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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Wolfe, Gene. *Nightside the Long Sun*.

Tales Newly Told

A COLUMN ON CURRENT MODERN FANTASY BY ALEXEI KONDRATIEV



here is still, perhaps, not enough appreciation in religious circles of the all-important role mythopoeic literature has played over the last thousand years in bringing theological concepts into popular consciousness. While it may have been the intellectual constructions of professional theologians that were officially sanctioned by Church authorities and helped to define doctrine throughout Christian history, lay people would have had little incentive to give such ideas a role in ordering their lives unless the ideas had first, in some way, excited their imaginations. And this challenge to the imagination was the work of poets and fantasists. It was Dante's visionary journey from Hell to Heaven that, more than anything else, crystallised in Mediaeval minds the perfectly ordered, all-inclusive spiritual cosmology of the Scholastics. It was Milton's powerful narrative presentation of humanity's fall from grace (and works like it in other languages, such as Vondel's *Lucifer*) that truly gave post-Reformation Europe a consistent, easily intelligible picture of the mechanics of Sin and Redemption — a picture that still prevails in most of the Christian world to-day.

Even in the twentieth century mythopoeic literature continues to play a crucial role in interpreting — or generating — theological speculation. Although what most people think of as "religious fiction" usually consists of novels following nineteenth-century "realist" canons in which characters apply religious ethics to moral problems in everyday life, it is in the realm of fantasy and science fiction that we find the most compelling and powerfully influential articulations of theological models — even if their influence becomes manifest only in the long term. The works of the Inklings, of course, have been particularly noteworthy in this regard. C.S. Lewis dusted off the "discarded image" of the Mediaeval schools and gave it a new imaginative relevance by adapting it to an expanded world of space travel and post-Enlightenment consciousness. Tolkien, by creating a historical myth in which the relationship between Creator and creatures develops through time, devised a useful parallel to the historical myth contained in the Bible, and shed light on how the economy of salvation is worked out through the episodes of our own history. Charles Williams, by depicting the spiritual interactions between people as tangible, physically perceptible forces, made possible a clear understanding of the theology of coinherence and substitution. In their skillful manipulation of significant images, their merging of the timeless and the contemporary, these writers have done what all good theologians are expected to do: tell us, in the language most appropriate to our time, how God relates to the world, what salvation might be, and why it is reasonable of us to hope for it.

To-day, however, religious world-views are again facing a credibility test as science continues to change our understanding of our experience of the world. Having successfully weathered the crises brought about by heliocentrism and the discovery of human evolution, theism is now confronted with efforts to reduce consciousness itself to an accidental result of impersonal forces. Faced with the possibility of massive engineered alterations of consciousness and personality by chemical means (as the chemical basis for consciousness within the brain becomes better known), and with the increasing potential for artificial intelligence, the average person may well be driven to ask: Is there anything that is really "me"? What is left in human beings that can be said to be in the image of God? What is the meaning of salvation, if there are no real persons to save? Again, it is writers of imaginative fiction who have made the most serious attempts at grappling with these issues from a theological perspective — often going much further than professional theologians have ever dared to! And foremost among such writers is undoubtedly Gene Wolfe, whose *Book of the New Sun* and *Soldier in the Mist* series were brilliant explorations of "difficult" subjects from a variety of novel perspectives. *The Book of the New Sun*, especially, with its unconventional evocations of New Testament material set in a far-future world where magic and technology have become one and the same (i.e., where the natural seems supernatural), inspired one to reflect on many theological issues, from the nature of the miraculous to scientifically plausible ways in which the Divine might intervene in the material world. Now Wolfe continues his work in this vein with *Nightside the Long Sun* (Tor, 1993), the first installment of a multi-volume story, *The Book of the Long Sun*.

