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Missives to Mythlore

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Missives to Mythlore

cused of spending the night with her, though the French poet quickly added that of course it was really Lancelot. In Malory all this seems to boil down to her praising him on his prowess in battle, though this is early in the game—throughout most of Malory, Kay is again only the spiteful weakling. Guinevere's love life will always remain a mystery.

ANOTHER THING THAT SEEMS QUITE STRANGE is that the Scotch, a people just as Celtic as the Irish or the Welsh, have produced no great hero, no mythic cycle of tales. Bits of Arthurian lore have been found among them, and some very poetic versions of old Irish tales; and certainly everybody knows of the highland Scot's fame for the latter, but they have no epic. One would like to think that it was trampled underfoot by the Covenanters, those nice people who made laws forbidding such sinful revelry as the celebration of Christmas, but even if all the written versions had been found and burned, a national epic if it had existed would have survived; it would have been too deeply embedded in the national consciousness for such late-comers as the Covenanters to stamp out. And even while they were going to church every Sunday—they'd have caught it if they hadn't—many Scotch farmers were setting aside one little plot on each farm for the devil himself. One wonders how their hell-fire early Protestant preachers ever stood for that. Of course the so-called devil, no doubt originally a pagan god, was no longer being worshipped, but he was certainly being propitiated. The ground on which his tithe must originally have been reared was being left barren, useless to man or beast, something that in itself must have been pretty hard on a thrifty people such as Scots are usually said to be. They did make a few tries at storytelling. Thomas the Rhymer, whose name is truly magical, escaped hell by being carried off by the Fairy Queen, who will keep him with her forever, and there what might be called the shadow of a saga clings to the name of a man who evidently was really a historical figure: the enchanter, Michael Scott; but alas, he never became a match for Merlin. Somehow, for some reason, the Scotch have lost their heritage. I am sorry, for I have a good deal of Scotch-Irish blood, and that really means Scotch.

My own work has been deeply influenced by Eastern mystics, which often fits in with folklore remarkably well. You could say that one of our present-day scholars is corroborating that a bit by linking old Irish laws with old Sanskrit ones, and druidic practices and beliefs with those of the Brahmins, but I'm sure he would indignantly repudiate the charge. Also, I myself prefer to accept Rhys' theory that the druids are really pre-Celtic, and converted their warlike invaders. But because ancient peoples did get around a great deal, in spite of their lack of comfortable transportation, it is hard to tell about such things. A great deal of Hindu mysticism may have originated with the builders of the lost civilization of Mohenjo-daro, which the Sanskrit-speaking invaders presumably overwhelmed. And that folk may very well have been relatives of that lost race whom

the Aryan Celts overwhelmed. In view of the great astronomical knowledge displayed in the building of Stonehenge—the comforting idea of Mycenaean influence is fading since radiocarbon dating seems to be putting the old Celtic megalithic building farther and farther back—the people who built such an observatory can't have been just ignorant savages. So maybe the Celts themselves were only the heirs of broken and scattered wisdom which they recast and elaborated just as the French later recast and elaborated the Arthurian cycle, as our unknown Mr. X did with the Mabinogi.

We could take all this still further back, and suggest that perhaps this wisdom was originally brought down from other planets in the chariots of the Gods. I haven't yet read up on this interesting theory, but while scientists certainly don't accept these chariots yet they're still a bit too scientific to be in my line. I never have been attracted by machinery. I see no beauty in it, and I also find it hard to handle. Make no mistake—I'm an effete offspring of the 20th century; I'd be just as unhappy without my electric blanket, my electric washer and toaster, and a few other things as anybody else would. But I can see that machines endanger creativity; not just handicrafts, the fine old hand-made things, but the arts. They've made fiction the exclusive field of the sacred few who can get their work printed, and made extinct the wandering storyteller who used to go from house to house. A cousin of mine who taught in a famous Eastern conservatory of music once told me that it was very hard nowadays to get people to pay for their children's musical education, there were so few jobs for musicians now. In my childhood every big movie theater had its own orchestra—I believe the late Dick Powell got his start at the Circle Theatre in Indianapolis, my own birthplace—but nowadays, thanks to radio and TV, there are only a few big, well-paid orchestras. A city, unless it is one of the very big ones, usually has only one orchestra, an artistic but hard-pressed local organization that depends on private citizens' contributions, and can't hope to make its living at the box-office. Science is saving a lot of lives in our hospitals, and it is also inventing a lot of ways for us to hurt each other and so land each other in said hospitals, but it seems to me that it is trampling upon our imaginations with iron feet. Another kick I have against science: none of its discoveries about prehistoric man and his world ever really give us an answer; they just take everything one step back. It's like the old saw about which came first: the hen or the egg. Personally, I would say that since all creatures lay eggs, the first egg came out of an egg laid by what you might call some proto-hen, herself doubtless the product of untold ages of evolution. But what started that evolution? If matter and energy somehow collided so violently that they created life, where did the matter and energy come from? If the chariots of the Gods brought us our civilization, where did they come from, and how did their planet become inhabited and civilized? Religious people say, "God." Those who aren't religious have no better answer than the old proverb so well-known here in the Southwest, "¿Quién sabe?"

