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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Powers, Tim. *Last Call*.

Tales Newly Told

a column on CURRENT MODERN Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

Many of us have, at some point in our lives, had a glimpse of the frightening *otherness* of the universe, the intuition that the way things work in the cosmos may have very little to do with the needs and wishes of our small, limited selves. Usually the experience lasts no more than an instant, and we return to the safety of our everyday perceptions; but sometimes we let it haunt us, recreating it in our imagination to discover what it can teach us. Writers of horror fiction have, indeed, long been adept at evoking such experiences, focusing them before the reader in their unadorned intensity, cultivating the feeling of alienation for its own sake. Other writers of imaginative fiction — like the Inklings, for instance, and especially Lewis and Williams — have tended to “mythologise” this type of phenomenon by finding ways to fit it into a larger intellectual and spiritual context where, paradoxically, the experience of meaninglessness ceases to be meaningless. The force of the experience is not denied, but it is shown to be subordinate to the eternal source of human worth; and, once it is no longer felt to reflect ultimate reality, the horror is accepted as a gratifying literary experience.

Tim Powers, has, in all his earlier novels, displayed a remarkable talent for juxtaposing the alienated vision of horror with a sense of eternal values. In some cases (as in, say, *The Anubis Gates*) the sheer baroque inventiveness of his imagery and situations may have drawn attention away from the strong moral framework of his storytelling; but it is always there. His latest novel, *Last Call* (Morrow, 1992), is in fact an almost perfectly balanced combination of those two sources of his inspiration, and in some ways represents a new plateau in his development as a writer.

In his novel the horror-inducing element of inhuman chaos and randomness is embodied in the concept of playing cards, and especially in the two uses to which they are most commonly put: fortune telling and gambling. The locale, appropriately, is Las Vegas — a fantasy place if there ever was one! The main protagonist, Scott Crane, is the adopted son of a professional Poker player, and has thus absorbed the techniques and the “ethos” of gambling from early childhood, but as the story begins he has settled into a sedate middle-aged existence in southern California, far away from any temptation to risk and adventure. It is the shock of his wife’s sudden death, and the severe depression he suffers as a result, that lead him to return briefly to the gambling milieu, as a means of raising money to pay off his debts; and by placing himself once more within that pattern he attracts the attention of powers who have a special interest in him because of the circumstances

of his birth, and links himself again to events that had been set in motion twenty years earlier, at a card game he had taken part in.

Cards, in Powers’ universe, are true embodiments of the eternal Platonic archetypes whose interplay gives rise to the events in our world. Tarot cards are, of course, the most genuine — and thus the most potent — representations of those eternal archetypes; but even ordinary playing cards, since they are (however disguised and corrupted) descendants of the Tarot deck, can serve the same function. As in Charles Williams’ *The Greater Trumps*, where all Tarot decks derive their properties to their relation to one original deck, itself inspired by a set of magical figurines whose movement replicate the dance of the angelic rulers of the universe, Powers has an “ur-Tarot”, the Lombardy Zeroth deck, whose images are so disturbingly potent that most copies are kept under lock and key, and which is used only by those who have completely given themselves up to an archetypal role. Any combination of cards (from any deck), however, when it appears as a hand in a game, constitutes a destiny, a pattern crystallized out of the random play of the archetypes, and now intimately associated with the individual who dealt that hand. If money — the primary embodiment of power in our culture, and thus invested with strong magic — is used to buy a hand, the destiny represented in that hand’s pattern passes on to the buyer.

Scott Crane’s real father, a French gangster named Georges Leon, has used the magic of the cards to become one with the archetype of the Emperor, and has come to wield all the power associated with that role. But he is an unbalanced, destructive version of the Emperor that he has chosen to incarnate: instead of taking a Queen for his consort, allowing the fertility of the Empress and the wisdom of the High Priestess to complement his own rigorous nature, he has had the Queen murdered, and rules over the arid Waste Land with unmitigated masculine harshness; and instead of giving his place to a younger heir at the completion of a cycle, he has, like Saturn, devoured his children. Only Scott has escaped destruction, through having been — like so many redeemer-heroes in so many myths — set adrift as a child by his mother. However, he unwittingly returns into his father’s orbit when, as a professional gambler in his twenties, he participates in a game of “Assumption” in a boathouse on Lake Mead. This game is held every twenty years by Leon on Holy Week, when his reign would be expected to end, and is a means for him to “assume” the

identities of various people whose hands he buys, gaining him the power to devour them spiritually, much as the devils do to each other in *Screwtape*. This provides him with fresh bodies to inhabit, giving him a hope of immortality. Scott, though unrecognised by his father, is one of the individuals thus "assumed" (although, like the other players, he has no knowledge of the real stakes of the game); but the full takeover of his body will only take place twenty years later, when the next game of Assumption is played.

