



SPIRIT AND FAËRIE

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THE LITTLE FAIRY WHO COULDN'T DANCE

About six months ago, near the end of the Summer my grandmother gave me an unfinished faërie story written by her mother, Elizabeth “Bippy” Barnitz. The title of the little work was *the Little Faërie who Couldn't Dance* and it was penned down at some point in the 1930s. It presented a basic Promethean morality tale involving a faërie who gets banished to Earth because she cannot dance, where she gets scared by goblins, kisses a boy and finds her heart before being welcomed back to the faërie court. It is very simple and problematically innocent, employing the classic tropes of goblins and “gypsies” and an “Elf Doctor” who proclaims that the faërie has no heart. The story was intended to be performed as a ballet and was illustrated but never completed.

While engaging with this inheritance I started thinking about faërie stories in a deeper way, I felt inspired to expand my Great Grandmother’s simple story into an epic fantasy opera more geared to adults who could engage with the more problematic themes and tropes from a nuanced perspective. I see this as an opportunity to explore themes of innocence, otherness, disability, alienation and displacement through image and text. But it is also a love story, a dance and a vessel for spiritual communication and correspondence. As it stands, I do not feel comfortable presenting the original story to a contemporary audience, I believe that it can only do the work of conveying the message that my great grandmother intended if it is taken down from the psychic Faërie Land of children’s stories and allowed to mature and rediscover itself in the same way that the main character did. I was interested in the relationship between faërie

stories as a genre and my other inheritance, Swedenborgianism, which presented the realm of spirit in ways that were similar yet subtly different to the realm of magic.

The actual story of *The Little Faërie* is not irrelevant to the story of the Swedenborgian diaspora as it has brought us thus far, or, to risk creating something of a “Marry Sue”, my own story within it. We have sought to create “Faërie Lands” by establishing enclaves of “New Church” communities in isolation from the world, and those who do not abide by the established choreography often find themselves in exile and alienation.

STORY, MYTH AND SCRIPTURE

This train of thought brought me back to the well-thumbed pages of Professor J.R.R. Tolkien’s masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings* for inspiration and comfort and I found myself wondering at the semantic barriers placed between faërie story, myth and scripture and eventually reading his essay *On Faërie Stories*, from which I have drawn much of the ideas in this paper. According to the Professor, the etymology for the term, “Faërie Story” goes back to 1750,¹ which means that the concept as a distinct genre arises in correlation with the era of the New Church and may in many ways reflect the alienation of modern humans from the natural world; before the modern era there was no need to distinguish those narratives which allowed for the presence of magic. A reaction to the ““rationalization,” which transformed the glamour of *Elfland into mere finesse, and invisibility into a fragility*”². I do not think that this is

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, Verlyn Flieger, and Douglas A. Anderson, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, Expanded ed., with commentary and notes. (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

coincidental, Swedenborg's own exegesis points towards the same struggle to save scripture from being rendered useless by scientific rationalism. He makes scripture more about the significance of the story than about its literal facticity. But the inverse must therefore also be true, that some of those stories which we have dismissed as irrelevant can and should be included in the scriptural cannon, not as adjuncts to confirm what we see in the Bible, but as so fully authoritative that we should be delighted to see our own sacred texts subjected to their hermeneutics and interpretive authority. The implication is that scriptures should be read by the interior light and seen as confirmation of the varied influx of divine love and wisdom, placed in conversation, not competition with The Other. This takes work, but we actually have a beautiful mythic framework for how to develop these conversations, and it comes to us out of the Asatru tradition.

Tracing the inherited lineages of the Faërie Story. I naturally gravitated back towards the *Poetic and Prose Eddas*,³ the Eleventh Century Icelandic texts from whence Tolkien derived inspiration and sometimes direct appropriation.⁴ My mind was once more drawn to the figure of the Völva and her song to the Allfather, and to that which honeys the voice of the prophetess, the Mead of Poetry.⁵ I gave a sermon on this topic in November and at that point started to consciously deepen my consideration of my own role within my ministry and creative practice, could I function as a poet in a way that didn't feel disingenuous while also working at a church?

³ Jackson Crawford, ed., *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (Indianapolis ; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2015).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ Snorri Sturluson and Jesse L. Byock, eds., *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology* (London: Penguin, 2005), 55.

