Abstract

This thesis provides a survey of four writers who created fictional fantasy worlds as settings for their stories. Before the widespread success of JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1960s, there was no obviously commercial motive for them to do so. It is therefore important to examine the literary and philosophical decisions that led them to undertake this onerous feat of the imagination.

The thesis opens with an introduction explaining these objectives and defining four subject authors – George MacDonald, ER Eddison, HP Lovecraft and Mervyn Peake – in opposition to the 'genre fantasy' of recent decades. A literature review is then provided.

Chapter one deals with George MacDonald, who turned to fantasy world-building in order to denude his fiction of rationally comprehensible geographies and ideologies, replacing these with the intuitive emotional truths that he saw as being spiritually valuable. This requires an examination of MacDonald's role in the emergence of the fairytale as a literary form in Britain, and also of MacDonald's debt to the German Romantics, whose spiritual and literary ideas he claimed as a central influences. This debt raises the crucial question of exactly how MacDonald defined reality itself, which is addressed with reference to his stories and essays. Heavily influenced by Christian Platonism, MacDonald defined reality as that which exists in the mind of God and can be perceived by its earthly analogy, the human imagination. To his mind, therefore, the imagination is a more reliable judge of reality than the intellect. He used fantasy to inspire this potent capacity of the human mind.

Chapter two covers ER Eddison, mostly via investigation of archival holdings relating to him. It opens with a general introduction to Eddison's first novel, *The Worm Ouroboros*, and goes on to offer a similar explanation of the tone and content of his later, lesser-known works, the Zimiamvia cycle. With this information in place, the philosophical content of Eddison's novels is explained: struck by the perceived inadequacies of conventional moral definitions, Eddison used a fantasy world to propose a full-scale revision of moral philosophy. His ideas, and their applicability to the real world, are further illustrated by his correspondence dealing with World War II. Eddison's views on reality as a whole, which he defined in relation to the purpose of a single, immutable central ideal, are then discussed. Eddison is shown to have had

a highly optimistic, rather than escapist, view of the universe, and to have used fantasy to show that perception more clearly than realism could have permitted.

Chapter three deals with HP Lovecraft. Lovecraft's fantasy fiction is introduced in the context of his deep regard for his own regional (New England) history and his simultaneous secular materialist convictions; he was attempting to build a world in which the two could be constructively combined. His depiction of humanity's relationship with the universe is then examined. Lovecraft repeatedly claimed he had no interest in humanity, but many of his best and most well-known stories are found to express clear, albeit narrowly and exclusively focused, humanistic morality. This contradiction is explained by revisiting the conflict between intense parochialism and materialism in his stories and essays. Lovecraft wanted New England to survive as an eternal, almost spiritual truth, but could not see how this was possible in a universe that could entertain any such teleology. His fantasy world emerged as part of an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile this tension.

Chapter four examines Mervyn Peake, whose fantasy world of Gormenghast is examined in detail and found to be working on entirely different principles to reality, serving to thwart personal identity and reduce individuals to functions of an institution. From there, the controversial question of whether or not Gormenghast can be considered Gothic literature is examined. Gothicism is interpreted broadly as literature concerned with the remoteness of metaphysical truths, and by that definition, Peake's world clearly falls into the category. This raises the question of the nature of the metaphysical truth missing from Gormenghast, which is answered via reference to Peake's broader body of work: in Gormenghast, as in reality as Peake saw it, human being suffer potentially insurmountable emotional and spiritual isolation from one another. The fictional castle therefore serves to illustrate what Peake saw as a profound flaw in the real world.

A concluding chapter locates a core similarity between these four authors: each one was meditating on the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of reality, an undertaking that required its participants to look at reality from the outside. Hence they created fantasy worlds where the cornerstones of reality, and perceived threats to it, were thrown into high relief. World-building is therefore situated as a conservative form of literature, but one that allows the testing and critiquing of, rather than escape from, reality.

Secondary Worlds in Pre-Tolkienian Fantasy Fiction

by Joseph Young

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University of Otago

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Acknowledgements

This project has been a long time in the making. Not simply in that it has taken the thick end of four years to complete, with twelve months of pre factum legwork and preliminary retraining before that. I made my first, informal proposal for a PhD on the history of the Crusades in 2000, another on the history of heraldry laughed out of town in 2002, and was denied the requisite funding for a third, more official proposal on Latin invective in 2005. Looking back on the difficulty I have always had with working in languages other than English that was probably just as well.

So I decided to study the literature of a language I could actually speak. Fantasy literature of various kinds has been a constant companion of mine throughout childhood and adolescence and, to the despair of various authority figures, stands to this day as my central cultural influence. Much as l loved it, however, it did not occur to me to try to study it in an academic context until late 2005. At the time I was making small contributions to public radio and had recently made a proposal for a series of short documentaries about contributors to fantasy literature. The idea was rejected, but putting together the proposal had required me to do some cursory research into a number of fantasists, and it occurred to me that there might just be a degree in this. Besides, I reasoned, I hadn't made my parents sit through a graduation ceremony in eighteen months.

My supervisors, Doctor Paul Tankard and Emeritus Professor Colin Gibson, were instrumental in the process of turning my extremely rough idea into a workable academic proposal. I wish I could say I was a long-term fan of George MacDonald and ER Eddison, striving to give my long-beloved idols their due, but in fact it was Paul and Colin who suggested their inclusion while making suggestions for the downsizing and refocusing my unworkably long list of subject authors. Once the project was underway, their ongoing aid, attention and input in the process of refining my ideas was indispensable. This thesis would never have gotten off the ground, let alone been finished, without their help. In light of their frequent requests for shorter sentences, I offer them this one: Thank you.

Thanks are due to some other members of the Otago English department as well – to Professor Lyn Tribble for steering me in the right direction to begin with, to Doctors Tom McLean and Wendy Parkins for their invaluable introduction to literary

theory, and to our indefatigable department coordinator Liz Lammers for skillfully juggling postgrad resources and masterminding my many and sometimes slightly far-fetched Amazon orders.

The Eddison chapter was especially onerous as I had to hike all the way to England and study him there. Passing acknowledgement of aid in keeping body and soul together for those nine weeks are due to Deborah (in Leeds) and David, Carrie and Timmy (in Oxford). No thanks whatsoever are extended to the person who picked my pocket in Leeds Public Library. That wallet was a gift.

Numerous friends and fellow fantasy fans have read bits and pieces of the thesis, and offered valuable moral and intellectual support. Of especial note are Craig Johnson and Kirsti Rawstron, who were both thoughtful and encouraging proofreaders; Kirsti in particular spotted some terrific howlers in the Lovecraft chapter. Also appreciated were the comments and encouragements of David Bisman, Nicky Conroy, Kathy Cresswell-Moorcock, Leon Day, Harry Harding, Andrew Robins and Grant Robinson. Thanks also to Chris Jacobs for his congratulatory fist-bump upon learning that I'd included *Dragon Magazine* as a primary source in an academic bibliography. I'm glad to have been able to refer to a magazine that was more or less the trade paper of my adolesence, even if only to provide an example of what I *wasn't* looking at. One of the issues I referenced even had cover art by Larry Elmore. For better or worse, things don't get much more D&D than that.

Finally there is the matter of the dedication. It is customary, of course, to dedicate one's thesis either to a spouse or partner, of which I have neither, or to a major academic influence, of whom I am blessed with several, no one of whom seems preeminent. Consequently I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, William Young, who didn't live to see the project started, much less completed, but whose financial support made the Eddison trip, and indeed most of my postgraduate career, possible. I doubt Papa would have quite understood my thesis – he struggled with fiction at the best of times – but he and I had any number of conversations about academic matters, and I am quite sure he would have grasped the spirit of the thing, if not the letter. Happy birthday.

Introduction

In 1988, American writer Bob Salvatore received a telephone call from his editor asking if he could write a new character into the proposal for a fantasy novel he had recently submitted. He said yes, he'd get back to them in a couple of days. The editor responded that she would need an immediate answer. At the very least, she needed to know the character's name.

On the spot, Salvatore replied, "Drizzt Do'Urden of Daermon N'a'shezbaernon, Eighth House of Menzoberranzan" (Varney "RA Salvatore" 120).

The novel, *The Crystal Shard*, was published later that year and did very well, chiefly because of Drizzt, who was described by one reviewer as a character "readers will enjoy getting to know" (Bunnell 79). Readers certainly do enjoy him; he has gone on to be the central character in sixteen more books by Salvatore, who at his publisher's suggestion took the pen-name RA Salvatore, considered more suitable, apparently, for the author of books about a character who has grown into a calm, calculating anti-hero. Salvatore is now the very bankable author of some seventy novels, which turn up routinely on bestseller lists. A decade after writing *The Crystal Shard*, tiring of Drizzt for the moment, he created a new fantasy world which he said would be "good for another fifteen to twenty books before I run out of places to explore" (Varney "RA Salvatore" 120).

Salvatore's method of work is indicative of the way the recent boom in the demand for fantasy literature has been supplied. Salvatore and his colleagues are professionals writing fantasy because their publishers know it will sell. There are any number of such authors working right now across the world, many of them using intellectual properties – fantasy worlds and fantasy characters – owned by publishers and licensed to writers as the need for new product emerges. Drizzt's adventures take place in a fantasy world, the Forgotten Realms of Faerun, originally created by Canadian fantasy fan Ed Greenwood in the late 1970s (Varney, "Ed Greenwood" 112). According to the bibliographic website fantasticfiction.co.uk, the number of novels, short story compilations, omnibuses, gazeteers and reader's companions relating to the Forgotten Realms exceeds three hundred. Around forty authors have contributed to this line of product.

The Forgotten Realms novels can fairly be reckoned as pulp literature. Although we must take care to extend Salvatore and his colleagues the courtesy of assuming that they are self-respecting wordsmiths out to produce credible pieces of popular fiction, their books exhibit few pretensions to enduring literary merit. Authors chronicling adventures in the Forgotten Realms are producing light entertainment, something that it is by no means wrong – or easy – to do. Their method of working, however, demonstrates a clear trend; to write fantasy, you need to have or create an imaginary world with its own geography, demography and history. Once that world exists, you visit its cities, nations, characters and historical epochs until you run out of nooks and crannies to explore, or the publisher becomes disenchanted with the sales figures. This model is employed by authors who have created their own fantasy worlds as well as those writing to order. Having created the world of Valdemar in the late 1980s, Mercedes Lackey has written over thirty books exploring it. This is how modern commercial fantasy works.

JRR Tolkien established this trend, by and large single-handedly. His richly-imagined secondary world of Middle-earth has become the blueprint for a huge proportion of subsequent fantasy writers (Grant 393). Since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1953 – or more correctly, since its American paperback publication some fifteen years later – it has become possible to talk about a stereotypical fantasy world, which is usually a broadly medieval place peopled by warring goblins and elves, or their close equivalents, while wizards and dragons pursue their own agendas with the aid of small bands of (often unexpectedly) heroic agents.

Certainly, the novels set in the Forgotten Realms follow this pattern very closely. Drizzt Do'Urden is a disinherited elf nobleman, with no home, accustomed to adventuring alone in the wilderness, noted for his signature bladed weapon. Attentive Middle-earth fans will note the parallels with Tolkien's Aragorn; Salvatore has claimed that he thinks of Drizzt as "a cross between Daryth [another, less popular *Forgotten Realms* character] and Aragorn from *The Lord of the Rings*" (Weinlein 80). Other heroes in the Forgotten Realms enjoy the advice and encouragement of an unflappable, itinerant, pipe-smoking, apparently unkillable wizard, Elminster of Shadowdale, whose likeness to Tolkien's Gandalf the Grey are unmistakable. A very similar character, Fizban the Fabulous, makes regular appearances in another multi-authored fantasy series from the same publisher, the *Dragonlance* books. These tell of

the adventures of the Heroes of the Lance, a band of dwarfs, elves and warriors of various fictional nations working to thwart the overwhelming reptilian armies of the evil Dragon Highlords. Many of the *Dragonlance* novels (which, like those of the *Forgotten Realms*, number in the hundreds) feature a map of Ansalon, the fictional continent across which this war is fought (Hickman and Weiss 102-103). Such aids to the imagination are all but expected by contemporary fantasy fans.

This tradition of 'genre fantasy' has become immensely popular and commercially successful. As a result, Tolkienesque characters, races and narrative patterns have proliferated across other media. The most recent film adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, adapted for the screen by Linda Woolverton and released in 2010, has imposed a new plot on Carroll's characters that owes a great deal to the conventions and stereotypes of post-Tolkienian genre fantasy: the Red Queen has conquered Wonderland with an army, and Alice, the Mad Hatter and the Cheshire Cat embark on a covert paramilitary mission to overthrow her. Woolverton's script not only conforms to a very conventional genre-fantasy plot, but also displays the implicit assumption that Wonderland, being a fantasy world, operates in the same manner as Middle-earth, as a unified, mappable geographical space governed by fueding kings and princes of varying moral standing, each attempting to use magical artifacts to tip political and military proceedins in their favour. What has happened here is that Lewis Carroll's episodic and dream-like fantasy has been adapted to conform to post-Tolkienian assumptions about how fantasy worlds work. Much the same could be said about the recent cinematic adaptations of CS Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* or, for that matter, of Tolkien's own work. These films dispense with much of Tolkien and Lewis's spiritual and philosophical content to make room for physical action, much of it invented by the screenwriters working under the assumption that fantasy is about battles, wizards and warlords, rather than moral discussion or spiritual contemplation. Such rewriting arguably strips Tolkien and Lewis's books of the power that separates them from their mass-produced offspring, but the sales figures suggest that this is what the audience wants. As of this writing, a film studio stands ready to spend over half a *billion* dollars adapting Tolkien's *The Hobbit* for the screen, confident of a robust return on investment (Scherer A1). The cinematic adaptations of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, after all, rewrote the record books in terms of ticket sales. Success like that is, practically speaking, self-justified. Shippey (xvii) quotes "the

commissioning editor of a major publishing house" as saying "Only fantasy is mass-market."

Shippey's justification for the title of his book *JRR Tolkien: Author of the Century* is that Tolkien's work has become the *locus classicus* of arguably the characteristic genre of twentieth-century literature (xviii-xix). Further indication of this cultural and commercial phenomenon can be found in the extraordinary success of Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, which are said to account for a considerable percentage of all sales of paperback books in Britain (Hunt 91). Pratchett's novels are prose pantomimes of a sort. They are set in a consciously-cnceived parody of a standard fantasy world and populated by stock characters who are well aware of their conventional functions and make a habit of commenting on it with ironical self-awareness, as does Pratchett's voice as narrator. In his novels the entire race of dwarfs are caricatures of Tolkien's Gimli; there is a running joke through several books in which non-dwarf characters speculate as to how female and male dwarfs could possibly tell each other apart (the perplexed dwarfs explain that it doesn't really matter). Given the modern media environment, Pratchett can be confident that this sly joke about the profusion of mail-clad, axe-weilding, luxuriantly bearded dwarf warriors in genre fantasy will be caught. The fact that his novels comfortably outnumber and outsell many of the fantasies they parody stands as eloquent vindication of that confidence.

Those world-builders who try to step out of Tolkien's shadow often do so in a way that concedes a continuing debt to him. Novelty value in genre fantasy is typically sought through the reorganisation, rather than abandonment, of Tolkienian stereotypes. The *Dark Sun* novels, for example, take place in a world specifically designed to contradict those stereotypes; dwarves are clean-shaven, elves are nomadic, utilitarian savages, the technology is akin to that of the late Stone Age, the dominant terrain is desert and wasteland, and the morality of the characters depends largely on the reliability of their water supply. What is interesting is that the designers of this world, Timothy Brown and Troy Denning, instinctively saw fit to consider their portrayal of dwarves and elves, to deprive them of their magic swords and stereotypical nobility, and indeed to deliberately sit down and create a separate, invented geographical stage for his work (the *Dark Sun* world, Athas, is mapped as faithfully as Ansalon or Middle-earth). These characteristics indicate who their greatest influence really is. Tolkien's blueprint is accepted not just because it sells,

but because two or three generations of fans and writers have grown up thoroughly immersed in his books and those of the writers immediately and powerfully influenced by him, and tend to accept his blueprint more or less implicitly. It is very much part of our cultural fabric. This should be construed as a testimony to the power of Tolkien's vision.

Tolkien was not, however, the first person to create a new world as a setting for fiction. Although much of the popular currency of fantasy may be traced to attempts to imitate the commercial success and creative methodologies of Tolkien (and more recently those of JK Rowling), the invention of secondary worlds is a practice dating much further back in the history of literature – further, in fact, than the emergence of any remotely definable fantasy genre, or even the division between fiction and nonfiction. Whether Homer thought he was creating fiction or history – or even if he distinguished between the two – is a vexed question, but the *Odyssey* takes place on a series of invented islands, kingdoms and underworlds for which the Olympian religion had no definitive scriptural depiction. Likewise, Spenser created the fictional realm of Gloriana, a place obviously designed to represent Britain, but often in a more allegorical than geographical sense. Indeed, despite the fact that King Arthur is identified as English and references to real British places are often made in the stories about him, many of the various interpretations of the Arthuriad present settings inspired by, rather than genuinely portraying, the real England (Ashley 60-61). In the last two centuries, writers such as George MacDonald, David Lindsay, ER Eddison, HP Lovecraft, Robert E Howard and Mervyn Peake have all taken it upon themselves to invent new places and new worlds as stages for their fantasy adventures. They did so, furthermore, in a time before such literature was fashionable – before bookshops had large fantasy sections, and before hardened professionals such as RA Salvatore and Try Denning could go to meetings with outlines for fantasy trilogies and expect their publishers to instinctively welcome, and indeed solicit, such proposals.

I am interested in examining how and why writers such as George MacDonald and Mervyn Peake went about their world-building before the existence of the Tolkien's methodological blueprint. Fantasy is, I argue, the literature of the counter-intuitive, requiring the creation of strange new worlds and supernatural fiats that need to be both marvellous and believable. To build an entire world that satisfies both criteria is an arduous undertaking; to create one that resonates with its audience all the

more so. What I want to examine in this dissertation are the reasons writers of fantasy in the century or so preceding the post-Tolkienian boom were moved to create self-contained secondary worlds.

What follows is an account of four major pre-Tolkienian fantasists – George MacDonald, ER Eddison, HP Lovecraft and Mervyn Peake. These four were chosen because they present a very diverse set of imaginations. Here we have here a Congregationalist cleric, a civil servant, an unemployable poseur, and a struggling, eccentric painter. MacDonald's reason for getting up in the morning appears to have been to further his relationship with God; Lovecraft was a vociferous and at times mean-spirited materialist. Eddison was the very picture of a dry, stiff-upper-lipped British civil servant, Peake an incurable, sometimes pathetically unworldly romantic. Unlike RA Salvatore, none of them seem to have had any commercial imperative or prodding from their publishers to produce fantasy fiction. And yet all four turned to writing fantasy and, quickly enough, began the process of world-building. My central research question is why.

After my literature review, this thesis is divided into four main chapters, one on each of my four authors. The first chapter covers George MacDonald, beginning with a brief introduction to his life and works, and his conviction that experiental, emotional intuition offered the true path to Heaven. This is illustrated with reference to his major works of fantasy, the novels *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895) and his fairytale "The Golden Key". Having laid this groundwork, I go on to explain MacDonald's debt, as both a theologian and writer, to German Romanticism. This includes discussion of his role in the emergence of the fairytale as an English form and the controversy over its potential function. I point out that MacDonald saw it as an ideal vessel for his spiritual manifesto, which I revisit in light of his Germanic education, with reference to "The Golden Key" and "The Light Princess". I also discuss aspects of MacDonald's life that demonstrate why he found Romanticism such an attractive idea. The chapter concludes with an examination of MacDonald's position in the tradition of Christian Platonism, referring especially to his understanding of the location of the division between reality and invention, and describing his debt in this endeavour to Augustinian theodicy. This discussion is offered as an illustration of MacDonald's apparent disengagement from the notion that reality is empirical, and therefore from any particular faith in realism as a literary device. He turned to fantasy, I conclude, as an attempt to disengage with rationalism;

he subsequently built worlds because of their expressive value to his essentially Romantic theology.

The second chapter addresses ER Eddison, and begins with an explanation of the tone and content of his novels (which are obscure enough to warrant such an introduction). Eddison's later fantasies *Mistress of Mistresses* (1935), *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941) and *The Mezemtian Gate* (1958), forming the tripartite Zimiamvia cycle, are given pride of place here, as it is in those works that Eddison did the bulk of his potent world-building (his earlier novel, *The Worm Ouroboros*, published in 1922, is discussed largely to give context to its successors). I argue that in the Zimiamvian novels, Eddison was using fantasy to erase his characters neuroses and therefore focus on the true kernels of their humanity. This chapter draws extensively on my original archival research on Eddison, about whom there is little scholarly discussion. Recourse to archival sources reveals a great deal about Eddison's optimistic ontological ideas, which he used fantasy to illustrate. The true nature of Zimiamvia's womenfolk is explained in some detail, as Eddison's fabulously beautiful female characters play a crucial role in this illustration. Eddison's concession of the necessity of evil, and his suggestion that it did not, in fact, invalidate his point, is also discussed. By way of further illustration, I have explored Eddison's writings and correspondence during World War II, as these shed a great deal of light on his intentions as a philosopher and world-builder. The chapter concludes with a discussion of which world Eddison considered 'real', Earth or Zimiamvia. This involves a restatement of Eddisonian cosmology and morality. The point is made that to Eddison, reality was a relative concept; operating on sounder moral principles than Earth, Zimiamvia is 'more real'. This leads me to the conclusion that Eddison created secondary worlds because his search for symbolic truth required him to shift moral and ontological goalposts in ways that realism could not allow.

Chapter three deals with the American fantasist HP Lovecraft, and begins with a brief introduction to his life and his more noteworthy works. I go on to explain the cosmology of Arkham, Lovecraft's distinctive fantasy town, a part of America that could never have existed in real life. I define this cosmology as a secular witch-hunt, centering around evidence of Lovecraft's own antiquarian preoccupations and secular materialist convictions and using the stories "The Festival", "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth" as examples of this paradigm in action. I also examine the consequences of Lovecraft's own unfortunate psychopathology for the

social and moral tone of his world. I go on to examine Lovecraft's perception of humanity's relationship with the cosmos, pointing out that his self-proclaimed focus on non-human affairs actually required him to pay close attention to how he depicted humanity in his fiction. "The Colour out of Space" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth" are used as examples. This leads into a discussion of his opinions on race and how they affect stories such as "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Dunwich Horror"; my conclusion is that Lovecraft was in fact something of a 'reluctant anthropologist'. I argue that, in this capacity, Lovecraft was essentially using fantasy to make a plea for social and intellectual stasis. Works such as "The Rats in the Walls" and the novella *At the Mountains of Madness* serve to illustrate his fear that the destruction of humanity could be destroyed by either progress or regress. This fear, I argue, is the result of tension between the abiding, essentially spiritual respect he had for a very specific set of human accomplishments and the expansive, impersonal secular materialism he espoused so strongly. My conclusion is that he created a world as an arena in which to test the endurance of those accomplishments in the face of the battering they inescapably stood to receive from the universe.

The subject of the final chapter of the thesis is the fantasy fiction of Mervyn Peake. I begin with an examination of Gormenghast as an entirely separate and all-encompassing secondary world specifically designed, it seems, to stifle plot and reduce characters to functions of an institution. What Peake has done here, I argue, is stop time. Peake then places two more recognisably and sympathetically human characters in this world, an act I connect to Tolkien's argument that, in order to be successful, fantasy requires points of human contact. Although biographical evidence from Peake's life has been presented by other authors seeking to explain his highly unusual fantasy world, I find those explanations unsatisfactory. Rather, I examine the more controversial suggestion that Peake is a contributor to the Gothic tradition. This involves an explanation of the essential features of the Gothic tradition, and of the broad but numerous parallels that Peake's work has with it. Peake will be presented as an author centrally concerned with the gap between fact and truth (unlike MacDonald and Eddison, who create worlds where the two are reconciled). This leads into an analysis of Peake's career-long fascination with islands and maritime imagery, which appears in his novels in the form of a remarkable number of water metaphors and similes. Building on the work of leading Peake scholar G. Peter Winnington, I argue that this is symptomatic of Peake's perception of a shifting, unmappable chaos

between isolated human souls, and the necessity (but also the danger and potential impossibility) of bridging those gaps. This furthers my conclusion that Peake was a writer preoccupied with metaphysical gaps. Gothic fantasy, with its focus on alienation from symbolic truth, was an ideal venue for such discourse. Moving into the no-man's-land between humanity and its imagination, furthermore, necessitates world-building to express such a vision.

My overall answer to the question of why these four writers of fantasy built secondary worlds is to critique reality as a whole, rather than any particular aspect of it. Despite their diverse backgrounds and very different imaginations, all found themselves dissatisfied with reality on a fundamental, systemic level. In order to articulate such an comprehensive and elemental critique, all four needed to create self-contained universes set up on different motivating principles to our own. Realism does not allow this, so these four writers turned to fantasy and, quickly enough, to world-building as a method to illustrate the deficiencies of reality.

This is a strategy with an important function. It vindicates Tolkien's point that escape from reality is not necessarily a cowardly act. Fantasy is occasionally accused of fostering escapism, and it certainly has that capacity. What I demonstrate is that by setting aside the rules of reality and the notion that realism is the best way of depicting reality, these authors acquired a rare capacity to examine our position within it. Such work was done long before there was any commercial imperative for writing fantasy. Secondary-world fantasy is, and will likely remain, a genre of great cultural importance, if only because it is written, bought and read in great quantities. But this boom is built on the work of these earlier fantasists who were writing against the grain rather than with it. Knowing what moved them to make that effort, and to make Drizzt possible, is therefore important to our understanding of our literary culture.

The Theory of Fantasy

Fantasy worlds are not traditionally seen as problematic places. As Peter Hunt remarks (5-6), one of the more common functions of fantasy is simplification, and many secondary worlds – by substituting violence for conflict, friendship for love, magic for accomplishment and so on – accomplish this very successfully. By situating the action of a work of fiction in a new and invented environment, writers of such literature very consciously and clearly place their work within the bounds of the impossible. Since definitions and the academic discussions proceeding both to and from them tend to be more directly concerned with edges and with taxonomising problematic or borderline cases, few literary critics spend a great deal of time on secondary worlds, either in terms of constructing general frameworks or examining specific examples. Instead, theory relating to fantasy and the fantastic has tended to be preoccupied with examples or subgenres where fantasy elements are less obvious, or more anomalous, than they might be taken to be in places such as Eddison's Mercury or Peake's Gormenghast. In giving examples, many theorists of fantasy will tap the work of authors such as Kafka, Cazotte, Poe, Henry James and Hoffman. Others will champion interpretations of Pynchon or even Stoppard as fantasists.

This has left the emergence and development of an important literary form largely untouched by theorists and rarely examined by critics. With rare exceptions such as Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz's brief compilation of case studies of *Alternative Worlds In Fantasy Fiction*, scholarly commentary on fantasy has tended to steer clear of secondary worlds. This lack of emphasis has persisted as secondary-world fantasy has grown into a hugely pervasive publishing concern.

Therefore, building a theoretical framework for a project such as mine is difficult. There exists a sizeable body of literary history and theory relating to fantasy, but most of the writers who have contributed to it attack the practice of world-building and argue that stories that take place within an artificial world fall outside the purview of any theory pertaining to fantastic literature. One will search the aforementioned fantasy shelves in contemporary bookshops in vain for any of the supposed fantasy exemplars commonly cited by most theorists. Much of this reticence can be traced back to the influence of Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic; a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, published in 1970 and translated into English in 1973.

In this book Todorov argues that fantasy literature is a genre built around what he calls *the fantastic*: that period within a narrative in which both the characters and the reader must guess for themselves whether events are caused by natural or supernatural agency – essentially, the time between something going bump in the night and anyone finding out what it was (25). Once this matter is cleared up, Todorov argues, a work of literature becomes either *uncanny* (if what was going on turned out to be merely odd, in which case the strangeness was simply a result of misapprehension or imagination on the part of the characters) or *marvellous* (if the magic was presented as real). The pure fantastic, he suggests, is present only in a small group of mostly nineteenth-century works where the question of exactly what it was that went bump in the night is never wholly answered. The fantastic therefore constitutes a dividing line, rather than category of its own, in the graphical diagram he constructs to demonstrate his point. By this definition, as later commentators on Todorov's theories have pointed out (for instance, Jackson 32-35), fantasy is not a genre but a mode that literature adopts.

Todorov argues that for the fantastic, so perceived, to function at all, a text must present the events in question as taking place within a 'real' world of 'living' persons, and much of the remainder of his book is dedicated to clarifying and examining the consequences of this (33). He reminds readers that a text is a closed system whose elements refer only to each other, rather than to anything from outside. A written description of, for example, a pencil in a book refers not to a pencil that may be sitting next to the book on the desk as its owner reads the description, but to pencils in the way the author intends them to appear and function within the work (152). Todorov discusses this point to remind his readers that all works of fiction, as a consequence of their composition, take place within an invented world, in which the author suffers no external restrictions on his or her decision of what a pencil looks like, does or even is. Deciding to put a dragon into a book is therefore not so huge a leap of the imagination as an uninitiated reader or critic might suppose. Nonetheless, since literary language in general and that discussing the fantastic in particular exists in only notional connection with the world outside the book, making such an inclusion allows the creation of a fantastic world that is not only dependent on its written description but in a sense *is* written description (92). The fantastic can only function, Todorov argues, in cases in which the author is using such description to make assertions he or she intends to be taken seriously, but that are related only to the

internal universe of the book by the reader. Fantasy cannot be created via, and should not be read into, metaphor, compositional flourish, or poetic device – it must 'actually' happen. Todorov is quite strict about this. The authors of allegorical fairy tales, he argues, use the fantastic as a foregrounding technique to emphasise externally applicable morals that often boil down to mere common sense. The supernatural in such works is not, he argues, meant to be taken seriously, even within the world of the story. Therefore such works cannot be said to exhibit the fantastic (64-65). Under strict Todorovian modeling, therefore, most of the work of George MacDonald would fall outside the definition of fantasy.

Fictional worlds in which the fantastic is taken as read by the characters are not examples of the fantastic either, Todorov argues, and it is in this manner that he excludes from his discussion most of the fantasies I wish to examine. This is an important point. Because the fantastic, by his definition, depends on uncertainty over whether events are the result of magic or happenstance, worlds in which wizards or ghosts or giant insects are already perceived as fact by narrators or characters do not count. Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, he argues, is only fantastic for the first few sentences, until Gregor Samsa establishes that he has, in fact, turned into an insect. Tolkien's remark in the opening paragraphs of *The Hobbit* that hobbits are naturally imbued with a sort of 'everyday magic' (2) would therefore set off Todorovian alarm bells. King Gorice's achievement of cyclical immortality in *The Worm Ouroboros* or the very pointedly irrefutable discovery of the existence of a race of supra-intelligent limpets in "The Shadow out of Time" would similarly place the work of Eddison or Lovecraft outside his definition. Because it is immediately made obvious that those elements are supernatural in nature, Todorov's definition of the fantastic does not apply to those texts. Eddison and Lovecraft were, in Todorovian terms, writing marvellous rather than fantastic literature. Todorov does taxonomise the marvellous (placing works such as those of Eddison and Lovecraft in the category of the 'exotic marvellous', where the supernatural is presented as natural), but not in great depth (56).

This emphasis on uncertainty, rather than the supernatural, as the *sine qua non* of the fantastic, would in fact exclude most fantasy written since Todorov's book. *The Fantastic* was first published in French in 1970 and therefore comfortably predates the bulk of the post-Tolkienian fantasy boom; there is, in fact, scant reason to expect Todorov to pay attention to any of that literature. Todorov, who is French and was

working in an avowedly European context at the close of the 1960s, can hardly be blamed for drawing his examples from predominantly European sources or for focusing on issues of uncertainty. Even laying aside issues of chronology and context, his exclusions are hardly unreasonable or foolish, as work such as that of MacDonald or Lovecraft is clearly not composed with reference to the sorts of effects or methodologies Todorov wishes to discuss. In his book *Microworlds*, science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem has sternly criticised Todorov's book, which he sees as being riddled with logical flaws, baseless preconceptions and unhelpful examples. Such criticisms may be valid, but for our pupuses it is important to note that Todorov's intent was to analyse literature in which the reader must decide for themselves whether or not the events in question take place in a different world, not that in which this is made clear from the outset. The upshot of this intension is that his theories, and those of several theorists who followed him, do not provide an ideal framework for my research aims.

Notable among such theorists is Rosemary Jackson, who argues that psychoanalytical theory is crucial to full understanding of the fantastic and criticises Todorov's lack of especial adherence to that school of thought. Nonetheless, she views Todorov's framework as fundamentally sound, and her book presents more of a corrective elaboration on his ideas than a refutation. In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), she pays considerable attention to the notion that fantasy, as defined by Todorov, functions only in the presence of inherent uncertainty, dissolving the links between the signifier and the signified (38-45). Todorovian fantasy, Jackson observes, breaks down such links, constructs nothing in their place and goes to considerable lengths to concern itself with semiotic loose ends; she gives many examples of fantasy texts that, even in name, seem preoccupied with notions of invisibility (*The Invisible Man*), absence (*The Man with no Face*) and vacuity (*The Shape of Illusion*) (22-23). Nonetheless, as she sees it, fantasy is still engaged with reality in that it is defined in opposition to it. By presenting things that may or may not exist, Jackson argues, fantasy allows for the examination and, in ideal circumstances, subversion of society's conventions concerning what obviously does exist (23). That is a crucial point, echoed by such writers as Peter Hunt (2), but since the framework of Jackson's discussion, and her choice of examples, are similar to Todorov's, little else in her book is applicable to secondary-world fantasists.

Much of the rest of Jackson's theoretical discussion is given over to how, with its malleability of representative paradigms and fascination with vacuity, fantasy concerns itself with the issue of the construction and destruction of personal identity. She is quite adamant that "to give representation to an imaginary realm is…not possible. This realm is non-thetic, it has no 'human' discourse. To attempt to give it a voice in literature is a manifest contradiction" (90). More directly, by writing a book seeking to isolate and interrogate examples of how the uncertainty inherent in the Todorovian fantastic can subvert real social power structures, Jackson has little time for literature that excludes that uncertainty. 'Genuine' magic of the sort popularised in literature by MacDonald and Morris operates outside human experience, she argues, and so cannot be meaningfully subversive. In fact, in her opinion, such literature may end up bolstering conservatism by providing wish-fulfillment and so compensating for the failings of established orders (153-155). Hence she accords world-builders little space and less praise. Le Guin and Tolkien come in for particular criticism; the latter is accused of foisting upon his audience "chauvinistic, totalitarian effects…conveniently removed from present material conditions" (156). Jackson's view of the boundaries and proper function of fantasy are, if anything, stricter than Todorov's, but the net result is the same – her ideas are of only limited use in considering secondary worlds.

In 1981, the same year as Jackson's book, came Christine Brooke-Rose's *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*. This constituted another important contribution to the Todorovian school, but one presenting similar problems. Opening with a rather thunderous statement of the existential crisis facing contemporary humanity ("Never before, it is felt, has man been so squarely faced with the possible annihilation of mankind and all his works": 8), Brooke-Rose provides a detailed introduction delving into linguistic, textual and general literary theory. Thereafter she offers her own observations on the Todorovian schema, which she espouses, although she wonders if a definition hinging on uncertainty is really consistent with such sharp and definite restrictions (65). In particular, Todorov's injunction against interpreting allegory as fantasy bothers her, since most texts are at least open to allegorical readings and, as she points out, Todorov's view of the fantastic hinges on uncertainty and variable interpretations as to exactly what is going on in a text. Citing Dante and Langland, she suggests a close kinship between the Todorovian fantastic and the layered and open meanings of medieval allegory (68-71). Such ambiguity of interpretation is, she

argues, surely a feature of *any* well-constructed narrative text. Despite making this criticism, however, Brooke-Rose accepts Todorov's model and sticks to it, a concession that makes much of the rest of her book only loosely applicable to secondary-world fantasy.

Unlike Todorov or Jackson, however, Brooke-Rose accords the twentieth-century marvellous considerable attention, and uses Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* as the paradigmatic example. However, the arguments presented in this chapter arrive at a dismissal of world-building just as sharp and thorough as Jackson's. Tolkien, she says, used the wrong tools. By employing the marvellous in the creation of a fictional world which the reader is intended to accept on the same terms as those of the intratextual world of a realist novel, she argues, Tolkien succeeds only in creating an unproductive muddle of competing literary techniques and aims (247-248). Meant to free the imaginations of both writer and reader from the 'megatext' of a setting somewhere in real space and time, Tolkienian world-building requires both to acquaint themselves with a whole new universe, leading to frequent and, she argues, pointless expository asides. She suggests that the only real effect this information has is to pad out a weak plot by, for example, delaying the Fellowship at Balin's tomb specifically so the orcs can attack them (244). Consequently, she sees the creation of Middle-earth as a wholly counterproductive feat of the imagination. The primary effect of world-building is, in her mind, to slow down the action with exposition and then slow it down again as the characters cope with the consequences of their dithering. This is not, she insists, a productive or convincing use of the marvellous – wizards exist to give history lectures, Elves to provide languorous, utopian rest cures for characters engaged in what is supposed to be an urgent mission, and most of the invented places on the maps bear no relevance to the plot. Adjectives such as "irrelevant", "interminable" and "unconvincing" turn up frequently in Brooke-Rose's discussion of *The Lord of the Rings* (233-255).

Although this is a critique of a single example of the marvellous, she offers similar criticisms of other secondary worlds. In her chapter on science fiction she criticises the expository passages in Robert Heinlein's *Stranger In A Strange Land* and Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* as compensation for "a real and unsolved problem" of settings "denuded" of inculcated geography (101). By contrast the work of Kurt Vonnegut is praised for its lack of "Gandalfian explanations" (267), and 100 pages of her book are taken up by a defence of the fantastic nature of Henry James's *The Turn*

of the Screw, a work of literature obviously not set in a secondary world. If, however, information about a created megatext is "pointless...combining the weakest features of realistic discourse and of the marvellous" (245), the value of creating one is surely placed in serious doubt. If Brooke-Rose finds the appendices and maps in Tolkien "infantile" (247), what she must think of the thousand-word metaphor that begins *Titus Groan* (mentioned nowhere in her book) can be safely left to the imagination. While she accords the marvellous more space than Jackson does, the result is merely a more thorough dismissal of secondary worlds.

Something of the same thing can be said of the more sympathetic Neil Cornwell, who in his book *The Literary Fantastic* (1990) also follows Todorov's "trail-blazing" (3) lead. In the section of his book devoted to theory (much of the volume consists of author studies), Cornwell offers various refinements and elaborations on Todorov's framework. The most applicable of these to the current discussion is his breakdown of the Todorovian marvellous into subcategories of the "what if" tale (set in the real world with marvellous elements, as in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*), the fairy story (set in a timeless and/or nameless place that is still purportedly 'our' world) and "romance fantasy" that "unfolds in a world that is patently not 'ours'…*a la* Tolkien." (40) This last category seems to perfectly describe the sort of literature I wish to examine. Despite giving my subject a home within the Todorovian schema, however, Cornwell still quite justifiably focuses his attention on the fantastic. Elsewhere he mentions several world-builders in a brief discussion of 'high fantasy':

> Touching on the 'nonsense' of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, it matured into the allegory of Kingsley and George MacDonald. In the twentieth century, this line has followed through to embrace religious allegory (CS Lewis), sword and sorcery (TH White and his modern successors), fantasy of the mind (Mervyn Peake), faery (Tolkien), animal stories (Richard Adams) and a whole spectrum of children's literature. This tradition can also extend on occasion to faery erotica. (146)

This paragraph, which mentions by name some of the authors I wish to examine, is included in an initial brief discussion of various "minor works and genres" that Cornwell excuses himself from examining fully in a chapter containing

dedicated subchapters on Mikhail Bulgakov, John Banville, Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison. Given that this chapter is something of a quest to locate a continuation of the pure Todorovian fantastic within twentieth-century literature, his exclusion of examples of the exotic marvellous is quite understandable, but exclude them he does.

Similarly, Dorethea von Mücke's *The Seduction of the Occult and the Rise of the Fantastic Tale* and Tobin Seibers's *The Romantic Fantastic* both examine the fantastic in particular historical contexts that essentially exclude discussion of world-builders or world-building. Although these books contain valuable individual ideas, they operate within definitions that makes them very little help for constructing an overall theoretical framework for this project. The ghettoisation of fantasy world-building as a subject of literary theory perhaps reaches a high point in the work of TE Apter, who at the very outsets of *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality* explicitly states "The works discussed here are different from the fairy-tale, myth or saga which are either enacted in a world separated from ours spatially or temporally…or which are imaginative, emblematic histories" (2).

Nonetheless Apter's justification for excluding such works – that their supposedly supernatural elements are in keeping with the natural laws of their settings and therefore not actually supernatural or fantastic – is in itself rather useful in that it provides a codified definition of the sort of works I wish to examine. As Todorov points out, all works of fiction take place in invented worlds of some sort or other due to the largely unavoidable complications of composing such texts. A writer of fiction must create the internal world of his or her story, and the question of whether or not it has wizards in it is but a subsidiary, and not necessarily major, element of that task. What I wish to examine are those works in which such invented worlds clearly contravene Apter's parameters – that is, those which incorporate some element of the supernatural or marvellous as inherent in their fictional world and accepted as such by the characters. Such worlds are, furthermore, patently not 'ours', but feature new invented geographies as stages for their use of the marvellous. This clearly places them within Cornwell's definition of romance fantasy, although it remains to be seen, in practice, how useful that taxonomy will be. MacDonald's Fairy-land and Land of Seven Dimensions are clear examples of such worlds, as are Eddison's Mercury and Zimiamvia, while Lovecraft's Arkham, although notionally placed in the primary world, is full enough of skewed preoccupations and demonic extraterrestrials to surely count as such. Devoid of anything wholly supernatural, Peake's Titus novels present

perhaps the most troublesome inclusion, although Todorov's notion of the hyperbolic marvellous, in which proportions are manipulated to ridiculous extremes (55-56), is surely applicable to a story about a 77-generation dynasty inhabiting a geographically self-contained, millennia-old castle with corridors kilometers long. The fact that it is the alteration of these conditions, rather than the conditions themselves, that strike the characters as unusual would surely admit Peake's work into the category of fiction I wish to examine.

For my purposes, therefore, the Todorovian school of fantasy theory is useful primarily in that it provides a point of opposition. Its contributing authors have developed a solid theoretical basis for the examination of those works they claim to cover, but their overall framework is inapplicable, often quite explicitly, to the works I wish to examine. Fantasy as defined by Todorov and his adherents constitutes a borderland or grey area in which no clear indication exists of where the reader or the characters stand in relation to reality. Worlds obeying their own invented social and geographical patterns, and their own invented natural laws, fall on the other side of this borderland, in the realms of the marvellous, and are accorded scant attention. An offshoot of this school of thought, championed by Eric Rabkin and construing fantasy as anything presented to the reader as especially remarkable or astonishing – such as Sherlock Holmes's deductive ability (8-12) – is even less helpful. Little Todorovian theory is concerned with twentieth-century fantasy, and none, so far as I can ascertain, deals with the post-Tolkien fantasy boom of the 1970s and 1980s. Although this rise in the marketability of the genre took place at the same time as the development of the Todorovian school of fantasy theory, the fact that most such fantasy takes place in invented worlds of the sort Apter so cogently excludes from her discussion means that this lack is hardly surprising.

