Reviews

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Reviews

Abstract


Additional Keywords
A.V.G.; R. Patrick McCabe; Sarah Beach; Bonnie GoodKnight

Misconstruction


Having been raised from childhood with the maxim that one ought never judge a book by its cover, I fear that I am about to betray, at a stroke, all the best intentions of my preceptors by entering into a discussion of Daniel Grotta-Kurska's biography through a comment on the level at which the book first assails the senses. Nonetheless the sheer grotesquery of it cannot go unobserved. We are supplied on the cover with a rather distended and misshapen portrait of Tolkien, with something that looks very like a vault door opening in the middle of his forehead, out of which are emerging a throng of piggy creatures uniformly dressed in a shade somewhere between Lincoln green and olive drab. Their poses and expressions suggest variously and collectively the nse, the self-important, the self-satisfied, and the merely animal. In that they have conspicuously hairy feet, they are, I take it, Hobbits. All proceeding from a vinegary caricature with close-set suspicious eyes, and a bulbous brow.

I mention the cover first because one cannot help having a lingering distaste for it while hanging on to the book; and second, because it provides a bridge to the discussion of the text itself. For while its faults -- tastelessness and an almost malevolent misconstruction -- are most emphatically not the faults of the writer, there is between them the common thread that both of them are apparently assigned work from a publisher who was looking for an expedient way to fill a gap in the market before someone else got to it. Similar in conception, and certainly less successful, is Hitchman's Such a Strange Lady, on Sayers. But both should serve as warning against trying to make scholarship out of the stuff of journalism. The latter is a technique which presupposes one or two central facts which are given at the beginning, and which investigates the causes and effects of that dense core in a discursive manner. The biographer's chief problem is one which seldom presents itself to the journalist -- how to deal with a long procession of hierarchically disordered and substantially incommensurate facts, and to knit of them a coherent whole, relating (according to the purport) to the inner life of the individual or to his public life, or whatever other aspect(s) the biographer elects to explore.

In doing this Mr. Grotta-Kurska's biography is simply grossly inadequate. It takes a more ordered whole of "Tolkien's lyrical, more thematic -- to make a biography. There is not really enough biographical matter here, either, to compete with what can be gathered by perusal of old newspapers and literary dictionaries. And as for "getting inside the head" of Tolkien, which seems what the cover is trying to suggest about the book, it is a bit presumptuous for anyone to completely assume that he understands another from the inside out; even more so that one not familiar with Germanic, Celtic and Romance Philology and English university life, which were after all the man's career, could approach an understanding of Tolkien, the man and his work.

What the biography (if so we wish to continue calling it) does do it does by indirection, and indeed it could have been much the better had the end been the goal rather than the consequence merely. It works toward (and to some measure succeeds) in providing a sort of context for American readers to the life of Tolkien. We know that Tolkien spent time in the army, that he was present at the Ypres, battle in the first World War: Grotta-Kurska goes on to attempt to compass the impact of that war on the awareness of a nation. This is perhaps a nicey, perhaps taking too seriously the careful elaboration of all circumstances. But there are enough features of British life, and particularly academics, that differ from American institutions (founded more on German than on French or English models) that a handbook defining them and illuminating the differences developing across the century is a genuinely useful idea.

The unfortunate fact of the book is that Grotta-Kurska either formulated the notion too late, or never quite formulated it at all: In any case the press demands required that the product be rendered up as a biography of Tolkien, and not as a leisurely survey of "Tolkien's World", or the like. Given the fact that Grotta-Kurska was provided little or no cooperation by those who had access to the special information about Tolkien's life (he offers a slightly tiresome plea for forgiveness at its worst), it might have been wiser to retire from the immediate perspective and present just such a contextual survey, which could have been executed with considerable grace and supplied a genuine need.

As it was, these features, while making up a good proportion of the book, are given second place in its scheme of things, each being a mere excursion and not terribly important.

