

Unlikely tales

On the possibility for mythic truth in Chesterton and Heidegger

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Summary

This essay explores the possibility of myth as a truth-narrative by interpreting Chesterton's notion of myth as a Heideggerian artwork and therefore a place where truth 'happens'. Myth is an interesting sort of artwork because of its special relation as a story to both reality and religion. After sketching accounts of myth and truth in Chesterton, Heidegger and Plato, the essay investigates a number of different kinds of stories (literary fiction, historical fiction and myths) to see in what way these notions of truth relate to them. Myths have two main characteristics: they uproot beings from their familiar surroundings, and they change the way in which those beings appear in the first place. It turns out that it is precisely this fantastic capacity that allows them to be truth-narratives in the sense of Heidegger's artwork.

‘Pluck this flower and a princess will die in a castle beyond the sea.’¹

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (London 1925) 116.

Introduction

The Australian aborigines, regarded as the rudest of savages, have a story about a giant frog who had swallowed the sea and all the waters of the world; and who was only forced to spill them by being made to laugh. All the animals with their antics passed before him and, like Queen Victoria, he was not amused. He collapsed at last before an eel who stood delicately balanced on the tip of its tail, doubtless with a rather desperate dignity.²

What truth is there to this tale? The tale presents realities in an unreal situation and in doing so gives those beings a new meaning so that they are viewed in a new light, as if for the first time. The frog, the sea, the eel and the laughter, even Queen Victoria, are all beings that appear in one way before reading the story, and in quite another afterwards. Two things are at work in a story like this. The first is that it abstracts elements from reality and shuffles them around so that properties that once belonged to one thing now belong to another.³ Being giant becomes something that can be said of a frog while being swallowed becomes something that can be said of a sea. The second thing is that the appearance of the beings presented in the story changes because of it. Queen Victoria has become something else now that she has been likened to a giant frog, while the next time we see an eel, that eel may first appear to us as the eel who stood delicately balanced on the tip of its tail in this strange procession. In any case, this brief myth seems to have refreshed our view of all these beings by presenting them in a way in which we have never seen them presented before. It's as if giving new meaning to these realities by removing them from their respective surroundings and presenting them in unfamiliar ones has somehow shown us something true about those realities themselves that would have remained hidden otherwise. It is this capacity of stories to be fictional but truthful at the same time that is the subject of this essay.

² Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 112.

³ Much of my discussion of myth owes to Tolkien's discussion of 'Fairy Tales'. For his more in-depth discussion of this power of language by abstraction and imagination, see: J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Tales', in: *The Monsters and the Critics* (London 2006) 109-161, especially the passage on 'green-grass': 121-122.

More precisely, I will investigate whether stories in general and mythic stories in particular can be understood as truth-narratives. A truth-narrative in this sense refers to all kinds of narrative that show some being as it is and thus present it in truth. There are three main reasons for wanting to do so that all concern religion and the appearance of the divine in some way. The first reason is simply that we as readers of fictional narratives have the intuition that although the narrative may be fictional, it may nevertheless manage to say something true about some real manner of being. Moreover, fictional narrative seems to have a power to show kinds of being that remain hidden in factual narrative, even in ones that are perfect and complete. It is obvious that fictional narratives are not true in the sense of presenting facts, but they nevertheless seem to be able to show a kind of truth that is beyond the reach of factual description. It is of this special kind of story-truth that I hope to give a preliminary account in this essay.

The second reason is that this power of stories to reveal truth but not necessarily as relating facts may well have been or may well be interpreted as a divine power. Telling a story may be likened to a magic incantation, while poets (and artists in general) may express the act of creating a story not so much as unilaterally inventing the story but as relating it from some divine origin.⁴ In any case, the truthful power of stories seems to be related to some sense of the divine. In the case of the poet and his creation, having a notion of truth that allows for this kind of story-truth should help in answering the question whether the divine origin of his stories should be interpreted as a religious hidden reality beyond appearance, or as the description of a phenomenon that the poet felt to be the most adequate one. As descriptions of phenomena, poetic and religious expressions may sometimes be more adequate than factual ones, because they evoke the phenomenon so that it itself appears in front of us, something that a factual description seems unable to achieve.

⁴ The most obvious examples of this are the Muses of Greek myth, but different contemporary thinkers have put this process of creation in a similar way, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss: 'But nevertheless I think there is also something significant about it, in that I don't have the feeling that I write my books. I have the feeling that my books get written through me and that once they have got across me I feel empty and nothing is left.' Moreover, Chesterton presents pagan poets as viewing the imagination in a similar way, as employing the imagination as 'an incantation that can call [up truth].' Furthermore, Heidegger at one point in his essay on art presents the artist as a doorway that destroys itself in creating the artwork. See respectively: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (Toronto 1978) 3; Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 116; Martin Heidegger, 'Origin of the Work of Art', in: *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York 1993) 166 [39].

The third reason for wanting to interpret myth as a truth-narrative is that by doing so we may add to Martin Heidegger's project of inquiring into the history of being, but doing so by investigating the pre-philosophical world of myth instead of the philosophical one.⁵ Heidegger himself usually began his investigations with the pre-Socratics and was hesitant to regard myths themselves as original descriptions of being and preferred the attempts of early philosophy.⁶ However, by employing Heidegger's own notions of truth and art in describing myth we may get a better view of the sort of world that was disclosed by ancient myth before the advent of philosophy, thus adding to our general view of the history of being as a whole. Especially interesting in this light is the religious relation that was hinted at in the previous point, between the figures presented within ancient mythic narratives (like gods) and the phenomena with whom those figures are associated (like thunder), but whose appearance in turn is changed by the mythic narrative (as when thunder is no longer simply thunder but becomes the thundering of the thunder-god).

