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Subverting Mythopoeic Fantasy: Miyuki Miyabe's *The Book of Heroes*

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Abstract

Introduces us to Miyuki Miyabe, who deliberately rings changes on Tolkien’s concept of sub-creation in his thought-provoking *The Book of Heroes*, a story that turns the virtues of storytelling itself on their heads.

Additional Keywords

Miyabe, Miyuki. *The Book of Heroes*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of sub-creation



SUBVERTING MYTHOPOEIC FANTASY:
MIYUKI MIYABE'S
THE BOOK OF HEROES

GRZEGORZ TRĘBICKI

"All stories are the sin of their weaver."
The Lament of the King in Yellow

AS MAREK OZIEWICZ OBSERVES, "THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT among scholars today that Tolkien and Lewis started a new genre especially steeped in myth" (65). This genre, perhaps most adequately referred to as "secondary world fantasy,"¹ has become one of the most popular types of contemporary "fantastic" writing, at the same time playing an essential role in what is sometimes described as "twentieth century mythological revival" or "twentieth-century rehabilitation of myth."² The mythological affiliations of fantasy as well as the cultural, social, psychological, and ideological significance of the phenomenon has been extensively discussed by numerous researchers and critics. We might mention here, by way of example, inspiring discussions of the presence and function of mythic structures in particular fantasy texts (notably those by J.R.R. Tolkien or Ursula K. Le Guin, who have become universally regarded as archetypal mythopoeic fantasy writers) by Jeanne M. Walker, Tom Shippey, Pauline Archell-Thompson, Milena Bianga, or Michał Stawicki, and also more synthetic and theoretical treatments of mythopoeic fantasy as a whole provided by Oziewicz³ or Le Guin herself.⁴

¹ Term used, for example, by Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer 3-28; Zahorski and Boyer 56-81; Manlove 4; and Trębicki, *Worlds So Strange* passim. It conveniently refers to Tolkien's original notion of a "Secondary World" ("On Fairy-Stories" passim).

² See, especially, Oziewicz, chapter 4.

³ Marek Oziewicz's *One Earth, One People* is probably the most comprehensive and ambitious discussion of contemporary mythopoeic fantasy in various literary, anthropological, cultural, social, and psychological contexts up to date. My summary of the core features of mythopoeic fantasy in section two is primarily based on this study.

⁴ Several interesting insights on the use of archetypes and myths in fantastic literature have been included in Le Guin's collection of essays *The Language of the Night*. Most relevant to the subject are especially the essays "Dreams Must Explain Themselves" and "Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction."

The present article ventures to discuss a recent novel by the Japanese writer Miyuki Miyabe, *The Book of Heroes* (published in English in 2009). This interesting work, while retaining the core assumptions of mythopoeic fantasy, at the same time considerably breaches or actually subverts its semantic and ideological patterns.

My subsequent discussion will be divided into two principal parts. In the following section I will attempt to specify my understanding of mythopoeic fantasy and summarize its predominating conventions and meanings. In the next section I will discuss how these paradigms are transformed in Miyabe's novel.

Mythopoeic Fantasy

Although it might be difficult to find a contemporary fantasy book completely devoid of some mythic elements, it is, on the other hand, by no means justifiable to qualify all books of the genre as mythopoeic. In the present section I will try to delimit mythopoeic fantasy in the true sense and distinguish it from numerous works in which mythic elements are applied more superficially.

In the first place it might be useful to draw a line between what I have approximated in another publication as the "episodic" and the "structural" mythopoeia (Trębicki, "Mythic Elements" 32).

