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## Tales Newly Told

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## Tales Newly Told

# Tales Newly Told

a column on current modern Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

The telling of a story is, quite naturally, affected by all the stories that have been told before. Each new attempt at storytelling must measure itself against the expectations that have been raised by established narrative traditions. It is thus always, to some extent, a reaction to the past — and may result, as the occasion warrants, in either a vindication/reinforcement of past practices or a repudiation of past experience. Mythopoeic fantasy, in particular, delves into archetypal patterns that have governed human imagination for centuries, and seeks to relate them creatively to the raw experience of the present.

There have been periods in our history — periods of cataclysmic ideological change — when the entire past of our species seemed to pose a philosophical problem, and mythopoeic fantasy was enlisted to make sense of the conflict in imaginative terms. Around the turn of this century, at the height of the influence of the “rationalist” positivism on our intellectual culture, one of the favorite genres of imaginative literature was the “lost world” fantasy, which was raised to classic heights by writers like H. Rider Haggard and A. Merrit, but rooted itself in humbler realms of popular culture as well. According to the typical pattern of a story in this genre, a group of modern Westerners, visiting a poorly explored corner of the globe, discover an ancient civilization (usually a civilization familiar to archaeologists, and made popular by museum exhibits) that managed to survive unknown to the rest of the world. This civilization is romantically appealing, but usually there is something dark and threatening at its core: some “pre-rational” magic, or a purely physical but no less horrifying menace (such as a monster). There is also a dichotomy in the visitor’s reactions to the “lost world”: the hero will uphold humane ethical values, siding with the “best” features of the ancient civilization, while some other character, greedy and materialistic, will identify with the “dark” side as a source of power. There is a clear correlation between the popularity of the “lost world” theme and the massive rejection—in the name of “progress”—of all past cultural models (that was characteristic of the period) with the resulting anxiety about, on the one hand, the atavistic return of “pre-rational” forms of experience and, on the other, the loss of humane values, which have a subjective rather than a “rational” base. The “lost world”: to the late Victorians represented the unwieldy, all-too-complex burden of the human past, which they could never completely exorcise.

The classics of the “lost world” genre retain all their power today. Yet it is not a story-pattern that many modern fantasists choose to follow. One wonders: has not this vein of storytelling been exhausted? Can it still give

form to the creative needs of contemporary writers? Does it, in fact, still reflect the deep preoccupations of our culture? Edward Myers, in *The Mountain of Light* (RoC, 1992) attempts to continue the genre, with mixed results.

He has set his story in the Peruvian highlands in 1921. This helps to suspend disbelief (a civilization such as the one he describes could plausibly have remained undiscovered by Western powers until that date, though not much later, but limits the story to the cultural concerns of that time, necessitating the use of a certain amount of “period” style, and bringing the book dangerously close to being a mere pastiche of the “lost world” genre, rather than a creative use of that story-pattern from a modern perspective. The main protagonist, Jesse O’Keefe, has become disillusioned with Western civilization as a result of his experiences in the trenches during World War I, and has come to Peru ostensibly as part of an anthropological research project, but really to escape from a world he equates with personal failure and (one gathers) an unhappy love affair. Hearing rumors of a tribe of *alpinistas cholos* (Indian mountain-climbers), he decides to investigate, and meets a strange polyglot old man, Norroi the Timo, who becomes his guide on a quest that O’Keefe himself comes to see more and more in spiritual terms. He also crosses paths repeatedly with Forest Beckwith, a spoiled rich New Yorker that O’Keefe is trying to escape: as the plot unfolds, O’Keefe will sometimes see him as an ally, sometimes as a nemesis.

At last, under Norroi’s guidance, he comes to Xirrixir, the land of the Rixtirra, the Mountain-Drawn, a hitherto unknown people who fled the lowlands when the Spaniards conquered Peru. Their semi-mythological forbears, Ossonnal and Lissallo, led them to the high mountain country, and eventually left to prepare for them the ultimate, impregnable refuge, the mountain Made of Light. This has given the Rixtir culture a constant preoccupation with “further up and further in,” as well as an obsession with the tools and techniques of mountain-climbing. They also have a prophecy concerning the Man of Knowledge, a Lowlander who will appear one day to lead the Rixtirra to the Mountain, and who will be accompanied by his shadow, the Man of Ignorance. O’Keefe is given into the care of Aeslu, a Wordpathguide (i.e., interpreter, linguist: she has learned most European languages from earlier, unsuccessful explorers) who comes to believe that he is the Man of Knowledge (she understands “anthropologist” as “Throw-Fall-of-Gist,” which she interprets as “someone who forces a realization about the nature of things”). The reappearance of Beckwith provides



another Lowlander to the pattern, a possible Man of Ignorance. But which, in fact, is which? O'Keefe and Beckwith's self-justifications before the Rixtirra somewhat recall Ransom and Weston before Oyarsa, but Myers has worked in some ambiguity: O'Keefe is immature, petulant, and abysmally gauche, while Beckwith, for all his callous selfishness, has a profound knowledge of mountain-climbing, which is what the Rixtirra prize above all else. To complicate matters, two factions among the Rixtirra, the Heirs and the mysterious Umbrage, have radically different interpretations of the prophecy, and both want to either eliminate or exploit the Lowlanders. Norroi, Aeslu, O'Keefe and Beckwith flee across an increasingly wild landscape, seeking the Mountain. But the Mountain, of course, being a symbol of transcendence, is no more attainable than Moby Dick, and the tale ends with a tragic, inconclusive catastrophe.