Consequently, such features are not really given the kind of attention they require, and what is conceptually the meatiest part of the book is rigidly withered out. We are informed that "In England, the Classics invariably mean Greek and Roman Language, literature, art, history and philosophy -- still the queen of curricula in pre-War England -- with optional courses in modern languages, literature, and philosophy: the nearest American equivalent would be liberal arts education..."
Art in Words and Pictures


The author of this interesting but somehow disappoimting book believes that "the fantastic exists only against a background to which it offers a direct reversal." (p. 197) This from a man who includes Lewis Carroll, Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, George MacDonald, William Morris, Edgar Allan Poe, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and H.G. Wells in his Index. Rabkin reiterates this thesis from cover to cover: "a true Fantasy such as Alice continues to reverse its ground rules time and time again" (p. 37): "the fantastic is a quality of astonishment that we feel when the ground rules of a narrative world are suddenly made to turn around 180 degrees" (p. 41); "Fantasy is not random freedom from restraint, but the continuing diametric reversal of the ground rules within a narrative world" (p. 73); "In a true Fantasy we find the repeated reversal of the ground rules of the narrative world" (p. 75); "conceiving of one's proper audience as a child makes one more able to seriously postulate a diametric alternative to those perspectives that create in us a need to escape" (p. 96); "Because the fantastic reversal involved in this dialogue are really reversals at the level of the underlying logic of both Alice's worlds and ours" (p. 112); "Unlike Sturgeon, Clarke reverses the science on which he builds himself in his story "This...sudden reversal of a ground-rule of its narrative world (in Childhood's End)...is para-digmatically fantastic" (p. 130); "Structural reversal is at the heart of science fiction as a genre" (p. 146); "A metaphor, like the fantastic, depends on the rapid and direct reversal of some perspective" (p. 153); "Naturalizing the supernatural, of course, is a direct and fantastic reversal of the ground rules that justify the supernatural" (p. 186); "One may have a sense of a direct reversal, which signals the fantastic in literature..." (p. 189) "The fantastic...is an affect found abundantly in Fantasy. This affect is generated by a direct reversal of a narrative world" (p. 213). Finally, on the last page, we find the kernel of his argument: "Fantasy represents a basic mode of human knowing; its polar opposite is Reality." (p. 227)

All this reiteration -- as if the reader might otherwise forget -- suggests that Rabkin himself realizes that he is using the word "Fantasy" in a very particular (not to say rigid) manner. In fact, fantasy (which derives from a Greek word meaning mental imagery) is not confined exclusively to diametric reversals, unless we are to say that any departure from reality constitutes a polar opposition. C.S. Lewis has written somewhere that a really good fantasy makes only very slight departures from "reality" (if a work of fiction can ever be "real").

In "On Science Fiction" (C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, London: Bles, 1966) Lewis says, "The impossibility is...a postulate, something to be granted before the story gets going." (p. 70) The emphasis is upon a whole range of variations: in "On Fairy Stories" he says, "That is one of the functions of art: to present what the narrow and desperately practical perspectives of real life exclude." (Lewis 1966:70) He has put it succinctly: "The impossible...can be used in literature for many different purposes." (p. 69) It is always, however, the element of wonder that distinguishes mere speculation from fantasy. Real fantasy creates in us a homesickness for another world than the one we occupy, and that homesickness, as Lewis says, has an object: "To construct plausible and moving 'other worlds' you must draw on the only real 'other world' we know, that of the spirit." (p. 12) The pleasures of fantasy come precisely not from the unexpected, or dis-expected, or even anti-expected, as Rabkin would have it, but from having our profoundest expectations satisfied. It
is in the Other (at whatever degree of otherness; 180° is but one point on the compass of the mind) that we encounter all that is within us.

Having said all this I must add that The Fantastic in Literature contains a number of extremely interesting insights and is well worth reading. Much of the time Rabkin quite abandons his single-factor thesis and writes with penetration on the whole range of fantasy, from Gothic tales to fairy stories to detective novels to science fiction to mythopoeia.