In the case of episodic mythopoeia, mythic motifs appear either with a low intensity or in a way that is relatively fragmented and isolated. They constitute a purely scenographic element or simply inform the plot. By way of example, we can mention here numerous "contemporary" fantasy works,⁵ set in our "primary" world, in which the textual reality has been enriched by various fantastical elements, usually borrowed from particular mythologies or folk traditions. Thus, Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys* (2005) includes frequent references to African myths and legends. The protagonists of *The Art of Arrow Cutting* (1997) by Stephen Dedman have to fight demons of traditional Japanese mythology. Creatures of Irish mythology invade ordinary reality in *War for the Oaks* (2001) by Emma Bull or *The Wild Reel* (2004) by Paul Brandon. In all those texts the primary function of the mythic motifs is to evoke a sense of wonder in the reader or make the plot more attractive. The texts in question offer no complex ontological systems of their own and when they employ the existing ones, they tend to rely on the superficial attractiveness of various mythic elements rather than try to convey their deeper significance and original meanings. They rarely attempt to offer "a holistic vision" of the universe (Oziewicz 71) or reenact the cosmic

⁵ This short description of "contemporary" fantasy works is based on my discussion of the possible genre of the contemporary magical novel included in Trębicki, *Worlds So Strange*, chapter 5, section 2.

struggle between good and evil. They are driven by the conventions of the romance, the detective story or the adventure story rather than by mythical archetypes.

The case of works such as Steven Erikson's *The Malazan Book of The Fallen* (1999-) set in autonomous secondary universes is, perhaps, a bit more complex. On the surface, "the myth as a thematic motif is constantly recurring there, and the anthropological interest in different peoples and races, existing within the world of the cycle, their beliefs, customs and mythology is evident" (Trębicki, "Mythic Elements" 37n34). On the other hand, the cycle presents, in fact, a reductionist rather than holistic attitude towards myth (compare Oziewicz *passim*). Here, "it does not convey transcendental truths with the help of symbols and archetypes, but rather obscures 'real' historical (ancient as they might be) events" (37n34). It should be also emphasized that gods or other supernatural beings, although technically transcendental, "in fact belong to the sphere of perfectly mundane pragmatism and differ from mortals only in the scope of power" (37n34). Above all (like the "contemporary" fantasy texts mentioned earlier) the cycle does not offer a holistic, ethical vision of the world, a feeling of moral unity which can (and must) be pursued by the protagonists in their quests.

Having thus excluded fantasy texts which only superficially employ mythic motifs, let us now focus on works which are characterized by structural mythopoeia. Here, "all mythic and ontological motifs constitute the core of both the presented world's and the plot's construction" (Trębicki, "Mythic Elements" 32). Only those texts, in my opinion, fully deserve to be qualified as mythopoeic fantasy in the true sense. This class of works is mythopoeic, as Oziewicz states,

not only because it is written in the language of myth—through symbols and archetypes—or because it reflects the author's preference for mythic materials and structures; it is also mythopoeic because it is written in "the poetics of myth," with a specific attitude to its material. If myths can be distinguished from legends, fairy-tales, fables and other types of stories by the fact that they were, at some point, believed to be true, mythopoeic fantasy takes over this attitude. It is, as Jared Lobdell puts it, essentially a "believing fantasy"—a soul-nurturing, integrative type of literature [...]. [I]t is a visionary genre: a story about what it is to be human, to live in the world, to participate in a value system [...]. And since for mythopoeic fantasists our humanness is to great extent constituted by the recognition of the ethical dimensions of existence, mythopoeic fantasy is a story about the protagonists' struggle to meet specific moral imperatives in the secondary world; the story which suggests why similar imperatives in the primary world demand certain kinds of behavior. (84)

Obviously, mythopoeic fantasy does not simply quote or rewrite unreflectively traditional mythological material. Instead, it artistically reworks, re-imagines, and reconfigures mythic elements—archetypes, plot structures, characters, events, or motifs (Oziewicz 84). As a result, it creates new meanings which, while structurally relying on traditional mythic patterns, are culturally useful and cognitively inspiring in the modern context.

So understood, mythopoeic fantasy encompasses a broad range of very diverse texts, but certain prevailing features can be easily approximated. Mythopoeic fantasy “provides an imaginative experience of a world in which metaphysical concepts are objective realities and the protagonists’ responses to those realities reflect on their lives” (Oziewicz 84). It strongly relies on Tolkien’s concepts of fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation but it also, at the same time “feeds the belief in the ultimate conquest of death based on the perception of the essential oneness and continuity of life. It affirms the value of life based on ideals and is concerned with the good of the holistically conceived universe on all levels” (Oziewicz 85). Thus, mythopoeic fantasy presents meaningful universes in which the protagonists take part in the struggle between good and evil, waged on a transcendental scale, whose outcome is frequently bound to determine the fate of the whole microcosm. The plots

in most cases can be seen as a combination of the quest and *bildungsroman* structures. Its quest-and-mature plot usually departs from a certain violation of a natural order, an intrusion of the supernatural on the life of the protagonist, who is violently wrenched from ordinariness and faced with overwhelming demands and shattering responsibility. The narrative situation is usually that of dire danger on the global, universal, cosmic scale into which the protagonist gets involved through a concatenation of events. (Oziewicz 86)

