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Discourses on Fantasy: A Narrative Allegory

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DISCOURSES ON FANTASY: A NARRATIVE ALLEGORY

by

Reuben Dendinger

B.A. University of Maine, 2015

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

University of Maine

May 2018

Advisory Committee:

Sarah Harlan-Haughey, Assistant Professor of English, Adviser

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by Reuben Dendinger

Thesis Adviser: Dr. Sarah Harlan-Haughey

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented

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This project, though officially designated by the English Department as a creative thesis, is really a hybrid work that combines creative writing with literary criticism. The work is structured as a “dream vision,” a literary genre popular in the Middle Ages in which a narrator receives some form of instruction or wisdom through an allegorical dream. Examples include *The Pearl*, *The Romance of the Rose*, and Chaucer's *House of Fame*. In this thesis, the allegorical space of the dream vision provides a platform for a series of essays structured as dialogues. These dialogues explore the aesthetics and politics of modern fantasy and supernatural literature, focusing particularly on the opposition of this literature, which often draws on ancient and medieval source material, to modern capitalist society. The discourses themselves are not strictly critical, but incorporate subjectivity, metaphor, and symbolism in their investigation of cultural texts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not have been able to complete this project without the patience and wisdom of my adviser, Dr. Sarah Harlan-Haughey. I would also like to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Greg Howard and Dr. Naomi Jacobs, all of my friends and colleagues in the English Department, the amazing staff of the English Department and Graduate School who helped me along the way, and my wife Maia for her undying love and support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During a fiction workshop taken in my second year as an undergraduate, I was warned by the professor to avoid “flights of fancy” in my prose. These could get me into trouble, he said. When decorating a room, one should not allow ornamentation to interfere with the free movement of bodies; if a beautiful sofa is blocking a door, it should simply be relocated or removed entirely. Fiction should be the same way, I was told: it should be designed to facilitate the efficient movement of the reader's subjectivity from thought to thought, scene to scene, without any wasteful detours or extravagant decoration getting in the way.

Perhaps no author violates this dictum more consistently and flagrantly than William Morris. When I set out to write my thesis, I intended to write about Morris, a figure whose artistic and political vision I've long been fascinated by. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre in *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* argue that Romanticism should be understood as a kind of visionary anti-modernism, which appeals to idealized eras of the past as way of attacking modern, industrial civilization. Though, in their view, Romanticism is thus inherently political, it often does not fit easily into the conventional spectrum of “left” and “right” that defines modern politics. Morris's romantic medievalism is indistinguishable from his revolutionary politics, a politics that places aesthetic creation and aesthetic experience at the center, as opposed to a modern world that was not only unattractive on its surface but ugly to the core.

I began to read Morris along with other late Victorian and early 20th century writers of supernatural literature, post-gothic horror stories, and fantasy tales from the age before “fantasy.” It all became for me a kind of golden age of the anti-modern imagination. Running through all of

it one can feel hatred, fear, rejection of the modern world.

Turning from these books to the ancient and medieval works which inspired them, I thought I discovered some pattern, some common spirit underlying and linking authors as widely disparate as André Breton, Nabokov, Lovecraft, and Chrétien de Troyes. I struggled to find the right word to describe this quality, which runs deep through a work and informs its every dimension. Enchantment, wonder, majesty – whatever you want to call it, it is that element of human experience which has been banished from modern life.

Then, extraordinary though it may sound, toward the end of my first semester of researching these ideas, I experienced a long, vivid, marvelous dream, a vision like the *Romance of the Rose* or Chaucer's *House of Fame*, in which the thematic subjects of my research came alive as allegorical figures in a mythical drama. I found myself transported to the allegorical planet of Fantasy, on the eve of its invasion by the armies of Modernity.

During my tour of the planet I met a number of strange beings all too eager to share their thoughts and feelings on supernatural literature, the mortal art which formed the fabric of their immortal realm. When I awoke I wrote down everything these unearthly characters said, word for word, along with my best attempt to describe them and their fantastic world. The work of writing this document consumed me for several days, and by the time I was finished I realized I should abandon my research and instead devote the rest of the year to editing this dream vision – *this* would be my thesis.

I did my best to track down and properly cite all the literary references of my fairy interlocutors, though it proved somewhat difficult (not impossible) locate one or two of the rarer volumes (the first edition of *The King of Elfland's Daughter* proved particularly tricky). Despite

the addition of this minor scholarly apparatus the document presented here is relatively unchanged from the original manuscript I typed up in the days following the dream. Of course, some points have been exaggerated or distorted by memory, but on the whole it is a faithful representation of the vision I experienced on the night of December 24th, 2016.

-Reuben Dendinger

CHAPTER 2

A DREAM

It began with a dream of a forest by the sea where two armies fought.

The air was thick with the gunsmoke of exploding rifles and artillery; it was like a dense fog had descended on the wood; hot, malodorous, artificial, industrial, malevolent fog. Fearing for my life, fearing I would be caught by a stray bullet, I kept low and tried to hide myself in a growth of blue juniper. I did not question how or why I had found myself in the midst of the battle: my one concern was to stay alive.

We were in a kind of wooded crater, like a circular valley, with pine trees growing all the way down to the bottom where there stood an altar surrounded by columns of white marble. I had a vague sense that this marble structure was the cause of the fighting, that the two armies were each desperate to gain control over it; and yet, in their eagerness to kill one another, they seemed to have forgotten all about it, and they showed no regard for its safety as each side launched cannonballs and explosive shells at the other with reckless inaccuracy.

To my right were soldiers in black, their army designated by triangular black pennants bearing the sign of a white crescent moon. They had no ranks, but fought in disarray, like German or Gaulish tribes of antiquity, and like them had no uniform. Some wore wolf or panther skins, others had painted their faces white and black to inspire terror. Some wore old military hemp decorated with patches indicating membership in mountain clubs and wilderness societies. Others rode horses and, brandishing lance or saber, charged madly at the enemy without a thought for life or death. Almost every soldier sported some armband, flag, patch, or other device, of black, green, purple, white, or gray, emblazoned with obscure signs, which marked

unique allegiances or associations distinguished from their comrades.

Where all the weapons on that side were antique, and none of the guns looked to have been made after the Second World War, by contrast the other side was outfitted with advanced technology. This army, which was to my left, wore red, and was designated by rectangular red flags bearing the emblem of a yellow sun. They wore identical red uniforms resembling flight suits; they carried matching rifles, and maneuvered in synchronic units, communicating with one another via headsets to organize their steady progress. Some of them carried metal tanks of fuel on their backs, hooked to flamethrowers which they used to systematically torch the forest as they advanced. Now when I saw this, it filled me with a new fear: for if they torched my little juniper, I would have to flee into the open and risk being shot. Captaining the flamethrowers was the leader of the red army, a young woman, her uniform smeared with soot. Her nose was missing, she'd lost it in her long career of fighting; in its place was a plastic covering to protect the useless orifice. Ugly burns and knife-scars marked her face; thin strands of sickly hair dangled from beneath the black beret pulled over her skull.

Paralyzed with fear, burying my face in my hands as I squatted there helplessly, I then felt a tap on my shoulder. Looking up, I saw to my astonishment a mirror image of myself, a twin. He looked exactly like me, and even wore my clothing. But unlike me he was entirely unafraid of the battle raging around us. Looking down at me with a patient and godlike contempt for my cowardice, he handed me a silver coin resembling a United States quarter dollar with an eagle on it. Taking the coin, I realized suddenly that I was in a dream, and that the bullets and explosives could therefore do me no harm. Placing the coin in the pocket of my bathrobe, I rose to my feet. Indicating that I should follow him, my twin proceeded to float or glide away through the battle.

He led me through the deadly clash, and so long as I had the coin in my pocket, I remained invulnerable like him to the heat, smoke, and bullets. I hoped he would take me to the marble sanctuary at the bottom of the crater; I was curious about this and wanted to see it closer. However he did not lead me there, but straight through the wood, to a cliff overlooking the sea where the sun was just beginning to set.

Looking behind me, I perceived the red army advancing rapidly – their victory was imminent. But as they slew the black ones, freakish specters rose like smoke from their motley corpses. The hideous ghosts laughed and screamed as their black substance mingled with the smoke of the burning forest and ascended into the orange haze of burnt sky.

My twin leaped from the cliff, soaring out toward pink clouds. I made to follow him, but I could not fly – I plummeted down, down into the cold sea. I awoke then, sweaty and unnerved, in the middle of the night.

Unable to fall back asleep, I got up to make a cup of tea. Everywhere on the floor of the cramped apartment stacks of books and papers were piled haphazardly – the materials for an unfinished Master's thesis – and I had to step carefully around them to the kitchenette. As I waited for the water to boil, I ran through the dream in my head, but I could not understand why it had disturbed me so greatly.

As I stood there pondering, I stuck my hands in the pockets of the bathrobe I wore against the cold December night. At once I felt a coin, roughly the size and shape of a quarter. This was odd – I couldn't remember ever having placed anything in those pockets, especially not money, as I never wore the robe out of doors. Then a thought struck me, chilled my flesh. Removing the coin from my pocket, I examined it under the light, and perceived with a lightning flash of horror

– it was no ordinary quarter, but the alien coin from my nightmare. The silver was polished with age, but the design was unmistakable: the same emblem of the eagle I had seen in my dream.

The kettle began to sputter and scream as I stared hypnotized by the impossible coin. Then with a sudden jolt of consciousness I dropped it, shivering and wiping my hands on my robe as if they were somehow contaminated by the object.

The familiar action of pouring the water helped me regain my senses. I tried to convince myself that I had merely hallucinated, that the coin was actually a simple quarter, and I had only imagined otherwise. Forcing a laugh, I told myself it was all ridiculous, as I fabricated a memory of having left a quarter in the pocket some morning prior. As the lie materialized in my mind I allowed myself to be relieved by this false remembrance. It was the reality of the coin that caused the dream, not the other way around!

While the tea was steeping I bent down to look for the coin. If I could find it and toss it in to the small bowl where I kept other loose change, it would get mixed in and become one of them, a common piece of currency indistinguishable from the others. It would have no dreams attached to it and would therefore have no power over me. But I could not find the coin. It was nowhere on the floor, and even when I used a flashlight to look underneath the refrigerator I could not find it. Though this disturbed me, after a few minutes of searching I decided it was better to give up and forget the whole incident. I drank my tea and lay in bed until dawn, reading dry philosophy to distract my troubled mind.

Reoccurring nightmares haunted me over the next few weeks, visions of drowning and imprisonment. The nights lengthened, the days became grim with winter clouds. The snow should have brought peace, but the ceaseless churning of automobile tires, the tramping of feet,

the operation of industrial shovels, turned everything into a foul slurry of polluted ice. There is no more repugnant sound than that of an automobile slushing through the dirty, half-melted leavings of urban winter, and to me the sight of the ruined snow was just as hateful as the sound. And so after filling my cupboards with food and drink, I locked my door, shut the curtain on my tiny window, and resolved to stay in my apartment for as long as possible, devoting myself entirely to my research.

As the days went by my nightmares worsened. One night, as I was drowning in that black and freezing-cold ocean, I was thrown by powerful waves onto a dark shore. Bruised and salt-washed, I limped inland toward bright lights, hoping to find help, and fresh water to drink. A city was being constructed, all of concrete, steel, and gargantuan streetlamps that washed out the night sky, eliminating the stars, and greatly reducing the moon. “Water! Water!” I called out, but nobody seemed to hear me. But then I was met by a woman, the same woman with the noseless, disfigured face I had seen in my dream of the battle, leading the troop of flamethrowers in the red army. Now she left one of the work crews she was supervising, to greet me, shake my hand. Her uniform now was no longer red, but gray, just like that of the vast industrial army hard at work all around us. Meeting her up close, I was forced to confront her ugliness, which was so terrible that I struggled to hide my repulsion. In addition to her nose I noticed she was also absent one ear; there was no bandage or protective plastic, only a cauterized hole on the right side of her head. One of her eyelids was fused halfway shut, the flesh around it appeared melted by a blast of fire. Her teeth were black and rotten, a couple fingers were missing from her hand. However she was perfectly clean, her gray uniform was spotless, and the few strands of hair that remained on her head were neatly slicked against her skull.

“You wore red before,” I noted.

“We wore that color for fighting,” she explained, “but now we wear gray. Here, I have one for you.”

And she gave me a neatly folded gray uniform.

“I am thirsty,” I said. “I need water.”

Ignoring my request, she began to lead me on a tour of the city, going on at length about ambitious projects toward Universal Electrification, the permanent abolition of the night through the creation of the Artificial Sun, and the construction of a vast Communications Network that would combine all mental activity into a single Unitary Thought.

“It's all very interesting, but I'm dying of thirst,” I repeated. “Do you know where I can get a drink of water?”

Her eyes narrowed, she gritted her teeth. “We have no water,” she said, spitting the last word. “We've progressed beyond water, and there's no going back! It's best not to talk about such things.”

She led me to the factory where they produced workers for the industrial army. The workers sat on a conveyor belt which led them through the stages of the production process. Robotic saws carefully cut a line around their skulls, making a lid of their brainpan. The lid was then opened by technicians who removed the brain and replaced it with a mass of circuit-boards, wires, and electronic components. The skull was then carefully replaced with a generous amount of surgical glue to seal it back together.

“We've made such progress already,” said the woman. “Imagine what the future will hold.”

Turning to me, she grasped my hands, and staring into my eyes said: “Leave off studying ancient lore! What good does it do for the world? For the lame, the poor, the helpless masses, who suffer daily from hunger, cold, and the indignities of servitude? How are they helped by those dusty books, full of hateful lies, vile myths from the age of tyrants and war! I have shown you the future – the inevitable future. Will you join with us and fight for it, or will you cower in the ruins of past ages, sucking your thumb in the dusty library of romantic illusions? Make your choice!”

I awoke then, in a cold sweat. But if this dream was disturbing, the following night was worse.

I dreamed of a black heath of hateful brambles and soft heather, all bathed in moonlight and darkness. A few solitary trees, bare and warped, stood out amid the low vegetation; near one of these trees was erected an upright stone. A dark figure stood between the stone and the tree.

“You can see the stars here!” she said. “Not like in the city.”

I looked up, and apprehending the sky for the first time, I reeled. The stars were all ten times the size they ought to be, shining brilliantly, pulsating with unreal light. I staggered drunkenly, and almost collapsed backwards on the heather. Then I found myself standing near the woman and the stone. Though she remained cloaked in darkness, I could see markings on the stone, they seemed to glow crimson: runes.

She spoke to me then, soothing, rhythmic, hypnotic language. She told me not to trust the lies of the other dream-woman. There was no future. She showed me, in the runes, a calendar of the universe: growing, blossoming, dying, rotting, and then everything over again, forever. Then she gestured, pointing behind me, and I turned and saw a sight which overwhelmed my heart,

caused me to grasp at the gnarled tree for support lest I crumple to the ground.

It was an old trailer, a faded pink color, with pieces of cardboard taped over the broken windows. Unmistakable! The home of old friends, from long ago, when I was young, a teenager. I couldn't believe it, but I could feel that somehow it was true. They were in there, I was sure of it, I could feel their presence: A, J, and M. They were right in there, smoking, drinking, laughing – about to watch a movie together on the old television. I was desperate, almost mad, to join them, to relive just one old night from that age before cruel time tore us from our native soil and scattered us in the maze of adulthood to wander alone; to grind, not even to fight, but to grind alone against the million daily tyrannies, the million tedious and stupid tyrannies of life.