To get a view of myth as both a religious narrative and a form of art I will begin from G.K. Chesterton's views on myth in pagan religion as a means to access truth through the imagination. This notion of myth I will then re-interpret as a form of art in the sense of Martin Heidegger's *Origin of the Work of Art*, in the hopes of finding an adequate notion of truth to describe a way in which such myths might be said to be true accounts of being.⁷ With these notions of myth and truth in hand I will then continue to discuss three different stories

⁵ In naming this reason I am following the lead of Lawrence J. Hatab, who investigates the relationship between Martin Heidegger and myth in a more thematic way, by showing how some Heideggerian themes appear in ancient myths and the other way around. Another discussion of the relationship between Heidegger and myth is John J. Davenport's discussion on the 'chthonic' as the 'profane', in which from a broader perspective he shows how Heideggerian ideas relating to the holy and the profane (among ideas of other thinkers like Claude Lévi-Strauss) show up in ancient myths and in world literature in general. Lawrence J. Hatab, 'Heidegger and Myth: A Loop in the History of Being', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 22:2 (1991); John J. Davenport, 'A Phenomenology of the Profane: Heidegger, Blumenberg and the Structure of the Chthonic', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30:2 (1999).

⁶ As in *Sein und Zeit* when introducing the Cura myth. In later years he may have become more sympathetic towards myth as disclosure of being and his own thought might almost be called mythic at the end, but as far as I know he never specifically investigated myths as truth-narratives. For an analysis of Heidegger's reluctance regarding myths, see: Drew A. Hyland, 'Caring for Myth: Heidegger, Plato, and the Myth of Cura', *Research in Phenomenology* 27 (1997) 90-102.

⁷ Primarily read in English and Dutch, with a copy of the German 1960 edition for reference. Heidegger, 'Origin', 143-203; Martin Heidegger, *De oorsprong van het kunstwerk*, trans. Mark Wildschut and Chris Bremmers (Amsterdam 2015); Heidegger, Martin, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (Stuttgart 1960). By default I annotate the English translation, adding references to the German edition in square brackets. The one reference to the Dutch translation has been presented on its own.

that relate to truth in different ways. The first story is Lorrie Moore's 'Community Life', a contemporary literary fiction short story that is meant to be completely fictional but that nevertheless seems to show something truthful in a more familiar and relatable sense than the myth of the giant frog presented at the beginning of this essay.⁸ The second story is a Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, from which the image will be discussed that presents cannons firing on a Napoleonic battlefield.⁹ This account is fictional in the strict sense but is based on both personal experience and on historical fact, making its relation to truth more complex than that of the first story. As the third story we will return to the myth of the giant frog with which we began, building on our findings from the previous two stories and adding to that discussion the two elements of myths that followed from the frog-myth. The first of these elements is the 'disjunctive' element of myth by which realities are presented in unreal situations, while the second element is the 'world-changing' element of myth by which the appearance of those realities changes because of their presentation in those unreal situations.

A truth-account for our present purposes is any linguistic expression that intends to relate beings as they are in truth. I will distinguish between two kinds of truth-account, following Plato's preliminary exposition on *muthos* and *logos*, related by Timaeus in introducing his creation myth.¹⁰ The kinds of account will be interpreted as exemplifying the two kinds of truth that Heidegger distinguishes in his essay on art. The first kind (*muthos*) will be called *stories*, or fictional accounts that are presentative truth-narratives. The second kind (*logos*) will be called *reports*, or factual accounts that re-presentative truth-narratives. Furthermore, myth in our modern sense (as a specific kind of *muthos*) will be interpreted as a specific kind of story, one that involves the factual world while greatly disfiguring parts of it, seemingly making it difficult to attribute truth to it. To give a first impression of the difference between presentation and re-presentation, we may start with the most basic

⁸ Lorrie Moore, 'Community Life', *The New Yorker*, September 30, 1991. See also the podcast in which the story is read and discussed: Deborah Treisman, 'Roddy Doyle Reads Lorrie Moore' (updated October 1, 2018), <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/fiction/roddy-doyle-reads-lorrie-moore> (visited January 27, 2019).

⁹ The image recurs many times, but one example is the passage in which Captain Tushin compares the enemy cannons to tobacco pipes, during the Battle of Schöngrabern. Leo Tolstoj, *Oorlog and Vrede*, trans. Yolanda Bloemen and Marja Wiebes (Amsterdam 2006) 248.

¹⁰ Plato, *Timaeus; Critias; Cleitophon; Menexenus; Epistles*, ed. and transl. R.G. Bury (Cambridge, Mass. 2012) 48-53 [Timaeus, 27c-29d].

example imaginable. Re-presentative accounts are factual accounts that do not present themselves but outside of itself. When we say: ‘The sun is a star’, nothing is presented by the proposition itself. What is presented is a proposition, what is re-presented is the fact that the sun is a star. When, however, we say: ‘The sun ate a star’, we are no longer dealing with a proposition in the re-presentative sense. The sun eating a star is not about a real sun being a real star, but about itself: about the image of the sun eating a star. The sun appears in the narrative, but the narrative does not stand for the sun. Instead, it *presents* the sun. The sun is presented as a figure in a story. If ‘the sun is a star’ might be called the most basic example of a logical report in the sense of *logos*, then ‘the sun ate a star’ might be called the most basic example of a mythical story in the sense of *muthos*.¹¹

The success or failure of characterising myth as a truth-narrative thus hinges on two questions. First, can fictional stories be true without re-presenting facts? Second, if so, can fictional stories be true that intentionally displace or disfigure factual realities, as is done in myths? In general, we will ask ourselves: can myths be true accounts of being, and if so, how?

