the numbers of those who go to church, although the latter group also have been perhaps much more profoundly shaped by this literary mode of reflection than by the work of conceptual theologians.

As if in recognition that by this means Christianity still exerts a covert hold on the global imagination, Philip Pullman in His Dark Materials has written an anti-Christian fantasy trilogy, which to some extent is deliberately directed against certain key themes of the Macdonald tradition—in particular the privileging of the innocent, childish eye—while at the same time it is manifestly indebted to this tradition for its mode of construction. This is especially apparent in terms of its envisaging of a parallel universe with its own laws which is deployed both to point out the arbitrary contingency of the universe we inhabit and to indicate more sharply an essence of ethical legality that might transcend arbitrariness and display its imperatives in any possible world whatsoever. Moreover, Pullman’s ethical prescription remains a theological one of a sort—he offers a kind of materialist Gnosticism as an alternative to orthodox Christian faith.

The fact that it is now possible and respectable to offer this sort of thing to children could be seen as one measure of de-Christianization—although already Pullman has called forth a popular work of Christian fictional critique in the shape of D.P. Taylor’s Shadowmancer—unfortunately a work that is well-conceived but poorly executed, though little more so than the latter part of Pullman’s trilogy which severely degenerates, perhaps because of its mythopoeic incoherency, after the unsurpassed brilliance of the first volume (especially the first half). And of course the Harry Potter sequence—so much better in the films when the plodding prose is cast away to leave the superbly imagined core—is rightly recognized as essentially sustaining a Christian vision.

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3 D.P. Taylor, Shadowmancer (London: Faber and Faber, 2003)
And this calls forth a wider reflection—is the entire adaptation of Christianity to a fantastic mode itself a sign of de-Christianization and a post-religious approach to religious materials? A conversion of doctrine into a fictionalized myth might be seen as one manifestation of a post-Christian phase in which what was once truth still persists in the echo of public value. Moreover, the association of erstwhile Christian realities with other worlds, lost worlds or past worlds, might suggest a certain note of pathos pervading all such literature. In a way, it is arguable that Lewis and Tolkien or J.K. Rowling are in negative agreement with Don Cupitt: there is no core of theological realism that can survive the lapse of belief in an enchanted cosmos. Hence one can read their work at times as a lament for the loss of enchantment. If it is more than that, if it is part of a project of re-enchantment, as seems to be the case, then one might ask, would not such a project have to exceed the realm of the fictional imagination? Can there be in any sense a realist understanding of this literature’s engagement with the seemingly fantastic?

I want to suggest in what follows that it is possible to read what I shall call ‘The Macdonald tradition’ as more than a kind of rearguard action of retreating faith. It is not so much, I shall contend, that this tradition merely re-presents Christianity in a fictional mode, as that it re-envisages Christianity altogether, in continuity with certain strands of the Romantic tradition, in terms of the categories of the imagination, the fairy realm and of magic. It is as if, in the face of the decline of Christianity, Macdonald and Chesterton put forward the radical claim that this decline is linked to a perennial failure of abstract reason sufficiently to grasp the character of Christian doctrine and practice. This has a very important implication for the attitude of theology towards the striking emergence in our time—especially in the British Isles—of modes of neo-paganism, new-ageism etc. My argument in this paper will suggest that we approach this phenomenon in a sympathetic and mediating rather than confrontational manner, and that only such an approach will allow us to formulate a more precise critique of neo-paganism.

This re-envisaging goes along with a kind of subversion of traditional notions of catechesis. In terms of the latter, Christian teaching is something fully grasped by adults in abstract terms, and is then presented to children in terms of image and story that they will find more readily comprehensible. Yet at the centre of Christianity—still more so than with Judaism and Islam—stand narratives and symbols. It is these that are held to be inexhaustibly inspirational and to ensure that abstract doctrine must endlessly develop because it can never be finally conclusive. It follows that the most basic, the most fundamental elements of the faith can be taught to children and that in their initial imaginative and intuitive response to this saturation of meaning, there lies something of more authority than adult reflection. Adults may be the means of transmission, but in a sense they are conveying what they have received and must continue to receive themselves as children. The gospels themselves leave no doubt about this: it is children, particularly, who need to come to see Jesus and if the rest of us are to see him, we will ourselves have to become ‘like children’ and be born again. The infant Jesus in the temple was able to instruct his elders, not just because he was the Logos incarnate, but also because the true logos is the Son in whose generation the Father alone exists and therefore is also the child who instructs his parent with exact equivalence to the measure in which he is himself instructed. Thus the Logos speaks
on earth first with a childish wisdom that even his developed humanly adult mind does not lose sight of.

So there is a privileging here of the innocent eye, which is the inner eye whose ‘common-sensing’ is initially overwhelmed, before any strong degree of reflection intervenes, by the impressions made by images, sounds, touches and narrative sequences.4

Such things are enjoyed by the child for their own sake, in the mode of play, and in this way the childish eye has more regard for the entire ultimate ‘point’ of things, since, as yet, it is relatively immune to the goals of ambition, possession and sexual conquest. Like a cat, a child needs a certain range of its own, a certain territory for its safe free-ranging, but this is more to do with the child losing itself beyond egotism, than it is to do with possessiveness versus the equally ego-conscious claims of non-possessiveness. The child wishes to lose itself in a world of which it is nonetheless a part, outside the adult oscillations between possessive seizure and the imperative of self-sacrifice.

And it is this mode of losing of self that the gospels seek to recommend. It is an entering back into the paradisal before the very possibility of evil and death and their required remedies of sacrificial suffering and preparedness to die. This is not however to say that Christianity identifies childish innocence with Adamic innocence; that would be the post-Christian Rousseauian modification of the Christian view. Nevertheless, in the Christian view—for example in Augustine and contrary to most readings—before the individual will has freely assented to that impairment of our nature which is the legacy of original sin, it remains relatively innocent and there is a real powerful echo of Eden.5 To be sure, because of this legacy of impairment, constantly reinforced by all the evil decisions of the past, there is, from the outset, even for the child, a corrupted habitual tendency and so an adult travail to be gone through, which necessitates self-sacrifice and the preparedness to die oneself rather than inflict death upon others if evil is to be cancelled. But to die this way is to die ‘innocently’ and not purposely out of some half-concealed suicidal urge. Innocence no more wills harm to itself than harm to others—innocence is ranged on the side of cosmic justice and the free, peaceful play of all with all. For this reason, as the tradition has sometimes envisaged, it is Christ the confused child who dies upon the cross, and if he is able to sing the song of experience in such a way as to cancel the effects of experience although he cannot escape enduring them, then this is because he sustains in the face of adversity the vision of innocence—the vision of God himself who has experienced nothing, undergone nothing, passed no trials, no tests and for just this reason is good, as pure-envisaging, pure inner-playfulness, and pure intuition without any degree of reflection whatsoever. It is clear, as I have already suggested, that for Christian doctrine God’s ‘adulthood’ as Father is his originating, without remainder, the Son and therefore is but the emergence of God as child—it is, to repeat, fundamentally for this reason that it was appropriate for the Logos to become incarnate first as a child and , as a child, to

4 See Charles Péguy on the balance in humanity between childhood and adulthood in Basic Verities: Prose and Poetry trans Ann and Julien Green, 198-205, 222-231, 232-251 (extracts from Saints Innocents) esp 223: ‘It is innocence that is full and experience that is empty’ etc

5 See John Milbank, Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon (London: Routledge, 2003), 1-26
instruct the learned. The Christian reversion of pedagogy is consummated in the vision of Trinity and Incarnation.

This Christian privileging of childhood as the exemplary beginning of wonder has perhaps been especially grasped within British tradition from Thomas Traherne through to William Wordsworth. But already in the Middle-English Medieval poem *Pearl*, the narrator has a vision of his dead infant daughter as a spotless pearl who is justly elevated to the same beatitude as those who have lived, suffered, endured and persisted. They all receive by grace an equal justice due to innocence; they are all equally adorned by the white pearls of simpleness and purity. For if unsullied innocence should in justice be protected and given all that there is to give, so also those who have done justice must, precisely in order have done so, have defended innocence, and themselves sustained or further achieved an innocence by developing their own resources in an unsullied manner, since to do rightly is to preserve the integrity of one’s own nature, to let it grow—whereas if something ‘happens’ by mere unabsorbed chance experience to this nature, that something must be an evil contamination. As Charles Péguy put it: ‘It is innocence that grows and experience that wanes’. Hence if the innocence of the dead child is rightly rewarded, so, symmetrically, the achieved justice of adults receives the reward of innocence. Christ is a holy innocent on the cross; the holy innocents share in advance in his crucifixion.

However, it seems to have been only in the 19th century that a Christian and post-Christian sense that childhood was ‘special’ received a full recognition, and especially so in Anglo-Saxon countries. (The great French contributors to this theme are Péguy and Alain Fournier.) This is most certainly a complex phenomenon and full of ambivalences: it was sometimes indeed related to a dark and gloomy account of adult sexuality and a correspondingly perverse promotion of childhood and children themselves as objects of adult desire. This further entailed a series of projections rendering children either implausibly sexless or else sexualized in all too adult a manner. Another danger here is that of a cult of childhood as a retreat from a modern, adult, disenchanted world with its trials of sexual freedom and increased need for self-direction. This is clearly part of Philip Pullman’s legitimate worry about this legacy.