Fortunately there are scholars who offer ideas more clearly applicable to my subject matter. In his essay 'On Fairy-stories' (1938), JRR Tolkien defines fairytales or fantasies (he uses the two terms interchangeably) as those stories which take place in worlds other than our own. Despite claiming that this is too broad an area to justifiably generalise about, he suggests that all such worlds are, fundamentally, the same place – Faerie, or the 'Perilous Realm', in which elves, goblins and whatever else coexist with real elements such as the sun, stones and mortal men in a way that is intended to be taken as fact (15-16). Note, importantly, that this implies that a fantasy world must inescapably have some kinship with and points of similarity to the

primary world, and therefore cannot be seen as wholly separate from it. A secondary world must have at least a few points of contact wit the world of the reader's experience: plants must grow, the sun must shine, gravity must pull. The presence of mortal human beings may alone be enough to provide this mundane grounding (pragmatic and amoral as they may be, the humans of Troy Denning's *Dark Sun* world provide a point of reference that his Faustian sorcerer-kings and gargantuan beetles of burden cannot), but fantasy is bound to rely on a dialogue between the real and the unreal. The success of a creator of such worlds does not come from an ability to get an audience to "suspend their disbelief" in order to accept the existence of ogres or dragons, but from an ability to inspire "secondary belief" in the reader (37). To do so, he maintains, a world must be imbued with "the inner consistency of reality" (43) – and in this respect his opinions dovetail with those of Jackson. When it takes place in the Perilous Realm, fantasy cannot be simply be, as Rabkin suggests, anything wholly out of the ordinary, and Tolkien reserves considerable space – and vitriol – for criticising those fantasies that fall short of his ideals (46-52). A writer cannot simply insert wizards or talking animals into a book and call it fantasy. As if anticipating Jackson's arguments that secondary worlds have no connection to human experience or psychology, Tolkien labours the point that they do have such a connection given their genesis in the human mind, and therefore rejects the notion that fantasy worlds represent any sort of falsehood. Rather than bandy around terminology such as 'real' and 'not real', Tolkien uses the term "Secondary world" in his essay, a term meant to imply that it owes its existence to the creativity of an author in the real (or "primary" world). The strength of this relationship between the real and the invented is crucial to the success of a secondary world. "The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make", he maintains. "If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings would not have arisen." (50) Thus, while he construes the genre very differently (and, for my purposes, more applicably) from Jackson, Tolkien seems to endorse her notion that fantasy is intricately connected with reality and is always gesturing back towards it. This link seems to be universally agreed upon by those who have applied themselves to the question; "the one thing that can rarely be said of fantasy", notes Peter Hunt, "is that it has nothing to do with reality" (2). Tolkien extends this point to include fantasy worlds and therefore provides an important part of the theoretical basis for my thesis.

Despite emphasising the reality/fantasy symbiosis, however, Tolkien allows that fantasy and fantastic fiction are clearly distinguishable from reality and realistic fiction. He is also intrigued by the process by which fantasy and folklore emerge from the kernels of real life they refer to. For example, freely admitting that the Norse deity Thor is an allegorical personification of the abstract concept of thunder, Tolkien argues that such a reduction only takes us halfway to understanding him and the people whose imaginations created him. We can learn far more, Tolkien insists, by examining how members of that particular society came to construe thunder as being associated with a red-bearded, supernatural warrior-blacksmith married to a personification of valour and locked in eternal rivalry with the Frost Giants (26-27). Tolkien, therefore, openly admits and encourages the notion that fantasy refers to reality, but argues that being able to isolate specific examples of that connection is only half the job. To understand a particular fantasy, we must understand why its author chose to write fantasy rather than realistic fiction. To take an example from my own selection of subject authors, it is quite obvious that much of HP Lovecraft's work articulates his cultural conservatism and mistrust of immigrants and foreigners. How and why he saw fit to endow those foreigners with tentacles, immortality and the ability to travel through time is a separate and fascinating issue.

Tolkien's view of fantasy is only lightly touched on by most subsequent theorists. Todorov, Jackson and Brooke-Rose mention him and his works chiefly in order to refute their importance, and pay scant heed to his contributions to theoretical discussion. Another theorist who has recently followed their line of thinking is Lucie Armitt, who in *Theorising The Fantastic* (1996) accords Todorov an entire sub-chapter while spending only a paragraph on Tolkien. She argues that if Tolkien had read more pyschoanalytical theory, he would have realised that what he was calling for was an unrealistically demanding dynamic in which the reader and the writer could share the same codified dream. Armitt criticises Tolkien quite sharply for his perceived lack of appreciation of the link between creative writing and dreaming (26). Todorov, meanwhile, is praised for having the insight to construct and concentrate his discussion of 'the fantastic' as a mode rather than a genre (6-7). This distinction, which Armitt observes throughout her book, is held to have reversed the ghettoisation of the fantastic by invalidating the unhelpful distinction between 'fantasy' and 'mainstream' literature and allowing individual examples of the mode to be judged on their own merits. Consequently, Armitt suggests, the fantastic can be understood less

as the sort of subversive sideline to mimetic literature seen by Jackson and more as a mechanism for "opening up subversive spaces in the mainstream." (3) Todorov's work is, she says "often not sufficiently valued." (6) So far as Armitt is concerned, it is Todorov's breakthroughs, not Tolkien's, that have made it possible for theorists to appreciate "The secondary world as a site of subversion" (25). She does use the term 'secondary world', something few other Todorovians do, although she continues the Todorovian tradition of according the device a bare minimum of discussion.

Nonetheless, there are theorists who give Tolkien and his ideas considerable attention. Edmund Little, in introducing his compilation of author studies, *The Fantasts* (1984), writes a chapter entitled "The Making of Other Worlds", which criticises Tolkien's selectivity but uses some of his terminology and definitions. In twelve pages, Little does not accord himself space for much discussion, although some of his observations are telling. Contradicting theorists such as Jackson and Apter, Little argues that secondary worlds as Tolkien defines them are "more readily admitted to Fantasy" than works such as Stoker's *Dracula*, which places the supernatural in a depiction of Victorian London that is at least intended to be very realistic (9-10). Furthermore, he observes that "The Primary World has not only to be duplicated, even in another dimension. It has to be changed. To see how and where it can be changed is the purpose of this study" (11). Such an objective anticipates my own. He goes on to examine the issue with regard to his subject authors (his selection includes Peake) but presents little in the way of an organised framework for, or overall theory of, the secondary world. A later chapter includes a brief refutation of Tolkien's injunction against dreamworlds (117-118).

A more substantial contribution to this school of thought is made by WR Irwin, a writer for whom Armitt has considerable praise (40). In *The Game of the Impossible* (1976), Irwin construes fantasy in a manner that dovetails much more neatly with Tolkien than with Todorov. Taking Freudian psychology as his point of departure, he argues that fantasy is a literary codification of the instinct for creative play. He addresses the question of the difference between 'fantasy' and 'the fantastic', a point of terminology that has remained muddy despite various attempts to clarify it (much to Cornwell's displeasure). Irwin argues that fantasy occurs when a writer of fiction uses the fantastic – that which is patently impossible – in a manner that the reader is intended to construe as a report of fact (6-9). This directly contravenes Todorov's definition, and is at loggerheads with Apter's (since Irwin's book predates

Apter's he can hardly be said to 'refute' her point). "A fantasist chooses to invent a narrative embodying this or that impossibiliy", Irwin notes, "and in this choice, if he is is prudent, he will be governed by a discrimination between potential advantage and disadvantage. That is to say he will from the outset think like a rhetorician." (63) Thus fantasy becomes a rhetorical device consciously used to draw attention to certain elements of a literary composition (70-71). The supernatural must be depicted as real by being shown to operate independently within the bounds of the text as part of "a fully developed and autonomously persuasive illusion" (175 – see also 155) rather than as mere window-dressing. What Irwin seems to be calling for here is a cautious and thorough approach to Tolkienian sub-creation, an interpretation supported by his use of Tolkien's Middle-earth as a fine example of this in action. Viewing fantasy in general and secondary worlds in particular in this manner clearly puts him at odds with Jackson and Brooke-Rose, both of whom dismiss the secondary world as a literary device.

Of passing note in relation to Irwin is Ann Swinfen, whose book *In Defence of Fantasy* features a chapter proposing various attributes a secondary world must have to be fully developed and drawing on examples from the works of such fantasists as Tolkien, le Guin and Alexander (75-99). She praises those authors who she sees as having thoroughly developed their fictional universes and, in a direct contradiction of Brooke-Rose's criticism of secondary worlds as requiring tedious exposition, suggests that "For the author who wishes to start from a *tabula rasa*, it is the ideal form" (76). She shys away from theory, however, noting in accordance with Tolkien that there is no specific recipe or formula that can be followed to create a necessarily successful or satisfying secondary world.

Despite being essentially in accord with Tolkien, Irwin retains some important points of contact with Todorov. These parallels stem from a common insistence between Irwin and Todorov – and for that matter Tolkien – that the account of the internal world of a novel or story must be presented by the author as a report of fact. For Todorov, the fantastic requires that the narrator and characters – and therefore the reader – be unsure as to the nature of events. If the whole affair is being presented as an allegory or a joke, then the possibility that it is real never presents itself and the fantastic ceases to function. George MacDonald, interestingly, makes a similar point, calling the result of such a procedure mere "burlesque" and rejecting it as "of all forms of literature, the least worthy" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 196). Irwin agrees;

if fantasy is not presented as fact, he argues, 'anti-fantasy' can result. Put simply –
and Irwin himself spends very little time elaborating on the notion – anti-fantasy is
the result of the use of the fantastic for purposes other than the creation of meaningful
and persuasive fantasy (8-10). In this category he includes allegory, dream-stories
and, perhaps controversially, fairy tales (Clute also uses the same term to describe
genre fantasy; 393). If readers are meant to surmise, for example, that the marvellous
or supernatural events underway in a novel are 'just a dream', they cannot assume that
they are anything other than an illusion, and will therefore not be persuaded by them.
Such literature may be fine work, but it falls outside Irwin's definition; he speaks
highly of the dream-stories of James Branch Cabell but declines to call them fantasy
(9). Anti-fantasy seems, furthermore, to be a very similar concept to the Todorovian
uncanny, the result of fantastic uncertainty being eventually resolved by means of a
mimetic explanation. A story revealed at any point to be an unusually vivid dream –
Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unkown Kadath*, for example, or Noel Langley's
cinematic reworking of Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* – would fall into both definitions.
Irwin's value to the current discussion is therefore not only that he admits as fantasy
material that some theorists would decline to examine, but that his ideas provide a
useful conduit whereby some of the ideas of those theorists can be related to that
literature. He clearly establishes some common ground between Todorovians and
Tolkienians by arguing that fantasy, however it is construed, must take place in a
properly-constructed literary illusion. Where the two camps part company is that
Tolkien, Swinfen and Irwin allow that such an illusion can take the form of the
unambiguous presence of the marvellous, whereas Todorov, Jackson, Apter and
Armitt have doubts, a least, about whether such illusions can allow, let alone function
in their own right as, fantasy.

  An example of this consensus in action can be found in Kenneth Grahame's
The Wind in The Willows. Grahame uses the Irwinian fantastic to create a world
where a toad can not only yearn for possession of an automobile, but then use one,
however badly, when he gets it. The reader is quite willing to swallow this
impossibility because the world of *The Wind In The Willows* includes talking,
anthropomorphic animals. Were Toad, upon crashing his motor, to wave a wand and
teleport himself home – something JK Rowling's Harry Potter, ER Eddison's Gorice
or TH White's Merlyn might well get away with – eyebrows would be raised.
Todorov and Brooke-Rose would move the book from the fantastic, if they ever

placed it there, to the marvellous and have done with it. Jackson would question how such a random development aids in the subversion of realistic assumptions. Tolkien, already suspicious of the beast-fable, would bemoan the sudden loss of inner consistency and note that the flaw immediately places the reader back in the primary world. MacDonald would mutter darkly about the burlesque, while Irwin would probably invoke anti-fantasy. All, however, would agree that a spell had been, perhaps paradoxically, broken. Use of the fantastic, however it is defined, cannot be random. This would seem to be especially true if one is trying to evoke an entirely new world. I have come across no better encapsulation of this requirement than Tolkien's call for a fantasy world to have "the inner consistency of reality". How and why this was imparted before, as Hunt puts it, fantasy became "dominated by the Tolkien phenomenon" (20) is the central question I am interested in asking.

Another theorist who contributes, rather ideosyncratically, to the Tolkienian agenda is Karthyn Hume, whose 1984 book *Fantasy and Mimesis* takes the discussion in some intriguing new directions. Declining to use such terminology as 'genre' or 'mode', Hume argues that fantasy, defined as "any departure from consensus reality" (20-22), can only profitably be construed as the flip side of mimesis, and that these two 'impulses' tend to coexist in most examples of literature. Having made such a deliberately inclusive definition, however, Hume follows several other theorists (notably Brooke-Rose) by devoting much of her discussion to borderline cases and examples that support her framework rather than vice versa. Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are recurring subjects of discussion.

Nonetheless there are sections of *Fantasy and Mimesis* which offer useful ideas. Although she accords secondary worlds only sporadic discussion, Hume allows that as departures from 'consensus reality' they do count as examples of genuine fantasy. Defining them as 'literature of vision', she discusses their creation by what she differentiateas as augmentative, subtractive or contrastive fantasy. The presence of the Ring, for example makes *The Hobbit* a work of augmentative fantasy (86). In qualitative terms, she argues that Tolkien's ability to imbue his heroes with "the quasi-sacred powers of the heroic individual" by way of fantasy devices is more noble and convincing than Robert E Howard's use of fantasy to create the physically superhuman Conan (80). These comments cncern only the use of fantasy within

worlds, however, not fantasy worlds per se, a specific issue she addresses only much later:

> Works whose fantastic landscape similarly generate action are David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* and George MacDonald's *Phantastes* and *Lilith.* In each, there is an idea-component as well, but it emerges at the end of the story as a philosophy which the characters could be expected to embrace only after their assumptions had been shattered by the fantastic landscapes and their adventures therein. The landscapes dictate the adventures. The protagonists perform acts they never could or would have performed on earth – murder, absorbing the soul of another, and dying while managing to preserve consciousness. These fantasies could not be transported to other worlds without altering their essential effect. (160)

Thus, properly employed, a fictional geography can be of crucial importance to the text in which it takes place. She spends frustratingly little time developing the point, which she arrives at as part of a discussion of the applicability of Northrop Frye's theory of modes to the use of the fantastic impulse, but it is perhaps the most explicit endorsement of the secondary world as a fantasy tool to have been published since Tolkien's 'On Fairy-Stories'. It would easy to overstate the point, but the attention Hume pays to this particular topic displays clear common feeling with Tolkien and Irwin. She is also suspicious of the value of poorly-handled or rudimentary worlds, dismissing the notion of the human body as a secondary world in Issac Asimov's *Fantastic Journey*, for example (159). This is another point of continuity, however inadvertent, with Tolkien. Hume's book was published in 1984, after the main offensive by the Todorovian school, showing that literary theory had not entirely given up on the Perilous Realm – provided the perils therein are of sufficient influence on the other elements within the text. Making them so is the rub.

Nor is Hume a lone voice. Over the course of his career Colin Manlove has produced several books on fantasy, mostly collections of author studies categorised in different ways, with some overlap between books– he has examined George MacDonald in the context of British, Christian and modern fantasy. Manlove is not overly or overtly concerned with the theoretical side of fantasy, and even a book with the promising title *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* is yet another compilation of

author studies. Where Hume uses 'impulse' as a clearly defined theoretical term referring to one of the two great drives in the composition of literature, Manlove employs the term much more loosely, using it simply to refer to the desire to use the supernatural within a text (x). Nonetheless *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* is interesting in that it both covers fantasists who use secondary worlds and fulsomely praises those who do so convincingly. Notably, Ursula le Guin, viciously criticised by Jackson for her conservatism, is praised by Manlove for creating a credible world in which a conservative manifesto can be meaningfully defended (42-44). Throughout the book, Manlove argues that the impulse to use fantasy comes from delight in creation, a motive that drives both the author and, more often than not, their characters. Le Guin, MacDonald, Peake, Tolkien, CS Lewis, E Nesbit and TH White are all cited as writers who use the fantastic to celebrate freedom, creativity and self-affirmation as positive moral qualities in their work, while villains such as Peake's Steerpike and Tolkien's Sauron seek to enslave, control or break. On the part of the authors themselves, this notion that creating one's own world is an instinctive celebration of the world that already exists can be seen as a point of continuity with Tolkien.

Despite being published in the immediate aftermath of Jackson and Brooke-Rose's books, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* does not engage with either author, or Todorov himself. Manlove, like Irwin, seems to be fighting for the opposite corner, attempting to understand authors by developing a theoretical framework in which to examine them rather than starting with such a framework and excluding those authors whose work does not fit into it. Again, like other critics, he has a keen eye for productive or efficacious uses of fantasy in literature. Interestingly, he is vocally suspicious of Tolkien and Peake's ability to use fantasy in this manner (99 and 125-126), but he supports the scholarly consensus that the fantastic must be used carefully in order to have any effect. Similarly, he follows other scholars in his suspicion of poorly-handled fantasy worlds; a chapter on 'anaemic fantasy' includes indictments of such authors as Lord Dunsany and Peter Beagle.

In light of this widespread consensus on the need for scrupulous consistency and dedication in the creation of fictional worlds, some of the essays of CS Lewis become useful. Lewis's views on fantasy and world-building stem in part from much more general notions of what constitutes good literary composition. He suggests that to get the most out of a story a reader must be able to imagine the wider world in

which that story is taking place ("On Stories" 492). The literary backcloth is therefore crucial; analysis may reveal that cowboy novel and a Victorian bodice-ripper present essentially identical plots and casts of characters, but their differing settings, assuming the writers can effectively evoke their respective worlds, willmake them substantively different stories. Accordingly, Lewis argues for the inherent potency of fantastic forms. Although, like Tolkien, he concedes the value of fantasy as a vehicle for allegory ("On Three Ways of Writing for Children" 509), he argues that the supernatural elements of any text must have some innate appeal to the imagination beyond what they symbolise. A dragon, Lewis argues, is a dragon, not an airborne repository of symbolic and allegorical connotations, and must spring from and satisfy that part of the imagination dealing with dragons rather than those cataloging abstract notions of discord, chaos and destruction. One very clear example Lewis uses is from *The War of the Worlds*. A mere desire to present England with a terribly dangerous, apparently indomitable foe would not have required HG Wells to look for one on Mars. The very alienage of the Martians must have served some purpose to his imagination, and that of his audience ("On Stories" 495-497). So too, for that matter, must their specific origins, tentacled form, ghoulish method of taking sustenance and choice of towering, multi-legged fighting machines to press their advantage. Ultimately, therefore, the inclusion of fantasy in a text, and the form in which that fantasy presents itself, is crucial to the nature of the text. "Jack and the Beanstalk", Lewis points out, would not be remotely the same story were Jack merely outwitting a tall, brutish human. What we seem to have here is a call for a conflation of semiotic paradigm and narrative technique.

Given the importance Lewis places on the integrity and evocation of the world in which a story takes place, the decision as to how to include, justify and interrelate the supernatural elements in a fantasy world becomes crucial. He praises, for example, Tolkien ("Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" 520-521) and ER Eddison ("A Tribute to ER Eddison" 558) and credits H Rider Haggard with great skill in this area while criticising serious faults in his writing ("On Stories" 503-504). These authors have made proper worlds, Lewis argues, and deserve applause for doing so. His standards of best practice in world-building are similar to Tolkien's, as is his ultimate admission (in line with other scholars) that such worlds must be constructed in some relation to the primary world as the author perceives it, though he views the latter point from a specifically spiritual perspective ("On Stories" 498).

Hence Lewis proposes a model where the development and consistency of the internal world of a text – and, in the case of a fantasy world, its supernatural and preternatural elements – are quite central to the process of literary composition. This model, in keeping with Tolkien's views as well as those of the theorists who would follow them, also allows that such matters will inescapably be addressed in relation to the writer's understanding of the real world. Furthermore, all theorists and critics agree that in creating an imaginary world an author must take his or her world-building seriously and present the finished product to his or her audience as a report of fact. The overall consensus, even among the large number of theorists who decline to actively concern themselves with the issue, is that world-building is a serious business not to be played at. It must be approached carefully and thoroughly, with simultaneous consideration of various tactical and strategic concerns, and will inherently illustrate criticisms of the real world as the author sees it.

It is with this model of world-building in mind that the remainder of this thesis has been written. Tolkien's definition of the secondary world as a no-man's-land between humanity and its own imagination is as useful a definition as I have yet come across, Irwin's ideas about the rhetorical capacities of the supernatural and Lewis's insistences that such elements must be entirely central to a work of literature are also highly valuable. In order to answer the question of how these worlds came to be, therefore, close attention must be paid to what supernatural elements the authors included in their work, what non-supernatural elements were excluded, and what motivated the authors to make those decisions. What follows is an attempt to answer those questions.

George MacDonald's Intellectual Euthanasia

Although fantasy is in many respects as old as literature, its existence as a recognised, distinct genre is fairly recent. There are enough supernatural elements in the Homeric epics to count the poems as works of fantasy, but it is highly unlikely that Homer would have viewed his works as such. Much the same could be said of the poets who composed the various parts of the Arthuriad, or of other medieval writers such as those who contributed to *Beowulf*. As with many components of modern literature, fantasy as we understand it today is a relatively new phenomenon emerging out of a long tradition of antecedents. Those antecedents should be acknowledged, but they cannot be reckoned as earlier examples of the same thing, even by justifiable generalisation. For most of literary history there was no significant or conscious division between fantasy and realism. Therefore a panel discussion featuring Homer, a *Beowulf* contributor, William Langland, CS Lewis, Ursula le Guin and JK Rowling would not be a meeting of like minds.

The rise of the novel as a popular literary form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries altered both popular and literary perceptions of fantasy by creating a literary form in which, by and large, realism was the norm. Although some of the great eighteenth-century novels were Gothic fantasies, the novel distinguished itself in part by being a literary form which purported to depict the real world in action. Those writing fantasy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries therefore did so as a conscious decision to break with the literary norm, a decision that the Arthurian and *Beowulf* poets did not have to make. Among the earlier Anglophone writers to make this choice was Scottish cleric-novelist George MacDonald, a man whose work would become "a highly significant exemplar to the Inklings" and establish him as "a key ancestor of genre fantasy" (Stableford 259). MacDonald has also been an acknowledged influence on other popular fantasists such as Madeline L'Engle and Maurice Sendak (McGillis "Fantsay as Miracle" 211-212), demonstrating the length and breadth of his reach. A great deal of modern fantasy has been coloured by this man's ideas, and his manner of expressing them.

The ideas were large ones. MacDonald used fantasy to promulgate a highly idiosyncratic brand of Christianity, having stumbled on the form through his youthful exploration of German Romanticism. The value of fantasy to MacDonald, it seems,

was that it afforded him the ability to shift onotological and epistemological goalposts in a manner that realism would not permit. This demonstrates that world-building was, from a very early stage in its development, implicitly used as a method of critiquing the real world, and our perceptions of it. In MacDonald's case, those critiques were entirely deliberate. This man looked at the world in a way realism simply could not support.

The Case for Intellectual Euthanasia

George MacDonald (1824-1905) was a prolific and multifaceted writer who produced many works of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. Of central interest is his fiction; he wrote numerous short stories and some forty novels, the bulk of them realistic works of didactic intent. A Congregationalist clergyman, he was dismissed from his pulpit after accusations of heterodoxy. Despite this, MacDonald stated, "Preaching is my work, and preach I shall, somehow or other" (Hein, *George MacDonald* 88). The principle medium he chose was literature. Most of his novels were stories of life in his native Scotland, usually designed to demonstrate religious ideas, and many can be characterised as extended homilies or fictionalised sermons, often fairly straightforward, albeit well-executed (Wolff 305). But alongside numerous 'improving books' with titles like *Alec Forbes of Howglen* and *The Vicar's Daughter*, MacDonald produced a smaller number of remarkable works of Christian fantasy. In addition to his two fantasy novels, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, and some additional fantasy novels for children, he produced as many as a dozen short fairy tales (the precise number varies according to definition), most famously "The Golden Key". It is in these, perhaps, that he came closest to articulating his own idiosyncratic and demanding brand of Christianity. Certainly, they seem to have lasted better than the other sections of his literary corpus. MacDonald's secondary worlds are products of a remarkable confluence of religious, historical, folkloric, philosophical and biographical influences that require – and to a significant extent resist – extensive examination.

To those raised on the Tolkienian model of the secondary world as a mapped, codified fictional geography serving as a stage for objective-based adventures making up an "emblematic history" (Apter 2), MacDonald's fantasy worlds are odd, dreamy, indistinct places. *Phantastes* (1858) takes place in Fairy Land, a world of forests, ogres, fairies, kobolds and cryptically-minded, wizardly helpers who live in cottages

that stop just short of being made of gingerbread. It is only in the last few pages of *Phantastes* that the hero, Anodos, conclusively establishes that he has actually traveled somewhere rather than having merely dreamt his adventures. Anodos is drawn into Fairy Land by the spirit of his fairy great-grandmother. There he searches for the White Lady, an animated statue for whom he feels unaccountable but intense sexual desire. He also seeks a way to rid himself of the Shadow, a sinister, stalking doppleganger of shifting symbolic significance. These two threads link together a series of otherwise largely unconnected adventures; Anodos is caught up in a feud between tree spirits (38-54), sojourns in a deserted fairy palace (75-120), relives parts of his own life (136-138), helps a pair of adopted brothers fight marauding giants (146-157) and is killed rescuing a sacrificial victim from a wolf-like monster (173-177). Remaining conscious and articulate in his grave, he is vocally pleased with himself. His resurrection back into the primary world after three weeks in Fairy Land comes as something of a let-down, deferring a "great good" (182) he thought he had already earned.

Written thirty-seven years later, *Lilith* (1895) follows a broadly similar pattern. The hero, Vane, is drawn from his Oxfordshire mansion into the distinctly menacing Land of Seven Dimensions by Mister Raven, a curious man who appears as a bird when viewed from the front and an old man when seen from behind. Led to Raven's cottage, Vane is invited to sleep in a cellar full of grave-like couches, most already occupied by sleepers. Disgusted by the suggestion, Vane spends much of the rest of the novel running backwards and forwards across the Land of Seven Dimensions, having unnerving and often quite terrifying adventures and occasionally returning to the primary world. He retraces his own footsteps often enough for a rough fictional geography to be established – the Bad Burrows (227-231), the Evil Wood (231-234) and the hot stream (276-280) clearly lie between Raven's cottage and the venal, cruel city of Bulika. The overall episodic, indistinct effect is the same as in *Phantastes*, however; it is only in the second half of the novel that Vane's adventures begin to have some direction. Mister Raven unmasks himself as Adam, the first man of Edenic mythology, and continues to entreat Vane to submit to deathly sleep in his cellar, while Vane himself becomes involved with the evil she-demon Lilith. Via an enormously complicated set of symbolic mistakes, defeats, victories and catharses, both Vane and Lilith are eventually prevailed upon to sleep in Adam's cellar. They wake from this sleep to a fictional world vastly changed for the better,

but rather than enjoying this victory, Vane is unceremoniously dumped back into the primary world. There he ponders the existential quandaries of his adventures and waits, for what he is not entirely sure, in an "endless ending" (419) he finds both edifying and onerous. Only the profound alterations to his perception of reality remain as proof that anything actually happened to him.

MacDonald also wrote a number of shorter fairytales, which can be best introduced by way of a brief synopsis of their chief exemplar, "The Golden Key". This is the story of Mossy and Tangle, a boy and girl who find the titular key and are subsequently drawn into Fairy Land by curious airborne fish. They are guided to the cottage of Grandmother, a wizardly woman who bathes and feeds them before sending them off on a quest for the lock that the key fits. During this quest, which takes their whole lives, they are separated, before being reunited
in time to climb the stairs to the land from whence the shadows fall. "By this time", the narrator comments contentedly, " I think they must have got there" (144). This long, transformative trek to put a magical artifact back where it belongs is said to have been an influence on Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Manlove, "Logic of Fantasy" 233). Tolkien certainly admired MacDonald, although there is a crucial difference between the two men's works. Middle-Earth is mapped; the reader is implicitly invited to trace Frodo's journey through named, codified mountains, forests and citadels. By contrast, MacDonald's fantasy worlds are trackless, random, unmappable places studded with folkloric archetypes and weighty symbolism, through which protagonists wander, seemingly aimlessly, searching for…something.

Phantastes, *Lilith* and MacDonald's fairy tales (as well as some of his other works, notably the children's novel *At the Back of the North Wind*) are all loosely plotted works strung together by a search for something undefined and seemingly unattainable. Mossy and Tangle search for the land from whence the shadows fall; exactly why is never made clear, but their desire to find it keeps them searching for an entire lifetime before their youth is magically restored. Vane's search is rather less unified; he runs to and fro across the Land of Seven Dimensions on a series of compulsive searches and errands, none of which end remotely well until he and his demonic prisoner Lilith both agree to surrender to placid quasi-death in the tomb-like cellar of Raven's cottage.

The search, not the discovery, is the thing. Anodos, restored to life on his return to the real world, feels curiously edified by his adventures despite them not

having apparently come to anything; the pursuit of the White Lady that has bound his adventures together peters out with the discovery that she loves another. 'The Golden Key' concludes with Mossy and Tangle commencing their final upward climb toward the land from whence the shadows fall. Vane in particular is left struggling with open-ended existential questions and wondering what, if anything, he has accomplished, never returning to the garret room in his house that contains the portal to the secondary world. MacDonald's fantasies are not just inconclusive but, it seems, quite deliberately so. Flieger ("Myth, Mysticism and Magic" 40-42) has noted that *Lilith's* indistinctness and loose ends are quite central to its message. Open-ended plots are something of a feature of his contribution to the genre.

This would be in keeping with MacDonald's way of thinking, which was intimately tied up with Christianity. Although he only ever held one official position within the ministry, and that only briefly, MacDonald was a confirmed and active Christian who had the motto "Courage! God mend al!", an anagram of his own name, inscribed upon a bookplate with a depiction of a resurrection. MacDonald's religious faith was his great motivating force, and his ideas about God and the best ways of relating to him need to be examined in some detail. His devotional writings are still read for their original purpose in evangelical circles, and it is indicative of his reputation that one biographer saw fit to note in his introduction that "Some scholars believe MacDonald's fantasies may be contemplated quite apart from Christian doctrinal considerations and appreciate their purely literary stature and Jungian patterns." (Hein, *George MacDonald* xxii). In light of MacDonald's religious following, it may be worth stating that what follows is an attempt to explain MacDonald's way of thinking and writing from a secular, agnostic viewpoint. I aim to explain MacDonald's faith, and his use of fantasy as a means to express it, but it is not my intention to endorse or attack either the message or the medium. MacDonald was a man of faith, however, and is chiefly remembered as such today.

Not that he thought so himself. Unable to countenance the stern Calvinist God of his upbringing in northern Scotland, MacDonald experienced a serious crisis of faith in his teens and spent much of his early life trying to decide if he really counted as a Christian at all. His correspondence, however, reveals that this struggle was not that of a man searching for a god he could believe in or rejecting an ideology foisted upon him in childhood. "I think I am a Christian", he wrote to his father in 1845, aged 21, "though one of the weakest…

…My error seems to be always searching for faith in place of contemplating the truths of the gospel which are such as produce faith and confidence. But I trust that if God has led me to Christ, He will keep me there. My mind is often very confused. I have made more progress – much since I began to pray more earnestly for the spirit of God to guide me. Pray that I may not be that hateful thing, a lukewarm Christian." (*An Expression of Character; the Letters of George MacDonald* 11).

These sentiments – a niggling suspicion that one is ultimately incapable of living up to axiomatic minimum standards of behaviour or belief – bear a strong similarity to some manifestations of what is now termed clinical depression. MacDonald was not questioning the truth or value of Christianity but his own ability to live up to its ideals to any worthwhile extent. Failure to do so would be, as he said, hateful. Whether or not this train of thought is open to a psychological diagnosis, MacDonald passionately *wanted* to be Christian and spent his youth striving to satisfy himself that he was.

The coping strategy MacDonald adopted in order to deal with this youthful crisis of faith would have far-reaching consequences on his life, and his writing, and therefore his world-building. By his thirties, when he began writing, this conflict seems to have largely been abated by a realisation of the need to take matters of faith as, indeed, exactly that. A genuine Christian – and the passage quoted above is clearly the work of such a person – need not worry, he concluded, about quirks and eddies in their faith. "To the perfectly holy mind", he said at a time when he was still trying to ascertain that that was what he possessed himself, "everything is religion" (*Expression of Character* 18-19). Faith trumped doctrinal adherence, theological nicety, sectarian taxonomy and, above all, objective argument. This is not to say he dismissed all such concerns – expressing irritation at those who took Christ's name in vain, he could dash off scriptural support for his position, in the original Greek, from memory (179) – but such things were secondary concerns to an emotional, somewhat transcendental faith. "Do not suppose", he cautioned an inquiring admirer who appears to have missed the point of one of his novels, "that I believe in Jesus because it is said so-and-so in a book….You cannot have such proof of the existence of God or the truth of the Gospel story as you can have of a proposition in Euclid or a

chemical experiment" (153-154). Faith had to take the place of such proof. Crises of faith, he explained, were to be accepted and indeed welcomed in that they would, in the righteous soul – and MacDonald, despite his Calvinist upbringing, scarcely acknowledged the existence of any other kind – lead to a closer and improved appreciation of God. So confident was he of this platform that he preached it to his daughter Mary as he lay dangerously ill with tuberculosis, a disease he would contend with repeatedly during his life, afflicting either himself or his loved ones; it would kill Mary several years later (169-171; see also Hein, *George MacDonald* 226-229).

This eschewing of objective or even conscious argument over matters of faith was not, however, to be taken as a license for carelessness or religious complacency. Nor was it a call for mere doctrinal observance or, least of all, a suggestion that a good person could draw a line under the assumption that God would mend all and then go about their temporal business in a state of spiritual security. That was the very form of lukewarm Christianity that MacDonald found so hateful. Unavoidably separated from God in this lifetime, people *had* to work towards a closer relationship with Him, but the most effective way of doing so was simply to genuinely and consistently yearn for such a relationship. What MacDonald was calling for was the abandonment of conscious intellectual effort in religious contemplation and its replacement with a more emotional, intuitive epistemological method. This would have two beneficial effects. Firstly, it would grant a level of appreciation of the spiritual and metaphysical import of the Christian message that would bring the believer closer to God than rationalised acquiescence to intellectual positions or sectarian manifestos ever could. Secondly, and more importantly, it would both prompt and *require* an ongoing emotional commitment to God. Religion was too important a matter to be approached in any other way. This yearning for a closer connection with the divine could only end with its satisfaction, in death. In the presence of God, the emotions would have all the proof they needed.

MacDonald himself believed, furthermore, that such emotional understanding was virtually the only worthwhile way to apprehend anything. Like many Victorian clerics he had a grounding in science, having studied chemistry at university, but unlike most he firmly turned his back on it in adulthood. Not for him the spiritual edification that others found in natural theology or the codification of the workings of Creation:

Human science is but the backward undoing of the tapestry-web of God's science, works with its back to him, and is always leaving him – his intent, that is, his perfected work – behind it, always going farther from the point where his work culminates in revelation. (quoted in Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 63)

Fink (64) and Raeper (*George MacDonald* 247-248) have recognised that MacDonald embraced transformative biology for its allegorical value; God wished us to transform into better people just as he wished beasts to transform into stronger animals. This is probably a sensible point to make, but MacDonald seems to have kept out of most of the scientific controversies that took place during his lifetime, because he regarded them as more or less spurious. To him, the value of the gospels lay in their enduring symbolic power, not their historicity (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 250-251). Besides, one could not truly appreciate things by reducing them to objective facts and figures. So attached was he to the notion of 'feeling', rather than 'knowing' things that he scoffed at the notion of confining an idea within a written sermon (*Expression of Character* 38). MacDonald's frequent public lectures on secular literature – another string to his bow – were adlibbed rather than read from notes. He felt that reciting established knowledge, rather than sharing the immediate emotional effects of its discovery, would be cheating his paying audiences (Hein, *George MacDonald* 104).

To MacDonald's mind, therefore, one reached heaven not by constructing any sort of rational argument for one's Christian beliefs, but by passionately *wanting* to be Christian. The love, mercy, charity and other spiritual qualities associated with Christianity would naturally emerge as consequences, conscious or otherwise, of this desire. God loved everyone equally; it was up to us to love Him back. This egalitarian approach to divine favour landed him in hot water with his congregation in Arundel where, early in his career, he spent a year preaching in a Congregationalist church. His parishioners, already feeling somewhat of an embattled minority in what was a substantially Catholic community, expected their young minister to toe a fairly strict sectarian line (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 78). This was not a fortuitous appointment for a cleric of individualistic and non-rational ideas, and his seemingly imprecise, open-minded sermons – and especially his contention that the Heathen would be subjected merely to a period of purgatory before admission to heaven – grated on

many of his flock. It was hinted, then suggested, then requested, that he resign (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 89-95). The presence of a parishioner from Arundel among the mourners at his funeral fifty years later (Hein, *George MacDonald* 399) indicates that their dissatisfaction with his preaching was not unanimous, but the dismissal had far-reaching effects on his career. Stung by the rejection and unable to find more liberal ears in the notionally more forgiving religious atmosphere of Manchester, MacDonald never held another conventional clerical post. His desire to preach, however, remained strong, and he sought new ways of satisfying it that would also satisfy – and, by his own standards, benefit – the recipients of his preaching.

This was to prove difficult. MacDonald fully appreciated that he asked a great deal of his disciples (Hein, *George MacDonald* 319). He has come in for criticism, sometimes by those generally sympathetic to his manifesto, for asking more than was reasonable, or for doing so in a flawed or inconsistent way. Some critics, perceiving the responsibility of a cleric included instruction as well as inspiration, have even ventured to suggest relief that his official ministerial career was so brief (Manlove, *Christian Fantasy* 181). This may be a trifle harsh, but it is certainly fair to say that this would-be mystic had trouble explaining, let alone promulgating, his ideas.

The difficulty perhaps lay in the fact that MacDonald was, as a theologian, trying to rationally explain the spuriousness of rational explanation. In his estimation, the central opponent to be fought in religious instruction was not lack of faith or doctrinal laxity, but the questioning, doubting, hectoring human intellect. The intellect worked on an empirical paradigm that sought conclusive, demonstrable proof as a method of settling arguments, and settled arguments were no help whatsoever in inspiring the sort of enduring desire he valued as a method of reaching God. In his essay "A Sketch of Individual Development" (1880), MacDonald advanced his long-held contention that conventional secular education was a positively hazardous time in a child's spiritual life:

> His intellect is seized and possessed by a new spirit. For a time knowledge is pride; the mere consciousness of knowing the reward of its labour; the ever recurring, ever passing contact of mind with a new fact is a joy full of excitement, and promises an endless delight. But ever the thing that is known sinks into insignificance, save as a step of the endless stair on which he is climbing – whither he knows not; the unknown draws him; the new fact

touches his mind, flames up in the contact, and drops dark, a mere fact, on the heap below. Even the grandeur of law as law, so far from adding fresh consciousness to his life, causes it no small suffering and loss (31).

A fact, proven by empirical argument, may be correct, and even useful in a given context, but it brought its proponent no closer to God, and was therefore no help in understanding the universe. Although imaginary libraries turn up frequently in his works, MacDonald was dismissive of the instructive potential of the non-scriptural written word. In *Lilith*, Raven scolds the young rationalist Vane for equating his large library with a rich inner life: "books are but dead bodies to you, and a library nothing but a catacomb!" (210). Raven is a librarian on Earth, but in the Land of Seven Dimensions, where things tend to be closer to their true, Godly nature, he is a sexton, a caretaker of cemeteries. To MacDonald's mind the two professions were similar indeed – where a sexton makes sure dead bodies are properly stowed, a librarian does the same for books, the corpses of what could have been knowledge had their contents not been locked down as spiritually vacuous catalogues of rationalistic fact. Since earthly life was a dislocation from the one central, heavenly source of truth and happiness, recorded, static facts could not aid the spirit. This idea turns up in allegorical fashion at various points in his stories, most obviously in *Lilith*. Enslaved to a race of very stupid giants who have put him to the rather pointless task of ring-barking trees, Vane finds himself freed by The Little Ones, a race of childlike elves. The Little Ones do not reproduce biologically – they find their babies, in effect, in the cabbage patch – and have no real concept of empiricism, measurement or indeed knowledge in the sense that Vane understands it. He discovers this in a conversation with their leader, Lona;

"Do more boy or girl babies come to the wood?"

"They don't come to the wood; we go to the wood and find them."

" Are there more boys or girls of you now?"

I had found that to ask precisely the same question twice, made them knit their brows.

"I do not know", she answered.

"You can count them, surely!"

"We never do that. We shouldn't like to be counted."

"Why?"

"It wouldn't be smooth. We would rather not know." (241).

The Little Ones, who never seem to grow up, live in an idyllic woodland setting, free of greed, selfishness or anxiety, and Vane sojourns with them for some time. In time he discovers why there are no adult Little Ones, and why there are no giant children – the giants were Little Ones who developed too much of a sense of self, thought too much, and began eating giant food. One day they simply wake up a giant, completely forgetting their past lives. This fate is the one thing the Little Ones fear, as they regard the giants, quite justifiably, as stupid, fat, ugly, clumsy and hopeless, and yet a proportion of them always fall into this pattern. "When they begin to grow big they care for nothing but bigness", Lona mourns, "and when they cannot grow any bigger they try to grow fatter. The bad giants are very proud of being fat" (246). Vane equates this with the gathering of temporal wealth, but it does not take much work to allegorise the process as a warning about the corrupting influence of intellectual knowledge on spiritual and emotional development. The idea is present in several of MacDonald's other works, notably *Phantastes*. Says Anodos in a moment of startling clarity, "I found cheerfulness to be like life itself – not to be created by any argument" (62).

At points during his career, therefore, MacDonald found it best for his own emotional and spiritual well-being, and that of his audience, to retreat as far as he could from the realistic, the conscious and the codified. Deprived of a conventional ministry, he sought to instruct through fiction, since writing non-fiction would be arguing a point, something he felt loathe to do simply because he saw it as beside the point. He did publish three volumes of *Unspoken Sermons*, but did not see them as especially useful in getting his ideas across to his readers. In a novel or story, one could insert messages without being too rigidly or directly didactic. Within fiction, however, there were other complications. Realism also engaged the intellect by providing points of reference within the bounds of human experience. A reader who was offered a story set in London or America or even MacDonald's beloved home in Aberdeenshire could all too easily slip back into their rote-learned knowledge of the setting. Then they were merely using their intellect. The sheer quantity of MacDonald's realistic fiction demonstrates that he did not give up on the form, but it was a far from adequate vessel for his message.

Fantasy, he believed, offered a way to bypass the intellect and speak directly to the unconscious imagination, which was, the held, the closest thing to a direct link with God that humanity had. Consequently the rousing of the imagination was inherently a good thing. "The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience", he stated, was "not to give him things to think about, but to wake up things that are in him, to make him think for himself." ("The Fantastic Imagination" 198). This would open the spiritual and emotional sluices, as it were, bringing on the sort of religious yearning referred to in German as *sehnsucht* – the German Romantics were key influences on MacDonald's fantastic imagination – that would prompt the reader to consider God in the less conscious or intellectual manner MacDonald felt useful (Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 95-96). What better way to do this, he seems to have concluded, than by writing about marvellous or impossible things? Small wonder that when he began planning *Lilith* after a break from fantasy writing in the 1880s, MacDonald grumbled to his wife about being fed up with "inventing within mere human laws" (quoted in Hein, *George MacDonald* 384).

The abandonment of human laws prompted, it seems, an attempt at the abandonment of almost any other sort of law. Certainly, secondary worlds had to follow their own postulates, but chiefly as a concession to the reader, who needed such consistency in order to properly suspend disbelief or conscious thought;

> His [ie the writer's] world once invented, the highest law that comes into play is, that there shall be harmony between the laws by which the new world has come to exist; and in the process of his creation, the inventor must hold by those laws. The moment he forgets one of them, he makes the story, by its own postulates, incredible. To be able to live a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it. ("The Fantastic Imagination" 195-196).

