
Fall 10-15-1987

Tales Newly Told

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Recommended Citation

Kondratiev, Alexei (1987) "Tales Newly Told," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol14/iss1/13>

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Crowley, John. *Aegypt*.

Tales Newly Told

A Column by Alexei Kondratiev

Many of the Tolkien enthusiasts of today can trace their first involvement with Tolkien's work to their student days in the 1960's, and to the "Tolkien craze" that swept the campuses of the Western world at that time. Of course, Tolkien's mythos is not itself a product of that period, and his skill with language and imagery would make a powerful impression on a reader of any time and place; but the peculiar atmosphere of that tumultuous decade -- the make-believe combined with dead earnestness, the redefinition of cultural values, the idea of liberation from prisons both social and philosophical, the sense of infinite possibilities -- made the West particularly receptive to such unusual books. During a panel discussion at this year's Mythopoeic Conference it was suggested that "religious displacement" was one aspect of the deep response to Tolkien's work. Indeed, the single greatest thing the books had to offer readers of the '60's was a myth that really compelled belief, a way of looking at history -- both individual and collective -- that gave ultimate meaning to human achievement. It didn't seem to matter that the history presented in the stories was an imaginary one.

This is the theme John Crowley has chosen for his latest novel, *Aegypt* (St. Martins, 1987). While it doesn't have the emotional richness and intensity of *Little, Big* (a hard act to follow!) or the inventiveness of *Engine Summer*, it is an exquisitely crafted, memorable book: not, strictly speaking, a fantasy (except for the metafictional device of interlacing the narrative with excerpts from romances written by one of the characters), but with mythopoeia as its central concern. The main character, Pierce Moffett, is a teacher of history. Educated "in the last days of the Age of Reason", he begins his teaching career during the '60's and gradually sees the rationalist/positivist world-view he had taken for granted lose its hold over people's minds. This affects his own view of his field, not so much by presenting it with new material as by validating his childhood intuition that history is made up of recurring, meaningful patterns, and that these patterns have their origins in a past universe quite different, in essence, from our present universe. He integrates the various fads of the '60's into this perception, and gradually traces them all back to a Renaissance myth of "Aegypt" -- a land "like Egypt but different from it" -- where fundamental knowledge about existence was revealed through Hermes Trismegistus, and then lost to all but a few as the centuries wore on. Of course the myth was based on an erroneous understanding of Egyptian culture (before hieroglyphic writing could be read), but it presented a view of things so far-ranging and consistent that it compelled belief, and profoundly influenced the lives of those who came into contact with it. So, in a sense, Aegypt is real, as real as Egypt: "there is more than one history of the world". Pierce finds himself torn between his desire to identify with the life-giving power of the myth and his resistance to it as a rational historian. He toys with various ways of dealing with it -- first as a college course, then as a book -- and by the end of the story has moved himself from New York (which in *this novel*, is clearly the Fields We Know) and settled in the town of Blackbury Jams in the Faraway Hills (the Berkshires? The

Poconos?) to work on his project. Although Blackbury Jams is very ordinary and not, on the surface, magical at all, it represents, for Pierce, a first timid move towards Faerie, a distancing from mainstream history. The concerns of the Faraway Hills are not those of New York: they are, in a sense, on two different timelines.

But even in the Faraway Hills people are struggling to find meaning, to discover some pattern that will give them magical control over their lives. Meaning, Pierce acknowledges, is absolutely necessary to human existence. Mike Mucho, the therapist, seeks meaning in the "life cycles" of pop psychology. Val the astrologer finds it in the ordered pattern of zodiacal houses. Spofford, a Vietnam vet and one of Pierce's former students, has become Arcadian shepherd and creates meaning in his life by simplifying his goals. Beau Brachman, a miraculously intact '60's hippie, understands through mystic intuition what Pierce is slowly discovering through book learning. And Rosie Rasmussen, the novel's other principal character, struggling through her divorce from Mike, looks for meaning in stories -- specifically the historical romances of Fellowes Kraft, a local celebrity who is dead by the time the book begins, but who in many ways serves as the narrative's central focus, Bringing all its strands together.

Fellowes Kraft has the gift to turn history into meaningful stories, and to suspend disbelief in his fanciful embroidering of historical fact. Whether he is read for passive enjoyment by unsophisticates like Rosie, or critically by researchers like Pierce, his works have mythopoeic power. When Pierce and Rosie finally meet, they enter Kraft's house and discovers his last, unpublished manuscript, a fantasy about Dr. John Doe and Giordano Bruno. The reading of this manuscript constitutes the novel's climactic epiphany, for it crystallizes the meaning of the Aegypt myth -- for Pierce, and for civilization.