However, to stress only this dark side would surely be to ignore the way in which, late in the day, and ironically after the onset of its public decline, Christianity finally helped to bring about a recognition that childhood is a fully human phase of human life and yet one characterized by special needs and priorities of which the allowing of free reign to the imagination and to the realm of play are paramount. Pullman notably wishes to offer a Gnostic account of the need for transgression and of loss if we are to grow up. In George Macdonald’s work however, there is something like a Blakean sense that if the sexual field is to be successfully negotiated, it must be re-envisaged in terms of its original innocence—that in a sense it must be seamlessly integrated into unfolding childhood, in order that its wonder, play, total commitment to the immediate range of what is offered in the shape of one’s sexual

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6 ‘Pearl’ in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* ed Malcom Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996) 53-111

7 Péguy, *Basic Verities*, 223
partner, and its selfless excess to the contrast between sacrifice and egotism may be successfully embraced.

Thus, in his fairy story ‘The Light Princess’, the sheer childishness of the Prince and Princess causes them entirely to surrender to nights of swimming in the moonlit waters of an enchanted lake. The eponymous heroine who lacks a sense of gravity, both literally and figuratively, is not to be taken in Pullmanesque terms simply as an ultra-child who needs to learn to ‘fall’ and so to grow up, because in fact she lacks also the child-like gravity of serious play—which she discovers only through the pull of water and not on dry land—and can laugh, even at disaster, but lacks the capacity to smile. She is if anything a damaged, autistic child, gaping amorally at the world of gravity as if at the harmless bangs and crashes of a Disney cartoon, and the point of her fictional creation by Macdonald is to point out how our subjection to gravity is what literally helps to make us metaphorically ‘grave’ and to value our being held-down, pulled towards finite things, including in a sexual sense. As with his friend and contemporary Lewis Carroll and with Chesterton later on, Macdonald’s play with counter-factuality makes us see the contingent absurdity of our own world which might have been otherwise, and at the same time the specific value of this elective set of circumstances. Being held to the ground gives rise to a certain set of appreciations and for a human being to be without gravity is grotesque.

And yet, the princess at the end of the story still occasionally misses her levity, and there is a hint that for other modes of created being—the angelic, for example—such an idiom might be appropriate. So it is not the case that this story can be culturally instrumentalised as a parable about the need for the child to grow up, nor about a necessary passage through rupture—the ‘light’ which it sheds on our world and the comparative weight which this ‘lightness’ grants it, is rather more subtle and indirect, since the princess must, in a unique fictional fashion, grow into the reality of our world from which she has been sundered at birth through the malice of a wicked fairy. Although she must indeed learn to fall, this is not a passage through a happy transgression, but simply the acquiring of our peculiarly human ontological density.

Particularly striking in this respect is the fact that, since the Princess has not been able to fall, save into waters, tears have not been able to fall from her eyes either. The reader of the story anticipates that they will do so -- thereby inducting the rest of her body into weightiness -- when she sees that the Prince is prepared to die for her by acting as a human stopper to prevent the draining of the lake (!) under the further evil enchantment of the wicked fairy. But we are disappointed—this does not occur. Instead, the Princess’s tears fall first through joy when the Prince is resurrected from his sacrificial death. In this way a Gnostic or Hegelian message that all spiritual reality must suffer in order to develop is avoided—for what the Princess has endured through the hand of malice is less an outright evil condition that it is an ontologically inappropriate one. (For this reason it is also not a Heideggerean ‘fall’ into the ‘guilt’ of ontic existence as such.) Hence her cure does not lie—as it must for a fallen creature and for those around her who have to endure her anomalous condition as an evil—via the passage through suffering of which her levity remains autistically oblivious, but rather through her

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rebirth into genuine humanity – including the capacity for sympathetic suffering -- by joy and ecstasy. Something at last ‘gets through to her’.

Thus the Princess becomes able fully to love the Prince by belatedly becoming a normal child. Here, for Macdonald, ontologically speaking, maturation is an event *within* childhood and this sophisticated aspect of his vision is something which Pullman’s critique is unable truly to come to terms with. One could say something similar about Pullman’s key theme of self-reflection, self-consciousness and the acquiring of a determinable identity when one’s ‘daemon’ takes on a fixed habitual shape—a wonderful mythopoetic thematic in his trilogy. Surely this work of individuation is always already begun within childish play itself, in the trying out and gradual selection of different roles? Gradually, such role-play becomes in adolescence more ‘for real’ and then, indeed, self-consciousness sets in. But the ferocious Lyra is, I would contend, more plausible in her early childish phase than in her later pre-pubescent and adolescent ones, for such a degree of boldness is more characteristic of the unself-conscious child who imagines that, if one merely adopts a role, the wherewithal successfully to fulfill it will automatically follow……..this is true of Joan Aiken’s Dido Twite, who remains very much a child and on whom it seems to me Lyra may be somewhat based. Adolescent self-consciousness, by contrast, is inhibiting as much as it is awkwardly promoting of action and of a distinctive identity that is still to some degree a childish try-on. In this respect Lyra’s character does not seem to alter sufficiently and her adolescent experimentation is too confused with a childish and uncomplicated directness.

Moreover and more decisively, the ‘reduction of one’s *daemon* to one fixed shape’, since it occurs under the aegis of an insecure adolescent trying-on of a specific front, is surely both more unstable and less final than Pullman’s fiction imposes? One could argue that such a reaching for fixity is really characteristic of adolescent, initial adulthood, rather than fully achieved adulthood as such.

Surely, by contrast, full adult mature self-consciousness comes at the point where, as C. S. Lewis indicated, one half steps back into childhood and relocates self-reflection within a certain forgetting of self in order to re-engage with the world, and where also one steps somewhat back into a flexibility of role-playing in the surer knowledge that one’s *unique* character, since it survives such public metamorphoses, will shine through many necessary social disguises. So only the pathological adult would be always a psychic wolf, fox, spider etc. and it may be that the problem with adults in our own time is less that they remain still monstrous children as rather that they remain still awkward, graceless adolescents. But the adolescent phase itself need not be pathological where greater self-reflection is correlated with the realization that, if the individual mind uniquely reflects the world, then also certain aspects of the world are thereby reflected through the mind back to the world. Perhaps a lack of this sort of somewhat neo-platonic metaphysical realism helps to foment adolescent narcissitic pathologies in our own time—in the case where the emerging child imagines that she is stuck simply with her own peculiarity that has no broader disclosive significance, self-consciousness can take the form of either nihilistic aggression or else anorexic self-laceration and self-starvation. Yet altogether to avoid these pathologies and to sustain a sense that self-reflection is also an induction into the world reflecting itself in us as truth, requires that the healthy adolescent remain somewhat a child, able still to

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put her experiences into the perspective of a playful experiment which strives to echo the play of the whole of existence.

Of course a human being may succumb to the syndrome of the puer aeternus: remain forever over-attached to the smothering embrace of his parents. But the point here is that the drama of trying to remain, as one must, attached to one’s legacy and yet capable of freely developing it, begins in childhood itself, indeed in babyhood. At any point in a human life one can be either too childish or too grown-up, or both in different ways. To be a child is to begin to work out how to be a determinate and deliberating adult; to be a rounded adult is to know how constantly to qualify egoistic self-consciousness with a childishly active but unselfconscious participation in the real. Thus as has so often been said, fairy stories work well with children, especially less self-conscious younger ones, because they are not mainly about children or animals, but about adults facing grim tasks and horrors in an obviously make-believe universe. In this way, the oft-repeated theoretical story goes, real trials to come can be safely negotiated in imagination in advance in a way that shapes and steels the child’s intellect and will. And no doubt this is all true. But should one entirely reduce the make-believe factor to the instrumental—as if living out the realist novel in one’s own life were the real point in the end? I am not so sure. For the child is not initially concerned just with his own success or otherwise, but also with the very defining of worthwhile projects to pursue. The latter depends upon a conception of an ideal world, to whose ideality such projects would contribute.

The ‘otherness’ of make-believe therefore constitutes the distance of never fully realized value, and not just the distance of play or safety. Indeed play as such is related to ideality in terms of the ‘for its own sake’ beyond the instrumental, and its experimental character is related to a sense that cultural and even natural worlds are only given contingencies which might be otherwise. And not only does this tried-out variety postulate different values, it is also an experiment carried out in order to discover precisely which values survive transmondain adventures—what code of chivalry applies in the deserts of Arabia as much as in the frosts of Norway, so to speak.