Once that concession was made, however, departure from rationalistic frames of reference was a virtual must. Anodos's journey in *Phantastes* simply cannot be mapped. On more than one occasion he opens a door and finds himself in an entirely new place with no reference to where he was the previous minute (120, 137-145). This, obviously, would not be possible in a realistic novel or story. Even when he proceeds across the landscape in a more conventionally intelligible fashion – and

there is plenty of this in the novel – Anodos moves in deliberately random ways. He says as much himself. Coming across a river, he claims "I thought I could not do better than follow it, and see what it made of it" (71).

MacDonald's desire to escape realistic frames of reference also goes some way to explaining the weird and wonderful monsters and creatures that Anodos, Vane, Mossy and Tangle meet. Where his contemporary Charles Kingsley devotes considerable energy to demonstrating the scientific feasibility of his water-babies, MacDonald's fantastic creations rarely make any sense to the rational mind. The Little Ones in *Lilith* do not give birth, and do not trouble themselves with the question of how their babies arrive in the wood where they find them. In *Phantastes*, Anodos comes across and recounts the tale of a planet where reproduction takes place in similar imponderable ways (82-89). In *Lilith* Vane finds himself assailed by an entire ecosystem of bizarre autochthonous monsters whose ultimate inability to harm him is – but of course – a consequence of their aversion to the moonlight in which he walks (228-230). MacDonald's inventive, implausible fantasy zoology perhaps reaches its zenith in the aeranths that guide Tangle into Fairy Land in 'The Golden Key'. They are fish, he asserts, that move through the air as though swimming through it, but they have feathers like birds and faces like owls. The good-witch figure the children call Grandmother has a tank full of them in her back room, and when she bathes Tangle they are only too happy to serve as animate washcloths. They talk, and at suppertime beg to be cooked and eaten, emerging from the pot as winged human souls. Christian symbolism and allegories of martyrdom or rebirth into higher life can be discerned here, but a casual observer could be excused for dismissing these creatures as semi-comic whimsy.

This refusal to provide explanations is, it seems, quite deliberate (Manlove, *George MacDonald* 74-75). MacDonald had no quarrel with Kingsley – in fact he urged his wife Louisa to read *The Water-Babies* (*Expression of Character* 71) – possibly because both writers, for all their differences, championed a view of religion that placed sound epistemology above conduct (Manlove, *Fantasy Literature of England* 170-171). He was, however, using the marvellous in an entirely different way from Kingsley. MacDonald was depending on the fiat of the marvellous to write unencumbered by any of the intellectual machinery of humanity, and in doing so indulged that fiat as far as his imagination could take him. To him, the whole point of fantasy in general, and secondary-world fantasy in particular. was to create an

indistinct and unknowable imaginative environment that could not be fathomed by the intellect. Readers would therefore have little option but to suspend the intellect and let the story work on "on that part of us for whose sake it exists" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 200) – that is, the emotional, intuitive imagination. The ability to make this paradigm shift was, to MacDonald, the chief measure of maturity and good sense, as it placed the thinker in a closer relationship with God (McGillis, "Liminality in *Lilith*" 123; see also Schrock, 58-76). Practiced upon himself, this might have been termed intellectual suicide; practiced upon his readers, the term intellectual euthanasia seems more appropriate.

The equation of enlightenment with death may seem slightly morbid, but it is justified given the centrality of death to MacDonald's way of thinking. "Death is", said Tolkien, "the theme that most inspired George MacDonald" ("Tree and Leaf" 59). MacDonald was, throughout his life, a firm proponent of Christ's scriptural observation that one had to die in order to truly live. It was, after all, the only way to truly get close to God, and therefore a transformative benediction rather than anything to be feared (McGillis, "Fantasy as Miracle" 203). MacDonald therefore looked forward to death, and seldom regarded the personal dislocation it caused as anything more than a temporary separation (Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 57-58). Those who died had not lost anything, or indeed been lost to anyone – they were merely undergoing a transition slightly more quickly than those they (*temporarily*) left behind (Yamaguchi 103-105). The process of death itself might well be unpleasant, but the pain was brief and needed to be embraced, in much the same way as a bitter tonic, in order to claim subsequent reward of a second and infinitely greater life in heaven. During the eighteen days it took for pneumonia to claim the life of his teenage son Maurice in 1879, MacDonald prayed for the strength "to help the darling die" (quoted in Greville MacDonald 492), confident in the knowledge they would be meeting again soon enough. His patience was sorely tried in old age, when he was buffeted by a succession of personal tragedies, but his son insisted that he never entirely lost the will to maintain a "constant waiting for something at hand" (487). That was the eventual, cathartic transition from one's deathbed to the presence of God himself;

> All my life, I might nearly say, I have been trying to find that one Being, and
> to know him consciously present; hope grows and grows with the years that
> lead me nearer to the end of my earthly life; and in my best moods it seems

ever that the only thing worth desiring is that his will be done; that there lies before me a fullness of life, sufficient to content the giving of a perfect Father, and that the part of his child is to yield all and see that he does not himself stand in the way of the mighty design. (528)

This position comes through in much of his fantasy writing, in which death is simply a transition to more, different and greater life. "I was dead", says Anodos after being killed towards the end of *Phantastes*, "and right content" (177). The fact that he can say or think anything after his death demonstrates that MacDonald did not see death as the end of anything beyond the emotional frustration of separation from God. In 'The Golden Key', Tangle and Mossy's search takes them their entire lives, and the reader is perhaps meant to assume that their separation is symbolic of one of them dying before they are reunited on their final climb into a folkloric equivalent of heaven (Wolff 141). *Lilith* in particular displays a preoccupation with the notion that death is merely a transition to further, truer life. As a sexton, Mister Raven sees himself not as a caretaker of the dead but as a steward of those who have adopted a placid, emotional, intuitive course towards genuine life;

"None of those you see", he said, "are in truth quite dead yet, and some have just begun to come alive and die. Others had begun to die, that is to come alive, long before they came to us; and when such are indeed dead, that instant they will wake and leave us. Almost every night some rise and go. But I will not say more, for I find my words only mislead you! – this is the couch that has been waiting for you", he ended, pointing to one of the three.

"Why just this", I said, beginning to tremble, and anxious by parley to delay.

"For reasons which one day you will be glad to know", he answered.

"Why not know them now?"

"That also you will know when you wake."

"But these are all dead, and I am alive!" I objected, shuddering.

"Not much" rejoined the sexton with a smile, " – not nearly enough! Blessed be the true life that the pauses between its throbs are not death!" (216)

Vane does not understand this, and his misadventures are the result of his attempts to improve his lot and that of the other characters (including the Little Ones) by means decided upon by intellectual argument. Only when he finally surrenders to the placid, emotionally contemplative death that Mister Raven has been offering since the beginning do his troubles cease. He is perhaps handicapped in this effort by his unpromising starting point – he opens his narration of the novel with the proud statement that he has just graduated from university (187), something MacDonald himself never actually managed (Zipes 308), or apparently saw any value in. Thus he has become accustomed to thinking through his problems rationally. Without wishing to ignore the considerable debate surrounding *Llith's* knotty symbolism and enormously complicated patterns, it must be said that the novel can most easily be read as the story of an incredulous young rationalist gathering the wisdom and courage required to sit down, shut up and die (Hein, "A Fresh Look at *Lilith*" 75).

Mortality and temporality are deeply implicated in each other. MacDonald did not believe that death was to be feared, and he depicts worlds in which this belief is actualised. This is in part what led him to abandon realistic geography or demography in his stories in favour of the timeless, placeless environment of the fairytale. The preoccupation with death and its rituals that was exhibited by so much of Victorian Britain stemmed in large part, it has been argued, by a crisis of faith in traditional Christian eschatology and a creeping suspicion that earthly departure might very well be the end for a soul (Pemberton 36). Killen (72-73) makes a related point, arguing that the late-Victorian profusion of Gothic narratives involving orphans or other isolated individuals (to which MacDonald arguably contributed: Byron and Punter, 144-145) reflected the concerns of a society increasingly bereft of the comforting communality of a shared eschatology. More directly, Wolff (378) notes that suspicion of intellectualism was considerably more common among Victorian writers than the notion that death was any sort of benediction. Given such an intellectual and cultural climate, depiction of death as a longed-for transition to a closer relationship with God would be difficult to credit in a realistic story. By abandoning such modes in favour of a fictional universe, MacDonald was better able to promote his idea of death as a transitional, rather than conclusive, experience.

At times MacDonald's adherence to the notion that death is nothing to be feared leads to oddities in the morality of his works; if death is simply a passage into more life, for example, why is Lilith's murder of the saintly Lona so monstrous

(Wolff 363-364)? I surmise that MacDonald valued death as a final extinction of the spiritually irrelevant, conscious, intellectualised prattle he worked so hard to silence in his fantasies. Certainly, the works themselves would seem to back this up. To continue her journey through the underworld in "The Golden Key", Tangle must unthinkingly throw herself into a void; it takes her a year to muster the courage (138). Much can be made of the fact that during his pursuit of the White Lady that ties together his adventures. Anodos never experiences sexual satisfaction; the conclusion of the search is when he discovers she is betrothed to another. Anodos is happy not because his longing has been satisfied but because he can now abandon the search that has caused him such profound (and at times seemingly rather unfair) frustration (Manlove, *Fantasy Literature of England* 92-93; see also Woolf 85). Similarly, Vane's misadventures stem from his repeated attempts to rationalise, articulate and act upon the world around him after refusing Raven's offer of quiet, emotionally contemplative proxy death (Wolff 76). MacDonald asks his heroes, and his readers, not to give up the desire for, or hopes of attaining, the object of their search, but the search itself.

Death and pain, therefore, are not evils in themselves in MacDonald's mind. This is perhaps a good thing given the increasing outbursts of violence – symptomatic, it has been suggested, of his growing disillusionment with humanity – in his later novels, particularly *Lilith* (Wolff 383-384). Villainy in MacDonald's fantasies comes ultimately not from that which will physically harm the protagonists, but that which will threaten their ability to look at the world through innocent, childlike eyes. In that light, the true purpose of Anodos's quest is to free him from the Shadow that is, for much of the book, symbolic of worldly cynicism; under its influence he sees wondrous fairy-children as ordinary, grubby little boys (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 149). Far from being a magical or marvellous construct, therefore, this Shadow is *counter*-marvellous, forcing banality and realism on Anodos's view of a world that depends and insists on being seen as an imaginative, fanciful wonderland. In *Lilith*, similar monsters assail the Little Ones, the adorable, childlike creatures Vane credits with no knowledge but great wisdom, who, if they think too much, grow into grotesque and morally unsalvageable giants.

Indeed, the core didactic purpose of MacDonald's fiction, and his fantasies in particular, seems to have been to rid the readers of their own Shadows – their conscious, rational minds, the workings of which could never bring them closer to

God. Secondary worlds cut the imagination loose in an entirely created realm unfettered by any of the concerns of the real world. The dreamy, folkloric vagueness of MacDonald's secondary worlds was the very deliberate result of his attempt to make the most of this opportunity. His fantasies, MacDonald hoped, served the same purpose as Mister Raven's cellarful of grave-like couches, offering the audience an opportunity to symbolically die, if only briefly and temporarily, into the childlike bliss of emotional enlightenment. As a result of this euthanasia of the intellect they would, he was sure, come to the only conclusion that really mattered.

Folklore and philosophy in the fantasies of George MacDonald

George MacDonald's fantasies were created the better to promulgate his idiosyncratic spiritual epistemology – indeed, looking through his other writings and his life in general it seems that this was the guiding principle behind almost everything he did. As we have seen, world-building was valuable to MacDonald in that it enabled him to set up his own trackless personal cosmos where conscious, rational and intellectual argument could be abandoned in favour of the sort of emotional intuition he thought to be the only way to truly appreciate God. Manlove (*Christian Fantasy* 161-164) has cited him as an important member of the first generation of Christian fantasists whose work was intended to guide people to God rather than retell an established, usually scriptural Christian narrative. In many cases the Christian content of his work is only revealed after some analysis; as Manlove suggests (*Christian Fantasy* 181), many of his stories would perhaps be more readily appreciated by Freud or Jung than by Saint Paul . In the pre-Tolkien era, the creation of a secondary world is not an obvious step, and to take such a step in so innovative and emotionally demanding a way as he did is still less so. The value of Fairy Land to MacDonald, and his principle reason for sojourning there, has been established, but this does not explain how he discovered it. That question actually places MacDonald at a very interesting juncture in the history of literary fantasy in English, and grants him an oddly privileged position in its development.

In trying to discover where MacDonald picked up his Elvish craft, one might seize upon his Scottish ancestry and the nation's long-standing reputation for stories of brownies, boggarts, Bloody Bones and Little People. The chapter of Hein's 1993 biography dealing with MacDonald's childhood in provincial Scotland tacitly endorses this idea in its title, 'The Borders of Fairyland'. It is tempting to suggest that

as a child MacDonald learned Scottish fairytales and, as an adult, harnessed that tradition for spiritual purposes. In fact, Scotland's oral traditions were only incidental influences on his fantasy writing. MacDonald was raised in a Calvinist enclave in rural Aberdeenshire, and although he must have absorbed some folkloric ideas, the reading and discourse in the house was of a predominantly religious nature. He was familiar with Bunyan and Milton from childhood, for example, but seemed to recall little Scottish folklore (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 33). That folklore he did absorb was of the historical variety; with one ancestor narrowly escaping the massacre at Glencoe and another maimed a generation later at the Battle of Culloden (16-17), there was adventure aplenty in his family history without recourse to magic. His son Greville MacDonald, in his biography of his father, describes the Scottish clan system as the rock upon which everything else in his life was built, and uses this assertion as a jumping-off point for three chapters of discussion about the illustrious and enobling nature of Gaelic culture. This is the Scotland that MacDonald seems to have carried away from his mother's knee – a world of clans and tartans rather than of ghosts and goblins.

In adulthood, dividing his time between England and Italy, he always identified himself as a Scotsman and worked hard at maintaining his links to the land; wintering in Algiers in 1856 for health reasons, he insisted upon stamping around the city in full Highland regalia (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 138). At least one writer has described him as longing for the time when being a member of Clan MacDonald actually meant something (Wolff 381-382). Elements of MacDonald's upbringing in Aberdeenshire undoubtedly found their way into his writing. The framing narrative of his 1865 morality tale 'A Scots Christmas Story' concludes with a charming and possibly autobiographical episode (170-171) in which children mob their father with kisses in mock punishment for using Scottish dialectal terms in his story. His own stern but loving Scottish father has been cited as the obvious inspiration for the title character of *David Elginbrod* (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 22), while the two schoolmasters the young MacDonald worked under in his native village of Huntly – the first a hectoring disciplinarian, the second much more forgiving – both turn up, thinly disguised, in *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 30-31).

So MacDonald was intensely proud of his homeland, and this upbringing there left a profound and lasting impression on him. As a writer, however, he was more

interested in portraying Scotland's supposed realities than its fantasies. Robb ("George MacDonald's Scottish Stories" 10-14) has pointed out that MacDonald's debt to Scottish historians and historical novelists is extensive, and noted his regard for the poetry of Robert Burns (17; see also Raeper, "Diamond and Kilmeny" 136-141). What is noteworthy for our purposes is the earthly focus of these Scottish influences. MacDonald returned to Scotland (or rather his somewhat hazy, romanticised recollections of Scotland – Hein, *George MacDonald* 110) time and time again in his realistic novels, but it features only incidentally in his fantasies. His first foray into non-realistic writing was 'The Portent', a tale firmly grounded in Celtic folk traditions; "The Carosoyn", a later fairytale, is set in Scotland and reenacts the Celtic trope of fairies robbing human cradles. In *Lilith*, Raven's cottage stands on a rocky plain of heather. But that is almost it for overt Scottish themes in his fairytales. Flieger ("Myth, Mysticism and Magic" 42-43) makes the suggestion that imponderable realms of mystery and magic coexisting with the fields we know are common in Celtic mythology, suggesting this was an influence on the formation of *Lilith*. As William Raeper and Greville MacDonald make clear, however, it was Celtic *reality* that moved him, not Celtic *fantasy*. He did not take to writing fantasy because of his ancestry. Scottish fairy traditions are present in his writing, but they were no more of an influence than one would naturally expect of a native Scotsman.

By comparison, continental influences abound. MacDonald's characterisation of supernatural evil demonstrates this point well, as it owes little to the gory, predominantly utilitarian horrors of Scottish folklore. When MacDonald wishes to evoke evil, he eschews such Celtic bogies as the murderous Redcap, who haunts the old battlefields of Scotland dyeing his cap in the blood of unfortunate travelers, or 'Rawhead and Bloody Bones', the name given to an ogre who lurks under staircases gnawing the bones of Scottish children. Instead, he draws upon the spiritual threats of Old Testament diabolism (as in *Lilith*, whose title character is Adam's evil first wife) or, more commonly, evil witches and fairy stepmothers clearly inspired by the writings of continental, and predominantly German, folklorists such as the Brothers Grimm. Defining fairytales as a genre in his essay "The Fantastic Imagination", he offers Fredrick de la Motte Fouque's *Undine* as the supreme example of the genre (195).

Several of MacDonald's own fairytales are based on German originals. "The Light Princess" is a case in point. In a nameless kingdom, a similarly anonymous

princess is cursed by a witch who was not invited to her christening, leading to an odd magical affliction; she has no gravity, metaphorically or literally.

> The first awkwardness that resulted from this unhappy privation was, that the moment the nurse began to float the baby up and down, she flew from her arms towards the ceiling. Happily the resistance of the air brought her ascending career to a close within a foot of it. There she remained, horizontal as when she left her nurse's arms, kicking and laughing amazingly. The nurse in terror flew to the bell, and begged the footman, who answered it, to bring the house-steps directly. (17-18)

In addition to this semi-comic (and recurring) problem, the princess has no figurative gravity either; she is incapable of taking anything seriously, giggling hopelessly at military disaster, parental invective and socioeconomic pathos. Eventually the princess meets a migrant prince from far away. Through a series of quietly but unmistakably eroticised nightly swimming sessions in a favoured pond, the couple fall in love, restoring some of the princess's gravitas. Thereafter the witch seeks to destroy the kingdom by prevailing on a mighty underground serpent to suck all the water out of the land through a hole in the bottom of the pond where the prince and princess first met. The only solution to this problem, it is learned, is for a man to plug the hole with his own body, an undertaking that will obviously cause his death by drowning (43-44). The prince comes to the rescue, resolving to do the honours. He dies, but is resurrected, and his selfless, irrational devotion, fusing eros and thanatos, restores the princess's lost gravity.

The story is rife with both Christian and Freudian symbolism (Gray 41) but no attempt is made to deflect the suggestion that the bones of the plot are drawn from the preexisting Franco-German tradition of "Sleeping Beauty" (Mendelson 34). Wolff specifically traces the tale back to ETA Hoffman's *Prinzessin Brambilla*, a story MacDonald certainly knew (119-126). Others of MacDonald's fairytales, such as "The Giant's Heart" and "The History of Photogen and Nycteris" are also close cousins of German folklore. "The Golden Key", similarly recalls "Hansel and Gretel" in its depiction of two children lost in a trackless woodland, although Mossy and Tangle's journey takes them through deserts, mountains and caves as well (Mendelson 38-39). MacDonald also openly admitted that the Old Man Of Fire in

"The Golden Key" had been lifted almost directly from Novalis's novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (quoted in Wolff 146). Although large sections of *Phantastes* betray a considerable debt to Spenser, other sections are of patently Germanic ancestry, notably the embedded tale of Cosmo von Wehrstal (89-108) and the incident with the kobolds (121-122), who Anodos explicitly describes as being drawn from German folklore. The Shadow brings to mind the very German concept of the doppleganger (Wolff 65), even if MacDonald makes very original use of the trope. Gray (41) also cites the Danish Hans Christian Anderson, himself heavily influenced by German folkloric and Romantic traditions, as a central influence on MacDonald's "The Light Princess".

In his own distinctive way, MacDonald participated in the promulgation of the fairytale, a Northern European and more specifically German form, within the Anglophone world. Tracing the development of this form in the English-speaking world, and MacDonald's attitudes and contribution to it, is an important subsidiary component of the question of why he took to writing in this manner.

The century leading up to MacDonald's birth was not a profitable time for English-speaking fantasists. Although Anglophone fantasy folklore survived the eighteenth century with the tenacity characteristic of oral traditions (Summerfield xiv-xv), children's *literature* of the time was for the most part pointedly realistic and freighted with distinctly secular Enlightenment morality. Dr Johnson spoke for many:

> [I]t may be doubted whether habituating children to seek amusement, almost exclusively, in a fictitious narrative, has not a direct tendency to weaken the mental powers. These tales [ie fairytales] are the novels of childhood, and it is much to be feared that unlimited perusal of them will exhaust the sensibility, and produce the same listless indifference to the realities of life observable in older persons who devote their time to this kind of reading. (quoted in Summerfield 197-198)

This mindset persisted well into the nineteenth century. Avery has described MacDonald as being "born into one of the bleakest periods for children's books…[t]he imagination in itself was held to be evil, and all that was not actual fact was a lie and therefore damnably wicked." ("George MacDonald and the Victorian Fairy Tale" 126). Raeper ("Diamond and Kilmeny" 142) suggests that this policy

would have been exacerbated in a Calvinist enclave of the sort in which MacDonald was raised. The literary fairytale, the dissemination of which obviously depended on the publishing and commercial infrastructure of the Enlightenment establishment, struggled in this intellectual climate. Such stories would not start appearing in print in Britain until the 1820s, originally in the form of translations from German, and naturally aroused controversy when they did. By the time MacDonald began writing – and it is perhaps worth noting that all of his short fairytales were first published in the period 1864-1882 – a debate over the value and even admissibility to the nursery of the genre had been running for some time. Many writers felt it dangerous to create stories that merely entertained the fancy and imagination of children, and freighted their works with grave and often deeply unsubtle moral lessons. Notable among such writers were Edgar Taylor and George Cruickshank, who apparently felt it was necessary to add various topical cautions and moralistic asides to their 1823 translation of Grimm's fairytales in order to adapt them to a British audience (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 307-309). In the opposite corner, some writers, notably Dickens, cautioned against stifling the imagination with excessive concessions to topicality or regimented lessons about duty and obedience. Many of this school of thought agreed that the genre could be used as a didactic vehicle, but wondered how appropriate it was to harness that potential. Dickens, the man who killed off Little Nell, argued that, in a harsh and often unpleasant world, we should at least leave this bastion of innocent childhood fancy unassailed by adult morality ('Frauds on the Faeries' 56-58).

The debate was complicated in the 1860s by a shift in social perceptions of the moral standing of the child. Rather than impressionable innocents easily led astray, children were increasingly seen as uncorrupted, often highly sentimentalised moral compasses for their elders (Knoepflmacher, *Ventures into Childland* 8-11; see also Avery, *Childhood's Pattern* 133-136). This shift was not universally seen as helpful. MacDonald for one had his doubts about the angelic cherubs who increasingly came to characterise mid-Victorian children's fiction. As he said in his capacity as the narrator of his children's novel *At the Back of the North Wind*,

A fear crosses me, lest, by telling so much about my friend [the child-protagonist Diamond], I should lead people to mistake him for one of those consequential, priggish little monsters, who are always trying to say clever

things, and looking to see whether people appreciate them. When a child like that dies, instead of having a silly book written about them, he should be stuffed like one of those awful big-headed fishes you see in museums. But Diamond never troubled his head about what people thought of him. (267)

Gray (50-52) argues that there are only a few small points of difference between Diamond and the kind of child MacDonald is complaining about here. This underlines the fact that MacDonald's fairytales were born into a literary culture where the struggle to agree on the constructive potential of a still relatively new literary form was taking an interesting, complicating turn. Notwithstanding is aversion to controversy, MacDonald undoubtedly had an opinion on this issue. The previous quotation from *At the Back of the North Wind* demonstrates a clear engagement with the question of what sort of behaviour a fairytale can or should impute in its reader. He can hardly have lacked an opinion on his friend John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*, a fairytale whose warm-hearted adolescent hero is contrasted sharply with his oafishly immoral elder brothers. Likewise, Ruskin's introduction to a volume of translations of the Brothers Grimm, in which he begged that such tales not be burdened with the "premature imitations of the vanities of elder people" (60), must also have raised MacDonald's eyebrows. True to form, however, MacDonald seems to have kept such opinions to himself. In his biography of the cleric, Raeper cites at length Ruskin's criticisms of "The Light Princess" ("too amorous throughout" – Raeper, *George MacDonald* 222) but, with regard to the other side of that correspondence, can only note that "If MacDonald did listen to Ruskin' criticism on the subject, he did not heed him" (223).

The pendulum swung fairly conclusively in favour of Ruskin and Dickens with the publication and immediate success of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865. MacDonald, interestingly, had a tangential role in its publication. He invited Carroll, a family friend, to read the final draft of what was then called *Alice's Adventures Underground* to the MacDonald children (ten-year-old Mary MacDonald, 'Elfie', was one of Carroll's child friends), and they were, according to one biographer, "wildly enthusiastic" (Hein, *George MacDonald* 156-157). That such a reading was permitted (indeed, it seems, encouraged) in the house speaks volumes about MacDonald's position on what a fairytale should do, and by extension his views on the value of childhood innocence and imagination. By

insisting on the paramount importance of seeing the world through a prism of intuitive, childlike wonder, MacDonald placed himself firmly, if not altogether deliberately, in the camp of those who felt that fairytales should not be used for overtly didactic or topical purposes. Again, although he went to considerable and perhaps debilitating lengths to avoid debate and controversy, it is clear that he had opinions that were applicable to contemporary discourse. He agreed with Lewis Carroll: childlike innocence was valuable for its own sake.

However, where Carroll's book engages with the notion of fairytale didacticism solely in order to parody it (consider the laboured explanation, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 6-8, for Alice's search for a *Poison* label on the bottle from which she initially drinks), MacDonald remained convinced that the inspirational power of the form could be harnessed for spiritually constructive ends. He may not have put much stock in the later, more sentimentalised view of the inherently innocent child, but it dovetailed with something similar, which he held very dear: the notion that the childlike imagination was the part of humanity closest to God. He viewed early childhood as a fairly heavenly state:

> Neither memory of pain that is past, nor apprehension of pain to come, once arises to give him the smallest concern. In some way, doubtless very vague, for his being itself is a border-land of awful mystery, he is aware of being surrounded, enfolded with an atmosphere of love; the sky over him is his mother's face; the earth that nourishes him his father's bosom. The source, the sustentation, the defence of his being, the endless mediation betwixt his needs and the things that supply them, are all one. There is no type so near the highest idea of relation to a God, as that of the child to its mother. Her face is God, her bosom nature, her arms are Providence – all love – one love – to him an undivided bliss. ('A Sketch of Individual Development' 27)

Much could be made of this idealised view of motherly love given that MacDonald lost his own mother Helen to tuberculosis in 1832 when he was only eight years old (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 32). This is a tragic age to endure such a loss, as MacDonald had to do most of his growing up without direct maternal affection, yet would have retained at least a few clear memories of his mother, which he would not have if she had died when he was younger. Much of Robert Lee Wolff's

groundbreaking book on MacDonald is given to charting the possible effects this loss might have had on the man and his work, and this may not be the best place to reiterate his arguments. The point to be made here is that he held an idealised perception of childhood as something of a foretaste of heaven, and that children, with their unquestioning faith in and adoration of a self-evident higher power and their vast capacity for imagination and emotional openness, were in fact closer to God than adults. This is symbolised in his writings, notably "The Golden Key". Separated from Mossy in the course of her adventures, Tangle meets the Old Man of Fire, an articulate baby who is constantly arranging and rearranging a set of coloured balls. Tangle is enthralled for seven years by this activity, and its agent:

> There was such an awfulness of absolute repose on the face of that child that Tangle stood dumb before him. He had no smile, but the love in his large grey eyes was deep as the centre. And with the repose there lay on his face a shimmer of moonlight, which seemed as if any moment it might break into such a ravishing smile as would cause the beholder to weep himself to death. But the smile never came, and the moonlight lay there unbroken. For the heart of the child was too deep for any smile to reach from it to his face.
>
> "Are you the oldest man of all?" Tangle at length, although filled with awe, ventured to ask.
>
> "Yes, I am. I am very, very old. I am able to help you, you know. I can help everybody." (140)

The apogee of wisdom and enlightenment is a baby. Raeper has noted that, so far as MacDonald was concerned, "it is the heart of the child alone who can find faith" (*George MacDonald* 249) and therefore, that childhood was the point in one's life when one was closest to knowing and understanding God. Guiding his flock back into some approximation of this blessed state was one of MacDonald's core motivations for penning fairytales. As already noted, MacDonald was attracted to fantasy because it enabled him to bypass the intellect and directly stimulate the imagination. He initially attempted this with *Phantastes* in 1858, but the public mood was still against writing of this kind, and the novel's lukewarm reception continued to irritate his son Greville MacDonald seventy years later (296-297). However, the success of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865 demonstrated a growing public

appetite for fairytales less obviously didactic than those of Taylor and Cruickshank. Enthused by the possibility of a more receptive audience, MacDonald embarked on a creative spurt that would see all of his remaining short fairy-tales written and published over the next sixteen years.

It is important to note here that MacDonald drew a clear distinction in his mind between childlikeness and childishness. Again, there is an obvious example of this within in fairytale corpus, this time in "The Light Princess", where the king and queen heatedly discuss their daughter's odd malady:

> The king could not help a sigh, which he tried to turn into a cough, saying, -
> "It is a good thing to be light-headed, I am sure, whether she be ours or not."
> "It is a bad thing to be light-headed", answered the queen, looking with prophetic soul into the future.
> "'Tis a good thing to be light-handed", said the king.
> "'Tis a bad thing to be light-fingered", answered the queen.
> "'Tis a good thing to be light-footed", said the king.
> "'Tis a bad thing – " began the queen; but the king interrupted her.
> "In fact", said he, with the tone of one who concludes an argument in which he has only imaginary opponents, and it which, therefore, he has come off triumphant – "in fact, it is a good thing altogether to be light-bodied." (21)

Shortly thereafter the king's hireling Chinese philosophers, Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck, are charged with solving the problem.

> Their consultation consisted chiefly in propounding and supporting, for the thousanth time, each his favourite theories. For the condition of the princess afforded delightful scope for the discussion of every question arising from the division of thought – in fact, all of the Metaphysics of the Chinese Empire. But its only justice is to say that they did not altogether neglect the discussion of the practical question, *what was to be done*." (26-27)

In fact, they neglect practical questions altogether, filling several hundred words with helpless, ephemeral twittering clearly intended as a rather barbed parody

of objective argument. These people are idiots. Distracted by puerile matters of definition, logic, and sophistry and hamstrung by an adherence to realistic limits on their aspirations, they are too childish to accomplish anything. Then along comes the prince, who exhibits an innocent, passionate, child*like* devotion to clearly unrealisable ideals of love and marriage (Knoepflmacher, *Ventures into Childland* 133). Despite the efforts of the evil fairy, his methodology eventually works a treat. 'The Light Princess' was published within the framing narrative of the novel *Adela Cathcart*, which involves the reawakening of the childlike imagination as a cure for an invalid's physical and spiritual malaise, a notion described by one modern critic as "an assault on adult literal-mindedness" (Knoepflmacher, *Ventures into Childland* 142). The impotence of purely rational, codified learning is also repeatedly discussed in *Lilith*. At one point in his journey, for example, Vane follows a wondrous firefly guide provided by Mister Raven. Yearning to touch this strange creature, Vane reaches out and seizes it, "[b]ut the instant I took it, its light went out; all was dark as pitch; a dead book with boards outspread lay cold and heavy in my hand" (228). Seizing, possessing and scrutinising value, therefore, debases all concerned; those who truly value something merely want it and wonder at it.

Similarly, in "The Golden Key", the importance of childlike wonder is palpable. The golden key itself has been read as a phallic symbol (Woolf 137-138; see also Gray 47), which certainly makes sense, especially as its possession and use is the exclusive preserve of the male protagonist Mossy. The fact that the key is held by children, however, who grow old in the course of their quest but become children again upon finding and opening the lock it fits, strengthens the interpretation of the key as symbolic of the creative, spiritually significant imagination (Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 72-73). Children have this imagination. MacDonald sought to inspire it in adults as well. It was the only way to God, and therefore the only way to truly valuable knowledge or growth.

Whereas many earlier writers had tried to pound the square peg of rationalistic, secular Victorian morality into the round hole of the emotional, imaginative fairytale, MacDonald's call for endless, non-rational, childlike spiritual questing seemed tailor-made for such a vessel. Fantasy, after all, "unlocks the imagination" (Mathews xi). In grasping this potential, however, he was aware that he was embarking on a sort of compositional balancing act. Making things too obvious would reduce fantasy to just another invented intellectual system and defeat his whole

purpose. Consequently, where other English fairy writers laid down such strong, definite codes that their stories often amounted to little more than moral lectures (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 306), MacDonald would not even enter into debate on what his stories 'meant'. "So long as I think my dog can bark", he noted, "I will not sit up and bark for him" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 199).

It was the responsibility of the author to keep those dogs barking, and MacDonald's ability to do so seems clear given that his fantasies have continued to resonate with readers much more than his realistic novels. The influence of *Phantastes* on CS Lewis is almost proverbial (Wolff 8-9) and Knoepflmacher notes in his introduction to the 1999 compilation of MacDonald's *Complete Fairy Tales* that his other work has "faded" by comparison (vii). In fact, in George MacDonald, the Anglophone fairytale had fallen into the hands of a proponent capable of using it in a uniquely powerful way.

This synthesis of form and purpose may stem from the fact that much of MacDonald's theology sprang from the same source as his knowledge of fairytales. Quite where MacDonald first came across the German Romanticism that shaped so much of his thought is intriguingly unclear. Some biographers, including his son Greville (73), tell the suitably romantic story that during the summer of 1842, for want of tuition fees, the 18-year-old MacDonald forewent a university term and instead worked as a librarian in an unknown country manor in Scotland. The large collection of German literature in this library is said to have galvanised both his spirit and his imagination (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 48). Conceding that MacDonald is unaccounted for during that period, others doubt this version of events, leaving the presumption that he came across German Romanticism in the course of his seminary studies (Hein, *George MacDonald* 325). German was certainly one of the six languages that Highbury College required of its theology students (45) and this, combined with his preexisting liking for earlier Anglophone Christian Romantics such as Bunyan (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 33) makes it almost inevitable that he would explore the German branch of the movement. However the discovery was made, it is clear that during the early 1840s MacDonald became conversant with, not to say deeply effected by, German Romanticism.

The literary fairytale had reached England from Germany, where Romantic writers such as Ludwig Tieck and ETA Hoffman – who Greville MacDonald cites (297-298) as the central instigator of *Phantastes* – had adapted preexisting oral

traditions for their own ends. The Romantics, says Siebers, adopted "superstition as a means of combating the exclusionary practices of the Enlightenment and of asserting poetic pluralism in the face of what they believed to be a singleminded and restrictive mentality" (26). It was from his exposure to this literature, it seems, that MacDonald picked up the notion of disengagement from rationalistic intellectual thought. Finding that it eased the spiritual tension of his youth, he took this idea very much to heart. This meant that, like significant, earlier "Germanising" scholars such as Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, MacDonald was a good deal closer to the source of the fairytale as a genre than many of his contemporaries (Raeper, *George MacDoanld* 238-240). In short, MacDonald's fairy-tales are more powerful than many of those of other writers in large part because he knew what he was talking about.

MacDonald was especially moved by the work of Fredrich von Hardenburg (1773-1802), better known as Novalis. An eighteenth-century German philosopher-poet who died of tuberculosis at the age of 29, Novalis argued for the transcendent importance of emotional effort and experience in pursuing one's journey homeward to God the Father. To MacDonald, a young man who desperately wanted to be Christian but had trouble *feeling* Christian, the discovery of a figure whose ideas at least suggested his concerns were legitimate must have been a great comfort. These ideas therefore provided the basis for much of MacDonald's demanding spiritual epistemology, not to mention his understanding of German literature.

Novalis had very clear ideas about purpose, potential, and best practice in the composition of fairytales;

> A fairytale is like a dream-picture without coherence. A collection of wonderful things and events, for example a musical phantasy, the harmonic sequences of the Aeolian harp, Nature itself. (quoted in Wolff 43)

Novalis's view is that literature served to bring us closer than anything else in our everyday lives to pure truth. Divorced from commonplace experience and relying on figures and motifs plucked directly from the imagination, fairytales are a potent case in point. In a Christian frame of reference (in which Novalis most certainly worked) a fairytale was a superb method for instilling the sort of emotional yearning and questing required for one to truly meet God. Casting off the demands of the real

world might bring about a situation in which words developed intuitive, rather than directly comprehensible, meanings –

> "One can imagine narratives without coherence but rather with association, like dreams; poems that are indeed good to hear and full of beautiful words, but also without any meaning and coherence, with at the most single stanza comprehensible, like fragments of the most varied sort of things." (quoted in Wolff 42-43)

The result, said Novalis, would be "an indirect effect like music", coherent with the emotions rather than the conscious intellect. Such engagement was good for the soul.

Heady stuff, and perhaps something of a romantic or idealised anticipation of Jung's notion of the collective unconscious. MacDonald took this message to heart in both his theology and his fictional composition, borrowing the musical metaphor when he suggested that a fairytale was perhaps more profitably compared to a sonata than a realistic short story ("The Fantastic Imagination" 197-198; see also Brawley 92-93). Elsewhere he speculated that poetry was a better vector for his ideas than prose because prose had to obey fussy laws of grammar and syntax that only served – like the spurious codifications of the natural philosophers – to place a layer of rationalistic bureaucracy between the audience and the idea. In Fairy Land Anodos finds something that might be better –

> In the fairy book, everything was just as it should be, though whether in words or something else, I cannot tell. It glowed and flashed the thoughts upon my soul, with such a power that the medium disappeared from the consciousness, and it was occupied only with the things themselves. (*Phantastes* 89)

Here, as usual in his work, MacDonald spends little effort in explaining exactly why the fairy writers can nail spiritual truth so much better than humans, but this, of course, is the point. He himself found human language, "the meagre and half-articulate speech of a savage tribe" (89), an imperfect vessel for his ideas. Poetry was a better option, but MacDonald never put much stock in his abilities as a poet and concentrated on trying to put Novalis's ideas into action in prose. Epigrams drawn

from Novalis (among other Romantic poets) head some of the chapters of *Phantastes* (19, 180) and the very last paragraph of *Lilith* has Vane explicitly quoting him: "Our life is no dream, but it should and perhaps will become one" (420). As will be demonstrated later, this questioning of the actuality of the primary world by an examination of symbolically powerful alternatives is a feature of MacDonald's work that links him with some unlikely colleagues in the twentieth century.

Examination of MacDonald's life make it easy to account for his deep and abiding regard for Novalis. The younger MacDonald passionately wanted to be Christian; Novalis presented him with a manner of thought whereby one became Christian first and foremost by wanting it. In Novalis, in fact, MacDonald had found both role model and a kindred spirit. The German had, in a sense, lived the Romantic manifesto by enjoying a short, spiritually and poetically enlightened life before succumbing at the age of twenty-nine, contentedly enough, to tuberculosis. MacDonald would suffer intermittently from TB for almost half a century, losing his daughters Lilia and Mary (Carroll's favourite) to the White Death in the interim. Two more of his children, Maurice and Grace, also died. MacDonald was futher beset by worldly cares that seriously tried his patience and must have contributed to gradually more frequent outbreaks of ill temper (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 267) and disastrous secondary-world violence (as in *Lilith* 357) on his part as he aged. For much of their time together the MacDonald family would suffer various degrees of hardship. Some of these were arguably trivial frustrations: traveling in America in 1872, MacDonald wrote home to apologise in advance for not being able to afford many of the books he would have liked to buy for his children (Greville MacDonald 453). At other times, however, the family suffered entirely genuine and thoroughly depressing poverty. Lilia, their eldest child, developed the habit of occasionally foregoing meals in order to grant her siblings larger helpings. This not only illustrates the financial difficulty the family sometimes found themselves in, but also explains the source of Lilia's saintly reputation (MacDonald, so often resolute in his view of death as transformative benediction, struggled to cope with her passing; Raeper, *George MacDonald* 363). Charity from friends was frequent, and seldom refused; into his thirties MacDonald was soliciting (and receiving) food parcels from his father (*Expression of Character* 75 and 125).

What made these difficulties all the more galling was that there was little in MacDonald's theology to support material denial or the wearing of hair shirts.

Although certainly concerned with the matter of living a godly life, MacDonald was sure that living such a life had more to do with sound epistemology than with material denial. In *Phantastes*, for example, Anodos is quite right to be entranced by the material splendour of the fairy palace (76). Moreover, his intense sexual desire for the woman of marble is not a sign of spiritually immaturity. Rather, it is his misapprehended pursuit of her, proceeding from his faulty notions of entitlement and active, pursuing methodology, that cause him difficulty. In his own life, accordingly, MacDonald enjoyed what worldly pleasures he could afford. In fact, despite his spiritual focus, he was in some respects a rather worldly individual with a taste for comfortable clothing, good wine and military miniatures, and had an essentially conventional understanding of the value of a shilling. In several of his realistic novels he advocated widespread social charity schemes aimed at the alleviation of temporal suffering and privation. These schemes, says Neuhouser (6-10), resembled, and were very possibly modeled on, those being undertaken by some of his friends in the emerging progressive movement. This highlights the point that this very individual and uncompromising thinker certainly maintained important points of contact with the general spectrum of social and religious orthodoxy.

Wolff (381) describes MacDonald's worldly concerns as overcompensation by a man of humble status who felt his illustrious lineage should count for more than it did after the disestablishment of the Scottish clan system in the early 1800s. Given MacDonald's intense connection to his homeland, there could be something to this, but there was no hint of asceticism or Calvinist self-discipline in his spirituality. He was not a mercenary, either, and would not do something purely for the cash. Offered a lucrative pastorate in New York, he turned down the offer on the spot because "the serpent of worldly wisdom, however tempting the apple, could be no honest advocate" (Greville MacDonald 340). The episode reveals how much MacDonald was prepared to give up to avoid compromising his principles, but it does not change the fact that he tended to jump at Godly opportunities for material comfort and security. Most of his realistic novels were written, and his secular lecture tours undertaken, with payment in mind (Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 56). When luxuries could be afforded (such as during the period 1869-1872, when MacDonald was receiving £600 a year to edit the periodical *Good Words for the Young*) the MacDonalds indulged themselves with few stated reservations, clearly not believing that God wanted them to suffer or go without in any systematic sense. Louisa MacDonald accompanied her

husband on his 1872 lecture tour of America, and wrote home to her children in wonder at the outsized American meals they were presented with. Her surprise was not at any perceived unseemliness or ungodliness in the amount of food she was offered, but the fact that such helpings were even possible (Greville MacDonald 421). Once the MacDonalds established that this was how people ate in that country, they were quite happy to do as the Romans did. One did not, after all, reach heaven by denying oneself dessert. Novalis would likely have approved.

Finally, it is worth remembering that MacDonald lived, often in trying circumstances, to the very respectable age of eighty, while Novalis had briefly tasted the fruits of this world before hastening to the next. Without wishing to suggest that MacDonald harboured anything that could be dismissed or trivialised as a death wish, it must have occurred to him that Novalis had got it right, which means that the German writer must have contributed to the centrality of death and resurrection to MacDonald's view of the world. Novalis must have been a role model to him for the way he died almost as much as the way he lived and wrote.

MacDonald's adherence to both the marvellous architecture of the German fairytale and the Romantic instincts from which he felt it sprang mean that what he was writing, essentially, were German fairytales that happened to be in English. The first publication of "The Carasoyn", a story more clearly indebted to Scottish folklore than many of his fairytales, in fact bore the subtitle "an English *Mährchen*", making its links with the German fairytale tradition quite explicit. Immersed in German romanticism since his late teens, MacDonald was steeped in the source material of the German fairytale in a way that made his appreciation and use of the form a good deal more effective than those of many of his contemporaries. Raeper notes that "The fairy-tale, when all is said and done, is a deceptive form; for all its apparent simplicity there are very few people who have successfully written lasting fairy-tales" (*George MacDonald* 312). MacDonald stands among those few who have managed to do so because, in part, means and ends compliment each other to a far greater extent in his works than in those of some of his less well-educated contemporaries.