The dream-woman whispered in my ear: “There is a dream which exists beyond time.”

I turned back to her, and asked imploringly: “Is it real? Can it be real? Is it real?”

But she only repeated: “There is a dream which exists beyond time.”

Impatiently I looked again at the trailer, I was going to run towards it. But it was gone, vanished; only the dark purple of the heather remained.

“Torturer!” I cried, tears gathering in my eyes. The dream-woman seized my face with hands that were wet with blood. The blood seemed to flow from her hands as she smeared it over my face and in my hair, my shoulders and arms, until I was covered in cool, blackish blood. Then she spoke these words:

“He who rules all has sent you alone from your house to explore the other world.”

I woke up screaming then. That's right – it doesn't only happen in Gothic tales. When I came to, I was already sitting up in bed, screaming myself hoarse, spittle dribbling from the corner of my mouth. Perhaps the nightmare doesn't sound so bad to you, but my nerves were

already frayed, and it was all simply becoming more than my mind could handle. But of course things only got worse from there...

Over the next few days I slept less and less. Every time I closed my eyes I saw them – the first dream-woman, from the red army, her scowling, disfigured face, hounding me like the face of an evil justice; and the dark dream-woman calling to me silently, caressing me as I drifted to sleep, embracing me with her blood-covered arms, bathing me in phantasmic gore that chilled my insides so that I shivered and chattered my teeth no matter how thickly I wrapped myself in blankets and cranked up the electric heater in my apartment.

Then, one night, I awoke from a particularly awful nightmare of frenzied flight from the persecution of the noseless dream-woman. I awoke as I often did covered in cold sweat from the heat of my terror, my heart pounding. It was a noise that woke me, the distinct sound of someone rummaging through the drawers of my writing desk right next to my bed. Looking over in terror as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I perceived a shadowy figure doing just that, opening and shutting drawers, clattering pens and loose objects as he searched the desk.

I lived in a notoriously dangerous neighborhood – the door to my small apartment was outfitted with an iron cage which I always kept locked, and the apartment's single window was also barred. I couldn't imagine how this robber had broken into this cage of mine, but there was no time to think about it. In my condition – sleep-deprived, over-worked, haunted – I was somehow convinced by an overriding panic that the intruder meant to harm me, and so I summoned all my courage into one act of insane self-preservation. Reaching down to grab the baseball bat I kept underneath my bed, I leapt to my feet, switched on the lights, and, brandishing the bat, roared madly at the thief.

As he turned to regard me, his expression was one not of fear but of fury; it was I, not he, who became frozen with horror. For it was him – my twin, the figure from my dream! But now dressed all in black, dirty like he'd been sleeping out of doors. He resembled me in every way, except where my hair was brown, his was black. Terrified, powerless, I dropped my ridiculous weapon. The thief seized my shoulders.

“Where is it!” he cried.

“What?”

“The coin, the coin!”

Speechless with fear, not a physical fear of him anymore but the fear I was losing my mind, I could say nothing, but only stare back at him, my mouth gaping. Could he possibly mean the quarter he gave me in my dream weeks before?

Grunting with annoyance, my twin released me and continued his search of the apartment. Soon he alighted on a bowl on my dresser, where I kept loose change, my keys, etc. He sifted through the bowl, which contained a great many quarters, before flinging it against the wall with a howl of disgust. Coins scattered everywhere in a great ringing cacophony. But now the stranger began to laugh. He raised his eyebrows at me knowingly as if it were all a great joke.

“You lost it,” he said. “But of course I knew you would! I am accustomed to my gifts being squandered. That coin was a token you could have exchanged for the actual treasure which it represents. Now you'll have to go searching and find it yourself.”

“I, uh, I – ” I sputtered.

“Yes,” he went on, “you've screwed things up grandly – but that was the plan! Trust me, it's better this way, I assure you. This trip will be marvelous, pleasant, and instructive. You're

going to love it, I promise! But hurry, please, this world is so boring, I can't stand to keep chatting much longer like this. Quit staring slack-jawed like a child at the movies – put on some clothes, hurry, let's go!”

“Who are you!” I demanded, finding my tongue.

“My name's not important,” he said, as he seized my bathrobe from its hook on the bathroom door, and threw it over my shoulders, “but I am a friend, you can be sure of that.”

Finding myself unable to resist, I clumsily put my arms through the sleeves of the robe as I allowed him to push me toward the door.

“Please, I don't understand,” I said weakly, trembling with fear as I pulled on my boots. “What's happening?”

“I already told you – you've won a free trip, celebrity sweepstakes, chance of a lifetime. If you ask me again I'll clock you in the ear. Try not to be so ungrateful!”

As he opened the front door I realized I didn't have my key to unlock the cage on the other side. But with a touch of his finger, my twin unlocked the cage, it swung open without any need for the key (I suppose this was how he got in).

In the alley outside, illuminated by the orange glow of electric streetlamps, a black horse waited for us. My twin produced from nowhere a wide-brimmed conical hat, crumpled and dusty and black like the rest of his clothes, and in his other hand, a short staff or wooden rod. Donning the hat, he climbed onto the horse, which was naked with no saddle or reins, and then reached out his hand to help swing me up.

By then I knew I must be dreaming, but I was still hesitant, still held back by fear. But then my twin grabbed my arm, and with amazing strength he hoisted me onto the horse behind

him. As soon as my feet left the earth, I forgot all fear and hesitation. All mortal concerns evaporated, and as I made contact with the horse's back I was suddenly overcome with an unfamiliar sense of joyous exhilaration. I laughed as the horse took flight, soaring up above the city of street lights, surmounting the orange haze of electricity with tremendous speed until we were free in the true night, the sea of jewels spread out over endless black velvet. I pulled my bathrobe close to keep warm against the freezing cold. To drink from this icy immensity of darkness and terror – is to taste freedom.

Then I asked my twin three questions, and he answered thus:

“What kind of horse is this,” I asked, “which through black space can fly?”

“It is the horse of madness mortal money cannot buy.”

“And where precisely are we going? What planet do we seek?”

“It is a secret planet mortal science cannot see.”

“Who dwells on this strange planet? What beings rule the land?”

“Sorcerers and elves whom mortal law cannot command.”

But then my twin he silenced me, and pointed toward a light, a star of burning purple in the endless freezing night.

“There it is!” he cried. “Fantasy!”

As we approached, the world took form: purple oceans and blue deserts, yellow hills and endless woods. Crashing through the misty atmosphere we descended, landing finally in a plain of black sand and stunted trees. Above us was a clear night, a moon twice as bright as it would be on earth, surrounded by huge, shining stars. My twin leaped off the horse and began to get undressed.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

“Giving you my clothes. They're the right kind for traveling here.”

So I took off my bathrobe and put on my twin's garments: black clothes complete with cloak and hat. But he reserved his staff, and used it to dig a little hole into which he deposited my mortal clothes, speaking as he did so:

“Now, don't be polite like Perceval: ask a lot of questions. Try to learn something while you're here. Allow yourself to wander, take in the local color. Most importantly: have fun!”

Naked, he climbed back onto his horse and continued:

“Listen closely: in the pocket of your clothing you will find an antique book. This is the key you'll use to open the doors of Fantasy. To reach the belly of the snake you'll enter through the Mouth, which only wants to open for something rare and sweet. Now go along, good luck! We'll meet again before too long!”

And with that the horse kicked off the ground and soon was flying away. I cried after my twin, asking where I should go, which direction, what to do – but he was gone.

CHAPTER 3

SCORN

With no idea of how to proceed, I stood there in the dark desert for a few moments, looking in every direction for a clue. As I did so, my ears picked up on the sound of rushing water. I decided to follow it, and after some minutes of walking, a fantastic sight suddenly appeared before me in the darkness: a castle in the middle of a violent river. The castle rested in the midst of rapids, torrents of black water casting up an icy mist. The walls were fitted with ascending rows of metal teeth, and narrow windows for marksman to shoot from; machicolations protruded from the battlements, where defenders could drop stones or pour boiling oil on attackers; from behind these severe walls jutted the cruel spires which decorated the keep. On the other side of the river, a lush black forest stretched out endlessly. I called out, but was greeted by no one – the drawbridge of the castle remained shut.

Then, when I had been waiting for some time, finally a strange man appeared, leaning over the battlements and glaring down at me. His appearance was alarming, for his eyes were huge and yellow like an owl's, and his ears were also oversized and shaped like a bat's ears. His mouth was fantastically large and equipped with a huge tongue like a frog's. Venom overflowed from his mouth, it glistened on his fat lips and dripped down his chin – it was his evil tongue and not any fangs which was the source of this venom. And yet despite his monstrous appearance he was clothed in the finest brocade; it was worked with silver thread and accompanied by a quantity of rings and necklaces containing precious stones.

“What do you want!” cried out the ugly man.

“To cross the river, and enter the realm of Fantasy,” I replied.

“You are not wanted here. Go away!”

“I have brought a gift from Earth – a book.”

“We do not want your gift. I would take it for burning, but we are overstocked with fuel as it is. We do not even have time to burn it! Now kindly leave before I set our tiger on you.”

“Will you not even look at the book?”

With a groan of impatience, the strange one withdrew from somewhere an oversized pair of binoculars that matched his huge eyes. I held up the book for him to see, and I was pleased when his ears began to quiver violently and he dropped the binoculars, apparently with excitement. But as it turned out, it was not the book which he recognized, but something else.

“Where did you find that hat?” he cried.

Surprised, I touched the brim of the hat and said “It was lent to me by its owner.”

At these words the strange man's ears quivered ever more intensely and the pupils of his eyes grew large as he peered down at me. “My lord Mercurius? Why didn't you say you were his servant?” He disappeared from the battlements, and a few moments later the drawbridge lowered over the torrent, and the portcullis was opened. I walked across and entered the castle. The strange man greeted me anxiously.

“Why did you not mention you were on an errand from my lord Mercurius?” he repeated.

“I never would have kept you waiting. Please forgive me, you must understand the kind of riffraff we normally are forced to deal with. I am Gustus, the steward of this castle, which is called Scorn. The castle shares its name with the river. It is a good thing you did not try to ford it as some do, as the water is acid to the flesh of mortals. All those who swim across are stripped of their skin and hair – of course, the brave ones carry on, and acquire new skins on the other side.

But of course you have already got the proper garments!”

We passed by a tiger in the courtyard that was chewing on human bones. Behind it was a pile of bones, skulls, and innumerable books. I inquired about these things, but this seemed to upset Gustus; he was anxious not to discuss it. “They are not worth your time!” he said as he ushered me inside.

I was still curious and pressed my question. “You said you burned books for fuel – is that why you had such a quantity of books in the courtyard? Where do you acquire so many books, and why?”

Relenting, though impatiently, Gustus led me down a corridor to a boiler room. He opened the door to reveal a strange sight: a naked servant was busy with a pitchfork, shoveling books from a huge pile into an iron boiler. After a moment, another servant appeared through a back door with a wheelbarrow full of books which he dumped onto the pile.

“This boiler provides the electricity for the whole castle – and we need quite a lot of it, of course. Does this satisfy your curiosity?”

“Not quite,” said I as Gustus shut the door to the boiler room, which was quite hot. “I still don't understand – why books? Why not burn something else.”

“These books must be burned. We cannot risk them entering our world! 'You are what you eat,' isn't that what they say? And we eat only the rarest flowers. To do otherwise would spell the doom of our planet! I can tell from your look that you still don't understand. Please ask me nothing further, but wait to see the master. He will answer your questions better than I can. I love to eat, but he is the true critic!”

I was taken then to a hall, furnished in grand style with gold-trimmed tapestries adorning

the walls; chairs and table hand-carved from black oak, and at the far end a matching throne fitted with red cushions and complete with fantastic wood carving of a dragon that curled around the seat. In this throne, a man wearing a black waistcoat and silk cravat over shirtsleeves reclined; his nose wrinkled imperiously and he drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. Beneath him, on bended knee, a young man was pleading his case. I could not make out what was said, and the conversation soon ended.

“No,” said the lord, with terrible finality. The supplicant rose in a huff, angry and ashamed, and as he stormed past me he said disdainfully, “Don't waste your time! If he won't admit me, he won't admit anyone alive!”

A cane appeared in the hand of Gustus, who proceeded to thrash the young man with it. “Do not speak with such familiarity! This man is a servant of my lord Mercurius!” I tried to restrain him, but he could not be stopped. He thrashed the poor fellow mercilessly, and spat burning venom upon him as he shouted “You're the waste of time! Frivolous! Derivative! Mediocre!”

The young man struggled to his feet and ran from the room in tears. You might imagine I had been made more than a little nervous by these events – and you'd be right! I hoped that my association with my mysterious twin, the one Gustus called Mercurius, would protect me from such a vicious repudiation, as I had no means of defending myself.

Before Gustus could introduce me, the lord of the castle spoke: “Poets should be dead for at least one hundred years before they dare to approach this hall! I have no stomach for living poets – they are far too human. Gustus referred to you as a servant of Mercurius – if that is so, let me welcome you! Anyone on an errand for Mercury is welcome here, and may cross the river

freely. Did he send you to pick up his dry cleaning? No, don't tell me. And I see you have a book for me – not your own book, I hope? So you are a reader, and not a writer? Good, good! I am the Baron, the Gatekeeper of Dreams, though you may simply call me Scorn. Gustus, why do you linger? Back to the walls – we must be ever vigilant!”

Gustus apologized profusely and kissed the Baron's shining shoes with gratuitous obsequium until Scorn kicked him away. The Baron rose from his throne and gestured for me to follow. There was a portal in the rear of the chamber, behind the throne; a heavy wooden door which the Baron proceeded to unlock with a silver key the size of a dinner fork which he produced from his sleeve.

The first thing that struck me about the library was its modest size. There was space for a leather sofa and a pair of armchairs, a table, writing desk, gramophone, and a liquor cabinet – that was it. The walls were covered by bookshelves which reached up to the high ceiling, but the shelves were not even full. One entire shelf was almost entirely bare. When the Baron had finished locking the door behind us, he indicated I should sit, and then he pulled a gold-tasseled rope which summoned almost instantly a servant from a discrete side door. This servant was unlike those I had encountered previously; he was smartly dressed in a modern black frock coat, with his hair neatly combed, and wearing rouge, kohl, and crimson lipstick to accentuate his feminine features.

“Brandy alexander,” said the Baron. The servant went to work silently preparing the drinks.

The Baron flung himself dramatically into the armchair next to where I sat on the sofa. Extending his arm, he made an infantile snatching gesture. I handed him the book.

“Ah!” he said. “*The King of Elfland's Daughter!* Of course, I've read it, but would you believe I don't have a copy here? The first edition, and almost untouched!” He sighed grandly, shutting his eyes and clutching the book to his chest like it were a lover's perfumed missive. “Truth be told, his short tales are much better. But I will gladly add this to my shelf.”

The servant brought our drinks on a silver tray – crystal tumblers full of some white, creamy potation. I was delighted to find it tasted like chocolate ice cream! I had many questions for my host, but weary as I was from my interstellar flight, for the moment I was content to sit and sip the first refreshment I'd been offered on the alien planet. Anyway, it seemed I needn't ask anything, at least for now, for the Baron was gazing into his brandy alexander as if into a crystal ball, as if he were gathering his thoughts for a discourse.