It is significant that, while so many '60's fads are touched upon in the book, nowhere is Tolkien mentioned (except by very discreet allusion, in the phrase "the long road went ever on" -- surely no accident from a writer as meticulous as Crowley). The reason for this is obvious: Pierce's "recovery" of a certain view of the world through a literary experience corresponds to the sense of "recovery" afforded to readers of Tolkien, and to have drawn the parallel too closely would have weakened the book's impact. In one sense, Aegypt is the Renaissance equivalent of Middle-earth; in another, it is the eternal archetype of which Middle-earth is one incarnation. What the myth tells us is that "once, the world was not as it has since become". Once, the world had order, meaning, and purpose, but we have fallen out of that pattern. We still, however, recognized it when we see it, and when it is presented to us as a myth, whether it be in the Hermetic Corpus or the writings of Tolkien, we cannot help believing it. Although objective appraisal tells us that it is feigned -- not factual -- history, still we cannot label it "false".

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time that Tolkien art and Tolkien Manuscripts have been exhibited together -- the Marquette University Archives showed small selections from their holdings in 1983 and earlier -- but it is the first pairing of the significant Tolkien manuscript holdings at Marquette with the artwork by Tolkien held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The resulting exhibition impressed and delighted attendees at the 1987 Mythopoeic Conference -- though not a few were distressed to find that none of the reproductions of Tolkien's paintings made to date can compare to the originals in purity of color. *Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves*, for example, which is reproduced on the cover of the Haggerty Museum catalogue and on an accompanying poster, has a yellow cast not present in the original -- the result, maybe, of not matching film type with lighting when photographing the painting, or of excess yellow inking in the four-color process. Happily, Tolkien's pen and ink drawings have fared very well on the printed page, so well that it takes an effort to distinguish reproduction from original when a drawing is on display.

The Haggerty catalogue describes the sixty-two items in the exhibition and illustrates twenty-one, three in full color, in addition to a portrait photograph of Tolkien. Five of the illustrations are, I believe, reproduced for the first time: a preliminary sketch of the original dust-jacket for *The Hobbit*, ink on paper; *The Hill: Hobbiton*, pen and ink and pencil on paper, an early sketch which led to the pen and ink and (later) watercolor frontispieces to *The Hobbit*; *One morning early in the Quiet of the World*, pencil and crayon on paper, a very rough sketch of Gandalf approaching Bag End, with Bilbo standing at the door smoking his long pipe; *Trolls' Hill*, pen and ink on paper, a drawing of a wild country beneath a moody sky, heightened in the original (but lost in the one-color reproduction) by a spot of red ink, the trolls' fire; and *Map of the Upper River and Mirkwood*, ink and pencil on paper, with a portion of holograph text, here reproduced unfortunately faint and small.

As an added attraction, the Haggerty catalogue prints a transcription of an unpublished letter from Tolkien to G.E. Selby, 14 December 1937, lent by the Pierpont Morgan Library, concerning *The Hobbit* and the reaction of Tolkien's family and Oxford colleagues to its publication. The letter is followed by essays on Tolkien's art, the *Hobbit* work in particular, by Curtis L. Carter and Richard Schindler. Carter, the director of the Haggerty Museum, adds little to the comments made ten years ago by Baile Tolkien in *Drawings by J.R.R. Tolkien*. Schindler's essay includes some original thoughts but is irritatingly pedantic. He hunts sources, or at least analogues, with abandon, offhandedly and often to no good purpose: *The Hill: Hobbiton across the Water*, for example, reminds him of fifteenth-century Flemish painting, while *Lake Town* has "implied references to classical landscape painting like those of Claude Lorrain." In note 15 he implies that the Archibald Thorburn golden eagle on which Tolkien's *Bilbo Woke* painting was based first appeared in T.A. Coward's *Birds of the British Isles* (1933); whether or not Tolkien referred to this book, in fact the Thorburn painting was first reproduced in 1893 in Lord Lilford's *Coloured Figures of the Birds of the British Islands*.

To complement the Haggerty Museum *Hobbit* exhibition the Marquette University Archives mounted an equally impressive display of additional Tolkien material from their collection. These fifty-five items are listed in a booklet together with short essays on Mr

Bliss, Farmer Giles of Ham, and *The Lord of the Rings* by, respectively, Jared C. Lobdell, Taum Santoski, and Verlyn Flieger. Each essay is a fascinating and informative tour of the relevant manuscripts held at Marquette. All three essays deserve republication for a wider audience.