One complicating effect of this apposition is that MacDonald's fairy-tales are knotty and difficult to analyse from an academic standpoint, especially a secular one. Early in *Lilith*, for example, MacDonald goes a paragraph out of his way to allow Mr Raven to make the perfectly straight-faced observation that it rains a lot on Uranus (200). No further discussion of the planets is given in the book; at first glance the

episode seems to be a semi-comic non-sequitur in an otherwise distinctly menacing work. Were *Lilith* a more conventional novel, it would be the instinct of a literary critic to try to analyse this statement, perhaps trying to find some convoluted metaphor in it. One might even be found in the role that rainfall and running water play as indexes of goodness in the later chapters of *Lilith*. Perhaps we are meant to put the two points together and conclude that Uranus is a more Godly place than Earth. The utility of making such connections, however, is open to question; doubtless MacDonald himself would have been unimpressed by such efforts. The spiritual purpose of MacDonald's fairytales was to inspire, not instruct. and without wishing to suggest that his work is wholly resistant to conventional literary analysis (it is not), dispassionate attempts to pin down specific spiritual ideas or allegories in any of them have a faintly Sysiphean quality (Manlove, *Christian Fantasy* 169). As the previous quotations from Novalis remind us, however, literary and poetic imagery really ought to be imponderable if it is to be properly evocative. Lacking self-confidence as a poet, MacDonald was drawn to prose idioms like fairytales that allowed him something of the same freedom of association. Such an idiom was well suited to his purposes. Writing with specific reference to *Phantastes*, McGillis notes that "Fairy Land, or what we might simply call poetry, provides a community of the centre, a place where the imagination is freed from the pressures of desire and convention" ("The Community of the Centre" 53). Consequently, MacDonald's fairy-tales endure, but they only make sense if, as he advises, they are allowed to work "upon that part of us for which they are intended" – the Romantic imagination. And to the Romantic imagination – which to MacDonald's way of thinking was the part of the mind closest to God – the notion of talking ravens visiting the drizzly valleys of Uranus is just as likely to feed the soul as a viewing of a particular Grecian urn.

Giving up the conscious search for something while deliberately fostering a passionate yearning for it is an intensely Romantic thing to do; finding the desire itself as edifying as its satisfaction is more so, and conceding the fundamental unobtainability of the object of that desire more so still. MacDonald's religious manifesto was therefore a highly Romantic affair; that he pursued it via a literary form endemic in German Romanticism is hardly surprising. Instead of wondering about the relative lack of Scottish touches in his fairy-tales, we might wonder how he managed to work so many such references into what were essentially German stories.

MacDonald's fantastic bent was therefore a product of his Germanic education rather than his Celtic background. His exposure to German Romanticism was in large part what shaped his idiosyncratic and demanding theological opinions, but it also instilled in him a grasp of both the form and potential function of Faerie. Despite his aversion to controversy, his fairytales and fantasy novels represented potent, and firmly partisan, contributions to the contemporary debate over the utility and admissibility of an emerging literary form. That he discovered form and function in the same place gave him the ability to produce works that have the enduringly eerie power they possess.

MacDonald on Reality

In her book *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Kathryn Hume defines fantasy literature as that which presents a deviation from empirical "consensus reality" (20-22). This is as good a definition as any, but as has previously been noted, actually defining fantasy literature is a complicated business. Hume's definition does not take into account the fact that perceptions of "consensus reality" vary widely with time and place, and indeed between individual intellects within a given time or place. Although broad trends are sometimes apparent, such shifting perceptions are complicated and dynamic, and should never be reckoned on a single, linear continuum of ever-increasing codification of the sort of rationalised material cosmos championed by committed secularists. One does not have to adopt any particular position in the current debate over the admissibility of intelligent design to note that the debate itself neatly demonstrates that there is plenty of room for individuals to sternly disagree on the standards by which anything can be reckoned as meaningfully 'real'.

Fantasy writers are implicitly involved in this discussion in that their work must, inherently, be composed in relation to wider social perceptions of reality. For example, Punter has suggested (*Literature of Terror* 26-27) that the vampires and ghosts of eighteenth-century Gothic fantasy emerged partly in response to the rising tide of Enlightenment rationalism: as popular belief in something declines, it will of course start popping up in *fiction*. A century later, respectable endorsements of spiritualism had considerably reversed this trend, placing writers such as Sheridan le Fanu on interesting ground in terms of whether their work described the popular perception of reality. MacDonald, undoubtedly, was grappling with this question, and an examination of his perception of reality sheds interesting light on his reasons for

adopting fantasy as a mode of expression. His debt to Romanticism, however, combined with his unshakeable personal Christian faith, make the standards by which he measured reality a complicated business.

If MacDonald remained deliberately obscure on the purpose of any given tale, he was somewhat more open about the didactic value of fantasy as a whole. Reference has already been made to his essay "A Sketch of Individual Development", but he also wrote two essays on the subject of how individual development could be shaped for the better by fairytales. These essays were written many years apart. "The Imagination; Its Functions and its Culture" appeared in 1867, at the height of MacDonald's productivity as a writer of fairytales, while "The Fantastic Imagination" was written and published as the introduction to an 1893 collection of his tales. By that stage in his career he had not published a fairytale in over a decade, although the composition of *Lilith* was well underway. Despite the interval between their publication, however, these two essays advance essentially identical ideas about the value and use of fantasy, indicating how constant MacDonald's faith in the medium was once it became established in his university days.

In the introduction to his 1946 anthology of MacDonald's religious epigrams, CS Lewis noted "What he does best is fantasy – fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic" (14). MacDonald's ability to produce work that eludes simple interpretation was one of his central strengths, but he had trouble when writing prose that *was* intended for such interpretation. Reputedly brilliant at adlibbing speeches and lectures, MacDonald wrote essays that routinely give the impression of someone operating at the very limits of his ability to crystalise ideas in expository prose. What these essays demonstrate as much as anything is an ongoing attempt by MacDonald to articulate a set of ideas with which he struggled himself. Nonetheless, in "The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture" he does manage to explain why he privileges the imagination so highly:

> The word itself means *imagining* or a making of likeness. The imagination is that faculty which gives form to thought – not necessarily uttered form, but form capable of being uttered in shape or in sound, or in any mode upon which the senses can lay hold. It is, therefore, that faculty in man which is likest to the power of God, and has, therefore, been called the *creative* faculty, and its exercise *creation*. *Poet* means *maker*. We must not forget, however,

that between creator and poet lies the one impassable gulf which distinguishes – far be it from us to say *divides* – all that is God's from all that is man's; a gulf teeming with infinite revelations, over which no man can pass to find out God, although God needs not to pass over it to find man; a gulf between that which calls, and that which is called into being; between that which makes in its own image and that which is made in that image. (1-2)

God, therefore, is the only true maker of things, and he makes them in his *imagination*. That the human imagination is capable of extrapolating from what it perceives, and indeed of creating ideas *beyond* those placed in front of it, is a consequence of our creation in the image of God, the divine creator, who is of course the wellspring of everything in the universe. God gave us this faculty in order to help us explain the rest of his creation. By giving "form to thought", the human imagination is absolutely central to our perceptions of the world. It is the yardstick by which sensory input can be understood. A chair may be a chair because it possesses We know a chair is a chair not because it possesses any central Platonic essence, but because God has given us the imagination to see and use it as a chair. It is with our imaginations, therefore, not our eyes and ears, that we ultimately perceive and make sense of the world. And perception, it seems, is nine tenths of reality:

> For the world is – allow us the homely figure – the human being turned inside out. All that moves in the mind is symbolised in nature. Or, to use another more philosophical, and no less poetic figure, the world is a sensuous analysis of humanity, and hence an inexhaustible wardrobe for the clothing of human thought. (6)

Thus a thing is perceived in a manner wholly dependent on the state of mind of the perceiver. If the perceiver saw something in a work of art that the artist did not intend, then so much the better, as MacDonald noted twenty-six years later in 'The Fantastic Imagination'. In this essay MacDonald adopts a dialogic mode of argument, and when he notes that it is the responsibility of the writer to awaken new ideas in the reader, he has his interlocutor ask:

"But a man may then imagine in your work what he pleases, what you never meant!"

Not what he pleases, but what he can. If he be not a true man, he will draw evil out of the best; we need not mind how he treats any work of art! If he be a true man, he will imagine true things, what matter whether I meant them or not? They are there none the less that I cannot claim putting them there! (199)

Both of these essays are ultimately gesturing towards the notion that there is a single, central locus of absolute truth underlying everything, and that by unconscious reference to this standard, we understand the universe. As Gray notes (29), the idea of an unconscious part of the human psyche having an inescapable impact on the conscious part substantially predates Freud's discovery of a therapeutic use for it. Further to the point, Prickett (24-25) suggests that MacDonald anticipates both Freud and Jung in arguing that symbols can speak directly to this psychological substratum in a way that conscious argument cannot. In MacDonald's eyes, the unconscious was in fact the intuitive, unreasoning imagination, and the locus of truth it referred to was, in a word, God.

The debt to Platonism here is fairly clear, and the debt to Christian Platonism equally so. This point is worth dwelling on, however, as it has implications for MacDonald's perception of reality, and therefore his departure from realism. MacDonald owes a great deal to Saint Augustine, whose writings on the issue of evil existing in a divinely created (and therefore, we must surely assume, faultless) universe have, it hardly needs to be said, influenced a great many Christian thinkers. Applying Plato's ontology to Christian scripture, Augustine argued that evil sprang from confusion within human souls as to their precise purpose in life; all were created good, but some forgot or ignored the point. Since God is good, and also the creator of everything, goodness (that is, Godliness) thus becomes the central measure of reality. Therefore, evil is a consequence of people not aligning themselves closely enough with God, the central yardstick of reality – people do bad things because they are, in a fundamental sense, not being 'real' enough. As both a Christian and a fantasist, MacDonald put this idea into practice: evil was present in the world as a result of people who forgot their position as pilgrims trekking through one life, with resurrection into a second, truer life as their destination (Raeper, *George MacDonald*

253-254). All people, therefore, were part of the same divine stream; rather than good and evil, there were merely those who accepted their destiny to be washed to an all-encompassing ocean, and those who, foolishly, swam against the current (243).

Being 'real' therefore involved being properly aligned with God. The conscious intellect, that wellspring of doubt, inquiry, obstinacy and spurious scientific bureaucracy, was the problem here. For MacDonald, therefore, aligning oneself properly with God involved undergoing the intellectual euthanasia he repeatedly championed. Fantasy allowed MacDonald to portray this theodicy in a fairly direct manner. In *Lilith*, Vane's cares and woes are largely self-inflicted consequences of his repeated refusal to obey God's sexton, Raven. When Vane accuses Raven of speaking in riddles, Raven responds:

> "No, but you came and found the riddles waiting for you! Indeed you are yourself the only riddle. What you call riddles are truths, an seem riddles because you are not true."
>
> "Worse and worse!" I cried.
>
> "And you *must* answer the riddles!" he continued. "They will go on asking themselves until you understand yourself. The universe is a riddle trying to get out, and you are holding your door hard against it."
>
> "Will you not pity tell me what I am to do – where must I go?"
>
> "How should I tell *your* to-do, or the way to it?"
>
> "If I am not to go home, at least direct me to some of my kind."
>
> "I do not know of any. The beings most like you are in that direction."
> He pointed with his beak. I could see nothing but the setting sun, which blinded me. (226)

The reference to blindness, and indeed to the setting sun, with its connotations of death, may be very deliberately placed; Vane's insistence upon living on his own active, rationalistic terms, rather than helping him truly live, will lead him to a fate considerably worse than the beneficent death Raven offers him. Missing Raven's point and insisting upon this kind of life, Vane accordingly sets off on his sorrowful and gruesome adventures. Only by dying does he experience true life (McGillis, 2008, 203).

Monster as she may be, Lilith herself in fact suffers from a similar problem;

Now what she called *thinking* required a clear consciousness of herself, not as she was, but as she chose to believe herself; and to aid herself in the realisation of this consciousness, she had suspended, a little way from and above her, itself invisible in the darkness of the hall, a mirror to receive the full sunlight reflected from her person. For the resulting vision of herself in the splendour of her beauty, she sat waiting the meridional sun. (355)

Secure in this self-referential aggrandisement, she seems rather pleased with herself. We quickly discover, however, that she is not a well woman; for all her demonic power, she suffers from a terrible abscess that "cover[s] half her side" (356). After much argument and obstinacy, she is, like Vane, eventually cured by her abandonment of her self-referential, active, rationalistic way of thinking for an acceptance of placid emotional yearning in Raven's cellar. Salvey (28-29) reads this as an indication that she is not essentially evil, and that her evil is an inimicality corroding a fundamentally sound divine creation. Like Vane, she is a good person, but is being made less good, and therefore damaging her own substance, with her obstinate rationalism. MacDonald's fairytale theodicy is therefore neatly tied to his ontology; evil is not a force in itself but an absence of the only true force in the universe, caused by people not orienting themselves closely enough with fundamentally beneficent reality.

This idea is also illustrated in one of Vane's earlier adventures in the Land of Seven Dimensions, when he comes across an area of peaty soil:

To my dismay it gave a momentary heave under me; then presently I saw what seemed the ripple of an earthquake running on before me, shadowy in the low moon. It passed into the distance; but, while I yet stared after it, a single wave rose up, and came toward me. A yard or two away it burst, and from it, with a scramble and a bound, came something like a tiger. About its mouth and ears hung clots of mould, and his eyes wrinkled and flamed as he rushed at me, showing his white teeth in a soundless snarl. I stood fascinated, unconscious of either courage or fear. He turned his head to the ground, and plunged into it. (228-229)

This is the first of several bizarre monsters that leap from the ground that night to menace Vane. He learns that moonlight is protecting him, and walks on unafraid. Visiting the hollow again at the conclusion of the novel, however, Vane finds it transformed into a lake; but these monsters are still present in the lake, and they are, if anything, more horrible than before. Given that, by this late stage in the book, much of the oppressive sense of evil that permeates *Lilith* has been dispelled, their survival is perhaps surprising, but Vane explains the problem:

> Not one of them moved as we passed. But they were not dead. So long as exist men and women of unwholesome mind, that lake will still be peopled with loathsomeness. (413)

Evil is depicted as a consequence of the unwholesome (that is, ungodly) capacities of the human mind. More particularly, it is a consequence of the independent, directed obstinacy of the human intellect, with its drive to control and measure and deduce, a drive that Vane himself has now forsaken, much to his credit. The enduring presence of evil in this 'bad burrow' is merely evidence that there are people who have yet to silence this least Godly (and accordingly, least *real*) part of themselves. MacDonald consequently imagined the earthly universe as a fundamentally good place, but one with complications caused by human intellect and self-regard. The Land of Seven Dimensions gives this perception practicable significance: evil is not real there.

Likewise, in *Phantastes*, Anodos is troubled by his Shadow, an evil spirit who interferes with his perceptions;

> Once, as I passed by a cottage, there came out a lovely fairy child, with two wondrous toys, one in each hand. The one was the tube through which the fairy-gifted poet looks when he beholds the same thing everywhere; the other was that through which he looks when he combines into new forms of loveliness those images of beauty which his own choice has gathered from all regions wherein he has traveled. Round the child's head was an aureole of emanating rays. As I looked at him in wonder and delight, round from behind me crept something dark, and the child stood in my shadow. Straightaway he was a commonplace boy, with a rough broad-brimmed straw hat, through

which brim the sun shone from behind. The toys he carried were a multiplying

glass and a kaleidoscope. I sighed and departed. (66)

Here, Anodos's Shadow represents his disillusioning intellect, wrecking his vision of this wondrous little boy by providing unimaginative, settled, joy-killing explanations for the boy's magical appearance (Wolff 64-67). Clear, rational explanations therefore demean both the thing being explained and the receiver of the explanation ("I sighed and departed"). The fact that MacDonald uses what he calls "Shadows" (another of which serves as a sinister, counterproductive henchman to Lilith) as personifications of evil is interesting, in that shadows exist due to a blockage of otherwise prevalent light. MacDonald's magical Shadows, manifestations of the evil caused by the human intellect, exist due to the blockage, and therefore absence, of otherwise pervasive divine beneficence in the same manner. That shadows also bring to mind more conventional notions of ill omen (as in HP Lovecraft's 'The Shadow over Innsmouth') was probably only a valuable bonus.

Thus MacDonald once again vents his frustration with rationalism; the intellect befouls the imagination and obscures the prevailing goodness in the universe. It is his explanation for the presence of evil in the universe. MacDonald used fantasy as a method by which this theodicy could be incarnated, and therefore clearly illustrated. The most obvious instance of him doing this is Lilith's festering abscess – the fiat of the supernatural allows him to portray spiritual drift as physical illness. MacDonald characterised evil as a vacuity that threatens substance, not a force in itself. For all that *Lilith* in particular is a grim and at times unsettling novel, nothing in it is intrinsically evil. The Land of Seven Dimensions is a fundamentally good place distorted by absences, not presences. Those absences arise from epistemological dissonances in characters – Vane and Lilith – who learn only through considerable, self-inflicted suffering that their world is an intrinsically good place being spoiled simply because they are looking at it in the wrong way. Again, *Lilith* is a dark and unsettling book, but it features a characterisation of evil that suggest MacDonald's central message hinges on his conviction that the world is ultimately a good place.

Such allegorical writing is hard to miss, but the potential to make such portrayals was not what specifically attracted him to the genre. This is an interesting point in that allegory seems to be something MacDonald was very good at. One of the first things that strikes an agnostic reader upon first looking into MacDonald's

fantasies is their rich and at times intimidatingly dense symbolism. What, for example, are the aeranths, the fishy airborne martyrs of 'The Golden Key', actually meant to represent? Why is it a *golden* key? Why, indeed, a key at all? Why is the Old Man of Fire – the oldest man of all, or so we are told – a baby? Of what relevance is the fact that Tangle has a much harder journey than Mossy, given that their ultimate reward is the same (Marshall 99-102)? Is it because she is a girl, and if so, what is MacDonald's rationale for that? As soon as such questions are formulated, possible answers become apparent; *Phantastes* also contains a number of episodes in which symbols seem to be used in ways that are certainly open to allegorical reading. Towards the end of his meanderings Anodos converses with a knight who tells him of a meeting with a young child searching for wings with which to fly. The knight describes a bizarre assailant from whom he must defend this girl:

> This being, if being it could be called, was like a block of wood hewn into the mere outlines of a man; and hardly so, for it had but head, body, legs, and arms – the head without a face, and the limbs utterly formless. I had hewn off one of its legs, but the two portions moved on as best they could, quite independent of each other; so that I had done no good. I ran after it, and clove it in twain from the head downwards; but, it could not be convinced that its vocation was not to walk over people; for, as soon as the little girl began her begging again, all three parts came bustling up; and if I had not interposed my weight between her and them, she would have been trampled under them. (171-172)

Hein (*George MacDonald* 109) reads this as an allegorical jab at cultic leaders whose wooden adherence to sectarian manifestos can only thwart the childlike spiritual aspirations of their flocks. This is a fair reading, although the caveat to it is MacDonald's skeptical view of allegory as a whole. Among the various points of influence MacDonald had on JRR Tolkien (Gray 31) is the latter scholar's suspicion of allegory as a literary device;

> A fairytale is not an allegory. There may be allegory in it, but it is not an allegory. He must be an artist indeed who can, in any mode, produce a strict

allegory that is not a weariness to the spirit. An allegory must be Mastery or Moorditch. ("The Fantastic Imagination" 197)

To mention the London suburb of Moorditch in this manner, MacDonald must have regarded it as an insufferably tedious and prosaic place – and he was clearly aware of the possibility that heavy-handed allegory could be every bit as dull. Nevertheless, his fairytales obviously had "allegory in them". His use of the device is difficult to miss, and he probably would not have argued with an allegorical reading of some of his fantasies. He shares with Tolkien, however, a skepticism about the intrinsic value of pure allegory which means his fantasies cannot be interpreted solely as examples of the form. As he points out in the paragraph following the one quoted above, "A fairytale, like a butterfly or a bee, helps itself on all sides, sips at every wholesome flower, and spoils not one". He valued fantasy, in part, because it allowed him to portray things and events that were *not* open to mechanical analysis. McGillis notes that fairytales "evoke meanings, but do not force them" ("Fantasy as Miracle" 202). Allegory is, undoubtedly, a mechanism – figure X stands for quality Y, and is illustrated as having effect Z on the world. MacDonald was attracted to fantasy precisely because its departure from everyday reality endowed it with an inherent polysemous quality that was more resistant to such rationalistic mechanisms than realistic fiction (McGillis, "Fantasy as Miracle" 211). Obviously, he was not going to dispense completely with allegory; indeed, he made frequent and often very powerful use of it. MacDonald's skill as an allegorist needs to be acknowledged, but he was not simply using fantasy to illustrate theological arguments. Rather, he was using it as a method by which he could get his audience's imaginations to float freely. I cannot put the issue better than does Stephen Prickett:

In the face of a predominantly empericist and scientific culture, concerned to rationalise and, where possible, demythologise the long record of man's awareness of the numinous, MacDonald reasserts the *value* of myth and symbol, not as a primitive relic, nor simply as a literary device, but as a vital and irreplaceable medium of human consciousness. Religious experience is seen not as something to be reduced to physical or psychological terms in order to be articulated, but as itself *a new kind of articulateness* – a symbolic and mythmaking activity that taps the very roots of human creativity. (22)

This brings us back to MacDonald's belief in the absolute primacy of the imagination. He saw it as the only valid interpreter of universal truth. Moreover, our possession of an imagination made us more like God. Using the imagination makes people closer to God, and consequently more real ourselves. It was with our imaginations, not our logical intellects or the nuances of our sectarian manifestos, that we could pursue our relationship with Him. It was, moreover, by the strength of our relationship with God and our ability to think in some vague analogue of his creative, imaginative method that our own capacities as real entities could be measured.

After all, MacDonald argued, God's primacy as the one central yardstick of ultimate reality made him the ultimate world-builder. God's act of cosmic creation was analogous, albeit on an incomparably larger and more effective scale, to human acts of creation. What a rationalist took to be the primary world was therefore a secondary world created from the mind of God. In building this world, God set people up much like characters in a novel. Like a novelist, he could plant whatever idea he wished in a person's mind, perhaps a lifetime earlier, then bring it to light at a point at which he finds it most useful. Hence, it would seem, MacDonald's often-quoted suggestion that "a man is rather *being thought* than *thinking*, when a new thought arises in his mind" ("The Imagination; its Functions and its Culture" 3). "His sculpture is not in marble", MacDonald notes slightly earlier in the essay, "but in living and speech-giving forms, which pass away, not to yield to those that come after, but to be perfected in a nobler studio" (2). This depiction of Earth is an interesting one, as it takes into account the creative, directing will of God; this life therefore becomes not so much a waiting room for heaven as a rehearsal room for it. In this way the human imagination becomes God's chief mechanism for intervention in the world. Deciding there should be great theatre in the world, "He makes a Shakespeare" and Shakespeare writes us *Hamlet*. Everything that exists, ever existed, or ever will exist, ultimately does so in its capacity as an idea in the imagination of God.

The important thing to note here is that MacDonald suggests a series of telescoping increments of reality. God, the one central and personified reality, conceives something and, in order to enact it, creates an earthly agent, who then carries out His plan by doing the business. Whatever that agent does in that capacity must have been part of God's plan. In that sense, therefore, the actors Hamlet hires to

play before his stepfather are enacting not just a play within a play, but a play within a play within a play. Acknowledgement of this idea by scholars has interesting effects on the study of MacDonald and his works. Cuisick, for example, rejects Wolff's Freudian readings and argues that MacDonald was essentially anticipating Jung's ideas about the collective unconscious (57-59). Taking a rather different tack, Manlove (*Modern Fantasy* 61-62) has criticised MacDonald over the inconsistency of insisting that all creative human action is ultimately in accord with divine intentions while also insisting, as MacDonald did, that humans had free will. We are here to examine the literary consequences of ideas, however, rather than their philosophical defencibility; MacDonald argued that all ideas ultimately come from the same source. Proceeding from that source, they will percolate through stages of inspiration and execution, and may well become diminished or garbled in the process. However, since all ideas have a common point of origin – the mind of God – it is impossible for them to be wholly worthless, or indeed wholly unreal.

So once again MacDonald offers us the imagination as an answer to the question of how to perceive the truth. This, in turn, is a link back to the Romantics and their philosophy. Since this idea takes into account the fact that the existing contents of a human mind will alter the manner in which new input is received, it can be linked with Kantian philosophy, which has been noted as a significant influence on the German Romantics (Gray 11). MacDonald received Kant's ideas about the mind shaping new input through literary intermediaries such as Novalis. This probably contributed to the way he extrapolated them. Since, he argues, our imagination is the only adequate yardstick we have to measure the reality placed before us, that reality is, in effect, a function of our imagination. Because our imaginations are, in fact, the *only* tool we have in determining the fact and use of a chair, that chair is little more than an icon for the human imagination to hang ideas on. The Platonic essence therefore lies not in the perceived object but in the imagination of the perceiver ('The Imagination; its Functions and its Culture' 6). Existence is, in effect, in the eye of the beholder. The imagination is not only what you truly see with – it is the only way that that which is seen can become true. Empirical fact was all very well and good, and in some senses could be thoroughly useful, but the highest, most unshakeable truth was that apprehended by the God-like powers of the human imagination. London obviously existed, insofar as the evidence for its existence was in front of us every day. Fairy Land, however, existed solely in the imagination, that part of the human

mind that was closest to God. Even if we could not see it with our eyes, we could *imagine* it, and that made it just as real as the primary world.

Indeed, our *inability* to see Faerie and the *requirement* that we use our imaginations to perceive it probably made it considerably *more* real than the primary world. Reliance upon the imagination freed the perceiver from the garbling demands of the rationalistic intellect and the experiential and empirical contingencies upon which our perception of the primary world inescapably depended. It was therefore impossible for a sincere person to perceive it badly or wrongly. Here two points made earlier need to be restated. Firstly, MacDonald, subscribing to Augustinian theodicy, simply did not believe in the existence fundamentally insincere, bad or wrong people – his suggestion that even animals and Catholics would be saved was what lost him his ministerial position at Arundel. Anyone was capable, when sufficiently inspired, of looking at something correctly. Secondly, it should be remembered that MacDonald's subscription to Augustinian theodicy led him to viewed the world as a fundamentally good place. It was merely thrown awry, not by evil presences, but by episodic absences of goodness caused by the (harmful, but uniformly inadvertent) misapprehensions of rationalism. His decision to write about things and places that did not exist threw his readers back on imagination alone and allowed him to iron out those wrinkles. The traditional, post-Enlightenment practice of putting fact before fancy is therefore completely flipped on its head (Manlove, *From Alice to Harry Potter* 27). Something could only be regarded as real insofar as it existed in the imagination, and something that existed solely in the imagination could be spared the Shadows that plagued the primary world. Both of MacDonald's fantasy novels can be read as stories of people ridding themselves of their Shadows by slowly becoming aware of their epistemological shortcomings. This allows them and their surroundings to take on a closer relationship to God, and therefore to become more real.

What MacDonald has done here is critique reality in a really quite ingenious manner. He perceived a flaw in reality, but his faith and the schools of religious thought he found most useful led him to the conclusion that the flaw was manifested in terms of the way people perceived reality, rather than the reality itself. Rather than simply writing a wish-fulfilling what-if tale rectifying that flaw, therefore, he set to designing fictional universes wherein allegory could be used to demonstrate his favoured *method* of rectifying that flaw in action.

He was not merely writing epistemological instruction manuals, however. That might have been enough, and he was certainly very good at it, but it was only a preliminary step in his program. His exposure to Romanticism, especially the German branch of the movement and particularly the ideas of Novalis, had left him with a potent vision of what certain literary genres and devices were capable of. Fantasy allowed him the freedom to bypass rationalism and speak as directly as he could to the essentially Romantic imagination. Realism might be an easier sell than fantasy, but it implicitly endorses rationalism by investing the primary world with a significance of a kind or to a degree MacDonald simply thought was not valid. Fantasy allowed MacDonald to debunk that significance and work within a frame of reference that he saw as more useful. By abandoning realism, he felt he was not creating false things but things that, existing solely in the imagination, could be seen as real. And reality, under MacDonald's demanding epistemological paradigm, was in the imagination of the beholder. Throwing his readers back on the resources of their childlike imaginations helped them see clearly. Some of his more rationalistic contemporaries (such as, almost certainly, Charles Kingsley) must have regarded this as a removal of tools. MacDonald, however, with his firmly-held views on the primacy of the imagination, must have seen it as a purification, a way of polishing the mirror and reflecting genuine reality based not on childishly factual argument but on the far more solid and profitable grounds of poetic truth. MacDonald used allegory to illustrate his epistemological programme, but he set those allegories in fantastic environments essentially in order to trick his readers into adopting that programme without realising it. To describe MacDonald's objectives as any sort of 'trick', however, would seem to cheapen his efforts to do nothing less than get his audience to view the universe correctly. As he pointed out at the conclusion of "The Fantastic Imagination", "If any strain of my "broken music" make a child's eyes flash, or his mother's grow for a moment dim, my labour will not have been in vain" (200).

Secondary worlds allowed MacDonald to completely shift the goalposts of reality by creating entire universes operating according to these principles. He then performed an incisive concluding act, deliberately contrasting these worlds with the primary world as a way of explaining his critique. On the last page of *Phantastes*, Anodos rests under a tree on his estate in the primary world:

As I lay, with my eyes closed, I began to listen to the sound of the leaves overhead. At first, they made sweet inarticulate music alone; but, by and by, the sound seemed to begin to take shape, and to be gradually moulding itself into words; till at last, I seemed to be able to distinguish these, half-dissolved in a little ocean of circumfluent tones: "A great good is coming – is coming – is coming to thee, Anodos"; and so over and over again. I fancied that the sound reminded me of the voice of the ancient woman, in the cottage that was four-square [one of several wise figures who guided Anodos on parts of his journey through Fairy Land]. I opened my eyes, and, for a moment, almost believed that I saw her face, with its many wrinkles and is young eyes, looking at me from between two hoary branches of the beech overhead. But when I looked more keenly, I saw only twigs and leaves, and the infinite sky, in tiny spots, gazing through between. Yet I know that good is coming to me – that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and courage to believe it. (182)

Anodos has returned to the primary world, and is once again discontentedly separated from God, but his experiences in the secondary world have given him the faith and courage to abide on Earth until he is called to heaven, as he is sure he will be in good time. *Lilith* also follows this pattern. The conclusion finds Vane, awakened after his purgative sleep in Raven's cottage, back in his library in rural Oxfordshire. He continues to struggle with existential questions, but his perception of reality has been subtly altered:

Now and then, when I look round on my books, they seem to waver as if a wind rippled through their solid mass, and another world were about to break through. Sometimes when I am abroad, a like thing takes place; the heavens and the earth, the trees and grass appear for a moment to shake as if about to pass away; then lo, they have settled again into the old familiar face! At times I seem to hear whisperings around me, as if some that loved me were talking of me; but when I would distinguish the words, they cease and all is very still. I know not whether these things rise in my brain, or enter it from without. I do not seek them; they come, and I let them go. (420)

Much of the scholarly interest in MacDonald in the last several years has revolved around the question of *Lilith's* "endless ending". The recent essay collection *Lilith in a New Light* (2008), billed as the first book-length study of the novel, is largely a compilation of contributions to that debate. For our purposes, however, it is perhaps most helpful to note that Vane's perceptions have been changed as a result of his experiences in the secondary cosmos. Convinced, after much travail, to view the Land of Seven Dimensions in the correct manner, Vane becomes aware that the transitory, permeable primary world is best understood by passive emotional yearning rather than settled rational comprehension ("when I would distinguish the words, they cease"). By creating a secondary universe, MacDonald gives himself the ability to create this sort of contrast; the Land of Seven Dimensions has been a sort of spiritual boot camp for Vane, who returns to the primary world better equipped to cope with it.

Fantasy allowed MacDonald to demonstrate his ideas allegorically and, if he handled it well enough, inspire the sort of enlightening childlike intuition he valued so highly. In that sense his decision to use fantasy can be easily accounted for; it was the only way he could get his audience to see things in the way he wanted.

Transferring his characters from a primary to a secondary world and back allowed him to undertake a third, potentially decisive stage in his critique of reality and the conventional rationalistic view of it. Using this device, he could show characters like Anodos and Vane abiding in the primary world with a heightened understanding that the central problem with that world is not due to any attribute of the world itself, but with our perception of it. Having both now seen a world operating perfectly, they understand this world to be a good place, but flawed – and transitory, soon enough to give way to perfection once again. This gives them the courage to wait out the interval, secure in the knowledge that, as Anodos says, a great good is coming to them. For all his troubles, Vane knows at the last that "when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more. I wait; awake or asleep, I wait." (420). His ultimately successful quest for perfection in the secondary world has given him the courage to last out the imperfections of the primary world, because his experiences in the secondary world have taught him, in his heart of hearts, they will pass soon enough.

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Christian literature has a long tradition of using allegory as a device to illustrate spiritual ideas; indeed, those who demand a strictly literal interpretation of the scriptures themselves are only a vocal minority. MacDonald contributed to that tradition, certainly, but he did so in a remarkable and all-encompassing way. Rather than simply presenting people or things as emblems of given ideas, he created entire cosmoses designed to prove a point. His point was that the world as we see it is not the true world, and that the only way of perceiving the true world was to turn off the rationalistic intellect and attune oneself more closely to the childlike, intuitive imagination. By creating worlds where this idea could be portrayed in practice, MacDonald could arguably be said to have been practicing allegory on a peculiarly grand and deep scale.

He took matters one step further. By suggesting that truth could ultimately be perceived by recourse to intuitive faith rather than empirical observation, he was essentially shifting the goalposts of reality. MacDonald's fantasy worlds are not fantastic because they contain ogres, giants, kobolds or cancerous abscesses that kill the self-involved. Those things are merely consequences of the driving principle of the world – alignment to a standard of reality predicated on alignment to God via the exercise of the childlike imagination. To give voice to such a principle in literature, MacDonald had to renounce not only realism, but the real world. He did so cheerfully and with gusto; after all, he did not see it as especially real to begin with.

Ultimately, therefore, MacDonald's fantasies can be read as efforts to depict worlds that could be demonstrated as working on sounder ontological principles than our own. In order to portray the true nature of reality, MacDonald needed to take a step back from realism and create his own universes. In doing so, he found common cause with a twentieth-century writer who seems, at first glance, to be a highly unlikely colleague.

In Defence of Paradise: ER Eddison

For all their complexity, George MacDonald's fantasies were written to satisfy a fairly straightforward impulse – a passionate desire to illustrate the Christian message. The symbolic truth MacDonald found in the gospels was so intense that he ultimately questioned the relevance of any other standard of being and set about the creation of worlds in which that truth could be demonstrated. MacDonald was not the first Christian author to use fantasy in this way, and he will probably not be the last. This is not a thesis on Christian fantasy, however. MacDonald is included here because he was to have a profound influence on the Inklings, and therefore on the development of fantasy fiction in the twentieth century.

The two decades between MacDonald's death and the coalition of the Inklings would, in fact, be something of a ferment for fantasy literature, with the likes of William Hope Hodgeson, Lord Dunsany and David Lindsay all active. Today, these figures are largely unknown to the general public, and are likely to remain so, at least until someone has the courage to produce a film version of *Jurgen* or *A Voyage to Arcturus*. Most have also received only cursory scholarly attention as well. One would hope this will change in due course, since some of these authors found uses for fantasy every bit as striking and original as those discovered by the Inklings.

Noteworthy among the fantasists to emerge in this period is the dapper, fairly obscure figure of ER Eddison. Eddison's work deserves especial attention in this context for three reasons. Firstly, he came perilously close to being an associate Inkling himself; he knew both Tolkien and Lewis and was invited to read part of one of his novels, in manuscript, at one of their meetings. Lewis for one was very impressed (to Gerald Hayes, 3/3/43; *Collected Letters* 2:560). Secondly, Eddison built worlds for a fascinating reason – to test the viability of conventional standards of good and evil, and their ontological consequences, and propose revisions to these ideas. His philosophical ideas are immensely challenging, and it is up to individual readers to decide how convincing they are, but they reveal a solid, disciplined core to novels that might otherwise be dismissed as grandiose prose confections. Eddison is not widely studied, and his intellectual and spiritual ideas have not received the same sort of attention that has been lavished on Tolkien and Lewis. Finally, Eddison reveals on examination a striking, and in some respects thoroughly odd, degree of convergent

evolution with MacDonald. Undoubtedly, there are major differences between the two men. Eddison's attempts to use fantasy in order to disengage from Judeo-Christian morality and his contention that temporal pleasure was of ontological significance would seem to put him at loggerheads with the Scotsman, and a debate between the two men, had it ever taken place, would surely have been a sight to see. And yet upon his decision to use narrative literature to illustrate his ideas, Eddison would adopt many of the same methods – allegory on a cosmic scale, a world predicated on a wholesale ontological gear-shift and an artful theodicy revolving around the ultimate unreality of evil – as did MacDonald. Ultimately, like the cleric, Eddison sought to point out ways in which our conventional definitions of reality simply would not do; and again like MacDonald, he used fantasy because real*ism* simply would not do.

Introducing Eddison and his Worm

The construction of secondary worlds, in the sense used throughout this thesis, is not necessarily a complicated business. Almost anybody can sketch a map of a fictional continent, draw in some cities, countries and war-zones with imaginative names, and send a mismatched party of heroes on a quest across it. Conscientious world-builders will be, as Ann Swinfen (91ff) has noted, more thorough: they will create fictional societies of at least notional depth, with attention paid to their languages, cultures, histories and beliefs. Ursula le Guin and Lloyd Alexander stand as examples of those who use this methodology. Others, such as Tolkien and Canadian fantasist Ed Greenwood, may produce written narratives in order to give tangible form to the very exercise of world-building. Perhaps most interestingly from the point of view of the current discussion, however, is a fantasist whose narrative includes a bizarre and inscrutable act of world-building on the part of his characters, in which they build an experimental world – Earth, no less – in order to satisfy their own, and their creator's, intellectual curiosity.

ER Eddison (1882-1945) was a writer by inclination rather than profession. Born into something approximating provincial gentry in Yorkshire, he spent most of his life as a senior civil servant, writing only when Britain's Board of Trade could spare him, and his books are obscure compared to those of Tolkien or CS Lewis. He has largely escaped proper academic analysis as well. He is duly represented in genre directories, and a few such articles gesture towards the philosophical content of his work (Grant 308; Rottensteiner 90-91) but scholarly interest has by and large stopped

there. Seven decades after his death no formal biography exists, and those searching for information about him will find only a handful of academic articles. Much of the research presented here is original and has been the result of primary archival study in his native Leeds and in Oxford, where he was a student in the first years of the twentieth century. It is hoped that this chapter will go some small way towards sparking a renewed interest in a man possessed of a strikingly powerful, disciplined imagination. Eddison in fact deserves far more credit than he has received. His work has come under attack at times as unfocussed or even silly, and few academics have applied themselves to anything more than his first novel. Therefore any attempt to meaningfully add to the tiny body of criticism dealing with him must be in part an introduction to his work and, perforce, a defence of its worth.

Eddison's first novel was *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922), a dream-fantasy in which a Cumbrian gentleman, Edward Lessingham, dreams of a mighty war between the Witches and Demons who inhabit Mercury. These creatures – more or less human of aspect – are of a mindset broadly borrowed from the characters in the medieval Icelandic sagas Eddison read from an early age. The war is undertaken for little more reason than the joy of competitive effort, with the Witches characterised as evil mostly because their King, Gorice, using magic as often as good honest physical prowess, is not fighting fair. When the Demon Lord Goldry Bluzco kills Gorice in a ceremonial wrestling match, no humanitarian qualms are raised – Gorice entered a physical confrontation willingly and with knowledge of the risks involved, and his death is therefore a cause for detached discussion rather than lamentation. Resurrected by his marvellously sinister sorceries, however, the vindictive Gorice unleashes magical and physical hell on the Demons, prompting the latter to a series of deeds of superhuman courage, skill and derring-do. Ultimately the determination and daring of the Demons give them such an upper hand that Gorice and his lieutenants commit mass suicide, and although the Demons have no qualms about celebrating the victory, they are suitably appreciative of their foes. "True it is", notes the Demon Lord Juss as he outlines plans for the funerals of the Witches, "that none greater hath lived on earth than King Gorice XII" (491). Dignified, honourable, competitive effort is so central to the nature of the Demons that they swiftly tire of the solace and peace that victory has granted them, and magic is used to rewind time to the beginning of the war so that they may match themselves against the Witches again, hence the novel's title.

The Worm Ouroboros may strike uninitiated readers as silly, especially in synopsis, as it inescapably recalls the "and then I woke up" cliché of shoddy plotting. Its characterisations, especially of the heroes, are also open to accusations of shallowness. D'Ammassa (91) has noted that there is little to pick between the Lords of Demonland, and that Keith Henderson's canonical illustration of these four heroes essentially depicts four doppelgangers of the same person. These are fair criticisms, but they do not address Eddison's intentions in writing the book. *The Worm Ouroboros* is less about narrative or character than it is about evoking, and perhaps promoting, a particular approach to a given set of events. The perceptions of heroism and morality espoused by the Demons are alien to modern, primary-world humanity. When their comrade Mivarsh Faz, who has accompanied them loyally through great adventure and hardship in the mountains of Impland, falls to his death from the back of a bucking hippogriff, the Demon Lords Juss and Branoch Daha dismiss his passing with barely a thought. After all, they reason, if Mivarsh Faz had reached the limit of his abilities, then his death was only to be expected; in something of the manner of commentators measuring the performance of a sportsman, they applaud his bravery in trying, but spare few tears over his failure or consequent demise. Nobody on Mercury equivocates – they simply do, and in daring to do are judged as heroic.

Ursula le Guin (148) has cited Eddison's skill at adhering to this moral yardstick as his central strength as a writer. She describes him as one of the few modern writers of fantasy whose characters speak with a genuine "Elfland accent", evoking a world primarily through their own rigidly consistent discussion of and approach to it. As le Guin points out, such an undertaking is like a tightrope-walker's act – "one slip spoils everything". Eddison never slips, so his assertion that *The Worm Ouroboros* is "neither an allegory nor a fable but a Story to be read for its own sake" (v) holds a certain volume of water. We are not meant to be interested in the internal lives of these characters, but to be awed by their decisive, larger-than-life activities. As le Guin notes, Eddison accomplishes much by this policy. There can be little doubt that, read in the right spirit, the novel is a marvellously entertaining joyride, but it only succeeds as such because of its author's ability to follow through on his own policy. In the hands of a less dedicated writer (le Guin offers Fritz Lieber as an example) little would have been accomplished.

As well as being a remarkable display of compositional consistency, *The Worm Ouroboros* is a codification of Eddison's own childhood fantasies. The

Bodleian Library holds a notebook dating from when he was around ten years old (MS Eng. misc. d. 654), full of meticulous drawings of characters from *The Worm*, sometimes lined up as if for group photos and sometimes depicted in the course of their adventures. A few of these pictures ("Lord Goldry Blusoe [sic] throwing Gorice I of Witchland in the wrestle for Demonland") directly correspond to the published novel. Others, such as "Lord Branoch Daha slaying the villainous Imps who wish to imprison him" and "Lord Goldry Blusco escaping from Didarus the Long-Legged by leaping over a chasm 20 feet broad, whilst Didarus fell headlong down it and was killed" tell of events that did not make it into the codified adventures of these characters. One engaging drawing also shows the Demons playing a game of football. The events of *The Worm Ouroboros* seem to constitute a sort of greatest-hits package of a set of characters Eddison had fantasised about since early adolescence.

