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Tales Newly Told

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Abstract

Bishop, Michael. *Unicorn Mountain*. Paxson, Diana. *The White Raven*.

Tales Newly Told

a Column by Alexei Kondratiev

Ever since, as an exotic import from the Celtic world, it captured the imagination of poets and artists in the twelfth century, the "Matter of Britain" has haunted the literature of the West, and especially literature in the English language. The tale of Arthur and his knights, of Guinevere and Lancelot, the Questing Beast, Tristan and Iseult, is rooted in the timeless world of myth but also in the specific history of the British Isles, and it is just this unresolved tension that it expresses between myth and history, the Otherworld and this world, fate and accident, the cosmic and the individual, that has perpetuated its dynamic appeal for creative artists to-day. Earlier attempts by modern writers to deal with the material – from Tennyson to T.H. White – tended to emphasize its archetypal qualities and paid little attention to its historical roots and cultural origins, being often content to set the stories in the high-feudal world of the Mediaeval romances, with little

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concern for anachronism. A more recent trend, however – beginning more or less with Rosemary Sutcliffe's *Sword at Sunset*, a masterpiece as yet unsurpassed – has been to focus on the historical Arthur and on the life he might actually have lived in the Dark Ages, and on the pre-Christian patterns that lie behind the familiar Christianized forms of the tales. Subsequent works such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, Mary Stewart's *Merlin* books, and Parke Godwin's *Firelord*, to name a few, have universalized the approach and demonstrated the variety of possibilities it contains.

But there are dangers inherent in such an approach, as is painfully apparent from the works of some lesser writers: an overemphasis on the characters as individuals of a particular time and place can obliterate their mythic dimensions (and incidentally – if the writer's scholarship is insufficient, as is often the case – make the whole story unbelievable through a piling-up of anachronisms). One must never forget that Arthurian characters live on the edge of the Otherworld, that even as flesh-and-blood people they incarnate divine archetypes, and that any reductionist treatment of them as merely mundane will kill the very source of the story's appeal.

The tale of Tristan and Iseult, concerned as it is with the mysteries of pure passion and matters transcending space and time, is of course quite resistant to that sort of treatment. Yet it is precisely its resistance to all reductionist psychological readings and to any infringement of the universality of its theme that has made it so difficult a subject for modern retellings – few of which have added very much to the Mediaeval originals. It is in this light that Diana L. Paxson's *The White Raven* (Morrow, 1988) comes as such a welcome surprise. She has used the very productive expedient of telling the story from the point of view of Branwen (Iseult's servant, the Brangien or Brangäne of the Mediaeval sources), thereby giving it a fresh new significance. The plot follows the episodes in the old romances quite faithfully, yet the whole story appears to be rejuvenated when the importance of Branwen's part in it is revealed.

The Book takes as its seminal image the episode in the original tale where Branwen is substituted for Iseult (here Hibernized as "Esseilte") in King Mark's bed on the wedding night. In the original this comes across as just a piece of transient foolery, one of the many tricks the lovers play on Mark, but here it becomes a matter of central importance. Branwen (literally "white raven," a major symbol in Celtic religion, which focuses on the reconciliation of opposites) makes an act of substitution for Esseilte, taking upon herself the spiritual responsibilities of Sacred Queen which Esseilte has relinquished in her pursuit of an individual passion. While thus freeing her mistress to follow her chosen love, Branwen shoulders all of the burdens of Esseilte's office and reaps very few of the rewards. In the process she falls in love with King Mark – a love which will, of necessity, be unrequited during most of the story. One comes to realize how close the self-absorbed love of Drustan and Esseilte would be to eternal damnation if it did not have Branwen's selfless love as its mirror. It is Branwen's participation in their story that will eventually give it a happy resolution in the Otherworld.

Though the author has taken great care with historical verisimilitude in this book, we are never allowed to lose sight of the Otherworld. Paxson gives us rich, believable portrayals of Ireland, Cornwall and Brittany in the Dark Ages, faithful to historical and archaeological sources, but they are true Celtic lands aware of their relationship with the unseen, and we get to meet some of their supernatural denizens, recognizable from Celtic folklore. In accord with Celtic tradition, this Otherworldly influence expresses itself through Pagan and Christian channels alike. One of the book's strengths is its ability (which it shares with R.A. MacAvoy's *The Book of Kells*) to depict the creative tension that existed between the two religions during the Celtic

Christian period, when each tradition enriched itself through its examination of the other, without setting up rigid barriers. The anachronistic partisanship that marred *The Mists of Avalon* is thus avoided. Even after she has finally committed herself to the Old Religion, Branwen is able to recognize the spiritual power that flows from the hands of the Christian hermit Ogion.