The plots of mythopoeic fantasy “must end happily” (Oziewicz 87), but in a Tolkienesque rather than Hollywood fashion. Good triumphs over evil and justice is done to all, but this victory is often paid for with great sacrifice and personal loss. Nevertheless, the protagonists are able to achieve a kind of inner harmony, a new, truly elevated status, which enables them to enact the renewal of the microcosm and restore the original order of the universe.

Among most notable mythopoeic fantasy books, apart from the seminal texts by J.R.R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*, 1954-1956 and *Silmarillion*, 1977), C.S. Lewis (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, 1960-1956) or Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Earthsea Cycle*, 1969-2001) we can mention, by way of example, also works by Lloyd Alexander (*Prydain Chronicles*, 1964-1973), Madeleine L’Engle (*Time Quartet*, 1962-1986), Patricia McKillip (*The Riddlemaster Trilogy*, 1976-1979), Stephen Donaldson (*The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever*, 1977-), Tad Williams (*Memory*,

Sorrow And Thorn, 1988-1993), Guy Gavriel Kay (*Fionavar Tapestry*, 1984-1986) or Tanith Lee (*Volkhavaar*, 1977). All these books—as well as many others—testify to the successful revival of mythopoeic literature in the twentieth century.

It also seems that within this broadly drawn collection we could distinguish texts which might be additionally labelled as “self-conscious mythopoeic fantasy.” Unsurprisingly, the names of Tolkien, Lewis and Le Guin again surface here. The above authors not only consciously employ mythic patterns to create their meanings, they also overtly comment on the significance of myth and myth-making both in individual and social life.⁶ Furthermore, the very texts themselves more or less directly draw the reader’s attention to their mythopoeic content, emphasizing its relevance.⁷

Perhaps a bit paradoxically, Miyabe’s novel clearly falls into the category of self-conscious mythopoeic fantasy. It not only employs mythic structures; it also openly makes the myth (or, more precisely, following the myth) its main subject. In many respects, it is a quintessential mythopoeic fantasy, as it follows most of the narrative patterns summarized above. Yet, at the same time, it appears disturbingly subversive towards some of the traditional messages of the genre. In the subsequent section, we will take a closer look at the book and discuss it in reference to prevailing concepts of mythopoeic fantasy (particularly those introduced by Tolkien or Lewis).

Subverting the Patterns

On the surface, *The Book of Heroes* appears to be a typical initiation-quest fantasy. The book recounts the story of Yuriko Morisaki, an eleven year old contemporary Japanese schoolgirl who lives with her parents and her elder brother, Hiroki. Yuriko’s peaceful life gets shattered when one day Hiroki unexpectedly stabs two of his classmates (one of whom subsequently dies) and then disappears without a trace. This is the start of a very hard time in Yuriko’s life: her parents are being continually questioned by the police and pursued by

⁶ See, especially, Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” and Le Guin, “Dreams Must Explain Themselves” and “Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction.”

⁷ See, for example, Stawicki as he comments on the prominence of myth in Le Guin’s *Earthsea Cycle*: “[myths] are recalled, sung, commented. In myths the meaning of events is searched for, in myths guidance and reliance is found. Myth renders to the wizards, sailors, fishermen and farmers of Earthsea the true, not only psychological or ethical, but also factual knowledge. Erreth-Akbe must have existed, if his magical ring is found by Ged. The mythical Segoy, the creator of the world appears in Tehanu in the shape of the dragon. The mythical genealogy of Arren [...] defines his fate, his destination as the future king. [...] In the world of Earthsea myth is the beginning of human life, it shapes it and determines its end. Human life is always confronted with the truth of myth—it can confirm it or deny and it also continues it and develops” (115-116; trans. mine).

the media, and the girl herself gets stigmatized at school as the sister of a murderer. When she loses any hope of finding Hiroki, suddenly one of her brother's books speaks to her in her mind and thus the girl enters the fantastical world she never suspected to exist.