Elsewhere amongst the Bodleian's collection of Eddison juvenilia is another series of drawings (MS Eng. misc. b. 105) showing an ongoing fascination with heroic violence and battles between warriors and monsters, with attendant liberal use of red pencil; even his rabbits are carrying muskets. It is probably important to remember that boys will be boys, and no attempt will be made here to psychoanalyse this preoccupation. The point is that Eddison had been toying with fantasy since before his perceptions of reality were properly formed – and, it would seem, before he was exposed to the Icelandic sagas he enjoyed so much as a youth and an adult.

As with MacDonald's love of Scotland, Eddison's love of the Icelandic sagas appears to be something of a red herring in determining the origin of his affinity for fantasy. Heroic, bellicose fantasy appears to have been the natural, intuitive home of his imagination, and the timbre and essential contents of *The Worm Ouroboros* were clearly in place in his mind from an alarmingly early age. Within the Bodleian's file of Eddison's childhood drawings is a sketch of a man being carried between the carefully-labelled planets of the solar system on the back of a flying, horned quadruped – almost exactly how Lessingham dreams of being transported to Mercury. The picture is not dated, but it has been carefully filed with another (of the Scissor Man hacking off a hapless boy's thumbs) dated to November of 1888, when Eddison was just six years old. Disconnected but individually well-formed aspects of the form and content of *The Worm Ouroboros* were therefore simmering in Eddison's imagination long before he discovered the Icelandic sagas. Although one might be tempted to suggest that Eddison's fantasies arose out of his love for this heroic

literature, it is my contention that the reverse is true. I believe Eddison took to Icelandic tales in his adolesence in search of external validation for his preexisting internal fantasy life, perhaps hoping to find that adventures such as those he had daydreamed about since childhood had 'really happened' somewhere. His lifelong fondness for this literature indicates that he found some such validation, although the eventual necessity to produce *The Worm Ouroboros* suggests that this solace did not wholly satisfy his imagination. In short, reality was not enough for him, and in 1917 he set himself the task of codifying his fantasies. *The Worm Ouroboros* was published five years later. In a letter thanking Eddison for his presentation copy, Arthur Ransome recalled his erstwhile schoolmate regaling him with tales of Lord Juss and King Gorice in kindergarten, noting "You were writing the WORM even then, and are quite right in thinking it your magnum opus." (4/7/22; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. e. 231 40-41).

Eddison seems to have felt otherwise. He would remain suitably proud of *The Worm* for the rest of his life, but he never revisited Mercury despite having kept certain events and adventures there up his sleeve. A growing appreciation in his own mind of the essential nature of his fantasies would lead to a more concerted effort to give them voice through literary world-building. In terms of cementing his position as a world-builder of consequence, this is probably just as well. *The Worm Ouroboros* is focused on the heroism and bravery of the characters. Mercury is not the matter under discussion in the novel, constituting little more than an "ornate obstacle course" (Manlove *Impulse of Fantasy* 48) for Juss and his colleagues to gallivant across. When Eddison returned to world-building in the 1930s (having, in the interim, written a historical novel set in medieval Sweden and a translation of the Icelandic *Egil's Saga*), he focused on the implications of one particular episode in *The Worm*. In the mountains of Impland, Juss and Branoch Daha briefly glimpse the land of Zimiamvia from a remote peak (219-220). It is referred to as the abode of the souls of the dead who are deemed suitably great, though who makes such judgments is not explained, and no further mention is made of the place. From 1931 until his death in 1945, however, Eddison devoted his imagination to explaining what sort of a place Zimiamvia was, and his attempts to codify this aristocratic afterlife deserve more attention from critics of fantasy literature than they have so far received. With the quality and importance of *The Worm Ouroboros* duly noted, therefore, the remainder of this discussion must focus on his subsequent novels. Attebery ("ER Eddison" 533)

describes the Zimiamvia trilogy as "surpass[ing] *The Worm Ouroboros* in philosophical content." For our purposes, it is worth noting that their philosophical content is very much concerned with the acts and consequences of world-building.

Zimiamvia: First Digestion

In Eddison's second fantasy novel, *Mistress of Mistresses* (1935), Zimiamvia becomes a mapped, codified secondary world, the stage for a convoluted power struggle between the heirs of the great King Mezentius, recently assassinated in his island fortress of Sestola. No connection with Mercury is mentioned; Eddison seems to have decided that Zimiamvia existed in its own right. His remaining two novels, *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941) and *The Mezentian Gate* (posthumously published as a collection of draft fragments in 1958) do not advance the story from *Mistress of Mistresses*, but rather elaborate on the events leading up to it, giving background information going back two generations. The Zimiamvia cycle possesses a eccentric cosmological circularity, with the invented and primary worlds mingling to an extent that will easily confuse the inattentive reader. Moreover, Eddison's attempt to characterise this fictional afterlife led him to develop intricate, somewhat self-serving moral philosophies that make those of *The Worm Ouroboros* seem tame by comparison. Eddison espoused his ideas with considerable passion, but also worked hard to sublimate them to the demands of a rollicking, hedonistic adventure story, worrying all the while that he was becoming too didactic. Espousing and explaining a philosophical manifesto without openly endorsing or promulgating it is not for the faint of heart, and the question of how well Eddison made his points lies, perhaps with some justification, at the heart of the dismissal of his books by many critics. Certainly, the Zimiamvia cycle demands a great deal from its audience and resists linear analysis. For these reasons, and because of its small readership compared to those enjoyed by other fantasy texts, the contents of *Mistress of Mistresses* require some introduction before we can address the depths of thought and feeling that lay behind it.

The tripartite empire Mezentius has left to his heirs in *Mistress of Mistresses* serves as an afterlife for Edward Lessingham, the Cumbrian gentleman who dreamed of Mercury in *The Worm Ouroboros*. In the 'Overture' to the second novel, an anonymous, Oxford-educated narrator sits in a building on the Lofoten Islands off the northern coast of Norway, surrounded by Ming vases and silk cushions, quoting

Swinburne and ruminating on how lucky he was to have known the recently deceased Lessingham, who lies in state in the next room. He tells a visitor, a beautiful Spanish lady, how he and Lessingham first met in Cumberland, and tells of their adventures in Kashmir and Paraguay, and of his friend's illustrious descent from Vikings and Prussians. Mountaineer, diplomat, historian, linguist, soldier and portrait artist, Edward Lessingham was, by all measures, an astonishing human being, who seemed to look upon other people from an innately superhuman vantage point. Towards the end of his life, infuriated with the world after the death of his wife, Lessingham amassed and inspired a private army to undertake a brilliant and decisive conquest of the Lofoten Islands. The narrator is glad that Lessingham has finally died; for all his brilliance there was nothing he could have done to defend his private fiefdom from the air-raid that the Norwegian government was planning for tomorrow, and his death has left him undefeated. As the narrator winds down his story, the Spanish lady mentions Zimiamvia, referring to it in the same manner as do the heroes of *The Worm Ouroboros* – as a sort of afterlife for those whose character and accomplishments are truly spectacular.

Edward Lessingham, it appears, is one such person, and such people, Eddison seems to argue, would be bored to tears by the mere spiritual bliss promised by traditional Christian eschatology. Instead, the main narrative of *Mistress of Mistresses* begins with Lessingham "taking possession" of the body of the 25-year-old cousin of Horius Parry, the Vicar of Rerek, the monstrous nobleman who heads one of the blocs jockeying for power in the wake of Mezentius's assassination[1]. In this identity, Lessingham is a trustworthy honest broker between the Parrys and their rival, Duke Barganax, the King's illegitimate son. He leads Parry's armies against Barganax when the two sides come to blows, but also reins in the sadistic excesses of the Vicar. His neutrality is a consequence of the romance he has pursued with the late King's daughter, the teenage Queen Antiope. As the Duke and the Vicar squabble ferociously, Lessingham brilliantly manipulates both men so that the struggle serves Antiope's aims. In much the same way that Barganax, a lounging aesthete, poet and artist, derives a prickle of excitement from his strong-willed, rather arrogant mistress Fiorinda, the pacific, childlike Queen balances Lessingham's characteristic drive for

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[1] A similarly intimidating character of this name turns up in a brief series of drawings from Eddison's childhood (Bodleian Library MS Eng misc b. 105) – further evidence that Eddison's drive to create fantasy emerged very early in life.

action and excitement. When agents of an outside power cause Antiope's death, Lessingham flies into a rage and forces Barganax and Parry into an alliance against this intruder's threat. Scared of losing his influence, Parry engineers Lessingham's assassination – but looks up from the deed to discover Duke Barganax looking at him with Lessingham's distinctive grey eyes. Even when finally bested, Lessingham will live on in his own personal heaven of endless, vicarious intrigue and competition. Rather than peace, Lessigham's reward in the afterlife is an eternity of excitement and challenge in a world that truly deserves him.

The world he has been given to gallivant in resembles a cross between Renaiscance Italy and Elizabethan England. Unlike MacDonald's fantasy novels, *Mistress of Mistresses* features an appended map picturing mountains, rivers, cities, moors and farmlands. Its inhabitants, an aristocracy speaking a rich Elizabethan patois, commission statues and temples to the Olympian gods, quote Sappho, quip in Latin and Norse, use the same playing cards as exist on Earth and, somewhat disarmingly, play tennis. The marvellous takes two forms. Firstly, there are extravagant emotions in play: love, enmity, jealousy, lust and ambition are felt and expressed in consistently histrionic, undiluted forms. Duke Barganax, for example, does not merely love his mistress Fiorinda:

> 'You ride me unfairly', he said in a whisper. 'You who have held my rendered soul, when you would, trembling in your hand: will you goad me while I sting myself to death with my own poison?'
> She made no sign. To the Duke, still steadfastly regarding her, all sensible things seemed to have attuned themselves to her: a falling away of colours: grey silver in the sunshine instead of gold, the red quince-flowers blanched and bloodless, the lush grass grey where it should be green, a spectral emptiness where an instant before had been a summer's promise on the air and the hues of life and the young year's burden. She turned her head and looked him full in the eye: it was as if, between the wings of death, beauty beaconed like a star. (38-39)

Barganax paints numerous portraits of Fiorinda, but, dissatisfied with the results, furiously destroys each of them in turn. Other Zimiamvians are similarly highly-strung in their moods, perceptions and deportment. Horius Parry is a ferocious

bully who punishes disobedient vassals by having them mauled by his monstrous hunting dogs; his nefarious valet Gabriel Flores is the very picture of a fawning, obsequious lickspittle. Barganax's Admiral, Jeronimy, is caught between his own territorial ambitions and loyalty to his master, the former portrayed as an irresistible force, the latter an immovable object; such internal tensions create dramatic ones within the narrative. Derxis, the king of Akkama, experiences rages that spill over into atrocities that would make Lady MacBeth cringe. The accoutrements of the Zimiamvian aristocracy are in keeping with their personalities. Barganax's bodyguard are all Herculean warriors with waist-length red beards and black plate-mail armour. Queen Antiope's audience chamber is entered through an archway adorned with life-sized statues of heraldic seahorses, each carved from a single piece of blue crystal. Even little Campaspe, one of Fiorinda's ladies-in-waiting, wears velvet gloves studded with zircons. At times Eddison will spend two pages describing such pageantry – a trait in his writing style that has drawn some sharp criticism (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 143).

There is also a more quiet and subtle magic at play in Zimiamvia. Dressed for a masque, Fiorinda wears enchanted, luminous caterpillars in her hair. Barganax's palace garden is under a spell that renders it permanently twilit, suiting his rather poetic, artistic manner. Doctor Vandermast, Barganax's superhumanly old, wise advisor, lives in his "House of Peace", which appears or disappears on the landscape as and when he wishes to receive visitors, and where he is waited upon by stone-eyed sphinxes and hedgehogs in waistcoats. From there he often influences events like a spymaster, using superhuman agents. Lessingham, flirting in a boat with Anthea, another of Fiorinda's ladies-in-waiting, notes that she has odd, cat-like eyes. Turning back to her after a moment's inattention, he finds himself sharing a boat with a grinning, sentient lynx. Anthea is in fact an oread, one of the shape-changing mountain-nymphs of Greek mythology, and one of several such 'half-gods' whose intrinsic command of the supernatural constitutes a guileful counterpoint to the crash, bang and wallop of Zimiamvian politics. When Fiorinda's abusive husband dismisses her ladies-in-waiting and locks her up at home, she is able to maintain a correspondence with Vandermast by sending out her pet water-rat – the naiad Campaspe in her 'beast dress' – on secret errands.

Eddison's characters possess emotions and capabilities – and, consequently perform actions – of hyperbolic proportions. They are very obviously and deliberately

larger than life and, it seems, larger than Earth. No real society has ever conducted itself as the Zimiamvian nobility does. It would not be possible. A fictional land and a fictional culture was required to contain these people.

Taken on its immedtiately obvious merits, *Mistress of Mistresses* comes across as a rollicking, high-pitched adventure story. It can certainly be enjoyed as such, especially by lovers of Eddison's baroque prose, but Eddison himself was not content to let the issue lie there. Almost as soon as he completed *Mistress of Mistresses* he began work on a sequel. Unlike conventional sequels, however, this follows up not the plot of the first Zimiamvian novel, but its cosmology. The narratives of *A Fish Dinner in Memison* and *The Mezentian Gate* overlap as Eddison tells and retells certain aspects of the story in ways he hoped would shed light on the cosmological and ontological ramifications he saw in his attempt to codify a paradise.

A Fish Dinner in Memison (1941) elaborates upon the relationship between Earth and Zimiamvia by telling two parallel narratives, one covering the last several weeks of King Mezentius's life in Zimiamvia, the other giving highlights of 25 years (1901-1926) in the earthly life of Edward Lessingham. In the course of the earthbound narrative, Edward woos and, with some difficulty, wins the hand of the equally remarkable Mary Scarnside, paints numerous portraits of her (including one entitled *A Vision of Zimiamvia*), participates in the historical Great War (he has no truck with its limp-wristed armistice) and has a stellar career as a civil servant with the Foreign Office; his brother remarks that he could have been Prime Minister if his ambitions had lain in that direction. Widowed in a horrible train wreck in 1923, he reacts at first with tremendous courage and restrain, but then burns down his house, destroying most of his possessions. This narrative both begins and ends with Edward sitting in a café in Verona chatting to a mysterious, dark-haired woman, the same Senorita who visited his bier in the Overture to the first novel. After their first meeting, this woman steps from Earth to Zimiamvia, where she is addressed as Fiorinda. By the second meeting, Lessingham has worked out her identity: she is Aphrodite, the "mistress of mistresses" after whom the first book was named, the idealised woman who compliments and completes the male principle.

On one level, Eddison is simply dealing in archetypes of the male and female, placing one of each in each world. He was quite consciously doing so, as well – he notes in a letter of introduction to *A Fish Dinner in Memison* that his novels constitute, in large part, a meditation on the universality of those forms, in both fact

and fiction (xxv-xxvi). As much of the tiny body of scholarship on the Zimiamvia cycle points out (Flieger, "The Man Who Loved Women" 29-32; Schuyler 13-14), Eddison's handling of these archetypes was closely informed by his philosophical outlook, a complicated matter deserving a subchapter of its own.

To cement an understanding of his cosmology, however, the focus must now shift to the Zimiamvian sections of *A Fish Dinner in Memison* and *The Mezentian Gate*, which open further intriguing complications to the overlap between the two worlds. The title of the first of these two books refers to a grand banquet given by Mezentius's mistress Amilie, the Duchess of Memison, at which the conversation takes the form of a philosophical dialogue in which the various participants discuss how, and if, the world of Zimiamvia could be changed for the better. They decide not to try, but as they bandy about hypotheses the King, leading the discussion, magically builds a world in a large bubble on the dinner table in front of him. At the end of the dinner, dissatisfied with the result, Fiorinda casually pops the bubble with a hairpin. It leaves "a little wet mark the size of her fingernail" (312).

This act of world-building is startling in and of itself, underlining the King's slow climb towards apparent omnipotence, and grows more remarkable in light of the notes Eddison left for an unwritten chapter in *The Mezentian Gate* in which the fish dinner was to be re-narrated. It would be made clear that the world in the bubble is Earth. The diners were to watch all of earthly history unfold over half an hour. The two pairs of lovers present at the dinner (Mezentius and Amilie, Barganax and Fiorinda), would furthermore enter the bubble and live mortal lifetimes in twentieth-century England, with the two women existing in the guise of Mary and the two men as Lessingham. This lifetime in the bubble would pass in a few seconds outside it. Vague, dream-like memories of this lifetime would be retained, to greater and lesser degrees, by the four lovers, explaining the mysterious episodes of intense, surpassing empathy they later experience (*Mistress of Mistresses* 133-135, 171, 261-266, 371). It would be Fiorinda's dissatisfaction with her experiences on Earth that prompt her to destroy the bubble. Eddison's working papers for *Mistress of Mistresses* make clear that Barganax and the Zimaimvian Lessingham are avatars of the passive and aggressive sides, respectively, of the Earthly Lessingham's character, showing that this juggling of identities across worlds was part of the plan from the beginning. In a letter published as a foreword to *The Mezentian Gate*, Eddison wrote "the trilogy will, as I now foresee, turn into a tetralogy, and the tetralogy probably then (as an oak puts

on girth and height with the years) lead to further growth" (xi). Sadly he would die before even the trilogy was finished, but the sentiment demonstrates that it was the incrementally unfolding philosophical consequences of his world-building, rather than the desire to chronicle further adventures, which kept Eddison writing.

As it stands, the relationship between Earth and Zimiamvia is a circular one. The Zimiamvians create Earth, enter it on a sort of artistic expedition to experience another world, and, when their earthly avatars die, are reborn into Zimiamvia as the people who will build Earth at the fish dinner. Mary and Edward Lessingham of Nether Wastdale are such amazing characters because, although they are only dimly aware of it themselves, they are expatriate Zimiamvians accustomed to a world of explosive emotions, unalloyed self-confidence and sapphire goblets. Lying in state during the Overture of *Mistress of Mistresses*, Edward Lessingham is not being sent to a blessed afterlife as a reward: he is merely going home. The precise reasoning behind Eddison's decision as to which world should enjoy primacy here is tied up with his existential and moral philosophies, but this cosmology betrays a very keen appreciation of the tension between reality and fantasy implicit in the creation of a secondary world. Somewhat like MacDonald, however, Eddison had a hard time precisely articulating the critique of reality he was trying to make. Repeated visits to Zimiamvia were required for him to explain himself. Hence the growth of the place from a vague reference to the virtue of psychological self-honesty and courage in *The Worm Ouroboros* to a mapped, populated, culturally homogenous secondary world in the later novels. Eddison wrote and created, and did both repeatedly, to satisfy himself that he had made his point – and, in fact, that he had one worth making.

Was Eddison, therefore, a failed world-builder? Certainly the gestation of the Zimiamvia project was slow, with only about 1,000 almost evasively verbose pages to show for thirty part-time years of imaginative work. His inability to sustain a properly-articulated fantasy world through to its full realisation, even by not being able to complete and publish the books before his death, certainly stands against him here. His baroque prose style and insistence on sumptuous description perhaps compound the problem even further. His plots and lines of argument are easy to lose track of amidst the pageantry, and he stands accused of descending into a sort of unfocussed pornography of opulence that has led to his work being regarded as "only partially successful" (Anderson 430), "lacking the fibre of reality" (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 127), and "egregiously imperfect" (de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen and*

Sorcerers 130). With the books existing in the form they do, it is difficult to wholly refute those charges.

The intricate partnership with Earth expounded in *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, however, reveals that a startling amount of thought has gone into these books. In a letter to his brother published as a foreword to *The Mezentian Gate*, Eddison openly reveals that the possibilities and consequences of world-building were what kept him writing. He also offered an eccentrically perceptive view of how his invented world differed from the real one:

> A very unearthly character of Zimiamvia lies in the fact that nobody wants to change it. Nobody, that is to say, apart from a few weak natures who fail on their probation and (as, in your belief and mine, all ultimate evil must) put off at last even their illusory semblance of being, and fall away into the limbo of nothingness. Zimiamvia is, in this, like the sagatime; there is no malaise of the soul. In that world, well-fitted to their faculties and dispositions, men and women of all estates enjoy beatitude in the Aristotelian sense of ευεργεια κατ απετην αρισγον (activity according to their highest virtue). Gabriel Flores, for instance, has no ambition to be Vicar of Rerek: it suffices his lust for power that he serves a master who commands his dog-like devotion. (xii)

This is an interesting paragraph, showing Eddison's literary, philosophical and polyglot bent (mottos from Norse, Greek, Latin and Middle-English sources are scattered, all in their original scripts, through his books) as well as the core difference, as he saw it, between Earth and Zimiamvia.

On Earth, and in any fiction purporting to depict that place, people must guess how they should relate to the world, act accordingly, and hope for the best. Zimiamvians just do it; the world does what they want. Zimiamvians may bide their time, consider their options carefully and lay plots that take years to bear fruit, but they never vacillate, dither, or engage in anything but the most noble and high-minded of introspection. They may fail in their endeavours, but if they do, it is because they have been outplayed by an opponent, not because they are weak, wrong or stupid. Mezentius, knowing that his conniving wife Rosma intends to murder the bastard

Barganax, *knowingly* drinks the poison she meant for the Duke, thus allowing his illegitimate son to live. Rosma, furious but dignified in defeat, drains the same cup and dies herself. Thus both the hero and villainess of the piece are beaten rather than failing. As Eddison himself explicitly conceded, there is no way that characters such as this could be credible on Earth. They are quite beyond the scope of realistic fiction. He gave them their own world, where they can conduct themselves confident in the knowledge that they are competing with each other rather than with an impersonal universe that might arbitrarily scuttle their plans. Such a milieu naturally breeds confidence and self-indulgence, but after all, this is supposed to be heaven.

By bringing characters used to operating in such an environment to Earth, furthermore, Eddison confronts the interrelationship between the real and the unreal necessary for functioning fantasy in a very direct manner. Being, unbeknownst to themselves, expatriate Zimiamvians, Mary and Edward Lessingham lack neuroses, existential qualms and personal insecurities – they have no "malaise of the soul" (*Fish Dinner* xii). Consequently their sense of self is almost absolute. It would probably never occur to Edward that scaling the Himalayas, writing a surpassingly incisive biography of Fredrick the Great, conquering a medieval fiefdom for himself in modern Norway or openly stating a willingness to die in battle to teach the Germans a proper lesson are unusual or impressive things to do. Similarly, Mary never offers any explanation or apology for being the greatest and most charismatic beauty of her age. She is what she is, and acts accordingly. Although prepared to ruminate on the consequences of this, she never wonders about the possibility of being otherwise. Her untimely death, however, shatters Edward, and to his full-throated, unabashed Zimiamvian sensibilities, the arson of Nether Wastdale is an obvious and reasonable course of action. To their Earthly contemporaries, however, these two are amazing, and the reader is rarely allowed to forget this difference. We last see the earthly Lessingham, in the last chapter of *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, sitting in a Verona café, observed by a collection of young English wags who are whispering heatedly about being in the presence of superhuman greatness. When Aphrodite arrives, that discussion only becomes more intense.

Frustrating in both form and content as it may be, the Zimiamvia cycle is intricately bound up with the core concern of fantasy as Tolkien saw it – the dialogue between humans and their imaginations – and uses magic to highlight, rather than overshadow, very basic human concerns. In Tolkienian terms, therefore, Zimiamvia

functions. Rather than following George MacDonald's lead by creating magical afflictions and Shadows, Eddison creates a society where there are no such existential maladies, and then, his curiosity aroused, directly contrasts such people with the imperfections of the primary world. These books in fact owe their existence in large part to the interest that Eddison aroused in himself by creating a fantasy world. What appears to be a succession of hedonistic doodles is in fact a fascinatingly intricate attempt to make philosophical sense of reality.

Furthermore, the act of world-building in *A Fish Dinner In Memison* seems to anticipate Tzvetan Todorov's point that anything in a text can be presented as real if the author wishes it to be. The content of a book, Todorov reminds his readers, constitutes a sealed system with no obligation to bear any relationship to anything outside the text (152). At the fish dinner, Duke Barganax agrees –

> "Have I your highness's drift?" said the Duke: "that when Truth's unhusked to the kernel, every imaginable thing is as real as any other? And every one of them imperishable and eternal?"
> "Ay", said the King: "things past, things present, and things to come. And things imaginable and unimaginable alike."
> "So that a God, walking where he will, (as you, madam', to his lady mother, 'in your garden, making a bunch of flowers), may gather, or note, this or this: make Him His own particular world at choice."
> The King nodded. (253)

Although he hardly thought of the issue in the same terms as Todorov, Eddison obvious knew his textual theory: the creator of a closed system can do what he or she wants. By devoting two chapters of his novel to a philosophical dialogue on the ins and outs of world-building, he puts this appreciation of the consequences of his work at centre stage. These matters become, for author, characters and reader alike, a genuine preoccupation, and the reader must grapple with the evolving relationship between the worlds for much of the length of the cycle. Unlike *The Worm Ouroboros*, therefore, the Zimiamvia books place the act of world-building and its downstream effects very much in the foreground. Perhaps more explicitly than any other fantasist examined in this study, Eddison displays a clear understanding of and abiding concern with the relationship between reality and fantasy. His handling of this

crucial issue was, and in the post-Tolkienian era remains, strikingly original. There can surely be no doubting his credentials as a world-builder. In order to properly examine his capacity as such, however, it is necessary to delve into the philosophical underpinnings of his work. With such a small body of scholarship dedicated to him, this has involved archival research into the composition of the Zimiamvia cycle.

Eddison's philosophical underpinnings

Mistress of Mistresses had a slow gestation. This is hardly surprising given that Eddison was a part-time writer, fond of extensive revision and greatly concerned with the internal consistency and ideological cohesion of his work, but *Mistress of Mistresses* was an especial headache for him. He began it in 1924, but became frustrated and put it aside with only a few notes committed to paper (although those notes do include sentences that turn up in the published novel). He could not, it seems, really get a feel for his own aims in the project. Instead, he decided to indulge his fondness for Icelandic and Scandinavian literature, writing the historical novel *Styrbiorn The Strong* and translating *Egil's Saga*. He was drawn back to his Zimiamvian project in 1930, an indication that he had realised that his compositional aims could not be addressed by mimesis, and that his fantasies were informed, rather than directly inspired, by his Nordic hobbies. The idea of copying the sagas, or even wrting some of his own, had obviously occurred to him, and been attempted, but had also clearly been found somehow unsatisfactory. The real world, even filtered through the robust imaginations of the Icelandic poets, would not do what he wanted it to do, or portray what he wanted to portray.

So he returned to Zimiamvia. The first few months of this renewed attempt remained tremendously difficult, until, as he records in a personal memorandum, a thought came to him –

> The profound verity which I want to ensnare and express in this book is this, I think: the reconciliation of Selflessness and Perfection. It is a defect of life as we know it on earth, or a main part of the grand illusion we call Evil, that Selflessness implies sacrifice, asceticism, renunciation, & too commonly seems to verge on some bloodless Nirvanah [sic] which is but a glorying term for Death. 'The vine, the woman, & the rose': these are good, absolute goods: on that I stake my salvation. I had rather be damned with Sappho & Egil than

go to heaven with all the pale mystics that ever withered. This book must incarnate my passionate faith in these things, in some way dimly compatible with the way in which Beethoven has incarnated his faith in the same insufferable beauties and delights when he wrote such works as the Fourth Symphony and the Fourth Piano Concerto. This is the immediate aim; someday perhaps I may try my art on the deepest of all mysteries. The reconciliation and transcendence of great tragedy which Beethoven achieved in Op. III. But I fear that only the greatest of men can achieve that. (Leeds Public Library SRQ 823.91 ED23)

Eddison noted that this thought struck him at 1:45pm on Good Friday 1931, while he was on his way to lunch in central London. Novel as it is to be able to pinpoint a moment of literary inspiration so precisely, the importance of the note lies in its contents rather than its date. The attempt to expound the ideas expressed in this mission statement was to occupy Eddison's literary imagination for the remaining fourteen years of his life. Much of that time would be spent developing, and then defending, a sound philosophical basis for a fantasy world that might at first glance be dismissed as flippant and escapist, and probing – sometimes gropingly, sometimes precisely – after the consequences of his own lines of thinking. Analysis of this Good Friday manifesto, and of his various explanations and extrapolations of it, is therefore quite crucial to understanding his imaginative processes.

The Good Friday manifesto was attempt at a wholesale revision of terms in moral philosophy, which Eddison saw as having profound ontological consequences. All conscious creatures, he argued, have desires; those who claim otherwise have merely placed one desire, that of satisfaction, higher than all others (*Fish Dinner* xxi). Defining spiritual perfection as an abstract consequence of asceticism or sacrifice was essentially to deny the value of vine, woman, rose and, in fact, anything, and therefore tantamount to nihilism, a position of which the consequences clearly were not worth thinking about. "It is spiritual suicide", he insisted,

> & a sin against the Holy Ghost, to think of the ult. reality as something unnatural; true religion <u>must</u> be anthropomorphic. Since God is infinitely good, wise and beautiful, these qualities are the test of reality. An ascetic

shrinking from these things (save as a mere matter of expediency) is blasphemous.

This note, filed amid Eddison's working papers for *Mistress of Mistresses* in Leeds Public Library, is dated to November 1930, and therefore predates the Good Friday manifesto, demonstrating that Eddison spent some time formulating these ideas in his own head before they finally clicked during that fateful lunch break. In any case, the consequences of this note are clear. "[A] 'mystic' or abstract or disembodied heaven is not worth a pease", he informed George Rostrover Hamilton (3/10/33; Leeds Public Library); heaven must be a place where one's appetites were indulged, not merely a place where one's suffering was assuaged. Therefore Lessingham, the paradigmatic man of action who delights in surmounting challenges and testing himself against his fellow man, finds himself in a heaven where there are always intrigues to pursue and foes to fight.

So far, however, what we have is a license for hedonism – an argument that we drink therefore we are. Indulgent heavens are, of course, the stuff of many personal folklores, and such a position would have sufficed if Eddison was merely interested in gushing about mighty battles, luxurious palaces and sybaritic damsels. These are the attributes of Zimiamvia that capture the attention at first reading, but Eddison was not interested in pandering to those who would remain satisfied by a single reading of his books. His argument, as given here, has already intimated that the hyperbolic opulence of Lessingham's personal heaven was little more than a natural, arguably inconsequential downstream effect of Eddison's compositional aims. A world geared specifically towards the indulgence of one's appetites would naturally take on something of a rosy hue. A man such as Lessingham, and therefore a writer such as Eddison, was not going to be satisfied with tasteful understatement in constructing or describing his material culture.

Again, though, it must be emphasised that the descriptive pyrotechnics characteristic of Eddison's novels are a consequence of rigorously sensible ideas. Having established, in his own mind at any rate, the moral sidestep required to grant ontological significance to pleasure, Eddison now felt obligated to construct a credible argument as to what kinds of pleasure was of genuine value. He lived up to this obligation. Here reference to the Good Friday manifesto again provides a useful jumping-off point for explaining his thought. Scribbled in the margin is another note,

dated 15th May 1933, in which Eddison reminds himself that "2 days later" – that is, Easter Sunday 1931 – "Fiorinda took shape at Seaford."

Now Lady Fiorinda is a contentious figure, both within Zimiamvia and among its readers. However much she captivates Barganax, few of Eddison's confidants and correspondents found her an attractive character. CS Lewis for one detested her (Lewis to Gerald Hayes, 3/3/43; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. 230/1, 44) and others saw his point (Hayes to Lewis, 6/3/43 47). In a sense her detractors have a point – she strings her lover along mercilessly, engineers the assassination of two annoying husbands without a second thought (much less any censure, either from any of her fellow characters or from Eddison himself) and wallows throughout in the indolent, detached, surpassingly self-assured arrogance she displayed from her first speech, while sitting for her portrait in *Mistress of Mistresses*:

> "Would you be ageless and deathless for ever, madam, were you given the choice?" said the Duke, scraping away for the third time the colour with which he had striven to match, for the third time unsuccessfully, the unearthly green of that lady's eyes.
> "I am this already", answered she with unconcern. (34)

Fiorinda makes this flippant claim to immortality because, uniquely among the various avatars of Aphrodite that appear in Eddison's novels, she *knows* herself to be a goddess. She claims to have been informed of this by the inscrutable Doctor Vandermast, whose knowledge of philosophy allows him something approaching omniscience. In the following chapter she confirms the matter in a moment's insight while dressing:

> Even as she, standing in the first beams of day, began to put up her hair and pin it with pins of chrysolite, she seemed on the sudden grown taller by a head, to out-top the tallest men in stature, and whereas, since there is no increase beyond perfection, the beauty of her body might not increase, yet the substance of it as if transmuted in a moment to pure light, of a like a brightness and essence with the heavenly fires of sunrise. No man could in that time have named the colour of Her eyes or Her hair; the shifting of the dark and light was become as a blinding glory too awful for modern eye to

look upon, too swift for the mind of man to seize or read. For upon Her cheek in that hour was the beauty that belongs to fair-crowned Aphrodite; and that beauty, thus made manifest in its fullness, no eye can bear or see, not even a God's (66-67)

Such baroque prose is common in Zimiamvia, and this passage can easily be overlooked as another example of Eddison glorying in the description of sumptuous beauty. Again, however, Eddison wasted little time on inattentive readers, and this moment of insight on Fiorinda's part places her in a unique and crucial position in his cosmology as someone who understands herself to be, in fact, the basis of the universe.

By including this character, Eddison furnishes himself with a personification in his invented world of all value, and therefore all morality. To his mind there was no plurality of ultimate values – truth is only valuable if it serves some good, and good is only valuable per se (as opposed to as a means to an end) if it is beautiful. Consequently Beauty, the thing that can be loved for its own sake, is the only thing of true value, and any artwork or philosophical system worth spit must strive to create or locate concrete examples of it (*Fish Dinner* xxiii-xxiv). Beauty must of course be loved, and thus "ultimate reality rests in a Masculine-Feminine dualism" (xxiv). All that is of true value, therefore, must rest in people, and more specifically female people:

> [I]n the last analysis, Beauty is the one thing that can be loved for its own sake, as end, not as means: that Beauty must [therefore] be a Person, since anything lower than a person can only be loved as a means or as an attribute or aspect of something. (to Gerald Hayes, 14/4/44, Bodleian Library MS Eng, lett. c. 230/1, 74)

On Earth, Mary Lessingham fills this role as the culmination of all worth. In Zimiamvia, Aphrodite wears various guises, including Antiope and Amilie, who have not had the same apotheosising insight as Fiorinda.

It is important to note here that, to Eddison's mind at least, this is not allegorical writing. It can certainly function as such, but Eddison wished to take matters one step further by granting monopolistic ontological significance to the

qualities these women personify. The avatars of Aphrodite, including their most obvious and self-aware form in Lady Fiorinda, personify not mere pulchritude, but the basis of all that any decent thinking person should (indeed, ipso facto, must) value. Eddison therefore took an initially rather bleak line of argument and followed it through to a quite warm-hearted assertion of the central importance of human affection, as precipitated by women. The very laws of physics are subservient to this idea (Flieger, "The Ouroboros Principle" 43-44). That his women are, uniformly, stunningly beautiful and fabulously sexy is little more than a compositional indulgence; the fact that they are loved as such makes them goddesses. "♀ the only worth or value", he scribbled elsewhere, "But, can only persist by being loved (& created or preserved) by ♂" (Leeds Public Library). Within Eddison's invented world, Fiorinda and her less astute colleagues are the meaning of life incarnate. As such, they also serve as a standard of morality; what serves their purposes and pleasures is good, while that which harms or irks them is evil. In Fiorinda, Eddison had worked out how to illustrate this point: he has a character who is wholly conscious of her position in this romantic mechanism and, unlike the comparatively coy Antiope or sedate Mary, acts accordingly. Attebery's comment that "The Zimiamvian books are more love stories than they are tales of heroic adventure" ("The Zimiamvia Trilogy" 2,212), although fair comment, only goes halfway to articulating this profound narrative gearshift. In Zimiamvia, those who have the strength and courage to love without reservation are, ipso facto, heroes – therefore love stories of sufficient pitch *are* tales of heroic adventure.

Eddison's use of the female principle as the central measure of reality raises interesting questions about his perception of women in the primary world. This could be taken as evidence for either uncommon reverence or patronising prejudice towards women. There is in fact little to suggest that he felt either. De Camp (*Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* 118) suggests that Eddison had exacting standards of female beauty, describing short-haired women as "hermaphrodites" and forbidding his own wife from ever cutting her hair, but does not reference the anecdote. There is nothing in Eddison's preserved correspondence to hint at his position on "the woman question", a silence made all the more conspicuous given the times he lived in (the composition of *The Worm Ouroboros* was, after all, underway when British women received their voting rights). He signed letters to his wife, Winifred, with love,

evidently adored both his daughter and granddaughter, was gracious to various female correspondents, and paid his (female) typist promptly, but offered no thoughts on the real or perceived place of women in primary-world society. Living in the time he did, it would be fair to assume that he had a narrower view of women than is now generally held, but there is nothing to immediately suggest his perception of women was unusual. Certainly, a concerted feminist reading of the Zimiamvian novels would be a substantial addition to Eddisonian scholarship.

Eddison was writing about a world with a standard of reality very different to our own. In this he demonstrates another interesting point of contact with George MacDonald. Both men equate goodness and existence, in any meaningful sense, with allegiance to the purpose of a personified central reality, rather than empirical evidence. This point of contact has far-reaching consequences in relation to Eddison's interesting ideas about the nature of reality, which are to be examined later in this chapter, but the kinship between him and MacDonald ought to be signposted at this point. Notably, both men demonstrate this standard of reality and morality by requiring the audience to applaud behaviour that would, in the primary world, be cause for concern. We have already seen how, in *Lilith*, MacDonald's Mister Raven repeatedly invites Vane to realise his potential for true existence by, essentially, abjuring his empirical existence and free will and accepting beneficent, death-like sleep. That Vane has great difficulty understanding this request, let alone acquiescing to it, and this problem may be symptomatic of an appreciation on MacDonald's part of the difficulty of his ideas. In the Zimiamvian books, Eddison similarly asks his audience to applaud goodness in apparent nastiness. Fiorinda is, to the uninformed or unsympathetic eye, distinctly unloveable. Her relationships with men demonstrate the point well. Aphrodite does not take kindly to confinement, and loves who she chooses, in her case Barganax. Unfortunately her lawfully-acquired husband Morville objects to being cuckolded:

> He struck her across the mouth with his glove, saying, in that extreme, "Go your gait, then, you salt bitch."
> Her face, all save the smouldering trail of that blow turned bloodless white. "This may be your death", she said. (*Fish Dinner* 159)

So it eventually proves. Bested in a duel with Barganax, Morville slinks ignominiously from his own house and is later found mauled to death by a wild animal (the oread Anthea in her lynx-dress). This is the second time a husband of Fiorinda's has been mysteriously murdered; questioned as to this matter, she shrugs, "he had me wronged" (232). The episode excited correspondence from friends of Eddison, who saw Morville as having been mistreated. These complaints often came from admirers who delighted in the viciousness of the obviously villainous Horius Parry but could not stomach it from someone ostensibly presented as a sympathetic character. Defending Fiorinda from their complaints became something of a theme in Eddison's letters. His core point in these defences was that her status as a goddess essentially made her immune to reproach:

> I think the only way to tolerate her is first to assume she is a Goddess; more, she is the goddess. As a mere woman – Good Lord – I could not stand her, not for a moment! She is all you charge her with, but, she is much more. (to Gerald Hayes, 4/3/44; Bodleian Library MS Eng. letters c. 230/1, 66).

> Fiorinda, whom I must suppose you have in mind when you say my heroine is a study in feminine perversity (for I cannot, try as I may, stretch this indictment to touch Lady Mary or the Duchess of Memison) has or course 'a taint of the harsh Tartar' and many dangerous qualities besides, with fierce southern blood in her, the wit of the Devil, and the unscrupulousness of Cleopatra; and of course (the crucial fact) she is, and very well knows she is, and enjoys and exploits that knowledge to the full, the very Goddess herself, Beauty's self in visible and tangible and loveable flesh and blood, perfect and immortal. (to JM Howard, 4/6/42; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. e. 231, 131)

> Fiorinda, I agree, is a-moral; but that is because, being who she is (with a capital W for the 'who') she is herself the standard of morality. In this world I admit she would be a scourge (though some wd. count the game worth the candle); but she is not of this world. Pantheresses, moreover, have claws, & I myself agree with the Duchess when, on second thoughts, she rejected the idea of clipping them! Morville got what he deserved: went back to Limbo….and Fiorinda is not cruel to the person that matters – Barganax; unless it is cruel to

give your lover what he wants, & give it on such terms & in such an atmosphere of danger & unexpectedness that he can never get tired of you. (to George Rostrevor Hamilton, 10/8/40; Leeds Public Library SRQ 823.91 ED23)

Morville, in other words, is the immoral one in Zimaimvia, where morality happens to be personified in a person who sees nothing shameful in adultery. Fiorinda's emotions, and her physical and spiritual enjoyment of them (insofar as these pleasures can be separated), will not be postponed by anything so ephemeral as a political marriage. Morville could not handle the heat, and was therefore removed from the Zimiamvian kitchen. Eddison occasionally worried about the frequency with which his friends seemed to miss his point, but he remained firm on the issue, insisting that, given the very philosophical conceits that led to her creation, she could not be compromised (to Hayes, Bodleian Library MS Eng. letters, c. 230/2, 242). On a slightly lighter note – Aphrodite being, as Eddison noted, "laughter-loving" – it is hard to think of another (respectable) fantasy heroine who could, in all seriousness, send her pet water-rat to deliver a message such as this to her paramour:

"'In token whereof', said Campaspe, 'I shall wear for the Duke tonight', says she 'my silken gown of red corn-rose.'"
"'And for the more conveniency, 'cause I think the night will be close", says she, "I'll wear no undergarment".' (*Fish Dinner* 163)

Eddison's philosophical arguments led him to demand a peculiar moral *volte face* from his readers whereby apparent evil and flippancy must be accepted as self-evident, potent goodness. By including a character who behaves in such a way, Eddison was able to make his point by personifying perfection in a person who obviously utterly rejects the retiring, self-disciplined asceticism that the term 'goodness' so often connotes in the primary world. It is important to note that, as mentioned in the letters quoted above, Eddison appreciated that such an outlook was hardly practical in the real world, where, he admits, Fiorinda would be a frightful monster. Only by following the dictates of Zimiamvian philosophy, which cannot be precisely applied in the primary world, can her actions be excused. When this is done, however, Fiorinda's actions become those of someone simply being honest with

herself. After Eddison created this character at Easter of 1931, *Mistress of Mistresses* progressed quite quickly, held up only by his work at the Board of Trade and the occasional need to pause and refresh his understanding of his own line of argument.

Fiorinda's feisty, self-serving arrogance is crucial to her role as the "Queen of Spades" who brings excitement and inflammation to the retiring artistic life of Barganax. For Lessingham, the consummate man of action, Eddison provides a very different other half, Queen Antiope. She too is Aphrodite, the basis of all value, but does not know it and therefore has a quiet, playful, rather childlike demeanour. When one of her less likely suitors – the sinister King Dexris of Akkama – displays his savagery by hurling a stone at a toad in her palace garden,

> He met in her eye an Artemisian coldness and displeasure. Then, with a sudden lovely grace picking up the toad, she made sure it was unhurt, made as if to kiss it, then put it back in a safe place in the flower bed. (*Mistress of Mistresses* 218)

Antiope's potential ferocity is quietly foreshadowed in an act otherwise worthy of a Disney princess. Towards the end of *Mistress of Mistresses* Dexris grows frustrated with Antiope's refusals, invades Fingiswold and tries to force her to marry him. Displaying the calm, unshakeable resolve characteristic of the defeated Zimiamvian, she takes poison instead, yanking both the plot of the novel and the line of argument it is intended to promote in a perplexing new direction. News of her death throws Lessingham into a distraught fury, and understandably so. This is, however, meant to be Lessingham's heaven, and "what Zimiamvia is this", Eddison asked himself, "that takes its colours from hell?"

