On Elves and Angels: The Inkling's Quest

"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. Yet his shadow still looms. "

> (Nitezsche, The Gay Science: 1882, Section 125)

"Of fuck, not another elf."

> (Hugo Dyson, at an Inkling reading of The Lord of the Rings)

September 19th 1931, Oxford England: as the wind scatters the crisp autumn leaves across the cobblestones, the fellowship arrives at the Eagle and Child, so named for its signboard depicting the infant Ganymede being carried off by Jove's eagle. The pub was a favorite meeting place of the Inklings - the group of writers and academics begun by C.S. Lewis including, most notably, J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien and Lewis were first brought together by a shared interest in the mythology of the Norse. Later, the group began sharing their manuscripts that would later turn into *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings* and the *Narnia* stories.

The group's shared love of Norse mythology reflected a turning away from the modern movement in literature then surging in England under the banner of T.S. Elliott.   Elliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, had quickly become the great generational statement of its time.   The poem attempted to make sense of the loss of coherence in the old Biblical stories and the growing irrelevance of the classical tradition in the face of popular entertainment by collecting the fragments of these ancient, original sources. With advances in science - most importantly acceptance of the Darwinian views on evolution - the Biblical stories had lost currency.   Already in Shakespeare's day, the animals found in the new world called into question the story of Noah's Ark.   With Darwin's theory of evolution, God and the scriptures were loosing their literal power and were no longer necessary to explain the world around us. Elliott attempted to salvage these old stories by quoting the useful bits and putting them in a new context relevant to the new century.   But by pulling these stories apart and reconstituting them, he was also implicitly acknowledging that they could no longer be taken literally on their own merits.

Lewis and Tolkien experienced the breakdown of Western Christian culture like Elliott but their response was a reactionary one. They wanted to retreat into the past. At Oxford, they organized a successful academic coop to limit the instruction of English literature to the pre-modern period. English literature for them was interesting only up until Beowulf.   There were "hostile to any manifestation of the modern spirit" (TI: 206) They were very attached to the Christian tradition.   They wanted to retain the power of these stories in their original context. To them, Elliott had thrown out the baby with the bathwater. He had given into the enemy. He had robbed the old stories of their magic.

The Inklings dread of modernism was rooted in a deep seated conviction that the modern out-look lead to relativism and nihilism. The feeling was that a mechanistic-Darwinian wold view with-out any transcendent purpose or design was meaningless and hopeless. This battle was personified for Lewis by the modern critic F. R Leavis who believed that at least among educated persons there was 'sufficient measure of agreement, covert and implicit, about essential values to make it unnecessary to discuss ultimate sanctions, or to provide a philosophy, before starting to work'. In other words, we didn't need these old stories anymore because we all have a moral sense that informs us. Lewis felt this attitude extremely dangerous. 'Unless we return to the crude and nursery-like belief in objective values, we perish' (TI: 64). With the horrors of Stalin and Hitler on their minds, The Inklings looked at the modern outlook as too soft to provide meaning in a hard world. What was needed was a true foundation to ground Christian Truth in the face of the societal collapse - or at least depreciation - of faith.

This crisis loomed larger for Lewis than Tolkien because in 1931 Lewis did not have his own faith to fall back on. Lewis, now widely regarded as a poster-child for a sophisticated thoughtful ap-proach to his Christianity, had struggled with his faith most of his adult life. By the time he was at Oxford, he had retreated into agnosticism from atheism but still was not a true Christian. He believed in Christ's existence but could not accept the rest of the Biblical stories. Christ was a an exemplary man, but the other Christian stories were seemingly false. Lewis could appreciate the beauty in these stories, but because they were not literally true he felt them worthless.

On that night in particular, Lewis was having a deep crisis of faith. With Hitler beginning his rise, Stalin's atrocities coming to light and the modern movement cresting in England, it must have felt like the enemy was at the gates. As the conversation continued on a walk outside the pub, Lewis remarked to Tolkien that though he felt the beauty in myth including the Christian Myth, he still could not see Myths as true. For him, myths are 'lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver'.

