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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

A Column by Alexei Kondratiev

It has often been stated that the work of the Inklings is the twentieth-century articulation of a cosmology that was more characteristic of the Middle Ages: Creation as a great hierarchical structure centered on a common, absolute Meaning, animated by the joy of selfless exchange, hidden from this world's everyday consciousness only by the sinfulness of human skill. This is the message of Gothic and Byzantine art, of Dante's poetry and Bonaventure's theology, the world-view that C.S. Lewis described in scholarly terms in The Discarded Image and gave poetic expression to in Perelandra. It is not a fashionable philosophy today, of course, but it has lost none of its validity, and still has the power to move. One wonders, then, if the cultural moods of other bygone epochs might not also appear in the works of other modern fantasy writers?

One could suggest, for instance, that at least some of the writings of Tanith Lee and Jack Vance have a distinctly eighteenth-century flavour. We tend to think of that period as the Age of Reason, but it saw the flowering of artistic and literary trends that had little to do with the rational. The theories of Locke on the importance of the senses in the formation of the personality coincided with a growing hunger for individual experience that went beyond the norms traditionally imposed by church and society. Sense-impressions -- and the feelings they in turn aroused -- were seen as important in themselves, rather than as instructions or temptations to be dealt with in a moral context. In time this preoccupation with the senses would come to focus more and more on the feeling subject, and at last Romanticism would grow out of a conscious emphasis on the importance of the individual. But for a long period mere sensual enjoyment -- coupled at times with a cynical disregard for received ideologies -- was felt to be enough, and led to the almost obsessively fine nuances of color and texture in the paintings of Chardin, Watteau and Fragonard, and to a great variety of sensuously descriptive fantasy stories, often with opulent Oriental settings. Lee and Vance both display a marked predilection for this aesthetic in their works, so much so that the vivid re-creation of sensual environments is as important to their stories as plot and character; and both writers have just produced works that are fine illustrations of their respective styles.

Tanith Lee's Delirium's Mistress (Daw, 1986) is her crowning achievement to date, and concludes the story told in Night's Master, Death's Master, and Delusion's Master. Lee is not only one of the finest fantasists writing today, but also one of the most prolific. There is something awesome about her ability to put a stamp of outstanding literary quality on even the least ambitious of her productions. Much of her work is centered on pastiche, the use of pre-existing genres and plot formulas which she transmutes, through a tightly controlled use of the language, into something fresh, and entirely her own. It reminds me of the music of Ravel: there is the same affection for well-established forms, and the same painstaking craftsmanship, resulting in a jewel-like, richly sensual art that is quite individual. The "Flat Earth" tetralogy is no exception to this rule of pastiche, inspired as it is by the Arabian Nights, and even more

so by their eighteenth-century European refection, William Beckford's Vathek. But, perhaps because it is the most extensive for her works so far, it seems to have more depth, originality and development of mythopoeic themes than most of her other novels.

On a pristine flat Earth (rather like Tolkien's Middle-earth before the Third Age) humans live between an Upperearth of cold, uncaring gods and an Underearth of lustful but amoral demons (Blake's "Heaven" and "Hell"). The main protagonist is Azharn, Prince of Demons, one of the Lords of Darkness who limit the freedom and happiness of mortals. He represents Wickedness, and in Night's Master we see him tormenting humans with a cruelty so elegant it almost comes across as innocence. But even then, the lovers Kazir and Ferazhin, transcending their environment through their mutual passion, escape his clutches. Here is the weak spot in Azharn's armour; and Chuz, Lord of Madness, breaks through it. "Love, too, is simple madness", states Chuz. Conversely, wherever Madness upsets the clockwork world of gods and demons, there is a possibility that the "unreason" of Love will liberate the spirit. Partly through Chuz's influence, Azharn falls in love with the human girl Dunizel, who embodies the light of the Moon (an intermediary for the light of the Sun, which is lethal to demons). Dunizel is killed, but has borne Azharn a daughter, whom he takes with him to Underearth.

Delirium's Madness, then, is the tale of that child, of the three different identities she assumes during her life. First, as Sovaz, she undergoes a period of adolescent rebellion against her father, and flees to Earth with Chuz. Disappointed by Madness, she returns to her father, takes on the name Azhriaz, sets herself up as a Goddess over the lands of Men, and builds a great City dedicated to the cult of Wickedness. The normally indifferent gods, reacting to this usurpation of their divinity, create three angels whose mission is to destroy the false goddess and her works (the imagery here explicitly suggests both the Sodom and Gomorrah story and the Book of Revelation). But Azhriaz has come under the influence of the holy man Dathanja (actually Zhirek, the sorcerer from Death's Master, who has cast away his old identity and achieved sainthood). She "becomes like a little child", receives Dathanja's instruction, and takes the new name Atmeh, "Spark of Life". The last episode in her story is her quest for mortality: death here is conceived very much like Tolkien's Gift of Men, the means by which humans are free of Earth's strictures and can grow indefinitely in the spirit. Once she has become fully mortal, the Lords of Darkness, her kin, enter the human family and lose some of their fearsome intransigence. A new age has clearly begun, an "Age of Men" rather like the Tolkienian Fourth Age (though I suppose Tolkien would have disliked the story's sensuous atmosphere, and disagreed with much of the implicit theology). One notes that, in keeping with the Blakean premise of the work, it is the emotional/sensual "Hell" of the demons that serves as the catalyst for spiritual growth, not the "Heaven" of the gods, who are at best indifferent and at worst mechanically vindictive.

