CHAPTER 1

Mythic Sensibility

Certain stories act upon us. They shape the way that we see, encounter, and understand the world. In this chapter, I argue that a phenomenological approach to a narrative encounter with the world in terms of the mythic helps to illuminate a certain sensibility that mediates the world to human persons such that it is experienced as meaningful. Understanding the mythic in terms of a sensibility rather than in terms of a genre of literature or a form of cultural expression sheds light on how mythopoiesis is not a phenomenon restricted to archaic societies and the tales of either a bygone age or a culture or religion not our own. Among the most visible places of such mythopoiesis is so-called 'mythopoieic literature', fantasies that actively play with the sense of the possible, with narratives shaping the lives of characters, and what can be brought to the surface when meaning and being more closely and obviously co-inhere.[1] The fictions of J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, Terry Pratchett, and others help demonstrate the dynamics of this mythic sensibility and how it continues to operate even within what Charles Taylor calls the 'immanent frame' of secular materialist culture.[2] I conclude the chapter by arguing that a phenomenology of play, both in terms of the ludic fancy of the mythic and fantastic and the perception-shaping power of a game's rules over the players, opens up the way that stories act upon our perception of the world and the meaning that we encounter.

Imaginative Structures

In his essay on the Bodleian Library's 2018 exhibit of Tolkien's letters, paintings, and manuscripts, Rowan Williams conducts readers through the

[1] In the literature, one finds both spellings: *mythopoeic* and *mythopoieic*. Except where quoting, I have opted for the latter spelling for better harmony with this book's concern for *poiesis*. This spelling also has the added benefit of holding to one side the question of *poetics*, which though related is distinct enough from the central concerns of this book that I do not wish to generate confusion.

[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 542.

imaginative *copia* of Tolkien's 'legendarium'[3] toward urgent critiques that might shed light on the crises of the present age. Williams notes that in spite of some of Tolkien's conservative or even 'bourgeois' positions in life, *The Lord of the Rings* nevertheless speaks to the wounds inflicted on the common good by 'unexamined power and the tyranny of profit' and to the perils of the relentless drive of modernity towards the spoiling and wastage of what cannot be shared and so must be bought and sold.[4] Williams reminds us that Tolkien's masterpiece, far from representing an escapist fantasy, is not unlike the great mythological narratives that are woven through human culture:

> As [Tolkien] made clear, part of his ambition was to provide something like a mythology for England.... The narrative of The Lord of the Rings and the 'legendarium' of The Silmarillion and other writings are presented as a set of imaginative structures in and through which people can think and feel with the same consistency, intelligence and growing wisdom as they did through the stories of Olympus, Troy, Asgard or the Arthurian cycle.[5]

Tolkien's 'presentation' of *The Lord of the Rings*, inaugurating the modern genre of mythopoieic fantasy, was in part a response to the disenchantment of the modern world.[6] The apparent triumph of materialist modernity in the wake of the first and second World Wars, the seemingly relentless march of technological advancement, and the incipient decline and collapse of public participation in Christianity described for Tolkien a public desperation for the imaginative potency of mythic narrative and the sense of a meaningful cosmos. As he writes in his poem 'Mythopoeia', addressed to the then-skeptical C. S. Lewis:

> Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme
> of things not found within recorded time.
> It is not they that have forgot the Night,
> or bid us flee to organised delight,
> in lotus-isles of economic bliss
> forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss

[3] Comprising the vast body of myth, legend, and history (largely embedded in his many invented languages) which can be found in *The Silmarillion, The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and its appendices, and the ever-expanding body of edited volumes of his notes and other works produced by his son Christopher.

[4] Rowan Williams, 'Master of His Universe: The Warnings in JRR Tolkien's Novels', *The New Statesman* (8 August 2018). www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/08/master-his-universe-warnings-jrr-tolkien-s-novels (accessed 4 September 2018).

[5] Williams, 'Master of His Universe'.

[6] Peter M. Candler, Jr., 'Tolkien or Nietzsche; Philology and Nihilism' in *Tolkien among the Moderns*, ed. Ralph C. Wood (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 95–130, 97.

(and counterfeit at that, machine-produced,
bogus seduction of the twice-seduced).[7]

The faculty of imagining not only that which is not but that which *cannot be* is itself a salutary check on the encroachment of the mechanised culture of a mechanised world. Indeed, according to Tolkien, it is by the metaphoric power of this fantasy that the material, phenomenal world itself acquires not only meaning but identity:

Yet trees are not 'trees', until so named and seen –
and never were so named, till those had been
whose speech's involuted bread unfurled,
faint echo and dim picture of the world,
. . .
Great powers they slowly brought out of themselves,
and looking backward they beheld the elves
that wrought on cunning forges in the mind,
and light and dark on secret looms entwined.

He sees no stars who does not see them first
of living silver made that sudden burst
to flame like flowers beneath an ancient song,
whose very echo after-music long
has since pursued. There is no firmament,
only a void, unless a jewelled tent
myth-woven and elf-patterned; and no earth,
unless the mother's womb whence all have birth.[8]

Mythopoiesis is the means by which human beings have made the world the world: Adam's act of naming the animals remains part of the human vocation. Owen Barfield, one of Tolkien's circle and a philosopher of language and epistemology, powerfully conditioned Tolkien's own understanding of the relationship between language, meaning, and myth.[9] In his *Poetic Diction*, Barfield argues that words' meanings have a mythic quality,

[7] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Mythopoeia', in *Tree and Leaf, including Mythopoeia* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 83–90, 88.

[8] Tolkien, 'Mythopoeia', 86–7.