Chesterton and myth

We begin from Chesterton because of his specific interpretation of mythic religion as originating out of, and in its essence still remaining, the art of poetry. This specific interpretation arises precisely out of the reason why a philosopher might want to have reservations about employing Chesterton’s thought in his philosophical investigations, namely, that Chesterton interprets mythic religion as a pre-cursor to, and eventually a part of, Christian religion. To illustrate this we have to say something more about the man Chesterton, his time and about his literary project as a whole.

¹¹ I take some liberties with Heidegger’s original ideas by postulating presentative and re-presentative truth this directly. For his own discussion of truth as ‘correctly representing’ in his essay on art, see: Heidegger, ‘Origin’, 161-163 [33-35].

G.K. Chesterton (1874 – 1936) was a fiction writer and fervent defender of Christianity at the beginning of the twentieth century, when especially orthodox Christianity was under attack from both rationalistic and spiritualistic movements; or as Chesterton viewed it, from a cold and ideologically empty modernity.¹² From rationalistic movements there appeared to be a strong tendency to approach all of reality from the rational objectivity of science, while from spiritualistic movements that suspected that something important was lost in such a rationalistic approach and wrong in a Christian one, turned to alternative kinds of spirituality like occultism.¹³ Chesterton disagreed strongly with both these tendencies and feared that they would cause reality to lose its meaning. According to him, both rationality and spirituality had their respective places but neither should be pursued exclusively, let alone at the cost of the other.¹⁴ He feared both rationality devoid of spirituality and spirituality devoid of rationality and made it his life's work to try and convince people that all they were looking for, they already had in Christianity.

It is in this context that Chesterton wrote, among other things, about myth. Specifically, the chapter 'Man and Mythologies' in *The Everlasting Man* presents a view of myth as a spiritual and highly meaningful approach to reality through the imagination alone.¹⁵ He then goes on to show why this approach is best at home within Christianity as a whole. In short, he argues that pagans were essentially agnostic about the nature of the gods, while at the same time they sincerely felt some divine presence and wondered about that presence by inventing myths about it. That divine presence, according to Chesterton, eventually turned out to have been the Christian God all along, thus making it quite unproblematic to incorporate all the richness of myth into the wider context of Christianity

¹² Such modern ideas included those of Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, H.G. Wells, Oscar Wilde, and others. Chesterton's essays attacking such ideas are bundled in his book *Heretics: G.K. Chesterton, Heretics* (London 1905; 2006).

¹³ For a more general account of esotericism and occultism as a response to scientific rationality, see: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden 1996; 2015, E-book).

¹⁴ In his own words regarding the encroachment of science upon the study of literature: 'We do not submit a sonnet to a mathematician or a song to a calculating boy; but we do indulge the equally fantastic idea that folklore can be treated as a science.' Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter V: Man and Mythologies, 111-128.

without failing to do justice to the pagan religious experience. If anything, that experience became all the more rich and meaningful for having been interpreted in a Christian way.

However, almost in spite of the intention to incorporate myths into a larger Christian worldview, Chesterton presents an interpretation of mythic religion that turns out to be quite interesting in a philosophical sense when investigating the possibility of truth in fictional narratives. To summarise his account of myth, Chesterton portrays pagans as poets sensing and revering the divine while withholding judgement as to its nature. This sensing of the divine inspires poets to create myths that at once a) acknowledge its existence, b) revere and appreciate it through the offering of a myth, and c) guess at its hidden nature without pretending to know anything about it. These myths, in turn, change the meaning of divine presences in such a way that the same phenomenon can no longer be said to still be exactly the same phenomenon.¹⁶ For Chesterton's pagans, then, the preferred way to access the truth about the world is through the imagination alone, and thus through story.¹⁷ The mythic gods presented in the stories of these pagans are described as akin to 'Day-Dreams' in the sense that they exist in the way that story worlds and figures exist.¹⁸ They are present in the world and influence human action but do not seem to be 'real' in the same way as 'real' shrines, 'real' temples and the 'real' human pagans of flesh and blood.¹⁹ There is therefore a lot of confusion as to how these mythic stories and gods 'were meant to be real'.²⁰ Hopefully, by employing Heidegger's notion of truth in art, we will manage to clear up some of that confusion.

¹⁶ As in the case of Father Christmas changing the meaning of winter. See: Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 115.

¹⁷ For poets touching upon 'transcendental truths', see page 16, and for pagan poets through seeking truth by means of the imagination, see page 123. *Ibid.*, 116, 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111, 118, 120-128.

¹⁹ See especially: *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

Heidegger and truth in art

We turn to Heidegger for three main reasons. One, since myth is analysed by Chesterton as a form of art and since Heidegger analyses the artwork as a place where truth ‘happens’, it makes sense when looking for truth in myth to try and analyse myths as such a Heideggerian artwork.²¹ Two, the relationship between the artwork, its creator, and the world of its creation as discussed by Heidegger is similar to the relationship between Chesterton’s pagan poets, their myths, and the divine that they sensed in their world, as should become clear later on in the essay. Three, Heidegger’s later thought incorporates much religious terminology to describe phenomena more adequately. Such terms include the holy (as a space for the arrival of the divine), the divine (as the deeply meaningful), world and earth (as the two constituents of the artwork), and lastly, gods and the arrival gods (to describe how something is or becomes meaningful).²² The use of these mythic and religious concepts should, however, not be taken to mean that Heidegger’s thought has become religious in his later years, or at least not the sense of metaphysics as knowledge of what lies beyond phenomena.²³ Philosophy (even Heidegger’s ‘post-philosophical’ thinking) should restrict itself to the phenomena as they appear and try and describe them as accurately as possible without ever supposing anything about them that they do not show themselves.²⁴ Thus, there is in Heidegger a sense of the religious that is in its essence agnostic about the divine, similar to the sort of agnostic religion of Chesterton’s pagans. So, in addition to the relationship between being and language being similar in both Chesterton’s sense of myth and Heidegger’s ‘post-philosophical’ thought (as addressed in the second reason), that relation in both cases seems to have some religious quality that is nevertheless agnostic about the nature of the divine.