“You are from the material world,” he said, “And so you must have many questions about this world, the world of Fantasy. Mercurius brought you here, so you are a friend of mine! Therefore I will answer your questions as best I can. But to begin, allow me to compose an answer as best I can to the most fundamental Question, which as I see it is necessary before any further inquiries are pursued; this fundamental Question being, what is this place? Dream, Fantasy, Faery, the Otherworld, the Unconscious, the Night – it has many names. But what is it?”

“To put it simply – it is the world of poetry. Poetry is fantasy, fantasy is poetry! It is not just that poetry shares the basic language of dreams, that is to say symbolism and metaphor (though this is half of it), but that poetry takes flight, its music has a vitality and a shimmering splendor which reflects the glittering fabric of the dreamworld.

“Take this book, for instance” and here he hefted *The King of Elfland's Daughter*. “Lord Dunsany conjures a vision of our world, which he calls Elfland. The Palace of Elfland he calls

'the palace that may be told of only in song.'¹ Only poetry can tell of the palace, because the palace is poetry, it is vision, the vision world.”

“So this world, Fantasy, is the invention of poets?” I asked. “If that is the case, it is unreal, an illusion.”

“That's right – it is absolutely unreal. Though that is not to say that it is not real. In fact, I would say that its unreality is the highest reality, the flower of human consciousness! But it is not simply that poets create the vision world – the vision world is also the source of all poetry, as Dunsany argues.”

“You keep citing Dunsany,” I interjected, “but what makes him an authority on this? I mean, if we want to understand the world of dreams, it seems we should look to psychology.”

At this, the Baron, who had used the opportunity of my speaking to savor his brandy alexander, suddenly coughed and choked on it. Wiping his mouth with a handkerchief, he chuckled with derisive amusement at the stupidity of my remark.

“One hundred years after Freud,” said the Baron, “Science still has absolutely no understanding of what dreams are or why mortals have them. The only researcher who came close to comprehending the secret of dreams – Carl Jung – has been largely forgotten. Only a science that can transcend the limitations of vulgar facts and ordinary logic – a science, in other words, that is also an art, indeed The Art – could hope to understand the truth of dreams. As for mundane science, it is useless in this regard. Let me see, there is a passage here somewhere – ah! Here it is.” And he proceeded to read from *The King of Elfland's Daughter*:

And how the horns of Elfland blew over the barrier of twilight, to be heard by any ear in the fields we know, I cannot understand; yet Tennyson speaks of them as heard 'faintly

blowing' even in these fields of ours, and I believe that by accepting all that the poets say while duly inspired our errors will be fewest. So, though Science may deny or confirm it, Tennyson's line shall guide me here.²

“Do you see?” he went on. “Dunsany's citation of Tennyson may at first appear strange, but as he himself points out, it is poetry and not science which is the true authority on matters concerning Fantasy; Dunsany thus positions his own novel as a work of criticism or research which should in turn be taken as an authority on the subject.

“Later, writing about a fellow who abandoned the quest for Elfland, Dunsany explains that we can only hope to understand the meaning of this Quest, and of magical things generally, by listening to the tales told by those still 'fired by its glory.' Ah yes, here is the passage in question:

But all was told by one that had lost hope in the quest. This was not the way to tell of it, not with doubts, not with smiles. For such a quest may only be told of by those who are fired by its glory: from the mad brain of Niv or the moonstruck wits of Zend we might have news of that quest which could light our minds with some gleam of its meaning; but never from the story, be it made out of facts or scoffs, told by one whom the quest itself was able to lure no longer.³

To speak truly of Fantasy, one must still have hope in the Quest! The search for Elfland, for the unreal, the impossible. This is the way to understand Fantasy. To understand dreams, we must dream!

“But why, why, you ask? Why can we not approach the world of fantasy through an objective analysis? As I said, Jung came closest – he believed in the dream! But finally he sought

to map the dream world, to solve the mystery. For Dunsany, Fantasy existed beyond the fields we know, by definition it had to exist outside the scope of mortal knowledge. Dreams flourish in the darkness. There was a time when Fantasy abounded in every forest, every lake, every heart! But the brutal and murderous empire of knowledge drove it from every corner of the Earth – that is why we fled to the stars! Deleuze and Guattari saw that the map creates the territory, in its anticipation of meaning it curtails the wilderness of dreams; however while their prose is pleasingly mysterious it is ultimately too boring – who can manage to read it to the end? Anyway! The Work of Fantasy should with the insane arrogance of prophecy assert itself as truth – but never should it claim to be fact!

“When it comes to criticism of fantasy, objectivity must be discarded. The critical work should itself be an original fantasy, which illuminates the work just as much as it distorts or obscures it; the prior work should decompose into a black earth from which new flowers arise. No maps! We desire rare and irreplicable visions, which are themselves the terrain.”

We had finished our drinks, and now the Baron gestured to his servant, who took our glasses and refilled them.

“So let me make sure I'm understanding you,” I said, as the servant handed me another brandy alexander before disappearing through his secret entrance. “The poetic vision of the dream is itself the dream?”

“The dream is the dream, that much is true – what could be simpler or more obvious?” said the Baron. He was pacing along the length of his shelves, examining his books. “The poet conjures this world into existence. Clark Ashton Smith understood this...” (and, shutting his eyes, he proceeded to chant these verses from memory):

I will repeat a subtle rune –
 And thronging suns of Otherwhere
 Shall blaze upon the blinded air,
 And specters terrible and fair
Shall walk the riven world at noon.
Before my murmured exorcism,
 The world, a wispy wraith, shall flee:
 A stranger earth, a weirder sea,
 Peopled with shapes of Faëry,
Shall swell upon the waste abysm.⁴

“The fantasy work conjures the Dreamworld anew,” he went on after a pause, “but at the same time each work is only a chapter in the great Work, which should be understood as an unfinished library – this library! Fantasy is both one planet, and a galaxy of planets, all reflections of one another. Friedrich Schlegel understood this – he saw poetry and mythology as indistinguishable, and the poetry of antiquity he perceived as one great poem, linked together by a shared mythological vision.”

“But Modern fantasy does not share one mythology,” I objected.

“You are right. But in another way you are wrong. Lovecraft and his acolytes wrote one universe that is certainly apart from that of, say, Robert E. Howard, but in reading the Lovecraft universe, it informs our dreams along with everything else we've read. Lovecraft, Smith, Howard, Tolkien; Goya, Gorey, and H.R. Giger; Babylonian magic and Martian visitations, the *Metamorphoses*, the Minotaur, and Marie de France. Brought together in one mind, they mingle

and coalesce into a single mythos. The ancient sword Beowulf uses to kill Grendel's mother – is this not the same enchanted weapon wielded by Alveric in *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, and by innumerable other heroes? Are not the horses of all epics descended that one true horse, the one ridden by Mercurius? Brought together in one mind, fantasies dissolve into the black primordial dream from which they all arose, what Schlegel called 'the infinite poem concealing the seeds of all other poems,'¹⁵ the fertile soil of the cemetery of poets and sorcerers where the vines of the black lotus flourish on the crumbling tombs.”

I wasn't sure I understood this last bit, but I wanted to know more about the Baron himself, his library, his castle with its strange customs. And so I asked him: “What is your role in all this? Why is your house on the borderland of Fantasy?”

“Why, isn't it obvious?” said the Baron scornfully. “Haven't you listened to anything I've said? If Fantasy is the creation of poets, we must determine which poets, or more accurately, which visions make up the great Vision. What would happen if we allowed everything in, every book, or should I say, every 'text,' purporting to be fantasy? The place would be overrun and destroyed, degraded, ruined! Ursula Le Guin once compared Elfland to a national park, a former wilderness now colonized by technology and commercialism, with highways, friendly park rangers, interpretive signs and all the rest⁶ – and so it would be, were it not for us here. We fled to this planet, we erected this castle, to save Fantasy.”

“Before you say more about what is kept out, please tell me, what work is allowed in?” I asked.

“Everything you see before you. This library is it. We have the myths of antiquity, the great epic poems, Medieval romance, grimoires and alchemical manuscripts, collections of

folklore and fairytales, the great Romantic and Symbolist works (including painting), some Modern occult philosophy, and of course the best of Modern fantasy, in addition to the true poetry of all ages.”

“It isn't much,” I noted.

“You're right,” replied the Baron. “Why should it be? Like food, drink, sex, and everything else of significance, quality should always take precedence over quantity.”

“So, what is kept out?”

“Everything else. Everything boring, everything mediocre, everything false.”

As we spoke, I had risen to inspect the shelves. Some of the titles I recognized, some I did not. I noticed that they seemed to be arranged chronologically, and that after *The Lord of the Rings* there were only a handful of books before the collection ended, with the final shelf almost completely empty.

“There's not much after the mid-20th century,” I remarked.

“Of course not,” said the Baron. He had just shelved *The King of Elfland's Daughter* and had now returned to his armchair with the complete paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. “Fantasy is no longer written by anyone,” he said. “It is dead, extinct – vanquished actually! That fellow who wrote *The Peregrine*, he said that sparrowhawks were, what was it? A banished race of beautiful barbarians.⁷ We could say the same of fantasists.

“Of course, you will immediately object, disputing my claim by naming some alleged fantasists of the 21st century. But you would be wrong to do this, because those writers – China Miéville, Neil Gaiman, and anyone else you could name – are not in fact fantasists, but rather, fictionists. Fantasy by its nature is poetry. Clark Ashton Smith, Lord Dunsany, Lovecraft, Poe,

Eddison, Tolkien – poets, all of them! Don't be fooled by the appearance of their words on the page, arranged in neat sentences and paragraphs, in prose-form. It may not be in verse, but it is poetry. Clumsy, outdated, unpolished, naïve – perhaps! But poetry nevertheless.

“Do you doubt this? Let me read to you from Clark Ashton Smith,” and here he leapt up in excitement, leaving the Bosch book on his chair and quickly retrieving from the shelf a tome bound in purple velvet. Opening to a seemingly random page, he went on: “Here, from one of his short fantasies, *The Dark Eidolon*:

On Zothique, the last continent of earth, the sun no longer shone with the whiteness of its prime, but was dim and tarnished as if with a vapor of blood. New stars without number had declared themselves in the heavens, and the shadows of the infinite had fallen closer. And out of the shadows, the older gods had returned to man: the gods forgotten since Hyperborea, since Mu and Poseidonis, bearing other names but the same attributes. And the elder demons had also returned, battenning on the fumes of evil sacrifice, and fostering again the primordial sorceries.⁸

“Apocalypse, ushering in the regeneration of demonic titans, pagan horror reborn in the fecund rot of dying civilization. Now this is a mythic theme, a mad vision: Fantasy. The language is purple, effulgent, wasteful, hateful! It reads off like an incantation: the alien vision takes form in the purple and black clouds of the eyelid-veil. Beauty fascination mingles with fear: enchantment. This is what I mean by poetry.

“Miéville should be commended for his defiant insistence on wasteful and decadent language, especially in his earlier work, which in general was more daring and fantastic. He is at his best in a novel like *Perdido Street Station*, a carnivalesque procession of nightmare images.

Maybe some decades from now I will grant it a space on my shelf! As of now the ink is still too fresh.

“Neil Gaiman has likewise tried admirably to bring a fantastic vision to the increasingly gray and totalitarian world of the 21st century. But his writing is fiction, pure fiction! Ultimately it amounts to nothing more than the importation of fantastic images into the materialistic domain of fiction.

“Far worse are those writers like George R.R. Martin who invade the otherworld in order to colonize it with materialism. The result is commercial novels of the worst quality. An older style of pulp fantasy may have included plenty of schlock, like some of Lin Carter's novels, but at least this was real fantasy schlock; its schlockiness was simple and barbaric, the product of amateurs and mediocre talents who were not really writing anything but actually just reading Robert E. Howard. Who can blame them for that?

“Many books are not worth reading, but are not worth hating either; they are innocently bad. The travesty of George Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* on the other hand demands severe and overstated denunciations. Martin's writing is a misreading of Tolkien: he makes a virtue out of length. Length is an unfortunate price we pay for Tolkien. Generally, it is to be avoided! I will grant you that some other books are lengthy – for instance *The Faerie Queene* is long, but nobody reads the entire thing anyway – it is not a true epic but a virtual world into which one may dip one's mind, submerging and emerging here and there; it was always meant to remain incomplete, it cannot end, unraveling, it opens onto unexplored woodland; there is a book that will put you to sleep, but when your eyelids droop down and you sink into darkness, then you are reading it properly!

“*The Song of Ice and Fire* is long, but it will not send you to sleep. It is far too 'exciting.' *The New York Times* called Martin's novels 'fantasy for grown-ups.'⁹ This says it all! Le Guin once famously wrote that Americans are afraid of dragons – Martin makes dragons safe.

“And yet so many are impressed, apparently by the sheer size of these neverending volumes. It is even rumored that when the author passes away, the work will be continued by certain designated heirs. Not even death can stop the production of these books!

“*The Song of Ice and Fire* is not fantasy, it is fiction of the worst kind. Let it stand as the symbol of everything wrong with literature today.”

“It can't be that bad, can it?” I countered. “Granted, I've never read the books, but I have friends who swear by them.”

“Well, of course, I've never read them either...” began the Baron.

“Never read them?” I cried. “What do you mean?”

“How could I read them?” he snapped. “I can't possibly – it would ruin everything, don't you see? That's what I've been trying to explain to you. I cannot allow inferior work into this library, into my mind – it would undermine the entire planet!”

“But how do you know it's inferior if you haven't read it?”

“That's why I have Gustus. He tastes everything in advance.”

“I just don't understand how you can have such hatred for books you've never read.”

“Because hatred, hared, I am full of hatred! Resentment, loathing, disgust, repulsion, fear, wrath, envy, arrogant disdain. Every kind of hatred you can name, I have it! I have it in surplus, in overflowing hoards – I am a great baron of hatred, and I am a generous lord. Should it be otherwise? I am the protector of treasures, I am the fermentation lock on an eternally unfinished

wine – I keep out contamination! I safeguard rare minerals which would become dull and ruined by the touch of greasy hands.”

The servant appeared unsummoned and took our glasses. This time he replaced them with snifters of cognac. The Baron returned to his armchair to sip the brandy and page through the Bosch book. His opinions were outrageous, irrational, unfair – I wanted to challenge him, but, remembering the expulsion of the young poet earlier, I was wary of pushing my questions much further for fear of annoying the Baron. I perused his library and let a few minutes pass as I considered how to go on. Finally I came up with a way to put it to him, all my doubts; I simply turned to him and said: “But is it all really true?”

He sipped his drink and pondered this for a moment before replying. Then he said: “I'd say it's true, yes. But really, what you should understand is that everything I've said is all part of a dream, the dream of this world. Consider Oscar Wilde's great essay, *The Decay of Lying*. Its brilliance, of course, is that Wilde's theses are themselves either half-lies or complete fabrications. The notion that art exists in complete independence from history, that history imitates art rather than the other way around, is obviously false; his claim that nature imitates Art is even more ludicrous. And yet, in a way these claims are true – at least, we can see what he's getting at. Anyway the truth value of these theories is secondary to their primary interest, as aesthetic artifacts to be turned over in the mind; they are like strange jewels through which the world is transformed when we gaze through them. We may know it is a fantasy, but it is nevertheless a delight to see the gray world turned purple, for a little while at least.”

These words hung on the air for some time, and I sensed that our conversation was now supposed to end. I was disappointed, because many questions had gone unasked. But it was clear

now that the Baron had nothing more to say at this time.

After a few moments had passed, he said: “I suppose you should be going, I don't want to keep you from your errand. But on your way out, I'll show you the engine room – you must be curious.”