Nor is play just a preparation for reality. To the contrary, the sane adult must continue to play—to keep the world of her work in perspective, she must continue to imagine other realities. To sustain, for example, a political critique, within the United Kingdom, she must retain the mythical sense that the island of Britain belongs not just to the current government but to nature, to the past, to the future, and to many hidden communities and changing racial configurations. Perhaps the great British-Irish literary theme from the hero-tales and the Mabinogion through to Brian Merriman (18th C County Cork author of the great Gaelic poem ‘The Midnight Court’, where a fairy judgment is dealt out in favour of Irish women against the male priesthood), Kipling, Yeats, Machen, Buchan, Tolkien, J.C Powys, Hope Mirrlees and now Susannah Clarke10 that the islands really belong to the Longaevi, the fairies (or else to the giants) is to do with just such an exercise of the critical imagination.

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And in the end, if the whole of the cosmos has a point, or is its own point, the rituals of play
and dance come closer to reality than the solemnities of work, skills, targets and means, so beloved of
our current masters.

This question of the role of fairy-stories and of play for young children relates strongly to
what I said earlier about a radical pedagogy. One can imagine that the real theoretical work in thought
concerns the extending of the frontiers of understanding, while education only deals with the
instrumental question of how to induct people into new knowledge. But, to the contrary, if what we
first learn is the pregnant essential, the entire grammar, including linguistic grammar, within whose
infinite scope or range all later cognitive permutations lie, then deciding what to teach means
theoretically to decide on what is basic—not in the sense of foundational presuppositions, but in the
sense of the most dense and the most simple—precisely the pearls of wisdom that we should first offer
to the uninitiated. Since children first learn through pictures and stories, the selection of the right
stories told the right way becomes the most central concern of philosophy—and this of course is
precisely what Plato, the first real philosopher, taught from the outset.

Thus in debating, as we so often do nowadays, what and how we should teach children, we are
really asking, as Rowan Williams has so often recently indicated: what is central to our culture and
what do we wish to be central and therefore to pass on? This is perhaps one reason why children’s
literature has recently come to such prominence. Perhaps most great literature, since it deals with what
is altogether fundamental and in some fashion therefore simple, is accessible by children—entirely
adult novels totally inaccessible to children are rarely the very greatest ones, with some important
exceptions. But today adult literature is more easily able to pose as pure diversion, whereas we still
guiltily feel that we must offer to children something of value and something entertaining in a
legitimate way. Moreover, the fact that sex, though it can be mooted, cannot be at the centre of
children’s literature, as neither can the world of adult work (although the world of adult warfare can be
— precisely why?) ensures that this literature must often be more concerned with the mysteries of space,
time, the immediate physical environment, the cosmos and the entirety of being, in a way that its adult
counterpart is not.

Myth and Fairy-Tale

If children are therefore increasingly offered ‘foundational narratives’, then one might say that this is
because children’s literature lies very close to the mythic. But what do we mean by the mythological?
Here it is perhaps best to commence with the outright scepticism of Marcel Detienne. For the latter,
there is no genre of ‘myth’, and ‘myth’ and ‘mythology’ are Greek inventions later revived and
repeated by the Enlightenment.11 To begin with in Greece, mythos and logos, narrative and reason,
were synonymous—they began to be distinguished when history separated itself from false tale or
rumour, ethical religion from scandalous tales about the gods, and philosophical abstraction from

mythological personification. But in all three instances, claims Detienne, the ‘critical’ turn against
myth failed to reflect that it was in large part substituting the protocols of a written culture for those of
an oral one.
If one realises that so-called ‘myth’ is essentially oral narrative, then one aspect of the supposed
‘puzzle’ of myth, namely its authorless social dispersion in multiple versions, evaporates. In the case of
writing, the text sustains a single author, but in the case of oral narrative, the survival of the tale
depends upon the chain of recipients and their re-tellings. For oral narrative there are endlessly shifting
versions and ‘public truth’ much more incorporates multiple subjective perspectives and
interpretations. Not just supposedly, but in a sense really and truly, in a history that is lived out in
relation to oral reportage and memory, natural events, dreams, imaginings, premonitions, and
forebodings form part of the fabric of what actually occurs. By contrast, written history has a formal
bias towards isolating objective and impersonal facts that must be accepted as true by all.
In a somewhat parallel fashion, the abstract concept in philosophy concerns something delimitable and
precisely repeatable, like a passage of writing. This tends to insinuate the idea that behind the processes
of nature lie regularly operating forces rather than capricious and quasi-wilful ones, as mythology often
suggests.
If one were to accept Detienne’s perspective, then ‘mythology’ would simply denote the entire world
of oral narrative reasoning—including what we tend to think of as fairy-stories as well as what we tend
to think of as ‘myths’. The Greek gesture, partially refusing its own oral culture, was then repeated on a
global scale from the 19th century onwards—Westerners were again scandalised by the shocking
features of tribal myths; they once more sought to disinter a ‘real’ history of tribes that could be written
down from the morass of oral accretion and they sought to teach to peoples of oral cultures a
supposedly truer religion, focused upon abstract concepts and ethical imperatives.12
It then became yet more urgent than it had been for the Greeks to account for supposed mythical
delusion—and many conflicting answers were supplied. Myth was proto-science (Comte); it was
language without abstraction (Tylor); it was the deceit of metaphor (Max Müller); it was the trace of
the subconscious (Freud); it was the detritus of an archaic humanity which confused subject and object
(Lévy-Bruhl), or it was rather the work of a strictly rational classification and grasping of
contradictions, albeit in concrete terms (Lévi-Strauss).13 And so on and so forth. But Detienne
contends that all these theories tend to miss the sheer multifariousness and formal necessity of myth
once we have grasped that it is equivalent to oral culture.
Now on the whole, I suspect that Detienne is right. Nevertheless there are three ways in which one
might defend a certain specificity of myth after all, building on some of Detienne’s own observations.
First of all, he himself notes that in terms of written culture there is a great difference between the
hieroglyphic imperial worlds of Egypt, Babylon or China and the phonetic alphabets of Greece, and,
we can add, Israel. In the case of the former the graphic is linked to secrecy, elitism, centralisation and

12 Detienne, 15-50

13 For an excellent summary of this history, see Robert Segal, Myth: a Very Short Introduction
(Oxford: OUP 2004)
bureaucratic control. We are talking about the records office. In the case of Greece, by contrast, remarkably few public records were kept and democratic procedures remained predominantly oral. Phonetic writing was here an exoteric instrument which made news more publicly available and allowed greater ease of access to collective memory. One can add that in Israel also legal practice remained overwhelmingly oral compared with her towering neighbour Babylon, and that alphabetic writing was less an instrument of central control than of sustaining and fixing in the public realm certain exemplary key laws, narratives and prophecies. But Detienne fails to reflect that, if Egypt was seen by the Greeks as the land of the longest memory and of the most ancient stories of divine and human origin, then this was deeply connected by them, as Plato tells us in the Critias, to the long survival in Egypt of written records and of authoritative graphic depiction. This then would suggest that myths as stories of origins exhibit a kind of formal bias towards writing rather than towards orality. And in this connection Detienne perhaps exaggerates the differences between oral and written cultures: in so far, as he says, that oral narration constantly obliterates older versions, it can also exhibit a bias towards the paradigmatic and atemporal, and tends gradually to distil certain stable features of a tale which survive all retellings, like Mr Punch and his club. Indeed one can argue that, by contrast, the moderate alphabetisation of Greece and Israel actually assisted the more syntagmatic aspect of orality: a record of earlier versions of a story or of earlier oracular predictions can serve to bring about a consciousness of non-identical repetition which swerves away from the mythical sense of a repeated static foundation towards one of an irrecoverable loss of origin which can only be saved by eschatological recovery. It is also the case that the more static aspect of oral narration is reinforced by graphic depiction on bodies and on the surface of the earth. Derrida was quite right to say that there is no cultural phase before any mode of writing whatsoever.

But the key point to note is the coincidence of an esoteric, hieroglyphic and bureaucratic writing, with a strongly mythological culture like that of Egypt, in the sense of one concerned with tales of gods and origins, the relation of rulers to Kings and the ritual repetition of origins by these monarchs. There is relatively less interest here in tales of heroes which tend to concern stories of the usurpation of kingship or the restoration of the hidden legitimate heir and so forth— such stories are relatively legendary and popular in character compared with the high tales of the origination of the world and of key features of nation and culture.

In the second place, Detienne sees the Greek refusal of myth as a rejection of scandalous stories about the gods, depicting them as involved in violence, adultery and the like. However he rightly contrasts Xenophon, who seeks a purified religious belief and practice free of all myth, with Plato who seeks rather to re-tell myth in a purified form. At first in The Republic, this seems to be a matter of an elite

14 Detienne, 155-224


re-educating itself and the masses, but in *The Laws*, it is rather a matter of the popular circulation of what Plato calls a ‘rumour’ (*pheme*) of the good and the beautiful, distributed through folk-tale, proverb and ritual practice. In general, in ejecting myth, the Greeks, including Plato earlier, were deploring old wives tales, but in *The Laws* Plato celebrates the passage of oral sequences from old people to children as most sustaining the vision of justice in the city, even though both these groups lie outside active citizenship. Here politics is a moment within education, instead of education instrumentally serving the polity.17 Therefore Plato, uniquely, envisaged a popular and yet not scandalous *mythos*. Detienne does not ask whether there is a profound inherited justification for this—but there might indeed be so. One can take *mythos* in the Greek sense as including both what we would more think of as myth and what we would think of as fairy or folk-tale. Yet it is clear that when oral stories first got written down, as by Hesiod and Homer, it was initially the ‘higher’ matters of gods and origins, or of heroes in relation to the gods which were selected out—the deliberate writing down of more ‘folkish’ material, as in Apuleius or indeed Virgil’s Aeneid, seems to have come later, whereas in Homer etc it is more accidentally present and has to be discerningly disinterred.18 For this reason Detienne would be right to say that ‘mythology’ was paradoxically *invented* by writing.

