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Matters of Grave Import

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Matters of Grave Import

Lionel Lewis snatched it up but no one seems to have defined it for him.

The word "tradition" occurs on nearly every page of his book. It justifies accepting medieval accounts of Joseph's journey, justifies a literal belief in the accuracy of Geoffrey of Monmouth and in Arthur's burial, justifies his theory of Mary's tomb. The widow of a former vicar of Tewkesbury avers that there is a proverb in the nearby Mendip range, "As sure as Our Lord was at Priddy" (Priddy is a town in the Mendips) and Mr. Lewis leaps on it as Evidence.

But in Catholic theology to appeal to Tradition for authority is to appeal to doctrines, memories and customs which are believed to exist under the protection of the Holy Spirit and to de-

rive their reliability from him. (I am not here defending the concept, merely describing it.) No such appeal is possible or sanctioned by any church to merely secular memories, even those that concern sacred personages. And tradition in the purely historical sphere may provide a clue, but cannot substantiate.

The Rev. Mr. Lewis, I am sure, went to his own Glastonbury grave never understanding any of this. He had heard that Tradition was reliable and he had indulged no scholastic hairsplittings over the term. He believed he had done Glastonbury honor and through it the Church of England; my guess is that he died a happy man. Were he still alive, I am not sure I would have written this column.

MATTERS OF GRAVE IMPORT

GRACIA FAY ELLWOOD

TEARS

From an Inca myth which explains the rain as the tears of the high god Viracocha, to a Narnian poem in a recent *Mythlore*: "where streams run free / Sweet Lion's tears"--storytellers and poets tend to see tears as a good. No one desires the pain from which they usually rise, but they are assimilated with life-fluids such as blood, water and milk. They are a balm; an ancient Jewish tale tells that tears were a gift of God to Adam and Eve, to assuage the pain of the Fall and the loss of Paradise. They are life-preserving: "Home they brought her warrior dead....She must weep or she will die." They are life-restoring, healing: the tears of Rapunzel healed her husband's blindness; the tears that MacDonald's Light Princess finally shed over the apparent death of her suitor the Prince made her a Solid Person at last.

In contrast to this wisdom of the heart, our culture along with others holds tears in contempt. They are a sign of weakness, allowed to secondary humans--small children and women--but denied to the two-dimensional Strong Man that a male is pressured to compress himself into.

It is not difficult to see why. The legacy of the primitive hunter and warrior is a fighting stance: armor on, weapon in hand, loins girded for the fray, a hard struggle, and above all, Victory. Tears may mean sensitivity, tenderness, which will sabotage a fighter. And tears certainly mean loss of conscious control, thus an opening for the enemy and probable defeat.

The "ideal" is prestigious and pervasive; the need for perpetual control may afflict women as well.

One may give up the ideal and resolve to become more whole, but a long-time habit of tight control can make the prospect of giving way to tears very frightening. Who knows what intensity of feeling may have backed up in the unconscious? To let go may mean finding the windows of heaven opened, the fountains of the great deep broken up, and an all-destroying deluge.

The danger of being overwhelmed by the power of the unconscious is real. One way to let the precious rain begin to fall on the thirsty earth yet prevent a Flood is by means of artistic experience, either in the creating or the receiving. The purpose of tragedy, Aristotle tells us in the *Poetics*, is to catharsize pity and fear. Extending this conception to include other works of art and other

emotions, we can see its great value. It is safe to weep for Hecuba, (or for Aslan's death or Frodo's departure) because they are works of secondary creation. Weeping for them is a good way to open ways between our own inner and outer worlds, so that we can safely weep for a sister, or a father, or our own wounded inner child.

Tears of joy do not present the same kind of threat to us, and anyone who has accepted the idea of tears as healthy may relish a good private cry over the healing of Digory's mother (as Jack Lewis could not heal his own mother) or the celebration at Cormallen. But to be the only one weeping, whether for pain or joy, among others who are composed is very hard. It is like being naked among the clothed, being a fool in the midst of the respectable. One falls not only at a disadvantage, but somehow humiliated.

This feeling cannot be explained altogether in terms of loss of control. A wild rage means a loss of control, and though disapproved it is not condemned as weeping is; it can be useful to a fighter. What is going on when we experience the joy that hurts is an act of submission, which, from the perspective of the fighting stance, is the ultimate disaster. We have seen into the heart of things, have visibly surrendered to That which is there and have made a self-offering. "By tender violence I was unmade....A mightier than I became my Liege." As in childbirth, indignity and pain and joy meet in a flow of new life.

The self-offering can of course be made in other ways, and a surrender to painful joy may be only momentary, having small effect on the overall course of a life. But one who tries to live out such an ultimate self-offering from moment to moment may find, with Sybil Coningsby (and no doubt Williams himself) that at some point the fool becomes the Fool at the Center, that surrender is sovereignty. *Incipit vita nova.*

LOTR ON RADIO

The BBC produced radio serialization of *The Lord of the Rings* will be starting the Fall as part of the NPR Playhouse. Many (but not all) NPR member stations will be carrying it on FM radio. Check with your local NPR member station for dates and times.

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