Wayne G. Hammond



MYTHIC CIRCLE

The Mythopoeic Society is sponsoring a new fiction publication, called *Mythic Circle*, which will appear four times a year. *Mythic Circle* runs approximately 50 pages an issue, and contains fantasy fiction, poetry and artwork. The first issue, which appeared in February 1987, featured a never-before published fantasy story by Charles de Lint. Issue Number Three appeared at the end of September, offering an exceptionally fine selection of poetry, and among the stories an intense depiction of Celtic life, called "The Last Card," by Paul Rucker. Stories in the publication range from humorous and whimsical to dark and evocative. There are two other important features of the publication: a section entitled "Mythopoeic Youth," which offers stories written by young authors; and a lively letter column. *Mythic Circle* was designed by its editors, Lynn Maudlin and Christine Lowentrot, to be a writers' forum -- where writers can see their material in print and get responses from readers -- but many of the subscribers enjoy reading it for its own sake. Readers are encouraged to share their opinions and reactions by writing letters. *Mythic Circle* \$9.00 for 4 issues. Write to: *Mythic Circle* P.O. Box 6707, Altadena, CA 91001

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Characteristically elegiac in his approach, Crowley seems to imply that permanent recovery of this sense of global meaning is impossible. Built out of childhood memories, and related to the childhood of the world, the Golden Age is as closed to us as our own childhood. Many Tolkien readers have, over the years, experienced the fading of the powerful vision *The Lord of the Rings* had inspired in them in their student days. This is not because the myth has been found wanting, but because the circumstances of this world have, perforce, closed them to it. Still, at odd moments, the vision calls one back to itself, the truth of the myth is manifested with blinding clarity. In *Aegypt* the characters are constantly being "reminded". Symbols flicker in and out of the narrative, like the movement of light on leaves, like the faintest of shadows, to be glimpsed accidentally and pondered once they are gone. Much stress is laid on dualities, or the contrast between outer and inner realities: objective and subjective truth; New York and the Faraway Hills; the Shadow River, a mysterious

double of the Blackbury River; the fact that there are two Rosies in the story, and that Pierce manages to get them confused; etc.

The narrative is open-ended, so that a sequel is possible -- almost probable, since we have only gone through three of the twelve astrological houses that serve as the novel's symbolic framework. Whether it will stand on its own or be extended in the future, this many-faceted, delicately woven tale should fascinate anyone who is asking the ultimate questions about meaning and mythopoeia.



A TOLKIEN INDEX

A *Working Concordance*, the first volume of Dr. Paul Nolan Hyde's comprehensive index of the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, was first made available at the 18th Mythopoeic Conference and is now being offered to the general membership of the Mythopoeic Society and other interested parties. It is a compilation of names, places, things, and language elements together with volume and page numbers of (almost) every occurrence. Volumes indexed include *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, *The Book of Lost Tales* (I & II), *The Lays of Beleriand*, *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, *The Road Goes Ever On*, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, *The Monsters and the Critics*, and Tolkien's "Guide to the Names in the Lord of the Rings" included in Jared Lobdell's *A Tolkien Compass*. The index also includes a complete listing of the Old and Middle English words used by J.R.R. Tolkien including the lengthy passages of Old English given in *The Shaping of Middle-earth*. It is soft-back, spiral bound, 163 pages, double column format.

Copies may be obtained by sending \$20.00/copy plus \$2.00 shipping and handling to Paul Nolan Hyde, 2661 E. Lee, Simi Valley, CA 93065.

Apologizes to Benjamin Urrutia. The review "Our Bodies, Our Elves", in *Mythlore* 50 was written by him.

From Under Mountains, from page 13

Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1980. 133-140.
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Courtly Love, from page 45

troop back to their master." (Ibid., p. 44.)

So the mad, gallant, foolhardy experiment is over. But Western civilization will never be the same. Woman will never again be seen as merely a piece of property or an object of barter. She is a human being -- a person -- whatever she may do or fail to do. And if she cares to stand on her dignity, she is a lady, with all a lady's prerogatives. As Lewis puts it,

To leap up on errands, to go through heat or cold, at the bidding of one's lady, or even of any lady, would seem but honorable and natural to a gentleman of the thirteenth or even of the seventeenth century; and most of us have gone shopping in the twentieth with ladies who show no sign of regarding the tradition as a dead letter." (Ibid., p. 7)

A lady, any lady, retains something of her ancient authority -- just how much no man can be quite sure. It is hers to have and to hold. She can forfeit her title to honor only by conduct unbecoming a lady, of which, to be sure, no wise woman would ever be guilty. Courtly love is Western man's heritage; it still flows in his bloodstream. "Neither the form nor the sentiment of this old poetry," says Lewis, "has passed away without leaving indelible traces on our minds." (Ibid., p. 1.)

NOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *Poems* (London: Geoffrey Bles, Ltd., 1964), p. 133.
2. C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936; Galaxy Books (paper), 1958), pp. 25-26.
3. Charles Williams, "The Figure of Arthur," in *Tales-in-sin through Logres* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (paper), 1974), p. 240.

Minor, Early References, from page 42

West, Richard C. "The Tolkienians: Some Introductory Reflections on Alan Garner, Carol Kendall, and Lloyd Alexander." *Oricrist* No. 2 (1968), pp. 4-15. [These writers are regarded as Tolkienian primarily for the reason that each has followed Tolkien's example and invented his own mythology.]

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Yussupoff, Elina. "Do You Know about Hobbits". *Tinicum Township Bulletin* (Tinicum Civic Association, Pennsylvania), June 1968, p. ? [Brief enthusiastic description of *H and LOTR*, and news that the former is now in the local library.]