

Mythology and Science Fiction

The sun, under which there is nothing new, also rises, and what has happened will happen again, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. This doctrine, though sanctioned by many authorities, has never found much favor among those whose trade is Novelty—gallery owners, fashion photographers, messiahs, and science fiction writers.

It can be argued that there are, in fact, new things under the sun nowadays—Concorde jets, Kellogg's Pop-Tarts, sun lamps, the *Tomorrow* show with Tom Snyder, and much else besides, some good, some bad, and all pouring with indiscriminate abundance from the cornucopia of technology.

What hasn't changed (so far) is the nature of the darkly wise being who must confront both old and new and make some sense of them. The forms of that sense are the structures of mythology, the forever bifurcating, often rickety architectures that support every conceivable (human) meaning.

Myths are everywhere—in every morsel of food, decorating banks and birdhouses, tingeing the blandest discourse with dire resonances, making the mildest encounter a drama. Don't take my word for it: read Freud, or Levi-Strauss, or Barthes. In this very broad sense mythology embraces the whole realm of the cultivated and the civilized, everything shaped by the hand and mind of men, which, for most of us, includes everything in sight. Indeed, even where the hand can't reach, the all-conquering imagination extends its empery, staking a claim on the stars by the simple act of connecting the dots and naming the figures formed by the lines: Orion, Cassiopeia, Hercules, Draco.

Myths are everywhere, but especially in literature. Reduce whatever tale to its atomic components and you'll find those eternal champions and heroes of a thousand farces, Mr. and Ms. Mythos. There they are, skulking in the background of even the likeliest story, disguised as people with next-door names—Steven, Edward, Anna, Emma—but recognizable for all that as Adam, Oedipus, Ishtar, or Snow White. It is not the ingenuity of critics that accomplishes this, but simple human nature. We are a species, alike not only in the morphology of the flesh but as well in that of the spirit—and limited in both. Limited, too, in the relations we

can form with others. People arrange themselves in pairs, in eternal triangles, in square dances, and so on, up to about twelve. Thirteen at table is unlucky; fourteen anywhere is a mob (or, if they're our mob, a tribe). Like the Sun Himself, we are prisoners of plane geometry, and the geometers who have described and defined the configurations we are capable of forming are the makers, and remakers, of our myths.

Myths are everywhere in literature, but especially in science fiction, in which category I would (for present purposes) include all distinctively modern forms of fantasy from Tolkien to Borges. The reasons for this aren't far to seek. Myths aim at maximizing meaning, at compressing truth to the highest density that the mind can assimilate without the need of, as it were, cooking. (Extending that metaphor, natural philosophy—science—would represent truth in a less immediately ingestible form—dry lentils, so to speak.) To attain such compression myths make free use of the resources of the unconscious mind, that alternate world where magic still works and metamorphoses are an everyday occurrence. Science fiction presumably abjures magic, but only—like Giordano Bruno, Uri Geller, and other canny charlatans—in order to escape the Inquisition. In fact, sf has been trafficking in magic and mythology since first it came into existence. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is subtitled *A Modern Prometheus*, and the horror-show monsters whose image continues to be emblematic of the genre are provably the descendants of "Gorgons and Hydras, and Chimaeras dire." There is scarcely a theme in sf for which a classic parallel cannot be found: try it.

As mythmakers, science fiction writers have a double task, the first aspect of which is to make humanly relevant—literally, to humanize—the formidable landscapes of the atomic era. We must trace in the murky sky the outlines of such new constellations as the Telephone, the Helicopter, the Eight Pistons, the Neurosurgeon, the Cryotron. Often enough, in looking about the heavens for a place to install one of these latter-day figures, the mythmaker discovers that the new figure corresponds very neatly with one already there. The Motorcyclist, for instance, is congruent at almost all points with the Centaur, and no pantheon has ever existed without a great-bosomed, cherry-lipped Marilyn who promises every delight to her devotees. But matching old and new isn't always this easy. Consider the Rocket Ship. Surely it represents something more than a cross between Pegasus and the Argo. What distinguishes the Rocket Ship is that (1) it is mechanically powered and that (2) its great speed carries it out of ordinary space into hyperspace, a realm of indefinable transcendence. My theory is that the contemporary human

experience that the myth of the Rocket Ship apotheosizes is that of driving, or riding in, an automobile. We may deplore the use of cars as a means of self-realization and of public highways as roads to ecstasy, but only driver-training instructors would deny that this is what cars are all about. And, by extension, the Rocket Ship. The twenties and thirties, when driving was still a relative novelty, were also the heyday of the archetypal—and, in their way, unsurpassable—power fantasies of E. E. Smith and other, lesser bards of the Model T. Among adolescents and in countries such as Italy, where car ownership confers the same ego satisfaction as surviving a rite of passage, the Rocket Ship remains the most venerated of sf icons—and not because it embodies a future possibility but because it interprets a common experience.