²¹ The first mention of truth ‘happening’ in the essay on art is after the example of Van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes. Heidegger, ‘Origin’, 162 [33].

²² The first discussion of the holy, the divine and gods in the artwork is in the example of the Greek temple. Ibid., 167-169 [41-43].

²³ Ben Vedder, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Religion. From God to the Gods* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 2007) 276-278.

²⁴ The terms ‘pre-philosophical’ and ‘post-philosophical’ are used by Hatab in his discussion to describe, respectively, myth and Heidegger’s later thought. Hatab, *Heidegger and Myth*, 45.

Hopefully, these similarities will make it easier for us to understand Chesterton's sense of myth as the same sort of artwork that Heidegger describes as involving truth.

But before moving on to our discussion proper, some remarks have to be made concerning Heidegger's general approach to being and truth and his specific approach to truth in art in *Origin of the Work of Art*. Concerning truth in the wider sense, Heidegger is less concerned with the question of what specific linguistic expressions are the true ones and more with how beings appear in truth in the first place. For any linguistic expression to be true of a being, that being must first have shown itself in its truth.²⁵ Expressions about beings that are concealed in some way (either because they are out of sight or because they show themselves as something else) will always be false, but whether they are concealed in some way cannot be judged from the level of the expression itself.²⁶ Any true expression will therefore for its truth always have to rely on some prior 'unconcealing', that is, on some *truth* to have appeared to us. It is because of this prior truth of the phenomena themselves that Heidegger, whenever he talks about truth, employs the word unconcealment (*alētheia*).²⁷ Therefore, to inquire about truth is to inquire about how beings are first revealed to us at all, and furthermore how they are first revealed to us as they are; that is, in truth. It is this kind of truth that I called 'presentative' in the introduction, because it is about beings both a) being presented and b) becoming present. A story always either presents a) new beings or b) old beings in a new way, and stands therefore at the beginning of the entire 'being present' of these beings. This 'beginning' of the 'being present of the beings' is a moment of unconcealment; or rather an *event* of unconcealment. Moreover, if the story suddenly stops before it is finished, the presented beings fade back into concealment and are lost. The story has to move or be finished to be able to stand on its own, it has to be change, there has to be a 'strife' that keeps it going even when it appears to have been finished.²⁸ Stories, and artworks

²⁵ See Heidegger's discussion of truth as 'certainty', 'correctness' and 'conformity': Heidegger, 'Origin', 175-177 [53-55].

²⁶ On the two different kinds of concealment ('Versagen' and 'Verstellen'), see: Ibid., 178-180 [57-58].

²⁷ There are two discussions of the Greek word *alētheia* in the essay on art: Ibid., 161-163 [33-35] and 175-177 [53-55].

²⁸ For the 'self-subsistence' of the artwork (the power to stand on its own) and in and by that self-subsistence having 'strife' 'rest' in the artwork, see: Ibid. 173-175 [49-52].

in general, set this strife in a stable figure in a way that the strife can ‘rest’ effortlessly as itself in the figure. The resting place of the figure that is the artwork allows this strife to fully be itself, it allows the art a place to move exactly as it is and be in no way restricted in being itself. Great art is thus capable of presenting any kind of being. Or in other words, all art presents beings, while great art is capable of presenting beings in their full truth.

What this means for the truth of myths like the one about the giant frog will become clear further on. For now, we will first have to double back a bit and begin the investigation proper from a more familiar point of departure. This point of departure is the idea that stories, insofar as they can be truthful, can only be truthful in the sense that they present an account *like* the truth.

Myth as a ‘likely tale’

A true account, according to Plato’s character Timaeus, is an account that exactly corresponds to eternal being. Such an account is called a *logos*, or argument, while an account of temporal and thus imperfect being (that is, becoming) is called a *muthos*, or story. In other words, a true account is about beings that do not change and are perfect as they are, while we can at most hope to give truth-ful accounts of all beings that do change and are imperfect in some way.²⁹ These account will never be true in the full sense. For Timaeus, that is because any re-iteration of something else is a copy and thus less than its original. In this way being itself is the first iteration, while *logos* and becoming are both re-iterations of that first being. *Muthos*, then, as a re-iteration of becoming, is a re-iteration of a re-iteration and thus too far removed from the first and original being to be called true in its full sense. However, Plato seems to acknowledge that there is something truthful about stories, that stories can say something about reality that arguments (at least insofar as our human intellect cannot perfectly relate

²⁹ This conclusions of Timaeus’ remarks on *logos* and *muthos* can be found here: Plato, *Timaeus*, 52-53 [Timaeus 29c-d].

them) seem unable to grasp or show.³⁰ It might even be argued that both his extensive use of stories alongside arguments and his use of dialogue as the embedding framework for those stories and arguments, point to a more complex understanding of the relation between language and being, and thus of truth.³¹ However, this is not the place for such an investigation. For our present purposes it is enough to have a first impression of how stories can be said to relate to truth. In its most literal sense, according to Timaeus, stories are images of images of the true. A true account of the sort of things that stories are about (that is, about life and death, love and hate, birth and loss), is not possible because such things are themselves untrue images of the true that is the eternal. One can hope to write up a true account of perfect shapes and perhaps of perfect concepts so long as our imperfect human mind can keep up with perfect reason, but to write up a true account of something that is itself untrue is utterly hopeless. At most, these accounts can hope to say ‘something true’ about life and the world and about being in general. That is, at most they can be truth-ful accounts of being.

