

Chapter I

The Tradition of the Heroic Myth

I. Medieval Context: The Medieval Idea of the Myth

The modern genre of fantasy has enjoyed continuous and exuberant growth over the last century. As a predictable and welcome outcome of this process, the boundaries of the genre have undergone constant redefinition, as fantasy comes into contact with other literary genres, styles and traditions, cultural modes of expression or aesthetic decorum. It is no wonder, then, that the most incisive critical studies seeking to provide a valid and workable model for the mercurial genre commence with an attempt at normalising the many incarnations of what is collectively conceived of as constituting the multifarious tradition of fantasy literature. Thus, for instance, Ann Swinfen in her seminal 1984 study *In Defence of Fantasy* seeks to organise the models of secondary world creation into a threefold division. She makes a distinction between animal fantasy, where only selected elements of primary reality function beyond the limits of formal realism; dual fantasy, founded upon a dichotomy between coexisting fictional worlds, one of which makes recourse to fantasy imagery and conventions; and lastly, a full submersion fantastic secondary world, where all elements constituting the fictional reality operate within the fantastic mode.

Subsequently, Farah Mendlesohn, in her 2008 normative study *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, proposes a four-category model: portal-quest fantasy, whereby the unfamiliar surroundings of the fantasy setting

are channelled through the perception of a protagonist positioned in between the “unknown” new world (1) and the audience’s familiar experience; immersive fantasy, taking place in an alternative “complete world” (59); intrusion fantasy, where the familiar reality is “ruptured” by an intrusion from the fantasy world (115); and, finally, liminal fantasy, where the sense of inherent validity of the fantastic imagery is undermined by the introduction of a interpretative distance between the protagonist and the audience (184-185).

More recently, Mark J. P. Wolf, in his renowned 2012 publication *Building Imaginary Worlds*, proposes a four-level arrangement of the nominal, cultural, natural and ontological realms which are designed to mark the degree to which literary secondary worlds become saturated with fantastic elements as they progressively depart from the consensual realism of the primary world.

What lies behind these divergent models designed to normalise the various types of secondary worlds which can be found in modern fantasy literature is the assumption that the key to their categorisation and definition will be found in the degree to which the constituent elements of their imagery become distinctly separated from their direct, or indirect, conceptual counterparts in the primary reality.

It would indeed be futile to question the indubitable validity of such an approach. Yet it seems important to argue here for the introduction of an additional nuance into similar normative models by considering not solely those elements of the secondary world which constitute the textual presence of the narrative, but also those which create the sense of the past which extends beyond the immediate plot of the narrative and which frequently provide the overriding cultural context for the story which is there unveiled. To develop this sort of sensitivity is especially important for those literary texts which belong to the subgenre of the high, or heroic fantasy, because they rest on the shoulders of the literary tradition where the ultimate value and significance of the narrative cannot be made sense of except in relation to the heroic past conceived of as having been acted out in a mythical reality distinct from the historical time in which the action of the narrative takes place.

Admittedly Wolf’s model allows much room for the consideration of some aspects of such mythical reality within his cultural realm

where much of the communal significance of the notion of the heroic past would be made apparent. However, we must realise that heroic fantasy builds its model of mythical reality upon literary and cultural traditions which derive from epochs where the perception of reality was markedly different from contemporary standards and customs. Consequently, we shall find that the interaction between the reality of the heroic mythical past and the narrative present will cut athwart Wolf's cultural and ontological levels as it will now be the cultural reference stemming from the communal acceptance of the underlying validity of the myth that will provide the rationale for the functioning of the basic ontological phenomena, rather than the conceptual framework based on the empirical concept of physical laws which does not have any cultural validity before the seventeenth century.