Or would I be more naturally acclimated to the fringes of the Swedenborgian community? How do you build a ministry at a constantly expanding fractal edge, maintaining the freedom of the poet to chase down the profligate and profane from the pulpit? It would have to be dealt with the same way I dealt with all dissonance, creatively.

The idea of scripture presented in the myth of the *Mead of Poetry* is especially relevant to someone working with Swedenborg, himself a poet and a native wanderer of the spirit world, for whom scripture was by definition correspondential, written in a *twilight language* of degrees and subtleties.⁶ Therefore, for a Swedenborgian, to treat a given text as scriptural is not to treat it as literally true, but to treat it as a symbolic representation of a higher experience. A channel for the manifestation of directed influx. This expands “the Word” to what is potentially a much broader canon of symbolic mythic texts. What’s more, “The Word” can mean intriguingly diverse things within this cannon, we could speak about the resonant “Voc” of the Vedas as described beautifully in Guy Beck’s *Sonic Theology*,⁷ or wandering branching energy systems in Siva yoga as a kind of interoceptive scripture,⁸ we could speak of the Tao as the Word, or even nature or consciousness itself, the common quality being that of mechanisms of divine influx and reception, or as Swedenborg defines it:

⁶ Emanuel Swedenborg, “Concerning the Sacred Scripture or the Word of the Lord from Experience” (n.d.): 2.

⁷ Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (The University of South Carolina Press, n.d.).

⁸ Thirumoolar, *The Thirumandiram*, ed. T. N. Ganapathy, 5 vols., Yoga Siddha Research Centre: Publication Series 8 (Quebec, Canada: Babaji’s Kriya Yoga Order of Acharyas, 2010).

*“There are two things which proceed from the Lord, Divine Love and Divine Wisdom, or what is the same, Divine Good and Divine Truth; for Divine Good is of His Divine Love, and Divine Truth is of His Divine Wisdom. **The Word in its essence is both of these...**”⁹*

This quote is written within a larger argument for the contemporary symbolic relevance of the Bible specifically, but I am going to take this idea and read it through a broader hermeneutic which employs this wider definition: “the Word” is the physical manifestation of the influx of divine love and wisdom from God into the natural world. The literal story is as close to its spiritual cause and meaning as the fading of the paint on the side of a house is to the sun.

Scripture contains a vast canon which is often internally contradictory, even within a single text, therefore there must be some moderating influence between the external literal sense and the source of the influx which inspires it, in between the externally contradictory literal text and the internal direct experience of Divine presence.

In the realm of scripture we perform an epistemological tight rope dance between two forms of truth, this space between subjective and objective reality is the substance of spiritual world, and of the land of Faerie. How we (and our sacred texts) express and perceive celestial and spiritual truth informs what texts we gravitate towards and how we interpret them. there is a causal flow to how we perceive reality. When one becomes spiritually aware they are simply stepping further up this stream. But there are perils in faërie land and the water is swift. I would

⁹ Swedenborg, “Concerning the Sacred Scripture or the Word of the Lord from Experience,” 33.

suggest that perhaps one of the primary differences between spirit and faërie is which direction you are facing in that causal stream.

Within the Tolkienian canon the Fair Folk are presented as facing perpetually downstream, that is, towards the natural world and incapable of the up-stream escape of true death which is “the Gift of Men”.¹⁰ I think it would be fair to relate Swedenborg’s humanist interpretation of scripture and its existence in the natural and spiritual world to this idea.

Swedenborg’s assertion in *Sacred Scripture* is, essentially, that we should read the Bible with the assumption of innocence on the part of its source in a way that is somehow unique, that its author had love and wisdom as their primary motivator; even in parts of it that may seem literally horrific, and that this internal loving wisdom represents a “spiritual sense” of The Word.¹¹

Rather than seeing this as a charge towards an abandonment of all criticality towards the supposed protagonists and antagonists of the narrative, I would suggest that we treat Sacred Scripture like a person. And this is the punchline of the whole progression of Swedenborgian historiography; the *Torah* becomes symbolically reflected in the life of Jesus who then becomes reflected in ourselves. Myths have a tendency to expand to all of history, how similar are Tolkien’s progression of ages within the *Quenta Silmarillion*, Swedenborg’s progression of “Churches”, the Vedic series of the *Yugas*, Ovid’s golden and silver ages – and do we actually

¹⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien and Ted Nasmith, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, Illustrated edition. (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2021), 132.

¹¹ Swedenborg, “Concerning the Sacred Scripture or the Word of the Lord from Experience,” 1–5.

think that these narratives have more in common with actual history than they do our subjective experience of the stages of an individual life? I do not.