Tolkien who had retreated from his experiences with the horrors of war and industry into a deeply Christian pre-modern world view shaped by his love of Norse Myth, believed that Myths are indeed true. And true in a meaningful - in some ways the most meaningful way. For him, man's moral ideals were a reflection and confirmation of a God who informed even our stories. "Not merely the abstract thoughts of man but also his imaginative inventions must originate with God and must in consequence reflect something of eternal truth." Tolkien believed that God's light was refracted in all of mankind and therefore a storyteller's or sub-creator's (as Tolkien called them) stories were a reflec-tion of that eternal truth. Even Pagan myths "are therefore never just 'lies': there is always some-thing of the truth in them." (TI: 43) Tolkien argued that Lewis was holding the scripture to a higher standard of truth than he did for any other form of expression.

Lewis, believing the basic conviction that mankind's moral sense indicated a higher force, took to Tolkien's argument easily. By the end of the night he was convinced. Lewis's conversion to

Christianity, however, was not *grounded* in rigorous argument (though possibly inspired by vigorous argument). It was at above all a leap of faith. He believed in the functional usefulness of keeping the Christian mythology. 'Even assuming (which I most constantly deny), that the doctrines of historic Christianity are merely mythical, it is the myth which is the vital and nourishing element in the whole concern" (TI: 47). He follows fellow Inkling Charles Williams here (in turn following Soren Kierkegaard) who refused to seek a trascendent foundation for his faith. (TI: 83) This was a return to a pre-modern emphasis on faith as an action, a choice to believe in God. This choice was beyond reason. We cannot truly expect to understand the almighty and wise God. If you have reasons to believe in God, your faith is too easy.

The night's conversation meant a lot to Tolkien and Lewis. It was the catalyst to Lewis' conversion and it was a call to arms. Tolkien wrote a poem - "Mythopoeia" - to commemorate the night and outline the task ahead:

> Dear Sir, I said - ' although now long estranged,
> Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
> Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,
> And keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
> Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
> Through whom is splintered from a single White
> To many hues, and endlessly combined
> In Living shapes that move from mind to mind.
> Though all the crannies of the world we filled
> With Elves, and Goblins, though we dared to build
> Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
> and sowed the seeds of dragons - twas our right
> (used or misused). That right has not decayed:
> we make still by the law in which we're made (MC 144)

Sub-creation here is the act of creating these mythologies. For Tolkien, the task of sub-creation was a Christian task. Man is "merely the sub-creator and that all stories originate with God" (TI: 138) Tolkien coined the word Mythopoeia - the subcreator's task - to describe narratives that create fictional mythologies. Tolkien - reflecting his turn away from modernity - experienced his sub-creation as a recovering of ancient truth. Myths "must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements. After all, I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kinds were discovered and must always reappear" (S, XV). The best sort of writing is not an invention of a story it is a letting the story reveal itself.

Tolkien's viewpoint was informed by a theory of Myth based on linguistics that Owen Barfield had developed in his books *History in English Words* (1926) and *Poetic Diction: A Study In Meaning* (1928). Barfield believed our language was a history of our collective mythic consciousness.

at the "dawn of language" speakers did not make a distinction between the 'literal' and the 'metaphorical', but used words in what might be called a 'mythological' manner. For example, nowadays when we translate the Latin *spiritus* we have to render it either as 'spirit' or as 'breath' or as 'wind' depending on the context, But early users of language would not have made any such distinction between these meanings. To them a word like *spiritus* meant something like 'spirit-breath-wind'. When the wind blew, it was not merely ' like' someone breathing: it was the breath of a a god. And when an early speaker talked about his soul as *spiritus* he did not merely mean that it was 'like' a breath: it was to him just that, the breath of life. (TI: 41)

Myths then were not metaphorical to the ancients. They were literal. "Language in its beginnings made no distinction between the literal and the metaphoric meaning of a word, as it does today" (SL:TW) If you interpret the language in the original sense, there would be no way to distinguish between the metaphorical or the literal elements of the story. To the ancients, Gods and man intermingled and nature was alive. "It was natural to tell tales about the gods who ruled the elements and walked the earth." (TI: 42) Myths weren't a particualr type of fantastic story yet - they were just stories about the things around us.

At some point though this changed. We lost our ability to understand these stories as they were understood by their original audience. One of Tolkien's gifts as a linguist was to be able to cast light on the fundamental differences in worldview underlying something like Beowulf and making it sensible for contemporary readers. He could get into the minds of the pre-moderns by immersing himself in their words. The Inklings were deeply worried by society's inability to understand these original stories in their original context.

