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## Tales Newly Told

# Tales Newly Told

## A Column on Current Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

With her latest novel, *Lens of the World* (Morrow, 1990), R.A. MacAvoy has taken the step one expects of a major writer, the risk that confirms the breadth and depth of a literary talent. Unlike her previous books, *Lens of the World* is a first-person narrative, requiring a consistency of character, a control of diction, a focusing of vision far more demanding than in the types of story she has told before. In meeting this challenge, she has had to sacrifice some hallmark traits of her earlier writing that had, surely, done much to gain her a wide readership. Gone, for instance, is the madcap energy that we had come to see as a primary characteristic of her style. However, this does not make itself felt as a lack: this book has plenty of power of its own, but in a new, more introspective mode.

The story unfolds in an imaginary world vaguely resembling seventeenth-century Europe: experimental science has become a major concern of the intelligentsia, the economy is slowly turning toward industrialization, but feudal institutions still dominate society, territorial conflicts between rival kingdoms are an every day reality, and much of the world is still, for most people, a complete mystery. The narrator, Nazhuret, is composing this account of events that took place some twenty years before the time of the writing as a kind of *apologia* for his life and his role in those events. He is — a little self-consciously — addressing his king, with whom he first had personal contact during that time, and whose destiny he affected at a crucial moment. It is the recent death of a third person who had a profound impact on both men — Nazhuret's teacher, Powl — that has prompted this reassessment of past experience.

Brought up without any knowledge of his parentage in the closed atmosphere of a military academy, Nazhuret's self-image is molded by what he perceives to be his great physical ugliness, mitigated by an exceptional prowess which he has cultivated in compensation. On the brink of manhood, about to embark (not quite willingly) on the military career expected of him, he follows an impulse to wander away into the countryside, where he comes upon a curious structure (conditioned by his upbringing, he at first takes it to be a military installation) and meets its denizen, the mysterious man who will become his teacher. Powl here plays the role of the wizard/mentor so prominent in the modern fantasy tradition, but he is in fact a scientist, more concerned with empirical observation and proper cognitive processes than with magic. Yet this passion for exact knowledge, in him, does not simply reduce the universe to a materiality that technology can then manipulate: like the "good" science of the sorns in C.S. Lewis' Ransom trilogy, it is a holistic concern, focusing on the observer as much as on what is observed, aimed

at perfecting awareness of the human person at all levels, material and spiritual. Indeed, in Nazhuret's first traumatic encounter with him Powl plays the transforming role of a shaman, literally killing his pupil and then allowing him to freely take back his own life.

From then on, freedom — the development of a truly free Moral personality, not conditioned by cultural parochialism or restrictive social and political allegiances — becomes the primary goal of Nazhuret's education at Powl's hands. To avoid fostering a personal dependency on himself, Powl remains emotionally aloof from his charge (though obvious links of affection grow up between the two men). So that he need never be in a position where he can be physically overpowered by others, Nazhuret is made to perfect his warrior skills. To prevent his mind from being trapped by a single conceptual system, he is made to learn several foreign languages, and get used to seeing the world through different eyes. And he learns to make lenses for scientific instruments, mastering technological means of exact observation as well. As Powl explains to him:

You are the lens of the world: the lens through which the world may become aware of itself. The world, on the other hand, is the only lens in which you can see yourself. It is both lenses together that make vision.

Then, as suddenly as it began, Nazhuret's period of apprenticeship is over. He is left alone, forced to rely on the skills that he learned during his years of seclusion to make his way in a world about which he actually knows very little. "Optician" is the new identity he adopts for himself; and he becomes our lens onto his universe, as he gradually comes to grips with its patterns — even as his own exceptional abilities and unusual freedom from social constraints provide those he meets with a new lens to view the familiar world around them, subtly transforming *their* vision. He himself, of course, is constantly being transformed as his perceptions are refined. He discovers that what he had always interpreted as his "ugliness" only reflects the characteristic facial features of a foreign race. When, disobeying Powl's injunction not to take sides in human affairs, he helps a group of villagers avenge what seems to be a heinous crime, he finds to his chagrin that his hosts do not have the same moral understanding of the situation as he does. An unresolved encounter with what may or may not be a werewolf shows him the limits of his understanding. He also, in a passage of simple and moving beauty, has a religious experience.