> The answer must be given dramatically instead of didactically.
> In essence it is this – the old trinity of Truth, Beauty and Goodness can be stated thus: the ultimate reality consists in this, that omnipotent Love is the only power, and that that power (which is "good") creates Beauty, which is the fundamental <u>value</u>.
> The Power that does this is the elemental Goodness, the "Love of God": indeed it would seem that all Power, except insofar as it is enslaved to Beauty must be <u>Evil</u> (cf Bertrand Russell, "The Scientific Outlook", p. 86) &

therefore <u>Nothing</u>. (NB Goodness in the ethical sense is relative, subject to
convention & expediency; but we are only concerned w/Goodness *sub specie
eternitatis*.

Thus the tragedy for L. is an apocalypse of the basis of the universe: a
revelation of the necessity of the Divine Power to preserve & defend the
Divine Value: a revelation, to, if that were needed of the supreme value
(incarnate for him in A) of Her, showing him what a "story told by an idiot"
the world would be if she were slain indeed. It is from that nightmare that he
wakes in "<u>Zimiamvian Night</u>" (Leeds Public Library)

"Zimiamvian Night", was originally going to be the final chapter of *Mistress
of Mistresses*, and was going to return Lessingham to Earth after his Zimiamvian
death with a renewed appreciation of his role in life. This does not happen in the
published novel, although this section was written, and survives among the working
papers for the novel. Some of this discarded material turned up in one of the earthly
sections of *A Fish Dinner in Memison*. Eddison dropped it, perhaps, because it was
too obviously didactic, something he never wanted his books to be (another
interesting parallel with MacDonald). His point ("nothing ever loved entirely except
lost, or in immanent danger of loss", he scribbled elsewhere in the same file) is that it
is impossible to love something you know you can absolutely take for granted. This
would seem to be a concession that Evil, a quality he consistently sought to exclude
from his depiction of paradise, must exist in order to show Good its role. This is
probably the case, but it is nonetheless Zimiamvian, Eddisonian Evil, the evil of
nihilism and denial. Dexris, like Morville, sought to control and command the
ultimate value, and consequently brought about its destruction. He is therefore evil,
and deserves to die; the plot leaves him alive, but we can safely assume that
Barganax, as compelled by Lessingham, will pursue a war against him. The death of
Antiope is not an admission of defeat in Eddison's philosophy so much as an
illustration, appreciation and graceful accommodation of a complication.

The coherence and strength of Eddison's entire line of argument has come
under attack by some critics, who accuse him of fiddling with presuppositions and
definitions in order to reach the conclusion he desired (Pesch 97; Manlove, *Impulse of
Fantasy* 142). Be that as it may – and Eddison himself humbly conceded his imperfect
command of philosophy (*Fish Dinner* xvii) – the existence of the Good Friday

manifesto and its extrapolations clearly indicate Eddison's stature as a philosophical fantasist and world-builder of intellectual substance. Eddison thought long and hard about the implications of his work, successfully or otherwise, and turned all of his skill and education in interpreting the primary world to trying to understand the secondary one. This is a point that has been made before, but given Eddison's occasional dismissal as a writer whose "wonder at the nature of created things goes too far and defeats itself" (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 127), any remotely substantial discussion of him must be in part a defence of his merit. Thus the point is worth repeating.

Perhaps the most striking comment in the Good Friday manifesto is "on this I stake my salvation". In something of the same manner that George MacDonald passionately *wanted* to be Christian, Eddison clearly and passionately *wanted* Zimiamvia to serve a purpose. Eddison himself made it plain that was not going to waste his time on pot-boilers:

> I would rather a hundred people should read my books again and again than a million read them once and be done with them. What is written to be read once is journalism. Good journalism is a fine art, but its technique is (by very reason of the over-riding necessity to deliver all art at first reading) entirely different from the technique of the trade I follow. And so I will not load my pages with signposts & "author to reader" becks and nods, which, much as they may ease a first reading, can but provoke boredom, if not nausea, on a second. (to George Rostrover Hamilton, 31/3/38; Leeds Public Library)

In adhering to this maxim Eddison did not make things easy for himself or his audience – parts of *Mistress of Mistresses* are virtually incoherent until one reads *A Fish Dinner in Memison* – but this was an author less concerned with being dismissed as a fool than he was with becoming a hack. He was not simply a daydreamer burbling about mighty warlords, hideous mantichores and knickerless enchantresses, as one might surmise upon first looking into his books. He was a thorough, disciplined man, the sort of person who supplies a footnote giving three different definitions of a dialectical term ("Eiligug – a species of sea-bird") he used in a story he wrote at the age of five (Bodleain Library MS Eng misc. e. 456/1, 47). Solid groundwork was an indispensable part of his imaginative process, and if his argument

is ultimately philosophically suspect, his faith in and pursuit of the conclusions he was trying to reach were never shaken. There is another clear parallel with MacDonald here. It may not be going too far to describe the Zimiamvia novels as an unwitting humanist rejoinder to *Lilith* (unwitting in that there is no indication that Eddison was even remotely familiar with MacDonald's work).

After having wracked his brains for some time – the eleven-year gap between the conception and completion of *Mistress of Mistresses* would seem to speak for itself here – he had arrived at the conclusion that his ideas could not be served by realistic fiction. The earliest manuscript fragments of *Mistress of Mistresses*, dating from 1924 and preserved in Leeds Public Library, are set in Lessingham's earthly home in Cumbria. It would be stretching the point to suggest that Eddison originally intended to write Lessingham into a realistic novel, but he does seem to have slowly and incrementally realised that he needed a different, custom-built world to properly articulate a different standard of reality.

He proceeded to strive for the rest of his life to explain this standard of reality. Thanks to his scrupulous dating of manuscripts, it is clear that during the fourteen years between the Good Friday revelation and his death, he rarely let a fortnight go by without at least sitting down and trying to make progress on one manuscript or another. Although he worked a time-consuming day job and was essentially an amateur author (his royalty statements make sobering reading) he was in respect of his approach to the craft perhaps the most scrupulously professional world-builder discussed in this thesis. Having staked his salvation on a belief, he naturally wanted to make sure he got his point across, even if it killed him. In 1944 he expressed relief that *The Mezentian Gate* had reached a stage where it could be published to some effect "even if I were to be snuffed out" (to Gerald Hayes, 22/2/44; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. 230/1 62-63). In the event, this is precisely what happened, but Eddison continued to work on the novel until a fortnight before his death and, as the project progressed, predicted the necessity for further exploration of Zimiamvia. The fact that these novels move backwards rather than forwards in time, thoroughly buttressing the story of *Mistress of Mistresses* by detailing the events leading up to it – foremost among them a philosophical disputation on possible shapes and motivating principles of worlds – demonstrates that Eddison was a writer motivated by ideas rather than financial concerns, narrative curiosity, or the joy of composition. His ultimate lack of interest in that last possible motivation should be a final dismissal of the idea that

Eddison was merely burbling about splendour. He was critiquing the primary world, and he cared very deeply about making sure his critiques were thorough and properly appreciated by his audience.

A question therefore arises: how much Zimiamvian philosophy did Eddison genuinely believe? Certainly he had no great trouble working within conventional social, moral and religious structures. The other three writers examined in this thesis struggled, to a greater or lesser degree, with the necessity of living and working in the primary world. Eddison appears to have had no such problems; he spent his life working, happily enough, in a sensitive position in a government office requiring rigid and continuous attention to thoroughly conventional standards of value and importance. In fact, the issue of how 'real' Zimiamvia was to him is an interesting one. As shown, Zimiamvia exists essentially as a demonstration of an ontological argument in action. The very existence of the argument, however, implies a willingness to at least countenance the idea that the yardsticks by which we measure the primary world are open to substantial revision. Before embarking on the question of whether or not Eddison considered the Three Kingdoms 'real' or not, it is instructive to dwell on a fascinating episode in Eddison's career, in which he directly applied his ideas to primary-world matters that would seem to demand rigid, utilitarian realism. The conclusions he reached in doing so shed further light on this sort of ontological editorialising as well as demonstrating its value.

Aphrodite on the Home Front: ER Eddison and World War II

Twentieth-century history can be broadly reckoned as an hourglass-shaped affair, with virtually everything in the first part contributing to the advent of the Second World War, and virtually all subsequent events relating in some way to the course and outcome of that great calamity. This notion is applicable to literary history, including that of the Perilous Realm. Indeed, the enormous changes wrought on English society and self-perception in the first half of the twentieth century have been cited as a major contributing factor to the wealth of secondary worlds built by English authors during that period (Manlove, *The Fantasy Literature of England* 56-57). When current events seem unbelievable, the temptation to create something that makes more sense than the primary world does is obviously stronger; psychologists often find themselves tracing disassociative mental illnesses back to trauma early in life. But where the psychotic, by definition, believe their delusions at the expense of reality, world-builders know

their work to be falsifications, and must, if they wish to have any readers, conduct it with one eye on the real world. Occasionally links between the primary and secondary worlds will only become apparent as their respective histories unfold. This seems to have been very much the case with ER Eddison. Although the bulk of his work had been accomplished by 1939, archival evidence suggests that he perceived his earlier work to be applicable to the crisis of the 1940s, which in turn became a great spur to the continuation of that work in the last years of his life.

If the events of the 1940s continue to bewilder subsequent generations, they were far more frightening to those who lived through them. Eddison's friend JM Howard ably demonstrated the prevailing terror of Total War in a letter of 1942:

> Today's wars are mechanical and ideological monstrosities, violations of conscience & betrayals of professed gods. Lies & counterlies sport with semantic superstitions; the imagination is paralysed by the marching of the actual horror; men die wonderingly, cynically or casually. There is no poetry; all is propaganda. Courage is an impersonal psychological asset. Victories are slight advances on a world-wide map – they do not lift the heart. Defeats are shortages of creature comforts without spiritual significance. The depths of our disaster cannot be understood by anyone now living; it is too complicated – and too frightening. (JM Howard to Eddison, 3/2/42; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. e. 231 122)

Despite losing his son-in-law, Flying Officer Kenneth Higson, in action in 1940 (*A Fish Dinner in Memison* is dedicated to his memory), Eddison himself tended to be more reserved in his assessment of the situation. He could perhaps afford to be. In 1938 he had retired from public service and moved to Marlborough, a place of scant interest to the Luftwaffe (and just as well; his former residence in London would suffer a direct hit in the Blitz). There, forbidden by his doctor from joining the local Home Guard, he did ARP work, tended an extensive vegetable garden, worked on *The Mezentian Gate* and struggled to get the completed *A Fish Dinner in Memison* into print. British publishers could not spare the paper, but in 1940 the manuscript reached American publisher Edward Niles, who, after extensive correspondence, pushed out an edition in his homeland in 1941. Three years later, Niles wrote to Eddison noting the foresight he had shown in naming one of the Demon Lords in *The*

Worm Ouroboros 'Spitfire', following up the observation with some startling comments about more recent events:

> With what you know of Corsus and the other great Witches, you and noone else should be able to tell us the inside as to Goering & the Nazi chiefs – but you'd be on new and boggy ground with Hitler? You have not yet shown us the Ghouls, but when on Dec 7, 1941, when the Japanese burst forth with unimagined ferocity I thought at once of your Chronology. Are you writing of them now? Have they enough soul – some in the mass – to make it worthwhile distinguishing between them? They haven't to our men in the Pacific. (EA Niles to Eddison, 12/11/44; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. c. 232 284-285)

Niles refers here to an event mentioned in the appendices of *The Worm Ouroboros*, in which the Demons, Witches and "other polite nations" formed an alliance against the "unimagined ferocity" of the Ghouls, a race of monstrous barbarians who eventually have to be exterminated (*Worm* 515). The wars against the Ghouls have been concluded by the time the narrative of *The Worm Ouroboros* begins. The Witchs' failure to properly support the Demons in an important battle during that war is touched on as a *causa belli* (21), but the episode as a whole is quickly glossed over as unpleasant for all concerned. Given that the Demons take great delight in the thrill of competitive effort occasioned by their seemingly dreadful war with the Witches, this would indicate that the wars against the Ghouls – which gave common cause to Demons, Witches, Goblins, Imps, Pixies and even Mercury's mysterious and reclusive Elves – were terrible indeed. Perhaps they involved the sort of unsentimental, grinding "mechanical and ideological monstrosities" that JM Howard lamented in 1942. Here, Edward Niles not only perceives a parallel between the Ghouls' implied viciousness and that of the Axis armies but directly quotes Eddison's description of the fictional war in describing the Pearl Harbour attack. Nor is this a wholly isolated view among Eddison's admirers, or indeed from Eddison himself:

> This War is far unlike the contentions of life-giving action, such as Lessingham's and the King's against the Vicar; far unlike the wars of Galing against Carcë which, by their ending, brought such woeful & empty-handed

bereavement upon Juss & his friends, & the promise of whose resumption promised life & glory again with that trumpet-call when the Worm's tail came at last to its mouth & the world's great age began again.

No; this is a war against Dexris, against the Ghouls, a war of destruction: a heavy, inescapable, ugly job, having at its end & sanction the extirpation of things which, until by our strength & manhood we extirpate them, stand between mankind & the life which – if we are to remain men – is alone worth living.

In this we fight against ultimate Evil, which is a drab, dirty, ugly, unadmirable thing. (to JM Howard, 16/3/42; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. e. 231 124-125)

Elsewhere Eddison suggested that the current state of affairs was "really a religious war" given that, unlike in 1914, those who surrendered to the Axis powers would "lose their souls" to a tide of mechanistic nihilism which, in accordance with Eddison's view of morality, was a fate worse than death (letter to EA Niles, 7/7/40; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett c. 232 13). Such a utilitarian conflict, defending oneself from such inhumanity, was a matter of desperate, amoral expediency rather than heroism.

In such a situation, Eddison and Eddisonian heroes would seem to be rendered powerless. Lord Juss's slaying of the mantichora in *The Worm Ouroboros*, for example, is a high-stakes lark:

And Juss, for all his bitter pain and torment, and for all that he was well nigh stifled by the sore stink of the creature's breath and the stink of its blood and puddings blubbering about his face and breast, yet by his great strength wrestled with that great and filthy man-eater. And ever he thrust his right hand armed with the hilt and stump of his broken sword yet deeper into its belly until he searched out its heart and did his will upon it, slicing its heart asunder like a lemon and severing and tearing all the great vessels around the heart until the blood gushed around him like a spring. And like a caterpillar the beast curled up and straightened out in its death spasms, and it rolled and fell from that ledge, a long fall. It fell not clean into the snow, but smote an edge

of rock near the bottom, and that strook out its brains. It lay there in its blood, gaping at the sky (206-207).

This episode exists solely to give Juss an excuse to demonstrate his heroism; it does not advance the plot of the novel or serve any other utilitarian purpose. Similarly, Horius Parry, the nominal villain of Zimiamvia, exists merely because Lessingham needs someone to test his mettle against. In both cases, the competition is its own prize; faced with actual, meaningful victory (in Juss's case over the Witches) or defeat (in Lessingham's case by Dexris) both heroes are at a loss. The very fact that each of them is operating in a secondary world, however, demonstrates an important qualification to Eddison's view of their exploits. At first glance something of a romantic reactionary blithering about invincible warriors, he actually had a firm grasp on what any one human soul could accomplish in the real world – his reason, partly, for the creation of fictional ones. Even when eulogising Edward Lessingham, the narrator of the Overture in *Mistress of Mistresses* concedes that the great man's staggering bravery and charisma would count for nothing against the mechanical wherewithal of the Norwegian air force (5-6).

For Lessingham's amazing abilities as a warrior and leader of men to count as much as Eddison clearly wished they would, he required a universe set up specifically to test them. The fact that there are no guns in Zimiamvia was no accident; gunpowder and the internal combustion engine were, Eddison said, baffles to human potential rather than testaments to human progress (letter to Gerald Hayes, 4/3/44; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. e. 230/1 66). A soldier could demonstrate heroism by defeating an enemy in battle, but if he did so by building himself a battle-winning machine he merely demonstrated superior wealth. So when the armies of Zimiamvia are mobilised, Lessingham defeats Barganax through skill, daring and bravery, not by having more or better tanks. Nor is this entirely to do with the escape from modern industrialisation that is a common thread among various twentieth-century world-builders. Juss's sword breaks during his celebrated battle with the mantichora, requiring him to enter into a spectacularly gory wrestling match which he wins largely because he refuses to submit to the alternative (*The Worm Ouroboros* 205-207). Despite hazarding accusations of shallow or silly characterisation (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 145; see also D'Ammassa, 91), Eddison attempts to get his characters competing on the grounds of their human spirit alone. This is not escapism or

idealism so much as humanism espoused to a level of purity that could only be tenably maintained under the literary equivalent of laboratory conditions. In the right light, Eddison's work can in fact be seen as a very conscious and canny attempt to examine and portray the intrinsically human concerns of heroism, accomplishment and romance in a setting unencumbered by realistic distractions from their centrality.

What we have in Eddison is a man deeply concerned with isolating and portraying the core values of humanity (as he, in his own idiosyncratic manner, reckoned them) in an era when the loss of such notions seemed a very real prospect. His views on World War II actually serve to clarify this issue as well as serving as a useful demonstration of Eddisonian philosophy in action. Unable to participate as a soldier in a war he saw as being a matter of spiritual as well as physical and political significance, Eddison offered what contribution he felt he could. Despite continual rebuffs from pragmatists, he continued to push for a British edition of *A Fish Dinner in Memison* to be published during the war, *while it was still topical.*

Given that utilitarian, as opposed to heroic, competition is such a marginal concern in his novels (the courses of the wars against the Ghouls and against Dexris are not part of any Eddisonian narrative, published or otherwise) this is a curious claim to make. Further reference to his several letters on the issue, however, clarifies his position. One such letter forms part of Eddison's correspondence with the *Christian Science Monitor*. Though not a Christian Scientist himself, Eddison had friends within the sect – his brother Colin was a member (de Camp, *Literary Swordsman and Sorcerers* 128) – and the journal had published glowing reviews of his previous works. Its editors declined, however, to discuss the *Fish Dinner*, which had recently been published in America. Eddison retorted that such a snub was unhelpful, especially in this day and age:

> I feel books with a philosophy to them, & books which try to look over wider horizons than that of bombs & guns & this 'ghostly war' with 'the Prince of Evil's old prerogatives' which monopolises so much of our thought and action today, are just what should be read at this time; & indeed may help to stiffen our resolve against an enemy who would destroy, if he could, all that makes life worth living. (letter to Evelyn F Heyward, 4/3/41; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett., e. 231 77)

At first glance this may seem slightly self-serving, or even mercenary – Eddison could be accused of complaining that his book was not receiving sufficient public exposure at a time when he had spotted a niche in the market. As usual, however, initial appearances are misleading. Eddison was not writing for the money (he had been securely pensioned by the civil service), or even fame (he received royal honours for his work for the government). The *Monitor's* final, firm rebuff of the *Fish Dinner* survives in the Bodleian Library's Eddisonian archive, gloomily annotated by Eddison himself to the effect that he would press the matter further if it was someone else's book (Heyward to Eddison, 3/10/41; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett., e. 231 100). As a master of polite correspondence, he did not feel free to do so with his own work.

It might also be argued that Eddison was hoping to lift public morale with his book. Fantasy certainly tends to beget escapism, from the pejorative kind to the spiritually potent Escape identified by Tolkien. Eddison's books contain material that can work at various points along that scale. Zimiamvia is a balmy, pre-industrial realm peopled by well-fed, fabulously arrayed, incisively self-assured warriors fighting for the thrill of competition. Clearly, this bears little resemblance to England in 1941. Again, however, the vainglorious descriptive passages that leap out at uninitiated readers of Eddison are not central to the matter. This to Gerald Hayes:

> Worse men than your admired and beloved self have accused me of writing pages and pages of perfectly beautiful words which mean precisely nothing at all; which seems to me a curious accusation, when my rigid rule on revision for the printer is consistently to delete any word that cannot prove to my satisfaction that its deletion would obscure or leave unexpressed some essential part of my thought in strict relevance to the whole drama (24/2/45; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. e. 230/1 101).

Eddison saw the beauty (lower-case 'b') of Zimiamvia, and the intricate descriptions of it in his books, as apposite rather than flowery – compositional side-effects of the underlying moral and philosophical framework of the novels. The depth of feeling evident in the Good Friday manifesto ("on this I stake my salvation") is worth recalling here. What Eddison was trying to do was to get a piece of literature into the public sphere at a time when he passionately and genuinely believed it would

serve some social purpose. That purpose went beyond the lifting of morale by offering his readers aesthetic escapism. Such "daylight action" was not what he hoped to get across to people in the context of the 1940s – it was the ideas behind the glory that Eddison saw as topical.

"When the civilised world is agonised in a Ragnarok struggle between good and evil", Eddison wrote, "& everything that can be shaken is shaken, & the only comfort for wise men is the certitude that things that cannot be shaken will stand, poets & artists are faced squarely with the question of whether they are doing any good by producing works of art." (to William H Hillyer, 24/11/42; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. e. 231 112). To do any good by means of the line of argument with which Eddison introduces *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, a work of art must be principally concerned with the depiction of true value, that which can be loved for its own sake (*Fish Dinner,* xxii-xxv). If Eddison's definitions can be accepted, his books certainly serve this manifesto, being a depiction of a world where Beauty is objectively incarnated, sometimes self-evidently, then loved without reservation and defended against attack by individual human heroism. Such a model of the meaning of life was in no way served by a catastrophic war in which the main index of success was physical survival achieved by superior material resources. "Rightly or wrongly", he continued in the same letter to Hillyer,

> I am satisfied that by continuing (as time & other duties permit) to carry on what has become my job, I am making my best contribution to the cause which your country & mine, now shoulder to shoulder, are with so much blood & tears & sweat (& at last with so grandly dawning a promise of success) upholding against the greatest & most expert organisation of evil the world has ever seen. As I conceive it, my writings are not wholly irrelevant to the 'ghostly war' which at this time issues in unexampled material violence to the world-wide summation of life & the means of life. It is well, when ideas & 'ideologies' are bandied about with noise & fury, to remember that, in life as in art, what matters is not the idea but the person. It is from personalities, individual living minds of men and women, that ideas take life, grow & form themselves & have their nourishment; & they gain power (in the long run) as organic parts of the mind of this and that living being that entertains them and makes them part of itself. A noble world is a world fitted for noble men and

women; all else is machinery, & machinery (a truism bitterly brought home in recent generations) is neither good nor bad, progressive nor reactionary, but as its user makes it.

Because of its preoccupation with the mean facts of physical survival, World War II was, as Eddison saw it, a utilitarian struggle. It was, to be sure, a vital undertaking, but it was an ethical good, and ethical goodness was "relative, subject to convention & expediency" (Leeds Public Library, *Mistress of Mistresses* file), a means rather than an end in itself. The only truly noble undertaking was the service of Beauty as exemplified by Lessingham and Barganax. Eddison wanted to get a book discussing this idea published at a time when the English were in danger of becoming so preoccupied with the mechanical (and, therefore, ultimately ephemeral) means of victory that they might forget the precise human ends. This might for convenience's sake be called escapism (Eddison conceded the point), but only in the sense that it could give the English a chance to stop and draw breath, and remind them of what they were really fighting for. That end was not simply victory over the Axis powers, vital as that might be, but the freedom to attend to things that were truly important – a point that, while crucial, could all too easily be overlooked in the tumult of Total War. Upon being reminded of the central importance of a prize, one would presumably be more disposed to work towards it. By providing a "general philosophy of life", he said, Zimiamvia would be "Steadying and invigorating – champagne, not dope, nor emetic" (to Faber, 16/6/40; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett c. 232 8). Similarly,

I have a strong impression that there is a growing public (more than ever, perhaps, in wartime) for books that offer a taste of new air, not so much irrelevant to our troubles as above them. Such air is champagne; not dope, but a tonic, & a foundation-rock for action and endurance (to Richard Church, 22/4/41; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. c. 232 173)

If the claims Eddison made for the topicality of his work seems faintly far-fetched, it may also be important to bear in mind the emotional impact of the very thing he was critiquing – the prolonged, desperate utilitarianism of the era. Fifteen minutes spent in front of the History Channel will demonstrate that generalissimos on both sides of World War II spent months at a time frantically signing off on whatever

far-fetched initiative might grant them even the most fleeting of advantages, and that their populations were following suit. The call for London housewives to donate their saucepans to RAF munitions factories had less to do with sourcing additional iron than it did with fostering a sense of individual contribution to remedying a situation the gravity of which would continue to shake people down to the present day. Eddison clearly felt a desire, and perhaps a duty, to inspire the same blush of heroism in an age where expediency ruled. World-building, he had discovered, allowed him to propose a situation where heroism could be objectively defined and portrayed. That he saw such an undertaking as valuable to a nation embroiled in World War II is hardly surprising; whether or not he was right is hardly the issue. The fact that he saw such work as applicable to the situation at all, however, is crucial. It exemplifies his ongoing desire to make sense of reality by taking a step back from it and, therefore, a keen appreciation of the partnership between the real and the invented. His denial that his work was an emetic for the primary world is illustrative. If a world where evil cannot endure seems escapist, it is worth remembering that when composing *Mistress of Mistresses* Eddison ultimately found he had to metabolise, rather than discount, evil. The same point could be made with regard to Morville, and his fate, in *A Fish Dinner in Memison*. The Zimiamvian novels constitute a theodicy, explaining why evil exists, rather than a utopian dream – another parallel with MacDonald.

To extend this line of reasoning to the primary world in the 1940s was a considerably more responsible and noble undertaking than might at first appear. Much of *The Mezentian Gate* was written during his less demanding shifts in the local ARP office (to Hayes, not dated but apparently from 1943; Bodleian Library, MS Eng lett. c. 230/1, 57). Eddison was undeniably concerned with current events and saw his work as being applicable to them. Some support for this idea can be found in the following he had among those most directly preoccupied by World War II – his correspondence includes fan letters from various Allied servicemen (for example, the letter from Captain CM Cavman, 13/10/44; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett., e. 231 60-61).

Others saw Eddison's philosophy as being topical in a less positive sense. Gerald Hayes, who had mapped Zimiamvia and encouraged Eddison in his composition of further books, became increasingly nervous of the way in which the development of those books came to mirror that of the primary world. Hayes noted that the behaviour of Fiorinda, Lessingham and other Zimiamvian characters, in

accordance with underlying Zimiamvian philosophy as it might be, amounted to "sheer, bloody Fascism", and wondered how excusable such ideas were in the current situation (Hayes to Eddison, 20/2/45; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett., e. 230/1 99). L Sprague De Camp makes a similar point, noting that Eddison's concept of greatness led him to create "cruel, arrogant bullies" whose method of self-justification "was most recently revived by the European Fascist movements of the 1920s and 30s" (*Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* 132-133). This is a serious charge, and was all the more so when Hayes made it in 1945. Understandably, Eddison bristled at the accusation:

> 'Fascism' is a 20th-Century disease born of the mischiefs of an industrial civilisation. It issues in tyranny, just as communism & all forms of collectivism issue in tyranny; & by tyranny I do not mean monarchy or oligarchy per se but the tyrannical rule of bad or foolish men – generally both bad and foolish. There is nothing in my books – because there is nothing in my mind – that has the smallest comfort for 'fascism', unless indeed you concentrate on Lessingham's perfectly natural passing remark (he makes it in 1923) expressing preference for the Italian tyranny rather than the Russian. <u>At that date</u>, most informed and impartial people would have agreed with him. (to Hayes, 24/2/45; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett., e. 230/1 102)

The term 'aristocratic' turns up frequently in commentary on Eddison, and faith in and articulation of the concept has been cited as the central feature of his work (Stephens xi-xii). De Camp sharply criticises Eddison for this, accusing him of blatant sociopolitical wish-fulfillment and sarcastically asking "wouldn't it be splendid to be a member of a ruling class in a country where the lower orders loyally served and obeyed their betters, without thought of changing either the system or their own status?" (*Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* 133) In fact, de Camp is quite wrong about this. The passage quoted here from Eddison's correspondence with Hayes demonstrates that Eddison certainly subscribed to the principle of aristocracy, but interpreted the term literally – as meaning rule by the best. Exactly how to measure who the 'best' are or were is, of course, the central question of political science. Eddison has in fact used fantasy to provide an answer to that question: the 'best' as those whose human spirit is unencumbered by neurosis. Eddison consequently does

not envisage a world where the peasants know their place, but where the princes, acting in accordance with unbreakable moral verities embodied by Fiorinda and her sisters, are inherently and unquestionably worthy of theirs. Apparently ignorant of Zimiamvian philosophy and adhering to conventional definitions of aristocracy, nobility and goodness, de Camp fails to make this distinction, and his analysis of Eddison is therefore fundamentally flawed.

Lessingham's remark about the "Italian tyranny" demonstrates the distinction well, and serves to tie the matter back to World War II, although it requires brief introduction. Towards the end of the *Fish Dinner*, the recently widowed Lessingham sits in his armoury in Cumbria, surrounded by Viking swords and other medieval weaponry, dining with his brother-in-law Jim Scarnside and discussing the political developments of the current year, 1923. Lessingham mentions "foxes in lion's skins", which Scarnside takes to mean Mussolini.

> Lessingham answered with a shrug. "There is the better always, and there is the worse. But the mischief is more in the game than in the player. In mankind, not in particular men. The field, and the apparatus, are too much overgrown and sprawling." (*Fish Dinner* 281).

Here Eddison articulates almost the same idea as in his letter to Hayes; that the fascists were only able to extend their tyranny and depredations to others (and therefore, that fascism was only worth worrying about) because of its use of the mechanical wherewithal of industrial civilisation. Without his panzers and Luftwaffe, Lessingham seems to argue, Hitler would simply be a deluded, undistinguished artist sitting in a Munich bar babbling conspiracy theories, an inconsequentially tragic individual who had, like Morville fleeing from the fight with Barganax, allowed the universe to get the better of him. This is, however, close to the Eddisonian definition of evil. By exploiting the apparatus of mechanical civilisation – which are, as he said to Hillyer, neither good nor evil in themselves – that evil could visit itself on millions. Eddison, who lost a son-in-law in the war, hated the "Destroyer of delights & the severer of societies and the Devastator of Dwelling-places" (to George Hamilton, 9/9/40; Leeds Public Library) as much as anyone, and called it evil. He viewed fascism as evil, and indeed even topical, as a result of the same line of moral argument that had led to the creation of Zimiamvia. That the application of such

philosophy to the real world can produce a very similar conclusion to that resulting from more conventional moral arguments is perhaps another point in Eddison's favour. This man was not escaping from reality but attempting to make sense of it, and promote his reasoning in a nation that stood, as he saw it, at a crossroads between the glory and nobility of Barganax and the flaccid, miserable extinction of Morville. This would seem to directly contradict Manlove's comments about how Zimiamvia is "aloof" (*Impulse of Fantasy* 141) from the primary world and its wartime troubles. Eddison understood that the search for perfection in art and literature can have meaningful and positive effects on its creator's and audience's capacity to endure imperfaction and hardship in reality. That search must be sincere, but Eddison's sincerity is not as easily called into question as his grasp of philosophy or his compositional taste. The common charge of fantasy as escapism is relevant here, but the comments Eddison makes in support of his work – echoing those of EA Niles, as quoted on p. 118 – make Zimiamvia's connection to Earth quite obvious. In identifying the value Eddison saw his work as possessing in wartime, it is important to remember Tolkien's admonition against confusing "the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter" (*Tree and Leaf* 54).

Eddison's view of the dangers and privations of the 1940s was steadfastly optimistic. He felt and bemoaned the war, but seems never to have doubted its outcome. With both sides equipped with mechanical forms of cheating, he seems to have believed that the side that kept mindful of its ultimate duty to Aphrodite was certainly going to triumph against those who forgot it. He was a firm supporter of Churchill's policy of intractable resistance to fascism (to EA Niles, 25/8/40; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. c. 232 35) and his extensive correspondence with American friends and colleagues is peppered with sentiments such as this:

> The spark of consolation is that you and we are now brothers in arms, as we were already in all else. More and more clearly the situation stands defined; &, though we have a great and perhaps long fight before us, there is no shred of doubt that we & those others who are with us will be strong enough to master these ruinous desperadoes & wise enough, too, it is to be hoped, to 'seal the pit over destruction's strength' when the fighting is over. (to EA Niles, 18/12/41; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. c. 232 279).

Eddison outlived Hitler by only a few months, and although he remained well enough to continue tinkering with *The Mezentian Gate* until a few days before his death, no post-war correspondence of his appears in any of the archives I have found. His thoughts on the outcome and aftermath of World War II can only be guessed at, but it would be fair to speculate that he saw the eventual victory of those who were "on the side of the Gods" as something of a vindication.

It is also worth noting that there is a body of opinion among historians that Hitler's popular reputation as a super-villain or evil genius probably gives him too much credit. In his influential biography, Ian Kershaw argues that he was in fact merely a frustrated, poorly-grounded man of no especial intelligence who browbeat his way into a position of enormous political and military power, for which he was manifestly ill-suited, and which came to subsume his parlous internal life (xxv-xxvi). By then, however, his insecurities and mismanagement were being visited on a vast sphere of influence. The emergence of such a school of thought could be construed as further vindication of Eddison's ideas about the disastrous consequences of giving mass-produced battle-winning engines to such otherwise inconsequential "foxes in lion's skins" (*Fish Dinner* 281).

On the question of the wartime value of *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, Eddison was not so lucky. The American edition of the novel would be the last of his books that he lived to see in print; a British edition was not published until after his death, and *The Mezentian Gate* did not reach bookstores until 1958. Consequently it is difficult to judge how the book would have been received in his homeland. EA Niles's quoting *The Worm Ouroboros* to describe the Japanese air force, however, suggests that Eddison's hopes for the *Fish Dinner* were not entirely baseless. Whatever the case, it is clear that Eddison's claims were made entirely sincerely, and as a result of considerable thought. He saw World War II, dreadful and unavoidable as it was, as a means rather than an end, and felt that those lost in the complexity and desperation of those means would benefit from a momentary reminder of the ends that they were fighting for. One does not need to swallow Eddison's entire theory of the paramount importance of Beauty to find a certain merit in his argument here. In a time of Total War, the emotional solace and reassurance offered by Eddison's fantasy was entirely topical, a point that underlines his primary concern with depicting fundamental and eternal human ideas. It is simplification and escapism, to be sure, but of a cerebral, responsible kind that exists in a demonstrable, if not entirely practicable,

relationship with the vicissitudes of the primary world. Eddison sought not to encourage "avoidance of the harsh facts of pain, loss, ugliness and evil" (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 154) but to keep them in perspective, the better to overcome them. Britain had the Goddess on its side, of this he was sure, and the value of this assurance is demonstrated by his unflinching optimism about the war's outcome; he wanted to share it with others.

Eddison on Reality

If the creation of a secondary world implies a rejection of the primary one, it is not, necessarily, an attempt to ignore it. Escapism, Tolkienian or otherwise, if it is to be effective, must be formulated with close reference to that from which the fugitive seeks refuge. ER Eddison viewed his novel *A Fish Dinner in Memison* as being topical during World War II not because it demonstrated the best way to survive an air-raid but because it gave readers a glimpse of a world where air-raids were impossible, allowing the audience to consider broader human issues from which the practical horrors of the war might otherwise distract them. Although he admitted he had not formulated his book with Total War in mind, he believed passionately in the applicability of his secondary world to its primary equivalent.

Or was it vice versa? Those who have read the entire published Zimiamvia cycle will know that when King Mezentius builds a world on the table at his mistress's dinner party, the world he builds is our own. He, the Duchess, their son Barganax and his lover Fiorinda enter this world, to know it from within, and live out mortal lifetimes as Edward and Mary Lessingham, humans of staggering power and beauty. The highlights of their earthly lives are recounted in the earthly sections of *A Fish Dinner In Memison*, which cover the years 1901 to 1926. At the end of the party, after they have returned to Zimiamvia (their earthly lifetimes having taken only seconds by Zimiamvian reckoning), Fiorinda, unimpressed by his world, pops the bubble with a hairpin. All of human and cosmic history is compressed into ten minutes in heaven, where time itself is subservient to the wishes of Beauty. It seems that Eddison was proposing that our world, not Zimiamvia, was the invented one.

If so, Eddison did not seem to have planned it as such when he began writing about Zimiamvia. The surviving working papers for *Mistress of Mistresses* contain no mention of such an idea. When Eddison began the task of properly delineating the place (which, it will be remembered, is mentioned in passing in *The Worm*

Ouroboros), it was a private heaven, constructed in keeping with his belief in the ultimate correlation of meaningful pleasure and spiritual fulfillment. The notion of actively transposing the two worlds, and eventually linking them in an inextricable partnership, emerged only later, and as a further consequence of the philosophy he developed to justify his position. A perfect world, he argued, was one in which people were free to be noble; nobility sprang from the pursuit and service of that which was of value for its own sake, which Eddison, displaying characteristic ontological optimism, termed Beauty. 'Ethical good' – that is, behaviour that served some utilitarian purpose – was perfectly acceptable, indeed sometimes quite necessary, but it was subject to expediency and circumstance and therefore could not serve as a philosophical principle. Any other behaviour – denying Beauty, or working against it – was evil. Since Beauty was the only stable, universal reality, furthermore, evil was a sort of glitch or temporary fault, containing the seeds of its own imminent destruction. Within a sufficiently large time frame – which did not necessarily have to be especially large – evil could not endure. If Zimiamvia was to be a "Pagan Heaven" (which was, according to Eddison's working papers in Leeds Public Library, a quickly-discarded working title for *Mistress of Mistresses*) it must therefore be set up in order to put this manifesto into action.

The shape, and indeed advent, of Eddison's last two novels was largely dictated by a drive to better explain this notion, and to explore its consequences. Looming large among those consequences was an evolving perception of the primary world as lacking in some thoroughly fundamental way. Since – as World War II demonstrated – one is not always free to love Beauty to the extent She obviously deserved, Eddison had his doubts about this odd and imperfect cosmos in which he found himself. He was convinced, he said, that

> Nothing is 'too good to be true'; that (vide the Milton quotation on the fly-leaf) all the elements of any respectable 'heaven' are all within our experience here on earth, the difference being (as the Duchess said) that in this pinchbeck world they are somehow wrongly arranged; they don't last; it is like the 'real world' (which is emphatically <u>not</u> this one we temporarily inhabit!) but crooked. And with this goes the idea that Aphrodite herself, masquerading as an Earl's daughter, can give her lover a foretaste of that real world, & after his death give him life after life of it, with himself and herself in varied &

simultaneous incarnations, each having its own perfection – to be the protagonists of great action & contemplation, and unending drama & prayer because it centres in her, who is, of herself, divine Beauty & desirable for her own sake alone. (to HA Lappin, 4/11/41; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. e. 231 145-146)

Heaven, therefore, becomes a place where the good things in life (reckoned as such on the basis of their applicability to the purpose of the female principle) will go on for as long as we want them to. Working on this principle, Zimiamvia functions in close accord with Eddison's insistence that the only efforts or events of note were those which served the purpose of absolute value. Consequently Zimiamvia can be regard as 'fundamentally real'. Eddison never used such a phrase, but it seems an appropriate coinage given his insistence that service of the Goddess is in fact "the standard of reality" (Leeds Public Library; *Mistress of Mistresses* file), a notion he had been trying to articulate since Good Friday 1930. By contrast, the primary world is a "mockshow, operated by Time and the endless chain of cause and effect." (*Fish Dinner*, 3), and can therefore be regarded only as 'relatively real'. Aphrodite's stated distain for such mechanistic explanations of the functioning of reality is interesting, as it reveals another parallel between Eddison and MacDonald. In Zimiamvia itself, at the fish dinner, Mezentius shrugs over the inconsequentiality of his creation;

> "Leave it. It will ungo of itself. For indeed", he said, with a back-cast look at Fiorinda, "rightly reading, I hope, the picture in your mind, madam, I took occasion to give it for all your little entities that compose it, this crowning law: - that at every change in the figures of their dances they shall by uneschewable destiny conform more and more to that figure which is, in the nature of things, their likest; which when they shall reach it at last, you shall find dance no more, but immobility: not Being any more, but Not-Being: end of the world and desistency of all things." (*Fish Dinner* 311)

The laws of physics may be entirely accurate and highly useful, but to Mezentius's mind they are transitory and provisional; given sufficient time they will cease to function. Thus, like ethical good, they are ultimately not fit for purpose to those who would seek to understand the true, eternal qualities of reality. A thing of

Beauty, however, is a joy forever. Earth's guiding principles are transitory; Zimiamvia's endure. Thus, by Eddisonian standards, Zimiamvia is the real world, and this world the fake.

It is partly due to this highly eccentric view of what constitutes reality that Eddison has been dismissed by some critics. Assigning the quality of existence only to that which is good, Eddison can easily be accused of escapism and "avoidance of the harsh facts of pain, loss, ugliness and evil" (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 154). He seems, indeed, to have tried to sidestep negativity. The ferocious Vicar, sitting in his demonically-decorated banqueting hall snarling threats and insults to his obsequious valet Gabriel Flores, is certainly the villain of the piece. He exists in order to allow Lessingham the life-affirming pastime of service to the Goddess, however, and is therefore not evil. He is an apparatus, a cog in a machine set up to please Aphrodite, in much the same way as Newtonian motion facilitates travel in a universe set up to follow the laws of physics. Consequently he can – indeed, really ought to – exist. Because the purpose of that existence is to give Lessingham something from which to defend Queen Antiope, he is, in Eddison's estimation, "fundamentally sound" (Leeds Public Library).

In order to demonstrate the point he was trying to make, however, Eddison eventually decided he had to place Antiope in genuine danger. Lessingham cannot meaningfully protect her from something that, being a part of himself, cannot meaningfully harm her; for anyone to be able to value Beauty, it must be in some degree of genuine danger of being lost. Thus the selfish, hectoring, acid-tongued King Dexris of Akkama appears. The story never moves to Akkama, and it is not made clear in the published novel why that realm is so unpleasant, although Eddison planned to take us there in *The Mezentian Gate* and scribbled notes to himself about it ("cold & wintery climate; barbarous language, v. cruel and selfish people…practice piracy, throw criminals to pigs, which are their chief cattle and very fierce" – dated 20/1/44, Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. 456/1 102). Introduced only a few pages after Antiope herself, Dexris balances proceedings as "a breath of cold air" in a chapter Eddison hoped would otherwise be pleasant and restful to the reader after several chapters of intrigue and warfare (Leeds Public Library). Seemingly a nasty side-note, Dexris eventually invades Antiope's stronghold of Rialmar and tries to force her into marriage, prompting her suicide to avoid this fate. Lessingham therefore learns his place in the universe; losing Beauty to misadventure on Earth, he loses it to evil

agency, and his own neglect, in Zimiamvia. Shortly afterwards, he dies, to be born once again in another world with, one would assume, even greater understanding of his role in safeguarding his own reality.

Dexris is evil both in conventional and Eddisonian terms and plays a central role in *Mistress of Mistresses* as the exception that proves the rule. For evil (Dexris) to succeed, furthermore, good (Lessingham) must be absent, albeit seemingly legitimately. After effortlessly evading Dexris's assassins on several occasions, Lessingham leaves Rialmar to attend to developments in Rerek, a distant, contested part of Antiope's realm. Dexris strikes then; he could overcome Lessingham and had to wait for his absence. For Lessingham's efforts to really amount to anything, however, Dexris had to present a real danger. Properly applied, good must by definition triumph over evil, but for goodness to demonstrably exist, he conceded, evil must also be present. Thus Eddison does not 'avoid' evil. In the first of the Zimiamvian novels, he redefines evil and uses it to demonstrate and buttress his manifesto.