He led me out of the library, down a corridor to a portal he unlocked with his key. The room contained enormous glass vessels that frothed with black and purple chemicals; plastic tubing ran back and forth from these vessels to a steel contraption, some kind of engine, which emitted a constant, loud industrial roar. A worker in rubber apron and gloves manipulated a computer terminal while another recorded data from a series of gauges on the equipment.

“It may not seem like much,” he said, “but this engine is what propels our planet away from earth; yes, this world is a ship, sailing farther and farther away all the time, fleeing the gaze of telescopes. As our enemies grow in power, so our distance from them must widen.”

“Enemies?” I said.

But he offered no reply. Shutting the door, he led me back down the corridor.

After thanking the Baron for his hospitality and bidding his farewell, I returned to the courtyard, where Gustus ordered the drawbridge to be opened for me – the one leading to the opposite side of the river from where I first arrived – and I crossed over into a dense and pathless woodland. When I turned to look behind me, the castle of Scorn was gone; I found myself alone in the forest.

CHAPTER 4

THE CEMETERY

Though the forest was dense, with a canopy that blocked out the sky, the powerful moonlight suffused everything, illuminating my surroundings. Walking aimlessly, I was alone except for the owls, and the occasional rustling of unknown creatures in the leaves.

I'm not certain how long I walked – only a few minutes, or several hours – but eventually I emerged from the wood into a clearing. Before me was a tall, wrought-iron fence, enveloped in Virginia creeper. The gate was slightly ajar but immovable as a result of the tangled ivy holding it in place. Just barely squeezing through the opening, I then found myself in a cemetery. Old marble tombs, uncared for, crumbled, devoured by kudzu and creepers. Rows of headstones tottered or sank into the ground, collapsing in slow motion. The roots of giant oak trees thrust up through the earth to smash tombs and knock over gravestones. A faint white fog, pushed along by a gentle breeze, moved over everything.

I followed a winding path from the gate which led me through the abandoned cemetery, beginning with the oldest graves and arriving at newer plots, though the newest of these was still a century old. There I discovered a man in black clothes, sitting on the damp earth against one of the moss-eaten tombs and scribbling in a notebook.

“Hello there,” I said.

The man looked up to regard me. His face was deathly pale, his eyes sunken with sleeplessness, his cheeks sunken with hunger. His greasy hair and dirt-covered jacket indicated that he'd been living on the ground in the cemetery. At first he seemed distracted, unsure of my reality, and then as if waking from a stupor he seemed to really notice me, he hugged his

notebook against his chest to hide it, and snarled:

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“I'm just a traveler,” I said. “Though I'm not quite sure where it is I'm going. Maybe you can help me find my way.”

“You're lying!” he cried, scrambling to his feet, still clutching the tattered notebook to his breast. “You're one of them, I know it! They sent you here to spy on me...to take measurements of the cemetery. It's true, isn't it?”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I said. “Why would anyone want to take measurements of the cemetery?”

“They're making plans,” he said, his voice taking on a hushed, conspiratorial tone. “They want to bulldoze the tombstones, clear the whole place.”

“Why?”

“They want to build condominiums, vacation rentals...Movie theater, arcade, fun house – the works!”

“Who, exactly, is planning this?”

“Oh, you know, them, *them!* People, people, *people*. Humans. Earthlings.”

I laughed. “I've just come from Castle Scorn, which guards the boundary to this planet. They've got the whole place hermetically sealed. There's the river of acid, and they've got this fearsome tiger...”

“No, no, no,” he whimpered. “You don't understand. They can't be stopped. And it's not just the cemetery, they're going to destroy everything, clear the forest, drain the marshes, blow up the mountains...”

It occurred to me then that his clothes were not just worn and dusty from sleeping on the ground. He was wearing a kind of 19th century suit that in addition to being covered in dirt was tattered and eaten through with holes, almost as if he'd borrowed the clothing from one of the interred. Leaning against the tomb helplessly, he clapped a hand on his forehead and cried out dramatically: "We're doomed, doomed, doomed!"

Thinking I'd distract him from this upsetting topic, I asked him about the notebook, which he had dropped on the ground.

This seemed to work. He was pleased to tell me about it. "Mallarmé wrote his Tomb of Edgar Poe and Tomb of Charles Baudelaire. This is my Tomb of Lovecraft."

"It looks very long," I remarked as he flipped through the notebook, revealing scores of densely-inked pages.

"No, no, these are just notes, ideas. The poem itself will be short, only a few lines. Maybe just one line, or a single word."

"Why are you writing this poem?"

"Because one day, I hope, someone will write one for me! I have to believe in my death – why else would I tolerate life? But it would be a lie to say I never despair – I often recite the words of the poet, when I walk the unbroken fields of future graves," and here he spoke these verses:

No illustrious tombstones ornament
the lonely churchyard where I often go
to hear my heart, a muffled drum, parade
incognito.

'Many a gem,' the poet mourns, abides
forgotten in the dust,
unnoticed there;
'many a rose' regretfully confides
the secret of its scent
to empty air.¹

And then he began to weep uncontrollably.

I pushed aside the fringes of overgrown moss, laden with crumbled earth, which obscured the markings on the tombstone. It was indeed the resting place of Lovecraft. I wondered who else was buried there, and I remembered that the Baron had mentioned a cemetery.

“Are all the poets of Fantasy buried here? All the ones who are dead, I mean,” I asked the Gravekeeper.

“They're all dead,” he said, wiping his tears and his nose on the dirty sleeve of his garment. “Even those who never lived!”

Now I wondered what he could have meant by that. I asked him. By way of response, he led me to a small tomb in the next row. Brushing away dirt and moss, he revealed the name: Alistair J. Hunt.

“I've never heard of him,” I admitted.

“Of course not,” said the Gravekeeper. “Nobody has, because he does not exist. His soul was not made for the mortal world – literally, it was not...He was not born in Portland, Maine in July 1887, to a formerly distinguished but declining family, and he did not die at the romantic age of 29, his inheritance completely spent, having never published the only novel he never

wrote, *Misanthropia*. The greatest fantasy novel of all time.”

The Gravekeeper kept with him a faded leather satchel which presently he opened and began to rifle through. Alongside worn and yellowed paperbacks within the bag he hid grim victuals: rotting apples alive with writhing worms, and rock-hard bread covered in green mold. Now he found the book he sought and handed it to me. It was an aged paperback bearing the title *Misanthropia*, author, Alistair J. Hunt. The cover was decorated with a weird drawing: a human skull with a city of black pyramids and antique palaces built upon the brainpan.

“What's it about,” I asked.

“A world beyond,” said he, looking up at the stars in the black sky. “The world of *Misanthropia!*”

He went on, still gazing nightward: “The book we have not read will always be superior to the book we have read. This is why *Misanthropia* is the greatest book. We project onto its blank pages the vague shimmering outlines of untold majesty, the distant fata morgana of our unknown desires; we can smell its perfume, it arouses us with the nostalgia of strange cities and alien wildernesses we never dreamed of; when we find it is unreachable, we are maddened! but the madness of this longing is a pleasure unlike anything else!

“Lovecraft knew this well. Everyone knows his famous invention, the Necronomicon, a book which will always hold great power precisely because it does not exist and so nobody will ever read it. One of Lovecraft's greatest achievements was his essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, in which he ingeniously applies this principle to literary criticism. In hinting at the terror and mystery at the heart of works by Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson, and others, Lovecraft conjures an aura around those tales which is so powerful that the reader is invariably

disappointed upon reading the actual story. Even if one has already read Hodgson's peculiar book *The House on the Borderlands*, for instance, it is preferable to contemplate its eerie title and imagine what that book is not, rather than what it is. A century later, the effect is heightened still further by the rarity and obscurity of certain of those forgotten volumes, especially those that are out of print and nearly unattainable. They become like so many Necronomicons, bits of smoky crystal breeding weird illusions in the half-light.”

As he spoke, I flipped through the pages of Hunt's *Misanthropia*. Sure enough, every page was solid black, completely covered in ink.

“This, of course, he went on, “was the basis of Lovecraft's work: the rejection of what is in favor of that which is not. For Lovecraft, that thing called 'life' or 'reality,' was only a thin patina of illusions disguising the black and formless abyss of existence. Lovecraft perceived this abyss as the maw of an immortal demon, which waits patiently to devour all human civilization, to swallow us into the hell of its bowels, digesting us slowly over untold kalpas, until we are cast out, disintegrated cosmic excrement. That is our inescapable destiny.

“The strange contradiction of Lovecraft is his apparent masochistic pleasure in the destruction of the illusions of civilization, and his simultaneous desire to escape 'reality' altogether by fleeing into private dreams. What he despised was the middle ground between the abyss and the dream – that ugly prison called 'life,' the world of sex and money. 'To offer an alternative to life in all its forms constitutes a permanent opposition, a permanent recourse to life – this is the poet's highest mission on this earth.’”²

“Anyway...It can be difficult to interpret that book if you don't know how. My friend lives not far from here, he'll show you how to read it.”

Just then there came the sound of voices, talking and laughter, from somewhere in the cemetery. The Gravekeeper flattened himself against Hunt's tomb, he pressed his hands against his mouth as if suppressing a scream. Then he looked at me desperately for help, grabbing and shaking my arm and saying:

“Who are they? What do they want? What do they want with me? Oh please, make them go away!”

They appeared out of the fog: four youths, wearing denim and leather, with chains and studded belts, combat boots, long untamed hair. They drank beer from amber bottles (one of them carried a cardboard case) and passed around a marijuana cigarette; they talked and joked loudly, swearing like sailors, shoving and jostling each other playfully. At first they did not notice us as they stopped at a nearby tomb. One of the men produced a canister of spraypaint from his denim jacket, which was emblazoned with profane slogans, and proceeded to paint a crude pentagram along with the words “HAIL SATAN” in black on the marble side of the tomb. At first, the Gravekeeper only looked on in horror, trembling, unable to believe his eyes. But finally he leaped into action, running toward them and crying out, “Stop it! Stop it! What are you doing?”

Laughing, one of the men grabbed the Gravekeeper by the shoulders and held him at bay while the other finished spraypainting the tomb. The other two, young ladies, looked on in laughter as the Gravekeeper struggled pitifully against the overwhelming strength of his captor. One of the girls finished her beer and threw the bottle against the side of the tomb, where it smashed into a hundred pieces. This, for some reason, was even more upsetting to the Gravekeeper than the spraypaint, and he began to weep and cry. The man threw him to the

ground, then picked up the Gravekeeper's satchel and emptied its contents onto the ground as well.

“Alright,” I said, making my presence known for the first time, “You've had your fun, now leave him alone.”

They ignored me. The Gravekeeper's tormenter, a fellow with a leather biker jacket and long dirty blond hair which went past his shoulders, knelt down to examine his victim's belongings. The Gravekeeper buried his face in his hands, sobbing like a child, and crying out “Oh, they're barbarians! Barbarians!”

But then, something dawned on the blond beast's face as he examined one of the antique paperbacks from the Gravekeeper's bag, and he said, turning to his erstwhile victim:

“Woah. You read Conan?”

The Gravekeeper abruptly stopped crying. Wiping his nose on his sleeve, he said, “Yes, but only the original tales, of course...”

They all sat down with him and began to talk and drink beer. Someone lit up another special cigarette. As they talked, I wandered away along the cemetery path, until I reached another gate, with another forest beyond it. The gate stood open, and the path continued through it into the wood, so I kept walking.

CHAPTER 5

FEAR

As I went on the earth around the path became increasingly sodden and muddy. All around me, nocturnal toads splashed and belched in the shadows. When I heard the rustling of a larger beast, I stopped to look and listen for danger. A scrawny dog crossed the path in front of me – he had caught one of the toads in his mouth. Shaking it until it was dead, he proceeded to gobble up the little monster, without bothering too much with chewing. But the dog did not appear satisfied with his meal, he whined and tottered uneasily, then collapsed in convulsions. I rushed toward the poor creature to help if I could, but he was gone – I may have imagined the whole scene.

I arrived at an impoverished village ravaged by plague. The diseased people were gathered in the village center. The flesh of the afflicted ones was spongy and blue, nightcrawlers lived in their bodies and could be seen moving in and out of the holes in their skin. The people were gathered to demand justice – they wanted to hang the hooded one, the enchanter who caused their affliction. Beyond the village I could see an ancient tower rising above the trees – the dwelling place of the evil one. The Inquisitor was there, he wore a metal dog mask, and carried the book of the law and a scepter containing a piece of polished stone, a burnt orange color streaked with black smoke. He had come from the city, and now he was listening to the testimony of the people of the village; when he had transcribed all the testimony into his book he would go with the mob to seize the evil one and administer justice.

I passed through the village to the tower of black onyx which lay amid the woods on the other side. On the portal was a metal knocker shaped like a toad. I pounded with the knocker and

was greeted almost instantly by a small elder wearing a black hood. When he opened the door, I was hit by a powerful odor of rot or mold – something wet and toxic that caused my lungs to shrivel and recoil.

“What do you want?” he spat.

I showed him *Misanthropia*, the mysterious book with the black pages. “I need help interpreting this book,” I said.

Taking the book from me, he examined it, and grinned with grotesquely swollen lips, showing teeth filed to razor points. He pulled back his hood, revealing a lumpy, gibbous head, bald, and covered in a thin layer of mucus that glistened in the torchlight. Tiny eyes the size of pins peered out from his misshapen head. He ushered me inside.

Within the tower, I found the stench so powerful that I was forced to cover my mouth with the sleeve of my garment.

“Allow me to apologize for that mob outside,” he said. “I’ve been so busy, I haven’t had time to deal with them yet. My name is Misandro. That book is one of my favorites – I am happy to help you read it.”

“The people of that village,” I said. “Why are they angry with you?”

“I will show you,” he grinned.

He brought me down a spiral staircase, to a humid cellar where the vile odor hung like a mist. It was a subterranean serpentarium, and as he led me on a tour, he eagerly informed me of the name of each inhabitant, providing also curious lore, as to their rarity, strange origins, the unique properties of each poison, to heighten my enjoyment of the weird and frightful creatures.

From one glass case he removed a tiny albino frog, small enough to hold in the palm of

his hand. “This is Paranoia,” he explained. “The male of the species. When witches conspire in the dead of night, they smear their bodies with ointment made from deadly nightshade, henbane, and this little frog boiled down to paste. Shivering and drooling they fly in mystic transportation to the witch's sabbath, there to worship the devil in obscene rites, and draw plans for the ruination of the world that hates and fears them.

“The female,” he went on, replacing the frog with its black twin, “is eaten by the witchfinder. Sadistic hunter, collector of human skins; he consumes a decoction of this frog, which gives him the power to smell heretics and witches.

“This serpent here is Panic, powerful constrictor, he'll squeeze your heart, bind up your limbs, leave you helpless. Then when you're paralyzed, you'll meet his friend Torment, a goblin with green skin pulled tight over strange bones. He comes to kneel on your chest, crushing the air from your lungs, as he leans in to show you his hideous face.

“The viper Horror is famous, does she require explanation? Her venom is the glimpse of darkness, death, infinity, unveiled by lies.

“Now this may appear an ordinary wolf spider, but don't be fooled. This is Hysteria. His venom voids the mind of reason, and sends one into fits, dancing, singing, stripping naked.

“Invasion is the name of this bat. He likes to creep in through open windows to crawl on warm skin of sleeping bodies. You'll dream of terrible violations, robbers pounding on the door, while this ugly creature sucks blood from your thigh in the night.”