Thus, reading a story as a likely tale about being in the strict Platonic sense, does not allow for stories to be fully true. However, as Plato is never as straightforward as he might seem at a first glance, it may be that there is more to this notion of a likely tale than first impressions suggest. As mentioned before, this is not the place for in-depth investigations into Plato’s works, but since we are not looking for the most reasonable interpretation of Plato, but for *any* kind of interpretation of stories as truth-narratives, we may expand a little on this notion of a likely tale without pretending to still be interpreting Plato himself. What I am getting at is that we can interpret stories as likely tales in the sense that they present ‘what it is like’ for a being to be in a certain way. Stories are of course fictional and present fictional situations, but through that fiction we do seem to be shown something of what it is like to be in a certain way in the real world. By doing so, stories seem to be able to show something of

³⁰ One overview of problems concerning Plato’s disposition towards myth and truth is George Rudebusch’ review of David A. White’s book on Socrates’ ‘swan song’ in the *Phaedo*. George Rudebusch, ‘Myth and Metaphysics in Plato’s *Phaedo* by David A. White (review)’, *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 56:4 (1992) 726-732.

³¹ For one such interpretation of Plato as a non-dogmatic thinker, see: Drew A. Hyland, ‘Caring for Myth: Heidegger, Plato, and the Myth of Cura’, *Research in Phenomenology* 27 (1997) 90-102.

the real world (that is, of being) that would not show when related in a factual account in the sense of a report as sketched above. In this way, it might be said that stories can be more true (or at least more truth-ful) than such reports, because stories seem to have a power to show *more* of being than reports are capable of. Or in other words, if we only had reports to talk about beings and their being, it seems that a lot of them and a lot of their being would remain undisclosed in our discussions. Even so, I will be the first to admit that a tale of what it is like to be in a certain real situation is still not a very strong sense of a truth-narrative.

The being of a being, world and home

So, interpreting mythic expression as saying something *like* the truth fails in two ways. The strict interpretation of Timaeus himself, in which the true is the eternal and all becoming is an imperfect reiteration of that original first being. The broader interpretation in which ‘liking’ is understood in the wide sense of ‘what it is like to...’ sounded a lot more promising and could be said to be at least truth-ful, but for the qualification as a truth-narrative in the full sense something still seemed to be lacking. In this next section I will elaborate on this second interpretation of myth as a likely tale by employing something akin to the notion of truth that Heidegger employs in his essay on the artwork. To do so I will return to the two kinds of narrative as presented in the introduction, a kind that *presents* beings and a kind that *re-presents* beings. It will hopefully become clear that stories in general can well be understood as truth-narratives in the presentative sense of truth because ‘true stories’ show not just the being itself but ‘the being of the being’. That is, not just the being itself, but the way in which it is when it is in its own way. In yet other words: there is the being, and then there is the way in which the being is; a true presentative account shows not just the being, and not even just the way in which it is, but the way in which the being is when it is closest to its origin, or where it is most ‘at home’.³² Heidegger talks about works of art having their own proper world, the place where they belong and where the way in which they actually are can be

³² On artworks being ‘at home’ and on ‘world-loss’: Heidegger, ‘Origin’, 166-167 [40].

glanced exclusively. That is, an artwork can be taken away from its 'home', it can lose its 'world', and when it does so it will no longer be able to fully show itself. In a different world it will show itself in a different way, especially if that world is very alien to its own. For any being to show itself, it has to be 'at home' in a sense. That is, it must first be approached from and surrounded by a world that is familiar to its own. Only then can it 'come forth' out of 'unconcealment': we have to become part of its world as much as we can.

Thus, to get a full picture of a being we need to not only present what we think is the being, but we need to present its world. A pair of peasant shoes (an example that Heidegger uses), is just a pair shoes until we start to describe the world in which peasant shoes belong. Moreover, it is only in that world that the way in which the shoes is actually first disclosed. This is what Heidegger means when he talks about the being of a being. The being itself in this case is the pair of peasant shoes, while the being of that being is in its use and appearance in the world of the farmer that wears the shoes, works in them, cleans them when they are filthy, repairs them when they are worn out, stalls them by the fire to have them dry, forgets about them on the morning of a free day.³³ This world of the being, the realm in which it has its being, cannot be disclosed by merely stating its factual properties. It has to be evoked, and it has to be evoked in a way that takes its cue from the being that we want to have show itself. If the world of the being is evoked in the wrong way, the being will remain hidden. If we try and say of the peasant shoes that they are at home in a different world, say, in the middle of a street, the world of the shoes is denied to us and instead a different world is presented, one in which the shoes are 'homeless'.

However, even though the world in which the shoes belong is now denied to us, this new world seems to possess something of its one. What is it that happens in this new world in which a pair of shoes has been left in the middle of the street? How did they get there? To whom do they belong? Is there no-one who will pick them up and bring them back home or at least hem them out of the way? This further effect, of placing beings into a new world in a way that evokes a new story, hints at the power of myth that we intend to discover. For myth

³³ On this example of Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes: Heidegger, 'Origin', 158-161 [28-32].

seems to go beyond what truthful stories generally tend to do, they explicitly disfigure elements of reality, they declare that grass can be any color and that a giant frog can gulp up the ocean. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Where to find true stories

When we think of true stories, we think of stories that contain accurate references to matters of fact. Movies about historic figures are said to be such ‘true stories’. It should be very clear that this kind of true story is precisely not the kind of story we are talking about. These stories can perhaps be true in the story-sense of truth, but not because they relate matters of fact. If we wanted to relate matters of fact, we should have turned to what we have described as a report. It is by the report that we relate facts while stories do something else entirely.

The truest *story* is not the story that most accurately relates how one particular farmer worked her fields, nor how precisely Napoleon marched into Russia. When we say that a story is true in the story-sense of truth we rather mean that the story stirred something in us. We mean that the story showed something profound about life, about the world or about being in general. The fact of Bagration being in command in the battle of Schöngrabern is true in the sense of a historical fact, but the fiction of the cannons firing from across the field and the bullets flying through that same air that the fictional Andrei breathed all showed something that cannot be said to be historical fact, but cannot simply be dismissed as untruth either. It is quite telling that the fiction of the Battle of Schöngrabern seems to show us more than any account of historical facts ever could, and it should not be dismissed lightly.