Twenty years have passed: like the other individuals who were "assumed", Scott is a "fish" ready to be reeled in. But by virtue of being the King's true son, he is also a "jack" who can challenge the King himself. As he is drawn into the supernatural pattern of his destiny, he discovers that his foster-sister Diana is the murdered Queen's daughter, able of taking the role of Queen herself, and thus an automatic target for the King's assassins. Accompanied by his aged foster-father Ozzie and his eccentric neighbor Archimedes Mavranos (who is suffering from lymphatic cancer, and hopes to be cured by an exceptional realignment of probabilities), Scott journeys to Las Vegas to save himself and his loved ones by confronting his father.

There are more than factors working against him, however. Scott is an alcoholic, and whenever he drinks he places himself magically in his father's power. He is haunted by a succubus who has taken on the features of his dead wife. A panoply of grotesque villains, each the embodiment of a negative archetype (reminiscent of the N.I.C.E officials in *That Hideous Strength*), closes in on him from all sides. To prevail, he must mobilize all his reserves of goodness, courage, humility and self sacrifice, and undergo a heroic transformation.

Powers is a wonderful storyteller, orchestrating his many subplots with hardly a break in the suspense of the narrative. As in his previous novels, he weaves together seemingly unrelated mythological and literary themes so skilfully that the combinations do not come across as forced at all. Thus the Nevada desert, even as it is described in the most realistic terms, becomes simultaneously the Waste Land of the Grail romances and the desert of the Middle Eastern dying-god myths. Figures and motifs associated with the Grail appear frequently, and in the most unforeseen guises (and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with its juxtaposition of Tarot images and Grail legend, is invoked at length, as one could expect).

Their common use of the Tarot motif makes a comparison between Powers and Williams inevitable, and it is indeed interesting to note how close both men are — despite the obvious dissimilarity of their styles — in the world-view they present in their novels. Both see the Platonic archetypes as essentially neutral, capable of destroying as well as blessing, but only in response to the moral choices of the human souls who interact with them. Although the archetypes are the sources of all power, and are immensely powerful themselves, they are subordinate to the moral universe that human minds inhabit. Even the

more frankly demonic beings that populate Powers' earlier novels (the Vodoun loas in *On Stranger Tides*, the lamias in the *Stress of Her Regard*) can do no harm to anyone who makes a moral decision not to submit to them. It follows, then, that any unconscious identification with an archetype (through an exaggerated desire, say) leads to evil; whereas the conscious assumption of an archetypal role — taking the moral responsibilities that go with it into account — is a source of creative good.

The main difference between Powers and Williams is that Powers' characters are essentially non-religious, and receive no consolation or guidance from traditional religious sources. Although the general world-view of the story is recognizably Christian, the protagonists are not consciously aware of Christian principles. There is no Sybil Coningsby in Powers' work. The closest equivalent to her in *Last Call* would be Scott's foster-father Ozzie, who gives his life to protect his adopted children, but his perfect love is achieved through a tortured, anguished struggle: it is not the fruit of a serene, mystical personality. Because they have no conception of a good supernatural, Powers' characters are more likely to perceive the dark, alienating side of great archetypes, and to experience them as horror. Their choice to stand by decency and love is thus made all the more striking, and carries greater spiritual weight: in both *Last Call* and *The Stress of Her Regard*, certain key characters are saved by Christian sacraments, without quite understanding how; it was, in fact, their moral resolve that made them worthy. By holding up this beacon of ultimate human worth, Powers manages to guide us through a forest of frightening images to a truly satisfying eucatastrophe.

Last Call is, on one level, an engrossing page-turner, which will satisfy any lover of romantic adventure, but on another level it is a genuine mythopoetic work of considerable sophistication, and will repay many readings.