[9] The seminal account of this relationship is Verlyn Flieger's *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*, rev. ed. (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2002). The literature on Tolkien and his relationships with and the intellectual influences between himself, Barfield, Lewis, and the other Inklings is nearly endless, very worthy of exploration, and sadly beyond the scope of this book. In addition to those cited elsewhere in these pages, Humphrey Carpenter's classic *The Inklings* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978) and Diana Pavlic Glyer's more recent *The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in Community* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2007) offer readers a sense for the milieu in which Tolkien developed his insights into and high valuation of the mythic.

bound up with the mysterious associations of naming and what later generations would call the supernatural. The Latin *spiritus*, for example, when translated into English must contextually be translated 'wind' or 'breath' or 'spirit' as needed. For the Latin-speaker, however, and much more for the speakers of the Proto-Indo-European language or languages that preceded Latin, these meanings are not distinguishable.[10] The consciousness of meaning that holds these ideas together rests in a mythic apprehension of the world that does not distinguish meaningfully between 'wind', 'breath', and 'spirit', and it is only later sensibilities, conditioned by other accounts of the world, which find the need to distinguish between them. The words we use to describe the world, the names we give things, are a constituent part of how we encounter the meaning of the things, the world, and indeed ourselves. The combination and re-combination of these now-distinct words, is, according to Barfield, the source of the resonances which attach to the mythic.[11] By juxtaposing the now-splintered motes of original unity in new and unexpected ways, meaning emerges or appears, revealing something of the lost sensibility of an intuited semantic whole. This process of mythic generation, according to Barfield and Tolkien, is simply part of what it is to be human. And properly understood, this mythic impulse is always already shot through with what he might call the work of the elves, or more commonly the fantastic, and even the numinous.

The Lord of the Rings, of course, is also myth-woven and elf-patterned: laced with a quality of numinous suggestion of the supernatural and a depth of history and significance for every place and every action. This quality has invited readers over the decades to a strong association with the fiction, to the extent that some of Tolkien's intention to create a mythology, in Williams' terms an imaginative structure to think and feel with, has been borne out: When I look out on the bleak landscape of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in southern California at sunset, with its broken, rocky hillsides punctuated by boulder falls and scrub vegetation that seems to be clinging to life as roots dig deep for water, all I can see is Mordor. Perhaps as a Christian I ought to see the wilderness of Kedar or the rough hill country where Jesus spent his boyhood if I am not going to see this desert at this time. But the mythic signification of wilderness, the suggestive topography of shattered land and baking decomposed granite

[10] Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 81.
[11] Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 87.

and sand impresses itself upon a mind formed in the narratives and hermeneutical imagery of Western, Anglophone culture to the degree that I can only see *as*. I can only see as my vision has been formed by the mythic resonances lurking in my language (desert, deserted, deserving, just deserts) and the mythic presences that have shaped my seeing. That Tolkien's works are manifest fictions has no bearing on the impression I receive upon encountering the wilderness of California's desert valleys: the thirst, the desperation, the overwhelming vastness are not only *what* I see, but also *how* I see. I do not merely see sand and rock and cracked mountains: I see these things as instances of the fictional but very real desert of Gorgoroth over which Frodo and Sam journey at the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*. This capacity to shape a reader's vision and encounter with the world is what might be called a 'mythic sensibility'.

As a Christian, Tolkien's theological sensibilities cannot be completely distinguished from the mythic in his work. This intertwining of literature and a meaningful encounter with the world has traditionally been conceived in terms of religious traditions and discourse, and the recognition of the theological potential for narrative is not a new one. Not only was Jesus Christ a participant in a rabbinic tradition of storytelling and a gifted and potent storyteller himself, but since the introduction of stories into preaching by Franciscans in the thirteenth century,[12] they have been a mainstay of the Christian homilist's arsenal through to the narrative theologians of the 1990s and early 2000s.[13] Tolkien himself and his circle were well aware of narrative's power to make present and alive the good news of the Gospel. With this in mind, we can consider the force with which *The Lord of the Rings* struck the public imagination and which it continues to exert on novelists, filmmakers, game designers, and visual artists as both testimony to the potency of Tolkien's creative vision and perhaps as well to an underlying drive or hunger in the public's imagination. The arrival of Peter Jackson's film versions inaugurated a new era of fantasy filmmaking, bringing audiences not only the

[12] The specific use of stories in sermons began in early Franciscan preaching with the use of illustrative *exempla* in order to evoke the theme and affective qualities of the sermon's message. See O. C. Edwards, Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 218ff.

[13] Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1977); Gale Heide, *System and Story: Narrative Critique and Construction in Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009); Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Francesca Aran Murphy, *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Navone, SJ, *Seeking God in Story* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990). Gerhard Sauter and John Barton, eds. *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

Harry Potter films, but also more emotionally and psychologically ambiguous films such as Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* and Dave McKean's *MirrorMask*, all revelling in what Neil Easterbrook calls the 'shamelessly fictive'.[14] Since the stories and myths of the Old and New Testaments no longer structure imaginations and hermeneutical vision as they once did in post-Christendom Europe and North America, the increased visibility of the shamelessly fictive and the rise of the 'shamelessly mythic' invite consideration. The popularity of *Game of Thrones*, *The Sandman*, the *Star Wars* and various comic book superhero films all attest to the hunger of the public for explicitly mythopoieic fiction. The hollowing out of trust in the institutions of religious life has become a byword, and yet the avowedly theological character of Tolkien's writing and much of the writing that followed in his footsteps puts into question claims that the public has grown quite away from the wonderings and the desires with which they once turned almost universally to the Church for answers.[15] This 'mythic turn' represents a shift in the public's relationship to questions of faith and opens new questions about what makes for religious discourse at all. Mythopoieic fantasy is one of the most visible locations of the exploration of this hunger for narratives which reveal the world to be meaningful.

Williams notes in his essay that 'myths have no authors'. This is certainly true of the *mythoi* of history and many of the present day: composition has come in the retelling, and no single author can claim ownership of the Greco-Roman myths any more than any one person can claim authorship of the myth of the American Dream or the creation narratives of Genesis. However, this mythic sensibility nevertheless continues to make itself known even in authored fiction. Recalling that one of Tolkien's aims in the weaving of his legendarium was to create a mythology for England, Williams opposes this aim to the composition of 'fantasy novels', regretfully concluding that *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and the rest are, in the end, more novel than myth. The hard line that Williams proposes between the mythic and the novel is

[14] Neil Easterbrook, 'The Shamelessly Fictive: Mimesis and Metafantasy', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 18/1 (2012), 193–211, 199.