Misandro showed me the evil brewery, where the various venoms were mixed: the vigorous fermentation, carried off in an open pool, proved the origin of the awful stench. Greasy, black, unwholesome foam gathered at the surface, gratuitously spilling from the open trough-like

vantage. Occasionally, something splashed: I thought I saw a tail, or perhaps a pair of yellow eyes, appear, then vanish, in the brew.

“All beauty and wisdom originates in hatred of the world and its inhabitants,” said the evil one. “I am manufacturing enough poison to wipe out the entire race of man. I will fly to every town and poison everyone. My tower will soar into the sky, higher and higher, into outer space where no microbes can survive, the filth of man dies off, starved and suffocated in the freezing heights of space. Purified, totally separate from the world of men, I will be free.”

These smells and sights were wearing on my nerves. I felt myself becoming dizzy; I touched my forehead, it felt cold and not my own. Misandro, sensing my discomfort, seemed to take delight: he grinned, running his tongue along his razor teeth. Seizing then an oversized ladle, he filled a goblet with the evil water and proffered it to me.

“Drink, drink!” he insisted, as he pushed it toward my face. And though I refused, he would not relent until I had a taste.

“This is the liquor of Fear,” he said, “and it is powerful stuff. Don't worry – it's organic, all-natural, and pure. It will not kill you (probably), it's less a poison than a drug. Panic, terror, doom, and dread, all manner of anxiety, fear of death and fear of life, all mixed together perfectly.”

“Now why,” I said, “would I want that? I'll drink no such thing.”

“But think! The doors this potion opens, the treasures that it brings...It produces hallucinations magnificent and wild, it furnishes the mind with the most extravagant delusions. Now drink, drink!”

Best to get it over with, I told myself, the sooner to leave that fetid dungeon. So I took the

cup, and took my draught – thankfully, the stuff was tasteless. Now I urged Misandro to let us leave before I fainted from the awful smell.

He led me up the stairs to a kitchen or laboratory. Here he took the book from me and examined it once more. Inhaling deeply from the pages, he said: “Ah yes, I remember: this was a good century! Now wait a moment, and I will extract the liquor.”

He placed the book in a type of vice or fruit press apparently designed for just this purpose, and proceeded to crank the handle vigorously until black ink dribbled from a spigot into a jar. Emptying the jar into a spherical crystal flask which he corked shut, he then led me to a darkened room where he placed the crystal ball in the palm of a mummified hand which stood erect from the center of a velvet-covered table. The hand came alive and gripped the crystal ball snugly. Now Misandro used his moist fingers to extinguish the only candles, so the chamber was plunged into darkness. We sat on cushioned seats on either side of the crystal ball and gazed into it, as it began to glow with a weird anti-light, a black radiance that shone in the dark.

I can't say for how long we stared into that crystal ball – minutes, hours, weeks, or years. There's no way to describe the hideous visions which unfolded there, the endless profusion of nightmare images. Except to say – I saw the world, the real world, Earth. I saw it bathed in darkness, transfigured by the gaze of fear, into the image of its hidden, shadow self. I saw slavery, war, disease, destruction, feasting on the corpse of a planet that was already dead.

Then suddenly there came a sound of pounding and clattering, and I started as if awaking from a nightmare. Leaping from my seat, I accidentally knocked over the corpse-like hand which held the crystal ball. The crystal fell to the floor and shattered. Misandro snapped his fingers and candles came alive to light the chamber. I thought he would berate me for my clumsiness, but

instead he grinned and licked his bulbous lips – my terror pleased him.

Then there came the sound again of pounding – it was coming from the tower door.

Misandro's glee turned to fury: he bared his glistening teeth. “The mob!” he hissed.

“They've come.”

He pushed me out of the chamber and down the stairs to another room.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded. “I want no part of any of this!”

We entered a kind of study, with some bookcases, and a writing desk.

“The Inquisitor,” explained Misandro, “wields a scepter tipped with an orb of polished chalcedony. One strike on the head with this will dispel our fantasies, destroy our illusions – and then we will never escape their grasp, you'll be caught once more in their dream! You've seen the misanthropic vision of the world, the illusion which reveals the secret truth – there's no going back now.”

Again came the pounding on the tower door, I could hear the groaning of the wood as the mob endeavored to force it open, a sickening sound that carried through the cold corridors of the stone tower to our ears.

“Quickly now!” cried Misandro, and I did not resist, as he pushed me toward the desk.

Over the desk, hanging on the wall, were two images. On the right hung an architect's blueprints, the designs of a city. On the left was a painting of a lush forest, blooming with a thousand colors; a full moon shone in the sky, and on a granite boulder a beautiful woman reclined, luxuriating in the moonlight and the mingled fragrance of the unreal flowers.

“Two ways to escape the nightmare of the present: the dream of the future and the dream of the past,” said Misandro. “Choose quickly!”

“What are these designs? I asked, indicating the blueprints.

“They're a waste of time, that's what!” hissed Misandro. “Foolish aspirations for a better world. But Man will never be redeemed: the Earth is doomed!” and he slashed at the drawings, ripping them down with his hand, which had become like a fearsome claw.

Then he grabbed the ornate frame of the left-side painting and pulled, revealing it as the door of a secret portal. As the painting swung forward, it revealed a window that looked out, not upon the dark and toad-infested swamp which surrounded the tower, but rather upon that verdant wilderness from the painting, which seemed to shimmer with an unreal light, the freshness and the glory of a dream or a memory exalted by nostalgia.

Just then the door to the tower gave way, I heard its splintering explosion. Within moments the Inquisitor was standing in the doorway of the study, the mob behind him. He removed the dog mask, revealing a familiar face. It was her, grinning evilly, the noseless, disfigured woman from my dreams. “I've come,” she said, “to destroy you and your poisonous illusions.”

“Go, go!” cried Misandro, “Don't worry about me, I can handle her.”

I wasn't so sure, but I needed no further goading. Anxiously I clambered over the desk, trampling the torn blueprints, and escaped into the past.

CHAPTER 6

THE EXILED KING

I wandered through that pleasant landscape for hours or days, eating fruit from the trees, napping on the soft grass, listening to nightingales and owls. When I heard the murmuring of a brook, I followed its sound until I came to running water. I walked along the brook until I came across a fellow sitting on a tree stump beneath a drooping willow.

He was a bearded man wearing dirt and grass-stained clothes and a wicker crown on his head; he was engrossed in a dog-eared biography of Julian the Apostate. Despite it being the middle of night, the moon was so bright that one could read without any difficulty. Scattered on the wet sward were other dirty paperbacks: all biographies, of Charlemagne, Julius Caesar, etc. A dog slept nearby, but didn't so much as open its eyes when I approached and hailed the man.

“So,” he said dramatically as he laid eyes on me. “You've come at last.”

“Pardon?”

“You are my assassin, are you not? No more games. Get on with it!” And he ripped open his shirt to reveal a sailor's tattoo of a red heart on his chest. He jabbed at the tattoo heart with his bony finger. “Right here! Give me the bullet, the knife, the syringe of untraceable poison! Whatever you have, I'm ready for it.”

“I haven't come to kill you,” I tried to explain.

Rising from his seat the man went behind the willow tree and pulled out a wooden cross and a toolbox which he showed to me. “There's a hammer in there, and enough nails to set me up good. The cross is exactly to my proportions – I made it myself – and I'm sure it will hold my weight, as I've practiced hanging from it with ropes many times. Now, how do you want to do it?”

I was thinking upside down, if it's not too much trouble – oh, but I can see by your face that this is all wrong! I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I? You want to thrash me first. You're a real monster! Very well, I'll remove my shirt.”

“Keep your shirt on – please!” I cried. “I'm not an assassin, and I don't want to thrash you or anyone else. I've only come to talk with you about literature.”

“Oh, but of course,” he said, sitting back down on his stump. “My name is Máni, it's a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I said, sitting on the grass. “But I must ask, if it isn't a rude question: why would anyone want to have you killed?”

“I am the Last King,” declared Máni, “the last living heir of an ancient line. I'm descended from Cronos (yes, *that* Cronos), and the men of the Golden Age who lived in Atlantis. Things were different back then, let me tell you! The sun shone with a different kind of light, which made the whole world glitter, and filled the air with warm smell of musk. In this latter age, glory has been banished from the day; the old kind of light exists now only in the moon. But soon that will be gone as well: the final assassination.

“It's true that I live in luxury and wealth far beyond what's common for mortals today,” he went on, gesturing at the grass and willow trees. “But if only you could see how my ancestors lived! The poets of antiquity were always careful to downplay the luxury of distant times, for if they gave an authentic description it would be far too shocking, and surely induce incurable despair in the hearts of their audience, dwellers of the iron age, who could never hope to experience that paradisiacal life of wealth, pleasure, and longevity. And so I will not say too much on this subject, because I don't wish to upset you. But trust that I am descended from the

lofty heights of sheer mythology, the gardens of Atlantis. My family has declined since then, in tandem with the world itself, through each generation of progressive decay: I'm the last and lowest in the line.”

“I still don't understand,” I said, “why anyone would want to kill you.”

“I'm the reincarnation of Alexander, Arthur, and Aleister Crowley. Of course they want to have me killed!”

“But who are 'they'?” I asked.

“Oh, you know – *them!* Psychologists, schoolteachers, the secret police: all servants of the Usurper.”

“And who is the Usurper?”

“Not who, but what!” he cried. “What! The throne of all existence lies empty. There is no king. We have instead – Freedom! But what is this thing, Freedom? Freedom is an abbreviation: it stands for free domination. The wolf, having convinced the sheep that their shepherd was a tyrant, set them free – and now he eats his fill. This bloody revolution I refer to is the revolution, still ongoing, against nobility in all its forms – noble people, noble books, noble art, noble thoughts. The sacred Ideals which formerly guided us through the terror of history have been discredited, defamed, and dethroned by the partisans of Materialism. Beauty, Religion, Honor, we are told, were mere lies peddled by the tyrants of backward ages – all that is real today is Greed.”

“You've lost me,” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about a wolf!” whispered Máni. “The ancient ones called him Fenrir because he comes from the treacherous fen where noble trees cannot grow. The gods bound this monster

with a magic fetter, made by dwarves from unreal things: the sound of a cat's footfall, the breath of a fish, and so on. But the unreal only exists in stories, and when men forgot the old stories, the binding lost its power and could no longer restrain Fenrir. Now the fetters are broken, the wolf runs free! His hunger is the only law. And then of course there is the dragon..."

"Dragon!" I interjected. "What could you mean by that?"

"Surely you've heard of him," Máni went on. "His deeds now are famous, the way he belches poison into the air and vomits excrement into the rivers, taking pleasure in the defilement of creation. The dragon Nidhogg dwells in an evil hall with his prisoners, damned souls. These cursed ones live in the darkness without sunlight, they drink polluted waters which clouds their minds as they toil in servitude, manufacturing the black venom which the serpent blasts into the sky to blacken the sun and poison eagles, whom he despises. Nidhogg feasts upon his slaves, the living dead, he devours them greedily, but in this corrupted age the damned are so numerous that the dragon's banquet is constantly refreshed.

"Freedom for Fenrir, Freedom for Nidhogg: this is the freedom of the modern world, paid for with the blood of nobles and peasants alike."

"You're talking about capitalism," I said.

"Capitalism! What nonsense. There is no such thing. Remember Thor, how he was fooled by the magic of deceitful Giants, which caused him to perceive a fat cat, when really it was the weight of the great serpent he was hefting! Such is the trickery which blinds you, and leads you to use this false word, capitalism.

"But I must tell you of another monster," Máni went on gravely, "the one who wants to devour me. He is a wolf, sired by Fenrir in the Iron Forest: his name is Resentment. He eats

what's living and beautiful and shits out dead iron. In the Iron Forest there is neither sun nor moon; the giants worship fire, they want light they can control, not the heavenly light made by the gods. The wolf called Resentment, born of Fenrir and a giantess, this wolf despises the moon, he's jealous of its shining light, he wants to gobble it up.

“Now you understand what I'm up against! Please, if you would discuss these matters further, join me in my lunarium.”

Rising from his stump, Máni walked about three steps in the direction of the river and sat down on the damp grass near the sleeping dog.

“I hope you won't mind Edgar joining us,” he said as I sat down across from him on the ground. “He's the one person I trust completely. And anyway, he's entirely deaf. Isn't that right, Edgar?” He patted the dog affectionately on the rump. The dog snorted and wagged its tail appreciatively before resuming its nap.

“I would invite you to the drawing room, but I'm having it refurbished, and I absolutely won't allow anyone in there until the wallpaper is up and the new damask-covered chairs have arrived. Anyway, the lunarium is comfortable enough, wouldn't you say?”

“Yes,” I said, adjusting myself on the hard ground, “quite comfortable. But now I would like to hear your thoughts regarding literature. You seem to have a pretty dim view of the modern world, so I take it you're no great admirer of modern writing.”

“I'll try,” said Máni “to summarize everything that's wrong with storytelling today. The corruption of the modern soul, and the decadent condition of art, are readily grasped through consideration of the phenomenon of mythological revisionism. What do I mean by this? Well, get out your notebook, and write this down, because I am about to supply you with the foolproof and

highly lucrative formula.

“A popular target is fairytales, though various legends, epics, and myths are all frequently subjected to the same treatment. Get your hands on a fairytale, and rewrite it so as to exalt the villains and monsters, impugn the heroes and innocents, generally to invert the whole moral code of the tale. Turn everything decent on its head, and fill the whole with liberal doses of 'realism,' i.e., sex and money. That's it, that's all you have to do! Not only will you find an eager audience for this kind of work, but you will be applauded by critics for your 'unmasking' of the tale, your revelation of the 'truth' which was supposedly beneath the surface of the story all along.

“Take *Beowulf* for instance. Beginning with John Gardner's *Grendel*, modern adaptations of the legend have tended to sympathize with Grendel and depict Beowulf and Hrothgar as corrupt, despotic persecutors of the pitiable monster, thus revealing the 'truth' behind the lies of the propagandistic poem.

“But the poem never was an apology for the patriarchal system as it existed in reality. It was the presentation of a high Ideal, unreachable except by the heroes of a legendary past; the best possible world that could be imagined under those conditions. Hrothgar makes it very clear that Beowulf's greatest victory, his true heroism, is not his monster-slaying, but the concord which came of it, the ties of friendship which united the Geats and Danes. Peace, brotherhood, generosity – these are the noble Ideals which are villainously defamed by the scornful adapters of that great poem.

“But of course modern writers are sympathetic not to the utopian desire for peace and abundance, but rather to the poem's representation of greed, discord, and war: the oppressor, Grendel. Our world is ruled over by a hundred thousand drooling Grendels. You see, the

adapters, in their sympathy for Grendel, are doing precisely what they accuse the old poem of – flattering the ruling class.”

“Alright,” I said, “you don't care for adaptations, but what about other modern books? Is there anything you approve of?”

Máni grinned weirdly, staring up at the sky as he reclined on his elbows. “I remember,” he said, “China Miéville's *King Rat*...now there was a king, a true fairy lord, that King Rat! Master of the sewers, lord of the subterranean world, he dwelt in permanent exile. Feared, despised, dweller in the filth, this evil one; but he commanded beauty, a majesty borne in subtle movement of the wrists, in the puckish way of perching sullenly on secret thrones; in the splendor of the costume and the sharpness of the tongue; in the anarchy of passions, royal hatred, madness, vice!”