-- by Nancy-Lou Patterson


Anybody who wondered whether Mythprint would continue to be interesting in its new, reduced form, must have been delighted with Paul H. Kocher’s characteristically perceptive review of The Father Christmas Letters in Mythprint (December 1976) Vol. 14, No. 6. Emboldened by his statement -- "The many colorful and ingenious pictures... painted by Tolkien himself, deserve a longer treatment than can be given here" -- I add the following addendum. The illustrations are delightfully personal.

We see pages of Tolkien’s wonderful calligraphy (readily discernible behind the personas of shaky-handed Father Christmas and Elvish-handed Iborbeth). The illuminated envelopes are -- really and truly -- enchanting. His North Pole looks uncannily like Canadian painter Laurence S. Harris’s "North Shore, Lake Superior," a statement which will be comprehensible solely to Esagaroth members, unfortunately. And the Polar Bear (Karhu) looks remarkably like certain Inuit sculptures of the subject (including those from the prehistoric Dorset people). I make these in-group Canadian comparisons because they give outside attestation to the accuracy of Tolkien’s Northern images. Add to these his psychodelic Aurora Borealis; his "trees and stars and suns and moons"; his enchantingly erudite pictographs with their references to Scandinavian, African, and Dordognian Paleolithic (as well as Goblinsque) rock painting; the marvellous interiors he has invented for Father Christmas to inhabit; of each of these we might well say, "It would have been enough for us."

Oddly, he has added nothing to the iconography of Father Christmas himself, who stumps across the snowy landscape clad in a red hooded robe from which his white beard juts forward into the storm. His reindeer are few in number and rather pictographic, and his elves with their pointed caps and upturned toes, give no hint of what, in The Lord of the Rings, they were to become. As to his little black Goblins (which have a bad smell), the less said the better. As Jim Allan suggested to me, there is a hint of the Rupert Annual here -- Christmas books about Rupert the Bear and his friends, which include the Golliwog -- very "Period British" material which still circulates in Britain (and Canada) today. I don’t know if Rupert was published in the twenties, but works of a similar nature certainly were. Anyway, Tolkien has surpassed such sources. I don’t know why the book is not paginated -- to defeat solemn scholarship, I suppose.

Tolkien was a splendid watercolourist and an excellent calligrapher. His drawings are always whimsical and appealing: sometimes, as in the dark (though comet-lit) night of 1927, they achieve a rare power. It was generous of his children to share their Christmas treasures with us.

-- by Nancy-Lou Patterson

Poems


The Inklings were fond of writing poetry. Lewis published Spirits in Bondage and Dymer in his early years; Tolkien, The Adventures of Tom Bombadil in his age; and Williams, a series of volumes throughout his life -- not to speak of the verse by such other Inklings as Owen Barfield and Adam Fox. It therefore seems fitting that occasionally there should be a poetry review column, with emphasis on fantasy but perhaps no more limited to it than (say) Lewis’s poems were all fantastic.

The first of the authors to be considered, John Wain, was a one-time Inkling, although he’d like being classified an Inkling about as much as he liked being considered an Angry Young Man or a member of the Movement (which were reviewers’ groupings for post-WWII British novelists-and-playwrights and poets, respectively). Anyway, his poem is our concern here.

Feng is a sequence of seventeen poems based on the Hamlet legend (the original, medieval form, not Shakespeare’s); this may suggest that Wain is writing an Inkling-like piece of medievalism, but this is misleading -- Wain is concerned with poli-
tics, not religion. He takes as his center of consciousness Amleth's uncle, Feng (Shakespeare's Claudius), who murders his brother Hormundil (the elder Hamlet), marries his sister-in-law Gerutha (Gertrude), and, in this version, rapes Amleth's beloved Ophelia). Wain writes in his introductory note: "My version is concerned with Feng, the sick and hallucinated person who seizes power and then hasto live with it. Since I have lived through an age in which raving madmen have had cause for great and powerful nations, the theme naturally seems to me an important one." (p. vi) Some of the poems deal with theme: no. V, "A Circle of Stones and a Nude Blade," in which Feng promises wars in order to be chosen king to succeed his brother; nos. IX and X, "Feng Writes a Letter to the Future" and "Feng's Images of Pleasure and Power, His Tormentors," trace the love of power on the part of Feng's counselors, his soldiers, and (via sensuality) the court ladies. It is certainly a sick society which Wain describes (and it may be much like the modern world); Feng has only his madness and his admiration for wild animals as means of escape (and the latter fails him).