But we do not seem to be ready to clearly distinguish these two kinds of truth at this point in a narrative that so clearly involves the factual kind. The temptation to say of *War and Peace* that it is truthful precisely insofar as it’s got its facts right seems to shew away any sense of the way in which it can be true as a story instead of as a report. So before we get to the complex relation to truth in historical novels like *War and Peace*, we should get a clear view of what this story-sense of truth is about on its own, without the looming shadow of

factual truth that seems to bar the way to encountering true stories on their own terms. But where should we find such stories? Where should we find stories that are both ‘great art’, but also ‘merely’ stories that are judged *as* stories? It is by these two criteria that we need to try and find the place where the truest stories in the sense of story-truth reside, for two reasons. First, Heidegger asserts that the sort of truth that he describes as happening in art only happens in ‘great art’.³⁴ That is, in the sort of art that is created by artists who have mastered their craft. Therefore, we have to look for a place that is at least commonly acknowledged as a place where great art is found. The second reason, made explicit by Chesterton, is that it’s only artists who can properly appreciate and therefore judge art. One has to know ‘how to begin a story’ to know what a story does or attempts to do and therefore how one can judge whether it succeeds or not.³⁵ Therefore, we need to look for a place where ‘great artists’ judge ‘great art’. One such place is *The New Yorker: Fiction podcast*, where writers are invited to pick a short story from *The New Yorker* archives to read and discuss with fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, Deborah Triesman. For our purposes, any story will do, since I myself am not a fiction writer and cannot judge great stories from bad ones. We will have to rely on the opinion of experts and can only relate the impressions that a story made on us in the flawed way of laymen.

The librarian

Since our space in this essay is limited, I will summarise the story and advise readers to go and read or listen to the story in their own time to get the full sense of the sort of disclosure of truth in story that we’re talking about. But for our present purposes, a provisional sketch of the beings and the world presented in the story should suffice. As related in the introduction, the story I picked is ‘Community Life’, by Lorrie Moore. In this story, a woman is portrayed for whom the outside world becomes increasingly inaccessible and whose life in turn

³⁴ Heidegger, ‘Origin’, 165-166 [38-39].

³⁵ ‘Yet the whole trouble comes from a man trying to look at these stones from the outside, as if they were scientific objects. He has only to look at them from the inside, and ask himself how he would begin a story.’ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 114.

becomes increasingly hidden from that outside world. As a child, she emigrated with her parents from Eastern Europe to North America, but a number of years later both her parents suddenly die, leaving her isolated and unable to relate to her surroundings. The story relates how she comes to work in a library and how she eventually finds herself in a relationship with a man who is active in 'community life' (that is, in the outside world). But the story makes it uncomfortably clear that when her parents died, so did the last people who would ever see her for what she was. We watch with increasing nervousness how her connection with the world is slowly but surely severed. And while she still lives in a sense (she is still a being and she still has a world), that world is now hidden and inaccessible from anywhere except through the story that is told of it. No one in her real world, not the man she gets into a relationship with, nor her colleagues in the library, nor philosophers or scientists searching the world for true modes of being, gets to see what we get to see about the way in which she is (that is, about her being) in her isolated state. Any attempts at accessing her being (that is, the way in which she is) from the real, outside world succeed insofar that she can be disclosed as simply another being. But the *being* of her being, *how* she is, the way in which she is, the manner of life that she now leads and what it means to lead that life, this cannot any longer be accessed from the real outside world. Her life is hidden from view and the only reason that it is nevertheless disclosed is because a fictional story was invented about it.

What then, does this story show? It is clear that the librarian does not correspond to a real factual librarian in the real outside world. But then again, she couldn't have, because in that outside world she is hidden from view. Nevertheless, we seem to have learned something of some reality in reading this story. It seems to be true in at least some sense. But what is that sense? Perhaps what we can say in the very least is that the story shows what the life of people like this woman in reality is like. It is easy to see that there are probably people like her who in the same way lead isolated and hidden lives that are never viewed or seen by anyone until they die, and it does seem that we have learned something about this 'sort' of life. But is that all? Is this story nothing more than a likely tale about a kind of factual reality,

or does it do something else that is not covered by the notion of a likely tale but that nevertheless can be said to be true?

Story disclosing world

Perhaps we might say that beyond showing what it is like to be a being in her situation, her mode of being does not even appear before the story is read. In other words, before reading the story, we had no idea of even the possibility of a life and a world like those of the librarian. The being that shows itself in the story of the librarian in the life of a librarian in her situation, and this being would have remained concealed if the story had not been read. An interesting side-effect of this is that not only would this woman and people like her have remained hidden from us if we had not read the story, but additionally, we would not have known to look for them. Or put another way, the possibility of people like her existing would not even have occurred to us, and in meeting someone like her we would not have recognised her as such and thus would not have been able to see her for what she was in truth. The story has allowed us to imagine a mode of being that only first allows for the possibility of encountering someone in that mode of being. In a broad sense, after reading the story it has become possible for more kinds of being to present themselves to us.

But is this indeed the case? If truth is this only first presenting of the being of a being, so that it ‘beings more’, and the story about the librarian turned out to be a true tale in this sense, because it first showed and made possible to be seen, the mode of being of this librarian – could then the same be said about myths? The strange relationship between this primordial sense of truth as a first-appearing and the other kind that is more familiar to us as correspondence to actual matters of fact, already seems to grind uncomfortably in the story about the librarian. We tend to want to protest: ‘But these concrete instances of matters of fact that the story treats to not correspond to *real* matters of fact, the story is fiction and this particular sequence of events did not *really* happen.’ In the case of the librarian-story however, it is easy to see why this is not a problem: the story does not pretend to presents

historical matters of fact, but nevertheless shows something that such matters of fact could never have shown. Thus, as long as we acknowledge that it's just fiction, we are generally not bothered by its lies.

