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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told
With her latest novel, *Lenses 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, *Lenses 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 tōse 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 there can be both misdirected and wholesome forms of this kind of love, there is the possibility of both.

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 in mind, we may be aware and skillful players in this serious and therefore joyful game.

_The Greater Trumps_ 1922; _Shadows of Ecstasy_ 1933; _Descent Into Hell_ 1937; _All Hallow's Eve_ 1945; _Taliesin through Logres_ 1938, and _The Region of the Summer Stars_ 1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).

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**Mythopoeic Core Reading List**

_ClythloRE_ 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**


_C.S. Lewis_

_Out of the Silent Planet_ 1938; _Perelandra_ 1943; _That Hideous Strength_ 1945; _The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe_ 1960; _Prince Caspian_ 1951; _The Voyage of the Dawn Treader_ 1952; _The Silver Chair_ 1953; _The Horse and His Boy_ 1964; _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; _Taliesin through Logres_ 1938, and _The Region of the Summer Stars_ 1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).

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_Such reservations should not, however, dissuade anyone form 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._