[15] He wrote to a priest friend, '*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously at first, but consciously in the revision'. Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), n412. For a thorough exploration of the dimensions of Tolkien's theology as presented in his work, see Austin M. Freeman, *Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-Earth* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).

finally hard to maintain too absolutely, as they share a certain presence as we approach both the fiction and the world and which opens even 'secular' literature to the religious and even the theological. This mythic sensibility binds together the hermeneutic presence that illuminates the most ancient of myths and the cultural narratives that continue to give meaning to the shamelessly fictive mythopoiesis of the contemporary mythic turn. As Graham Ward notes of literature's inability ever to be entirely secular,[16] so, too is mythopoiesis, however pedestrian or fantastical, never wholly distinct from faith, poetic or otherwise.[17] It is not simply that we are unwilling to encounter the world 'as it is' and so we introduce otherwise superfluous and fanciful characterisations in a regrettable distortion or pareidolia, seeing faces in clouds where there are none. Construed in this way, mythic sensibility would represent a wilful reversal of the modern claim to be 'the removal of the superfluous and additional'[18], revealing the natural, pre-existent real, freed from the clothing of superstition and mythology. As will be explored further in this chapter, the mythic is not additional upon a pre-existent 'neutral' world which 'really' exists underneath the mythic narration. Rather, myth-making, by which we tell stories to understand the world, emerges as a constitutive dimension of our approach to meaning, whether it is conducted consciously or unconsciously. Mythopoiesis is neither restricted to the anonymity of the furthest reaches of our species history[19] nor to the pages of the 'mythopoieic fantasy' that followed in Tolkien's wake. However, as the most 'shameless' location for our myth-making ways, mythopoieic fantasy offers an entry point into the question of how the mythic sensibility appears. This most visible manifestation of mythopoiesis offers a useful backdrop to the theological questions which emerge from reflection upon the drive to tell stories in order to encounter the world as meaningful.

[16] Graham Ward, 'Why Literature Can Never Be Entirely Secular', *Religion and Literature* (Summer 2009), 21–7.

[17] Coleridge's rumination on 'poetic faith' in his *Biographia Literaria* touches on the reader's ability and willingness to suspend disbelief in the supernatural. Literary theory has expanded the idea to all fictionality, but the original context highlights the importance of imagination and faith in the dynamics of mythic sensibility. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Biographia Literaria' in *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 155–482, 314.

[18] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 9. Unless otherwise noted, further references to John Milbank in this chapter will be to *Theology and Social Theory*.

[19] Though for a thought-provoking investigation of the furthest reaches of our mythic history, see E. J. Michael Witzel, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Making Myths

A mythic sensibility combines two distinctively human faculties: imagination and meaningful encounter.[20] Irrespective of the fictionality of the story, engaging narratively involves an imaginative capacity.[21] Mythopoieic fantasy dwells intentionally on both of these dynamics, carefully constructing 'imaginative structures' in such a way as to highlight their imaginative nature (often employing the tropes of folklore to point up their 'shamelessly fictive' character), provoking the reader's imagination and perhaps conditioning her encounter with the world outside the text. Appealing to Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, literary critic Chris Brawley suggests that beyond mere escapism, mythopoieic fantasy is 'a subversive mode of literature [intended] to revise our perceptions . . . and, the distinguishing feature of these authors is . . . an inculcation of a certain religious or mystical "feeling" of the numinous in the reader'.[22] Like myth itself, mythopoieic ('myth-making') fiction presents the taxonomist with a challenge who to provide an exhaustive categorisation. However, by connecting those works of (especially fantastic) fiction which draw heavily on the same affective qualities of myth as it appears outside of fiction, Brawley is able to point the way toward an idea of the mythopoieic. In *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature*, Brawley explores the potential of mythopoieic fantasy to enable readers to shift their perspective on and understanding of the world they inhabit. As we will see, this revision of perception is a crucial characteristic of mythic sensibility. For Brawley, a myth is primarily a story that has the power to condition or even to alter our perceptions of the world. It operates in a way analogous to the perspective-framing and meaning-engendering experience of religious faith, Otto's 'feeling of the numinous', with all its fascination and fearful mystery.

[20] The famous experiments with Koko the gorilla and other primates suggest that, like most all faculties, imagination and meaningful encounter probably exist on something like a spectrum in the animal kingdom. However, they are so important to human experience that their consideration seems both vital and unavoidable. See M. L. A. Jensvold and R. S. Fouts, 'Imaginary Play in Chimpanzees (Pan Troglodytes)', *Human Evolution*, 8 (1993), 217–27.

[21] Discussed by Stephen Crites in 'The Narrative Quality of Experience', *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39/3 (Fall 1971), 292–311. Oliver Sacks recounts the story of a patient who had lost the ability to narrate his own life, and so lost a sense of his own identity; narratability is necessary for a sense of who 'I' is, the one whose story it is. Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 23–42.

[22] Chris Brawley, *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2014), 9.

According to Brawley, the imaginative worlds of Tolkien, Le Guin, and others have superseded the imaginative world described in the Christian Bible, and his aim is to describe how, following the failure of Christianity to prevent ecological catastrophe, the public has sought to 'scratch the itch' of religious 'feeling' in the context of mythopoieic fantasy, and to examine how, in ways analogous to religious myth, it serves the subversive, frame-shifting function once performed by Christian myths and religious culture. His account of the mythic is compelling for its description both of how myths shape (or reshape) perception and for its observations on the dynamics of fiction that overlap with more traditional religious mythology. However, the scope of his work and the limitations of his methodology fail to acknowledge the other kinds of myths and the other kinds of presences which shape our perception of the world and which do not necessarily reflect or inculcate any 'religious' feeling whatsoever. Or, put another way, Brawley does not account sufficiently for the religious quality of all myths: even apart from the shamelessly fictive myths of mythopoieic fantasy or the overtly 'magical' qualities of what is commonly identified as the mythological, Brawley himself is operating from within a certain narrative of scholarly distance from his object of study: myths are safely stowed away now in texts, to be approached or adopted at the reader's leisure. The mythic, however, is neither safe nor stowed, either in texts or in the past. Rather, according to philosopher Aleksei Losev, it remains present, and powerful, and an unavoidable dimension of human understanding.