The poems themselves are what are usually called free verse, which means in this case they are quite varied, according to the mood of the poem. No. III, "Feng in the Orchard," is in the extreme form of free verse, perhaps best described as shredded prose, in order to indicate Feng's thoughts as he pows the poison in Hormundil's ear (it includes a discussion of self-killing in straight prose). The opening of no. V is in the alliterative meter (the Middle English free form, not the Old English) as is fitting for the crowning in a circle of raised stones. For example:

King-crowning is toward. And the crooked Feng is made straight. Stone-circled, at sunrise the waiting warriors shall see their will dourly enacted, their deeming demonstrated: saluting the king, their stern selection.

Later in this same section, after a passage in prose, Gerutha's acceptance of her marriage to whoever is king is meditated upon in heroic couplets. No. IX (Feng's letter) is mainly in prose. No. XI, "Feng Contemplates the Sailors," ends in an iambic pentameter villanelle. Etc., etc. The point I am making is that of professionalism. The Spasmodics have come of age at last.

The second volume under consideration -- Ursula le Guin's Wild Angels -- has thirty-two poems, most of them free verse, and most of them ("Coming of Age" is the exception) strong. Most of the poems are also fairly obscure; for example, the reader never learns who the masculine pronoun refers to in "There":

Do you see: where his absence stands by each tree waiting for nightfall, where shadows are his being gone,... there the averted face of absence turns.

To be honest, I should add that in the previous verse paragraph, "He planted the elms, the eucalyptus, / the little cypress, and watered them." But le Guin's first two poems are so autobiographical in poetic statement that I suspect this third poem may be about a relative -- perhaps her father -- or a close friend, rather than just the Tree-Planter. There are several possible critical approaches to this volume. One could collect the references to trees (always a favorite le Guin image), for example, or consider her comments about writing in "Ars Lunga," "The Molsen," and other poems. (There's also an interesting "Song" about feminine psychology.) But from this Society's point of view, perhaps the most significant poems are those with religious and fantasy motifs. In "Coming of Age" le Guin writes:

Oh Lord, this is a hard world for atheists. Well, draw the curtains, pretending that outside them is a quiet street in an autumn evening, car-lights passing, house-lights not, heaps of yellow leaves. If you will not keep up the world, Lord, I will.

But the most interesting religious (or mythic) image is that of the book's titular angels. In the untitled introductory poem, le Guin writes, "O wild angels of the open hills / Before all legends and before all tears: ... you were with me in my youth." In one of the fantasy poems, "From Whose Bourne" (Hamlet again) -- about a traveller back from the realm of death -- a question is asked about angels:

But listen, would angels come where winter never came, they of the night, the living night between the winter stars?

Whatever else this implies about angels (they seem to be rather like Lewis's Eldila, without the imagery of solar radiation), they are for le Guin like Jacob's wrestling partner, beings of the night. (Of course, the angels may be different entities in the two poems: le Guin is not necessarily writing consistent theology.) Probably the religious poem closest to her own Oriental position is the final poem, "Tao Song."

There are other fantasy poems -- "The Darkness" and "Dreampoem," for example, where death is personified. (This can be considered simply a literary device, but death in "Dreampoem" has three faces: not a usual image, and perhaps one borrowed from Satan at the bottom of Dante's Hell.) Overall, le Guin's poems are as highly interesting and as subtle as her later novels, even if their technical polish is not up to Wain's. My only regret is that the few poems she wrote in the language she invented for The Left Hand of Darkness are not included -- but perhaps that would be too much caviar.