So, the Bible is human, and humans do not exist in vacuum, a person must exist in community. There they stand, the *Word*, treeish in their psychic expansion, regarding the reader with a complex consciousness that desires communication and love more than judgement. What more fey and terrible eldritch cyborg could we possibly summon? Meeting an elf would challenge me significantly less than meeting the Divine Human.

THE MEAD OF POETRY

Scriptures have to talk to each other, and when they do, we get creativity, this is a lesson we learn from the myth of the Mead of Poetry:

And again said the ocean, "Whence did this art, which ye call poetry, derive its beginnings?" The Poet answered: "These were the beginnings thereof. The gods had a dispute with the folk which are called Vanir, and they appointed a peace-meeting between them and established peace in this way: they each went to a vat and spat their spittle therein. Then at parting the gods took that peace-token and would not let it perish but shaped thereof a man. This man is called Kvasir, and he was so wise that none could question him concerning anything but that he knew the solution. He went up and down the earth to give instruction to men; and when he came upon invitation to the abode of certain dwarves, Fjalar and Galarr, they called him into privy converse with them, and killed him, letting his blood run into two vats and a kettle. The kettle is named Ód-re-rir, and the vats Són and Bodn; they blended honey with the blood, and the outcome was that mead by the virtue of which he who drinks becomes a poet or scholar. The dwarves reported to the Æsir that Kvasir had choked on his own shrewdness, since there was none so wise there as to be able to question his wisdom. The ocean asked: "In how many ways are the terms of poetry variously phrased, or how many are the essential elements of the skaldic art?" To which the poet replied: "The elements into which all poetry is divided are two." The ocean asked: "What two?" The poet said: "Metaphor and meter." (VS.96 - adapted)¹²

¹² Snorri Sturluson and Byock, *The Prose Edda*, 55.

The story of the Mead of poetry is the story of how different scriptures speak to one another across cultures, and the assertion is that creativity, *Kvaser*, the primordial poet, arises from this intertextual resonance. But the life of the first poet is doomed, and he is inevitably killed, and in his death and martyrdom, inspiration is scattered across the whole Earth.¹³ Surely Christ represents a least a drop of the Mead of Poetry, and in every drop there is an ocean. But to Christianize and thereby deny the inherent syncretism, and the implied pluralism within this pagan narrative would be to deny the very moral of the myth. Is Christianity strong enough to stand as an equal with those who assert their prerogative to remain beyond its control? And is the whole genre of fantasy not located along the syncretistic seams of tradition? A creative space that allows for Christianity and paganism, spirit and faerie to meet each other in curious play.

We have two qualities associated with sacred scripture, an internal core of pure influx that is the same through all consciousness and an external immanent manifestation that, through the vehicle of human creativity gives us all the vast variety of human spiritual practice and culture. The artist finds delight in the external filigree of immanent manifestation, the mystic taps into the divine light within all beings, but the poet connects them both. When the poet matures into the fullness of their power, they become a wizard.

Of course, it seems like the main problem with poets is that they tend to be alive. Poets do not stand conveniently at the peak of the doctrinal bellcurve, or tucked away in dusty scrolls, they are challenging, revolutionary, fringe, antinomian. They are usually belittled by those who would pursue more “serious” spirituality, dismissed as mere storytellers or performers, their

¹³ Ibid.

whimsy mistaken for naivete, and narrative theology for fantasy. Deities become fodder for corporate fandom and religions reduced to judgmental book clubs, and from this shallow doom, our only salvation rests in poetry. Meter and metaphor, tremulation and correspondence. If “the Word” is fundamentally a vessel for influx, then Meter and Metaphor are the potter’s hands.

So perhaps what we think of this not as a dichotomy between sacred and profane, internal and external is largely socially constructed and heavily dependent on perspective and subjective experience. Maybe placing the Bible on a pedestal above all other stories only really serves to reinforce the vast, ancient hegemony which we have so interlaced with our own egoic desire to be right and good that it becomes a spiritual prison. While Swedenborg repeatedly attests to the fullness of loving significance tucked between the jots and tittles of this one short book, when I look around at the vastness and the wisdom of humanity and nature, it is simply not enough.

Poetry is a feedback pattern, a conversation between pantheons, between scriptures, it is chaotic and strange and urgent and impolite, and it is sacred. The word is flow, it is a river, a mind, a breath, and the moment we think we have our hands around it, it disappears.