The book, an ancient dictionary (called by its friends "Ayu") tells Yuriko what has really occurred. Her brother had acquired the forbidden and dangerous *Book of Elem*, an incarnation of the eternal story or myth sometimes called the "Hero" and sometimes "The King in Yellow," which possessed the boy, made him commit the crime and then took over his body. Yuriko at first cannot completely grasp Ayu's explanations but agrees to take it to the house of Ichiro Minochi, her long-deceased relative, from which Hiroki took both Ayu and *the Book of Elem*. There the girl meets some other books, even wiser and more powerful than Ayu, which start to acquaint her with the basic principles of the reality she has entered.

The very concept of "myth" or "story" lies at the core of the ontology of the fictional universe. The physical world as we perceive it turns out to be just a single "region" within a much larger "Circle." The Circle, as the wisest of the books, the Sage, informs Yuriko "is born of words. It only begins to exist the moment men first attempt to understand the natural world around them. It is power, it is a desire, it is hope, wishes, and prayer" (63). The Circle is made up of all myths, all stories created by man, and is much larger than physical reality. In other words, it is, in a way, within the Circle that human souls and hearts really reside. "It is within this Circle that stories cycle" (64). If the stories stop to cycle, the Circle is destroyed, and, consequently, "all culture and civilization would vanish from the world" (69). The Circle consists also of other regions—worlds created by human imagination, especially by writers, between which the initiated ones can travel more or less freely.

In the whole Circle there is one particular, central place—the source and origin of all stories, from which they come and to which they return. It is called "the Nameless Land" and it is also the place "where the great story known as the Hero was imprisoned" (65), guarded by the "nameless devout."

This is, obviously, an extremely mythopoeic vision—in Miyabe's universe myths, stories lie at the core of all creation not only metaphorically but, in fact, quite literally. The world as it really is, the ultimate reality of the Circle, after all, is technically composed of stories. Here all stories automatically become true in the primary, original way, as Tolkien phrased it in the Epilogue to his seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories."

At first sight the book seems to glorify myths and mythmaking—in a way largely analogous to those implied in Lewis's, Tolkien's, or Le Guin's writings. However, when we look more closely into this vision, disturbing elements begin to surface.

The main antagonist of the novel—the Hero—is the archetype of all heroic myths, the most powerful of the stories in the Cycle that exists in numerous incarnations and continually affects both the cycle and—indirectly—the physical reality. It is, as the Sage explains

the story that is the source of all the greatest deeds. The heroes who exist in [our] Cycle all spring from this original story. [...] When people in the world do something great or upstanding, they are called heroes [...] and when their stories are told over the years, it means a copy of the Hero has been created. Because these copies of the Hero are themselves stories, they in turn feed the strength of the original story. [...] As history progresses, all manner of heroes are born and their great deeds are told of, and told of again, increasing the Hero's power. (62)

Unfortunately, there exists also a dark side of the Hero because

if a beautiful, noble story shines very brightly, then the shadow it casts must be also very deep. This shadow too is the Hero. Like a coin, a story must have a front and back, right and wrong. Light and darkness always exist together, and there is no one who might separate them. [...] In the original story of the Hero, there is darkness and evil in equal measure to light and good. Both sides grow together in a contest that continues to this day. [...] And if the dark side of the source should deepen, so too does the dark side of the copies deepen and grow stronger. (62-3)

Thus, the Hero is an extremely dangerous story. As Ayu states, its real nature is conflict. "It manipulates people, starts wars, turns the world on its head" (39). Therefore, it must be at least partly subdued and imprisoned in the Nameless Land, since "[w]hile you cannot sweep away the light and the dark that already exists in this Circle, you can prevent them from further increasing" (63).

