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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Greenberg, Martin H., ed. *After the King*

Tales Newly Told

a column on current modern fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

When J.R.R. Tolkien was weaving the great tapestry of a story that would take form as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, it was, essentially, a private pastime, known to and appreciated by only those few friends and colleagues who shared his immense erudition, his fascination with the history of language, and his unfashionable delight in myth and romance. There were few works of modern fiction around that came anywhere near it in mythopoeic ambition — too few, certainly, to warrant discussion of a literary genre called “adult fantasy” — and what little existed was treasured by a small elite of connoisseurs. It was, by and large, taken for granted that a viewpoint so eccentric and specialized, so rooted in the literary conventions of bygone ages and so divorced from both the intellectual and popular philosophies of today, could never have mass appeal. And yet, as we all know, the appearance of a mass-market edition of *The Lord of the Rings* in the mid-60's gave rise to a popular fad that not only catapulted Tolkien to unexpected worldwide fame, but created a demand for “fantasy” as a commercial genre. Clearly a hitherto unsatisfied craving had been awakened in the reading public, and publishers vied with each other in, first, trying to ascertain just what the craving was for, and then in satisfying it as profitably as possible. It seemed that any story featuring a group of odd people careening across a wild landscape on a quest to defeat the Ultimate Evil, encountering a proper contingent of elves, goblins and dragons on the way, would do the trick: for the first time in centuries, mediocre fantasy became a commonplace. Even so, many gifted writers who had spent their formative years reading Tolkien eventually chose to express their most intimate and powerful visions in mythopoeic forms inspired by his work, thus establishing “Modern fantasy” as a durable branch of literature.

In this year which marks the centennial of Tolkien's birth — and roughly, a quarter century of post-Tolkienian fantasy — it seems appropriate to take stock of his continuing influence on writers of imaginative fiction. The new anthology *After the King* (Tor, 1992, edited by Martin H. Greenberg) provides us with a certain perspective on the subject, being a collection of original stories commissioned from a variety of authors as a tribute to J.R.R. Tolkien on his hundredth birthday — and, presumably, reflecting something of the authors' reaction to Tolkien's work.

Although the contributors to this anthology represent a broad spectrum of the fantasy field today, they obviously should not be seen as a “who's who” of contemporary fantasy writers. Some of the giants in the genre are conspicuous by their absence: there is no Ursula K. LeGuin

here, no Gene Wolfe, no John Crowley. The many-faceted “Minneapolis school” is represented only by Emma Bull — one misses Steven Brust and Eleanor Arnason. And some of the writers who are included are better known for their science fiction than for their fantasy: Barry N. Malzberg, Mike Resnick, and Gregory Benford (and Robert Silverberg — although his “Majipoor” books are borderline fantasy). Wisely, all the contributors have avoided imitating Tolkien's style or setting stories within the universe he created — such attempts in the past having been almost uniformly disastrous. Only Charles de Lint's “The Conjure Man” makes a direct allusion to Tolkien's work, by developing the central metaphor of “Leaf by Niggle” and depicting an obvious close relative of Tom Bombadil. Otherwise, many of the writers have been content to build stories around themes that have become popular because of their prominence in Tolkien's myths: there are stories about dragons (Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's “The Dream of Tolin” and Patricia A. McKillip's “The Fellowship of the Dragon”), goblins (Poul and Karen Anderson's “Faith”), elves (Judith Tarr's “Death and the Lady”), trolls with working-class accents (Terry Pratchett's “Troll Bridge”), crotchety wizards (Karen Haber's “Up the Side of the Air”), and desperate stands against invading evil (Andre Norton's “Nine Threads of Gold”). Stephen R. Donaldson's “Reeve the Just” is a succinctly but elegantly written Christian allegory rather in the manner of “Leaf by Niggle,” though vastly different in content. John Brunner's “In the Season of the Dressing of Wells” depicts (with only the most discreet hint at the supernatural) the spiritual healing of a wounded veteran as he participates in the ancient customs of a rural English community shortly after World War I, and evokes with gentle nostalgia the kind of social milieu that Tolkien came to idealize in the Shire (the same milieu that Robert Holdstock has drawn on so successfully for his own recent fantasies). Harry Turtledove's “The Decoy Duck” is set in the universe of his “Viddoson” books, exemplifying the world-building genre of fantasy which, in its most intricate and intellectually demanding form, was feigned to be a lost chapter from Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, echoing Tolkien's device of giving his works sources in supposed ancient manuscripts. The tone of the stories ranges from the broadest of broad comedy (Dennis L. McKiernan's “The Hafling House”) to the starkest perspectives on the human condition (Jane Yolen's “Winter's King”).