In the balance it manages to strike between historical realism and mythic fantasy, between the demands of modern storytelling and the evocation of a period remote in time, and between Celtic particularism and human universality, *The White Raven* is remarkably successful, and is likely to become a milestone that future writers dealing with the Matter of Britain will ignore at their peril.

Mythopoeic literature is often thought of as a medium of transformation, a way of taking the human perspective to a level where the unresolved problems of mundane existence can be understood and dealt with. What would happen if you tried to use one of the most primary, powerful but dangerously overexploited symbols in our mythic vocabulary, the unicorn, against one of the most symbolically charged, ugly, cruel calamities to beset the world to-day, the AIDS crisis? This is essentially the experiment Michael Bishop has made in his new novel, *Unicorn Mountain* (Arbor House, 1988). The plot follows the basic pattern of North American "urban fantasy" as practiced by Charles De Lint, Megan Lindholm and other writers (though since the action takes place in rural Colorado, a more inclusive term than "urban fantasy" will have to be found), taking a realistically described contemporary situation into a rather matter-of-fact confrontation with supernatural events. The three main protagonists of the story are all suffering from the consequences of failed relationships: Bo Gavin, a gay man dying of AIDS, has forsaken his lover who had contracted the disease before him, and is estranged from his homophobic parents; Libby Quarrels, an aging hippie who runs a horse farm, is still dogged by her shallow, philandering ex-husband (Bo's first cousin); and Sam Coldpony, a middle-aged Ute Indian who works on Libby's farm, has left his wife (now a suicide, whose decapitated ghost plays an important role in the plot) and his daughter. When Libby, in an act of moral courage (and with considerable misgivings), gives shelter to the dying Bo, the fantastic elements of the plot come together in earnest. Unicorns have appeared on the grounds of Libby's ranch, migrating between this world and the spirit-world, and they are suffering from a plague with symptoms disturbingly like those of AIDS. The image of the unicorn here takes on at least three levels of symbolic significance: the suffering Christ; Death, as a positive agent of transformation; and sexuality liberated from its potential for pain and destruction. AIDS becomes a metaphor for that corrupting strain of modern thinking that blocks us from the riches of the spirit-world – the sort of cynical "objectivism" that can desacralize any life-giving image through commercial exploitation. Characters like Libby and Sam (and, eventually, Bo, who of course has a special affinity for them) respond intuitively to the

unicorns' symbolic message, while others see them only as quantitative riches to be possessed.

It is Sam's teenage daughter Paisley, dream-called to be a shaman and to participate in the normally all-male Sun Dance, who becomes the catalyst for the final healing. When she sacrifices her desire for modernity to become her people's shaman, she displays the kind of moral strength that makes communication with the spirit-world possible, and through her the Sun Dance ceases to be a powerless ritual in a disintegrating culture and becomes a true sacrament. The unicorns are able to heal Bo spiritually in this world, and he, after his death, heals them physically in the spirit-world.

In a short review one cannot do justice to the intricacies of Bishop's writing, the wealth of minor characters, the kaleidoscopic transformations of symbol into symbol, all understated by the deceptive simplicity of his diction and his grittily American idiom. *Unicorn Mountain* is an impressive achievement, worth many rereadings.

Sonnet XXXVII

Commentary, Genesis 2:19

*And how he thought about them, trooping past,
Stopping to lick his hand or sniff his knee –
Tiny as bee or hummingbird, or vast
In girth, the river-horse – and first to see
In fur or feather, cold heraldically,
The colors – and the antics! – speechless, stare
At scampering mice, at stallions' thunder, tree-
Like limbs of elephants, ambling bulk of bear –
This creativity beyond compare!
What Fruit brought forth in bare but fertile mind;
From sound and sight, throat muscles, subtle air
To weave the Words, the Poet's power unbind:
To call the Correspondences by Name,
As Adam called the animals who came.
Donald T. Williams*

NOTE

In the last issue a line was mistyped in this column. It begins on the 12th line from the end of the column, on page 44. It read "Although the psychological mechanisms that govern the functioning of religion is offered in response." It should have read "The psychological mechanisms that govern the functioning of religious institutions are here mercilessly exposed, yet no materialist/rationalist version of "truth" is offered in response." – Ed.