Wolfe's new novel takes place in the same future world as *The Book of the New Sun*, and repeats some aspects of the earlier work (the vaguely South American atmosphere, for instance, and the coexistence of very archaic technologies side by side with unimaginably advanced ones), but the action is set not on Urth but in the Whorl, which is actually a planet-sized starship, somewhat reminiscent of Larry Niven's Ringworld. But to call it a "starship" is to trivialise the grandeur and complexity of the world Wolfe has imagined. Certainly its ordinary inhabitants don't know it's a starship, and have no sense of its destination. It is, on one level, clearly intended as a Platonic metaphor for our world (this becomes obvious when characters use the term "whorlly" to mean "worldly").

Although the Whorl once had an extremely advanced technology, it is falling into ruin and apparently can no longer be repaired — a state of affairs the population

accepts fatalistically. One of the technological items that now works only intermittently is the network of "Magic Windows" in the Whorl's temples, through which the gods once communicated with their worshippers. The official religion of the Whorl is polytheistic, recognising nine principal divinities and scores of lesser ones. Although the religious institutions are given antique-sounding names and some of the practices do indeed suggest ancient religions (the clergy perform blood sacrifices, for instance), they are also clearly meant to suggest parallels in our own world: thus the "manteion" is much like a Catholic parish church, the "augur" like a parish priest, the "palaestra" like a parochial school, the "Prolocutor" like the Pope, and so forth. This, again, encourages us to relate the Whorl to our own reality.

The story focuses on the adventures of Silk, the young augur of an impoverished manteion in the slums of the city of Viron. In his humility, his ease in communicating with people of all social backgrounds, his acute intelligence, his unshakable faith, his fearlessness in the face of physical anger, Silk irresistibly reminds one of Chesterton's Father Brown. He is also only twenty-three — a remarkable age to have attained such saintliness. As the story begins, his manteion has been repossessed by the city for failure to pay taxes, and sold to a rich gangster named Blood. Many families that relied on the manteion for assistance, education, and spiritual solace will be left destitute, but the sale has been legal, and there appears to be little recourse.

Silk, however, receives enlightenment from the Outsider, a mysterious god who is not one of the Nine and, unlike them, is not bound to the Whorl (one recalls here Tolkien's concept of the Valar being bound to Arda, with only Eru/Ilúvatar existing outside his creation). The Outsider makes it clear to him that he must save the manteion, but promises him no help. Silk begins by trying to confront Blood, only to have Blood propose a cruel wager to him, to which Silk nevertheless agrees. In the process he is sucked into the labyrinthine world of the Whorl's illegal trade networks. He discovers that good and evil can easily masquerade as each other. He encounters talking beasts and demonic possession. Forced into deceitful and violent behaviour, he begins to feel that he is losing his innocence, although his faith, courage, and determination appear intact.

Wolfe's narrative technique is here much more conventional than in his preceding works, following a fairly straightforward linear plot line. However, it is obvious that he has here revealed very little of the full scope of his imaginary world, or of his final narrative intent. Alien beings of unknown origin are present in the Whorl. Near the end of the volume the existence of a vast political conspiracy is suggested, in which Silk is unknowingly implicated. The character of Musk, a pretty and apparently evil young man who is Blood's steward, will doubtless be of central importance: although several scenes are described from his point of view, even there we are significantly told nothing of his emotional states or motivations.

And who are the Nine? Even though their presence in the Whorl obviously has a technological base (their Olympus is referred to as "Mainframe"), they appear to behave as gods, and to think of themselves as gods. We can expect to have these questions answered gradually, as they illuminate Silk's spiritual journey — and perhaps, by analogy, shed some light on our own.

Wolfe's work, like that of the Inklings before him, is uniquely precious in that it tries to deal seriously and constructively with the great fundamental questions of human existence that many modern writers refuse to approach at all, or do so only through irony. Future volumes of *The Book of the Long Sun* will be eagerly awaited.



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. To be a general help, the following might be considered a core reading list, with 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", 1946; *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 1930; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1946; *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* 1930; *Descent Into Hell* 1937; *All Hallow's Eve* 1940; *Tales from Logres* 1936, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1944 (the last two printed together in 1956).