Missives to Mythlore

John L. Leland, New Haven, Connecticut

Dear sir:

Your call in *Mythlore 9* for more commentary on the work of Lewis and Williams has led me to decide to mention a point which I noticed some time ago, when you published *The Noises That Weren't There*, and which I have always meant to examine in detail, but have always failed to study for lack of time. I mention it now in the hope that someone else will make the study.

This point is that the passage in *The Noises* which discusses the desire of evil spirits to create life, their concern with succubi, etc., is very closely parallel—I believe in fact for some part identical—with a passage on the same subject in Williams' *Witchcraft*. This raises, of course, a number of questions about the relationship between the two texts, from a purely bibliographical standpoint—that is, when did Williams write the passage, where did he originally intend to use it, did he ever intend it to actually appear in two published works, etc.—and also the more generally interesting question of the relationship between Williams' views on magic in the natural world and the processes he describes as actually occurring in his novels. I have seen very little discussion of Williams's *Witchcraft*—though as the only full-length study of "real" magic by a major fantasy author (so far as I am aware), it would seem to merit careful

attention—but it seems to me possible that one reason Williams set his novels (by and large) in an approximation of this world, rather than a new world like those of the other Inklings, was because he in some ways took more seriously the open intervention of truly supernatural forces in modern affairs. My feeling (I may be misunderstanding the question) is that Lewis and Tolkien—though they maintain the theoretical possibility of such interventions in our world—are tacitly accepting the assumption of most moderns that such things do not occur in our world, and then postulating another world where they do occur, so as to express ideas rather than magical systems. That is to say, I think Lewis is less interested in arguing that devils such as Screwtape maintain an actual existence of the sort he ascribes to them than he is in making the point that the methods adopted by Screwtape do in fact reflect undesirable states of mind or habits for the modern Christian; this is not to say that Lewis would have maintained that such states of mind were not in fact sometimes induced in humans by genuine outside evil entities but that he was using such actions—real or not—as a metaphor for the discussion of the states of mind. On the other hand my feeling is that Williams really is interested in the implications of the actual (possible, at least) existence of such powers in this world, and their effect on humans. These points, as regards Lewis and Tolkien especially, could be illustrated at great length, but the work is unfortunately beyond me; again I am

forced to appeal to others to take up the question—or challenge my interpretation.

I hope these comments will prove useful in stimulating further discussion.

Kathleen J. Gibbs, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Elen síla lúmenn' omentielvo!

...I liked your Tolkien memorial issue very much (despite its long delay in arrival!) but would like to object a bit to some of the contents. In particular, Benjamin Urrutia's "Professor Tolkien enters heaven" was rather short of the mark from any Christian perspective at all. "...Paradise is reunion/Walking together beyond the confines of the Earth/Seeing once more the beloved face you thought you lost..." Balderdash! Reunions with earthly beloveds are but a pale counterpoint to the union with our heavenly Father and Lover—reread "Leaf by Niggle" and tell me if Tolkien didn't understand this!—and try the last lines of "A Grief Observed" for Lewis's point of view—"She smiled, but not at me—*poi sí tormō all'eterma fontana*"—those lines from Dante are the guide to each Christian's true longing—we gladly serve all other souls when in beatitude, but even more eagerly desire to return to the contemplation of Him who is the source of all, the

eternal fountain of life. I sincerely doubt if an exact replica of Middle-earth awaited Tolkien in heaven, as Mr. Urrutia suggests; J. R. Christopher is nearer to the mark—Tolkien's creative vision was only one of many shadows of vision that tried to capture Paradise, the ancient woodland. It is *that* that one thirsts for, not one's own private vision of it. Reread the last of the *Screwtape Letters*: that is the idea.

Other than this poem, which as you see rather aroused my "ire", the rest of the issue was good, except that you rather frustratingly left out the footnotes on Glover's excellent article. The "Death and Deathlessness" idea is a profound one and should be followed up in a more lengthy study—the many varieties of that desire: evil in Denethor, resigned in Frodo, submitted in Aragorn and Faramir, bitter in Arwen, eternally unchanging in Galadriel. The review of Kocher's book is long overdue—this first-rate work is a necessity for any true student of Tolkien. The drawings were, as usual, excellent: each artist seems to have one of the "free peoples" that he or she does best. Tim Kirk's hobbits, and especially his orcs, and his landscapes are first rate; Annette Harper's elves are untouchable.

All in all, a very satisfying issue—hope the next one won't be so long in coming!

Namárië -

Book Review

The Not-World

By Thomas Burnett Swann

Daw Books, New York, 160 pages, \$1.25; February 1975.

