An Enlargement of Being

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I promised in the July, 1975, issue of Mythprint to comment 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 positions 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 rest ('sectarianism') on the one hand, and unfocused eclecticism ('latitudinarianism') on the other." This needs further explanation.

By their being joined together in time and space as they were, their similarity is not only of idea and theory, but also of common atmosphere. In a world which was becoming increasingly disillusioned by its own vision of reality, seeking answers in forms of religion, political systems, science, and psychology, our three authors found a system of cosmic order and created a myth to contain it. They were more concerned with myth as a work of art and as a conveyor of truth, than as the end point of a long string of influences. Many persons, including members of this Society as well as myself, have found a special difficult to define delight with the three. While being indebted to many other writers 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 wakened from nightmare into ecstasy. Like an accepted lover, he feels that he had 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 men seem much more individual than indivisibly distinct and real to me now, and this does help me to understand their writing more clearly; but the communication of joy comes primarily from their works, not their personal lives (although I do feel Lewis did at times, in his selfless 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. I am sorry for those who have thus felt in this way a real or imaginary intimacy among those of fresh enthusiasm, is not ultimately constructive for 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 alike 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 character of the Society; the 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... (continued on page 28)
asked of Taran. In his final encounter with Arawn Death-Lord in The High King, Taran merely cleaves a serpent in twain. This shadow has been suitably paid to his size.

Gurgi embodies, then, Taran's self-emasculating fear, his hunger for self-knowledge and identity—of which his being a pig-keeper is perhaps an echo, for the prodigal son, far from his birthplace, and starving, became a swineherd and ate husks with his pigs—and his doglike dependency: "Had Gurgi owned a tail, Taran was sure he would have wagged it frantically" (Book of Three, p. 38). When Taran reaches maturity, Gurgi (and the other magic)—that is to say, unconscious—companions withdraws: "Yes! yes!" shouted Gurgi. "All go to the land of no sighings and no dying!" He bounded joyously and waved his arms in the air, shedding a good portion of what hair remained to him. "Yes, oh yes! All together forever! And Gurgi, too, will find what he seeks. Wisdom for his poor tender head!" (The High King, p. 282.)

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(continued from page 9)

the Society's fuller maturity as a literary organization—balanced, united in intellectual honesty, and worthy 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 defense for—occupying 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 realize the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors. We realize 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, I 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 saddened result from the death of J.R.R. Tolkien, a man I, alone 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 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, especially 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