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Tales Newly Told

Tales Newly Told

A Column by Alexei Kondratiev

It is always gratifying to watch a writer grow into the style that best serves his/her creative gift. This has certainly been happening with Charles de Lint. Over the past few years his stories have been shifting away from pleasing but unexceptional high-fantasy settings to a new mode in which the fantasy element appears in tense opposition to a grittily real urban environment -- usually Ottawa, where de Lint lives. As this new mode has asserted itself in his writing, de Lint's style has become stronger and better focused, the fantasy clichés have faded away, and his imagination has expressed itself with a new vitality. Yarrow: An Autumn Tale (Ace, 1986) is by far his most successful work to date, and lines together the many strengths his writing has acquired. Like Mulengro, this is a suspense thriller in which a supernatural menace stalks (mostly) mundane Ottawa, claiming a growing number of victims (many of them likable characters), until its nature is revealed and it is forced into a climactic confrontation with the hopelessly unprepared "good guys". In Yarrow the focus of the evil is Lysistratus, an immortal Greek sorcerer who feeds on dreams, depriving people of the benefits of their imagination (and callously destroying his victims if they guess his identity). A fantasy writer would be the ideal prey for him, of course, and he finds just such a one in Cat Midhir, the tale's unwilling heroine. Cat bears more than a passing resemblance to the writer-heroine of Patricia McKillip's Stepping From the Shadows: she, too, has taken refuge in a fortress of powerful fantasy-images, and prefers to deal with archetypes rather than with flesh-and-blood personalities. She experiences this fantasy world (a vaguely "Celtic" realm, in which characters have Cornish names) in a serial dream over which she has no control, and has made it the sole source of her literary inspiration. When Lysistratus deprives her of her dreams, she becomes unable to write. Since writing is the only way that she can meet the demands of "mundane" society, her sanity (her will to live, in fact) is in jeopardy. So the suspense rests as much on Cat's ability to adapt to the situation in time as on the growing trail of bodies the sorcerer leaves behind him. As Lysistratus closes in (lusting, by now, for Cat's very life, not just her dreams), will she find the courage to open up to those who love her and can help her -- especially to the big, shy fan who has a crush on her and would be her ideal male counterpart? Such a plot device could easily lead to bathos, and nearly does, but the urgency of Cat's predicament saves the story. Her struggle with Lysistratus pits her against a real enemy, external to herself and to her fantasy world, and puts her in need of real power, rooted in something other than fantasy. She suffers an almost lethal disillusion when she realizes that Mynfel ("yarrow", in Cornish), the horned goddess of her Otherworld, is her projected alter ego (Cat's own secret name, in her fantasy is "Yarrow"). But when she comes to understand that this identity (an allusion to the famous Celtic "yarrow charm" in the Carmina Gadelica) is a sign of strength, not of weakness and failure, and that her Otherworld, though a product of her imagination, is more real than anyone had thought possible, she is able to stand up to the evil without, in a moving scene that more than confirms de Lint's skill as a fantasist.

The plotting is perfect, holding the reader's attention unflinchingly until the last page. But after we have closed the book, how much of it will remain in our memory, what profound experiences has it added to our store, what has it achieved that is mythopoeic? There is still a somewhat lightweight quality to de Lint's storytelling, a tendency to use settings and characters as mere props for the action, without letting them breathe and speak to us on their own. This is not to say that his characterizations are poor: he does, for instance, make us feel sympathy for a drunken derelict like Farley O'Denney (who is little more than a vignette) and a "loose woman" like Debbie Mitchell. But there remains the feeling that he could do more with his intriguing characters than he does, and all of them end up dwarfed by the care expended on developing the single character of Cat. The book's most powerful moment, as I have suggested, is Cat's affirmation of her life in the face of soul-destroying evil. De Lint's other triumph is his thoughtful, convincing portrayal of that evil, at times even recalling Charles Williams. This comes through with great force in the scene where Lysistratus enlists the service of Rick Kirkby, a selfish young computer salesman. It is made chillingly clear that Rick's fall, though abetted by his moral weakness, is a product of his own free will. These twin revelations of Life and Death -- soul-affirmation and soul-destruction -- are mythopoeic themes that de Lint has made fully his own, and which will no doubt continue to give power and depth to his considerable storytelling talent.

De Lint's use of Celtic motifs in Yarrow is allusive rather than direct. Other writers have preferred to explicitly use Celtic settings and themes from Celtic literature. In fact, this approach has been so popular that there is now talk of a "glut" of Celtic fantasy on the market. This does not, however, mean that modern fantasists have exhausted the riches of Celtic heritage; on the contrary, they have barely begun to scratch the surface. Most writers seem content with going to the same sources over and over again: the Mabinogion, and the best-known Irish myths as collected by Cross and Slover, or re-told by Lady Gregory. The basic plots are then filtered through Robert Graves, or Wicca, or forced into a Tolkienian framework wholly alien to Celtic tradition. The true range and breadth of the Celtic imagination (as well as more recent Celtic scholarship) has largely been ignored. So when one comes across a new Celtic fantasy with an unusual approach -- such as Tom Deitz's Windmaster's Bane (Ace, 1986), set in the mountains of northwestern Georgia -- one cannot help having high expectations. In this case, the promise is only half-fulfilled.