However, cannot one say, as we have already seen, that there is a certain elective affinity between ‘high ’ stories of origins and the stability of writing? Equally though, one could argue that the ‘scandalous’ element of arbitrary violence, grotesque metamorphosis and superhuman sexual greed is rather more to the fore in the mythic as a tale of origins than in the folkloric. It is often as if the contingency of the given world is here recognised in a tale of an initial arbitrary violence like the sundering of Cronus by his sons or the plundering of the giants’ bodies by the *Aesir* in Norse mythology. Folk-tales, for all their frequent violence, more often than mythological tales frame this violence by a wistful evocation of a realm where the bias of physical reality favours the doing of justice or the elevation of the weak in the shape of magically self-renewing sources of food or Cinderella’s carriage and so forth.

In a sense then, Plato in *The Laws* demands that the more popular folkloric and ritually dispersed idioms begin to speak of the highest origins and of mediation from the highest sources. Folk-tales are about exchanges of objects, whether by gift or by combat, and the generally just outcome of the latter means that their bias runs towards gift—in fact the entire ‘plot’ of a fairy-tale is less the work of the hero and heroine than it is in the gift of a sender-helper figure like Cinderella’s fairy-godmother. So, for example, in the Scottish tale ‘The Land of Green Mountains’ the helper-figure clearly knows in advance that the hero will violate the ban on touching anything in the princess’s bronze castle because,

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17 Detienne, 155-90; Plato, *Laws*, X, 887 c8 –e 1; XII 966 c5

18 This task has been carried out by Graham Anderson in his *Fairy tale in the Ancient World* (London: Routledge, 2000)
prior to this violation, he has already ensured that the hero secure for himself the friendship of a giant and the king of the fish, who later extricate the hero from the dire consequences of his violation.19

In what we tend to think of as myth proper however, the origin is rarely envisaged as pure gift, but rather as original rupture, or even as an original sacrifice, as in the Vedas. Often, in consequence, the ritual relation to myth concerns a sacrificial repetition of, or compensation for, this initial rupture, while the later dramatic relation to myth takes the mode of tragedy, wherein the agonised self-consciousness of the hero—wholly alien to the wooden protagonist of the folk-tale—is nevertheless the counterpart of an impersonal fated process which has overridden even the arbitrary deeds of the gods from the cosmic outset.20 Comedy and tragi-comedy on the other hand, are equally more linked to the folkloric.

For Plato in the Laws however, the real tragedy lies in the city itself—perhaps we should take this to include as well as high delight, also everyday anguish, dilemma and apparently good choice that fails to work out. But this implies that it no longer lies at the framing margins. Instead, origins can now be told and mediated in terms of the non-sacrificial donation of the good, true and beautiful. His reformation of myth in effect constituted an intellectually-led ‘folk rebellion’ against both aristocratic myth and bourgeois reason, since it makes the folk-tale, not the myth (nor pure philosophy) speak of beginnings. Yet this denial of scandal does not restrict orality, which Plato always privileges over writing. To the contrary, if popular, folkloric tales concerning more lowly personages than heroes are more constantly in circulation, then this mode of circulation, which is a kind of verbal gift-exchange, conforms exactly with the bias towards gift in the content of these stories. The inner reality of an oral culture is always the most oral: at its edges stands something more like fixed graphic boundaries—whether with other cultures or with myth—whose institution may be conceived as unilateral, arbitrary, violent. Plato in effect projects the inner reality of oral culture also onto its margins and onto its cosmic and ontological origins. Presently I shall argue that Christianity carries this process still further.21

In the third place, despite his denial that myth is a genre, Detienne seems to endorse Geoirges Dumézil and A.J. Greimas’s cautious distinction between myth and fairy-tale, according to which one can say that in myth the actants are primarily subjects, but in fairy-tales they are primarily objects.22 Strikingly, this understanding of fairy-tale is exactly that also of J.R.R. Tolkien, working in a very

19 ‘The Land of Green Mountains’ in Scottish Fairy Tales. (New York: Dover, 1997), 64-92. See also, ‘The Rider of Grianaig and Iain the Soldier’s Son’ in Popular Tales of the West Highlands Vol 2 collected and translated by J.F. Campbell (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994), number 58, pp212-239 for a similar story in which the sender-helper figure is a raven.


different philological tradition in his essay ‘On Fairy Stories’. Tolkien argues that drama, which
focuses on interpersonal action, tends to neglect objects, and so inevitably sees the death of subjects
(subordinating the survival of objects and signs) in tragic terms as the end of the plot. Oral, reported
narrative, by contrast, does not ‘present’ death on stage but speaks of those who are already dead, and
concomitantly is concerned with that which, like itself, the story, has nonetheless survived this death—
including especially material objects which outlive human lives.23 Such objects, when narrated, are in
fact surviving signs of promise, like the Biblical rainbow. The ineliminable positivity of things has to
be read as a sign of promise despite of or beyond death, unless we deliberately refuse to receive things
as gifts – failing to see that, as for Hopkins, there remains ‘the dearest freshness deep-down things’. By
contrast, following Greimas’s insight, we can see that stories of origin or ‘high’ hero tales are already
mainly dramatic, in that here subjective personages are dominant: this is most clearly evident in stories
of aetiology and metamorphosis where things originate from persons: the Myrhh tree from the
incestuous Myrrah for example in the story of Adonis, or the rapid mini-growth cycle of the dog-days
from the premature and excessive passion of Adonis himself.24 Conversely, in the fairy-tale, it is the
girdle, the ring, the vessel etc whose circulations move the plot—so much so that, as Greimas says, one
can reduce the fairy-tale actors to the status of mere occasional sources for the shifting positions of
significant objects.

However, there is a lurking paradox here, not brought out by Greimas. Myths apparently
foreground subjects or persons, yet this purity of form is often tragically undercut by a shadowy
objectivity which may be primordial chaos or obscure fate. Myth focuses on persons, but persons do
not here triumph. Fairy-tale yields up a symmetrically opposite paradox: the circulation of objects in
the basic plot is shadowed by the operations at a meta-narrative level of misty personages—senders and
helpers, preternaturally ‘other’ fairy figures and giants or else legendary human persons. Moreover,
though the human heroes and heroines of the main plot are ciphers, who simply receive gifts and
assistance and undergo trials and violate magical prohibitions as well as performing impossible tasks,
etc. these ciphers, unlike the more strongly characterised gods or heroes, do in the end triumph, thanks
to the mediations of the magical objects and a series of exchanges at the meta-narrative level with the
‘other’ fairy realms.25

Thus although objects move the fairy-tale plot they magically subserve the fulfilment of subjects,
whereas while subjects move the mythical plot, nevertheless all plot and purpose is finally undone by a
shadowy but inexorable objectivity.

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24 See Marcel Detienne, The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology (New Jersey: The
Humanities Press, 1977)

25 See the various works by Greimas cited above.
One can well illustrate this feature of fairy-tale from a folkloric element within the story of Sigurd in the *Volsungssaga*, following the crucial explorations of Wendy Doniger.26 Here the hero Sigurd changes shapes with his rival for the hand of Brynhild, Gunnar, before riding through Brynhild’s curtain of wavering flames which is the test she has set for an aspiring bridegroom. Thus on the level of subjectivity and appearance one has here a deception and a masking. However, when lying in bed afterwards with Brynhild, Sigurd takes from her hand the fateful ring Andvaranaut which much earlier he had given to her as a plighted of their eventual intention to marry (and which the dwarf Andvari had, at the outset of the tale had put under a death-dealing curse, after it was stolen from him by the greed of the half-god Loki.) Soon afterwards, Brynhild’s female rival Gudrun who is already married to Sigurd (the unfortunate upshot of his drinking of “the ale of forgetfulness”), in order to prove the greater valour of her consort reveals to Brynhild what has occurred by presenting her with the ring which she has now taken from Sigurd.

Thus the object here undoes the subjective deception, but only to prove that Sigurd was in reality impersonating another only in order to impersonate himself. For the valour that allowed him to leap through the flames was his alone; the ring was truly his own pledge such that he now takes back what truly belongs to him, and in the shape of Gunnar he has allowed Brynhild to sleep with her truly desired bridegroom. Thus in their stolen nuptial, the authentic has occurred under the guise of the inauthentic. The material object which is the ring gives this circumstance away, since both its meaning and its series of circulations cannot, like a spiritual being, hide behind a corporeal mask. On the other hand, the true meaning and the true journey of the ring are only revealed because Sigurd, through subjective heroic valour, has managed to keep pace with the course of the ring’s wanderings and thereby is able to seize it back to himself. This story of ‘self-impersonation’, often involving a ring as an identifying object, has been told many times within Indo-European tradition and actually more often of female subjects, as in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well*.

