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Tales Newly Told

Alexei Kondratiev

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Abstract

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Tehanu*.

Tales Newly Told

A Column on CURRENT Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

When the phenomenal success of *The Lord of the Rings* in the '60s convinced publishers that the adult fantasy genre had commercial potential, the stage was set for a new period of creativity in the realm of fantastic literature, and indeed before long a number of promising talents began to make themselves known. The majority of fantasy works published in the aftermath of Tolkien's boom were, understandably, very much influenced by Tolkien's vision and, in spite of the stylistic originality and language skills some of the authors displayed, tended to reproduce slavishly not only the narrative themes but the basic philosophical and aesthetic premises of Tolkien's works. It was, for instance, taken for granted that a fantasy should be about confrontations between good and evil, and that the evil heroes face should be externalized as inimical monstrosities — "Orkish" creatures incapable, by their very nature, of good. It was also taken for granted that the structure of the world, as expressed in such fantasy, should be hierarchical, a version of the "Great Chain of Being" of Mediaeval scholasticism.

A notable early exception to the rule was Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea Trilogy*. Although it showed many traces of Tolkien's influence — indeed, it is unlikely that it would have been written at all without Tolkien's example — it also rejected many of the assumptions that underlie the kind of fantasy he wrote. Le Guin avoided the simplicities of Manichaean symbolism, in which good and evil are presented as an irreconcilable opposition between light and dark, and the heroes (who are conceived as "good," even if they can be tempted by the bad side) fight an evil that is "out there" and can be shut out. In Le Guin's vision the primal duality of light and dark is a fundamental characteristic of the real world, and is present in all people. A balanced acceptance of both principles leads to fulfillment; denial of one or the other — and, consequently, of change and growth — is the cause of evil. So her hero Ged at first seeks to externalize the evil side of himself as a Shadow he can escape from, but can finally neutralize it only when he recognizes it to be a part of himself and takes responsibility for it. Although Le Guin's work did not, of course, discredit the Tolkienian manner of fantasy, it did provide a healthy alternative, a model for a different approach to writing fantasy literature.

The volumes of the *Earthsea Trilogy* saw print between 1968 and 1972, and quickly gained a wide following, becoming classics of the mythopoetic fantasy genre, on a par with the works of the Inklings. Almost as soon as the third book came out there was already much speculation among Le Guin admirers about the possibility of a continuation of the story: not all had been told that could be told about *Earthsea*. Yet, over the nearly two decades that followed, as Le Guin won recognition for her excellence in a wide

variety of literary fields, broadening her skills and fine-tuning her perception of the philosophical issues that concerned her, her style and general approach seemed to move her father and farther away from that specific realm of the imagination that had produced *Earthsea*, and it came to seem less and less likely that she would ever return there. So *Tehanu: The Last Tale of Earthsea* (Atheneum, 1990) comes as a delightful surprise. It is, in some ways, a return to familiar territory — a territory that has, by now, been explored over and over by nearly a generation of readers; and yet it also contrasts sharply with the earlier books, for the maturing of Le Guin's craft and the evolution of her ideological position are at once evident. The Contrast is made all the more striking by the fact that the plot of *Tehanu* takes over directly from *The Farthest Shore*, with the archmage Ged, half-dead and powerless after his victory over Cob in the Land of Death, being returned to his native island of Gont by the dragon Kalessin, and finding himself gains in the company of Tenar, the heroine of *The Tombs of Atuan*.

Tenar has, during the intervening years, refused the chance to study with mage Ogion and instead chosen to live her life according to the pattern traditionally expected of women in *Earthsea* (and, of course, in our own culture); she has married, accepted a role subservient to her husband's, raised children who have reached adulthood and left home, and now finds herself widowed, economically secure thanks to the inheritance from her husband, but not entirely sure how to use such freedom. Responsibility comes to her in two guises: a little girl whom she names Therru (the Burnt One), who has been left with hideous scars — both physical and emotional — by male psychopaths, and is in need of healing at the deepest level; and Ged himself, stripped of his mage's power (and archmage's standing) by his ordeal in the Land of Death, and unable to face life with this shattered self-image. To fulfill her duty to both of them Tenar will of course draw upon the nurturing skills that she, in her traditional woman's role, is expected to possess, but she is soon forced to go beyond her cultural conditioning and indeed, pressed by an evermore urgent situation (the returned psychopaths as a mundane horror on the one hand, a corrupted wizard as a supernatural threat on the other), to examine and question the base of that conditioning. Here Le Guin's feminist voice — a voice she has found and put to skillful use in recent years, but which had not developed noticeably in the period of the Earlier *Earthsea* books — comes to the fore, and sets *Tehanu* apart from its predecessors. The fundamental principles that govern male and female behavior (in *Earthsea's* culture, and in ours) are exposed in merciless clarity, but with comforting wisdom also.