Interpreting this from a theological standpoint, as the Inklings were want to do, the loss of our mythic sensibility is the fall. The Fall away from God, or the Mythic outlook, can be mapped in the growing alienation of our language from Myth. They believed we were "in the final states of a vast, age-long metamorphosis from the kind of outlook which we loosely describe as 'mythological' to the kind which we may describe equally loosely as intellectual thought' (Barfield, HEW). Before the fall, "every word would have had it's own unity of meaning embodying what we now can understand only as a multiplicity of separate concepts, concepts for which we (no longer able to participate in the original worldview) must use many different words" (SL:TW). "This fragmentation of vocabulary itself leads to further fragmentation of perceptions" (SL: TW). We had moved into the Tower of Babel.

This fall was not irreversible though. The Inklings believed in the ability of language to re-enchant our world. They thought fairy-tales - whether works of fantasy, science fiction, or the supernatural were stories that could re-enchant our experience of our world. The "fantastic should enable us to see the ordinary as if for the first time and thereby to regain a sense of its extraordinariness." (SL: TW) Rather than escapism then, these types of stories fundamentally connect us to the real - meaning True - world around us. As Lewis remarks "a child doesn't despise real woods just because he's been reading about enchanted woods. What he's read makes all real woods a little enchanted.....This isn't a retreat from reality. It's a rediscovery of it." (TI: 146). You can't argue your way to

an re-enchantment with the world; you must experience it as enchanted. As Lewis remarks "Story - or at least Story in the mythical type - gives us an experience of something not as an abstraction but as a concrete reality. We don't 'understand a meaning' when we read a myth, we actually encounter the thing itself" (TI: 143). This is why Tolkien refused to read Myths as allegories. To read Beowulf as an Allegory with the monster representative of some abstract concept puts an intellectual distance between the story and our experience thereby robbing it of its power.

So we know that besides Lewis' conversion to Christianity, both men seem to have embraced the desire to be sub-creators. But was there more to it than that? For on September 1931, with the leaves changing and beginning to fall, the specter of Hitler's rise to power had to hang over them. The rise of Fascism must have been on their horizon. Tolkien was particularly dismayed by the rise of Hitler because of the Nazi use of Norse Mythology in their propaganda. His feelings are clear in a letter he wrote to his son during the Second World War: "I have in this War a burning private grudge—which would probably make me a better soldier at 49 than I was at 22: against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler ... Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light."

Was the doubt in God that each had felt - even if they were believers now - was that a sign of a larger cultural collapse? The destruction of the foundation of morality that would permit something like the horrors of the Nazis? Had Nietzsche's nuclear bomb of a thought - God is Dead - detonated? Had the destruction of the mythological viewpoint created a moral vacuum of meaning that had to be filled by something else? A grand ideology to provide meaning in the face of nihilism. Something like the National Socialist German Workers Party with its ritual, pageantry and imagery to rival the Christian tradition.

Joseph Campbell, the noted theorist on Myth, writes that for us "not only have all the old mythic notions of the nature of the cosmos gone to pieces, but also all those of the origins and history of mankind." (7) And this is a condition he finds very dangerous for Myth supports our civilization, supports our moral order, its cohesion and vitality. With the destabilizing of these Myths "there follows uncertainty, and with uncertainty, disequilibrium, since life, as both Nietzsche and Ibsen knew, requires life-supporting illusions; and where theres have been dispelled, there is nothing secure to hold on to, no moral law, nothing firm. " (10).

But if the Bible was loosing currency because what once were taken to be literal truths where now unbelievable, couldn't we create new books to do the same work? And these books don't need to claim literal truth, they will be so compelling to their readers they create a mythic life world. A guide to how to live life. And not just any guide but a largely Christian guide shed of the Christian details. If myth was true, as Tolkien had just convinced Lewis of, even if that truth had nothing to do with literal truth, then couldn't we create our own myths? Elves for Angels. The old wisdom must be reworked into new stories - old wine put into new bottles.

The Inklings believed Myth is the most effective carrier of certain types of truth because it works with images rather than concepts, with forms rather than abstract ideas, and with action rather than argument" (SL: TW).   In the age of science, it's hard to argue that the woods are enchanted, but Fairy Tales allow us to experience the woods as enchanted.   And as Lewis argued, when we experience the enchantment in a fantastic context we brings that back with us to the world.   Despite the dominance of the mechanistic worldview, we still imbue the things around us with greater meanings. Fairy stories help define these greater meanings.