By the account of Aleksei Losev, a myth is a 'miraculous personalistic history expressed in words'.[23] Common usage places myths somewhere between Brawley's fantastic stories or fairy tales and the outright lie. Losev, however, takes myth not simply to be a story or a fairy tale, but rather as a fundamental category of human understanding and the means by which we meaningfully interact with the universe. By 'miraculous personalistic history', Losev means, among other things, that the mythic has a narrative quality (history), it bridges the gap between the objectivity of the world and the subjectivity of the human orientation for meaning (miraculous), and it is intimately bound up with human personhood, both in itself and for the human being who is 'subject' to it (personalistic).[24] The myth becomes for Losev, in effect, a presence, as a face presents the human

[23] Aleksei Fyodorovich Losev, *The Dialectics of Myth*, trans. Vladimir Marchenkov (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 185.

[24] Myth exhibits aspects of personality: it advocates values, it acts as an interlocutor, and each myth is distinctive in its attributes and attitude. Myth is also an important part of how we develop our own personality and sense of self; it is integral in the formation and *trans*formation of the person.

person. It is a story by which a human being relates in a human way to the world and her experiences; it is the story by which, as Ward puts it, we see *as*.[25] Our perception of the world is always already mediated by our past experiences, the language(s) we speak, our mental state, and so on. All of these priors determine not only how we react to new circumstances and new stimuli, but also how we perceive any given stimulus or situation. An assemblage of wood is seen *as* a table or an altar or a workbench. A congregation of people is seen as a rock concert or a brawl or an initiation. This seeing *as* becomes enriched with value in part on the basis of the stories by which we live, the myths, as Losev puts it, to which we are subject. Having been baptised into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, all strangers, and especially all who suffer, are seen and cherished as Christ himself. Having lived one's life in the sacraments of the Church, all bread and wine become imbued with more profound significance and are seen to be at least potentially holy. Having read and been moved by Le Guin's novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*, all sea-battered islands share something of the quiet power of Gont and Roke. Having recognised something powerfully true in *The Lord of the Rings*, all forests become Fangorn, and the fortunes and burdens of the very small take on new value and meaning. That these stories can shape our perceptions of the world and our understanding of our own experience is, for Losev, their mythic quality. That myth characterises our approach to the world allows that if the myth changes, the approach will change as well. And it is here that Brawley's understanding of myth intersects with Losev's. Myths for Losev are given rather than made, in concert with Williams' observation that 'myths have no authors'. Even the Gospel writers (if they were individuals at all) are, except by tradition, anonymous. Though myths traditionally do not have creators in the same way that a novel or a painting has, they do not come from nowhere. They are shaped by a community of 'subjects' over countless retellings. This communal mythopoiesis is appropriated in the mode of the modern novel by the authors of mythopoieic fiction, and it is this creative and innovative quality of myth-making that is of special concern to them. The continued elaboration of the mythopoieic process by authors evinces a human need to create such narratives where none exist or where none satisfy.

Because Losev's account of the mythic is primarily a phenomenological one, he makes no provision in his study for the sociality of myth.

[25] Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 49.

He rightly insists that myths make claims upon the mythic subject, but this relationship is, for Losev, always a binary one between the myth and the individual. From a theological (as well as philosophical and linguistic) perspective, this mythic solipsism is impossible. The mythic subject is not a radical individual, but rather always a member of a culture, nation, religion, tribe, language community, and more. Indeed, as Edward Schillebeeckx notes, 'everything about a person, including his or her inwardness, is social'.[26] In contrast with a simple Kantian interiority absolutely cut off from the outside world, Schillebeeckx offers a sense of the inward life which is always already bound up in the social: 'Becoming human is acculturation'.[27] René Girard calls this dynamic 'interdividuality'.[28] As interdividuals, we are always already bound up with others: we learn from them and we learn through them how to be human, even before we are aware of any difference between 'I' and 'you'. This shared social awareness is what Charles Taylor calls a 'social imaginary': 'the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.... [The social imaginary] is carried in images, stories, legends, etc.[29]' Those images, stories, and legends are *shared*, and they require a social milieu in which to live. The role of language alone in Losev's formulation 'miraculous, personalistic history expressed in words' must place myth within the sphere of the social, as the very words used to give the 'history' are artefacts of a social condition. We receive our words from our always already pre-existent language community, and we learn to think through them. We receive through language a set of interpretive frames which precede and follow us.[30] So, while for Losev (as for the experience of the mythic subject) myths are without origin and autonomous ('myths have no authors'), emerging from his account we find a reliance on others for the initial and continuing articulation of the myth which structures the subject's view of the world. Not only is the subject's relationship to the myth conditioned by her relationship to other human beings, it helps teach her to which social groupings she belongs.

[26] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 47.
[27] Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 47.
[28] Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 137, n2.
[29] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171–2. [30] Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 15.

Mythic Identity

Even today, decades after the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*,[31] long after those first childhood readers have become adults with children of their own, one can still hear the question asked, by one adult to another, 'Which house are you?' Never mind that it is a question without a proper answer: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, to whose houses the question refers, does not exist. Nobody believes that it exists. None of us is ever going to sit under the Sorting Hat to learn our wizardly identity. And so the preoccupation with its answer is curious to say the least, not least for the extent of its appeal and the intensity with which its answer is contested. This intense sense of connection with a house is not simply the expression of a desire for affiliation or belonging. Each of the Hogwarts houses not only gives the young pupil in the novels (and the devoted fan in the everyday world) a name and a social circle, a colour and a mascot: the Sorting Hat also gives to each house member a set of ethical principles, a suite of personality traits held up as cardinal virtues, and a justification for certain kinds of conduct. Gryffindor prescribes a programme of bravery and forthrightness while Slytherin advocates ambition and cunning.[32] For many who have grown up with the novels and the films, the moral architecture of the Hogwarts Houses has become a compelling means of understanding and expressing the relative merits of certain ways of life. Even the generally wicked Slytherin have their champions among the otherwise virtuous and law-abiding public who value (with varying degrees of irony) their priority on getting things done, whatever the cost. The moral universe of this imaginary magical boarding school has become a way of understanding the world for those who have become subject to its account, a story 'to think and feel with'.