The tale has the opposite implication (one could add to Doniger) to that of Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* as understood by Jacques Lacan, where the object as sign commands the action of the story by ensuring that its subjects are governed by an inter-subjective repetition compulsion which displaces them from one fundamental role in the plot to another. Supremely, the Government Minister who has seen through the Queen’s attempt to hide a compromising letter by leaving it in apparently exposed visibility, in turn resorts to the same ruse and is undone by the insight of the private detective Dupin.27 In principle, the latter could in turn become subject to the same unconscious forgetfulness, in which the subject becomes trapped within an ‘imaginary’ gaze upon herself and forgets that self-identification is but a moment within the chain of signification of the ‘symbolic’ order that escapes any subjective control and always moves towards at least temporary public disclosure.

But in the case of the Sigurd story, as in the others like it, the wiles of the sign as object are undone to the extent that the original subject and mover of the plot himself has contrived to catch up


with all the circulations of the object and restores his own and others’ authenticity by a total laying-claim to the object and its material history which is still what helps to personify him. Thus within this folk-tale structure, objects as identifiers can deceive, but often with magical aid the heroine (more often than the hero) can pretend to be herself and be in the right place to receive the right gifts which are hers even though they appear not to be so—like Cinderella receiving the vapoury fairy trappings of a prince’s bride because she really is to become such by right of her beauty.

So in the case of this archetypal folkloric story, it is the object which exposes the truth of subjective maskings, but it is only able to do so because the subject fully ‘keeps up’ with the gift-object (combining sign and materiality) that truly identifies him or her in their noble and honourable status. The ‘magic’ of the object finally subserves the subject, and yet the subject truly becomes subject in a certain history of association with the object.

This structure is in excess of Lacan’s post-structuralism precisely because it takes more account of the necessary material vehicle of the sign and therefore makes the gift (for example an exchanged ring) more fundamental than the sign. Since the latter can only be exchanged if a material thing is also exchanged (for example the paper that Poe’s message is written on) a sign is but an aspect of a gift, while inversely, every culturally exchanged thing is also a sign and therefore a gift. Gift is fundamental because it is the precise point of intersection between the real and the signifying, as also between the historical and the fictional. When a gift is received in real life, like a ring given as a promise of love, historical reality suddenly becomes also romance or fairy-tale, since for a while it loses its normal deficiency of meaning. The mere story of such an event, on the other hand, possesses a symmetrical deficiency of the real, and yet the very telling of the story brings it back within the real historical framework of actual offering in which the tale itself is offered as a gift to its hearers. Such a gift then represents a shadowy hope for a transformed historical future.

Because a sign must be always a gift and possess an object-dimension, it is this dimension that is able to rescue the subject from the Lacanian doom of the perpetual deceptive outrunning of the subject by the signifier. For even though the subject cannot pre-command all the endless new meanings which a sign may conjure into being, he need not necessarily be blind to their ceaseless instance in order to ‘imagine’ himself as a subject. Instead, he can keep pace with the signifier, and this is possible just because each new event of signifying interpretation of previous signs will always involve also a new material inscription and movement of objects which can only be accomplished by a subjective actor. This actor need not, of course, be the original initiator of the plot (indeed, scarcely ever will be, and finally, because of human death, will certainly not be) and yet, in principle it could be, if the original actor recoups the meanings stolen from him (for example the bonds of troth between lovers) by impersonating those impersonating him, and so occupying in turn all the fundamental role positions of the plot: those of ‘ruler’, ‘violater’ and ‘revealer’ as disinterred by Lacan.

So whereas the Poe story turns out to be ‘mythic’ (in keeping with the view that mythology already demythologises – see below) in that a drama of modern subjects in a disenchanted world is shown to be ruled by the impersonal circulations of sign floating free of gift, the Sigurd story remains folkloric, in that here a magical sign that remains also gift-object permits the ‘recovery’ of the subject against the possible deceit exerted by the sign (which thereby is reduced, contra Lacan, to
contingency.) In the ‘mythical’ Poe tale, the letter alone circulates; in the ‘fairy-tale’ Sigurd story, the
hero also circulates along with the sign-as-gift.

Of course, the paper that the betraying message in written on in the Poe story is also a gift and
then an anti-gift or stolen object, but it represents a disenchanted attempt to reduce objectivity to the
pure blankness of an instrumental vehicle without meaning in itself. Nevertheless, it is the sight of this
very blankness which reveals the truth first to the Minister and then to Dupin, and Lacan does not do
real justice to this negative gift-object dimension. For the blank paper is not simply an absent Lacanian
‘real’ always implied by the symbolic order: on the contrary it is a material real that always ‘keeps
pace’ with the symbolic and permits its instant. Correspondingly, it allows the detective to ‘catch up
with’ the sign-driven plot, even though he does not ‘keep pace’ with it throughout, like the folkloric
hero. In principle, Dupin might never be self-deceived in turn, since the rupturing hiddenness of the
symbolic order to imaginary self-delusion itself depends (as ‘The Purloined Letter’ shows) upon an
actual material act of subjective concealment which can never be final because every hidden thing is always
through this very hiding dangerously exposed to view, since all space is finally public space. In
consequence, the never-foreclosed realm of signification is also the transcendentally coterminous
realm of subjectively-enacted unconcealment.

It follows that the more that objects are disenchanted and we try to let signs float free of their
material vehicles (from the symbolic token through the pictograph to the hieroglyph to the phonetic
alphabet to printing to the internet), then the more indeed it is hard for the original actors to ‘keep pace’
with their meanings and self-identity. And yet, the always remaining possibility that the wiles of signs
and maskings can be ‘detected’ by some subject or other remains the trace of this ineliminable, because
transcendental possibility, of a trans-narrational keeping pace with signifying circulation on the part of
the initial actor. And this is because the most ethereal vehicle remains a vehicle and the most abstracted
signs must still deploy this vehicle and so remain in some degree also objects and therefore – as sign-
objects – gifts. This is even true of the sign-systems of fiction itself: because fictions, in order to be
transmitted, must be really offered as gifts, it is a transcendental condition of their very preservation in
time that historical actors might be able to ‘catch up with’ fictional meanings and actually realise their
utopian import. One could say that drama is the middle term here: on stage fictions are made ‘more
real’; remove the convention that drama is only ‘pretend’ and fiction itself is returned to history.
Because a fiction is also an objective gift, and is in excess of a sign-system precisely because it narrates
the exchanges of (semi-material) gifts and not just the exchanges of meanings, its first narrators can, in
a way, through later hermeneutic surrogates, even ‘keep pace’ with it throughout historical time.
Fiction is therefore more fundamentally theorised in terms of gift than it is in terms of sign.

In the end, the Sigurd story is not in its whole course folkloric, but rather conveys something of
the tragedy of the mythic, since the cursed ring lures all to their doom. Nevertheless, the ring is not
a pure cipher for impersonal fatality, since its magical action is complicit with a subjective greed and
will-to-hoard which denies the fundamental Nordic social principle of generosity and gift-circulation. If
Loki had not exercised inordinate greed in exacting excess ransom from Andvari, the fatal chain of
events would not have been set in motion.
Here, therefore, a mythical fateful order seems to arise only through refusal of the norms of oral-gift culture now ideally enshrined in the folk-tale. This may betoken the distinctive bias of Scandinavian mythology (as opposed to the Indian versions of the same Indo-European mythemes) against the notion of an original neutral violence. All conflict, fair and unfair, for the Scandinavian sources, seems to have originated in an original contingent evil deed like that conveyed through the fatal mistletoe which felled Baldr\textsuperscript{28}. Conforming to this singularity is the Scandinavian intimation of an eschatological crisis even for the gods. This shows how the borders between myth and fairy-tale can be very fluid: in ‘The Land of Green Mountains’ the magical objects of transport —a ship, a horse— are provided by the metamorphosis of the sender figure himself; yet unlike a tragic nymph or hero sacrificially reduced to a tree or whatever, the sender ‘gives’ these transitions and always recovers from them.