About the third book -- Martinson's Aniana -- I have mixed feelings as a reviewer. I have not seen the original Swedish, so I do not know if the translation is much like it. The lines of the translation, anyway, are usually iambic in meter, often in tetrameters or pentameters irregular and occasionally rhymed. Sheerly as poetry in English, the work is not up to that of the other two authors -- but Martinson received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1974, so the original is probably better. (I wonder about no. 42 of the sections, "Omitted in agreement with the author, as untranslatable." Dr. Hall's introduction does not
The structure consists of 103 poems — lyrics, dramatic monologues, character sketches — telling of a voyage of a spaceship toward the stars, a generation ship in the usual SF terminology. In other words, Heinlein's "Universe" changed from pulp fiction conventions to philosophic poetry. The book also has a glossary (pp. 131-133) of the more common invented words in the work, which the Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship may want to note. Curiously, the glossary runs only through no. 55; what about loxodrome in no. 69 or Ghazilnut in no. 70, for instance? (The word gimble in no. 12 — not in the glossary — may be from Lewis Carroll.) Actually, the concept isn't quite as good as a planned generation ship. This one takes off for Mars with new settlers as passengers (no. 1), and is thrown off course by an undiscovered asteroid, Hondo (no. 3). This dubious assumption that a transportation ship for the solar system has the capabilities to support passengers on an interstellar flight is, however, quickly passed by, and by the fifth poem it is six years into the flight. The ship is named Aniara ("the ship of sorrow"), fittingly enough; and one of its chief early entertainments is the Mima, which reproduces scenes, sounds, and odors of other worlds — without any means of identifying the origins. Perhaps this is a symbol of the imagination, for much of Aniara is concerned at one level or another with poetics; it is therefore not surprising to find that the ship is moving towards the constellation Lyra (no. 10). In addition to the nonsensical preparation for an interstellar flight, the description of Mars (in a reminiscence, no. 40) is more like Bradbury than science: "the black ice-tulip," "the throaty cockeral," "the arctic willow," "the non-scientific sides of human culture — here caught in a glass-sided ant hill, so to speak — are depicted also in Bradburian vividness and symbol simplification: rival religions (nos. 37, 58, 59, 84), despair over the loss of a homeland (no. 22), escapist art (no. 61), hedonism (nos. 12, 36). But this is only a fragment of the poem, which includes the love of the man who is the caretaker of Mima (the center of consciousness) and a woman navigator and mathematician, and which ends with the travellers' deaths long before they reach Lyra; (the main character sends on their history, which he has written). Thus the real comparison is not so much with "Universe" as with Melville's Confident-Man and Porter's Ship of Fools (although Martinson is actually somewhere in between Heinlein and the others).

Thus a poetic history, from medieval Denmark, through modern America (with angels), to a Swedish future. Perhaps in a year or so we'll consider another survey.

-- by Joe R. Christopher

Lament For Denethor
by Glen GoodKnight

Go now to your fire — beaten and mad
Rage in the flames —
existence having driven you insane
The contesting of both sides
become a hideous joke
Your first born is dishonored in death
Your second lies swooned before you
Leave the old Grey Beard —
all his plots cannot win
What does he know of the sundering visions in the seeing stone
Leaving you blinded
by the shattering of your crazy pride
To the star an unknown halfling sees from Mordor
Only the darkness is eternal...

EDITORIAL

This year The Mythopoeic Society will observe the anniversary of its tenth birthday. One of the ways planned to commemorate the Society's first decade is to make the September 1977 issue of Mythlore a 10th Anniversary issue. Part of the issue will be devoted to the Society's history in words and pictures. I recognize the dangerous excesses of being self-congratulatory (as a Society or an individual), but think it might be fitting if you would like to write short pieces on what the Society has and does mean to you, and how it has influenced your perceptions and life. I invite other suggestions on how Mythlore might help celebrate the Society's 10th Anniversary, as well as for the birthday itself.