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Book Review

Ed Chapman

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Book Review

Abstract

The Not-World. Thomas Burnett Swann. Reviewed by Ed Chapman.

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*

many years ago and thought that Mr. Swann might be on his way to producing a masterpiece of fantasy some day. In short, if Mr. Swann's talent is still immature, it has been so for years, and may in fact be a case of arrested development.

Certainly "immaturity" can't be a completely satisfying way of describing the shortcomings of *The Not-World*. If we think of another fantasy writer whose work shows signs of immaturity, for instance, we can see some immediate contrasts. Ms. Sanders Anne Laubenthal, for instance, is a young fantasy writer, known to readers of *Mythprint*. Her first novel, *Excalibur*, published late in 1973, was both a delightful romance, and one containing many faults: at times, Ms. Laubenthal seemed imperfectly in command of her style and her plot. But the romance was vigorous and intense in its evocation of strange areas of the imagination, despite its weaknesses. I would predict that in time Ms. Laubenthal may be a powerful novelist in the George MacDonald/Lewis/

Charles Williams tradition. And the point to be made here is that if Ms. Laubenthal had written about a haunted forest near Bristol, we would remember the forest as a haunting image. The witches Ms. Laubenthal would evoke would be searing memories, because Ms. Laubenthal believes in the power both of the demonic and of the divine.

Another question raised by Mr. Swann's unsatisfying novel is why the world of fantasy writing should be so dominated today by women. This is especially peculiar since so many of the great figures in the tradition of mythopoeic fantasy—Morris, MacDonald, Tolkien, Eddison, Lewis, Williams—have been men. Today, however nearly all the virile writing—if the ladies will permit such an adjective—is being done by women: Evangeline Walton, Joy Chant, Katherine Kurtz, Mary Stewart... The male myth makers seem to be in retreat or other fields.

—Reviewed by Ed Chapman

Homo monstrosus:

Lloyd Alexander's GURGI and other Shadow Figures of fantastic Literature

by

nancy-lou patterson



Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*.

a work of literature can exert a compelling power upon the reader quite out of balance with the space afforded to it, and when this happens, archetypal criticism can help to explain why it does.

Readers of Lloyd Alexander's five-volume fantasy cycle of Prydain—*The Book of Three*, *The Black Cauldron*, *The Castle of Llyr*, *Taran Wanderer*, and *The High King*—will be able to list the companions of the youthful pig-keeping hero, Taran. He is provided with a future wife, a musical friend, a wise old counsellor, and numerous acquaintances, mentors, enemies, and magical beings in the course of seeking out the secret of his ancestry and becoming High King. The companionship is more casual than the Fellowship of the Ring in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and lacks the basis of physical relationship of the Pevensy children in C. S. Lewis's *Narnian Chronicles*, but it falls well within the traditional structure. A much more mysterious figure among those companions has not been mentioned: this is Gurgi.

I read the Prydain series at one gulp in tandem with my twelve-year-old daughter. It is certainly true that Alexander is endlessly inventive—both of characters and events—sometimes breathlessly so. In pondering the whole experience, I find that

IN HIS ANALYSIS of human dreams, C. G. Jung developed the technique of amplification, in which he searched the literature of mythology and folklore for parallels, in order to understand motifs which could not be explained in terms of memory or wish fulfillment. This method has given rise in literary criticism to the seeking of archetypal sources for characters and events; perhaps most notably in Northrop

Sometimes a very minor element in

a compelling power upon the reader

quite out of balance with the space afforded to it, and when this happens, archetypal criticism can help to explain why it does.

Gurgi remains most vivid. Fflewddur and his harp become a single joke strained to the breaking point, Eilonwy exudes a faint perfume of the stereotype, so that her delightful traits are gently patronized; and the old magician Dallben never rises, as do Merlin in T. H. White's *Once and Future King*, and Gandalf in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, to the level of the numinous. Even the splendidly-conceived triple Goddesses—Orddu, Orwen, and Orgoch—repeat a mildly grisly running gag about Orgoch's appetite. It is a failure of taste, I think, or perhaps a failure of nerve; in the end Alexander is a rationalist, whose hero must get on with real life, having rid himself of childish fantasies—all his magical companions pass away into the Summer Country except for Eilonwy, his future wife, who is reduced in the process.

Perhaps this is the reason why Prydain for all its spectacular variety is not always quite a secondary world, not always absolutely real: there is a certain swashbuckling disregard of detail. On the one hand, events pour over us too rapidly to be remembered, and on the other, comic effects are simply repeated from volume to volume. There is a tendency to exaggeration: when Taran is mercilessly lashed by captors dragging him before the enchantress Achren in *The Book of Three*, there is little sense of his suffering, of the experience being more than a simple incident intended to lend drama and colour to the tale. The same motif becomes one of intense pathos when Frodo is trapped in the tower of Cirith Ungol in *The Return of the King* (yet he receives but a single stripe). And when the claws of Aslan mark Aravis with ten stripes, in *The Horse and His Boy*, her whole life is changed. The "throw-away" effect of Alexander's narrative diminishes its realism.

With the above comments I have exhausted my objections: they are minor in the face of Alexander's achievement, which is a major and authentic work of fantasy, and my purpose is rather to show his undoubted power at work. The aforementioned negative assertions might also be made about Gurgi—and yet he sticks in the mind—why? As C. S. Lewis said, the argument *ad hominem* is likely to mislead us, so I will not try to guess what Alexander meant by Gurgi. Instead, I will look at what he tells us about him.