This concept is—in a manner of speaking—rather anti-heroic. Although it is acknowledged that the Hero is the source of many good and brave deeds, this myth (as well as all the stories which derive from it) is primarily perceived as an immense threat, which constantly brings conflict into the world and makes it a violent place, destroying its balance. We can observe a total reversal of the traditional pattern here—in the works of Lewis, Tolkien, and their followers heroism (despite occasional downfalls or the weaknesses of particular heroes) is something unquestioningly noble and desirable. Mythic heroic figures are set as ideals to be followed. In the universe created by Miyabe there is, in fact, no greater sin than following a myth. It is quite imaginable that *The Lord of The Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia* might be, in fact, regarded here too as copies of the

Hero, perhaps much more genuine (and therefore more dangerous) than the fictitious *Book of Elem* which possessed Hiroki.

The idea is very confusing for Yuriko (as well as for the reader) who constantly refuses to grasp the truth of the Hero. To make things easier for her, the Sage proposes that the good of the Hero be called “hero” and its dark side “The King in Yellow” (from the title of the book which turned out to be one of the most successful copies of the original story).⁸ Yet, he (and other subsequent guides in Yuriko’s quest) constantly emphasizes that the two are inseparable.

Already at this stage also the ontological anti-dualism of *The Book of Heroes* manifests itself clearly, contradicting and, perhaps intentionally, engaging in an open polemic with traditional ontologies of mythopoeic fantasy. The protagonist’s role is not to take part in the eternal struggle between good and evil and contribute to the victory of the light over the darkness, but rather to help moderate the intensity of this conflict. There will be no Narnian “last battle” here—the good cannot really triumph over evil since these are just the two sides of the same coin. The escalation of the conflict can result only in the destruction of the whole Circle.

The Sage also tells Yuriko about her brother’s downfall. To break free from its prison in the Nameless Land, the Hero tries to lure people who search for him, possess them, and make them provoke a conflict. Then it subsequently consumes them entirely and its power gradually rises. Hiroki proves to be the “last vessel”—the Summoner who gave the Hero the final amount of power needed to shatter its bonds. Then the Hero took the Summoner’s body to manifest itself in the Circle. Thus Hiroki has, in a way, become the King in Yellow.

As Hiroki’s closest relative Yuriko accepts the position of “allcaste”—a person traditionally assisting in recapturing the Hero, hoping to save Hiroki at the same time. As an allcaste she receives the glyph—a special mark on her forehead that enables her to travel between regions and equips her with special magical powers.

Yuriko first travels to the Nameless Land, accompanied by Ayu. This strange place is inhabited by thousands of the nameless devout—once humans, now featureless figures, deprived of even slightest traces of their former

⁸ Interestingly, this refers to a real-world book—*The King in Yellow* by Robert W. Chambers, published in 1895. Chambers’s collection of supernatural tales features “an eponymous fictional book, a verse-play which drives its readers into madness and even suicide” (*Encyclopedia of Fantasy* 177). Chambers’s work has influenced many writers, including H.P. Lovecraft, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Stephen King and, obviously, may have been known to Tolkien and Lewis. Chambers is the only real-world author mentioned by name in Miyabe’s novel and his work appears as an obvious source of inspiration for *The Book of Heroes*.

individuality, who have become guardians of the Hero as a penance for the sin they committed. It is they who provide the protagonist with further details concerning the ontology as well as the eschatology of the fictional reality.

The task of the nameless devout is twofold. Apart from guarding the Hero, they have to eternally turn the two Great Wheels of Inculpation, which “send out the stories and receive them back, maintaining the flow of narratives” (106) and thus preserve proper balance in the Circle. “The Pillar of Heaven, which sends out the stories, offers joy with its song, while the Pillar of the Earth, which winds the stories back in, offers solace” (108). It is worth noting at this point that emphasis put on “joy” and “solace” seems to be an intentional reference to Tolkien’s ideas, included, for example, in his essay “On Fairy-Stories.”

