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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

A Column by Alexei Kondratiev

Now that the writing of fantasy -- as encouraged by its publishers -- has come to depend more and more on formulae, and to become compartmentalized in discrete subgenres, adopting predictable styles to entertain well-defined audiences, it is gratifying to see some writers still trying to serve the original mythopoeic purpose of fantasy literature: to transform the reader's world, to uncover life-giving truths, to illuminate through imagination. It is something of a pleasant surprise when such a talent is revealed in a writer like Greg Bear, who is best known for his science fiction (though perhaps not so surprising, if one thinks of the strongly mythopoeic sweep of books like Blood Music and Eon). The Infinity Concerto (Berkley, 1985) began the story that is now concluded in The Serpent Mage (Berkley, 1986). It is high fantasy of the most ambitious, most rewarding sort. To say that it is not without flaws is not to be taken as a disparaging comment. Such storytelling carries inevitable risks, and it is better to see it attempted with partial success than not to see it done at all.

The story rests on an essentially Gnostic-inspired mythos: after a primordial "war in Heaven" one angelic race, the Sidhe have overcome all the other races and imprisoned them in animal bodies devoid of intelligence. Only humans manage to evolve back to sentience and, although they have lost the primary creative powers of their former godlike state, are gradually developing similar powers through the application of imagination in art, especially in poetry and music. The Sidhe come to fear this growing challenge to their supremacy and do everything they can to impede it, snatching away promising human artists before they have reached their full creative potential, or otherwise aborting their efforts. Finally, through the influence of a surviving wizard of one of the deposed races, the focus of the conflict becomes Michael Perrin, a California teenager.

Artistically gifted and socially privileged, Michael is a spoiled American kid who has never been faced with any serious challenge. It is partly his ignorance and inexperience -- as well as his genuinely Romantic qualities -- that make him take the road that leads to Faerie. The world of the Sidhe is no stereotyped fairyland but an elemental place of vivid experience, by turns lush and bleak, horrible and sublime. At first Micheal reacts to it with adolescent defiance, and makes tiresome mistakes. But when the Breed (half-human, half-Sidhe) girl Eleuth sacrifices her life for him, although she has no immortal soul and no hope of an afterlife, he is forced into an adult acceptance of his responsibilities. He then becomes an active player and lends his weight to the complex of forces that is bringing about the downfall of the Sidhe. The "person from Porlock" who thwarted Coleridge's completion of "Kubla Khan" is a leading figure in the events that follow.

This is the most Inklings-like fantasy in years, both in its theme and in its technique. Instead of plunging us all at once into his subcreated world, the author introduces it by degrees, allowing each successive image to display its full range of archetypal resonance, so that by the time the whole

structure is revealed the reader's sense of wonder has been fully awakened. The characters face existential dilemmas that are profound and real, not relevant only to the context of the story.

In The Serpent Mage Michael has returned to Earth. Several years have passed in his absence, so he cannot dismiss his experience as a "dream", or even explain himself to his parents with an easy lie. Courageously, he opts to remain silent until he can tell the truth -- since the very mythic structure of the story he is caught in makes it clear that his role is not yet ended. But in the meantime he must seek to adapt to "normal" life, and here, after the awe-inspiring visions of Faerie, the mundane setting becomes jarring, and the plot loses its focus. There is much frantic tying-up of loose ends (some of which obstinately remain loose), a great deal of narrative ground is covered in a hurry without any sustained effort to engage the reader's imagination as before, and the story falters -- but not for long. As the world of the Sidhe crumbles and its inhabitants are forced into a confrontation with human reality, Michael emerges as the bridge between the two orders of Creation, the restorer of ancient unities. The mythic dimension reasserts itself, and the story comes to a grand finale which, for all its ambiguities, is a kind of eucatastrophe: the power of the universe to transform itself has been re-affirmed, we look out on a world that is no longer "the fields we know".

Gene Wolfe's gift as a verbal craftsman has been recognized for many years, and his mythopoeic talent was spectacularly demonstrated in The Book of the New Sun. With Soldier of the Mist (Tor, 1986) he has embarked upon a new large-scale high-fantasy project, set in ancient Greece at the time of Xerxes' campaign, and feigned to be the translation of an archaic Latin text found written in lead pencil on a series of papyrus scrolls. The narrator, who knows himself only as "Latro", has lost his memory in circumstances he can no longer recall (though later evidence makes it clear that he was a Roman mercenary fighting on the Persian side). Although he retains vivid memories of his early childhood, current events fade from his mind in less than a day's time, so that he is forced to keep a journal to stay aware of who he is and who the people around him are. Sometimes he forgets to write, and then there is a gap in the plot, both for the reader and for himself. Like Severian, the hero of The Book of the New Sun, Latro senses that he is a pawn in a larger scheme. But unlike Severian, who had total recall and could piece together evidence from an ocean of details, Latro has only his written record to provide him with knowledge of his own past: he can only hope that the events he chooses to record are significant ones, for nothing else will remain. But the most fascinating by-product of his condition is his ability to see and converse with gods and other supernatural beings. This faculty kindles the interest of the political figures he meets, and gains some regard for himself and his companions (one of his companions is the poet Pindar; less savoury companions include a lamia and some Scythian werewolves). Along the way we are discreetly made to reflect on the