Given what I have so far suggested, there is no reason to think that myth, just because it concerns the cosmically primordial, is ‘older’ than fairy-tale. There will always have been stories of a hidden other world within this one, alongside stories of origins. Moreover, if divinities were often at first local presences and familiar spirits, fairies may often be older than gods, even if, no doubt often in a pre-Christian era, gods were re-understood as fairies— for example the Scottish folktale of a battle between a Black and a White fairy-King for the White fairy’s bride is fairly clearly a reduced folk version of a piece of nature mythology.\textsuperscript{29}

Nevertheless, one can argue that fairy-tale lies closer than myth to the fundamental structures of human language as such. One should certainly beware of reducing myth or fairy-tale to a disguised feature of early language that lacked abstract concepts. However, more compelling than this approach, is Greimas’s argument that all human language has a narrative structure.\textsuperscript{30} The basic sentence contains a subject and an object, and slightly more complex ones two subjects. If one sticks to the purely grammatical modal values of these language elements, then one could deny that every sentence tells a story. But in fact, we only speak sentences at all because cultural values overdetermine the modal ones and no object is ever neutrally identified—a stick, a call, a flower, a house, a car etc always already have meaning for us. Thus narrative structure hypotactically encompasses sentence structure. And as Greimas says, within this structure the subject is secondary to the object -- the subject can only be identified by what he possesses, seizes, gives or receives (‘According to our topological interpretation, the various displacements of objects are alone enough to account for the organisation of story, with the subjects being no more than the loci of their transfer’\textsuperscript{31}). Such activities of the subject—whose series supplies her with a character—only make sense to us at all because objects are subjectively accorded some cultural value. Inversely though, meanings are still conveyed by objects – and for this reason

\textsuperscript{28} See Greimas, ‘Comparative Mythology’ in On Meaning, 3-16

\textsuperscript{29} See ‘Battle of the Fairy Kings’ in Mackenzie, Scottish Fairy-Tales, 1-7

\textsuperscript{30} See Greimas, ‘ Elements of a Narrative Grammar’ in On Meaning, 63-83

\textsuperscript{31} Greimas, ‘A Problem of Narrative Semiotics: Objects of Value’ in On Meaning, 25
Greimas sees narrative (and therefore language as such) as fundamentally about gift-exchange and as itself located within gift-exchange.32

And herein lies the source of meaning as such, if one adds to Greimas the fact that we perceive an object through the operation of all our senses and in the mysterious synaesthetic blending (or ‘exchange’) of incommensurable sights, touches, sounds, scents and tastes, we already have, in ‘common-sense’ embryonic form, an ‘intellectual’ apprehension of the object as meaningful. Yet this meaning is always further publicly coded in terms of the desirable or undesirable and such a cultural selection, if it is to be seen as more than arbitrary, has to be understood in terms of objects as themselves valuable gifts, and so as receiving their value from an ‘elsewhere’ which is the source of all validation. This, as Greimas indicates, is the ‘fairy realm’ of folktale. Thus the English 17th C poem lamenting the loss of the monasteries and of enchantment had it right: ‘Farewell rewards and fairies’.33

One can then see how the fairy-tale lies close to the fundamental narrative structure of all language; here subjects acquire and lose identity and prestige via the production and exchange of valued objects which are gifts. In the story of Cinderella, for example, she is identified and re-identified through objects (the ashes, the magical coach and ballgown) and moves from a negative economic exchange with her sisters to a positive one with the Prince. At the same time, she is involved in a more fundamental exchange with the fairy realm within which meaningful valuation as such is constituted and transformed: this exchange includes the ban on her remaining at the ball beyond midnight, and in some versions also an offering of food to the fairy-godmother in return for the magical items.34 At the metanarrative level in all fairy-stories, objects receive valuation from the ‘other’ fairy realm (identified by Georges Dumézil with the Indo-European ‘sovereign’ sphere)35 to which we are bound to convey return gifts.

However, this circumstance also constituted something of a problem for structuralist analysis, as Greimas recognised. For while such analysis is comfortable with the apparent sway of the paradigmatic over the narrow plot repertoire of fairy-tales in general, this sway is not so clearly maintained in the case of fairy assistance. For here it seems that the entire narrative universe of cultural gift-exchange is itself hierarchically and unilaterally given by the sender figure in a syntagmatic structure whose event character is irreducible to any synchronic reversibility.36 This contrast is doubled by a second one. At the human level of the fairy-tale plot, as Greimas notes, there is always

32 Greimas, ‘Elements of a Narrative Grammar’ and ‘A Problem of Narrative Semiotics: Objects of Value’ in On Meaning, 63-83, 84-105


34 See Joseph Courtès, ‘Une Lecture sémiotique de “Cendrillon”’ in Joseph Courtès Introduction a la Sémiotique Narrative et Discursive, 100-137

35 See Greimas, Preface to Courtes, Introduction, 25

instability associated with gift-exchange, in that anything ‘held’ may be later lost through re-tribution or renunciation within the processes of offering or else by dispossession within the processes of test or trial (which is an agonistic mode of exchange). In consequence, nothing immanent can be stable and the permanent framework within which exchange takes place is itself a more unilateral sort of gift that arrives from the ‘elsewhere’ of the féerique. Greimas deals with the resulting problem that this realm appears to be outside the sway of structural reciprocity by arguing that the sender of the gift of the plot itself does not, like the human characters within the plot, lose what he gives, but eminently retains what is given, in the fashion of a sovereign power.

However, one can criticise Greimas’s reading of this situation in two ways. First of all, it is only modern absolute sovereignty that is not in any sense involved in exchange and never exposed to depletion. More traditional human political rule constantly had to recoup its plenitude and reserve of donatable honour by receiving tribute from its subjects. Since the fairy-realm was not itself the divine realm, this applied somewhat also to its only partial sovereignty: as certain stories of fairies exchanging rulers with the human realm (especially the Welsh story ‘Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed’ in The Mabinogion) and of requiring other human goods and abilities (including the ability to die) clearly reveal. If the fairy-realm was a source of valuation for humans, then this means something more like the partial source of valuation that is located in the ‘other’ realm of nature, but which combines with the human realm to promote true value in a process of mutual supplementation.

It follows from this that the fairy realm in itself is not fully sovereign like the divine realm, and therefore does not itself escape the instability of exchange. How then, is the latter to be escaped in order to undergird the fairy-tale’s characteristic happy ending? Here the second point to be made against Greimas is that gift-exchange is not a modern zero-sum absolute exchange of equivalence, and thus the continuing attachment of the giver to the thing that he has given is not necessarily a kind of permanent looming threat of reversal (though it can be that) but rather represents an ideally irreversible syntagmatic advance towards further strengthening of the bonds of sociality. The crucial mark of this is that, while the gift given has inaugurated an endless expectation of future exchanges, the same identical thing is not expected back by the intial giver, but rather a ‘counter-gift’ -- even if this be the same thing, time and place will differentiate it, as they do not for our ‘commodity’. This ensures that reciprocity is not a circle but a spiral and that the synchronic is constantly breached by the diachronic.

Hence the solution to Greimas’s dilemma concerning stability, reciprocity and unilaterality lies with breaking the norms of his structuralist assumptions. On the one hand, one could suggest that the entire inter-human and human-fairy interaction is teleologically lured through spiralling gift-exchange by a higher divine realm which the stories only ever remotely hint at. On the other hand it is notable that, for the usual mythological outlook, the divine realm itself is often seen as subject to fateful drastic reversal – so from this perspective it is more as if the fairy-tale narrates a mainly

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immanent reversal that leads to stability, and that this narrating has a wistful, ungrounded quality to it. An adequate grounding in a stable divine good is only provided first by Plato and the Hebrew Bible and later by Christianity. In this way the fairy-tale is elevated and newly granted an ontological disclosiveness beyond the power of myth, which its former wistfulness only intimated.

An exceeding of the structuralist perspective also allows one to see that at the level of the existential situation of fairy-tales themselves, they do not, despite their strongly paradigmatic features, tediously reiterate the same story, as the Russian formalist and later the French structuralist tradition tended to imply – rather their variations are their interesting points and most of all reveal their structure as syntagms of contingent givenness. Their taegory is precisely their deepest meaning, as with a piece of music, as George Macdonald said.39

As human personality grows more complex and reflexive, we tend to forget that it has its source in an identification with objects. The grain of truth in Lévy-Bruhl’s theory of pre-logical ‘participation’ is perhaps that less reflexive peoples have not yet lost the sense that ‘form’ as the location of meaning necessarily circulates between people and things.40 Indeed, Lévi-Strauss’s idea that savage peoples classified the abstract in terms of the concrete, and located fundamental cultural structures and contradictions ‘out there’ in the wilderness of particular things, only makes sense (despite what he claimed against Lévy-Bruhl) if there were this relatively different – but not necessarily pre-logical experience of the world.41

The magical sense of the fairy-tale that things also are actors, and work with us or against us as much as persons do, lies closer than the world of myths of origin to this primordial sense that we can only be identified and active in and through things which are themselves contingently given to us and can take us by surprise. Myths of origin, by contrast, seem to project personages reflectively free of objective entanglement. Concomitantly and paradoxically, they appear also to project a more purely impersonal objective world, indifferent to subjective happiness. Myth therefore itself already de-mythologises, by dividing subject from object and by seeking to locate a fundamental abiding structure, identically repeated. In this way, myth is proto-science, and myth, as Adorno and Horkheimer precociously argued, unlike the non-identical repetition of the Hebrew Bible, preshadows rationalist enlightenment.42

But does this mean that myth is actually ‘later’ than fairy-tale? Not really. Rather, one could argue that myth always belonged to the margins, the borders, the origins. Oral and gift circulation abide within a tribe: but at its borders and origins one has mystery that tended to be internally configured as rupture, sacrifice, violence and fixed contract – all linked to a notion of how things arbitrarily are and always will be. Reflection on borders and origins therefore sustained an initial abstraction that tended

39 Macdonald, ‘On the Fantastic Imagination’


42 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, (London: Verso, 1992) 43-81
towards the formulation of impersonal laws that governed the apparently unruly itself. Of course, one can exaggerate this contrast: I have already indicated how different cultures (for example the Scandinavian) might more project an oral-gift element onto all of reality, while conversely a sacrificial and violent division is generally itself repeated within the tribe as a crucial aspect of what is exchanged and perpetuated.

