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An Enlargement of Being

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An Enlargement of Being

Additional Keywords
Bonnie GoodKnight
I promised in the July, 1975, issue of Mythprint to comment on this year on what I believe is the essence of the Society, in part in response to comments by others in Mythprint in the form of letters, controversies concerning rabbits, and thinly veiled allegorical tracts. My recent journey to Britain, which was as much as anything else a quest better to understand our three central authors, has greatly aided in clarifying my own thoughts about them and about The Mythopoeic Society’s relationship to them. I would like to share with you what I see as the essential nature of the Society. In the May, 1975, issue of Mythprint, I said: “The Mythopoeic Society treads the middle way between isolated exclusivity of interest (‘sectarianism’) on the one hand, and unfocused eclecticism (‘latitudinarianism’) on the other.” This needs further explanation. There are extreme attitudes that can be found within the Society on either side of the “middle way”:

There is what I see as an error of diffusion, of lack of focus, which in its milder form would have us completely and conveniently ignore the Christian element of the authors, and indeed spiritual which in its milder form would have us completely and conveniently.

There is, I believe, an opposite error of attitude: the idea that here as well, we hold them in unique regard, and wish know their work as well, we hold them in unique regard, and wish know their work better. The above reasons seem to make more than an adequate literary defense for an organization specially devoted to those men, if such a defense is really required. I recognize there are those who do not find this defense sufficient. To them I would say: Even though the Society does indeed function on many levels for many kinds of people — of which this convention is a good example — we exceed the bounds of the possible to seek to please the wishes of all persons in all ways.

There is, I believe, an opposite error of attitude: the idea that the Society should serve as an evangelical Christian organization. Those seriously concerned about evangelism I would direct to another organization, much older and more venerable, which has a founder much greater than I.

It is true that one result of my reading J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis as a high school student was my conversion from cynical agnosticism to Christianity — a conversion much as Lewis describes: “...The experience is that of catastrophic conversion. The man who has passed through it feels like one who has awakened from nightmare into ecstasy. Like an accepted lover, he feels that he has done nothing, and never could have done anything, to deserve such astonishing happiness.” (English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama. Oxford University Press, 1954. Page 33.) It is also true that the fusion of literary and spiritual joy which resulted from reading Tolkien and Lewis and from my conversion was the enthusiastic spark that led eventually to the founding of The Mythopoeic Society.

The joy that these men, and later Charles Williams, have brought me does indeed make me hope that every member of the Society would have a similar experience. I would be satisfied if each member would indeed read the primary works of the three authors, and “taste and see” what is to be encountered in that reading. How indeed persons do interact with this literature is beyond the scope of my reason for founding the Society: I realize one cannot institutionalize a personal experience. In this context, the Society’s aim is to provide a medium of exchange rather than to be a bearer of doctrine. The Society best fulfills its function if it does not set bounds to its members’ philosophies by adopting a religious or literary philosophy of its own.

My recent journey to Britain to see the people and places known to the three authors has affected me deeply. I have had time to allow what I already knew about these men to interact with and be corrected by what I learned on that very rewarding journey. I have returned appreciating and loving them even more than before, but worshipping them less. It is wrong to venerate them as icons of the joy to which they point. They would be the first ones firmly to protest such a view. The three as men seem much more indivisibly distinct and real to me now, and this does help me to understand their writing more clearly; but the communication of their joy comes primarily from their works, not their personal lives (although I do feel Lewis did at times, in his unselshf giving for others, take on saintliness).

Though one of the functions of the Society is to introduce persons to the body of literature, it would be presumptuous for the Society to insert itself in the experiential encounter between the reader and the body of literature. The Society has no doctrine, creed, or loyalty oath, and has never required one. Some people have assumed that the Society is evangelical or sectarian in that sense, or would be if it thought this would be permitted. The Society has never been so narrow an organization, and any such narrowing of it in the future would be very unfortunate.

The sectarian drive, although especially understandable among those of fresh enthusiasm, is not ultimately constructive in this sort of organization. To the degree that sectarianism is gratified, the Society’s universality is diminished, and such a trend, if continued, would make the Society’s purpose self-defeating. One would be left only with those who think exactly like oneself, and the opportunity of growth and exchange would be excluded, the vision and experience of the Great Dance lost.

In summary, I would not have the Society compromise the religious belief of its membership. It would be the first elements of that belief in their works; nor would I have the Society presume to interpret as an organization the meaning of that belief. By taking this position, I do not in any way mean to limit individual members in their interpretation.

I have taken this moment to discuss “errors of attitude” on either side of the Society’s middle course, in hopes of clarifying the situation and clearing the air, and in hopes of making the advantages of the middle way more obvious. I seek more than ever

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the Society's fuller maturity as a literary organization — balanced, united in intellectual honesty, and worthily fulfilling its stated
commitment. What I say is not in any way directed toward specific individuals, because I recognize that no single person that I know of personally is an embodiment of either error. Rather, real
people are constantly and subtly altering their own positions on
these and many other questions. I believe there is a reason for
literary experience — whether or not the individual acknowledges
a link with spiritual experience — in which I hope we may and can
find agreement. In giving a justification for reading great
literature, C. S. Lewis says in the Epilogue of An Experiment in
Criticism:
What then is the good of — what is even the defence for —
occurring our hearts with stories of what never happened and
entering vicariously into feelings which we should try to avoid
having in our own person?... The nearest I have yet got to an
answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want
to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole
world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness
peculiar to himself. And even when we build disinterested fantasies, they are saturated with, and limited by, our own psychology. We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with
other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as
our own.... The primary impulse of each is to maintain and
aggrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the
self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness....
Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully
realise the enormous extension of our being which we owe to
authors. We realise it best when we talk with an unliterary
friend. He may be full of goodness and good sense but he inhabits a tiny world. In it, we should be suffocated. The man
who is content to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is
in prison.... Literary experience heals the wound, without
undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass
emotions which heal the wound: but they destroy the privilege.
In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back
into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become
a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in
the Greek poem, we see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who
see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in
knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself
than when I do.

Notes on This Issue
The last issue took a great deal of time to become fact.
This was in part due to my personal saddening resulting
from the death of J. R. R. Tolkien, a man I, along with many
others, respected and admired deeply. Nevertheless the
issue needed to be finished, and gradually my own personal
feelings were forced to come to a head as I wrote the editorial
"Death and the Desire for Deathlessness." Its writing was a cathartic experience, and no longer held back by the
inertia of bereavement, I could look again look forward.
I realized Mythlore needed a larger staff, in order to
publish it, hopefully with greater frequency. I asked
Laurence Krieg, Gracia Fay Ellwood, and George Colvin
to join the staff, and they agreed. Laurence Krieg would
undertake the role of Managing Editor in a similar fashion
as he had done previously with Mythprint. As a result,
credit goes to him for the organization, arranging of art,
and layout of most of the interior of the issue (pp. 3-7, and
10-31). I am directly responsible for the content of the
two covers, pages 2, 9, and the lower half of this page. I
regret I was not able to follow the Managing Editor's policy
of not continuing ends of articles later in the issue. Gracia
Fay Ellwood made the arrangements for page 8. I express
my thanks to all the staff for their vital assistance, es-
pecially Laurence Krieg, in getting this issue into facthood.
Plans are nearly finished on the working out of a new way of
producing Mythlore on a regular basis. I have learned not
to make premature promises in print, but do both hope and
expect that you will be seeing the next issue sooner than
you may expect.

— Glen H. GoodKnight