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GOING ON IN THE GREAT DANCE

by Glen GoodKnight

Address given at the 1977 Mythopoeic Conference

This year we mark the passing of the first decade of the Mythopoeic Society. Much has occurred and come into being; much has passed away. Our culture was different when we began, and we have been able to control cultural shifts and changes slightly better than a stick controls the tide. Nevertheless, underlying this is our motto "Joy in the Great Dance." The idea of this dance can be found in varying modes and degrees on Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams. Tolkien calls it a "Great Music" in The Silmarillion:

Then Iluvatar said to them: 'Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. . . .

. . . and a sound arose of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights, and the places of the dwelling of Iluvatar were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not void. Never since have the Ainur made any music like to this music, though it has been said that a greater still shall be made before Iluvatar by the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Iluvatar after the end of days. Then the themes of Iluvatar shall be played aright, and take Being in the moment of their utterance, for all shall then understand fully his intent in their part, and each shall know the comprehension of each, and Iluvatar shall give to their thoughts the secret fire, being well pleased.

Lewis describes it in Perelandra:

"The beginning of the Great Game, of the Great Dance," said Tor. "I know little of it as yet. Let the eldila speak." . . .

. . . "The Great Dance does not wait to be perfect until the peoples of the Low Worlds are gathered into it. We speak not of when it will begin. It has begun from before always. There was no time when we did not rejoice before His face as now. The dance which we dance is at the centre and for the dance all things were made. Blessed be He!" . . .

"In the plan of the Great Dance plans without number interlock, and each movement becomes in its season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else had been directed. Thus each is equally at the centre and none are there by being equals, but some by giving place and some by receiving it, the small things by their smallness and the great by their greatness, and all the patterns linked and looped together by the unions of a kneeling with a sceptred love. Blessed be He!" . . .

"All that is made seems planless to the darkened mind, because there are more plans than it looked for. In these seas there are islands where the hairs of the turf are so fine and so closely woven together that unless a man looked long at them he would see neither hairs nor weaving at all, but only the same and the flat. So with the Great Dance. Set your eyes on one movement and it will lead you through all patterns and it will seem to you the master movement. But the seeming will be true. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. There seems no plan because it is all plan: there seems no centre because it is all centre. Blessed be He!" . . .

And now, by a transition which he did not notice, it seemed that what had begun as speech was turned into sight, or into something that can be remembered only as if it were seeing. He thought he saw the Great Dance. It seemed to be woven out of the intertwining undulation of many cords or bands of light, leaping over and under one another and mutually embraced in arabesques and flower-like subtleties. Each figure as he looked at it became the master-figure or focus of the whole spectacle, by means of which his eye disentangled all else and brought it into unity — only to be itself entangled when he looked to what he had taken for mere marginal decorations and found that there also the same hegemony was claimed, and the claim

made good, yet the former pattern not thereby dispossessed but finding in its new subordination a significance greater than that which it had abdicated. . . .

. . . And by now the thing must have passed altogether out of the region of sight as we understand it. For he says that the whole solid figure of these enamoured and inter-inanimated circlings was suddenly revealed as the mere superficies of a far vaster pattern in four dimensions, and that figure as the boundary of yet others in other worlds: till suddenly as the movement grew yet swifter, the interweaving yet more ecstatic, the relevance of all to all yet more intense, as dimension was added to dimension and that part of him which could reason and remember was dropped farther and farther behind that part of him which saw, even then, at the very zenith of complexity, complexity was eaten up and faded, as a thin white cloud fades into the hard blue burning of the sky, and a simplicity beyond all comprehension, ancient and young as spring, illimitable, pellucid, drew him with cords of infinite desire into its own stillness.

The Mythopoeic Society as part of the great dance has made some stumbles and mistaken moves. No dancer can gain the stability, agility, and grace in the dance without learning through his mistakes, his stumbles, lurches, and yes, even falling on his face.

The Dance is unending yet ever changing. Change, even unexpected change, is good within a perceived framework.

I would like to touch upon the some-time expressed opinion that the Society should expand its interests. I would reply that it should deepen rather than expand. Some may disagree, but an organization is not the same entity as an individual human being. As part of the Great Dance with its interwoven complexities, we as individuals benefit from an ever growing awareness of the existence both surrounding us on within us. To honestly feel growth in one's self is a true joy. A human's potential for growth can go in a great many directions. To formally apply this to an organization such as this is to invite chaos, since each member would want to see his own interest added to the express purpose. Applying this kind of growth to the Society we could arrive at Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and Robert E. Howard, or Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and Sherlock Holmes, or Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and Frisbee collecting, or Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and Calendar reform. In the formal sense we cannot become the Something for Everybody Society and continue to be a viable meeting ground for the already stated interests of the Society. But on a personal level, this does not and should not prevent us from sharing our other interests with those we meet.

I do thank George Allen and Unwin, Houghton Mifflin, and especially Christopher Tolkien for publishing The Silmarillion in coincidence with the Mythopoeic Society's tenth anniversary. It makes the occasion more enjoyable. I personally have been waiting twenty years for its publication; now all the false rumors have come to an end. We plan in 1979 to hold a special conference on The Silmarillion, which will be of interest on a multitude of levels. There will also be a non-stop reading of The Silmarillion in September 1977. (See the December 1977 Mythprint for the details.)

In its first ten years the Society has been a ground-breaker and a path finder. We were the first organization to be devoted to C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams. Now there are a number of exclusive Lewis groups, and a Williams Society has been formed in England in 1976. We were not the first Tolkien group, but the first national Tolkien organization, the Tolkien Society of America, became part of us in 1972. Thus we are the oldest, continuous, and largest Tolkien Society, as well as the same

for Lewis and Williams. In addition, the Society has indirectly contributed to the formation of other subsequent groups of varying interests and merits.