The Inkling's project then was to provide a new Mythology to house the old Christian wisdom. For Tolkien, at least, this was a Mythology for England. The shire is an idealization of a type of bucolic british life that he had grown up around.   Six of Tolkien's childhood friends, young men he has grown up with and shared his esoteric interests, were torn up and spit out by the machinery of the first world war with it's trenches and mustard gas.   Tolkien experienced the beginning of modern warfare, the turn from the chivalric romantic ideas of war to the reality of industrial destruction of bodies and nations.   Tolkien had been the lucky one. He had survived hell.

He no doubt felt a huge burden as a survivor. His need to create a new fantastic world to safe guard the innocence of his childhood must have been an acute psychological force.   He wanted to create and share with others a new Mythology to save the vital parts of the european culture before it completed it's turn.   He had an antipathy towards machines, industrialization and the city.   The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings enchant the bucolic english village life with new vitality.   The Lord of the Rings makes the great evil the horrors of industrial exploitation.   And the Silmarillion is the ancient wisdom of Middle-Earth.   It is the Bible and Norse Myths of our world encased and protected in the amber of Middle-Earth Lore.   The new bottles for our old wisdom can't be destroyed by advances in science or the crassness of commercial marketing.   This project was to not merely personal. In the introduction to the Silmarillion Tolkien writes that as a larger project it is an attempt to create a Mythology for England.

And of course, the project required that Christianity not be an explicit part of the new Myth. Tolkien wrote that he has "not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion,' to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.   The "Silmilarion is Tolkien's gloss on Christianity, illustrating its universals, not repeating its specifics. In fact, before developing the Hobbit, Tolkien considered retelling the Arthurian legend as England's myth. He abandoned that project however because that mythology is "involved in, and explicitly contains the Christian religion. For reasons which I will not elaborate, that seemed to me fatal. (S, Introduction).   Tolkien can't say he's trying to re-inscribe the Christian myth because his work would then become Allegory and robbed of its ability to be magical, to enchant. The magic doesn't work if you know the trick. A myth can't live if it's anyalzed.   God turned out to be all too fragile already.

As sub-creators, the Inklings hoped to have their fairy stories reflect the truth of the biblical myths without being tied up in the war between the modern, scientific outlook which was quickly disenchanting us from the world around us and the original mythic outlook. What better way to protect that Myth from the positivistic attack it was under than re-encode it into a children's stories? Stories that fundamentally inspire the child's outlook on the world. Stories that are deep enough to be read by an adult but entertaining enough to be enjoyable for a child. To re-enchant the world again through a new myth that took from the Biblical stories and wove them into a sub-creation reflecting God's truth. By relying on the suspension of disbelief granted such stories, the new mythologies of Middle Earth and Narnia could provide a true experience with the Christian myth. And if people came to love these stories, they would be reintroducing themselves to the Christian myth. As Lewis remarked about the Lord of the Rings "Wouldn't it be wonderful if it really succeeded (in selling I mean)? It would inaugurate a new age." (TI: 160). An age informed by the Christian Myths without the baggage of the Christian Myth.

The two approached their sub-creations from different directions though. Lewis was syncretic while Tolkien was working from an organic origin point based in Norse myth. Tolkien as a linguist was fascinated by Barfield's conception of language and it informed much of his world-building. A philologist who created 13 languages for the world of Middle-Earth, the mythic outlook on language profoundly informed the Mythology of Middle-Earth as laid out in the Silmarillion. Tolkien took his love of the poetic edda and his minute knowledge of old english and linguistics - with linguistics being an archeological handle for the beliefs and habits of a people - to create a fantastical world that abstracts a vision of Christian and pre-Christian Northern Europe to a mythological context - Middle-Earth.

Tolkien found the Narnia stories to be lacking and was disappointed in the way Lewis approached them. Tolkien spent 11 years writing the Lord of the Rings which drew from a mythology he had been creating since he was a boy, a Christianity re-inscribed in Norse Myth. He wanted to create a myth that had no inconsistencies or gaps of detail. "Every loose end, every detail of the story - the chronology, the geography, even the meteorology of Middle-Earth - had to be consistent and plausible, so that the reader would (as Tolkien wished) take the book in a sense as history." (TI: 224) Tolkien's essay *Tree and Leaf* laid out the work at hand: "To make a Secondary World inside which [a] green sun will be redible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft' (MC 140) Following the theories of Barfield, he felt that "language creates the reality it describes and that myth and language work reciprocally on each other" (SL:TW). Myth, language and culture must reflect one another and shape the world that gives them life (SL: TW).