“Hold on,” I interrupted, “I don't understand. An anarchy of passions? I thought you wanted Fenrir fettered.”

“You misunderstand! I abhor freedom, but I love liberty; true liberty is sovereignty, some call it grace or ecstasy. Desire wedded with beauty, consciousness, and dignity: this is what I call passion, never to be confused with the greed for money. In sleep we dream of only two forms of government – anarchy and monarchy.¹ The king is the image of the sovereign self.

“But then...but then...the monarchy is overthrown, the kingdom smashed to pieces. A revolution! No more King Rat.

“I remember...I remember the book disintegrate to ashes in my hands. The wind blew the gray remains like dust from my hands to mingle undifferentiated with the world of dirt. Crying, I smeared the ash over my face, mixing it with the tears of betrayal. What can I say? I was a child.

I did not yet know about the world.

“I had not yet read *Pale Fire*, a book which contains the entire secret history of the 20th century. What is the meaning of this extraordinary book? It tells the story of nobility's overthrow: the exile of the king, his betrayal by the poet, the prophecy of his eventual, inevitable assassination at the hands of a faceless and immane conspiracy of insects.

“*Pale Fire* waited patiently for decades, it waited for me to read it. It waited for me, and I waited for it. You see, I believe the book was written especially for me. The book was written for me, and I was born for the book. I remember distinctly the sensation I experienced upon finishing it. After reading the last sentence, I closed the book and gazed at its front cover. In that moment, I apprehended with perfect clarity the secret meaning of the text, the secret which exists beyond language, the treasure for which language is merely the treasure-box or velvet mantle. I am speaking of course of the crown jewels of Zembla, which the proletarian thugs searched fruitlessly for, ransacking the palace, they looked everywhere...King Charles was so confident they would never find the jewels – why?

“It recalls the masterful film of Werner Herzog, *Heart of Glass*. The film concerns a factory in Bavaria which manufactures ruby glass. When the master craftsman dies, the secret of the red glass is lost. The factory owner sends his goons to tear apart the widow's house, looking for the secret. Of course they find nothing. It is impossible to find anything of significance in this way. But today, this is how everyone searches. It is, in fact, the primary mode of all our activity. The ransack. Reading, talking, traveling, eating, fucking, living! But you'll never find the treasure in this way.

“Before *Pale Fire* was *The King in Yellow*, a collection of tales by Robert W. Chambers.

The book concerns a mysterious play of the same name, which causes those who read it to go insane. The first and best story, 'The Repairer of Reputations,' tells of a man who reads the cursed book and discovers in its pages the role he was always meant to play. Believing himself the heir to fantastical titles, thinking he is destined to rule the world – for this he is called insane. But is he wrong? Is Hildred Castaigne, the story's narrator, wrong to recognize the alien royalty, the heritage in distant stars, which is in fact available to all with eyes to see? 'I went to the cabinet and took the splendid diadem from its case. Then I drew on the white silk robe, embroidered with the yellow sign, and placed the crown upon my head. At last I was King, King by my right in Hastur, King because I knew the mystery of the Hyades, and my mind had sounded the depths of the Lake of Hali. I was King!'²

“Perhaps you would agree with his cousin, who perceived the diadem as a cheap toy, when for Hildred it was gold and diamonds. There are those who cannot recognize true gold even when it stares them in the face. Hildred discovered his birthright in the pages of *The King in Yellow*, he discovered the crown jewels, his inheritance. His liberty, his sovereignty from the world of money!”

“Do you remember the movie *Total Recall*? I always thought that the genius of Philip K. Dick is not realized in his own novels, which are mediocre vessels for an extraordinary vision. Dick's prophecy achieves its ideal in cinema, particularly in the films of David Cronenberg. *Videodrome* and *eXistenZ*, while not direct adaptations of any of Dick's works, express beautifully his prophecy of reality's disintegration. And yet I claim it is fortunate that Cronenberg never completed his version of *Total Recall*, that the project was taken over by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Paul Verhoeven, who turned the film into a comedic romance. Why would I

claim this? In Cronenberg's interpretation of Dick in the aforementioned films, the principle characters experience a progressive unmooring from reality, culminating in a total schizophrenic fragmentation where a central or objective ground is impossible to locate. *Total Recall* politicizes this process by meshing it with a heroic quest narrative, positioning the character in heroic defiance of the hegemonic narrative of 'reality' that is forced upon him by the industrial society. This wonderful piece of revolutionary entertainment prefigured *The Matrix*, but the latter film is ultimately less powerful and less true for its insistence on liberty as objective reality and slavery as delusion. In *Total Recall*, the heroism of the character is his ability to choose Mars, to choose a fantasy of heroic revolution against the false and oppressive reality of the industrial world; to transcend schizophrenia through a faith in liberty and love.”

“You sure watch a lot of movies,” I said, glancing around at the grass and trees. “Do you get Netflix out here?”

“Damn it, son,” he cried with exasperation, “I'm trying to teach you something important, something about heroism!”

Suddenly he seemed very old. I couldn't understand anything he said, and this disappointed him greatly. He sighed and petted the dog, Edgar.

“I should be going,” I said. “Thank you for talking with me.”

He waved me away, and I continued walking, following the brook upstream.

CHAPTER 7

THE TREASURY OF MARVELS

After some time I came to a hill, a huge mound rising from the field. As I approached I noticed granite blocks holding open a doorway to a dark interior. I entered, experiencing at once a cool humidity and the smell of earth. As I groped my way along the dark corridor, I allowed my nose to guide me when paths diverged, and I chose the way which smelled of minerals and water, as I knew this would take me deeper. Now I heard the soft murmur of a stream or fountain and my ears joined my nose in the search. Soon enough I could taste minerals in the humid air – calcium and sulfur. And then my hand, running along the wall of the corridor, felt the soft earth turn to rock. Finally I collided with a door, which opened without resistance, to reveal a dazzling light that restored my sense of vision.

I found myself in a palatial chamber, lit not by any fire, but by a light which seemed to emanate from every surface as in a dream. The high walls were moist, smooth, rippled cave-rock; stalags dripped from the ceiling, shining with a greasy dullness. Right and left were lined with columns of polished white marble streaked with pink. Before me was a fountain – the source of the gentle music and mineral smell I had followed to reach this place. The fountain was made of the same marble, and fashioned in an elegant, timeless style which defied categorization: water gushed from a central font, cascading down two successive basins into the third, lowest and widest pool. This bottom basin was full of copper and silver coins tossed by well-wishers; some old coppers were covered over with verdigris. The splashing water emitted a faint mist and filled the air with that wet, chthonic redolence. As I gazed into the pool at the shimmering coins, leaning over I closed my eyes, breathing in the mist. I was startled then by a

woman's voice that said:

“Hello.”

A maiden stood not far from me – she had appeared from nowhere, when I thought the chamber to be empty. Her hair was dyed a bluish sea-green, held back with a silver fillet full of dull almandines. She wore a gray gown, bracelets of hyacinth and emerald, and around her neck hung a perfect sapphire. Her ears contained lapis, her bottom lip was pierced with two silver rings, and when she spoke she revealed a pierced tongue containing a piece of purple chelonite. The beautiful maiden held a chalice of carved amethyst which she offered to me, as she smiled, and said:

“Would you like a drink?”

The smell of the water reminded me of childhood, though I couldn't say why. I thought that if I tasted it I would remember something. I took the cup and held it in the sheet of water falling from the higher basin, until the cup was full. I brought the cold crystal to my lips and drank the water: it was greasy and strongly flavored with algae and minerals, but I paradoxically experienced this as cleaner and more pure than other water. It had a wild, vigorous, healthful taste. And with the taste, nostalgia washed over me, exciting the nerves in my chest, shoulders, and arms. A memory appeared as I shut my eyelids, a shimmering impression of some lost scene from childhood, its significance forgotten, but still invested with an obscure power.

I opened my eyes. The maiden was still smiling; I think she was amused by me.

“I am Lunette,” she said.

“Lunette,” I said. “Where are we? And what is this fountain?”

“We are here, of course. And this fountain is a fountain.”

“And the water?” I asked foolishly.

“The water is water, the same as any,” said Lunette, and she laughed.

“Are you Queen of this place?” I asked.

“The Queen of the Fountain is my mistress,” said Lunette. “She is away at present, but I can show you her throne if you like.”

I eagerly assented. When I had refreshed myself, Lunette took back the cup, and then she led me from that chamber into an adjoining room even more marvelous than the first. The walls and ceiling were wild amethyst, rough crystal sparking violet. A carpet of white wolf furs covered the floor. On either side of the chamber heaps of treasure were piled high. Brightly painted chests overflowed with coins and gems; ancient spears, swords, and shields, grotesque helmets, glittering hauberks, fantastic armaments of all kinds were haphazardly arranged; cups and crowns filled with glittering stones heaped upon skin of white tiger; finely-wrought torques, rings, and bracelets of gold filled a silver cauldron wonderfully decorated and set with red garnets.

It was a dazzling mess, this spread of riches, amazing to behold. And at the far end of the chamber was the crown of the horde, the throne. It was carved from the living amethyst, ornately decorated with intricate figurative designs. The artist had left certain crystals untouched, giving the piece a sense of being unfinished; it was life and art at once. As we approached the throne, Lunette gestured for me to sit in a nearby chair. Next to the throne was a table holding a crystal decanter of purple wine, as well as a heavy book encrusted with emeralds. Lunette still had the amethyst cup, its twin sat with the decanter: presently she poured us each some wine, and then she perched on the throne, puckishly grinning as she sipped, and said: “What do you think?”

The wine was rich and sour: huckleberry, honey, plum, and other flavors I couldn't place, fermented with wild yeast. In its riot of flavors, regal color, bold wilderness, the wine reflected the barbaric majesty of the treasure hoard around us. "Fantastic," I said, "but please, indulge me. What's the meaning of this place, and all this marvelous stuff?"

Lunette gestured all around us and said, "This is the treasury of marvels, the wealth of the unreal: this is Fantasy. You've found it."

"I don't mean to argue," I said. "But I was told at first that Fantasy is a library, a collection of books lorded over by a Critic (indeed, I saw the shelves myself). Then another told me that Fantasy is a nightmare or delusion caused by Fear, or a narcotic escape from a vile and ugly world. Now you claim that Fantasy is a treasury of marvels. I'd like to hear more, if you're willing to enlighten me, so that I can weigh the merits of each metaphor and make up my own mind."

"Of course, I'm willing to converse with you," said Lunette, "but first let me point out: this is not a competition. There is no reason why we cannot each be right, just as the colors of the rainbow come together to make light.

"Now, if you want to understand the meaning of this treasure, you must listen to a story. It begins in the distant past, what is sometimes called derisively the childhood of humanity; before Chaucer, before Augustine; before Christ and Socrates; before Hesiod and Homer; an age before men wrote stories; an age when stories were alive in the minds of living people, and dreams were shared in tales and songs.

"At this age, we perceived the world around us as a living being, our mother, whom we worshiped. This ancient goddess was called Isis by the Egyptians – all goddesses old and new

represent aspects or dimensions of her. She had a male consort who traveled throughout the world spreading civilization while Isis ruled at home. Plutarch identifies this consort as Osiris or Dionysus, who spread ideas and technology peacefully, 'without the slightest need of arms,' through persuasion with the aid of music.¹ Women ruled at home and oversaw the production of food and the execution of religious rites, while men traveled from village to village, country to country, trading goods, playing music, and telling stories. War was rare at this time – there was no need for fighting because everyone was bound together by networks of trade. Interdependence, not competition, was the rule: and this interdependence between people and the world, between men and women, and between the village here and the village there, was reflected in the nature of thought and storytelling.

“The men, as they traveled to distant lands, heard songs, weird tales, and myths which they wove together into narrative tapestries, or cycles, that have no beginning or end. The relationship of stories in a cycle to one another is associational – they share characters, locations, and themes – rather than chronological. History at this time did not yet exist, so stories lacked this chronological dimension; the 'past' was not past, but a mythical dimension which acted upon and was accessible by the present. Social hierarchy also did not yet exist, so no story was more important than another: stories were practically and morally instructive, they contained religious and scientific wisdom, but they were also humorous, erotic, thrilling, and frightening; they were a sacred art that was also popular entertainment. Because people understood themselves to be integrated with what is now called 'nature,' plants, animals, and the landscape were major features of these stories. The oral medium of the stories meant that the storyteller related their tale with facial expression, gestures, dance, music, perhaps even props and costumes; storytelling

was a kind of theater which required the physical and mental presence of a living artist and a living audience gathered together.²

“So you see, oral storytelling by its nature was social and ecological: it connected people with the natural environment, individuals with the community, the past with the present, the religious with the everyday. The tapestry of stories itself, interconnected and rhizomatic, mirrored these ecologies.

“Now that you understand something about storytelling, I'll go on with my tale. Once, when Osiris the traveling god was away, his brother Set (who Plutarch calls Typhon), conspired to kill him. Set built a beautifully ornamented box according to Osiris's measurements, then promised to give the box as a gift to whoever fit inside it. When Osiris climbed in, Set's confederates nailed shut the lid, sealed it with molten lead, and threw it in the river to be carried off to sea. After a long search, Isis found the corpse in Byblos and brought it back to Egypt. But Typhon discovered the body and hacked it into pieces which were then scattered across Egypt.

“The box containing the corpse of Osiris washed ashore in Byblos, in Phoenicia, where according to Plutarch the local king 'used it as a pillar to support the roof of his house.¹³ The alphabet of course originated in Phoenicia. Byblos was a major exporter of papyrus, hence its eponymization by the Greeks; it is of course from the Greek biblos we ultimately derive bibliography, bibliothèque, Bible, etc.

“The connection of the myth with Byblos indicates that the story has something to do with the development of the alphabet.⁴ What is the alphabet? It is a writing system that is purely abstract, with letters that represent nothing other than sounds. The process of reading alphabetic script is reductionist, one component at a time, logical, and linear. It suggests for the first time

the possibility of experiencing and interpreting language privately rather than socially. Abstraction, logic, linearity, and privacy began with the invention of writing, as did the development of the abstract, invisible, and strictly patriarchal God of the monotheistic religions.⁵

“In former times the gods walked among people, they were part of our world. The invention of writing initiated a long process by which the gods were banished from the world. Typhon's box is alphabetic writing, it is the abstract concept which traps and kills the living god. It's no surprise that the box was used a pillar to support the house of a king: writing was tied to the development of patriarchy and private property. Laws were inscribed, patrilineal genealogies recorded, taxes tabulated. As the civilization of the written word increased in power over the ages, it gradually erased the qualities of oral storytelling which survived in literature until virtually none remained. Textual civilization reached its zenith in the bourgeois epoch, an age which perfected both the science of history and the art of the novel, an age which imagined human beings as individual agents separate from one another and from the environment.”

Here I interjected. “Surely you're not against the individual,” I said. “Isn't the literature of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth to be celebrated? In these writers, I think, the individual character, their inner thoughts and feelings, is developed, and in this development, do we not discover a freedom of mind which liberates us both from our base animal desires, and from our thoughtless adherence to society's expectations? You said before that privacy began with writing. You might as well say that the soul begins there as well.”