Degrees of factual truth

But stories come in different shades of such pretensions. The librarian lives in a place that exists in the real world, she comes from a country that we can visit, reads books that we know. We would not forgive the story if it lied that *War and Peace* was authored by Dostoyevski, unless there is some in-story explanation or reason for this mistake. But fiction can gradually become more serious, more about matters of fact as historical novels. How are we to judge the truth or falseness of *War and Peace* for example? Is Tolstoy a historian, someone who presents historical truth? We could say that he is and does so only insofar as he's got his facts right. But somewhere those historical facts end and the fictional ones start. Should we consider everything that is not an established historical fact as untruthful? I for one did not know what it's like to have cannons from across a valley release a plume of smoke and have a few seconds go by before the loud crack echoes across the fields, and the accounts of it are historically factual. Nevertheless, I may just have experienced more of this phenomenon in Tolstoy's book than any of those real historical soldiers on that field did, who would have been quite too occupied with not getting killed to focus their attention on this strange phenomenon of cannons firing from across the dale. Even Tolstoy himself might be said to only have really first experienced the being of these cannons when he started writing about them. Before they were allowed to speak in his narrative, the being of the cannons remained hidden by the momentary everyday life. We can never quite fully grasp the immediate life-situation in which we find ourselves. In the now, we are kept in the dark about most things. But those things that remain hidden in direct experience can become shown in art, even though this is not some asymmetrical finding of truth. Instead, there is a complex relation: the account about the cannons is something new and it changes the meaning of the

cannons; if I were to encounter in real life a valley filled with real Napoleonic armies and I saw such cannons firing from across the field for the first time, my first time seeing them would be quite different from the first time of real historical soldiers marching across such a field, actually being shot at by those cannons. I would not see them in the same way because they would have been changed by Tolstoy's narrative. I would remember Schöngräben, Austerlitz and Borodino, and even if I were to just glimpse them for a moment, because I would be too occupied with not getting killed, I would still glimpse them and their peculiar way of being more clearly than if I'd never encountered them in Tolstoy's artwork.

By now we should be getting closer to what is at stake here. Not only would the being of the librarian and that of the cannons have remained hidden were it not for the art, but moreover, the art first made it possible to view their being at all. Or put another way, these beings first are hidden in everyday life even though they are sensed to be greater than they appear. Some artist senses those beings and decides to listen to them and tell their tale, bringing their being to light for the first time. Then, having experienced the art, when the being again presents itself, it is changed. No longer is it the alien and hidden phenomenon that seemed to deny itself to us. Instead, the art has presented the being as something we can pay attention to.

The external soul of myth

This special relation between the fiction of the story and the way in which the non-fictional world appears to us, whereby the beings in the world in part only first appear after stories have been told about them, becomes much more pertinent in the case of the specific kind of story called a myth. The figures of myth called gods may have been inspired in a poet by perceived gods, or they may have been first perceived because a story was told of them. Moreover, it seems that the one does not preclude the other. In Chesterton's sense, pagan poets 'sense' the divine in their world and 'perfect [them] with significance', while that

meaning goes on to change the appearance of the divine.³⁶ One such example is Father Christmas in whom winter, as a cold, dark and hostile mood, is changed into something warm and cozy through the winter tale of Father Christmas.³⁷ In Heidegger's sense, whenever we want to know what or how a being is, we should approach that being directly and let it speak to us in its own way.³⁸ This speaking is not unilateral. It is a joint venture (so to speak), between the being and the interpreter. The interpreter (in this case the mythic poet), lets the being be in the way that it is, and relates what presents itself to him, while the account that arises in such a way (a myth) goes on to change the way in which the interpreted being was first encountered. This change is a disfiguration in a sense (that winter is not warm), it uproots a being in language. But despite or because of that disfiguration, the change shows something that is true (that there is something warm in winter).

Myths do about the same as the story of the librarian does, but whereas the latter is quite innocent in its supposed relation to particular facts, the first seems to cross beyond such innocence and into the truth-claims that the likes of Xenophanes and Plato opposed. This tendency of myths to uproot factual beings that are familiar to us from their surroundings and present them in radically fantastic circumstances is what Chesterton calls 'the external soul of myth'. And while this property of myths to have their soul external to them makes the myths all the more powerful, it too is the reason why we hesitate to attribute truth to them. If the myth of Father Christmas is taken to show that winter is actually warm in the sense of temperature, then it might seem to be rather false. Similarly, if the mythic notion that Zeus lives on mount Olympus is taken to mean that there is 'in fact' a super-being called Zeus residing on the peaks of that particular mountain called Olympus, then this notion as well might seem to be rather false.

But we might wonder: why not? Why should it not be that the tale of Father Christmas actually shows winter to be warmer than we initially anticipated? And why should

³⁶ Natural powers are given personalities not to give them meaning that they naturally lack, but to somehow show them through this new meaning: 'The point is that the [mythic] personality perfects the water with significance.' Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 115.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁸ Like, for example, Van Gogh's painting: 'This painting spoke.' Heidegger, 'Origin', 161 [32].