Fairy-Tale and Christianity

The reflections of the foregoing section permit us to approach in a new way the question of why the Macdonald tradition should have re-configured theology in terms of fairy-tale, and concomitantly suggested that Christianity requires the re-education of adults by children. For it is possible to read Christianity as finally imagining the origins and ending, the whole human and cosmic story, in terms of the hitherto inner-tribal local folktale, just as Christianity projects founding gift and gift-exchange beyond the inner-tribal also to this fundamental ontological level. These twin developments perhaps show us in a new way just why Christianity proposes itself as the universal religion, since it seeks to ensure that every locality, every tradition, is also the ultimate and universal location and tradition now that it no longer need undergo self-estrangement at its own borders. It is conceivable that Christianity properly understood is the metahistory of sending-helping which should rescue and not imperially overrule local tales and revelations.

The Christian narrative is more fairy-tale than myth. Initially, God confronts no primordial beast, but shapes a thing, the Creation, and then does further things with that thing. Human beings and even angels enjoy no original and independent spontaneity, but begin and remain entirely objects of the divine shaping. Later on in this story, the plot is not propelled by the primordial and irremediable conflict of warring personal impulses as in myth: love and war, love and domesticity: Aphrodite and Ares, Aphrodite and Hestia etc. Adam and Eve do not first compete for the apple, but Eve transgresses the fairy-tale ban on eating this object, which is objectivity as such in the mode of illusion of a value-neutral control over one’s fate and over life and death. Cain and Abel were not doomed to quarrel; rather Cain’s murderousness had something to do with his possessive approach to the realm of things. The later story of Israel concerns their escape from the obsessive rule of cruelly indifferent things (idols); their construction of a more mobile thing, the Ark, which realises but does not entrap their subjective identity; the losses and regainings of this mobile thing; and finally more detailed self-identification in terms of a legal handling of things which was throughout concerned with the protection of spirit and life from the fated objectivity of regular blood-letting.

In the New Testament, as the Russian teller of fantastic tales Nikolai Leskov suggested, Christ is as much a sender and an enchanter as he is also a sent and aided hero, able to command and subordinate all objects, but under the ban of not deploying this power for the sake of his own power. As with the original tale of creation, the entire narrative of the New Testament builds towards the shaping of a new ‘thing’ of redemptive power, namely the Eucharist, which as food is the most exact

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43 Nicolai Leskov, ‘The Enchanted Wanderer’ in The Enchanted Wanderer and Other Tales (Moscow: Progress Press, 1974) 85-239
example of an object necessary for subjective identity which nonetheless ultimately suberves that identity. (In consuming this food, unlike all other food, says Augustine and many others, we must become what we eat.) Consistently with this folkloric structure, it is objects to do with the Passion and the Mass which become the crucial ‘magical objects’ of the Grail legend. The work of the Eucharist undoes the abuse of the fruit of the tree. For here, the original absolute divine power over things and fate was subverted by human freedom, whose refusal of gift in favour of autonomy re-enslaves it to fate and the rule of objects – physical things, like its own body, which will eventually betray it. In the Eucharist however, God descends beneath humanity into thinghood, thereby restoring kenotically through this submission to the ways of things its subordination to subjective freedom, but retaining the truth that this freedom is only sustained by a measured use of objective material reality.

The later effect of Christianity upon literature – or rather perhaps the invention of literature in our sense by Christianity – is consistent with the reading of Christian narrative as fairy tale rather than myth. On the Atlantic seaboard of the Christian West, the fairy tale evolved into the romance or roman, within which space the novel fundamentally remains. The romance displaced in a permanent fashion – despite later early modern resistances – the epic and the tragic, dominated by mythic fate, by claiming for itself a new sort of universal seriousness. The Welsh writer of strange fantasies (which again revolve round the sense that there is within Britain ‘another’ world that belongs to more radiant beings, either sinister or benign) Arthur Machen, is supposed to have said that the literary worth of all novels is the degree of their conformity to Catholic doctrine and by this outrageous claim, he perhaps meant that the meaning of all romances is to do with the murky transition from paganism to Christianity and the question of what status now belongs to the dethroned Celtic and Germanic gods of war, erotic love and natural forces.

As already the Scandinavian Edda, the Acallam ná Senórach (an account of St Patrick’s encounter with the old pagan heroes) and the Welsh Mabinogion imply, the ‘fairy’ reduction of erstwhile gods and heroes to preternatural presences is in fact not a reduction, but an elevation, properly understood.44 For previously, they were chained by objective fate, bound in the end to suffer and even to die. But now they can in the end outplay the magical machinations of objects. Excalibur is drawn and eventually returned to await another day; the rings are restored to their rightful wearers; the Grail objects are glimpsed by some, and though they must be questioned and not commanded, they minister to human fulfilment. The Irish sagas and the Edda even face up to the death of the gods, which perhaps earlier pre-Christian pagan versions of these narrations did not so fully intimate (or even did not fully intimate at all – since all these stories have been mediated to us through the re-writings of monks). They can do so because, beyond the invocation of fate, they can now speak of Odin and Baldr again picking up the chess pieces – magical objects which have sacramentally outlasted all subjective destruction – in a reborn Asgard, or of St. Patrick meting out immortality and retrospective baptism to the old gods and heroes.

For the Grail stories, it is as if the salvific object – the Eucharist – has arrived, but must be everywhere and constantly sought out in the realms of nature and hidden polities which exceed the sway of human governance. The Grail is in the keeping of the ‘fairy’ realm, and it is as if the romance explores the counter-factual of the fairy much as the theologian explores the counter-factual of the angelic. This is borne out by the sporadic medieval speculations as to whether fairies were semi-fallen angels, fallen angels, unfallen human beings or a species between the human and the angelic. As C. S. Lewis said, the later early modern banishing of the fairies did not occur under the auspices of reason, but rather under those of superstition which concluded, like James VI of Scotland and I of England, that all fairies were really demons. If one recalls Greimas’s point that the role of the fairy sender-helper figure is to do with valuation, then one could say that the romance constitutes a theological exploration of the variety of immanent goodness beneath the sway of greater angelic and then divine governance. It concerns, as I have already suggested, the call of the other ‘within’ nature – that tantalising suggestion which we constantly experience of something ‘behind’ the distant hill or the near tree that we will never quite grasp – an integrity of nature to be respected, its own life which we cannot fully understand and yet which constantly teaches us in symbolic mode, ethical and aesthetic lessons – patience, hope, joy, keeping the right distance and perspective and so forth – if we will but pay attention. (This sense has been constantly captured by the modern French poet Philippe Jacottet.) And perhaps the most acute aspect of the sense of something ‘elsewhere’ within the natural realm lies in the sexual sphere – or in the intersection of this sphere with non-human nature. One recalls the first meeting of Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester on a dark country lane at twilight where they both, as they later reveal, appear to each other as superhuman, fairy-like beings.

Here one can comment that, properly understood, monotheism concerns an ultimate unified source beyond mere numerical unity and diversity – and it is a consequence of this very plenitude at the origin that there should be multiple and diverse spiritual mediators, some of whom can only be locally understood. It is the mark of true apophatic acknowledgment of the one God that one approaches him by multiple mediation of gods, angels, daemons, spirits and fairies: claims to direct access to a hypostasised subjective will are by contrast all too likely to issue in arrogant, terroristic interventions.


47 loc. Cit.


49 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Hoarmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985), Chapter Twelve, pp 143-7
4. Christianity and Magic

Perhaps then, the entire tradition of Christian romance as renewed by the Macdonald tradition points to a re-envisioning of Christianity which will stress its links to fairy-tale and a sense of the faerie and its elevation in significance of this folkloric consequence which is clearly focused upon gift rather than sacrifice and on spiritual-material intercourse rather than tragic dualism. And such a stress might perhaps in turn allow it to show a more generous sympathy for all local cults and practices.

So far though, while I have pointed out that fairy-tale gives the prime role to objects and thereby paradoxically renders subjectivity ultimate, I have said little about the magical character of fairy-tale objects, which is precisely the factor which sustains this paradox.