To quote the common maxim which Swedenborg himself employed, “*to the pure all things are pure.*”¹⁴ What if all it takes for something to be scripture is reading it as if it is? by this I do not mean we should take the *Ainulindalë* from the *Silmarillion*¹⁵ as a literal creation story, or in a less extreme example, to allow for the independent and discrete existence of differing pantheons in a schizophrenic cacophony of icons, rather it is the assertion that, when directed

¹⁴ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, 3rd ed., vol. 3 (swedenborg society, 1953), 7343.

¹⁵ Tolkien and Nasmith, *The Silmarillion*, 26.

heavenward, the human mind is itself the primary scripture from which all others derive. The suggestion is, that the relationship between sacred and profane is a social construct, that “the word” not only far transcends the Bible as it is traditionally presented but is in reality more intimately connected to the actual functions of cognition and consciousness than any specific scripture. This is resonant with Tolkien’s own definition of the faerie story:

“Faërie-stories are not in normal English usage stories about faeries or elves, but stories about Faërie, that is Faerie, the realm or state in which faeries have their being. Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.”¹⁶

So, to follow the Professor’s definition, faerie stories are about passing into an Other World, a realm or state where magical beings dwell. A question that must be addressed is therefore, what is the practical difference between Swedenborg’s “Spiritual World” and faërie land? And to be sure, I am not speaking about his “New Christian Heaven” which is but a minor vassalage in the spiritual world, but that higher, subtle plane of awareness conceived holistically. It is very easy to place enchantment into the hands of another, but there is a very big difference between absorbing a tale of faërie land from the lips of a bard and going there.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

The primary difference is that to Swedenborg, all of the inhabitants of the Spiritual World, even those from other planets, were at one time living “humans” and their continued ability to relate to God in human form is said to be important to their spiritual state.¹⁷ He doesn’t

¹⁶ Tolkien, Flieger, and Anderson, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, 4.

¹⁷ Emanuel Swedenborg, George F. Dole, and Jonathan S. Rose, *Other Planets*, The Portable New Century Edition. (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 2018), 4.

make a lot of room for the tomtens and elves of his beloved Swedish woodlands, his mines do not echo with the ringing hammers of dwarves. But Swedenborg's definition of "human" may be as broad as "love"¹⁸ therefore I think its fair to interpret this as forms of consciousness rather than those possessing human anatomy. To Swedenborg, there are no "natives" to the spirit world other than us, angels and demons are not separate from humanity, neither we may presume would be elves, faeries, goblins or aliens. That does not mean that faerie land does not exist, in fact it implies just the opposite, that all the qualities we want to assign to enchanted beings out of myth are more appropriately assigned to ourselves. By this is do not mean ourselves while in the body, but ourselves as we are indigenous to Faërie Land. In realizing an inner enchantment we open our spiritual eyes, we discover a magic that goes beyond the simple causal manipulations of spell and incantation and we tap into a magic that opens up the interior depth of the waking mind and takes us beyond the mundane cycles of life and death.

"Faërie" says Professor Tolkien, "*cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible.*"¹⁹ To Swedenborg the Spiritual World was similarly indescribable,²⁰ not that he did not make a valiant attempt. This quality of ineffability without impotency recalls the *Eddic* definition of poetry, for Bragi's *Meter* and

¹⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom*, trans. Bruce Rogers (Bryn Athyn, PA: General Church of the New Jerusalem, 1999), 1.

¹⁹ Tolkien, Flieger, and Anderson, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, 5.

²⁰ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, trans. George F Dole (New York, NY, USA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), 576; Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom*, 182; Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, 3:1682.

Metaphor both permit communication through means other than that direct description. In this way the poet becomes a magician capable of opening portals into the realm of enchantment. The inclusion of spirituality in such a practice means that these portals can not only open to the wild otherness of a realm of treacherous Small Folk with wings and antennas and ill intent, but what is perhaps a wilder frontier, it can open internal portals that empower us towards the mastery of our own awareness. Faërie land calls to wayward mortals, not just to observe, but to become. So perhaps the answer to the question, what's the difference between Faërie Land and the Spiritual World is that, to a spiritual person, when we heed that distant call of elven voices, we know that they are echoes of our own.