The gravity and earnestness with which Myers recounts this quest are certainly compelling. Unfortunately, however, some of the writing falls flat. Part of the problem has to do with narrative tone: while O'Keefe's first-person narrative voice is quite convincing, Aeslu's is much less so. To recreate the diction of a person with an extensive knowledge of the English language but almost no knowledge of Western civilization would be something of a literary *tour de force*, and Myers doesn't bring it off (conversely, if Aeslu's passages are meant to be translations from Rixtir, they are too full of modern English idioms to be realistic). The final confrontation between O'Keefe and Beckwith, which should be the dramatic climax of the story, also fails to produce the desired effect. O'Keefe's "knowledge" lies in his awareness of the moral horror behind World War I, the bankruptcy of the civilization that allowed it to happen, while Beckwith's "ignorance" is in his blithe disregard for such matters. This is all brought out at the proper moment, yet the result is oddly unmoving.

Still, Myers' obvious love of mountains and familiarity with the Peruvian landscape give the book an individual energy and soul. And it contains some memorable fantastic images — for instance, *l'lofissorih*, the city made of rope hanging over an abyss — that prove beyond a doubt that he has a mythopoeic writer's imagination.

The "lost world" genre in fantasy arose out of the tension between the remembered "pre-rational" past and the "rationalist" present (and, one assumed, future). Today one has less and less reason to believe that the modern world has anything to do with "rationalism," and no reason to expect a vindication of "rationalism" (in the nineteenth-century positivist sense) at any time in the future. Indeed, fantasists now feel free to imagine the future in terms utterly different from the high-tech, materialist projections of classical Rachel Pollack's *Unquenchable Fire* (Overlook Press, 1992), which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award when it first came out in England in 1988. It depicts a world transformed by a New Age Revolution which has driven out the "technophiles" and "True History" (which has nothing to do with the study of

historical records!), and a preoccupation with religious ritual ("Enactments") of every occasion of daily life. "Benign Ones" and Malignant Ones" (angels and devils, more or less) interfere routinely in human affairs. The story is set mostly in Poughkeepsie, where Jennifer Mazdan, who works as a Server (i.e., one who cares for the idols set up as guardians around public sites) is struggling to cope with the disastrous breakup of her marriage even as she negotiates the hurdles of an extremely complex environment. Pollack's depiction of the post-Revolutionary world is prodigiously inventive, and screamingly funny: constant emphasis on the "spiritual" has obviously little impact on the trashy commercialism, bureaucratic inefficiency, and conformist mediocrity we all know so well. Yet it soon becomes clear that the Founders — the group of mystics and visionaries whose example brought about the Revolution — really were extraordinary people with genuine spiritual power, whose deed operated fundamental changes in reality, but after their passing the vision they left to their followers has become corrupt and lost its force. The "clergy" who inherited the Founders' authority, the Tellers (who are, in fact, mythopoeic story-tellers) are no longer able to suspend their audience's disbelief and transform their consciousness as they once did, although they have maintained all their social privileges. Indeed, many people are now comfortable with this safe mediocrity, and refer to the "Age of Awe" (the miraculous time of the Founders), as the "Age of Fanatics." There is something different about Jennifer Mazdan, however: although she strives to be as "normal" as her neighbors, supernatural realities manifest around her with disturbing clarity. At last she finds herself pregnant (not by any man, apparently), with ample evidence that the child is to be a world-shaker with a divine mission. Her anger at having her body used so casually by a divine agency, and her struggle to maintain a sense of personal integrity and worth, fuel the rest of the story.

Interspersed at various points in the main narrative are other stories and part of stories, examples of the mythic narratives revealed by the Founders. Presented in the manner of folk-tales, they display the same *outré* humor as the rest of the book, but also a density and an emotional gravity that suggest true sacred myth. Echoes of ancient stories — that of Inanna, of Isis and Osiris, of Sekhmet — appear here and there in them, yet never in such a matter to make them frivolous "updatings" of older material. And although the mythic framework of the main plot — Jennifer's "virgin" pregnancy — obviously reflects one of the most familiar stories of all, no attempt is made to draw one-to-one parallels with that model. This is very much Jennifer's own story, the path that brings her (and the reader) to an understanding of death and ecstasy, suffering and love.

Rachel Pollack, who is well-known for her books on the Tarot, has had long experience of the mythopoeic power of images. She has now chosen to express her insights in narrative form, with impressive results: the originality and depth of her wisdom are a most welcome addition to the fantasy field. ☾