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and again:

Barganax and Lessingham...now faced one another as if, for all their company about them they stood alone, and a third presiding: a third perceived by them alone; and scarcely, indeed, to be named a third, as being present strangely to the Duke in the person of Lessingham, and to Lessingham in the Duke. [14]

The mysterious third presence for each man is his mistress— for Barganax Fiorinda and for Lessingham Antiope. Each perceives in his male opponent a feminine "other." This is Eddison's acknowledgement and realization of the presence and power of the feminine within the masculine. It is important to recognize that Eddison is not saying male and female are interchangeable, but trying to show that sameness in difference which makes them separate and the same time draws them together.

This round dance of self with other, and particularly the need of the masculine to recognize its feminine self, is both the medium and the message of Eddison's work. Psychologically it is reflected in the interweavings and interactions of the characters. Artistically it is reflected in the interpenetration of the two worlds of Earth and Zimiamvia. Technically it is reflected in the silken ease with which (especially in the Fish Dinner) Eddison's prose moves the reader from one world to another and back again with scarcely a perceptible transition, as if to say "You can only know it through the differences, but through them you must recognize that it is one and the same.

What this all comes down to is the well-known fact that fantasy is a most effective vehicle for communicating ideas, be they psychological, philosophical, or what you will. For the fantastic mode has by its nature a vitality and a vividness not accessible to expository prose. It is perfectly possible to read and be instructed by Jung's essays on the anima. You will learn a lot. But you won't see it or feel it or be in it as you will by going to Zimiamvia with Eddison. Or you can read Plato on the unhappy division of male and female from a primal unity, and learn how each half continually and instinctively seeks to rejoin its other. You will probably be able to imagine a sort of movable geometry-- two halves of a circle rolling awkwardly about and bumping into each other in all the wrong places. But you won't learn anything about love. Or hate. Better to experience Mary or Antiope through Lessingham's eyes, or see Fiorinda as Barganax sees her. Or even as C.S. Lewis saw her. You will see yourself in the process. That's what fantasy is good for.

Notes

- [1] James Stephens, "Introduction," A Fish Dinner in Memison (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1941), p. xi.
 [2] Fish Dinner, p. xiv.
 [3] E.R. Eddison, "Letter of Introduction," Fish Dinner, p. xxvi.
 [4] E.R. Eddison, Mistress of Mistresses (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 103.
 [5] Fish Dinner, p. 176, p. 141.
 [6] Mistress, p. 223, p. 227.
 [7] Mistress, p. 274.
 [8] Fish Dinner, p. 43, pp. 135-6.
 [8a] Bodleian Library Collection (hereafter B.L.C.),



Now is the time....

If you are planning to attend this year's Mythopoeic Conference, NOW is the time to register and make your travel arrangements. The current rates of \$145 for lodging and meals will rise to \$160 on June 1. Airline fare rates are low now, so why not take advantage of this in case they rise later. When sending in your registration to the Conference, request the detailed Progress Report, which will answer many questions.

This special event promises to be the largest and best Mythopoeic Conference to date. The programming will be very full of stimulating papers, panels and talks. You will: be intellectually enlivened, be creatively inspired, meet old friends and make new ones. Don't miss this. Make your preparations NOW. Don't wait until the last minute, which only adds work for the already hard-working Committee. The last minute may be too late. I hope to see you there.

Glen GoodKnight

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nature of memory, of personality (Latro's personality is well-defined and attractive, although he has no focused sense of identity), and even on that of the gods. The book is dedicated "with the greatest respect and affection, to Herodotus of Halicarnassos", and Latro's matter-of-fact observations do convey much of the charm of Herodotus' own style. As one has come to expect from Gene Wolfe, this first volume raises many questions and answers few of them, and leads smoothly to a cliffhanger, which makes one anxiously await the publication of the remaining "scrolls".

E.g. lett. c. 230/1, Folio 64.

- [9] B.L.C., Eng. lett. c. 230/1, Folio 44.
 [10] B.L.C., Eng. lett. c. 233, Folio 79.
 [11] B.L.C., Eng. lett. c. 230/1, Folio 49.
 [12] Mistress, p. 239.
 [13] Mistress, p. 176.
 [14] Mistress, p. 358.