Lunette laughed (she was always laughing, but in such a sweet way). “It may seem that way to you, but what you're describing is not the invention of the soul, but its privatization. During the reign of Isis (the period Marx and Engels called 'primitive communism'), dreams

were shared by the community and diffused throughout the environment: this is why people believed they could manipulate the environment through magic. In your time dreams are private, and they are typically repressed and ignored. What you're exalting when you say 'soul,' is really character. Writers of the bourgeois era developed character to unprecedented heights of sophistication, and along with the various social freedoms provided by liberal democracy and the great advancements of science and productive capacity that accompanied industrial progress, this was a laudable achievement.

“But if we consider dream and character as corresponding to Jung's use of the terms unconscious and ego, then it is quite clear that bourgeois literature's devaluation of dream literature reflects bourgeois society's devaluation of the unconscious. The Surrealists were quite right in arguing that a revolutionary upheaval of this value system must be the core strategy and goal of Communist art, and I hope you don't think I'm taking it too far by saying that the puerile and unscientific views of Freud have retained their popularity only because they reflect a prejudice against dreams, and against women, which can be traced to the distant origins of patriarchy.

“The ego, or character, when disconnected from the unconscious, imagines itself to be totally independent, free, autonomous. This, of course, is an illusion. The ego is only a strange vegetable growing from the soil of the unconscious, which, properly understood, is all of nature in its undifferentiated wholeness, the universe itself.”

“But,” I said. “Are we not individuals? Once the umbilical cord is cut, and we are grown to adulthood, do we not walk the earth on our own two legs?”

“What is the air you breathe, the food you eat, the water you drink? Who made the

clothes and shoes you wear? Who wrote the books you praise? There is no human being without every other human being, and all of them together are made, physically constituted, by the nourishment of the universe. What Freud called the 'oceanic' feeling of religion, and dismissed as childish, is simply the experience of reality.”

“To return to the question of dream and character: it is really a matter of pictures. The language of dreams is symbolism. The literature of dreams is therefore fundamentally ekphrastic. In order to grasp nature, especially the highest in nature, one must cease to live exclusively in ideas and begin to think in pictures.⁶

“Dream art consists of this thinking in pictures, which contain meaning which cannot be expressed through language. 'If the mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things,' writes Eliade, 'it is just because reality manifests itself in contradictory ways and therefore cannot be expressed in concepts.' The attempt to turn mythic images into concepts, as Freud did, is doomed to failure; to translate the image into an abstract concept 'is to annihilate, to annul it as an instrument of cognition.'⁷

“Images, unlike abstract concepts, are capable of expressing mysteries. Certain alchemical manuscripts feature the image of Hermes with his finger at his lips, indicating silence. Mysteries are rituals, sacred acts of theater which communicate divine secrets. Mysteries are realities which cannot be expressed through language, and actually are degraded by attempts to translate them; hence the injunction to silence.

“The characters in Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, finding themselves struck mute, are forced to communicate the stories of their lives by arranging tarot cards on the table. All destinies, all stories, all dreams, are contained within one tarot deck shared by the

community. Every life is only an arrangement of images from the common deck. But the deck is not eternal – the images change over time. This is why Calvino includes two sequences of stories, one using a Visconti-Sforza deck, the other with the Marseille Tarot.

“Calvino's novel exalts the symbol, the archetypal image, as a higher form of communication containing the truth of human existence. The narration which accompanies the images is an interpretation of the tarot sequences, a commentary on the revelation, but the truth is in the cards themselves, the arrangements of pictures. In this book the image has an independent existence; the interpretation is a passive secondary process which does not attempt to supplant the primacy of the image.

“I should clarify what I mean by 'interpretation' with regards to the narration in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. The narrator's interpretation is not the translation of the images into abstract concepts, but rather a description of the images with added details and actions linking them together into a story. This is the difference between what Walter Benjamin calls explanation and storytelling:

Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it...The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him [sic] to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.⁸

What Benjamin here refers to as 'amplitude,' highlights the crucial characteristic of these 'marvelous things,' which are their effectiveness. Explanation kills the vitality of marvels, the powerful images created by the artist; it destroys the mystery by offering in its place a concept

which can only ever be partial and incomplete. Explanation undermines the effectiveness of images because it asks us to comprehend their meaning logically and abstractly rather than to apprehend their power and mystery directly.

“One of the great marvelous images in literature is the appearance of the eponymous knight at the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poet describes the Green Knight's appearance in meticulous detail: his garments and hair, his axe, his horse. Everything glimmers with jewels, gold, and rich craftsmanship. The specificity of the description conjures a powerful image, meant to amaze, terrify, and impress the reader.

“When the poem ends, we are provided an explanation of the marvelous scene. Morgan le Fay enchanted Bertilak de Hautdesert, the lord of the castle where Gawain had stayed during his quest, making him appear in the terrifying guise of the Green Knight in order to test the knights of the Round Table and attempt to scare Guinevere to death.

“It was all a trick, or so we're told. But the power of the first scene with the Green Knight is such that this explanation does not suffice. The notion that the Green Knight's appearance was a trick to scare Guinevere is itself a trick, a joke devised by the poet. The mystery of the original image remains untouched by Bertilak's attempt to explain it.

“For Eliade, symbolism, the language of images, allows us to escape ordinary existence, and to experience a spiritual world which he associates with a lost paradise, a 'paradisiac stage of primordial humanity.’¹⁹ Thus the Image is bound up with the experience of nostalgia. 'The most abject “nostalgia” discloses the 'nostalgia for Paradise.' Nostalgic images in art:

express the nostalgia for a mythicised past transformed into an archetype...this 'past' signifies not only regrets for a vanished time but countless other meanings; it expresses

all that might have been but was not, the sadness of all existence, which is only by ceasing to be something else; regrets that one does not live in the country or in the times evoked by the song...in short, the longing for something altogether different from the present instant; something in fact inaccessible or irretrievably lost: 'Paradise' itself.¹⁰

“Like Poe said in his 'Sonnet – to Science' that Science 'dragged Diana from her car,' explanation unmask the world and robs images of their symbolism. We experience our environment visually – supernatural art thus approaches nature the proper way, through the language of images, expressing the vitality of nature through mythic symbols. When we apprehend nature through storytelling we are able to grasp its mystery. When we attempt to comprehend nature through explanation of its material reality, when we think of the moon as a cold, dead rock, we stifle the intercourse of our imagination with the environment.

“Friedrich Schlegel called mythology the 'hieroglyphic expression of surrounding nature in this transfigured form of imagination and love.’¹¹ The worship of nature's beauty demands symbolism capable of expressing that beauty and our desire for it. Poe's nostalgia represents all our nostalgia and bitterness toward modernity; all of it is a yearning for an era in which this symbolic consciousness still existed, nature worship, goddess worship, the time before the power of the image and its attendant stories was undermined by logical explanation.”

“Okay,” I said, “I think I'm following you – but I don't see what all this has to do with the treasure here which you promised to interpret.”

Lunette went on: “Morgan le Fay, called by Bertilak 'Morgan the Goddess,' is endowed with the power to create marvelous images: she is ultimately responsible for the vision of the Green Knight. The adornment which Morgan gives to Bertilak to transform him into Sir Gawain,

is the costume of ritual. The wealth and richness of the adornment transforms him into something supernatural and divine; and he holds in his hand a symbol, the holly bundle, like the thyrsus of Osiris or Dionysus. Morgan's enchanted adornment of the Green Knight mirrors the poet's adornment of the work with decorations and symbols. Like the fairy castle in *Sir Orfeo*, the gold and jewels of which mark it as magical and unreal, the poem's ornamentation removes it from the mundane world.

“The critic C.N. Manlove, writing about the modern fantasists Lord Dunsany and E.R. Eddison, denounced their fabulous excesses, remarking of Eddison's penchant for lengthy, luxurious descriptions of fantastic wealth: 'They are there to satisfy the greed of the imagination, and for no other purpose. The basis for this greed is the constant mention of numbers of huge jewels, of figures of exotic beasts and of rich colours.’¹²

“Here is a passage from the ending of *The Worm Ouroboros*, during which one of our heroes, Lord Juss, leads the Queen Sophonisba on a tour of his palace:

Juss walked with the Queen in the morning in the woods of Moongarth Bottom, now bursting into leaf; and after their mid-day meal showed her his treasures cut in the live rock under Galing Castle, where she beheld bars of gold and silver piled like trunks of trees; unhewn crystals of ruby, chrysoprase, or hyacinth, so heavy a strong man might not lift them; stacks of ivory in the tusk, piled to the ceiling; chests and jars filled with perfumes and costly spices, ambergris, frankincense, sweet-scented sandalwood and myrrh and spikenard; cups and beakers and eared wine-jars and lamps and caskets made of pure gold, worked and chased with the forms of men and women and birds and beasts and creeping things, and ornamented with jewels beyond price, margarites and pink and

yellow sapphires, smaragds and chrysoberyls and yellow diamonds.¹³

“This obsession with exotic riches permeates the entire world of the novel, and is apparent for instance in Eddison's ridiculous descriptions of palace feasts, which include menus like the following: 'kids stuffed with walnuts and almonds and pistachios; herons in sauce cameline; chines of beef; geese and bustards; and great beakers and jars of ruby-hearted wine.'¹⁴ Even this is insufficient, as later in the same scene 'more wine and fresh dainties' are brought out, including 'olives, and botargoes, and conserves of goose's liver richly seasoned.'¹⁵ Botargoes are a particular favorite of Eddison's, appearing repeatedly at the dinner table in *Ouroboros*. Like the 'fumadoes, and pilchards fried with mustard'¹⁶ that appear at another feast, it is not necessary for us to know what botargoes actually are; the words sound exotic, indulgent, and medieval, and that is enough.

“Manlove complains that Eddison overwhelms the reader with his excessive descriptions and meaningless catalogs of wealth. At times, the novel really does read like a series of set pieces designed to show off the colorful treasure hoards of Eddison's imagination. Manlove correctly points out that individual objects in such scenes – jewels, unicorns, botargoes – do not mean anything in themselves, however taken altogether they are not meaningless. The cumulative effect of Eddison's descriptions of magnificent wealth is to imbue the story with an aura of divinity, magic, and a glorious unreality.

“In the Medieval Irish tale *The Wooing of Étaín*, when Mider plays fidchell with Echu he wagers fabulous riches, listed off in a manner not unlike Eddison's treasure troves:

‘I will give you fifty fiery boars,’ said Mider, ‘curly-haired, dappled, light grey underneath and dark grey above, with horses' hooves on them, and a blackthorn vat that

can hold them all. Besides that, fifty gold-hilted swords. Moreover, fifty white red-eared cows and fifty white red-eared calves, and a bronze spancel on each calf. Moreover, fifty grey red-headed wethers, three-headed, three-horned. Moreover, fifty ivory-hilted blades. Moreover, fifty bright-speckled cloaks. But each fifty on its own day.’¹⁷

When his foster-father sees the wealth Echu has won, he concludes Midir must be in possession of magic power. It is precisely the excessive superabundance of the riches which indicates magic.

“In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*, the bed of Anfortas is adorned with precious stones. After listing off the many fragrances with which the room is perfumed, the poet goes on to list these gems. 'On every side it was luxurious, this bed of a man beggared of joy! Let no one try to argue that he ever saw a better. It was elegant and costly from the nature of its gemstones. Hear their names in detail.' Wolfram then proceeds to list off no less than 58 stones, among them gagathromeus, androdragma, pantherus, and hephæstitis.¹⁸

“Nobody who has read *The Mabinogion* will forget the story of How Culhwch Won Olwen. It begins with a long catalog of heroes, their names, relations, noteworthy deeds and special abilities. Culhwch invokes their names, every warrior in Arthur's retinue. In my edition, the list takes up nine pages!¹⁹ But the heart of the story is the deeds these heroes must accomplish, a long list of labors demanded by the Chief Giant Ysbaddaden before he grants Culhwch his daughter's hand in marriage. The list of labors is really a catalog of marvels; strange creatures, people, and objects. It goes on for eight pages, and includes well-known marvels from other tales, such as the Birds of Rhiannon.²⁰

“In Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, Herod delivers a ridiculous speech in which he lists off treasures, including precious stones, some of which are possessed with magic power. The speech

serves an obvious narrative function – Herod is desperately trying to convince Salome to accept one of these treasures instead of the head of the prophet Iokanaan which she demands – but it is primarily a flourish of weird poetry, a flight of fancy, and in Herod's endless cataloging of treasures his desperation to forestall the beheading of Iokanaan mirrors the poet's desire to prolong the fantasy itself, to go on luxuriating in its splendor and weirdness before all is brought to its inevitable end.

“Lastly I will mention the strange book of J.K. Huysmans, *Against the Grain*. The character of this novel, Des Esseintes, belongs to a declining family of the nobility; disgusted and bored by the Paris of the late 19th century, he retreats to the countryside to dedicate himself, like an anti-ascetic, to aesthetic experience and contemplation. The novel has a loose narrative, beginning with his creation of the weird hermitage, and ending with his forced return to Parisian society after the isolation destroys his fragile constitution. Each chapter is devoted to a different type of aesthetic object – literature, painting, travel, precious stones, flowers.

“The structure of *Against the Grain* resembles a lapidary, a treatise on gems, which has no narrative but proceeds from stone to stone, elaborating the aesthetic, medicinal, and magical properties of each, one by one. Similar to the lapidary is the bestiary, the treatise on animals. Both the lapidary and bestiary are types of supernatural art; in these books, objects of nature are rendered as marvels possessing hidden properties of power and symbolism; they represent nature invested with imagination. Now that science has stripped itself of art, it is impossible to write such books. This is why Borges wrote his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, a bestiary with no scientific pretensions, which is satisfied to deal exclusively with fantastical creatures.

“As for Huysmans' novel, it contains no symbolism: aesthetic pleasure is his only goal.

But this, in fact, is the deepest power of all marvels, all gemstones, flowers, unicorns, magic fountains, and holy grails: beauty, always new, always surprising, endlessly fascinating. Isis loves beauty, and when we adore beautiful images we worship her.

“The literature of dreams, of any age, can be understood as a lapidary, a treasury containing marvels symbolic and beautiful. Each marvel is a jewel, a decoration, but they also contain a hidden meaning; exactly like jewels in a lapidary or creatures in a bestiary. The *Odyssey*, the oldest romance, is just such an anthology of marvels (Polyphemus; Circe; the Sirens; Scylla and Charybdis) embedded in a frame narrative, not unlike an anthology of tales such as the *1001 Nights* or the *Pentamerone*.

“Stars and planets are the dreams which illuminate the night. They are jewels, marvels, which when grouped together form constellations. Each constellation is a story: Orion, the Pleiades, the Great Bear. Stories with roots in prehistoric oral tradition. Taken together, they form a mythology, arranged without beginning, end, or center. This tapestry of stories is the mantle of Isis, the Night.

“I will try to be a bit more precise. This tapestry or Cycle consists of Stories, each one made up of Rituals centered around Marvels. Take as an example Chrétien's *The Knight with the Lion*. The central Marvel is the magic fountain; the Ritual is Yvain's encounter at the fountain, slaying of the protector, and his wooing of the Countess; the Story is the linking of the major rituals, including Yvain's period of penance, living like a wildman, and acquiring his lion companion, into a coherent narrative; the Cycle is the whole Matter of Britain, all of its interwoven tales.

“Oral storytelling is the basis for all literature, but in Western literature oral qualities

declined over time as textual qualities became more prominent. As the emphasis on marvels and quest-ritual was replaced by psychology, the individual work became increasingly independent from other stories, until writers were expected to be entirely 'original.' Great works of modern dream literature often resisted this tendency. The Cthulhu Mythos of Lovecraft and his followers; the Zothique and Hyperborea cycles of Clark Ashton Smith; the neverending chronicles of Conan; all these cycles, written by a generation of fantasists whose library began with the *1001 Nights*, consist of short tales and curiosities which, while appreciable alone, are better grasped as a whole.