Lewis hastily churned out the first three Narnia books in a year. The stories had inconsistencies and loose ends. Moreover, the mythology borrowed so indiscriminately from other mythologies and narratives (fauns, Father-Christmas, talking animals) that "for Tolkien the suspension of disbelief,

the entering into a secondary world, was simply impossible" (TI: 224). Lewis re-encodes Christianity from a grab bag of mythic traditions. This undermined the realism of the work. While Tolkien created an immersive world with essentially biblical players with new names and histories, Lewis' work becomes a pastiche of stories. To the knowledgeable reader, the work always begs the question of what was C.S. Lewis intending when he combined this with that. Middle-Earth, in contrast, manages to be at the same time familiar enough to be understandable - hobbits are like us except they live in holes in the ground, and fantastic enough to re-enchant us. The combination of the real with the fantastic immerses the reader in the mythic world. As a student of language, Professor Tolkien was able to create languages, cultures and peoples who all made sense in the fantastic world he had developed.

The Silmarillion - the "bible" of Middle-Earth was truly Tolkien's life work. The Lord of the Rings depends upon the mythology developed in it. The are meant to be read in tandem. Knowing the Silmarillion mythology provides another level of depth to the Lord of the Rings. Tolkien intended the two to be published together but couldn't get his publisher to get behind the esoteric and difficult to define Silmarillion. The Silmarillion was not just a collection of stories, it was designed to be a living document. Tolkien wanted to create an open framework in which his mythology could be added to, emulating the oral traditions that brought us the Illiad, the Oddysy and the Bible. He:

"had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging form the large and cosmogonic to the level of romantic fairy-story - the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendor from the vast backclothes - which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country... I would draw some of the great tales in fullness and leave many only placed in the scheme and sketched. The cycles would be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama."

While he couldn't get the Silmarillion published in his lifetime, for Tolkien the Lord of the Rings and the Silmarillion were part of one larger project.

Lewis's output spanned Christian Apologetics to literary criticism to novels, while Tolkien's work revolved around Middle-Earth. It was almost as if he couldn't write anything else; to do so would undermine the believability of his world. What if God had also been the acknowledged author on other works? Here we have the play "the Frogs" one of God's minor comedies along with his best-sellers the first testament and the second. "Authorship" doesn't make sense out of a modern context. To make God an author is to kill him. God can not be an author. Humans can be authors, Gods must reveal their truth.

Lewis, always a more generous spirit than the relatively dour Tolkien, celebrated his friends work; writing that Tolkien "has the air of inventing nothing. He has studied trolls and dragons at first

hand and describes them with a fidelity which is worth oceans of glib 'originality'" (TI: 65). He wrote a glowing review of the Lord of the Rings and did his utmost to get it the attention he felt it deserved.

While Tolkien was not impressed with them, the Narnia stories have built up a fan base almost as large as Tolkien's. Both mythologies have transitioned from their novelistic beginnings to big-screen cinematic versions that have reached millions around the globe. Tolkien has a word "tolkienesque" in the Oxford English Dictionary reflecting his influence on other fantasy writers. His Lord of the Rings Trilogy has been bought by approximately 150 million people. The Narnia books by 100 million. Surely both series have been passed around quite a bit as well. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are part of a rarified club of authors whose names are commonly known. Their worlds are familiar to millions around the world. And they have largely avoided being interpreted as Christian Allegories - though that's surely a topic of academic conversation. Both series have generally taken for what they are: fantasy.

In his book "Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation," professor Anthony Gierzynski from the University of Vermont argued that the Harry Potter books effected the outlook of the millennial generation leading to a greater identification with Obama in the 2008 election. "The lessons fans internalized about tolerance, diversity, violence, torture, skepticism and authority made the Democratic Party and Barack Obama more appealing to fans of Harry Potter in the current political environment," Gierzynski argued. So, maybe it's not so far fetched to say that the Inklings succeeded in their mission. Tolkien's work has effected culture as much if not more than the Harry Potter books and the Narnia stories are not far behind. The Inklings transitioned an oral Christian mythological tradition into a novelistic world. These novelized worlds inform their fans real worlds - the fans see the world through the lens of the novel and behave like the characters in it - at least to some extent. This is the same thing a religion provides for a society - a way of seeing the world that informs our moral ethics, our everyday life. And now fans have gained new vitality in the age of the internet where like minded individuals are just a moment away no matter where they are in the world. They come together at conventions and dress up as their favorite characters. Maybe they have indeed already become their own new religion.