Throughout his adventures he constantly crosses path with Arlin, a young man who claims to remember him

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and therefore faces a subtler enemy, it must, even more whole-heartedly than they, invoke the divine protection if it hopes to remain sweet. For consider how narrow its true path is. It must not become what the other people call a "mutual admiration society"; yet if it is not full of mutual admiration, of Appreciative love, it is not Friendship at all.... Friendship is not a reward for our discrimination and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others.

I am not greatly concerned that our Society in any greater danger than any other group into falling into the deadly pitfalls of Friendship, *nor am I any less concerned*. It is *when* we cease looking together at our common interest and *instead* turn and begin looking at each other that we stand in danger of assuming a sense of superiority; to be an exclusive coterie (the number of which is not an issue); to become a self-appointed elite absorbed in collective self-approval. I have seen this happen in other organizations and groups and find it both pathetic and repelling. As I see it, we are in neither greater or less danger than others who consider themselves Friends. I do believe that as we continue to look in the direction of our stated interest, and not become overly preoccupied at looking *either* at ourselves as a primarily physical organization *or* as individuals within the organization.

As there are both incorrect and proper forms of self-love, there can be both misdirected and wholesome forms of group love which we call Friendship. Keeping that

delicate balance, that "Middle Way" if you will. Lewis offers us this challenge, taken from the same chapter:

It is one of the difficulties and delightful subtleties of life that we must deeply acknowledge certain things to be serious and yet retain the power and will to treat them often as lightly as a game.

May we all be aware and skillful players in this serious and therefore joyful game.



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from him from military school. Although they appear to be moral opposites of each other, contradicting each other's tastes and values at every turn, Arlin and Nazhuret are mutually entangled in a curious love-hate relationship. Arlin is not at all, of course, what he seems to be. Through him Nazhuret is brought into the presence of Rudof, the young king of Vestinglon, just in time to resolve the tensions of a rather conventional political crisis. Nazhuret's parentage is disclosed (as are Powl's and Arlin's), and the place destined to him by society from his birth comes to coincide with the place he has earned by his own efforts.

If the book has a major weakness, it is the banality of the dénouement. Although it is designated as "first in a series," allowing us to expect further developments and tying up of loose ends in future volumes, the tale is constructed so as to stand on its own, and on those narrative terms it seems incredible to the reader that Nazhuret, with his exceptional education and unique position in his world's society, should not play a more spectacularly significant role in it than the mere foiling of a very mundane conspiracy. And although Powl's identity and previous history are exposed, the true nature of his motivation remains as inscrutable as ever. This may well be intentional — another way of showing the limitations of Nazhuret's "lens" — but it is not very satisfying as *story*. Still, we must suspend judgement until the other volumes appear, and the full shape and extent of MacAvoy's project become clear.

Such reservations should not, however, dissuade anyone from sampling the riches of what is, all things considered, a beautifully crafted work. Nazhuret comes alive in his distinctive voice, and compels us to take his story in earnest. In its presentation of a highly complex universe through the eyes of a single individual who is mostly ignorant of the larger pattern that shape events around him, *Lens of the World* (though obviously less dense in design) reminds one of Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* and *Soldier of the Mist*; and it must be said to its credit that it does not suffer all that much by comparison with those masterworks. Even with this first glimpse, we can tell that the universe it depicts is quite engaging in its complexity, and are made eager for a second look — through Nazhuret's lens, or another's.

## 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 purpose of this journal. In order to be a general help, the following is what might be considered a core reading list, containing the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

### J.R.R. Tolkien

*The Hobbit*, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle," 1945; "On Fairy-Stories," 1945; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954; *The Two Towers* 1954; *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977

### 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 (the last two printed together in 1954).