However, when the Hero is released in the Circle, it will seek energy for more stories. The stories will fly from the wheel to join the Hero. As a consequence, the right wheel—the Pillar of Heaven—will spin faster and faster until the nameless devout can no longer keep up. At the same time, the other wheel—the Pillar of Earth—will slow down as the Hero will use up all the stories within the confines of the Circle and they will not return to the Nameless Land. In the end, “once the Great Wheel of Earth has stopped spinning, the free-spinning Great Wheel of Heaven would also slow, eventually joining in stillness” (109). This would mean the end of the Circle. “The moment before the Circle stopped, the Pillar of the Earth would shriek, singing its song louder than any song heard before. This cry is the message to those who live in the Circle that their world is ending. Some have likened it to the sounding of the angels’ trumpets” (109). Then the surviving nameless devout would wait for the next Circle to be born.

Yuriko also inquires about the nameless devout themselves. She is confused to find out that the sin they have committed is simply storytelling. Her new guide, the Archdevout, tells her that stories are lies. “It is the creation of things which do not exist. And the telling of these things. The lies become record, form which memories are born. But they are still lies.” On the other hand, “without these lies, men could not live. Their world could not stand. Stories are vital to [human] kind. They need these lies to be who they are. Yet lies are lies, and to lie is a sin” (106). This makes the very position of the nameless devout paradoxical. The Archdevout states that

[b]y turning the Great Wheels of Inculpation we provide the lies that the world of men seek. We work always, that the flow never be interrupted. It is both penance for our sins and the creation of new sin. [...] Those of us who have become the nameless devout are guilty of committing the sin of

storytelling when we were men ourselves. This is why we now serve to bear the burden of the story's sin for all those who live in the Circle. (106)

This explanation shocks Yuriko for whom (like the typical reader of mythopoeic fantasy nurtured on Tolkien's ideas) "stories are fun. They're beautiful. They make people happy" (106). When Yuriko enquires "what about all the good that's in the stories?", the Archdevout somewhat ambiguously concedes: "Yes, there is much good in stories. They fill the Circle with light. But [...] it is not so here. Not in the nameless land. Because this is the origin of the stories, the origin of lies" (107).

Even more shocking is the fate of the nameless devout, perhaps best summarized in this dialogue between Yuriko and the Archdevout:

"We are remains of those men who sought, in their lives, to live a story. We are guilty of the great sin of living lies and trying to make those lies real. This is why we lost ourselves and became the one that is many and the many that are one—the nameless devout [...]."

Now an even sharper need pierced Yuriko's chest: a question that demanded an answer. "When will you be forgiven?"

"Who would forgive men of the sin of living a lie? The gods? The gods are themselves no more than a story made by men, and lies cannot forgive lies, let alone absolve us of them."

"You mean you're all stuck here forever? For eternity?"

"There is no time in this land. An eternity is like moment, and a moment like an eternity. We are only here *now*. There is no *then*." (107-108)

Before we follow Yuriko on her quest, let us shortly reflect on the implications of this world order in reference to traditional systems of mythopoeic fantasy, which it seems to contradict on several levels.

First of all, the vision is atheistic or even—in the most general, philosophical way—arreligious. There are no ultimate transcendental forces in this world, no Aslan, no Tolkienesque Providence, no Heaven or Hell. The Circle seems to be largely a self-contained and self-regulating mechanism, created by human imagination. The ultimate reality is, arguably, of metaphysical nature, but it is described in pragmatic rather than moral terms. In comparison to Lewis's or Tolkien's Christian-inspired universes, it is also very static: it does not offer a promise of paradise, salvation, final triumph of good over evil, or even final triumph of justice. As we can see in the example of the nameless devout it does not offer redemption either. There is not much hope for Eucatastrophe here.

On the other hand, as the system of values of the book emphasizes the necessity of maintaining a certain balance, its ontology breeds inescapable associations with Le Guin's *Earthsea Cycle* and her idea of Equilibrium. I will

argue, however, that this similarity is largely superficial. Le Guin's vision while also non-deistic in the strict meaning of this word, at the same time retains some special metaphysical, almost religious quality. Equilibrium is more than a technical concept—it can be understood as an ultimate harmony and, even if it is not religious in the traditional way, it is definitely highly spiritual. The protagonists of *The Earthsea Cycle* (especially of its three initial volumes), while following their quests to preserve Equilibrium, do not only serve strictly pragmatic purposes but also perform certain semi-religious rites, enabling them to achieve an elevated spiritual awareness as well as the state of unity with their world and its needs. Le Guin's vision is deeply moral and very coherent ethically.