Consequently, in fantasy narratives which draw upon the literary tradition of heroic literary genres, the mythical past will constitute a distinct and autonomous level of the fictional secondary world. Its significance lies in the fact that the ultimate meaning and context for the present narrative action may only be found through reference to the mythical past. Indeed, this feature of literary narratives functioning within the romance mode was recognised long before modern heroic fantasy flourished in its present form. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, while talking about the legacy of the chivalric romance, Northrop Frye stresses the "romantic [...] tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience" (139) and argues for the presence of "the perennially childlike quality" of "its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time and in space" (186). Indeed, Frye's explanation of the inherent relation between the myth and the romance remains as valid as ever:

Myth, then, is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance, using that term to mean (...) the tendency (...) to displace myth in the human direction and yet, in contrast to "realism", to conventionalise content in an idealised direction. (136-137)

We must next go beyond Frye's avowed ahistoricism of perspective and proceed to a more incisive consideration of the role the heroic

myth plays in the consciousness of the kind of traditional societies which have bequeathed to us the literary genres of the epic and the chivalric romance from the legacy of which the dominant mode of artistic expression in the genre of high fantasy has crystallised.

The function and role which the heroic myth plays in the life and tradition of any human society has always been recognised as one of the central issues in studies of the cultures of all communities in all historical periods. These kind of studies have also continually overlapped with analysis of the literary heritage of any given community as the myth invariably becomes interwoven into the fabric of their literary tradition, determining both the underlying motifs of the traditional – oral, or else orally derived narratives embedded in the cultural heritage of a particular society – and the intertextual frame of reference for the newly emerging literate works where the underlying patterns find new articulation, and sometimes in their turn become sources of new mythical archetypes.

The key to the understanding of the concept of myth is to make sense of it in relation to a wider concept – that of cultural memory. Cultural memory, as defined in the classic theory of Maurice Halbwachs, is a conceptual construct by means of which a given community will establish its sense of identity as a social group in relation to a common past (J. Assmann 2015: 51-56; J. Assmann 2008: 110-112; A. Assmann 2013: 54-57, 127-132; Connerton 1989: 36-40). Within this approach, any individual memory, which is one of the fundamental elements which determine the individual's sense of personal and social identity, is itself a mental conception which emerges through contact with members of the person's native community. Consequently, it is the community's idea of the common past which is the decisive circumstance in the forging of individual memory of any member of the community. The function of cultural memory is thus essentially to foster and stimulate the group's collective experience of facing its own identity in the context of its historical legacy and of projecting its own image into the consensual vision of the past.

In evolving its own distinct cultural memory the social group develops a way to anchor its own sense of identity against its communal sense of the past. This sense of the past is distinct from any objective, retrievable data stored in historical records and accessed

for the purpose of historical studies. Typically, cultural memory ends at the point where the period of verifiable historical record begins, since both the nature and the objectives of both modes of conceptualising the past are inherently indifferent. Cultural memory reaches for the mythical mode. It takes as its beginning the farthest point in time which may be defined by the community with reference to a tangible set of reference points which are abstracted out of a potential historical context and acquire a more permanent symbolic connotation (Assmann 2015: 58-61, 79-81). The historical fact is typically an element defining a segment of concretised narrative tracing a process of continuous change. By being abstracted out of this context, the symbolic element becomes fixed in a narrative pattern whose primary function is to rise above the consciousness of historical change and become an element in fostering the consciousness of continuity, of underscoring the constant change inherent in the historical process with a sense of permanence through which the social group's mirror image of its unique identity is traceable to an original source which provides it with a sense of stability and purpose. Thus the community forges its foundational memory which attaches the community's underlying values and identity to a mythical moment of the beginning of time which is the source of its renewable vitality and continued social cohesion (Assmann 2015: 68). In other words, cultural memory transforms history into myth in order to preserve its symbolic significance which transcends the original historical context of the events which may have given rise to the mythical story, now functioning *in illo tempore*, i.e. being positioned at a higher extra-temporal level where the accumulated meaning of the past illuminates and vindicates the present.

Thus cultural memory retains a vision of the foundational past which is encoded in the form of a mythical narrative (Assmann 2015: 90-94). This mode of conserving the past is distinctly different from the mode of communicating values and patterns of behaviour through reference to a system of abstract ideas; however, it is just as separate from the historical narrative which seeks to project a given account of a specific sequence of events of which the ultimate import is tied to the specific context of the past. In fact, it may be said that it unites both approaches by conveying potentially abstract values as