In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien, following certain leads in northern mythology which I have already alluded to, offers a very Christian fictional account of cosmic origins more in terms of fairy-tale than myth in which, indeed, fairies or elves occupy a central cosmic role which they certainly do not in *The Edda*. In his preface to the second edition, he links this to the focal question of ‘the two magics’ with which all his work is concerned.50 The sinister magic is technology too slavishly deployed, and here he rightly indicates that we avoid noticing the fact that modernity threatens to be the triumph of this sort of magic – since no-one, including scientists, *really* quite comprehends why the radio, the light switch, the automobile, the mobile phone and the internet can by regular formulae command the powers they do. To surrender exclusively to technology is theologically to fall in the most fundamental sense as far as human beings (not angels) are concerned – through the will to dominate objects and so to forge a single means of domination: ‘one ring to rule them all’. By contrast, the ‘good magic’ and the higher magic of the elves is art, which constitutes the original musical beauty of the world. Where objects are approached in the mode of art, we attend to their inexhaustible values, or attempt to mould something that will charm in its own unique terms, untranslatable into a general formula of repeatable control. In this way, Tolkien offers a kind of ‘ecological’ rereading of Christian doctrine that is linked to a respect for the ‘fairy’ values immanent in nature and art.

Now if one were to extend this theology and attempt a more abstract transcription of the Macdonald tradition, then one might ask the following questions: first of all, if human thought is a psychic and not just a material reality, then how can it act on reality and be influenced by things? How can the subtly differing inflections of the wind affect my mood? Or a pattern of shadows, or the interplay between sea and sky? Inversely, how is it that words which do not obviously resemble things can invoke things in such a manner that things become thereby more powerfully present, even in their absence, than they are present to us ‘on their own’? Unless my consciousness is an illusion thrown up by my brain – and what could it mean that the illusion is ‘there’?-- is not this two-way intercourse between matter and mind a kind of ineffable, magical influence? (Perhaps the supreme explorer of this most basic mystery of all poetic experience was the novelist J.C Powys.)

Secondly, why might it be that the creative imagination is indispensable for thought? The neoplatonist Proclus, who is the real source for all later reflection on this topic, as the English Romantics (after Thomas Taylor) well knew, suggested that the mind must reach back downwards into matter, because in a certain sense the simplicity and non-reflexivity of matter, like the Pearl in the medieval poem, better reflects the simplicity and non-reflexivity of the original One which lies above intellect (even though it may think in its own, for us unaccountable manner) than does the spiritual realm. 51 It is for the same reason that Proclus, like Plato, did not think we could rise to the divine by theoretic contemplation alone: rather the divine itself descends to us and obscurely speaks to us in the language of myths and symbols. In consequence, even though the soul tends to lose itself by over-attention to the material realm, the cure for this can only be homeopathic: a new recognition of transcendence first of all within the material sphere under the reach of divine grace – since the soul having surrendered its superiority over the material cannot then, of itself alone recover it. (The proximity to Christian thematics here is of course far greater than has often been thought.)

Perhaps it is only these Proclean reflections, as partially taken over by Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor, that fully allow Christian theology to comprehend the inherent value of the realm of matter and the role of unthinking things, and so to answer the crucial question: why did God create the material cosmos and not just the angelic realm? Although indeed, spirit stands above matter because it is able to acknowledge its own nature as gift and so live appropriately as gratitude, the expression of this gratitude as imitative free-giving and reciprocal sharing with others is rendered possible insofar as things allow us to exit the circle of self-reflexivity – giving ourselves to ourselves – and bestow things on others and share things with them. This mediation by the material is for us the pre-condition of intersubjectivity and it may be that the relative ‘simplicity’ of things permits a certain co-incidence of self-sacrifice – ‘I give this thing to you’ – and of community ‘this thing is neither you nor me’ – as well as creative tension between the two, that is impossible even for the angels.

Thirdly, if the supreme art is liturgy, does not this art magically invoke the divine through human work? We cannot alter the divine mind by prayer or ritual, but this does not mean that they are merely convenient pedagogic instruments for self-education. Rather, as the pagan neoplatonist Iamblichus suggested, these practices ‘attune’ us to the divine and so as it were ‘magically’ channel divine power, even though God of course ultimately and entirely shapes our very invocations.52 In this way God is allowed to retain his aseity, yet is conceived as really and truly acting through our prayers and ritual performances.

In the fourth place, if creation is a divine work of beautiful art and our appropriate response to this is the grateful making and ethical exchange of things of beauty in turn, then what is the nature of the holding together of diverse things in a unified beauty and the recognition of this beauty by mind? Is it not ‘magical’ in the precise sense that the blending of the different and the identical as beauty, and the aesthetic response of mind to beauty in material things, is taken as real, yet cannot be described or

51 See Jean Trouillard, La Mystagogie de Proclus (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982) esp 44-53

invoked save ‘tautegorically’ by re-presenting the beautiful effect? One has here irreducibly ineffable ‘connections’, and if one accepts their reality, this is tantamount to acknowledging a magical dimension in the real. Proclus was also the ultimate source for Aquinas’s participatory ‘analogy of attribution’ which concerns just such an ineffable belonging together of the diverse in an hierarchical ascent up to God. But in Proclus this notion of participatory analogy is inseparable from his sense of ‘magical connectors’ as an ontologically fundamental principle. 53 The authentically Thomistic Pico della Mirandola (far more so than the neo-scholastics) in the Renaissance was well aware of this and so revived the crucial magical dimension of the analogia entis 54

We tend to think, of course, that magic simply anticipated science because it was a false mythical attempt at prediction and control. Yet the absolute contrast between free spiritual action and response on the one hand, and ‘automatic’ material action and response on the other is a post-Cartesian one which fails to reckon with the given fact of transition of meaningful forms between the one realm and the other. Much of ‘magical practice’ in the human past was in reality more like a ‘prudential’ mix of received formula and willed intuitive adaptation to circumstance that exceeded the prescription of rules, in just the way that ethical action did for Aristotle. This was because, in many ways like religious liturgy, it tended to blend formulaic ‘conjuraction’ with willed invocation of hidden personal powers or traces of such powers (in the ‘signatures’ of things) – these powers including the fairies, the angels, even God himself and the demons in the case of sinister magic. (Up until the 15th C the word ‘magic’ tended often to be reserved by theologians for bad, demonic magic, but the observation and benign manipulation of occult forces, that later came to be termed ‘natural magic’ was still recognized.) 55 Hence it could just be that ‘magic’, as for example practiced by the alchemists and the Cabalists (Jewish and Christian) names a lost possibility of a just and prudential as well as spiritually-elevating interaction also with nature as well as with the human realm. Certainly, one suspects that magic already in the Middle Ages (Roger Bacon, for example), and more especially in the Renaissance era after Paracelsus, became often routinised in a way that was indeed proto-technological. Nevertheless, it remains striking that a thinker pursuing a more hermetic and magical approach to the cosmos like Giordano Bruno seems to have far more anticipated modern physics which allows for uncertainty, mysterious action at a distance, singularities that evade the rule of general laws, the operation of unknowable forces and even the mediation of matter with subjectivity than does the finally disenchanted Newtonian tradition. 56 In seeking to extend these sorts of recognition also to the


54 Pico della Mirandola, Heptaplus, ‘Sixth Exposition: of the Affinity of the Worlds with each other and with all Things’ in On the Dignity of Man/On Being and the One/Heptaplus trans C.G. Wallis et al (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1998) 139-147

55 See Richard Kieckhefer, Magic in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: CUP 2000), 8-17

chemical and the biological sciences (following perhaps the example of Goethe) it might be that even in the realm of scientific and technological interaction with nature we need to infuse Tolkien’s ‘lower magic’ with the higher ‘elvish magic’.

Therefore, if the Christian narrative can be taken as a fairy-tale that mainly concerns the proper use of material things and their sacramental nature, it remains truer than we have suspected to the magical nature of the fairy-tale sign-object which is gift (and then supremely the eucharist as grail), just as it takes more seriously than we have suspected the immanent mediation of valuation that can be identified as ‘the fairy realm’. (The most astonishing example of this is the Presbyterian minister Robert Kirk’s neoplatonic and Biblical presentation of Scottish fairy-belief in his 1692 treatise, The Secret Commonwealth.)

Perhaps then, the fictionalization of Christianity in imaginative children’s literature is not a sign of the post-Christian but a harbinger of a new and truer re-imagination of Christianity as such. And it may be time to bid farewell to the monotheism of the grown-up, disenchanted cosmos – the grown-ups it produces are called bin Laden and George Bush, who invoke the sacred only as a crudely positivised apologia for their operations in a drained desert of money, machinery and electronic signals. But most people, aside from Biblical fundamentalists or analytic philosophers of religion (who have rather similar outlooks) cannot understand – and with good reason – a worldview where one acknowledges no mysteries until one suddenly stumbles upon the ultimate one of the one God. (It was to this abiding hidden popular Catholic sense of the plurally mysterious that first Newman and later Chesterton appealed.) By contrast, belief in God and in the triune God can perhaps only be revived if we re-envisage and re-imagine the immanent enchantments of the divine creation which appropriately witnesses to the transcendent One through a polytheistic profusion of created enigmas. The new tellers of fairy-tales to children and adults open out just this real horizon.

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Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Science (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1999) for a well received argument for Bruno’s relevance to thought in our own time.