On the contrary, the system of values in *The Book of Heroes*—especially if we take as a point of reference traditional western morality, which is like mythopoeic fantasy rooted in Christian ideas—seems confusing, ambivalent, and perhaps even incoherent. This is, obviously, not to say that the book is immoral or nihilistic. When it comes to the description of the more mundane plane, of physical actions the particular individuals take, the plot very much conforms to the traditional values of mythopoeic fantasy—loyalty, bravery, self-sacrifice, pity, mercy, friendship, honesty, resolve to work for the common good and protect the helpless, etc. But on a more metaphysical level things are not that simple. The desire to perform good deeds—or even, in fact, good deeds themselves—can lead to evil consequences. As in the very figure of the Hero itself—the light and the dark are inseparable. Myths inspire people, but following the myth can result in horrible disasters.

The text's attitude towards storytelling is, perhaps, most puzzling. People need stories as stories bring joy and solace, but creating them is the worst of sins. They are inherently ambivalent and they cannot be completely redeemed. There is no place for the liberating joy and innocent, well-deserved pride of a Tolkienesque sub-creator here.

During her stay in the Nameless Land Yuriko meets a nameless devout who seems to have preserved some fragments of his former self as well as some human emotions. He is also mysteriously driven towards the girl. As a result, he is declared by other nameless devout as "defiled" and "incomplete," expelled from the land, and made to accompany Yuriko on her quest. The girl, who feels great sympathy and pity towards him, names him "Sky."

At the next stage of her mission, Yuriko returns to her world to find out more about Hiroki's seduction by *the Book of Elem*. Her enquiry reveals that Hiroki tried to protect Michiru—a girl with an ugly scar, who was bullied by other students. Although he managed to improve Michiru's situation, he soon himself fell victim to the persecution from the two of his schoolmates who were inspired and backed up by an influential teacher. Filled with anger and the

feeling of helplessness and injustice done to him, he was easily possessed by the King in Yellow and took revenge on his friends.

While Yuriko is conducting her investigation, accompanied by Ayu and Sky, she is unexpectedly attacked by the Hero's monstrous envoy, apparently called forth from another dimension. She is saved by the Man of Ash, one of the "Wolves"—people whose task is to hunt for the copies of the Hero. To Yuriko's surprise her new ally does not come from her own world but turns out to be a fictional character from *The Haetlands Chronicle*—the book written long ago, which became another region within the Circle. It is there that *The Book of Elem* originally came into being (and thus it can be regarded, in a way, as a book within a book) and there that Yuri and her friends must journey next, led by the Man of Ash (or simply "Ash").

After experiencing several adventures and overcoming several obstacles (during which the relationships between Yuriko and both Sky and Ash are also developed), Yuriko and her friends finally face their enemy. The outcome of this confrontation takes a rather unexpected turn. When the Hero materializes in front of the friends, Sky immediately transforms into Yuriko's long lost bother. He barely manages to say his "goodbye" to Yuriko as he is drawn into the Hero. At that moment, following Ash's pleading, Yuriko uses her glyph. The Hero escapes while Yuriko and Ash are transferred into the Nameless Land. In front of them, a lonely figure in black robes is running. It is neither Hiroki nor Sky anymore, but a complete nameless devout, purified now by the glyph and deprived of any traces of his former self.

Later on, the Archdevout explains everything to Yuriko. From the moment Sky appeared, the allcaste's real mission was not to recapture the hero but to purify the incomplete (and also extremely dangerous for the whole land as he still retained some connection with the Hero) nameless devout, who had once been her brother. Ash, in turn, in the last pages of the book, finally emphasizes the book's message:

As people walk through their lives, they leave stories behind them, like footprints in the sand. Yet sometimes we place stories in front of us, choosing the brightest from those that hang in the firmament of the Circle to guide us—and when we try to live those stories, we fall prey to foolishness. For we are attempting to imitate the story as we think it should be, not as it is.