Thomas Burnett Swann's newest novel treats a promising idea: a forest near eighteenth-century Bristol remains enchanted by British and Celtic folklore goblins, nightmares, and witches, despite Puritan persecution and Enlightenment skepticism and industrialism. After an encounter with the young poetic prodigy, Thomas Chatterton, Mr. Swann's heroine and hero, accompanied by a spinster aunt, take a balloon journey into the center of the forest, the "not-world" of the title, to discover if Chatterton has retreated there, despite reports of his suicide in London.

Mr. Swann's heroine is a charming and sympathetic creature, a maiden lady of thirty mysteriously handicapped by a fall from a horse in her teens; she now compensates for emotional starvation by writing Gothic novels in the mode of Anne Radcliffe. Mr. Swann, however, tells us in an afterword that his conception of Deirdre was based partly on Elizabeth Barrett Browning and partly on the Katherine Hepburn character in the movie *The African Queen*.

The novel depicts Deirdre as being regenerated by her adventures in the haunted forest and by a sudden birth of love for the hero, a poorly educated but experienced sailor named Dylan. In the flush of her new-found love, Deirdre regains the use of her legs and defeats the witch who threatens to dominate Dylan's soul.

All this sounds like an imaginative basis for a romantic fantasy, but in my opinion Mr. Swann simply isn't able to bring it off. The novel's opening sections seem to work well enough and to foreshadow an agreeable evocation of the Supernatural. And the first incident in the forest after the arrival of the hero and heroine is imaginative in the grand tradition: both are assailed in their sleep by demonic tempters in disguise, trying to pervert their incipient love for each other into lust. But after this, the story is a disappointment. Deirdre's and Dylan's exploration of the enchanted forest doesn't live up to the book's earlier promise, and the plot is resolved by a number of silly incidents that seem hastily contrived. The story seems to fail in two or three large ways that are worth discussing in a little detail.

(1) First, the old forest near Bristol never becomes a living image of the Celtic or Druidic Other World that Mr. Swann wants it to be—at least not for this reader. Its worst terror is a supernatural or ghostly witch called Arachnae who seems rather like a papier-mâché Halloween horror. Nowhere do we meet with any creatures who really seem to uphold the fierce reputation of the Celtic otherworld. In fact, despite Mr. Swann's continued insistence that he's dealing with Celtic material, we feel

that we're back in the world of minor Greek mythology which plays so important a role in many of Mr. Swann's other romances.

(2) Mr. Swann does not seem to me to have the artistic maturity to deal adequately with the theme of Deirdre's awakening womanhood. In the beginning, Deirdre arouses sympathy, but she and Dylan seem to be little more than precocious adolescents. And I'm afraid that's all they seemed to me at the end too. Dylan, by the way, strikes me as singularly unconvincing for a sailor or who's supposedly had numerous adventures at sea and visited brothels in North Africa, England, and the Colonies. The idea of a growing love between Dylan and Deirdre was an excellent theme, but it requires more than Mr. Swann's mixture of sentiment and boyish jocularly to be made convincing. The story might work more effectively as a children's book than as an adult fantasy; but I think there's too much sex in it for that. The intention, in short, seems uncompromisingly adult.

(3) Mr. Swann fails to set up any strong contrasts in the novel between the materialistic everyday Bristol and the haunted forest he conceives. His failure to do this is in itself almost fatal to the novel's effect, for it does not allow us to be led gradually into an evocation of the Forest as a powerful image of the supernatural and mythopoeic past. The rising industrial and materialistic eighteenth century is supposed to be *there*, but the novel doesn't show us much of it even for a moment. Mr. Swann's negligence in this respect seems almost inexplicable, for doing a scene in eighteenth-century Bristol would appear to be a novelist's delight.

(4) Finally, though, what is wrong with Swann's novel here, and some of his other work too, seems to me to be something much bigger. The fact is that Mr. Swann seems to lack any very strong belief in *evil*. Or if he has one, he doesn't or can't present a very powerful imaginative conception of evil. This is one of the major ways in which Mr. Swann differs from C. S. Lewis, with whom Mr. Swann is sometimes compared. Actually Mr. Swann's theology, if it can be called that, seems closer to Robert Graves than to Lewis; but Mr. Swann's imaginative fiction seems inferior to Lewis's mainly because Mr. Swann doesn't present images of evil with much intensity. His novels seem to take place in an Arcadia without pain or death, or perhaps, a kind of pallid Narnia, not only without Aslan, but without the White Witch or Tash, or any of the other impressive demons created by Lewis. Mr. Swann's stories are often charming, but they seem to be products of the fancy rather than the imagination, to use Coleridge's terms.

All this might be another way of saying that Mr. Swann's work is still immature. But if so, his work has been disappointing to me for a long time, ever since I read *Day of the Minotaur*