That every fan knows the stories to be *fictional*, and indeed shamelessly so, is not consequential to the power that they have over the fan's view of the world. For a reader under Rowling's spell, the world is painted in shades of Gryffindor crimson and Slytherin green. Rowling herself, author

[31] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

[32] The very real distress experienced by real-world fans who are sorted into the 'wrong' House using a web-based sorting app is testament to the deep affinity many have for the virtues upheld by their House of preference. For a lengthy conversation between fans about sorting using the 'official' sorting quiz, see Shana Chen et al., 'If I'm Unhappy with my Pottermore Sorting Hat Quiz Result, Is There a Way that I Can Re-Take the Test?', Quora, www.quora.com/If-Im-unhappy-with-my-Pottermore-Sorting-Hat-quiz-result-is-there-a-way-that-I-can-re-take-the-test (accessed 17 February 2021).

of the fictions, participates in the real-world myth-making. Following the 2016 general election in the United States, many witnessed with alarm the xenophobic policies which Donald Trump began to enact and saw echoes of the *Harry Potter* arch-villain Voldemort, alumnus of Slytherin House, whose own 'anti-muggle' ideology forms the backbone of the series' conflict. When one Twitter user quipped, 'Slytherin Alumni go far! CUT TO MONTAGE of Jared Kushner, Eric Trump, Donald Trump Jr',[33] Rowling replied, 'You've got to get the letter before you put on the hat'.[34] The moral architecture of the house *mythos* expands to include pathological categories: The administration's poorly conceived, uninspired, and generally dreadful policies do not allow its members, however awful, even to enter the creative and magical world of the *Harry Potter* 'wizarding world'.[35]

It might be overreaching to read the Hogwarts house system on an epistemological level with the myths that have characterised more 'organic' or historically rooted cultural and religious perspectives, if for no other reason than that the scheme of houses is of such limited scope. Indeed, the broadly composed and broadly intending myths of Williams' authorless variety are indeed wider in their embrace of the human condition. Myths ultimately aim to universal application. The 'myth' of the Hogwarts houses could be viewed as what Milton Scarborough calls a 'mythlette'. Scarborough develops an understanding of myth rooted in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, framing myth as an 'intention' or a phenomenological 'orientation for human existence'. Unlike the 'perceptual, affective, motor, and linguistic intentionalities' which otherwise structure our experience of the world, 'myth intends the life-world as a whole'.[36]

[33] Oliver Willis, @owillis, 'Slytherin Alumni go far! CUT TO MONTAGE of Jared Kushner, Eric Trump, Donald Trump Jr' Twitter, 27 March 2017, 5:23 GMT, https://twitter.com/owillis/status/846336901057523712 (accessed 27 February 2018).

[34] J. K. Rowling, @jk_rowling, 'You've got to get the letter before you put on the hat, Oliver. https://twitter.com/owillis/status/846336901057523712',Twitter, 27 March 2017, 5:33 GMT, https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/846339432152215552 (accessed 27 February 2018).

[35] The relationship between *mythos* and author has become fraught in recent years as contact between writers and their fans has grown more frequent and authors continue to add to their works after publication. In the case of Rowling, controversy has emerged over her comments regarding transgender and transsexual people, even going so far as to declare that there are none in the 'wizarding world'. These attitudes and comments have shattered the *mythos* for many fans, who had previously read the texts as liberating for those like themselves who suffered marginalisation on the basis of their sexual or gender identity. See, for instance, Adam Bloodworth, 'This Is How Trans Harry Potter Fans Feel about JK Rowling's Recent Tweets', *Huffington Post* (10 June 2020), www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/this-is-how-trans-harry-potter-fans-feel-after-jk-rowlings-tweets_uk_5edf4b14c5b6d09ac35f9521 (accessed 1 March 2021).

[36] Milton Scarborough, *Myth and Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 85.

Myth, as Scarborough understands it, is not contextual: it is all-encompassing. He distinguishes between 'myths' which are concerned with 'the whole of the life-world' and 'mythlettes' which are individual narratives within a more comprehensive 'myth'.[37] For example, the mythlette of Persephone, which both describes the origin of the seasons and through the Eleusinian Mysteries gave adherents a structure by which to understand death and rebirth, exists within the wider myth of the ancient Greek cosmos. As a mythlette, the Hogwarts' houses do not aspire to the comprehensive claims of *mythoi* such as the creation stories of the *Timaeus* or Genesis.

The myth of the Hogwarts houses also differs from 'organic' myths in that it is the sole creative product of one person. Rowling is, of course, a member of a culture, a literary tradition, and a language community. As a white, educated woman from the developed world, her creations are embedded in (even when they might aim to undermine and critique) the assumptions and structures of her culture. The boarding school experience of Hogwarts' pupils draws directly from a nostalgic tradition of English public school fiction, and Hogwarts owes the most profound debt to Le Guin's School for wizards on Roke in her *Earthsea* novels. Likewise, Ron, Harry, Hermione, and the rest are recognisable types, and they are surely based in Rowling's experience of childhood and the children in her life: they are not *sui generis* anomalies, but instead participate in the shared history and discourse of which Rowling is a part. However, the particular narrative devised by Rowling is a unique production to which she alone can lay final claim. This differs from the shared quality of organic myths, which though they may achieve a canonical articulation at the hands of an individual, a Hesiod or a Homer, the stories themselves are the shared property of a community or culture. This shared character is part of what makes organic myths powerful: that they are shared enables them to function as a common bond for members of the community. Even though traditional myths may be recited or performed only at certain sacred moments by certain authorised individuals, those individuals would not make any claim to their authorship: though they are, also, the articulations of human beings, organic myths attain the character of being origin-less or given. This is a part of what is intended by the Christian doctrine of scripture as divine revelation: though penned by human hand, they have an ultimacy and a contingency that renders them independent of any author and authoritative on their own terms.