it not be that the tale of Zeus living on mount Olympus actually shows that mountain to be the mountain where the thunder-god resides all along? If we follow Heidegger, we should conclude that the stories not only change these factual phenomena but that they somehow only first show them to be what they are.³⁹ Or more specifically, where they first appeared blurred in a way, unclearly distinguishable from their surroundings, the stories now seem to have brought them forth. The stories have given colour to winter and a sharp outline to mount Olympus so that both are seen in a more clear light. Heidegger himself describes this effect by attributing the comparative participle ‘more being’ or ‘being-er’ to a being that is presented in this way.⁴⁰ To illustrate what happens to mount Olympus when it is described as the seat of the thunder-god, one should say that mount Olympus ‘beings more’ as soon as this tale is told of it. It may be a little odd to think of the word ‘being’ in the sense of such a verbal participle, but it is not as strange as it sounds. To ‘being more’ in this sense means that a being that no longer appeared as clearly and explicitly as it did before (perhaps because it had become an ordinary and expected element of everyday life), is allowed to stand in the spotlight and so come out of its slow submerging into obscurity. Think of some trees by the side of a road that are so familiar to you that you don’t notice them anymore. Now imagine that you meet someone who relates that these trees are not just any trees, but the particular trees that house the little spirits that before every dawn apply the morning dew on all the blades of grass around the world. ‘Preposterous!’ one might think, but the trees have by this tale suddenly become visible in a way that they had not been before. It is not that we now believe these trees to house these spirits, but the trees would not have appeared this clearly in any other way. By the tale, though in a rather indirect way, the trees have been revealed in their truth. It is of these trees that Heidegger would say that they now ‘being more’, since they were almost non-being when they were still just any trees that were so familiar to us that

³⁹ Art ‘founds’ a new ‘historical world’, it sends shockwaves through history and lets a new history begin: ‘Whenever art happens – that is, wherever there is a beginning – a thrust enters history; history either begins or starts over again.’ Heidegger, ‘Origin’, 202 [88].

⁴⁰ This emphasis on this kind of expression being a participial one is added by the translators of my Dutch text. See: Heidegger, Martin, *De oorsprong van het kunstwerk*, trans. Mark Wildschut and Chris Bremmers (Amsterdam 2015) 57, note 9.

we didn't even see them any more. The story, in other words, has 'amplified' the being of the trees.

So what is it exactly by which stories have this power for truth? It is as Chesterton said of his pagans: the imagination.⁴¹ But the way in which the imagination relates to truth in our sense of story-truth is different from the way in which Chesterton presents it and more akin to how Heidegger describes the power of truth of the artwork. Imagination is not capable of truth because it can access a hidden truth, but because it allows beings a space to show themselves in in the first place. The power of imagination might be said to be a power of expectation: by imagining possibilities we create a space of expectation in which beings are invited to present themselves. Or in other words, for beings to show themselves, we first have to expect them, and we can only expect them if we have imagined their possibility in advance. This, in turn, does not mean that we see what we expect to see, but rather the opposite: we see *because* we expect to see. Moreover, for this expective imagination it is unnecessary for the imagination to be an accurate, pre-emptive image of the being that appears. Again, it seems that quite the opposite is the case. The more disjunctive and disfigurative the image, the clearer and truer the being appears, if only because its appearance is not clouded by a linguistic factual interpretation of it. The reason for this is that story-truth is not so much about accurate descriptions as about vivid presentations, and if an image has presented a being vividly, it is that being and not the language that is true. In short, then, one might say that story-truth is about getting beings to show themselves in truth, while factual truth is about getting language to conform itself to a being that has already appeared in truth. Or in other words, story-truth gets out of the way of beings showing themselves to us, while factual truth rather obstructs our view of beings by putting itself in between the being and ourselves in its well-meant attempt to a right way towards that being. It is thus precisely because stories are fiction, that they can show beings in truth. Or put more boldly: precisely insofar as the language attempts to be true, the being does not appear in truth; while precisely

⁴¹ 'Mythology, then, sought God through the imagination; or sought truth by means of beauty, in the sense in which beauty includes much of the most grotesque ugliness.' Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 123.

insofar as the language attempts to be untrue, the being is finally allowed to show itself in truth, if it so desires.

Conclusion

To summarise, we set out to find a way in which myths could be understood to be truth-narratives. We found that truth can be understood in at least two different ways, as language re-presenting beings or as language presenting beings. The first we called a factual account or report, while the second we called a fictional account or a story. We then investigated three stories to find out how these two kinds of truth related to them and found that there is a special kind of story-truth in fiction that could not be related in factual accounts, even in cases that directly concern factual events like historical cannons firing across a battlefield. Stories in general turned out to have a capacity for truth in the sense that they could evoke an image that allowed us to see a kind of being that we would not have seen otherwise. In this way, we would not have been able to recognise someone who is in the situation of the librarian of our first story if we had not read that story. Likewise, by reading Tolstoy's passage on cannons, we got a glimpse of the true being of such cannon that we would not have had otherwise. However, whereas these two stories were still somewhat realistic and familiar, to go on and say that stories that are *fantastic* stories like myths can as well relate some kind of truth was by no means achieved at this point. Yet all the materials for doing so were already present. Mythic truth (beyond story-truth), it turned out, was not so much about presenting beings in their factual state, but about uprooting those beings from their factual and familiar state so that their original being could only then be viewed. It was almost as if language had to move out of the way for the being to appear as it was. The frog had to be giant, the sun had to eat a star, the shoes had to be put in the middle of the street, the trees had to become the home of dew-spirits, – all to get a refreshed and therefore clearer view of the beings thus presented. We could not determine at this time whether this kind of truth was divine in a sense or in what way pagans in particular would have viewed the gods in their

myths, but at least some of the capacity of myth for truth was revealed in this way, and this capacity in particular had to do with the power of imagination. To conclude we might say that imagination is a *precondition* for truth because it is needed to create the space of expectation in which beings first appear at all. Realities can only fully show themselves insofar as that full reality has been imagined beforehand and it is therefore because of fiction that facts can appear at all. Or in proper Heideggerian language: beings can only show themselves in truth insofar as they have been allowed an open and inviting space beforehand and it is therefore because of that inviting holy ground that the god can arrive at all.

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