Celtic fantasy with an American setting is not a new idea: it has been done by Louise Jane Curry, among others, and of course by Sanders Ann Laubenthal in Excalibur. Still, in its use of imagery so foreign to the original context of the stories, it remains a good device for presenting the stories themselves in a fresh light. Deitz's evocation of his native region is masterful and memorable: the ambience of pine forests, mountain lakes, the heat and storms of summer, rural life-patterns, the distinctly Southern rhythms of the

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sex. Weston believes he has a right to the lands of Malacandra. Devine believes that the planet's gold is his for the taking.

The judgement of the utopians is not death or imprisonment for these outrages. It is simply the decision, which they are capable of enforcing, that the miscreants must go home.

It is remarkable that these two writers from different eras produced such similar writing. They also approached the issue of the role of women in the scheme of things quite differently. Gilman wrote and spoke from the perspective of social reform of the status and treatment of women. Lewis considered the matter of women from a religious and symbolic aspect, such as is demonstrated in his works That Hideous Strength, Till We Have Faces and the Narnia stories. Historically, the two approaches have as often come to radically opposite conclusions as they have come to similar conclusions.

In fact, reading these books together gives support to the feminists' claim that their concerns are not just "female" concerns, but are -- or should be -- concerns of the entire human race. Peace, a more equitable distribution of goods, true community amongst peoples, an harmonious co-existence with nature, freedom from oppressions -- all these and more were achieved in Herland and on Malacandra. It should be discomfiting to realize that Gilman's Herlanders are not aliens at all, but humans, albeit female. Yet men, the normal young men of our culture, respond to them as if they were extraterrestrial as Martians.

The juxtaposed reading of these two books, Herland and Out of the Silent Planet, provides much food for thought. We see that men and women are indeed quite different, perhaps as alien to one another as a Martian would be to a terrestrial. And yet, how clearly they share similar fantasies.

Bibliography

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Herland. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979. (Originally published as a serial in 1915 in Gilman's monthly magazine "The Forerunner.")

Lewis, C.S. Out of the Silent Planet. New York: Macmillan Company, (paperback edition), 1965.

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feminine natures could give him. Instead, he slowly descends, giving up his masculinity as he simultaneously warps and misuses his femininity. Finally, his grip on reality and on his unconscious gone, he, in the words of Jung, is "caught and entangled in aimless experience, and the judging intellect with its categorization proves itself powerless... It is a moment of collapse. We sink into a final depth." [17]

Notes

[1] C.G. Jung, The Development of Personality. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 19), p. 198.

[2] Violet Staub De Laszlo, ed. The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung. (New York: Modern Library, 1959), p. 315.

[3] De Laszlo, p. 309.

[4] C.G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Bollingen edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), p. 70.

[5] De Laszlo, p. 313.

[6] Charles Williams, Descent into Hell. (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1949) All further quotations from this book will be followed by pagination within parentheses.

[7] De Laszlo, p. 274.

[8] Frieda Fordham, An Introduction to Jung's Psychology. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953, rpt. 1964), p. 54.

[10] De Laszlo, p. 159.

[11] Fordham, p. 54.

[12] It should be noted that not only does Wentworth's valuation of a personal relationship demonstrate his anima's increasing control, but also the traits which characterize that relationship. Devotion, intuition, dependency, and eroticism are also all traditionally feminine traits.

[13] De Laszlo, p. 314.

[14] Fordham, p. 54.

[15] Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, p. 67.

[16] *ibid.*, p. 71.

[17] De Laszlo, p. 316.

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dialogue. David Sullivan, a young Lady Gregory fan, is accidentally gifted with second sight and becomes involved in the affairs of the Sidhe. He gains the enmity of Ailill Windmaster, a Loki-like figure in Tir na nOg. When David's little brother is replaced by a changeling, and his Uncle Dale is struck by a fairy dart, he and his close friends Alec McLean and Liz Hughes (is this meant to be a union of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh?) must openly challenge the Sidhe and undergo the champion's ordeal. The depiction of the Otherworld's crystalline beauty is quite effective; it is the Sidhe themselves, as characters, who pose a problem. They follow Lady Gregory's model too closely, and as such become mere literary icons, too predictable to engage our imagination as great Otherworld powers. In contrast, we have the wild fluid, protean face of Faerie appearing in the mountain storm that besets David when he first issues his challenge. Here is the true, perilous spirit of the Otherworld, and the cardboard-cutout figures of the Irish "gods" make a poor showing in its light. One wishes that Deitz had done something more daring, perhaps made an original, dynamic blend of the Irish material and the Cherokee mythology he also claims as a source.

As it is, Windmaster's Bane is a well-told young-adult novel that could have aspired to something more. Since David Sullivan does not seem to have come to the end of his adventures, we may eventually be allowed to scale those heights we have as yet only glimpsed from afar.