Even among fantasists who freely acknowledge Tolkien's influence on their work, there are many who

have taken issue with the various cultural prejudices — products of his time and upbringing — that appear in his writing. Many of the most gifted fantasists of the last generation have been women, who have naturally reacted against the very male-centered flavor of Tolkien's imagination. There are elements of such a reaction in this anthology: the McKillip story, for instance, by presenting us with an all-female "fellowship" and dealing with the "enemy" dragon in a highly unorthodox fashion, is a pointed and delightful response to the whole concept of the heroic quest and its tacit assumption of male values. Another element that has come to play a major role in fantasy universes is Neo-Paganism, and Emma Bull's "Silver or Gold" has a strong Wiccan flavor (just as there is a hint of nascent "Goddess religion" in John Brunner's story.) Much Neo-Pagan writing (and, indeed, ritual) is strongly rooted in the experience of reading Tolkien, although Tolkien seems to have been unaware of the movement, and would not, in all probability, have looked upon it favorably.

Yet the most revolutionary aspect of Tolkien's appearance on the literary scene — the element that fundamentally challenges modernist "orthodoxy" — is his absolute faith in the imagination, his complete refusal of irony. Modernism relies on irony, which is indeed the only possible attitude in an agnostic universe, where all values become relative as a result of absolute epistemological uncertainty. While many writers have welcomed Tolkien's radical espousal of ancient certainties like a breath of fresh air, and followed in his footsteps, many others — even among fantasists — have resisted his challenge. In this anthology it is primarily the science-fiction writers who cast an ironic glance at the heritage of Tolkien — perhaps because science fiction has evolved (in the United States, at least) in a modernist setting. Robert Silverberg's "A Long Night's Vigil at the Temple" portrays myth as indeed a *kalon pseudos*, a "beautiful lie" necessary to maintain religious faith. Gregory Benford's "Down the River Road" tells of a boy's nightmarish quest for his father in a tubular world where a river of molten metal runs through Time, and where the search for the past (i.e., for a time other than the present) is shown to be tragic folly. The easy degradation of high-fantasy images into commercial vulgarity (so evident in our time) has also drawn the attention of some of the contributors: various aspects of the theme are dealt with hilariously by Terry Pratchett, raucously by Mike Resnick ("Revolt of the Sugar Plum Fairies"), wittily and ambiguously by Barry Malzberg ("Götterdämmerung"). Indeed, one could say that the best selling properties of light, obviously frivolous fantasy in bookstores today points up the fact that the public at large still prefers to take its fantasy with a heavy load of irony, and has not accepted the full gravity of Tolkien's vision.

Even so, the intensity of Tolkien's vision lives on in the work of other writers. In *After the King* it is the Judith Tarr and Peter Beagle stories which, I think, show the greatest kinship with Tolkien's inspiration (though very different from his work in style) — and both, coincidentally, depict an immortal being in love with a mortal. The tension

between mortality and immortality, permanence and change, "death and the desire for deathlessness," to use his own phrase, is the original wellspring of Tolkien's creative impulse, the aspect of the human condition that he has seen most perfectly and expressed with unique force — and it is the element that remains to haunt those who have loved his work, long after the colorful inventions have lost their novelty. The narrator of Tarr's story is Jeannette Lados, a fourteenth-century French peasant woman who befriends an elf who has just lost her mortal lover. Both women love truly, both women suffer truly, although they inhabit completely different spiritual universes: Lys (the elf) finds that her unconditional and all-pervading love is too strong for mortal spirits, and Jeannette, though offered immortality, makes the Choice of Friel, as in Tolkien's "The Last Ship." Beagle's immortal (a nagini, or serpent-fairy) tries to prevent her mortal beloved's appointed death, although she knows it is impossible. In Beagle's words,

... if there is any sort of message or metaphor in it, perhaps it is that sorrow and hunger, pity and love, run far deeper in the world than we imagine... And if there are no gods, nor any other words than this, if there is no such thing as enlightenment or a soul, still there remain those four rivers — sorrow and hunger, pity and love.

Those four rivers were well known to Tolkien, and to all of us who have followed them under his guidance, learning life-giving lessons in the lands they traverse.

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"*, 1947; *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*, 1960; *Till We Have Faces*, 1966.

Charles Williams

War in Heaven, 1925; *Many Dimensions*, 1925; *The Place of the Lion*, 1927; *The Greater Trumps*, 1928; *Shadows of Ecstasy*, 1929; *Descent into Hell*, 1930; *All Hallows' Eve*, 1931; *Tales from Logres*, 1932; *The Region of the Summer Stars*, 1933.

1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).