[37] Scarborough, *Myth and Modernity*, 87.

So, while the account of virtue provided by the *Harry Potter* novels does not aspire to the universal character of a more comprehensive mythology, and though it is the product of one mortal hand rather than a common, immortal one, it still demonstrates something of the interpretive sensibility of a 'naturally occurring' myth. Like the myth of Persephone, as enacted in the Eleusinian Mysteries, which offered initiates not only a description of the origin of the seasons, but also a life-shaping lens through which to understand the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, the *Harry Potter* novels offer readers an interpretation both of society and themselves. Eleusinian initiates encounter the world as given and understand it through the myth expressed by the rites of the mysteries.[38] Readers of *Harry Potter* likewise encounter themselves and others through the myth of the houses and understand them as value-imbued and meaningful. While this interpretive encounter in the *Harry Potter* novels can be powerful, especially for the devoted fan, it stops short of approaching the transcendence to which the Persephone myth and some other bearers of the mythic sensibility gesture. So, though limited, mythopoieic fantasy can be seen to exhibit the same dynamic of interpretive presence as more general and widely intentioned myths.

Shaping Our Seeing

Mythopoieic fantasy is concerned not only with myths, but also with making, *poiesis*, which is, according to Tolkien, in fact a remaking: of what has been lost, corrupted, or misunderstood. This sense is rooted in Tolkien's understanding of one of the powers and purposes of the fairy story (to which fantasy and the mythopoieic are closely aligned): the happy ending, the 'eucatastrophe' of catharsis and revelation that serves to reframe the perceptions at the story's climax, both with regard to the story and to the world: 'in the "eucatastrophe" we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater – it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world'.[39] As a thoughtful and practicing Catholic layman, Tolkien conceived of his work as a participation in the divine creativity, and as such aspired for it to bear something of the revelatory power of the 'natural' and sacred myths of history, and most particularly, of course, those of Christianity. For Tolkien, the creativity entailed in his work developing

[38] Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Anchor, 2009), 54–7.
[39] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 11–70, 64.

the geography, history, and myths of Middle-earth was not only that of the artist but also that of the theologian.[40]

We can observe two layers of myth-creation in the structure of *The Lord of the Rings*: both the myths endemic *to* the narrative, which are known to the characters of the novel (such as the stories of Eärendil, traveling through the void bearing a Silmaril on his brow) and the myth constituted by the text *of* the narrative: *The Lord of the Rings* as myth itself. It can be said to be 'mythopoieic' both in the sense of making myths of which its characters are subjects and in the sense of being made as a narrative with which the reader can interpret the world external to the story. The text gestures to something beyond itself in the same way that more traditional mythic texts do. Put another way, not only does *The Lord of the Rings* contain myths, it bears a mythic presence itself, a numinous sensibility in the deep woods of Fangorn, on the hopeless slopes of Mount Doom, and in the unlooked-for adulation of the humble on the Fields of Cormallen after the fall of Barad Dûr. The same duality of endemic and constitutive myth can be found in the myths of the *Earthsea* novels of Le Guin: the heavy, earthbound mystery of the Place of the Tombs of Atuan and in the blurring bounds of earth, sea, knowledge, and unknowing at the edge of all things in *The Farthest Shore*. Though it is at times deferred, and the subjectivity of the myth is obscured by distance or by the intent of the author, the sense of a knowing presence is not absent from these fictional myths. Like the experience of presence reported by anthropologists who have spent time in the dark with Palaeolithic cave-paintings, very real yet with unknowable content, the subject still finds himself recognised by the otherness of the mythic.[41] In some sense it contains something of the source of one's self, an origin of sorts.

Myths are indissociable from origins. Though he is reticent to offer an exhaustive definition, when Mircea Eliade does attempt to draw some lines around what he means when he talks about myth, they reveal a form of story concerned with the meaning to be found in beginnings:

> [The] definition that seems least inadequate because most embracing is this: Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of the Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior,

[40] Zaleski and Zaleski, *The Fellowship*, 412, 422.
[41] Werner Herzog's documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) offers a compelling example.

> an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation' it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural beings.. . . [M]yths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness. . . of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred . . . into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World and makes it what it is today.[42]

These origins, then, are not primarily concerned with answering the question *how* as it is posed by the empirical sciences, but rather with the *what* of human experience. Like Losev, Eliade prefers a phenomenological approach. The mechanics and procedure are not at issue so much as, by narrating the origin, one narratively experiences the meaning of the thing originated. *Being*, in the mythical sense, is identical with *meaning*, and that meaning is experienced primarily in conducting oneself according to its account: 'Because myth relates the *gesta* [deeds] of Supernatural Beings and the manifestation of their sacred powers, it becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities'.[43] By patterning our lives after the account of a myth's narrative of origin, we are able both to approach the supernatural and to transcend the limited horizons of strictly material reality (whatever that might be) as well as experience the world in truth. Karen Armstrong synthesises Eliade's description into the succinct formula that a myth is the story of 'something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time' and the truth of which is discoverable only by acting upon that story through what she terms a 'program of action'.[44]

The union of narrative and action encompasses much of what is meant by the mythic sensibility. The myth not only describes the world but it also describes the subject of the myth (that is, the reader, the hearer, the devotee). The degree to which my actions bear out the archetypal and model actions of the myth is the degree to which I am judged good or not in the myth's lights. Performing the ritual correctly, conducting myself correctly in society: these are the fruit of the myth and the means by which I am able to understand my life and my self as meaningful or not. Though Eliade and Armstrong are primarily concerned with myth as it relates to explicitly 'religious' practice, this judgement on the subject is equally true of secular myths such as the myth of the American Dream: hard work leads

[42] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), 5–6.
[43] Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 6. [44] Armstrong, *The Case for God*, xi–xii.

ineluctably to material success, and sustained poverty is equated with laziness and lack of virtue. Though transcendence and the supernatural are categories associated closely with religion, the kind of value placed on material success in American culture and the status accorded to those who possess it, especially when it can be framed in terms of a 'rags to riches' narrative, is not unlike Otto's *numen*, representative of the transcendent impinging upon the immanent. The myth of the American Dream reveals the world to be meaningful by way of hard work and material security: your life has value and meaning when it conforms to these patterns and is meaningless and desperate if it does not.[45] Material security is identical with happiness and the Good Life.