A PROBLEMATIC METAPHOR

Furthermore, as Dr. Rebecca Esterson has deeply explored, Swedenborg's correspondential exegesis of the Bible has a problem with antisemitism²¹ which can be expanded to a larger macrocosmic problem with the use of real cultures and races as representations for essentialist spiritual states. The elusive Faërie Story genre often somewhat clumsily replaces real world ethnicities and ideologies with convenient stand-ins. But I personally feel much more comfortable speaking about the spiritual nature of elves and trolls and goblins as representations for my own mind than I do Jews and Germans and Africans. Surely the fearful and exotic archetypes we hold up to those we deem "other" must stem from a psychological reality worthy of being processed creatively, these mythic creatures, including deities, create a stage for the creative representative play of spiritual processes within a stage set apart from the natural world.

²¹ Rebecca Kline Esterson, "Secrets of Heaven: Allegory, Jews, the European Enlightenment and the Case of Emanuel Swedenborg" (n.d.): 114.

Perhaps this is why the Biblical theater presents such a fruitful space for allegorical exploration, and yet, were I to refer to the stories of Moses and Elisha and Jesus as “Faërie Stories” it would probably be taken as an insult. Fairy stories are largely perceived as irrelevant and trivial compared to more supposedly relevant myths. To this I would humbly challenge my readers to question the systems of power that might underlie such assumptions. If an idea of scripture as fluid and inherently syncretistic as the “Mead of Poetry”, power is fundamentally challenged in the very mode of interpretation. Can a Biblical myth which has been endlessly politicized and weaponized by empires of the land and the mind, withstand an equal and creative dialogue with another mythology? Can these ancient stories ever be elevated out of the mire of the Love of Dominion to the profoundly real methodologies of the true magician?

ENCHANTMENT AND WIZARDRY

Enchantment is not escape, it is not fantasy or dissociation, it may be the exact opposite of madness, enchantment is a profound realization of the immediate presence of the real and transcendent within yourself, what Tolkien calls: “*the primal desire at the heart of Faërie: the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder.*” The state of *wonder* holds little space for literal scriptural authority, rather it suggests a vastness that flows and adapts and molds itself like water into human vessels. In our exile from Faërie Land our mission is therefore not to regain some lost innocence that would keep us dancing the childlike ballet which once bought our place in the court of the Faërie Queen, but rather, to realize what we once only imagined and, in that realization, to re-enchant our own lives with a sense of wisdom and urgency. To progress into the state of the New Church is to move through the historical metaphor internally, this final stage represents a union of the innocence of the first state with all that we have learned and endured in the process of living.

To re-affirm the realism inherent in faërie stories I can quote the professor further: “*since the fairy-story deals with “marvels,” it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion.*”²² This quality, perhaps more than any other places Swedenborg’s *memorabilia* in the category of the fairy-story. Swedenborg takes what we might call his “*system of magic*” extremely seriously professing his spiritual experiences as “*things heard and seen*” and it is exactly this faith that qualifies him as a frequent visitor of *Fairy Land*. He was tapping into a power far larger than Biblical exegesis or philosophy, beneath the mask of the Christian Theologian there is something wild, wonderful, seductive and terrifying in this lineage, emerging from the ecstatic dance of science and poetry, technology and desperation.

The Swedenborgian tradition is one of wizardry. I define wizardry as the wise application of spiritual principals for the empowerment of others. Wizards are by definition and styling, mature. They exist in the space between innocence and wisdom, straddling the edges of the natural and spiritual worlds. The fairy falling to Earth appears at first to be infantile, or mad. But this subtle blending of faërie and spirit creates something for which poets, in their youthful ecstasy, may only strive but wizards possess in full confidence: power.

Enchantment is ethically neutral and unaffiliated with either the factions of heaven or hell, by our arts and machination we may divert, dam or drink of the flow of power from its transcendent source into the physical. Turning downstream towards faërie we may risk mistaking our own little waterfall for the original spring and turning upstream towards spirit we may fail to see those who drown in the wake of our play. I would like to suggest that the difference between

²² Tolkien, Flieger, and Anderson, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, 7.

a Witch and a Wizard is neither gendered nor ethical, but is rather about their relationship to power. A Witch seeks power for their personal use, a Wizard uses their power to for other people.

The spiritual faërie world is not impotent, it is not imaginary or childish. It is a profoundly human space because it is a space of the otherness that proves the self. But we are charged to engage with it, not as witchcraft, but as wizardry. The highest powers in faerie land are those of harmony, mercy, healing, usefulness, wisdom and love; there can be no higher magic.

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