These stories we follow have many names. Sometimes they're called 'justice.' Other times 'victory' or even 'conquest.' Sometimes they are simply called 'success.' We charge forward, following a vision invisible to those around us. That is to sin of trying to live a story. In our pride, we place the ideal before the deed, and this brings only misfortune. The sin of

living a story is great indeed. So great that the last vessel becomes a nameless devout here to atone for that sin over an eternity.

But let me be clear [...] the sin lies not with the story. Yet the weavers know that sometimes stories can mislead our hearts. They know this, yet they continue their weaving. This is a conscious act that invites karmic retribution—still they are allowed to continue in their work because they also bring hope, goodness, beauty, warmth, and the joy of life to men. (333)

This is, needless to say, a rather confusing message. Is it always a sin to follow an ideal, or only when we abuse it? Should the sub-creators, weavers of especially wonderful stories and makers of truly magical secondary universes, such as Tolkien and Lewis, be regarded as especially great sinners in the light of the text's system of values? Both seminal mythopoeic fantasy writers treated their myth-making in a very serious way; we might say that, in a manner of speaking, they lived the stories they created. Would they join the crowd of the nameless devout? Is storytelling, is myth-making inherently and irrevocably ambivalent, both benevolent and harmful, necessary but requiring punishment and retribution, always bound to mislead and inspire human hearts at the same time? The book does not give clear answers.

At the end of the novel Yuriko is still sad; she still mourns Hiroki but she is reconciled to her fate. Feeling that she has done her best to fulfil the mission bestowed on her, she returns to her mundane reality. It is additionally suggested that in the future she will become a wolf and join the hunt for the Hero. She is also consoled that her brother's soul "rests in the great flow of stories until such time as it will reenter the Circle inside another life" (335).

Hiroki's fate perhaps best illustrates the ambivalent nature of the Hero as well as the text's equally ambivalent (and perhaps incomplete) notion of justice. Hiroki's initial desire to protect the weak from oppression, to oppose injustice is an extremely noble one. This is exactly what we expect of heroes. Yet, it is this desire that brings him unredeemable doom. Most readers of mythopoeic fantasy, nurtured on Tolkien or Lewis, would probably decide that the consolation offered to Yuriko as well as the act of Sky's purification does not completely satisfy their sense of justice.

Throughout the whole narration the protagonist, Yuriko, frequently acts as a sort of "proxy agent" of the traditional values of mythopoeic fantasy (or an involved reader of Lewis or Tolkien), constantly questioning or opposing what is revealed to her, opting for more idealistic solutions. But the eucatastrophe does not come. In the end Yuriko has to accept the Cycle's order and its rules. Obviously, the reader does not have to share her submission and can still question the book's meanings and messages.

The Book of Heroes is a very singular volume. In many ways, as it has been suggested, it is a quintessential mythopoeic fantasy. It employs mythic patterns, motifs and structures. It provides “an imaginative experience of a world in which metaphysical concepts are objective realities and the protagonists’ responses to those realities reflect on their lives” (Oziewicz 84). It constructs a meaningful, ethically marked universe. It presents a quest-and-mature plot which “departs from a certain violation of a natural order, an intrusion of the supernatural on the life of the protagonist, who is violently wrenched from ordinariness and faced with overwhelming demands and shattering responsibility” (Oziewicz 86). It introduces a young protagonist assisted on her quest by magical helpers. It makes myth not only its main structural principle but also its very subject. By all means it is what I have called in the previous section a self-conscious mythopoeic literature.

At the same time, it contradicts the most essential paradigms of mythopoeic fantasy. It (perhaps intentionally) engages in an open polemic with traditional concepts and values, such as those presented in Tolkien’s or Lewis’s writings. The novel puzzles and irritates the reader. It might be also accused of inconsistency and incoherence as far as its ontological or ethical orders are concerned.

Arguably, Miyabe does not have the ambition of presenting a fully unified, coherent, and powerful vision in the way Tolkien, Lewis or Le Guin did. Yet, *The Book of Heroes* is not to be dismissed too lightly. It is at least as inspiring as it is confusing. It helps us to see the work of the seminal mythopoeic writers in a new light. It makes us rethink and reassess our ideas about both mythopoeic literature and the very power and meaning of myth in our lives.

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