Armstrong notes that 'the only way to assess the value and truth of a myth [is] to act upon it', and that 'if we failed to apply it to our situation, a myth would remain abstract and incredible'.[46] In enacting it, the myth becomes real and it lays a claim on our actions . In this sense, the mythic sensibility takes on something of the character of a game. The intentions, goals, rules, and scope of the game dictate what the players want, how they go about trying to achieve it, and the space in which they pursue these aims. Johan Huizinga describes it in this way: 'Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order.. . . Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it "spoils the game", robs it of its character and makes it worthless'.[47] The spoil-sport, in fact, illustrates the gamelike, fictive nature of myth as it appears in wider cultural frames. For example, regarding the houses of *Harry Potter*, to mock a spellbound fan by telling them how childish it is to identify so deeply with a children's book or simply to dismiss their affection and affiliation out of hand on the basis that the whole construct is a fiction 'spoils the game' (and likely would lead to hurt feelings). Similarly, to view the ritual acts of the Christian liturgy outside the 'rules of the game' by which they are played is to spoil them. Demanding to slice into the Host in order to find the flesh inside is a violation of the rules and a spoiling of the game. As Huizinga points out, conscientious objectors spoil the game of noble

[45] One has only to think of the reflexive attitude of many Americans to the lives of the poor in the developing world: conditioned by unnumbered television commercials calling for donations to help African children, the people of Africa are assumed to live lives of wholesale privation and to be entirely without joy.

[46] Armstrong, *The Case for God*, xii.

[47] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1950), 10.

warfare and revolutionaries spoil the game of a changeless social order. However, it is not only the order created by the horizons of the myth that render it gamelike.

Play is also inherently imaginative and creative. Not only are the rules fictive, in the sense that they are contingent to the game and not necessary to human existence, but games themselves almost always involve a further imagined component.[48] Whether it is the importance or value placed on the goal (within the horizons of the game itself, the outcome is of utmost importance and is unrelated to any external reward or profit to be had) or it is an imagined world of faeries and wizards which constitutes the game's setting, a certain playfulness with the conditions of reality is necessary for the game *as game* to function. Within the boundaries of the game's order, the world is to be discerned in a certain way. Certain places are taboo, whether they be beyond the boundary lines painted in the grass or behind the doors of the Holy of Holies. A myth establishes a relationship between the subject and the world in which we live in the same way that a game establishes a relationship between the player and the world in which it is played. Certain people have privileged status, in the role of referee, captain, priest, or prophet. Though these roles exist only on the terms of the rules of the game/myth, which is to say in the imaginations of the participants rather than in any given or a priori way, within the context of the game, their reality is absolute. In its enactment, the myth shapes its subjects' apprehension of the world and it conditions its subjects' interpretation of it. In this sense, the game becomes the real agent.

Hans-Georg Gadamer observes how the game, in fact, *plays* the *players*. The game itself takes on the status of a subject: 'all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game is the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players.. . . Whoever "tries" is in fact the one who is tried. The real subject of the game . . . is not the player but instead the game itself'.[49] The subjectivity of the game is of crucial importance in the development of our concept of the mythic sensibility. Gadamer is primarily concerned with play as it is 'transformed into structure' in the form of a work of art.[50] However, taken in the

[48] Play is vital to the concept of myth in more ways than discussed in this book. The playfulness with 'reality' is exhibited both in traditional mythic narratives (the combination and re-combination of species and natural forms, creative and inventive magics, etc.) and in the being-played aspect of being 'subject' to a myth. Chapter 2 will develop at greater length both the mythic and interpretive role played by the 'play concept'.

[49] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 106.

[50] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 110.

context of interpreting our experience of the world and the self, Gadamer's observation becomes equally applicable to the mythic sensibility. The work of art and its interpretation entail the viewer/interpreter's participation in a game structured by the work of art's self-presentation. For instance, appreciation of a stage play requires that the viewer participate according to the rules of the game the play represents: the actors are to be taken for the characters they portray, the set is to be taken for the setting of the story, and the world of the play itself is (usually) to be taken as entirely distinct from the world outside. The game of 'play-watching' is the necessary condition for understanding what the play means and what it is saying. In the human being's interpretation of the world, myths can be understood as this same kind of game. Possessed by the rules and the structure of the game, the subject interprets her experience according to those rules and the imaginative world created by them. The encounter with the world entails an encounter with the subjectivity of the myth, the subject which both interprets the world to the human being and which interprets the human being to herself.