A brief review can hardly do justice to the wealth of invention in this tetralogy, the crisscrossing plots

and subplots, vividly realized minor characters, and above all the constant delightful surprises in the language itself, which reads like a heady, improbable blend of the Bible and the Marquis de Sade. I have no qualms about calling it one of the great high-fantasy masterpieces of this century, a work to be read and re-read with deepening enjoyment of its many levels of meaning. I hope there will be much discussion of it in fantasy circles.

Jack Vance's long career has established him as a master of exotic world-building, concise and polished prose, and crisp dialogue. Whereas Tanith Lee's imagination suggests the birth of Romanticism, Vance's -- though no less preoccupied with sensual experience -- is firmly rooted in Voltairian skepticism. Vancean characters exemplify what James Branch Cabell called the "Gallant type: utterly selfish, they nevertheless cultivate a refined, courteous exterior to avoid unnecessary friction with their fellows. Often the plot has the characters struggling to maintain this cool composure in the face of humiliations and indignities. The Lyonesse series -- begun with Suldrun's Garden and now continuing with The Green Pearl (Berkley, 1986) --, while exhibiting most of the traits familiar from Vance's other works, is on a somewhat grander scale than anything he has done before. Also unusual is his choice of a period in Earth's past for the setting: the waning Roman era (with King Authur "still two generations in the future", to be precise), although the geographical location -- the "Elder Isles", situated somewhere between Ireland and Spain -- is purely imaginary. There is no attempt at historical verisimilitude. Lyonesse is akin to the timeless world of the Arthurian Romances, where everything is equally possible, and anachronism is not a problem; and the meandering structure of the narrative, constantly sidetracked by secondary plots, also suggests that model. Only the caustic treatment of religion (again, recalling the eighteenth century) is decidedly un-Mediaeval. The first volume dealt primarily with the hero Aillas' love for the ill-fated Suldrun, daughter of King Casmir of Lyonesse, and with the adventures of their son Dhrun among the fairies. In this second volume Aillas, now King of Troicinet, occupies the disorganized baronies of Ulfland (reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands), which he proceeds to discipline with iron sternness, and wages a successful campaign against the Ska (a "master race" of fearsome warriors) while purging himself of his obsession with the Ska girl Tatzel. The last quarter of the book is devoted to the adventures of Princess Glyneth (Aillas' ward) in the parallel world Tanjecterly, which recalls Vance's Dying earth stories, as well as his science fiction. The book suffers from being an intermediary volume in a series, though an effort has been made to give some symmetry to the ordering of the episodes. Discussion of the rather mundane politics of the Elder Isles goes on for too many pages at a time, almost stifling the reader's sense of wonder. But on the whole, this book is an outstanding example of Vance's talent. The "Celtic" locale, with its wild coasts and moorlands, is well realized. All the colours, sounds, tastes and smells experienced by the characters are described meticulously. What other fantasy writer would see fit to inform us casually, of a character brewing a pot of tea, that he used "horehound for heart, penny-royal for savor and lemon verbena for zest"?

The third volume promises to deal with Princess Madour, the fairy changeling at King Casmir's court. One hopes that it will remain true to the standards set by the first two books.

Mythopoeic Core Reading List

Mythlore frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the special nature of *Mythlore*. In order to assist some readers, the following is what might be considered a "core" mythopoeic reading list, containing the most well known and discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given. Good reading!

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Hobbit (1937); "Leaf by Niggle" (1945); "On Fairy-Stories" (1945); *The Lord of the Rings: Vol. 1, The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954); Vol. II, *The Two Towers* (1954); Vol. III, *The Return of the King* (1955); *The Silmarillion* (1977); *Unfinished Tales* (1980).

C.S. Lewis

Out of the Silent Planet (1938); *Perelandra* (1943); *That Hideous Strength* (1945); *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950); *Prince Caspian* (1951); *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952); *The Silver Chair* (1953); *The Horse and His Boy* (1954); *The Magician's Nephew* (1955); *The Last Battle* (1956); *Till We Have Faces* (1956).

Charles Williams

War in Heaven (1930); *Many Dimensions* (1931); *The Place of the Lion* (1931); *The Greater Trumps* (1932); *Shadows of Ecstasy* (1933); *Descent into Hell* (1937); *All Hallow's Eve* (1945); *Taliessin through Logres* (1938); and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) (printed together in 1954).

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