“But I could keep talking forever on this subject – why don't we do something else? There's a feast tonight, a gathering of all the lords and ladies of this realm. Our lord has summoned everyone to attend, perhaps you'd like to come.”

“Yes, I'd like that,” I said. “Lead the way.”

As we prepared to leave that treasure room, I noticed against one wall a box marked with an unmistakable design. It was the same eagle emblem which appeared on the coin from my first dream.

“What's in this box?” I asked Lunette.

“An aetites, or eaglestone,” she explained, “so-called because eagles keep them in their nests. It ensures healthy pregnancy, and it is good for epilepsy too. It also has the power of reconciling feuding lovers.²¹ Now come along, let's go, the way is through here.”

When she turned her back to unlock a portal behind the throne, I quickly opened the box, snatched up the ordinary-looking rock that lay within, and placed it in my pocket before closing back the lid.

CHAPTER 8

TWILIGHT

Lunette led me down a long and twisting corridor, until we came to a wooden portal, which opened unexpectedly onto fresh air. The door came out on a switchback cut in the side of a steep hill, overlooking a ravine. A dizzying cataract roared on one end of the gulch, casting up mist full of faint rainbows. Vegetation thrived on the sides of the ravine, soaked by the heavy mist, which was already dampening my clothes.

I couldn't be sure how long I had been on that strange world, whether it was a matter of hours, days, or years. It was hard to tell, because the night never ended, and nobody seemed to sleep. But now, for the first time, I saw that dawn had broken in the East, and a red sun had risen up until it was just clear of the distant hills, but no farther. It hesitated, facing off with the moon, which hung opposite, in the West, unwilling to give up its place; somehow the sun was unable to shine with its full power to light up the sky, its red glow could only muster twilight. The whole spectrum of colors beginning with red unraveled from East to West, ending in the black which cradled the moon; a twilight rainbow covered with star-gems. Surely nothing like it was possible on Earth.

Though the path leading down the side of the gulch was narrow and muddy, Lunette walked quickly and without fear. Several times I had to plaster myself against the muddy hillside when I lost my balance, or cling to Lunette, to avoid tumbling to an unknown death in the mist below us. By the time we reached the bottom of the gulch I was covered all over with mud from my slipping and sliding on the treacherous path. Lunette would have remained clean, were it not for me constantly grabbing her for support with my muddy mitts.

At the base of the ravine the path came to an ancient paved road which followed the length of the river, criss-crossing it with moss-covered bridges. As I came sliding down the last bit of the muddy trail and onto the road, I crashed into what I thought at first was a tree. It turned out to be a man, who barely budged despite all my weight colliding with his legs. Laughing, he hoisted me up and slapped my back, as he and all his fellows greeted Lunette and me. They were a troop of fearsome men, half-giants, all wearing leopard skins and carrying guns, spears, axes, all manner of metal weapons. Lunette talked and laughed with them, though I could hear nothing above the deafening roar of the cataract, as we all marched through the cold mist toward the source of the tremendous sound.

And then, suddenly, it appeared: the deluge of water from the precipice above, the explosion of white mist as it met the bottom of the ravine. I scarcely had a moment to appreciate the awesome sight before I was pushed along by the others, down the road which took us behind the cascade. Passing around the veil of water and mist, we emerged in a massive, high rock shelter. Built into the cavern was a castle of black onyx. In grandeur and sheer size it put to shame the famed treasury at Petra. The wall was decorated with fantastic scenes from an untold mythos, set with glittering emeralds, white carbuncles, gems of every color. Monstrous serpents were wrapped around the several pillars. Before the gate were hundreds of warriors like the leopard-clad men we fell in with, and I realized then we were at the tail end of a long procession marching down the ancient road and into the castle. The lords were dressed in all kinds of animal furs and antiquated armor, and carried banners with emblems of totemic animals: otter, snake, bear, owl, ocelot, boar. Among them were ladies dressed in gowns of twilight colors and adorned variously with crowns and diadems, splendid gold and silver jewelry, ermine and sable, veils of

glittering samite; the ladies rode horses, or sat in chariots pulled by cats or deer or black goats with jewel-encrusted horns, or were carried in luxurious litters or divans over the shoulders of lords. They were princesses, queens; goddesses, perhaps. The gate of the castle was impossibly wide: fifty of those half-giant men could have walked in abreast. And above the gate hung a huge banner of a blue and green half-lidded eye burning with a purple flame. I couldn't conceive of how all this fit behind that narrow waterfall, yet there it was.

As I admired the opulent design of the fantastical château, gazing upwards at the onyx gargoyles which haunted its heights laughing and grinning grotesquely, I perceived the innumerable bats hanging from the roof of the cavern, I began to hear their chirping and tittering, and to notice the swooping flights of solitary bats to and fro in the cavern, and in and out of the castle itself.

Presently we neared the giant portal, and passed through it among the jostling half-giant men, to the hall within, where countless warriors of the kind described sat at four long tables which stretched far to the back of the hall. The ladies took turns rising from the thrones on which they sat to walk the length of the hall, where the men were taking seats to drink and eat at the banquet spread out on the tables, and fill cups from serving vessels which, no matter how much they poured, were always brimming over with the heady drink.

Besides the lords and ladies, the hall was full of half-wild animals. Bats fluttered above our heads, but other crepuscular predators darted between our legs and scampered across the tables: foxes, cats, ferrets, lynx, coyote, wolves. Nobody seemed to mind them knocking over cups and climbing into laps to eat from the table like it were a farm trough. Muddy children ran through the hall chasing the animals and playing with them. Owls, ravens, goshawks, and

peregrines perched on shoulders and ate meat from the hands of human companions, but then would take flight and land on some other distant shoulder to be fed, so it couldn't be said if they belonged to anyone in particular. Giant emperor moths with gorgeous coloration filled the air; cats, foxes, and children, made a game of chasing and leaping at them, and the bats showed restraint in dining only sparingly on these beautiful specimens.

At the far end of the hall, overlooking everything, was a throne on a high pedestal. Behind the throne hung the banner of the flaming eye. Lunette took my arm and ushered me through the chaos of the hall toward this high throne, talking in my ear along the way:

“That is the throne of the High One, from which he gazes out and observes everything in the universe.”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“It is He Who Rules All, the Flame-Eyed One, Fulfiller of Desire, Worker of Evil, the Black God, the Thief. He who always guesses right, who is wise in all things. The friend of mortals, watcher-over of dreams. He is a shapeshifter with many names; for this reason we call him the Masked One.¹ He loves to travel, but this is his hall, and he will be here tonight. He has gathered us here to tell us something.”

As we neared the throne it seemed to grow taller and taller, until I was craning my neck to see the top of the onyx pedestal. Then I saw how the roof of the hall opened there above the throne, it was a circular window to the night sky, and the crescent moon was positioned to be perfectly visible and bathe the throne in its light. A solitary raven circled in this skylight, circling the moon; it was descending in spiral fashion, and then it landed on the seat of the throne. And then, without any crack, spark, or flash, the raven was no longer a raven, but a man sitting there:

my twin, dressed all in black. And then he spoke, and all the hall – women, men, children, birds, beasts – ceased their activity to listen.

“I have flown to every corner of the universe,” he said. “I have conversed with every tree and every mouse, I have kissed every stone and seen the bottom of every lake. Yet despite my powerful wisdom and vast knowledge, my counsel is scorned by disrespectful children. I taught them the secrets of metal, beer-brewing, medicine, all the arts of civilization; I gave them the names of plants and stones and revealed their hidden virtues. I taught them fire and the alphabet – but like spoiled children they have wasted my gifts!

“Long have we ruled these hills where rich grass grows! But now – can it be? – a newcomer is trying to drive out the ancient princes! She deludes her followers with vain talk of silly dreams, which bids poor mortals choose the hope of a good that may some day come to pass, so that its feckless consolations flatter their wretched lives with idle expectation!²

“I speak, of course, of my loathly sister. Mistress of the disgraced and disfigured earth; saint of ugliness, she despises beauty; heartless economist, she spurns wasteful luxury; soulless philosopher, she hates sacred illusions. We left the earth, fled to the stars, but this is not enough for her. She wants to see this world destroyed, deforested, paved over: now, her strength is such that she is seeking to make good on this old desire. If we're lucky perhaps some of us will be kept around in cages to entertain small children at the zoo, if we're not first vivisected by scientists. More likely, we will all be killed outright, and this long-fought war will finally end.

“That's why we must not hesitate – now's our final chance! We must ride out, into the world, strike first, reclaim what once was ours. We'll shut out the lights, let darkness overtake the world. A long, dark age will settle in: forests will overtake the towns, the sea will rise and

swallow land. We'll make the whole earth wild again! A purifying rain will cause machines to rust and fall apart, and healthy vegetation will cover over all the ruins. Mortals will serve us once again, we'll be like gods and goddesses to them! They will abandon science, and turn back to...to..."

But he couldn't finish. He seemed to be choking. Gasping, he clutched at his neck. I realized then I could only barely breathe: I gasped, tried to suck in air, but only a tiny bit of oxygen found its way into my lungs. Looking around desperately, I couldn't find Lunette. All the occupants of the hall were choking, asphyxiating, collapsing. Lords and ladies fell face first into their food. Birds and bats dropped out of the air. As everyone and everything lost consciousness, my twin and I hung on to life, surviving on the smallest bit of air.

I took feeble steps toward the throne, wanting to reach my twin, to tell him to end the dream, to wake me up. I slumped against the base of the pedestal, unable to move. My vision was blurring, but I could see, entering the hall from the wide portal, figures in red uniforms, wearing oxygen masks and carrying guns. They stepped over the corpses of the fallen lords and ladies, ignoring the jewels, the crowns, rings, hairpins, brooches, necklaces, the vast wealth of ages, the ancient swords and armor; they didn't care about these priceless treasures.

The throne had suddenly become very small, the height of the pedestal had vanished, now the chair itself was on the floor. I found myself leaning against it. I clutched at my twin's leg, shook it, tried to rouse him, but his eyelids drooped and soon he was unconscious like the rest.

She was close now, and I recognized her: everything I feared and hated, the ugliness of the world. Inside her oxygen mask she grinned, showing her rotten-black teeth. When she was standing right before me, she held up a sewing needle and spoke, her voice distorted by the

plastic mask:

“One little prick is all it takes, and all the air comes rushing out. You see, History breaks down all arrogance. Greatness falls; the bubble bursts; swollen pride is flattened. The lowly ascend to high places and the proud are reduced to low degree.”³

The hall was melting at the edges, beginning to disintegrate: the dream was coming to an end. With the last of my strength I reached into my pocket and feebly grasped the eaglestone. If it was meant for something, it had to be this, somehow. I took it out, but couldn't keep my grip, I was fading too fast. The egg-shaped stone fell from my hand, rolled off my lap and onto the floor, where it collided with her boot.

She picked up the stone with her yellow-nailed hand and examined it contemptuously. Her dry, cracked lips peeled back over diseased, whitish gums in a hideous snarling grin as she hurled the stone against the ground. The stone split into two pieces. It was hollow, and covered inside with quartz. One half was red, the other purple. Something about the sight of it alarmed her, her grin faded, her countenance lost the cruel confidence which had always marked it before.

The sound of the cracking stone roused my twin. He was nearly dead, only capable in these last moments of staring expressionlessly at his murderer. She noticed him, met his gaze, then removed her oxygen mask, gripped the arms of the throne, and leaned forward, right over where I sat on the floor. Crushed between their bodies, I looked up and saw their faces preparing to meet. I could not tell if she was about to kiss him, or bite off his nose and proceed to devour him. But before they touched, the scene faded to darkness, and I woke up in my bed, at home, on earth, alone.

NOTES

Chapter 2

The idea of two opposing “dream-women” is borrowed from *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. Some of my language is lifted directly from Martin Regal's translation. “Then the good dream-woman came in...and advised me to stop following the old faith for the rest of my life, and to refrain from studying any charms or ancient lore. And she told me to be kind to the deaf and the lame and the poor and the helpless, and that is where my dream ended” (22, 531). “He who rules all has sent you alone from your house to explore the other world” (33, page 549, poem 28).

Chapter 3

1. “the palace that may be told of only in song,” Lord Dunsany, *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, page 43.
2. Dunsany, 116.
3. Dunsany, 135.
4. Clark Ashton Smith, from “The Song of the Necromancer,” *The Emperor of Dreams*, page 3-4.
5. Friedrich Schlegel, “Talk on Mythology,” *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, page 82.
6. Ursula Le Guin, “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” *The Language of the Night*, 83-84.
7. “They were a banished race of beautiful barbarians, and when they died they could not be replaced,” J.A. Baker, *The Peregrine*, page 11.
8. Clark Ashton Smith, “The Dark Eidolon,” *The Emperor of Dreams*, page 333.
9. Dana Jennings, “In a Fantasyland of Liars, Trust No One, and Keep Your Dragon Close.” Review of *A Dance with Dragons* by George R.R. Martin. *The New York Times*, 14 July 2011,

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/15/books/a-dance-with-dragons-by-george-r-r-martin-review.html?_r=0. Accessed 23 Nov. 2016.

Chapter 4

1. From “Artist Unknown,” from *Les Fleurs du Mal*.
2. From Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* page 119.

Chapter 6

1. Hakim Bey, “Black Crown & Black Rose,” 64.
2. Robert W. Chambers, “The Repairer of Reputations,” from *The King in Yellow*, 44.

References to Fenrir, Nidhogg, Iron-Wood, etc., are derived from Bernard Scudder's translation of the *Völuspá*.

Chapter 7

1. Plutarch, *Moralia*, Volume V, “Isis and Osiris,” 13, page 35.
2. This list of features is based in part on Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez's discussion of oral storytelling in *Contemporary American Indian Literatures & the Oral Tradition*.
3. Plutarch, “Isis and Osiris,” 15, page 39-41.
4. The seed of this interpretation comes from Rudolf Steiner's *Ancient Myths: Their Meaning and Connection with Evolution* (see Lecture II, page 17-19).
5. See Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*.
6. “In order to grasp nature, especially the highest in nature...one must cease to live exclusively in ideas and begin to 'think' in pictures,” Rudolf Steiner, *The Arts and Their Mission*, 86.
7. Mircea Eliade, Forward to *Images and Symbols*, 15.
8. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *Illuminations*, 89.

9. Eliade, 13.
10. Ibid., 16-17.
11. Friedrich Schlegel, "Talk on Mythology," 85.
12. C.N. Manlove, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*, 143.
13. E.R. Eddison, *The Worm Ouroboros*, 498.
14. Ibid., 316.
15. Ibid., 318.
16. Ibid., 106.
17. "The Wooing of Étaín," *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, trans. Jeffrey Gantz, 53.
18. Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzifal*, 392-393.
19. "How Culhwch Won Olwen," *The Mabinogion*, trans. Jeffrey Gantz, 140-148.
20. Ibid., 154-161.
21. Albertus Magnus, *The Book of Secrets*, 45-46.

Chapter 8

1. This list of titles is derived in part from Jean Young's translation of The Deluding of Gylfi in the *Prose Edda* (page 48-49).
2. Adapted from H.J. Thomson's translation of the *Psychomachia* (page 295-297).
3. Adapted from the *Psychomachia*, Hope's speech after killing Pride (299).

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