However, let us not look back too long, since most of of here have not been in the Society since its beginning, nor is that really important. What is important is what the Society and its individual members are doing now. A passage from Lewis' commentary on Williams Arthurian poetry might be helpful here:

... Dinadan, the knight of holy mockery, meeting Taliessin in the king's rose-garden on All Fools' Day, salutes him as the Master of the Company.

*'Well encountered, lieutenant
(they call you) of God's new grace in the streets of Camelot.'*

Taliessin disclaims the title. To call himself a Master? — it is a horrible thing, it is the beginning of the road to P' o-Lu. But Dinadan replies in effect that the title, if rightly accepted, is not so much a terror as a celestial joke; if truly understood it brings merry humility to the wearer. . . . The absurdity lies in the fact that every one of God's lieutenants is, in the last resort, wholly superfluous. . . . And now Taliessin, with a superficial ruefulness in his smile and a delight far deeper than the ruefulness, recognizes this. He is unnecessary to Dindrane, to Logres, to the Company, even to poetry: nay, poetry itself is unnecessary.

Many writers have in a satiric spirit unmasked human grandeur, delighting to show us that the King, stripped of robes and ceremony, is but clay like other men and that (says Bacon) 'the masks, and mummeries and triumphs of the world' show more 'stately and dauntly' by the candlelight of illusion than by the 'naked and open' light of truth. Any sixteenth-century writer — Shakespeare, Erasmus, Montaigne — can roll you out reams of such moralizing, almost in his sleep. Williams's view is different. He accepts all they say. He finds it so obvious as to be hardly worth saying. *Of course* the whole thing is a kind of make believe or fancy-dress ball. Not only official greatness, the greatness of Shakespeare, Erasmus, and Montaigne, is, from a certain point of view, illusory. What then? What but to thank God for the 'excellent absurdity' which enables us, if it so happen, to play great parts without pride and little ones without dejection, rejecting nothing through that false modesty which is only another form of pride, and never, when we occupy for a moment the centre of the stage, forgetting that the play would have gone off just as well without us — . . .

It is when we can see the Society as unnecessary, as (in its best form) a small example of the "excellent absurdity" that then, and only then, can we take it seriously. For I believe we cannot feel joy for anything we do not in that sense take seriously. Two phrases from Arthurian Torso might be added here: "Not flat equality, but a whirling carnival of interchange, dominion and service," and "Good is hard to preserve: but it is also terribly hard to eradicate completely."

I believe Existence is its own reward, in that we have the supreme honor of having been invited to join the Dance. Entering it, we should be aware that "Joy remembers Joylessness" and that Joy is not the eradication of suffering, but its fulfillment and redemption.

In the past I have used the phrase "We tread the Middle Way" implying the Way of the Great Dance. I now repent of the term "tread." Light of feet, we must step nimbly and lightly to completely enjoy the ecstasy of the Dance. Love of life and its source is the key to being a good dancer. At times the pace, the beat, even the melody become obscured from our jaded and distraught senses — if so, be still for a time. Surely the tempo will ill return, far more audible and joyous than before. We listen, we become aware, we enter into the movement, our spirits stir before the rising breeze. . .

And the Dance goes on.

A Brief Chronology

1965

Richard Plotz founds the New York Tolkien Society in Spring, name changed to Tolkien Society of America in Autumn.

1966

Plotz corresponds with J. R. R. Tolkien, who becomes the

1967

Glen GoodKnight starts a Tolkien Society at Cal. Univ. at L. A., as a result, first Annual Bilbo and Frodo's Birthday Picnic in Sept., where formation of the Society is proclaimed.

1968/69

Six more Branches begun. Mythlore first published. Edwin Meskys becomes Thain of the T. S. A., as Plotz enters college.

1970

Monthly bulletin of Society takes the name Mythprint. First Mythcon combined with Tolkien Conference III in Claremont, Ca. C. S. Kilby is Guest of Honor.

1971

Formation of the Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship. Mythcon II in Santa Barbara, Ca. Mary McDermott Shideler - G. o. H.

1972

Mythcon II held in conjunction with Westercon XXV in Long Beach, Ca. Poul Anderson - G. o. H. Merger of T. S. A.

1973

Mythcon IV in Santa Barbara. Peter Beagle and Richard Plotz are Guests of Honor.

1974

Mythcon V in Claremont. Katherine Lindskoog and Evangeline Walton are G. o. H. Bylaw Reform.

1975

Mythcon VI in Claremont. Walter Hooper and Edwin Meskys are G. o. H. GoodKnight visits England for Society.

1976

Mythcon VII in Sacramento. Thomas Howard — G. o. H.

1977

Mythcon VIII in San Diego. Richard Purtill — G. o. H. GoodKnight leads Seminar on Williams at MLA Conf.

BORS RETURNING

With Percivale dead and Galahad a legend
and Dindrane's brightness a bloodless pallor
I foot lurching deck
and sniff a northern gale
for anything that smells like Britain.

What flood did once fire will do again,
and ice awaits both king and knight,
and through heaving leagues
incense of Sarras fades from my beard
and makes me fit champion for faded queen.

Image of lost unity:
Britain spelled backwards is only nonsense,
and Ave backwards the devil's tool:
a life backwards an ignoble quest
charged to one not wishing return.

Guinevere and Lancelot to holiness,
Mordred to faith, Arthur to safety
with his table's wood unsplintered:
three tasks given with incense,
one to succeed, two to fade

and mine the choice. If the way
to holiness is retreat from holiness
to find one lasting good among three,
the abyss is open on each side
and me returning with lurching feet.

Robert Boenig