Power emerges as the central issue differing male and female attitudes towards power, which lead to the powerlessness of women and to men's obsessive preoccupation with their personal power. Even magic is seen to be a male prerogative: all mages are men. But in reality, of course, women do have power, even magical power, although cultural norms prevent them from exercising it fully. And it is from witches — women with magical talent who, having no access to the book-learning reserved for males, are obliged to use their talent in a haphazard and primitive fashion, but are by the same token free of the cultural limitations that men are bound by — that Tenar gains some of her most important insights, especially from Auntie Moss — a delightful, lovingly drawn character — who has this to say about men:

A man's in his skin, like a nut in a shell. ... It's hard and strong, that shell, and it's all full of him. Full of grand men-meat, man-self. And that's all. That's all there is. It's all him, and nothing else, inside.

What Tenar discovers is that the limitations imposed by culture, however strong and intimately bound to the personality, are illusory, and that all people, in Reality, are ultimately free, though usually unable (and unwilling) to grasp this freedom. Only the dragons — and dragons, both actual and metaphorical, permeate the book's imagery — exist naturally in this state. But we are reminded by the mythology of Earthsea that dragons and humans are close kin, and that indeed they were (and still are, on a timeless level) one and the same, free of the disdain of the male and female, culture and nature, conscious and unconscious, life and death. It is when they tap this freedom that Tenar and Ged are able to confront the dangers that beset them — and also to discover each other anew; and it is in relation to the world of the dragons that the child Therru's true nature is revealed.

Those who have learned to love the world of Earthsea over the past two decades will not be disappointed by this addition to the canon. And even though the author has stated unambiguously that this is the *Last Book of Earthsea*, it leaves us with so many narrative possibilities that one cannot help wondering if, in time, she might not be tempted to take us back for one more visit. ☞



REVIEWS (continued from page 52)

refuse ... the conclusion ... will deny the premise." Well, I accept the conclusion, but I would at least question the language of the premise; does "nature" make anything? What or who is "nature" that it (she? he?) makes things? I thought Ged made everything. Kreeft's essay is, even so, one of the best in the book and I'm grateful to him for taking the trouble to prepare and present it.

Now to GKC: Richard L. Purtil begins with a disappointingly thin memoir about "Chesterton, the Wards, the Sheeds, and the Catholic Revival," a subject of considerable importance; Ian Boyd presents a thoughtful as well as charming portrait of "The Legendary Chesterton," discussing the pre- and post-conversion to Roman Catholicism versions of his man; William Bissett gives a thorough and delightful study of "G.K. Chesterton and Max Beerbohm," including the nearly impossible feat of making us see in our minds caricatures which are not reproduced in his text; Alzina Stone Dale gives a well-researched, detailed, and informative overview of "G.K. Chesterton, the Disreputable Victorian," which is a welcome addition to her other scholarship on GKC; J.P. Corrin discusses GKC and his friend Belloc in the learned and incisive essay "The Chesterbelloc and Modern Sociopolitical Criticism;" David J. Dooley's superb essay "Chesterton in Debate with Blatchford; the Development of a Controversialist" is a virtuoso display of elegant, careful, clear, and effectively interpreted scholarship; Kent R. Hill's "The Sweet Grace of Reason: The Apologetics of G.K. Chesterton" explores its subject with equal grace; and finally, Janet Knedlick rides a skyrocket of Chestertonian wit into the stratosphere (or the seventh heaven) taking us with her in the essay that opened my review.

Quite simply, she takes on both Derrida and his critics, and wins. The essay ought to be required reading for all Christians. She begins by showing how "Derrida deconstructs Saussure's sign and identifies its implied hierarchy of SIGNIFIED/signifier, as the same false 'move' that enables all the traditional hierarchies in Western thought [GOD/man, SPIRIT/matter, INTEL-LIGIBLE/sensible, KING/commoner, MASCULINE/feminine]." That sentence and particularly Professor Kendlik's profoundly liberating gloss contained in her brackets, simply blew me away when I saw her, a twinkle in her eye and a manuscript in her hand, deliver it. Of course! What terrible destruction of human personality and even life has resulted from these false and falsely weighted dichotomies, which Christians, as incarnationists, ought to have seen to be mistaken! And she goes on, hilariously recounting an encounter between Father Brown and Flambeau (*not*, note, FATHER BROWN and Flambeau) as a parable of deconstruction. She concludes that "Derrida remains intoxicated with the pursuit of his beloved enemy, and the logos he must unmask." (p. 288) And who is that logos? "The one who bears about in his (elusive) body the marks of his own marginality and harlequin joy" and "the uncanny (non)presence that speaks in the flickering traces of a burning bush." (p. 289)

Kent R. Hill in his study "The Sweet Grace of Reason," concludes that "there is a remarkable fit between the key of orthodoxy and the lock of reality we experience," Chesterton and Lewis have showed their readers both key and lock, and with their help and the help of commentators like those included in *The Riddle of Joy*, we are enabled not only to turn the lock but to open the door.

— Nancy-Lou Patterson