The second task of sf writers as mythmakers is simply the custodial work of keeping the inherited body of myths alive. Every myth is the creation, originally, of a poet, and it remains a vital presence in our culture only so long as it speaks to us with the living breath of living art; so long, that is, as it continues to be twice-told. Everyone pitches in—from Mesopotamian parents recounting the story of Gilgamesh to scholars translating that story into modern languages. Even Homer, probably, felt the anxiety of influence; by Ovid's time all stories were old stories. The names might be changed, the scenery altered, but the basic patterns were as fixed and finite as shoemakers' lasts. This is why Kipling can maintain that "there are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, and—every—single—one—of—them—is—right!"

Science fiction writers do not have a unique responsibility toward preserving the body of inherited myth. It is a task that we share with poets, painters, playwrights, choreographers, composers, and commentators of every description. I offer the following catalogue not so much as an Extra-Credit Reading List (though they will all get you points) but to suggest the variety, range, and universality of the undertaking. Among works that conscientiously retell discrete myths from beginning to end are T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Richard Adams's *Water-ship Down*, Cynthia Ozick's *The Pagan Rabbi*, Mary Renault's *The King Must Die*, Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*; any number of plays by Yeats, Eliot, O'Neill, Gide, Giraudoux, Anouilh, and Sartre; operas by Bartók, Schoenberg, Strauss, and Stravinsky. Additionally, there are writers who, instead of retelling one specific tale, retrace the underlying structures of mythology as these have been systematized by scholars like the Grimm brothers; Frazer, Graves, and Joseph Campbell. Notable among such "synthetic legends" have been Goethe's "Märchen" (perhaps the first

artificial folktale), Koch's *Ko*, Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, Hoffmannstahl's libretto for *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, and Naomi Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*.

Only in the last ten or fifteen years have science fiction writers shown much interest in the preservative as against the interpretive side of myth-making. The most obvious reason is that writers for the early pulps were not notable for literary sophistication. Van Vogt's stories, at their best, have some of the charm of fairy tales, but I doubt that this was ever his aim. Similarly, the standard space opera often follows a pattern strikingly similar to that which Joseph Campbell describes in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, but again I would submit that the likeness was inadvertent. (Though not, of course, accidental: archetypes are hard to avoid once you've set out to tell a story.) The writers of the fifties, such as Blish, Knight, or Bester, though themselves men of undoubted literary culture, were obliged to write for a naive audience for whom almost any story was mind-blowing. The shades of irony or degrees of finesse that may distinguish one revision of a familiar story from the next are lost on readers for whom just the idea sets their sense of wonder to tingling.

What changed in the early sixties wasn't the nature of sf writers but of their audience. Simply, it had grown up. Not all readers, of course. There were still, there are still, and there will always be those for whom sf represents their first trip into the realms of gold. But now side by side with these are readers who can be counted on to know more about the life of the mind than can be discovered in the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Charles Fort; who have the knack of reading books in pretty much the spirit they were written.

The point, for instance, of Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* isn't that, gee whiz, a Time Traveler questing for the historical Jesus is involved in a case of mistaken identities. The point isn't *What Happens Next* because the reader is assumed to be able to foresee that. The point is, rather, how seamlessly the modern (ironic) version of the myth can be made to overlay the gospel (and so, inevitable) version. To a large degree, therefore, the point is the author's wit, his grace, and his depth. In a word, style.

Style not in the niggling sense of being able on demand to use the subjunctive and to come up with metaphors, similes, and stuff like that. Style, rather, in the exclamatory Astaire-and-Rogers sense of (in the words of Webster) "overall excellence, skill, or grace in performance, manner, or appearance."