Conclusion

Beginning in *The Wee Free Men*, Pratchett offers his take on the mythic dimensions of childhood, charting the growing up of Tiffany Aching as she learns how to be a witch.[51] It turns out that witching in the Discworld looks a lot like George Herbert's ideal of the Country Parson: going round the houses, offering a listening ear and pastoral care, and mediating the supernatural to a grateful populace. The most senior of the witches of the mountains, Granny Weatherwax, offers Tiffany advice on how to help the people she serves, and like many things to do with magic, pastoral care, and the development of a meaningful relationship with the world, the advice comes down to the kinds of stories that Tiffany tells. Stuck on the importance of telling the 'truth' (that is, the truth as logical inquiry and empirical science would have it, the *logos*-centric approach), Tiffany bridles at Granny Weatherwax's methods: '"But you told Mr Umbril the shoemaker that his chest pains will clear up if he walks to the waterfall at Tumble Crag every day for a month and throws three shiny pebbles into the pool for the water sprites! That's not doctoring!" Granny replies, "No, but he thinks it is. The man spends too much time hunched up. A five-mile walk win the fresh air every day for a month will see him right as

[51] Terry Pratchett, *The Wee Free Men* (London: Doubleday, 2003).

rain"'.[52] The stories we tell reveal the world as meaningful in ways that change our behaviour and change the way we value things. Mr Umbril lives in the conditions of a *mythos* that includes water sprites but not bacteria: the stories he has been told about the composition of the world has made certain actions understandable and others incomprehensible. The story Granny Weatherwax tells participates in the *mythos* to which he is subject so that she can draw out the most healthful meaning to the world and Mr Umbril's actions. Tiffany, too, learns to be less confident in the line between *logos* and *mythos*, as the two bleed together in an act of meaning-making and care. This is the play of mythopoiesis.

Myth-making is neither a thing of the past nor a matter of deception. Rather, it represents a fundamental aspect of the human encounter with the world: we tell stories in order to encounter the world as meaningful. For Tolkien, it entails an explicit appeal to or depiction of the supernatural, the magical, the elf-patterned. It is that very aspect of Tolkien's mythopoeia that *does* the mythic work: by allowing into our vision the possibility of magic, the imaginative language of the elves' 'secret looms' and the heavens as a 'jewelled tent', we are able to see things aright and ultimately to experience the eucatastrophe that is for Tolkien the highest vocation of the fairy story, the myth-woven work of human subcreation.[53] Authors of mythopoieic fantasy such as Tolkien, Rowling, and Pratchett each in their own way testify to the power of stories to shape our encounter with the world, and mythopoieic fantasy more than other genres of fiction explicitly explores the possibilities of playing with the contours of our mythic sensibilities. By building on Tolkien's insights into the power of the supernatural in mythic narrative to re-introduce the numinous into our perceptions, it becomes possible to discern how this mythic sensibility appears beyond the horizons of the fantastical.

Reflecting on Eliade's account of myth as disclosing the meaningfulness of the world, especially as discovered through action, we can discern a sense in which the mythic concerns that meaning-full encounter world and encounter with the self. There is also a sense in which finding both the world and the self to be meaningful itself also offers intimations of something transcendent and possibly holy. Gadamer's use of the idea of play and presence in the interpretation of the work of art and applying it to this myth-mediated encounter with the world reveals how a *mythos* functions as an interpreter, disclosing the meaning of the world and the self by

[52] Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 202–3.
[53] Tolkien, 'Mythopoeia', 86–7.

means of the rules of its 'game'. The *mythos* interprets the world to the subject and interprets the subject to herself. Our encounter with the world is mediated by such mythic sensibilities which manifest to us as a hermeneutic presence, interpreting the world in terms of the mythic narrative. Mythopoieic fantasy helps demonstrate how such mythic sensibilities are more or less naturalised, more or less 'shamelessly fictive', and so more or less available to scrutiny and critique. The *mythoi* bearing such mythic sensibilities are themselves made things, however artificial or natural they may appear. With Tolkien, we can affirm that this making is done 'by the law in which we're made', inviting our reflection on how this making, whether 'found within recorded time' or not, corresponds to, or indeed participates in God's own creativity, in and through the created world of which we are a part. In what follows, we will explore how the mythic sensibility of which Tolkien and his circle were so intimately aware, emerges throughout human beings' way of telling stories in order to encounter the world as meaningful, and how used or misused, this vocation opens us to the encounter with the holy, with God's own creative work.

'Mythic' and 'mythopoiesis', therefore, will be used to describe not a genre of narrative, but rather any narrative that carries a mythic sensibility, that bears for a mythic subject a hermeneutic presence. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, very nearly *any* story can be mythic in this way, if it proves able to provide for the mythic subject or community a compelling (or even seductive) account of the meaning-full-ness of the self, the social milieu, or the world. 'Mythopoiesis' describes the human faculty of making stories that exhibit this dynamic of conditioning the 'rules of the game', that with something like the numinous quality of the holy reveal reality not to be a chaotic flux of sensory input, but a meaningful world. A *mythos*, in this sense, is nothing other than such a narrative account of the world, be it a work of fiction, the implicit stories of a culture that account for its social imaginary, or the words of scripture directing the faithful to understand and perceive the world in a certain way. Words such as myth, *mythos*, mythology, and the like have been used in myriad ways by scholars of diverse disciplines, from social anthropology to literature studies to comparative religion to business strategy and self-help. Each is likely to use the word in (sometimes drastically) different ways, but all tend toward this dynamic of meaningful encounter with the world, and it is the dynamics of this encounter which we will explore. And though the content of our mythopoiesis may vary widely in content, quality, and ethical character, it is the contention of this book that as we 'make in the law

by which we're made', mythic sensibility is finally only understood in the light of the Triune God.

In the liturgy of Holy Communion, the gifts of the people are often commended to the altar with the words, 'All things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee'.[54] Losev speaks of the mythic as 'miraculous' and 'personalistic' inasmuch as it appears to the mythic subject that the *mythos* exists of itself and connects the subject's experience to history in a meaningful way. In the course of the *poiesis* of mythopoiesis, something new has emerged which reveals the world as meaningful in a new and exciting way. The hermeneutic presence of the myth is experienced as a new thing, beyond the materials given, a *novum* resulting from the act of mythopoiesis. In light of the commendation of the gifts quoting 1 Chronicles, Christian reflection on mythopoiesis invites the question, 'does the *novum* found in myth-making also come of God?' Or, put another way, how is a Christian theology of mythopoiesis to speak of the relationship between human making and God's gift of being to the creation? This is the subject of the next chapter.

[54] These words do not appear in *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England, though they are included in the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* in the Episcopal Church, and the form is used in many Anglican Churches.