The implications of Eddison's reasoning for this conclusion, however, go beyond a mere admission of structural opposition. By arguing that reality can only be reckoned in terms of its relative position to Beauty, Eddison turns reality itself into a relative concept, opening up broad grey areas between the real and the invented. It is in these areas that Zimiamvia comes into its own; there Lessingham is free to really *be* Lessingham, the unflappable and terrific man of action, and to be properly rewarded as such to an extent that would not be possible in the primary world. It is only in the secondary world that people can be 'who they really are', which is ultimately why there is, as Eddison said, "no malaise of the soul" (*Fish Dinner* xii) in Zimiamvia. In setting up what initially seems to be a firmly binary division between reality and Goddess-less, self-destructive extinction, Eddison in fact implies a continuum of realism based on how reliably the world in question pleases the Goddess for whom it was created and, by extension, those who serve her. Aphrodite, sitting across the table from Edward Lessingham in Verona, is not best pleased with this cosmos, and fair enough too – Mary Lessingham dies in a train wreck, and what sort of a miserable excuse for a universe is it where the personification of all value can be snuffed out by the chance malfunction of a utilitarian contraption? Sitting in Memison in her self-aware guise as Lady Fiorinda, she still does not like it as much as Zimiamvia. "It has served its turn", she says of Earth, "And were the occasion ever to

arise, doubtless his highness could make a better" (*Fish Dinner* 312). And since, by Eddison's definition, agreeability corresponds exactly to actuality, "better", coming from the mouth of Aphrodite, means "more real".

The point, and the fervour with which Eddison believed it, might well be demonstrated by reference to his thoughts on journalism during the Second World War:

> We live (in wartime) in an atmosphere of journalism & topical writings: but topical literature is surely often itself an "escape" from more important & (odd as it may seem today to say so) more permanent things in life – the flow of the world, its history, humanity, joie di vivre – seen as a whole (to FT Smith, 16/3/41; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. c. 232 165).

It may be something of a relief that he appreciated that this notion might seem 'odd'; it clearly demonstrates that Eddison appreciated the difficulty of these ideas, and therefore had at least one foot planted firmly in what is conventionally defined as the real world. As dispatches from Europe in 1941 bore no news of any service to Beauty, however, the suggestion that they neglected what was truly important makes perfect sense by Eddisonian yardsticks.

Neither Earth nor Zimiamvia is perfect by those measures. Where Zimiamvia is at least operating on sound (perhaps 'Goddessly') principles, however, the primary world is fundamentally flawed. For this reason, when King Mezentius creates Earth at the Fish Dinner, Fiorinda quickly tires of it and pops the bubble. This act of distracted cosmic vandalism is rendered in half a paragraph of leisurely prose on the second-to-last page of the novel (312), giving it a vaguely casual air quite in keeping with Fiorinda's character. Eddison, however, placed great importance on this "Copernican cataclysm" (Leeds Public Library), and cited it as the absolute crux of a novel he admitted was otherwise open to accusations of tedium (letter to Edward Niles, 19/11/40; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. c. 232 81). He was not pleased that the episode was ignored by most readers, including, he complained, all the American reviewers of the first edition. He felt he had made the nature of Mezentius's creation clear in the *Fish Dinner* and wondered if the idea simply "makes almost too many demands on the ordinary reader unless rammed home with laboured explanations?" (letter to HA Lappin, 28/7/41; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. e. 231 146). Eddison

especially disliked laboured exposition. He once criticised a small philosophical treatise penned by his friend and editor George Rostrover Hamilton on the basis that "GRH the poet and 'seer' has allowed himself to be hobbled by GRH the empericist and logician" (to Hamilton, not dated; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. c. 230/1 139). Eddison would not, he said, adopt such a mode of writing himself. Having failed to make his point with the *Fish Dinner*, he embarked upon *The Mezentian Gate*. in which the circular link between Earth and Zimiamvia was to be made explicit.

Eddison died during the composition of this novel, with the chapter focusing on the issue existing as only an expository memorandum (179-181). While writing it, however, he sent completed sections to selected friends, who correlated them with his earlier works and made the connection:

> The sequence of ideas from the first glimpse in *The Worm*, all through *M of M*, and up to the dinner, and again in the preliminaries of *MG* indicates that our world is the real one (even if it be in the guise of Demonland and Witchland) while Zimiamvia is a specially created one to reward specially deserving ones of this mortal world after death – a sort of infinitely varied and variable Valhalla; even for one individual so rewarded for his deeds here, there would be many Zimiamvian "days" – presumably not repeating one another. Thus for Lessingham, the world of *M of M* was but one of many such specially created worlds in which his personality would become itself in full measure. Now, however, unless I quite misread much of *MG* and also (by reflexion) the latter scenes of *FD* the world of the Three Kingdoms is the real one (perhaps in a rather supramundane sense) and this mortal world of ours is no more than a thing created out of a passing whim of her Ladyship (just the sort of dirty trick she would play, by the way).
>
> Are we supposed to believe both views by some Vandermastian metaphysics? Because if so, I believe you are asking too much: to my limited sense, that would reduce it all to meaninglessness – not even the possibility of termination like the hen and the egg in priority, but rather one of those conundrums, of the form, "Why is a mouse when it spins?" (Gerald Hayes to Eddison, 20/2/45; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. c. 230/1 98)

The first paragraph of this quotation certainly sums up Eddisonian cosmology as most diligent post-Tolkienian readers will come to understand it; the second perhaps expresses the same reservations Colin Manlove expresses when dubiously assessing Eddison's "swoony metaphysics" (1999, 48). In seeking a settled, binary division between the real and the imagined, however, Hayes seems to have failed to fully grasp Eddison's model of reality, or the continuum of actuality it implies. Worried that Hayes had evidently misunderstood him for almost twenty years, and that this misunderstanding had resulted in a dismissal of his work, Eddison explained himself:

(a)   To the people of Zimiamvia – eg to the Duchess or to Beroald – it is axiomatic that Z. is the world & that any other worlds are either imaginary or problematical. To us 'here & now', this world is the world, & Zimiamvia (or Valhalla, or the New Jerusalem, etc etc) matters of faith, disbelief, fantasy or speculation.

(b)   But (according to the myth) there is only one complete & self-sufficing reality, & that is God. The nature of God is duality in unity (Zeus & Aphrodite; Masc. & Feminine: Love & the Object of Love; Power & Beauty; a duality of Persons) – all these pairs of names are shorthand signs to indicate all that in truth IS (or was or is to come). Individual men and women are 'real' in so far only as they partake of or approximate to their individual personalities, the God and the Goddess, & only so far as they are inwardly or outwardly what He or She (who are perfect) desire. As with individuals, so with worlds: so also with the infinite things & relationships that go to make the world: each has only a relative reality according as it is more or less satisfactory to omnipotent and omniscient Love. By that test Zimiamvia is (at any rate it is my intention that it should be) preferable to this 'Dark Planet', as CS Lewis calls it; & therefore, more real. (to Hayes, 24/2/45; Bodleian Library MS Eng. lett. c. 230/1 101)

The reference to CS Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* is a rare instance of Eddison drawing a comparison between himself and one of his contemporaries, or indeed of him admitting to having read any modern fantasy. His broader argument, however, is even more interesting. He suggests that Earth must be accepted as real, but only on the strength of the empirical evidence we gain in our perception and experience of it, whereas Zimiamvia is self-evidently real on account of being ordered specifically to please the Goddess. Hayes is correct in perceiving Zimiamvia as the real world and this one as false; what he fails to grasp is that the two worlds exist at variance to each other on a continuum rather than standing on opposite sides of a binary division between the real and the unreal.

Again, though, by assigning actuality with reference to a sliding scale of agreeability, Eddison comes dangerously close to confirming the accusations of escapism and wish-fulfillment that have been used, rightly or wrongly, to dismiss world-building as a literary craft (Jackson 153-155). Thus Eddison's connection to the problems and complications of the primary world must be reasserted. It has already been noted that his perception of the Second World War was shaped in part by Zimiamvian philosophy. This mode of thinking allowed him to see the war as an infuriating utilitarian imposition (exactly the sort of thing, in fact, that you would expect in an imperfect world) distracting humanity from its true responsibilities. At no point did he advocate ignoring the problems of the real world; he sincerely saw *A Fish Dinner in Memison* is a highly topical critique of reality, "champagne, not dope, or emetic", rather than an attempt to escape it.

Nor was Eddison's view of World War II a special case, except perhaps in terms of magnitude. In trying to work out exactly what heaven would be like, Eddison had stumbled upon a theory of being which sheds considerable light on the trials and tribulations of this life. He fully appreciated those difficulties, but firmly believed that such things were quirks in a system, and that life was not *about* suffering. "As sane and humane people", he wrote, "we rejoice to see sanitoriums for the treatment of respiratory diseases, but that does not prevent our holding that it would be a better world if there were no tuberculosis and no sanitoriums" (to JM Howard, 4/6/42; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. e. 232 130). Accordingly, there are no such establishments in Zimiamvia. Eddison's creative drive is not so much escapist as it is optimistic. Excessive, blinkered optimism can be just as bad as escapism, but the very

fact that he used a secondary world to articulate his highly optimistic ontology – and indeed, came to explicitly contrast it with the difficulties of the real world – indicates a keen appreciation of the inevitability of imperfection in the here and now. As the atrocities of Dexris show, Eddison willingly conceded that the presence of imperfection was necessary for a meaningful demonstration of even relative perfection. The *search* for absolute perfection within art and literature, however, was what allowed us to cope with imperfection. This notion bears a distinct similarity to Tolkien's notion of Recovery. Thus, although Tolkien had his doubts about Eddison's ideas and perhaps even about Eddison himself (*Letters* 258), their respective works ultimately strike very similar notes.

Eddison's work also strongly resembles George MacDonald's at various points. The similarities between the two men have been repeatedly hinted at and are now, finally, ripe for proper examination. It seems that MacDonald and Eddison were ultimately doing much the same thing, but coming at it from completely different angles. MacDonald, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, used secondary worlds to expose what he saw as the invalidity of rationalism as a tool for perceiving meaningful truth. The only genuine truth was God, and one could only reach him by means of the exercise of the emotional, intuitive imagination. This meant putting aside the rational intellect, and with it the insistence on an individual existence independent of God. Those who refused to do so could not be reckoned as truly real, and would be plagued by disabling vacuities in their substance. MacDonald took people from the primary world into a secondary world set up on these ontological principles, then depositing them back into the primary world. Their experiences in the secondary world helped them understand and cope with the deficiencies of the primary world. Explaining these ideas in literature engaged the imagination, rather than the intellect, and was therefore a sounder methodology than a mere essay on Christian Platonism.

Although he shows little of MacDonald's reverence for the Christian message, Eddison can be seen to be doing something very similar in his fantasy novels. Like the Romantics, Eddison saw beauty and truth as essentially synonymous. Thus he revered beauty as the one central standard of reality, in much the same way that MacDonald revered God. Mechanistic explanations of reality certainly worked, but only for as long as they worked; the symbolic truth one experienced via spiritually meaningful pleasure (Beauty with an upper-case 'B') could be counted on in

perpetuity. Despite seeing no need to drag God into things, therefore, Eddison ultimately had the same suspicion of rationalistic ontological explanations as MacDonald. Just as MacDonald compared the emotive potential of fairytales to that of sonatas ('The Fantastic Imagination' 197-198), Eddison noted in his Good Friday manifesto that he would dearly like to use dramatic prose in the same way that Beethoven used music in his third symphony (Leeds Public Library SRQ 823.91 ED23). To perceive or understand true reality, one had to think less like a watchmaker and more like a painter or a composer.

Like MacDonald, therefore, Eddison abjured the expository essay in favour of narrative literature as a method of explaining his ideas. Also like MacDonald, he found the most profitable way to do this was to use fantasy to create situations in which the ideas could be demonstrated in action; he could not illustrate such a thorough ontological gear-shift using realistic fiction. In a further parallel with MacDonald, Eddison moves characters backwards and forwards between worlds operating on sound and unsound principles, using the resulting contrast to make his critiques of reality and our perceptions and measurements of it as explicit as he dared. As demonstrated with regard to his opinions on World War II, the portrayal of ontological perfection in literature helped him cope with the imperfections of reality. The same is probably true of his characters. *A Fish Dinner in Memison* opens with Lessingham, in the Verona café, disputing ontologies with a woman who (unbeknownst to him) is Aphrodite. At the conclusion, sitting in the same café, he has discovered her identity, and his understanding of the universe and his place in it, while not yet perfect, is much improved. The obvious parallel is with Vane in *Lilith*, who begins the novel as a bookish, impatient intellectual and ends as a yearning creature of emotions – a pilgrim of the imagination.

The two authors also have very similar fairytale theodicies; both argue for the ultimate unreality of evil. MacDonald, it has been shown, argued that evil resulted from people not aligning themselves closely enough with God. In a sense, evil took place not as the result of any malevolent presence in the universe but because of an absence – people did evil things because they were not being 'real enough'. For MacDonald, such ontological truancy was the result of the rational intellect and its drive to trap, measure and subsume God's creation to its own spurious laws. Eddison, likewise, depicts evil – personified by Dexris and Morville – as being done by those who would seek to trap, measure and subsume Beauty to further their own ends,

which they misapprehend as being independent of the Goddess. They too are seeking to deny the primacy of a personified standard of reality. Both MacDonald and Eddison therefore admit the existence of evil, even in the fictional universes they have set up as utopias, but characterise it as a glitch in a fundamentally sound and beneficent system. Consequently evil is, by its very nature, temporary.

It is possible to overstate the degree of similarity between MacDonald and Eddison. MacDonald's insistence on passive acceptance of individual non-entity as a method of transformative enlightenment (allegorised as physical death in both *Phantastes* and *Lilith*) bears similarities to the "bloodless Nirvaneh" of selfless spiritual bliss Eddison spurns so fiercely in the Good Friday manifesto. In the other direction, Eddison's claim that "all the elements of any respectable 'heaven' are all within our experience here on earth" (to HA Lappin, 4/11/41; Bodleian Library MS Eng lett. e. 231 145-146) would probably have appalled MacDonald, or at least drawn a resigned sigh from a man who spent his life trying to convince those around him of the insignificance of this world in relation to the next. Eddison's heroes demonstrate their reality by effective gallivanting in worlds set up to facilitate such behaviour; MacDonald's demonstrate theirs by giving up such behaviour in worlds set up to demonstrate its futility. Eddison's attempt to disengage with conventional moral principles might well also have offended MacDonald, who insisted that morality was the one thing a world-builder could not tinker with ("The Fantastic Imagination", 196). So the two men would have disagreed on a lot.

Nevertheless their respective philosophies bear close comparison on a remarkable number of points. Most importantly for our purposes, they saw the primary world as somehow fundamentally deficient, turned to fantasy because realism could not adequately articulate their concerns, and made the leap to secondary-world fantasy in order to contrast their more optimistic ontologies with those prevailing in the primary world. Far from 'escaping', reality, they were offering methods by which, in theory at any rate, it could be reformed. As a final, perhaps decisive point of continuance, both men are at pains to use fantasy to stress the beauty and nobility of genuine existence, however they define it. Both vindicate Manlove's statement that "at the heart of the [fantasy] genre is a delight in being" (*Impulse of Fantasy* ix). The similarities would seem to outweigh the differences.

Returning to Gerald Hayes's letter about the question of whether the primary or secondary world is 'real', there is perhaps one more point to be made. In his letter

quoted above, Hayes clearly seeks a concrete answer to the question of what is real and unreal. This places Hayes somewhat ahead of his time, as it is, in fact, very much a post-Tolkienian concern. The last fifty years have seen secondary-world fantasy evolve towards concrete cosmologies as an industry standard; the Perilous Realm is either a discrete, self-contained place as depicted in the works of fantasists such as Greenwood, Lackey or Paolini, or is reached via Narnia-like portals such as Rowling's Platform 9¾. Both approaches create fairly settled, static cosmologies, which of course is no bad thing, but nor is it *necessarily* desirable, except perhaps to the coordinator of a publishing-industry focus group. Eddison does not address Hayes's complaint about chicken-and-egg situations, perhaps because he did not have (indeed, was not burdened by) the post-Tolkienian perspective that would cause him to see such a situation as being undesirable. Loops are an Eddisonian trope; not for nothing does the worm Ouroboros, a cipher for eternity, adorn the covers of most editions of most of his novels. Eddison deals in existential dynamics, not statuses; the story of Lessingham's life and afterlife will cycle on in perpetuity, and one could conceivably read the three Zimiamvian novels in any order. Although the Copernican summersault that Mezentius performs at the Fish Dinner seems to beg the question of which world came first, the answer is not of any great relevance. The two worlds only make sense in relation to each other; they are, to Eddison, thoroughly interdependent. That he made this discovery speaks greatly for him as a commentator on reality; that he does not stoop to a mechanistic conclusion ought to add considerably to that reputation.

<div align="center">***</div>

There is unlikely to ever be a blockbuster movie or roleplaying game based on Eddison's novels. For all their pageantry, these books are too firmly rooted in their own cosmological, moral and philosophical eccentricities to allow translation to other media. In this the Zimiamvia cycle is undeniably difficult and demanding, and thoroughly unlike the bulk of modern commercial fantasy. Ranking highly among the differences that separate it from such literature, however, is Eddison's exquisitely developed appreciation of the enduring but permeable barrier between reality and fantasy, and thus of the ongoing partnership between them. That recourse to archival sources is required to highlight this understanding demonstrates only that the series is

incomplete; it is impossible to guess how successfully a completed version of *The Mezentian Gate*, or the further Zimiamvian novels Eddison planned, would have explained his manifesto. The increasing (and increasingly important) inter-world traffic of Eddison's last two novels indicates his growing appreciation of the consequences of his work, but to suggest this would have extended further is mere speculation. Only in this sense, however, are Eddison's books "only partially successful" (Anderson 430). Rather than being "anaemic" (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 154), they are if anything too full-blooded, striving to demonstrate through dramatic prose what might, contrary to Eddison's own feelings, have benefited from a less passionate, more expository treatment of the essentially Romantic concept of symbolic truth. The depth of thought and feeling that he put into his novels deserves vastly more praise than it has received.

Indeed, Eddison deserves to have been more influential than he was – but his lack of influence may not have bothered him, as demonstrated by a line of his thinking that highlights a startling and unlikely kinship with an unlikely colleague. ER Eddison and George MacDonald both sought to make penetrating critiques of reality by taking a step back from it, constructing an alternative that needed to disengage from realism in order to function, and then directly contrasting this (necessarily) theoretical model with the real thing in order to illustrate their point. Despite their important differences, this kinship with MacDonald shows that Eddison was essentially doing the same thing as a man who would go on to become a formative influence on the Inklings. We are not dealing here with an isolated crank, but an unjustly undersubscribed member of a noble tradition. Quantitatively, he may not quite be the equal of MacDonald or Tolkien, but qualitatively he was doing exactly the same thing.

As noted above, one of Eddison's most remarkable points of contact with MacDonald was his insistence on the unreality of evil – the notion that, on a long enough cycle, everything would come out in the wash. This use of fantasy to illustrate theodicy reveals a point of contact with a third author – although this third author ultimately found he could offer more warnings than assurances.

HP Lovecraft's Cosmic Witch-Hunt

Manlove (*Impulse of Fantasy* ix) and McGillis ("Fantasy as Miracle" 215) both argue that fantasy as a genre is centrally concerned with the celebration of reality, however the given author defines it. Both George MacDonald and ER Eddison bear this out; both writers were, in the final analysis, trying to articulate and celebrate an abiding philosophical principle of reality that was deeper and more stable than empirical observation. What is also clear is that both men saw themselves as doing so. Both wrote difficult and challenging books, putting huge amounts of thought into their work and straining the bounds even of credible fantasy in an attempt to remain faithful to their guiding principles. Another common train of thought among them is an ongoing concern that their works might be too straightforwardly didactic – instructive rather than inspiring – and therefore defeat their own purposes. Both saw themselves as writing books that had, and indeed *had to* have some abiding purpose. Whether they met these goals is not the issue at hand; both men saw themselves as producing serious literature.

At around the time Eddison's Worm crawled into bookstores, however, a very different breed of fantasy had taken root in America. The period between the two World Wars most certainly gave rise to American fantasists of lasting and intentional literary merit; it also saw the advent of a small group of magazines dedicated to the form, most notably *Weird Tales*. This magazine was dedicated to nothing more noble than the generation of sales to a target audience. Most of its writers were hardened professionals turning out short, fast-paced adventure stories making (often formulaic) use of the supernatural, and the most sympathetic commentators have conceded that the bulk of the resulting material is of more interest to cultural than literary historians. The cultural reach of such pulp literature is considerable, however. Perhaps the most well-known *Weird Tales* contributor is Robert E Howard, creator of Conan the Barbarian and arguably the originator of the "swords-and-sorcery" school of fantasy fiction. A good proportion of the fantasy boom since the 1970s has taken the form of attempts to meld Howard's kinetic, bellicose style with the more sedate mythopoeia of Tolkien. Howard still awaits the sustained academic attention he is due, and was very nearly included in this thesis. One of his pen-friends did 'make the cut', however, in part due to his own quietly pervasive influence on other writers.

The work of HP Lovecraft exists as "an unhealthy but fascinating growth on the body Gothic" (Byron and Punter 144). Attracting only a small modicum of fan attention on its initial publication in *Weird Tales*, it has spawned an entire industry of pastiches, tributes, precipitations, games and fan memorabilia marketed to a cult audience not a great deal smaller than that which surrounds Middle-earth. It would no doubt irk Lovecraft that much of this cult following is centred not upon his stories themselves but upon a broad, self-sustaining, sometimes deeply misapprehended oral tradition that has grown up around them. Across the English-speaking world, fantasy fans animatedly swap rote-learned in-jokes about monsters, places and organisations invented in stories that very few of them have actually read. Even seemingly legitimate scholarly texts have fallen victim to this pattern. Guadalupi and Manguel's map of Lovecraft's invented city of Arkham (35), for example, is a fanciful collection of streets named after characters in his stories (including some who do not appear in any of the Arkham stories) and is not copied from or suggested by anything I am aware of in Lovecraft's large body of published letters and working papers. Separating such loose (and often unhelpful) extrapolation from actual Lovecraft material has become an ongoing effort among those who seek to study this man. The post-Tolkienian fantasy boom in particular has seen 'Lovecraftian horror' enshrined as a specific sub-genre of fantasy, embraced as an ingredient in genre formulae. The authors of the *Cthulhutech* game, for example, have sought – and to their own satisfaction found – a cosy point of confluence between Lovecraft's monsters and the giant robot battles of Japanese animation. Such bastardisation serves as legitimate entertainment, but it is certainly unfair to the author. The emergence of a scholarly journal dedicated to studying his work has gone some way to rectifying the problem. The fact that *Lovecraft Studies* is not yet peer-reviewed (and, for that reason, was not widely consulted in the composition of this chapter) demonstrates that he is still very much in the process of becoming established as a respectable subject of scholarship. One would certainly hope this process will be seen through to its conclusion. Lovecraft was at times a very unattractive person, but his stories reveal a sharply disciplined mind making thoroughly original use of the fantastic. In his heart of hearts, Lovecraft was trying to decide which of two conflicting realities would outlast the other.

The Coming of the Terror

The dozen or so horror stories that Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) wrote in the second half of his career are generally regarded as both his most impressive and most characteristic output (Shultz 199). In these stories, Lovecraft articulates a vision of humanity as a meaningless speck in both space and time, existing at the mercy of sinister, ageless alien intelligences. We mean nothing to these creatures, who may use us as food, lab rats or concubines, but will never say please or thank you and will destroy us with the flick of a tentacle if the mood strikes them. Lovecraft's cosmic horror arises from the exposition of the terrible evils humanity may or will suffer as a result of this callousness, as well as the stark intellectual shock of their discovery, and humanity's consequent insignificance.

Despite its broad ramifications – by which Lovecraft essentially claims the entire space-time continuum as a secondary world – his microcosmic setting is very specific. Most of his heroes are part of the patrician intelligensia of a fictionalised corner of New England. He often attempts to de-emphasise the human race in his work, and indeed seems to be talking us down by exposing our inconsequential place in the cosmos. Nevertheless, close examination of his abiding preoccupations, as both an individual and a writer, reveals a very different purpose to his secondary world. Lovecraft was given to dearly-held, dogmatic opinions, often carefully worked out and exhaustively argued in the tens of thousands of letters he wrote in his lifetime. Not all of these opinions sit easily in relation to each other, however, and it seems that he turned to writing fantasy as part of an attempt to resolve the resulting tension and reconcile these competing notions. Individually, his ideas could only be properly explained via the abandonment of realism. Placed together within the texts, furthermore, they interact in ways that show that Lovecraft was trying to determine if, and how, they could be made to co-exist.

Although he would not become a serious writer until his thirties, Lovecraft began noticing the value of fantasy at an early age. As a child, he went through periods of intense fascination with Hellenistic and Arabian mythology (Joshi, *A Life* 18-26). ST Joshi, Lovecraft's principle biographer, argues that these preoccupations were what got him started on fantasy, and emphasises the precocious six-year-old's discovery of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (the 1870 edition illustrated by Gustav Dorê) in 1896 (19-20). Lovecraft claimed inspiration from childhood nightmares and the tales of "black woods, unfathomed caves [and] winged horrors"

(*Selected Letters* 4.354) told by his custodial grandfather. These meshed with his discovery, at the age of eight, of Edgar Allen Poe, a idol whose influence he would never wholly escape despite their two very different perceptions of the true loci of horror. Punter (*Literature of Terror* 281) sees Lovecraft's work as an inversion of Poe's, arguing that he is closer in spirit to Arthur Machen, another author he esteemed highly. Rather than the acute, intimate claustrophobia of Poe, Lovecraft offers prolonged, journalistic discussions of a cosmic agoraphobia – a longing for the establishment and maintenance of intellectual and psychological boundaries. Despite this important difference; Lovecraft's dense, adjectivally-precise writing often brings to mind an attempt, successful or otherwise, to imitate Poe. Lovecraft was never ashamed to admit this influence, according Poe an entire, glowing chapter (52-60) in his potted history of Gothicism, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927). This essay has latterly been described as "the first and most significant essay on the genre by a practitioner" (Bloom 157).

Lovecraft's own capacity as a horror writer and Gothic fantasist is questioned in a quantative rather than qualitative sense. Punter for one concedes that he ought to be included in surveys of the genre but regards him as a substantially unimpressive link in that chain (277-278). Be that as it may, Lovecraft's Gothicism is not widely queried, and is not, for our purposes, a particularly important element in his work. Therefore Gothic theory will be mentioned only in passing here (it is much more important for our analysis of Mervyn Peake, and discussion of those ideas has therefore been saved for the chapter dealing with him). Nor is the source of Lovecraft's liking for darker fantasies open to much debate. As a reclusive, sickly teenager, he schooled himself in the fiction of Poe, Radcliffe, Hawthorne, Matthew Lewis and MR James, as well as devouring prodigious quantities of the pulp magazines he would eventually contribute to (Joshi, *A Life* 92). He quickly became known for his letters to pulp editors, in which he agitated for more fantasy and less romance and realism (Joshi, *A Life* 93-96). In his twenties, he also produced a number of tales in imitation of Lord Dunsany, whose work he saw as profoundly moving. In 1919 he wrote a poetic tribute to Dunsany, which was published in an amateur magazine and which the Irishman appears to have been made aware of (de Camp, *Lovecraft* 141), although the two men never actually corresponded. Lovecraft's Dunsanian tales, such as "The Doom that Came to Sarnath", "The Terrible Old Man" and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, are solid, broadly effective pastiches, and

overlap somewhat with his later stories, but they are often omitted from compilations of his work. It would only be in his thirties that Lovecraft genuinely found his own authentic voice.

This voice emerged as a result of his parochial background. Born and raised in – and intensely devoted to – Providence, Rhode Island, Lovecraft harboured a deep and abiding fascination for the concrete remainders of New England's early colonial history. It was by voicing this fascination for the region that Lovecraft would create the brand of fiction for which he is now celebrated. After experimenting with Poe-like Gothicism and Dunsanian dreamlands, he spent the second, much more impressive half of his career writing of

> [T]he changeless, legend-haunted city of Arkham, with its clustering gambrel roofs that sway and sag over attics where witches hid from the King's men in the dark, olden days of the Province. ("The Dreams in the Witch House" 654)

The province in question is Massachusetts, specifically the valley surrounding the fictional Miskatonic River. The precise location of Arkham has been the cause of much fan speculation over the years, and has more recently attracted the attention of serious scholars. ST Joshi (*A Life* 243) argues that the town is actually of no *fixed* position within the state, moving about as Lovecraft's ideas evolved; later stories dimly suggest an estuarine or coastal setting. Lovecraft hints at his reasons for choosing Massachusetts as the host state of this fictional town in the passage quoted above, and we will see in due course why he made that choice instead of his beloved Rhode Island.

On the face of things, however, placing Arkham in New England would initially seem to exclude him from the ranks of secondary-world fantasists. Arkham is obviously a provincial Novanglian town, heavily stocked with the gambrel-roofed houses characteristic of the region and populated with old families whose members possess pointedly down-to-earth, tripartite Yankee names (Eckhardt 83-84). A character in one story purchases a bus ticket to Arkham in Newport, Rhode Island, and Miskatonic University mounts expeditions to Connecticut, Australia and Antarctica. However, mortals often reach the Perilous Realm from the primary world, either via the sorts of magical portals that CS Lewis uses to move children to Narnia or by being given secret knowledge such as that provided to George MacDonald's Mr

Vane by Raven. Neither of these are quite as straightforward as jumping on a bus, of course, but there is a long tradition of navigable links between real and invented worlds. In fact, secondary worlds without such links (such as Middle-earth and Peake's Gormenghast) are probably in the minority.

Precisely where Arkham is, however, is of less importance than precisely *when* it is. Arkham is, quite deliberately, an unrealistic version of its source material, a part of New England that never existed and, indeed, could never have existed, as the various elements of its cultural, intellectual, technological and material cultures have been deliberately reshuffled to better suit Lovecraft's intentions. The town is not a caricature of provincial New England so much as an idealisation of the region as perceived by an author who had formed intense associations with that part of the world. A desire to get to Arkham indicates something of the same associations that led Lovecraft to *create* the place. These include the antiquarian sensibility he saw in the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne ("Supernatural Horror in Literature" 63-64), the enduring wonder he found in Dunsany, the darkness of Poe and the firm, upstanding moral fibre which he credited to New England's Yankees. To get to Arkham, therefore, one must subscribe to a fictional, immemorial culture ingeniously combining various influences from pre-existing fantasy and reality. In looking for a more recent fantasy world of the same kind, one could do worse than Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Arkham itself is a fragment of colonial New England transported into the twentieth century; readers are repeatedly asked to imagine eighteenth-century buildings surviving all over the city and feel a sense of history that is simultaneously oppressive and enobling. Its inhabitants, as often as not the students and professors of the town's resident Miskatonic University, follow suit. They constitute a sort of stout intellectual yeomanry – learned, inquisitive, atheistic and incredulous, celibate and largely devoid of personal vices, or indeed personal lives. They evince strong connections to New England and its history and traditions. Literary critic Albert N Wilmarth ("The Whisperer in Darkness") studies local folklore, while quantum mathematician Walter Gilman ("Dreams in the Witch House") pays a premium to board in a house connected with the region's historical witch trials. Professor Dyer (*At the Mountains of Madness*) names the ships that take him on his research expedition *Arkham* and *Miskatonic*, Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee ("The Shadow out of Time") lives in the town and teaches at the university, while Francis Wayland

Thurston ("The Call of Cthulhu") investigates oddities among the papers of a ancestor who taught at Brown University, just over the state line in Rhode Island. Born somewhere in America's western states, the anonymous narrator of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" travels in the Arkham district on something of a genealogical joyride. These men are idealised, antiquarian inhabitants of an idealised, antiquarian New England that otherwise existed only in Lovecraft's imagination, upholding colonial ideals and enjoying a socially stable intellectual utopia. It is very much another world and, for some definitions of the term, a very nice one.

That world is, however, under threat. Ritual cannibalism is being practised within a day's cycling of Arkham ("The Picture in the House"). Only slightly further afield lie the district of Dunwich and the village of Innsmouth, where secretive degenerates copulate with devils ("The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth"). Demons infest nearby forests and cellars ("The Whisperer in Darkness" and "The Shunned House"). The librarians of Miskatonic keep the baffling eldritch tome *Necronomicon* under lock and key, terrified of its contents and yet loathe to destroy it. Research has disastrous consequences; Dyer, Peaslee and Thurston return from their investigations as broken men, the narrator of 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' goes mad, and Gilman's studies actually kill him.

Importantly, and despite the efforts of his self-styled successor August Derleth to redefine these stories as discussions of a fictional religion ("A Note on the Cthulhu Mythos" 253-254; see also Price 254-256), Lovecraft's horrors are entirely secular. Derleth did a great deal to preserve Lovecraft's writing from obscurity (de Camp, *Lovecraft* 432-434; see also Joshi, *A Life* 639-640), but his misapprehensions about the material he was preserving have led to widespread misinterpretations of the stories. These misinterpretations are, paradoxically, especially common among Lovecraft's dedicated fans, many of whom are more familiar with the ever-expanding 'Derlethian' oral tradition surrounding his works than with the works themselves. Thus the secular nature of Lovecraft's horrors needs to be explicitly stated. Although *Necronomicon* is written in portentious, cabalistic prose (the only substantial quotation is supplied in "The Dunwich Horror" 132-134), the tome expounds dark truths about cosmology, not demonology. Lovecraftian monsters come from unimaginably distant or inaccessible space, not any fictional version of Hell.

Distant stars are locations of great evil in these stories. Lovecraft's 'cosmicism', his conviction of the insignificance of humanity, and its emergence as a

preoccupation of his fiction, is well-attested (Shultz 205-210). He dabbled in astronomy throughout his life, having lobbied his indulgent mother for a telescope as a young child (Joshi, *A Life* 50), and remained struck by the sheer size of the universe ever after. A passage from one of the astronomy columns he wrote for a local newspaper as a teenager shows just how early this perception emerged:

> Alpha Centauri, the brightest star in this constellation, is the nearest of our stellar neighbors, lying at a distance of 12,000,000,000,000 miles from the solar system. That so vast an interval in terrestrial terms should be revealed as infinitesimally small in terms of space, is an eloquent testimony to the unbounded magnitude of the visible universe, to say nothing of the stupendous conception of absolute infinity. (quoted in De Camp, *Lovecraft* 81)

Similar ideas would turn up repeatedly in his letters, suggesting a lifelong preoccupation with the insignificance of humanity (*Selected Letters* 1.16, 1.90, 2.270, 4.550 and 5.778). Anything could be out there. When Lovecraft was called upon to invent monsters, therefore, anything *was* out there – space-going fungi, time-traveling limpets, anemone explorers, the shadowy materialist antichrist Nylarthotep, the ravening obscenity against the physical sciences, Cthulhu, and his pelagic, pre-human acolytes the Deep Ones. Since these monsters are things that could, just possibly, exist somewhere in "the stupendous conception of absolute infinity", it is highly unlikely that he saw what he was doing as fantasy. Certainly, he rarely used the term, preferring to describe his work as "weird fiction" or "tales of cosmic outsideness". It may, however be worth noting a parallel between Lovecraft's materialist demons and Tolkien's Elves. Galadriel, for example, views their magic as nothing more than an especially noble art form; searching for an explanation the hobbits will understand, she concedes that her mirror may seem magical, but queries their need for such a dramatic adjective (*The Lord of the Rings* 1:469). Thus it may well be argued that Tolkien and Lovecraft were both working within a frame of reference where distinctions between fantasy and science fiction – never entirely settled to begin with – cease to be profitable.

For our purposes, however, it is important to note that in the large majority of cases, Lovecraft's monsters are depicted as inherently evil, and their stupendous powers, both physical and intellectual, as perversions and mockeries of natural laws.

Lovecraft in fact strove for amorality in his work, but as will be demonstrated, his stories ultimately betray a strong basis in humanistic morality. What Lovecraft was attempting, therefore, was scientific diabolism, a kind of materialist fantasy in which he circumvents realism by *expandio ad absurdum*, blaspheming against humanity's construction of the universe, not God's. Arkham, a paradise of ordered rationalism, is threatened by this secular heresy. In their efforts to preserve their unsullied, self-satisfying intellectual utopia from this threat, Lovecraft's heroes are attempting a sort of atheistic Puritanism. What we have here is a materialist witch hunt.

Two Lovecraft stories in particular, "The Dunwich Horror" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth", discuss the rooting out of witch cults in the Arkham district. The first tells of the Whatleys, a decaying hillbilly family whose daughter – at the instigation of her evil, wizardly father – bears the children of the extraterrestrial, extra-dimensional abomination Yog-Sothoth. Her deformed sons go on to wreak havoc. The second involves blasphemy against Darwin as the inhabitants of the decaying fishing village of Innsmouth prostitute themselves to a race of demonic fish-men living in the harbour, gaining profane immortality at the cost of evolutionary degradation. In both cases the cosmic revelations (of space outside human perception in Dunwich and pre-human civilisations in Innsmouth) are accompanied by immediate social consequences. Dunwich could have been a prosperous farming enclave, but thanks to the Whatleys it is too far gone in apostasy against the colonialist and rationalist ideals that such a noble undertaking would require; the area is quarantined. Innsmouth could have been another Arkham; the narrator spots examples of wholesome colonial architecture moldering amid civil, intellectual and cosmic squalor (281, 285, 291-292). That squalor is, however, too dangerous to even quarantine. The authorities blow the place up.

Lovecraft's witch-hunts are, on a purely practical level, conducted to preserve the stable functioning of a New England society whose colonial period has been fictionally extended into the twentieth century. "The Colour out of Space", his favourite among his stories, follows a similar pattern: an eerie cosmic visitation has the banally terrifying side-effect of contaminating Arkham's drinking water with a madness-inducing poison. The Novanglian setting therefore becomes, in the words of one commentator, "paramount" (Nelson 105). It should come as no surprise that Lovecraft claimed to have based "storied", "witch-haunted" Arkham, where both the

historical and cosmic (ergo magical, ergo evil) past impinges on the present, on the real city of Salem (*Selected Letters* 5.744) – with, it seems, all that that implies.

The Call to Arms

Whatever their actual importance, the Salem witch-trials constitute the proverbial elephant in the room of New England's colonial history. Lovecraft's own perception of them, and of the colonial period in general, is important for an understanding of his fantastic imagination. Lovecraft was and is well-known for his love of the eighteenth century, which he always cited as a high point in the literary, artistic and social achievement of western civilisation. Throughout his life he indulged himself in an adolescent fantasy of actually living in the 1700s, backdating his letters by two centuries, affecting stereotypical eighteenth-century spellings and pen-names and discussing the War of Independence (in relation to which, "reckoning Anglo-Saxondom as a unit", he took the British side) as a current event (*Selected Letters* 1.39). Curiously enough, he was also given to doing a similar thing with regard to the American Civil War, occasionally even baiting those he knew to be descendants of Union soldiers (Joshi, *A Life* 71).

America's colonial period, however, was his central historical preoccupation. He adored eighteenth-century American fashions, diction and architecture. It was a tradition for him to take visitors on lengthy walking tours of Providence's colonial buildings, and he described his first visit to the well-preserved Massachusetts town of Marblehead in 1922 as "the high tide of my life" (Joshi, *A Life* 289). Noting that he ranked this visit as a more significant experience than even his marriage, biographers have pinpointed a perceptive explanation for Lovecraft's adoration of Marblehead: it united him with his "cultural and racial past", providing a concrete fulfillment of a long-held personal wish to be connected to history (Joshi, *A Life* 289-290). This is a man who held his colonial background dear, and who went out of his way to associate himself with it. His heroes do the same and applaud some of his aliens for following suit. When Professor Dyer discovers the eons-extinct *colony* of the plant-like Great Old Ones in Antarctica, he is terrified by the cosmic truths it reveals, but also acknowledges and applauds similarities between the social and scientific ambitions of the "star-spawn" and his own. "[W]hatever else they had been", he notes, "they were men!" (*At the Mountains of Madness* 316). Investigations by real-world scholars have

highlighted further similarities between stereotypical New Englanders and the aliens (Eckhardt, 95-97).

Despite his obvious antiquarian bent, however, Lovecraft was an amateur historian given to broad caricature and to characterising places and periods by mood, atmosphere and stereotype rather than historical specifics. He seems, for example, to have perceived England as a quasi-medieval fossil of manses and abbeys (*Selected Letters* 1.120 and 1.172; one may detect the influence of Poe's ingeniously nebulous geography here). Just as he fondly constructed the eighteenth century as a golden age, he viewed the seventeenth and nineteenth as long, troublesome periods of ascent into, and decline from, that idyll. His views on the seventeenth century are of particular interest. In 1923 Lovecraft wrote a letter to a friend about a visit to a house in Salem connected to the infamous 1692 witch-hunt. After a lengthy discussion of the hunt, he noted,

> …in my imagination the seventeenth century is as full of macabre mystery, repression and ghoulish adumbrations as the eighteenth century is full of taste, gayety, grace and beauty. This was a typical Puritan abode; where amidst the bare, ugly necessities of life, and without learning, beauty, culture, freedom or ornament, terrible stern-fac'd folk in conical hats or poke-bonnets dwelt two hundred fifty and more years ago – close to the soil and all its hideous whisperings; warp'd in mentality by isolation and unnatural thoughts, and shivering in fear of the devil on autumn nights when the wind howl'd through the twisted orchard trees or rustled the hideous corpse-nourish'd pines on the graveyard at the foot of the hill. There is eldritch fascination – horrible bury'd evil – in these archaick farmhouses. (*Selected Letters* 1.127)

The last sentence of this passage contains two archaic spellings ('bury'd' and 'archaick') that Lovecraft was fond of, demonstrating his antiquarian conceits; he probably would have used such diction in his stories if his editors had let him. The passage as a whole also clearly demonstrates his favoured method of soaking up the past by appeal to historical stereotyping. If emphasis on the Salem witch-trials is a "ghoulish adumbration" of New England's colonial period (as it probably is), it is one no greater than that which Lovecraft himself committed. Aping this misconception – thinking like him – reveals an important point about the workings of his imagination.

A creature of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, at least in his own self-mythology, he naturally saw the seventeenth century as an era of "repression" and "warp'd mentality". Taking this stereotype as an axiomatic truth, he mentioned it as a "propitious milieu" for the formation of "weird schools" of literature ("Supernatural Horror in Literature" 61). The potential value to him as a writer of horror of this regional history clearly impressed itself on him. New England was, he said, the natural destination for "the true epicure in the terrible" ("The Picture in the House", 34).

It was about the same time he visited Salem that Lovecraft read Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), which argues that historical witch-hunts in Europe and America were punitive measures against a pagan religion that had survived into the Christian era. Although this work is now largely discredited, the idea was popular at the time and certainly seems to have made sense to Lovecraft. Some time later he wrote:

> Much of the power of Western horror-lore is undoubtedly due to the hidden but often suspected presence of a hideous cult of nocturnal worshippers whose strange customs – descended from pre-Aryan and pre-agricultural times when a squat race of Mongoloids roved over Europe with their flocks and herds – were rooted in the most revolting fertility-rites of immemorial antiquity. This secret religion, stealthily handed down amongst peasants for thousands of years despite the outward reign of the Druidic, Graeco-Roman, and Christian faiths in the regions involved, was marked by wild "Witches' Sabbaths" in lonely woods and atop distant hills on Walpurgis-Night and Hallowe'en, the traditional breeding-seasons of goats and sheep and cattle; and became the source of vast riches of story-legend, besides provoking extensive witchcraft-prosecutions of which the Salem affairs forms the chief American example. ("Supernatural Horror in Literature", 18)

Lovecraft was attracted to the idea of atavism from his earliest serious compositions (Burleson, "On Lovecraft's Themes" 137), and used most of these ideas – the unwholesome survival of secret cults, ethnic antagonism, 'revolting' fertility rites, the deeper significance of ostensibly Christian festivals – in his later stories. He was clearly rather taken by Murray's ideas, mentioning her book by name in "The

Call of Cthulhu" (142), and suggesting on more than one occasion (*Selected Letters* 3:178; "Supernatural Horror in Literature" 18) that the prosecutors of 1692 might well have uncovered one of these secret pre-Christian cults. He also freely acknowledged the influence of her ideas on an earlier story, "The Festival", written five months after the Salem visit, and suggested the tale would have benefited from greater faithfulness to Murray's idea (*Selected Letters* 4.664). "The Festival" tells of a demonic ritual performed out of immemorial ancestral obligation by the inhabitants of Kingsport, geographically just up the road from Arkham but culturally rooted a century earlier. The story drips with references to the seventeenth century, including the notion that the twentieth-century narrator has somehow stumbled into the town's Puritan past before returning to the present day (117). The 1600s are a dark and spooky time when rituals are performed regardless of relevance and curtained windows hide the monotonous spinning and grim theological libraries (spiked, as it were, with a copy of the *Necronomicon* – 111-112) of mute, warped people. The narrator lost ancestors in the 1692 purge, he says (110), and so blurred is the time-scheme of the story that it has been suggested his identity meshes with theirs (Airaksinen 58). This is not the first story Lovecraft had placed in New England (or indeed in the Arkham district, which is notionally the setting of 1920's "The Picture in the House"), but it was the first he firmly rooted there. It would be another few years before Lovecraft began his own personal witch-hunt, but the story reveals a crystalisation of the notion in his mind.

Some slim but important distinctions must be made concerning Lovecraft's perception of religion, and of the Pilgrims. Despite his consciously-espoused atheism and his penning of a minor story entitled "The Wicked Clergyman" (revised and pubished by Derleth; Joshi, *A Life* 543), he had no quarrel with organized religion *per se* and freely acknowledged its social relevance. It was, he said, "a pleasing fiction inextricably associated with the artistic progress of our culture" which "deserves just as much recognition as any other ornament" (*Selected Letters* 1.170). Devoid of faith as he was, the 'ornaments' of religion fascinated him. The presence of handsome steeples is an index of civic decency in his stories, and the misuse of church buildings is a common thread between the monsters of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (303), "The Festival" (114-115) and "The Horror at Red Hook". Lovecraft underwent an Anglican marriage ceremony because he was impressed by the colonial architecture of his local Anglican church (*Selected Letters* 1:325) and spared a kind word for

Lilith, George MacDonald's most overtly Christian fantasy, in "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (79). Religion, he argued, could have positive social effects:

> Can you imagine anything more magnificent than the wholesale slaughter of Indians – a very epick – by our New-England ancestors in the name of the lamb? But aside from all that – these Puritans were simply marvellous. They did not invent, but substantially developed the colonial doorway; and incidentally created a simple standard of life and conduct which is, apart from some extravagant and inessential details and a few aesthetic and intellectual fallacies in all truth the most healthy and practical way of securing happiness and tranquility which we have had since the early days of Republican Rome. I myself am very partial to it – it is so quaint and wholesome. (*Selected Letters* 1.153)

Never mind that religion and superstition loomed so large in their lives, Lovecraft argues; the Puritans were good, upstanding, self-disciplined people who laid the groundwork for his eighteenth-century utopia. Two centuries later, the good, upstanding, self-disciplined men of Arkham, unfettered by religion, are continuing this tradition.

By the time he wrote "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926) he had learned to replace the superstitious fears he attributes to the Pilgrims with a dread he clearly saw as a more worthy subject – that of humanity's cosmic insignificance, as revealed by his invented materialist demonology. In order to project this dread it became necessary to create protagonists who embodied what Lovecraft saw as the positive aspects of the Puritan character – their colonialist bent, self-discipline and tenacious ideological integrity – but who would be offended and traumatised by material impossibilities rather than spiritual blasphemies. Hence, it seems, the creation of Arkham, a society in which colonial concerns and ideals mesh with a modernistic, secular outlook.

The question of why Lovecraft's witch-hunts end so disastrously needs to be examined. In addressing his obsessive pessimism, it is hard to ignore his psychopathology as the stable child of two psychotic parents. This is a real can of worms, but it is probably worth opening, if only because it seems quite relevant to his writing, and besides, biographers to date have not given the matter the attention it surely deserves. His father died in 1898 after five years of hospitalisation for "general

paresis", which is almost certainly a delicate term for the advanced stages of syphilis (Faig 49-51), while his mother succumbed to a slowly escalating paranoid psychosis in 1918 and died, still a psychological wreck, in 1921 (Faig 66-68). Lovecraft himself was, fan conceits to the contrary notwithstanding, entirely sane, but this dreadful family history must have had considerable effect on him. It meant he grew up essentially fatherless (he was three years old when his father was committed) and looked to his maternal grandfather, Whipple Van Buren Phillips, for a male role model, which probably contributed to his adoration of the past. He was undoubtedly kept in the dark concerning his father's undignified end, and thus would have had first-hand experience of the terrible hidden secrets that became something of a trope in his writing. The loss of both parents by degrees – first to mental illness, then to death after years of incarceration in the same mental institution – probably imparted a rather foreboding sense of the creeping inevitability of fate.

Such commentary may be speculation, but the fate of Lovecraft's father in particular has been the subject of substantial discussion. Nelson, for example, has observed:

> [A]n avid lay reader – as Lovecraft was, in a wide range of subjects – who looked up 'paresis' in the medical textbooks of the early twentieth century would have encountered photographs of real-life deformities the horrific magnitude of which almost defies description. It is hard not to believe, viewing these anonymous and pathetic images of suffering, that one has located the originals of Lovecraft's pustulating horrors. (*The Secret Life of Puppets* 117)

This is an interesting point, especially given that the precocious young Howard is known to have been consulting textbooks on reproductive medicine in the year of his father's death (*Selected Letters* 4.335). Discovery of the true nature of his father's illness may well have left a mark on Lovecraft's world-building. Consider the matter of Wilbur Whatley, the villain of "The Dunwich Horror", who is conceived in a mysterious hilltop ceremony on Candlemas in 1913 and who, when disrobed, bears a disturbing similarity to his demonic father:

Below the waist, though, it was the worse, for here all human resemblance left off and sheer phantasy began. The skin was thickly covered with coarse black fur, and from the abdomen a score of greenish-grey tentacles with red sucking mouths protruded limply. Their arrangement was odd, and seemed to follow the symmetries of some cosmic geometry unknown to earth or the solar system. On each of the hips, deep set in a kind of pinkish, cilated orbit, was what seemed to be a rudimentary eye; whist in lieu of a tail there depended a kind of trunk or feeler with purple annular markings, and with many evidences of being an undeveloped mouth or throat. ("The Dunwich Horror" 140)

Lovecraft's fans have long made something of a running joke about the Freudian nature of his monsters, but this is a serious matter. Nelson (117-118) notes that Lovecraft seems to have made an effort to stress these sorts of sexual deformities as overtly as he can bear. "The Dunwich Horror", "The Shadow over Innsmouth" and "The Thing on the Doorstep" all tacitly and squeamishly imply humans being raped by – or worse yet, voluntarily consorting with – demonic entities. Policemen stumbling upon a ritual in honour of Cthulhu discover a "baying, bellowing, and writhing" mass of degenerate humanity, flailing about "void of clothing" ("The Call of Cthulhu" 152). These are secular, materialist Sabbats, rationalistic versions of the "most revolting fertility-rites of immemorial antiquity" that Lovecraft mentioned in "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (18).

In light of this, it is worth noting that there is not a single example of healthy *human* sexuality in his stories. The Arkhamites are, almost to a man, primly celibate in both thought and deed. Nathaniel Peaslee of "The Shadow out of Time" has been estranged from his wife for some years. Edward Pickman Derby of "The Thing on the Doorstep" is married, but to a domineering witch whose *need* to marry the hapless Edward before controlling his body for her unspeakable ends hints at hidden foulness in the marital bedchamber. Arkham is a place of the intellect, where everything can be comprehended and controlled. By definition, therefore, sex is for demons and degenerates. Lovecraft uses his fiat as a world-builder to eliminate an element of the human psyche that any real human knows is inherently unruly. Whether or not this theme in Lovecraft's work is derived from the fate of his father, as seems likely, he clearly took the same high moral tone adopted by witch-hunters of fact and fiction. In "The Call of Cthulhu", apprehended cultists discuss how the apocalyptic awakening

of the demonic villain will be foretold by a catastrophic, global breakdown of human morality, "with all men shouting and killing and reveling with joy" (155). In that story, and in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (268), participants in these materialist bacchanals are shipped to prison camps for indefinite detainment.

With regard to the question of why Lovecraft's stories end badly it is also important to recall the initial impetus for his witch-hunt – his aggressive, crusading scientific materialism.

> Our human race is only a trivial incident in the history of creation. It is of no more importance in the annals of eternity and infinity than is the child's snow-man in the annals of terrestrial tribes and nations. And more – may not all mankind be a mistake – an abnormal growth – a disease in the system of Nature – an excrescence on the body of infinite progression like a wart on a human hand? Might not the total destruction of humanity, as well as all animate creation, be a positive *boon* to Nature as a whole? (*Selected Letters* 1.16)

Twenty years later Lovecraft would still be asserting the position of humanity as an incidental fluke in a universe that owed it nothing (4.550). This is the aspect of Lovecraft's thought that August Derleth never mastered (Joshi, *A Life* 403 and 638-640). Derleth, a practicing Catholic, insisted on the existence of points of similarity between Lovecraft's invented monsters and Christian diabolism ("A Note on the Cthulhu Mythos" 253), and also invented further beneficent entities to fight on humanity's behalf (as in "The Gorge Beyond Salapunco" 147). In his own stories of the 'mythos', therefore, monsters can be fathomed and combated with a realistic (if slight) chance of success through recourse to existing religious and spiritual traditions. This implicitly grants humanity an active, privileged position in the universe. In "The Keeper of the Key", for example, *Necronomicon* contains spells whereby the heroic Professor Shrewsbury can summon the ghost of its author, Abdul Alhazred, to a séance in order to aid his hunt for Cthulhu (195-198). The fact that the Professor eventually comes a cropper does not change the fact that Derleth has profoundly altered the nature of Lovecraft's ideas here. Shrewsbury *could* have won; Derleth offers humanity a fair fight, whereas Lovecraft's work rests on the postulate that we have no right to expect any such balance of power.

The positive depiction of the Arkhamites makes it clear Lovecraft himself also dearly wished to have his heroes triumph, but in accordance with his grim view of the cosmos, he needed them to lose. Placed against these unfathomable, ravening personifications of irrationalism, they could not do otherwise, and there is certainly nothing and nobody that could help them. Giliman and Derby die. Wilmarth and Dyer end up as raving, Cassandra-like cranks. Thurston and Peaslee are broken men, their spirits crushed by their horrifying discoveries. What victories are enjoyed are trivial. Dunwich becomes a lost cause, while the destruction of the Innsmouth cult is revealed to be too little, too late; the narrator goes native.

Lovecraft's cosmic witch-hunt emerged as a confluence of his lifelong conviction of the insignificance of humanity and his appreciation for the potential complimentary value of his own regional history. It allowed him to indulge his cosmic fascinations by pitting a society of atheistic Puritans – men constructed by taking Lovecraft's perception of what was noble in the character and accomplishments of his colonial forebears and projecting it into the twentieth century – against material, rather than doctrinal, blasphemy threatening their secular, rather than religious, colonial reality. In doing so they pursue a tight moral line in terms of acceptable human behaviour. They also lose, as humanity necessarily must in such an uncaring cosmos.

By creating Arkham, Lovecraft found his voice; these stories are both acknowledged as more typically 'Lovecraftian' than his earlier tales, and it is for such works that he is remembered (Shultz 199-200). Having established this secondary world, furthermore, he only occasionally wrote outside it. The cosmic witch-hunt consumed the bulk of his fictional output for the last decade of his life. The fundamental nature of Lovecraftian fiction has been established. However futilely, the battle for New England's intellect – its Lovecraftian soul – was on.

Contact with the Enemy

It could be said that Lovecraft's fiction, especially that fairly small body of later stories on which his reputation chiefly rests, is more usefully considered as science fiction rather than as fantasy. His monsters are, we always find out, extraterrestrials rather than deities or demigods, and they subvert the laws of the universe because of the vast differentials in intellect, technology or origin between themselves and the humans with which they interact. The Great Race of Yith in 'The

Shadow out of Time' gather information about Earth by transplanting one of their unfathomably brilliant minds into the body of an Arkham economist. The Old Ones who once dwelt at the Mountains of Madness (in Lovecraft's short novel of that name) were able to create a race of amorphous servants, the shoggoths, simply by dint of their superhuman command of biological science. Cthulhu's adopted home, the sunken city of R'yleh off the coast of New Zealand, boasts architectural features constructed in direct contravention of Euclidian geometry because Cthulhu knows more about structural engineering than humans can ever hope to know; he can, it seems, do the sums required to make such insanity work.

By Lovecraft's own estimation, "The Colour out of Space" (1927) was his most successful attempt to articulate these ideas in fiction (Joshi, *A Life* 419). The 'Colour' itself is an odd globule discovered inside a meteorite that lands in a field near Arkham, owned by the simple but respectable Gardner family. Researchers from Miskatonic University cannot make any headway in examining the baffling thing – "it was only by analogy that they called it a colour at all" (176). Meanwhile the farm produces a prodigious harvest of inedible crops. The fertility of the land then sharply decreases, and the livestock begin to sicken. As animals begin to die off, their flesh found to be brittle and useless as food, and the vegetation turns to ash. The farmer's wife, and then his sons, go spectacularly insane. When, a year after the meteor shower, a friend visits the isolated farm, he finds a sterile wasteland and only one living human, Gardner himself, gibbering about how he "dun't know what it wants" (188) as his body crumbles to pieces on the couch. Summoning help, the friend and several others see a column of the unknown 'colour' shoot skywards from the well. What was it? Had it had 'enough'? Where did it come from? Where did it go? How? And will you drink the water from the reservoir being built on the site? These are all good questions for a writer of supernatural horror to leave his readers with.

Lovecraft's increasing ability over time to master such a brand of horror has been the occasion of much of the posthumous praise he has received (Shultz 206-213). Unlike some of Lovecraft's stories, "The Colour out of Space" contains no explanation as to what actually went on at the Gardner place. We do not know what this colour was, whether it was animate or not, or whether it acted the way it did out of malice, predatory ecology, or simple chemistry. The Gardners therefore are innocent victims of a truly imponderable, alien force. As the "blasted heath" around the site grows "perhaps an inch a year" (198), it may be that Earth's entire ecosystem

will eventually follow suit. The colour will not care; indeed, there is no real indication that it has the consciousness, let alone the moral framework, required to care at all. In "The Colour out of Space" Lovecraft can be said to have effectively articulated the concept of humanity as an inconsequential casualty in a vast, uncaring, amoral universe.

An important point to note about "The Colour out of Space" is that it could never have been written as a realistic short story. In order to depict the colour as he does, Lovecraft needed it to be not simply odd, but completely *outside* human experience and means of perception. It is impervious to both the storied folk wisdom of the Gardners and their neighbours, and the exhaustive (and exhaustively described – 66-68) analytical procedures of Miskatonic's chemistry department. This is the most successful example of a leitmotif that became increasingly common in Lovecraft's writing during the second half of his career – departure from the human frame of reference, either intuitive or analytical. The year after he wrote of the colour, he wrote "The Call of Cthulhu", his best-known story. The appearance of its imponderable alien villain is described in some detail, but his true nature, in fact, is not open to description:

> They had shape…but that shape was not made of matter. When the stars were right, They could plunge from world to world through the sky; but when the stars were wrong, They could not live. But although They no longer lived, They would never really die. (154-155)

This catalogue of physical and physiological non-sequiturs simply cannot be applied to any real animal. Cthulhu is frightening enough to look at in effigy (141), and in person kills as many by sheer maddening terror as by physical harm (167-168). His true diabolism, however, lies not in his "fearsome and unnatural malignancy" (148) but in his total, intrinsic resistance to human experience or frames of reference. His home, R'lyeh, features architecture which is "abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours" (166). His very name demonstrates this – *Cthulhu* is a rough rendering, Lovecraft asserts, of a name unpronouncible by humans, or indeed those whose vocal apparatus follow the same geometrical or physical laws as ours (*Selected Letters* 5.714). Thus the widespread fan speculation on the correct pronunciation of this name over the years is quite

beside the point; *any* attempt by a human being to voice Cthulhu's name is bound to be incorrect. Lovecraft does this again in "The Dreams in the Witch House", which contains an attempt to articulate the fourth dimension (658-659). In "The Dunwich Horror", he quotes *Necronomicon*, a medieval Arab scholar's attempt to explain the idea of beings dwelling in a parallel universe that human senses are simply not able to detect. The monstrous Yog-Sothoth dwells, he says, "Not in the spaces we know, but *between* them" (132).

This is blasphemy against humanity's perception of the universe, not God's. These creatures expose the limitations of the human intellect as a tool for fathoming the universe. Where George MacDonald saw the defeat of the intellect as spiritually liberating, Lovecraft never failed to insist that it gives rise to madness, nihilism, violence and evil. Lovecraft's witch-hunters, sworn to protect the skeptical, rationalistic Elysium of Arkham, increasingly find themselves contending with such lunacy. In order to put them up against such foes, Lovecraft was bound to describe the indescribable. This responsibility gave rise to some of his most questionable prose composition (Nelson 104), but more interestingly, it necessitated a departure from realism. If for no other reason, Lovecraft wrote fantasy because reality simply would not permit him to do what he needed to do in his stories.

This fascination with "cosmic outsideness" would be in keeping with his own ideas about the universe. Lovecraft was a cynical scientific materialist who, as an adult, recalled being a skeptically inquisitive trouble-maker at Sunday school (*Selected Letters* 1:110-111; see also "A Confession of Unfaith" 145). He professed a complete lack of interest in the human race, and dismissed any ideas that might grant them a privileged position in the universe. Among these ideas was the notion that humans could genuinely understand the universe. The human race had, he asserted, largely inviolable intellectual and sensory limitations, and it was solipsistic to suggest that the entire universe could fall within those parameters ("In Defence of Dagon" 58). His lifelong adherence to 'cosmicism' has already been noted, although it is worth restating its importance to his fictional compositions. In a cover-letter to Farnsworth Wright, the editor of *Weird Tales*, Lovecraft wrote a subsequently much-quoted passage:

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast

cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form – and the local human passions and conditions and standards – are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. Only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities. *These* must be handled with unsparing *realism*, (not catch-penny romanticism) but when we cross the line into the boundless and hideous unknown – the shadow-haunted *Outside* – we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold. (*Selected Letters* 2:150)

Later in this letter Lovecraft criticises Edgar Rice Burroughs for failing to meet this standard and treating Mars and Jupiter merely as different countries. Lovecraft's opinions of *Weird Tales* were fluid; he variously praised it as a rare outlet for fantasy fiction and damned it as cheap entertainment, and this ambiguity, combined with literary ideals not easily compatable with the demands of pulp fiction, led to an uneven relationship with the magazine and its editor (Murray 106-112). Certainly, however, these remarks are in keeping with comments Lovecraft made elsewhere:

I could not write about "ordinary people" because I am not in the least interested in them. Without interest there can be no art. Man's relations to man do not captivate my fancy. It is man's relation to the cosmos – to the unknown – which alone arouses in me the spark of creative imagination. The humanocentric pose is impossible to me, for I cannot acquire the primitive myopia which magnifies the earth and ignores the background. ("In Defence of Dagon" 53)

With billions of stars and trillions of planets, the goings-on among a race of banal bipeds confined to a single inauspicious rock could not be reckoned as anything remotely noteworthy. De Camp (*Lovecraft* 212-213) has cited Lovecraft's personal reserve and lack of life experience as reasons for his "bloodless" human characters, which is probably a good point, although this intellectual preoccupation must also

have had a role in shaping such characterisations. Arkham means nothing until it has been placed in opposition to Rl'yeh, Y'ha-nthlei, Yoggoth, or whatever ridiculously distant domain is home to the colour out of space. Consequently, Lovecraft was in a way using the entire space-time continuum, with its infinite possibilities and potentially fluid laws, as a single secondary world.

Crucially, however, he focuses on this planet. Whatever the colour out of space is, and however accidental its visitation may be, it turns up on Earth. Why? What about the Deep Ones in their underwater city off the coast of Innsmouth, the Mi-Go infesting the hills of Vermont, or Joe Slater's imponderable interloper in 'Beyond the Wall of Sleep'? *At the Mountains of Madness* tells (278-279) of a dreadful war between two alien races, The Great Old Ones and the Cthulhu-spawn, both drawn to Earth and both so determined to maintain a presence here that a concessive treaty is eventually signed in order to allow uneasy coexistence. The demonic Yog-Sothoth desires to draw Earth to another universe for nefarious purposes – presumably his reason for choosing the half-witted Dunwich albino Lavinia Whatley, out of all the females in this cosmos, as the mother of his children. The blind idiot god Nyarlathotep, howling madly at the centre of the universe, has followers of especial importance here. Time and again Lovecraft presents his readers with a situation in which the monsters, out of all the gin joints in all the cities in all the world, have walked into ours. In particular, they like New England. Nyarlathotep, Yog-Sothoth, the Mi-Go, the Deep Ones and The Great Race of Yith have business there; the Antarctic city of the Great Old Ones is discovered by researchers from Miskatonic, Lovecraft's idyll of a humanistic New England university. Earth, presented in microcosm as the Arkham district, is an important hub, it seems, in the comings and goings of the pointedly inhuman interstellar or inter-cosmic community that Lovecraft purports to describe on his broader 'cosmicist' canvas.

Moreover, despite his stated desire to avoid depicting human traits as native to other worlds and other civilisations, some of his most interesting aliens betray, on examination, similarities to humans. The most celebrated examples of this are the Great Old Ones encountered in *At the Mountains of Madness*. They appear to be wholly alien; the researcher who dissects one describes a perplexing combination of features likening it to a cross between a bat, starfish, sea-anemone and cactus (212-214). In time, however, these creatures are revealed to be intellectually-inclined, asexual frontiersmen with an intense emotional connection to their original landing

point in their new home – all attributes that have been highlighted as similarities to New England Pilgrims (Eckhardt 95-97). "Historical interest and pride", we are told, "obviously formed their chief psychological element" (*At the Mountains of Madness* 281). On those grounds, Professor Dyer ultimately absolves them of their murderous disruption of his Antarctic expedition (316). The Great Race of Yith, described in "The Shadow out of Time", may look like giant limpets, but betray many of the habits of a caricatured Enlightenment scientist. They are totally preoccupied with arcane scientific pursuits, gearing their entire society to such matters, and reproduce by shedding spores, impersonally raising their young in communal, crèche-like aquariums. These two races of 'Great' aliens are portrayed by Lovecraft as not antagonistic to humans so much as utterly indifferent to them. The Great Old Ones have never met a human, or indeed a mammal, and Dyer pauses in his narrative to imagine, quite sympathetically, how such a meeting would have seemed to them (316). To the Yithians, meanwhile, Earth is merely a good source of lab rats.

By comparison, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" posits that a race of immortal, amphibious fish-demons has inhabited Earth's seas since the cosmically distant past, and that there are certain isolated human enclaves where they are worshipped as gods. Lovecraft goes to considerable lengths to demonise this race and their human acolytes, repeatedly mentioning the "nauseous fishy odour" (282) of Innsmouth and its "repellent-looking" (284) natives, a once upstanding and noble community disappearing into noxious squalor. The cult of the Deep Ones has wrecked a perfectly handsome, prosperous community, usurping wholesome church buildings and offending the cultural imagination as well as the nostrils. When they are brought on-stage after forty pages of foreshadowing, they are found to be offensive to the eye and ear as well, hopping, baying and croaking in what Lovecraft insists is a terrifying manner. Many fans have followed de Camp's lead (*A Life* 72-73) in attributing the presence of these fishy horrors to Lovecraft's abiding abhorrence of seafood. Several of Lovecraft's alien races bear obvious marine traits, but not all such races are characterised as evil. The Great Race of Yith, for example, resemble giant limpets, and their gastropodal locomotion is presented as a dry anatomical fact (742). The Great Old Ones are also quite at home in the sea. The Great Races are, furthermore, anti-heroes; in "The Shadow out of Time" in particular, Lovecraft seems to be delineating his wishes for society, placing utopia in the hands of aliens. "The Shadow over Innsmouth", however, presents them as abominable agents of social and

aesthetic blasphemy. The ichthyic nature of the Deep Ones is not, so to speak, what makes them fishy.

In fact, the shadow over Innsmouth is the result of an altogether more sinister turn of events. While more enlightened races confine their activities to intellectual pursuits, there comes a time when the revolting and, it would seem, lecherous Deep Ones demand carnal traffic with their human worshippers. Lovecraft is vague on what the monsters hope to gain from this; they already have human sacrifices, and now offer magic and immortality in exchange for "what they hankered arter" (303), forcing the issue when their acolytes demur. "Many women commit suicide or vanish", Lovecraft wrote in his working papers for the story ("Notes for 'The Shadow over Innsmouth'" 249). The result is a society of deformed, insane hybrids who will eventually transform into Deep Ones and join their demonic parents under the sea, where they will be welcomed as kin. There is, however, no indication that the aliens *need* such converts; this is not a retelling of the ancient tradition of fairy cradle-robbing (exemplified by George MacDonald's "The Carasoyn"). Rather it is, apparently, a fulfillment of a need for a secular, materialist Sabbat at which humanity gives itself to the carnal satisfaction of demons. This is a curiously human motivation for such pointedly inhuman monsters, and one that contrasts sharply with those of the self-disciplined, cerebral, spore-shedding Great Old Ones. Lovecraft, an autodidact who had very definite ideas about social cohesion, propriety and miscegenation, and who claimed to have been conclusively cured of his sex drive as a child (*Selected Letters* 4.355), seems to have been unable to prevent a degree of humanising socio-political allegory from slipping into his depictions of alien civilisations.

This reveals an important point about his work. Lovecraft was using fantasy to explore the possibilities of an infinite cosmos and indulge his 'cosmicist' viewpoint in writing, and from a visual or scientific standpoint his extraterrestrials are among the most admirably strange a reader is likely to come across. However, he was not able to dismiss the importance of humanity. An author wishing, as he claimed to, to examine "man's relationship to the cosmos" ("In Defence of Dagon" 53) must address both sides of that equation. There can, of course, be no monsters without humans; fantasy requires a mundane point of reference for magic to mean anything. Tolkien's remark that "If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings would not have arisen" ("On Fairy-stories" 50) would seem to be as applicable to Lovecraft's randy fish-devils as it is to Tolkien's naturalised magic or

Eddison's attempts to portray existential cynosures. Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, the Deep Ones, the colour and the rest of his alien horrors can only be seen as horrible in comparison to humans. Arkham may be of trivial importance compared to Yoggoth, but Yoggoth means nothing at all without Arkham.

In his attempt to dismiss humanity as a cosmic trifle, Lovecraft was in fact forced to position us as a small but demonstrably indispensable cog in his compositional machine. The same goes for the morality of his secondary world. Lovecraft's aliens are admirably inhuman in their physiology, but in their psychology and habits they reflect a continuum of traits and motivations that strongly mirror his perception of what does or does not belong in a moral, ordered, *human* society, and Lovecraft characterises them as anti-heroes or villains accordingly. *Humanitas* therefore becomes an index of goodness. Even the impressive "The Colour out of Space" follows this pattern. Morally imponderable as the colour may be, its effect on a decent farming family (and later Arkham at large) is depicted as a dreadful and eerie sequence of events. This is because it hurt humans, both physically (by destroying the farm and its occupants) and intellectually (by demonstrating the size and impersonality of the cosmos). Were humans truly worth nothing, their woes would not be worth lamenting. The same idea are at work in *At the Mountains of Madness*, "The Dunwich Horror", "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth".

These ideas can be seen to preemptively vindicate Tolkien's assertion that fantasy constitutes a dialogue between the human race and its imagination. Lovecraft's imagination was tightly disciplined by his perception of the universe. His youthful pastiches of Dunsany aside, Lovecraft created magic not by quietly ignoring natural laws but by embracing them to the fullest extent possible, expanding their importance to the point that they cease to be applicable. In order to examine the effects of this he required a staging post, a physical and moral point of reference, and to echo Tolkien's perception of fantasy once again, there is only one of those.

Lovecraft's views on this matter are worth examining at some length. In contrast to Eddison's silence on the issue of women in primary-world society, Lovecraft commented hotly and at length on the question of race. Many of these comments make unpleasant reading. Throughout his life he subscribed to pseudoscientific views of humanity that even highly sympathetic critics struggle to excuse. This line of thought has been a persistent stain on his personal and literary reputation, and it is entirely fair to call Lovecraft racist, even by the standards of his

time, given that he adhered to many of his increasingly outmoded racial theories despite continually updating and revising many other intellectual ideas. Whatever one wishes to call them, however, his ideas about race reveal useful points about his worldview, and therefore the makeup of his secondary world.

The usual excuse for this behaviour is that he lived in an age when such opinions were more acceptable. In fact this is a complicated issue. The massive waves of immigration America absorbed in the early years of the twentieth century had certainly led to a widespread resurgence in racism, pseudoscientific and otherwise. Lovecraft is known, for example, to have read *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), Madison Grant's widely-circulated defence of the Aryan theory, among a number of other books seeking to justify racial segregation. Lovecraft persisted in these opinions after the trend ran its course, however, with his sojourn in New York (between 1924 and 1926, a time when the city's status as America's great melting-pot was especially apparent) serving to harden his attitudes. In this he was not wholly alone. Even within his own profession, his pen-friend and *Weird Tales* colleague Robert E Howard displayed an obsessive concern for identifying, delineating, characterising and segregating the tribes and nations of the Hyborian age ("The Hyborian Age" 1-20, "The Devil in Iron" 264-265, "The Frost-Giant's Daughter" 819-820) that could easily be construed in a similar light. Both men were, however, part of the rearguard of an ideology retreating from respectability.

One illustrative manifestation of Lovecraft's racism was his curious attitude towards the First World War. Lovecraft enlisted when America entered the conflict, although he was later excluded, on intriguingly unrecorded grounds, after the intervention of his mother (Joshi, *A Life* 140-142). His attempt to enlist is especially odd given his perception of the war. He saw it as a lamentable internal conflict between a pair of noble Anglo-Saxon nations, Germany and Britain, who really ought to be celebrating their shared heritage and giving the bootheel to lesser races rather than squabbling ("The Crime of the Century" 13-14). Nevertheless he supported the war and applauded America's entry into it. England and America are simply separate manifestations of the noble civilising impulse of the Anglo-Saxon race, said Lovecraft. Since America is an offshoot of the British Empire, American patriotism is not possible "without a corresponding love for the British race and ideals that created America" (quoted in Joshi, *A Life* 139). Nobody could accuse Lovecraft of not loving America, or at least New England. Although his strident adoption of the British side

in discussions of the American War of Independence (de Camp, *Lovecraft* 5) may seem to contradict this, it is in fact a demonstration of his ethnic ideas in action. He was, he said, "a warm partisan of Anglo-American reunion; my opinion being that the division of a single culture into two national units is wasteful and often dangerous" ("A Confession of Unfaith" 147). He saw New England as an estranged branch of the British family tree. Affecting disappointment at this estrangement, he nevertheless loved both root and branch.

This episode demonstrates that Lovecraft placed ethnic identity above the realities of political nationalism – America was founded by Anglo-Saxons, and was therefore an Anglo-Saxon country, independent or otherwise. Immigrants would have to adjust to perceived Anglo-Saxon ideals, or be damned. This belief in an ethnic aristocracy has been cited as a reason why Lovecraft recommended *The Worm Ouroboros* to his friends (de Camp, *Lovecraft* 291), as that book dwells on the inherent nobility of certain people. To describe Eddison's book as supportive of racial supremacy or segregation would be churlish, however. Bellicose as they may be, the poeples of Mercury respect each other, and liaise, mingle and even intermarry freely and cordially when the situation arises. Glory on Mercury is apportioned to individuals rather than races. Lord Juss's panegyric to the defeated Lieutenants of Witchland is worth remembering here (*The Worm Ouroboros* 491). By contrast, Lovecraft observed fundamental differentials between various races, and sought where he could to enforce boundaries between them. "We don't despise the French *in France or Quebec*", he noted, "but we don't want them grabbing *our* territory and creating foreign islands like Woonsocket and Fall River" (*Selected Letters* 4.195; Lovecrafts emphases). True Americans, he said, hated and loathed Jews "as the mammal hates and loathes the reptile." (quoted in de Camp, *Lovecraft* 254).

There is plenty more in this vein, but the point has probably been made. That Lovecraft married Sonia Haft Greene, a Ukrainian-born Jew, as something of a joke between intellectual acquaintances (Joshi, *A Life* 327-328) could be seen as eloquent testimony to the inevitable gap between ideology and action in real life. In fiction, however, he had a stick with which to enforce ethnic boundaries, and a soapbox from which to denounce those who ignored them. The first allowed him to present Arkham as a more racially homogenous Yankee enclave than ever really existed. The town simply does not have ethnic minorities. The second afforded him a useful foreshadowing tool, whereby characteristically unsympathetic depictions of melting-

pots could be used to presage disaster. It is most evident in stories such as "He", written during his miserable sojourn in Brooklyn, the immigrant population of which he describes as follows:

> …the throngs of people that seethed through the fume-like streets were squat, swarthy strangers with hardened faces and narrow eyes, shrewd strangers without dreams and without kinship to the scenes about them, who could never mean aught to a blue-eyed man of the old folk, with the love of fair green lanes and white New England village steeples in his heart. (119-120)

The semi-autobiographical nature of this passage is hard to miss.

Another story Lovecraft wrote while resident in Brooklyn features references to "the primitive half-ape savagery" ("The Horror at Red Hook" 129) of the locals, who include "an Arab with a hatefully negroid mouth" (139). "The Call of Cthulhu", uses "men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type" (153), whose destruction seems "almost a duty" (165), as villains. The inter-species breeding taking place in Innsmouth can obviously be construed as a cosmicist expansion of such a "hopeless tangle", and is foreshadowed by the whispered slander that nearby Cape Cod is home to a community of Fijian immigrants (272).

Put simply, Lovecraft believed that there was more than one human race, in both fact and fiction, that these different races occupied different positions on a sliding scale of nobility and worth, and that no good ever came of blurring the boundaries between them. Once the notion of such a stratification is accepted, giving some immigrant races tentacles and wings is really nothing more than an indulgence of the simplifying fiat of the supernatural. Special pleading can be and is made for the decent and upstanding Great Old Ones, but in Lovecraft's fiction, non-Yankees are almost by definition villains, whether they come from Syria, Fiji or Yoggoth. And birds of a feather flock together. In "The Call of Cthulhu", Thurston's uncle makes no progress in his investigation by means of discussion with "Average people in society and business – New England's traditional "salt of the earth"" (145). Eskimo religion, however, noted for "its deliberate bloodthirstiness and repulsiveness" (149), turns out to be the worship of the god-like alien. Thurston pauses in his narrative to absolve a sober and upstanding Nordic sea-captain for his killing a group of Pacific Island

cultists (164-165). The Innsmouth cult, we learn, was imported to New England from the Pacific Islands in a covert instance of reverse colonisation (295-300).

In his racial paranoia, Lovecraft grants no quarter to Yankee quislings. "Gawd knows", says an outsider discussing the furtive and unpopular people of Innsmouth, "they've gotten to be about as bad as South Sea cannibals and Guinea savages." (274) Decent New York society is similarly adulterated by their involvement in the immigrant necromancy being practiced at Red Hook. Then there is the queer little township of Dunwich:

> [T]he natives are now repellently decadent, having gone far along that path of retrogression common in many New England backwaters. They have become a race by themselves, with the well-defined mental and physical stigmata of degeneracy and in-breeding. The average of their intelligence is woefully low, whilst their annals reek of overt viciousness and of half-hidden murders, incests, and deeds of almost unnamable violence and perversity. The old gentry, representing two or three armigerous families which came from Salem in 1692, have kept somewhat above the general level of decay; though many branches are sunk in the sordid populace so deeply that only their name remains as key to their disgrace. Some of the Whateleys and Bishops still send their sons to Harvard and Miskatonic, though those sons seldom return to the mouldering gambrel roofs under which they and their ancestors were born. ("The Dunwich Horror" 109-110)

This is precisely the same sort of parochial, dilapidated simplemindedness that Washington Irving played for laughs in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow". Indeed, although the plot of "The Dunwich Horror" can be construed as a black-humoured, materialist parody of the life story of Christ, its setting is very much the same as that of Irving's story – a weird little New England backwater that has slipped through the cracks of the Enlightenment and has sunk into intellectual and cultural squalor. There is little indication that these parallels are conscious (Irving scarcely rates a mention in "Supernatural Horror in Literature"), but they are hard to miss. In Lovecraft's universe, however, the nadir of the decline is not the sensibly ignorant Hans van Tassel, but the Whateleys, a 'decayed' clan of apostate backwoodsmen who traffic with the demonic Yog-Sothoth. "We have no business calling in such things from

outside", cautions Professor Armitage of Miskatonic University, "and only very wicked people and very wicked cults ever try to" (173). Rooting such quislings out from among the white trash is the first step in the cosmic witch-hunt to protect Arkham. Dunwich is, in a typically prim, reserved, Arkhamite manner, wiped off the map: "all signboards pointing toward it have been taken down" (109). In Arkham, expunging a community from intellectual memory in this way is something akin to genocide.

The degeneration of white society, is a noteworthy feature of Lovecraft's work, also being referred to in "The Lurking Fear", "The Rats in the Walls", "The Picture in the House", "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth". Decayed, mountain-dwelling white folk have been used in American fiction as "among other things crypto-Puritans twisted by political isolation into parody" (Williamson 37) – an almost perfect description of the Whateleys. Their ancestors left Salem for more isolated homes in 1692, taking their copy of *Necronomicon* with them, and by 1928, the family is using the crumbling tome to summon non-Euclidian demons to materialist Sabbats. This demonstrates once again the "paramount" (Nelson 105) importance of setting (and therefore of the invented Arkham district) to Lovecraft's fiction, but it also indicates a real belief in and concern for the way a racial or ideological grouping might fray at the edges. The fact that the degeneration of Dunwich is presented as an extreme example of a social trend "common in many New England backwaters", furthermore, suggests a belief, or at least assumption, that such a decline is possible, perhaps even current, in the real world. Joshi (*Annotated Lovecraft* 108, n. 14) notes Lovecraft making remarks to precisely that effect in some of his unpublished letters. "The Dunwich Horror" was written in 1928, too early to really be part of the emergence of the stereotype of the ignorant, slovernly, lascivious hillbilly (cited in Williamson 41-42 as symptomatic of the new economic anxieties of Depression-era Americans) but it draws from the same well. The same can be said for Lovecraft's depiction of Joe Slater, the mountain-dweller possessed by a discorporate alien entity in "Beyond the Wall of Sleep". Brutish, filthy, irrationally violent and too stupid to communicate intelligibly with his doctors, Slater is, in the words of one commentator, "scarcely human" (Joshi, *A Life* 165).

Like the 'colour' that destroys the Gardners, Slater's interloper has no actual interest in humanity, being chiefly preoccupied with leaving Earth in order to pursue

an unfathomable vendetta against another alien many light years away. Lovecraft claimed that his concerns as a writer lay in similar regions, and the number of times he lectures his friends on their insignificance on the cosmic canvas suggests that this preoccupation was fairly genuine. Nevertheless the demands of his chosen form of expression required him to take an interest in humans, if only to balance the fantastic equation by providing his aliens with something to be alien to. In doing so he provided an almost purpose-built case study in the Tolkienian perception of the relation between fantasy and reality. More importantly, he accords humanity, even degenerate humanity, a modest but undeniable and quite concrete status within his fictional cosmos. Morality is a quality credited to those who understand this status and work to preserve it.

This status led Lovecraft to take great interest in humans and human qualities, and his view of humanity prompted him to stratify them on a sliding scale. A continuum of humanity in Lovecraft's work runs as follows – supernaturally idealised Yankees such as the Great Old Ones and the Great Race at the top, followed by Yankees themselves, then Yankee apostates such as the Whateleys, non-white interlopers such as those investing Brooklyn, and finally monsters such as Yog-Sothoth and the Deep Ones. One who truly had no interest in human affairs would not repeatedly in both correspondence and fiction display such an interest in human beings, or criticise those who crossed the boundaries notionally resulting from that interest. Lovecraft does so repeatedly. In Dunwich and Innsmouth, rationalist human apostates are crossing those boundaries in particularly horrifying ways; at Red Hook and the old Gardner place, such foulness is the work, deliberate or otherwise, of immigrants. In all cases, however, evil is done, and perceived as such (indeed, *only* as perceived as such) by humans. The fate of humans and adherence to human morality, as he perceived them, are at the centre of Lovecraft's work, and his world. This is not to say that he failed in articulating his comic vision, but that he uncovered an unexpected complication in doing so, and responded by examining these cosmic vermin closely and working out exactly what to think of them, becoming, in effect, a reluctant anthropologist – as many a fantasist is. This, in turn, turned his witch-hunt in a fascinating direction.

Stalemate

HP Lovecraft's strongest defenders must concede that his life story invites unsympathetic commentary. Born into an already self-consciously old-fashioned family with largely defunct notions of aristocratic breeding and status, he remained handicapped throughout his life by atavistic notions of personal decorum and social stratification. L Sprague de Camp, author of Lovecraft's first full-scale biography, quoted him as writing that "[M]y ideal is to be an absolutely passive & non-participating spectator", and that

> A far greater net return from life can be obtained through a repudiation of the overspeeded modern ideal, & a return to the sane classic principles of old which recognise the superiority of *being* over *doing*, & emphasise the necessity of *civilized leisure* & of an easy-going reflective and savouring process if one is to extract any solid or enduring satisfaction from the events of existence. (quoted in de Camp, *Lovecraft* 56)

Some manifestations of this line of thinking, such as the month he spent traipsing around Brooklyn looking for a suit jacket that had precisely three buttons and would not make him look like "a mongrel gutter-rat" (Joshi, *A Life* 361-363), have a faintly comic air. Others, such as his intransigent racism, are frankly offensive. The term 'snob' is hard to avoid, but he suffered as much from his own snobbery as anybody else. Attached to the notion that a gentleman should never *apply* for work, he only ever sent out the most evasive and silly of job applications (de Camp, *Lovecraft* 208-209), dooming himself to a life of meagre material subsistence that made something of a mockery of his pretensions to colonial aristocracy. Likewise, a man quite sincerely wedded to the perception that America was a fundamentally agrarian, intrinsically Anglo-Saxon outpost of the British Empire was setting himself up for a fall by settling in the lower east side of Brooklyn in 1924 and marrying a Ukrainian-born, Jewish milliner. After three years the marriage dissolved. Lovecraft returned to his native Providence and moved in with an aunt. There he continued to conduct his imaginative witch-hunt in between taking antiquarian road trips, clashing with his few professional associates (*Selected Letters* 4.17), and writing essays in praise of cats and correct English pronunciation. It takes a deliberately sympathetic biographer, such as ST Joshi, to cast this story in a positive light.

From a biographical perspective Lovecraft's conservatism is not difficult to account for. Until the age of fourteen he had been raised in his grandfather's house as an indulged only child in a world of affluent, attentive adults very conscious of their 'Old American' heritage. His grandfather's death in 1904 and the subsequent collapse of the Lovecraft fortune shattered that stability, with the resulting financial strain contributing to the slow-burning psychosis that eventually saw Lovecraft's mother, Susie, committed to a psychiatric hospital in 1918. She died there three years later. Left to eke out a living on his modest inheritance, Lovecraft can perhaps be forgiven for his tenacious attachment to the notion that he lived in a time of decline from the peak of American civilisation. That peak may never have actually existed in the pure, ethnically and intellectually homogenous form that Lovecraft liked to imagine, but the idea of such an epoch was clearly very important to him. He affected Georgian spelling and diction, maintained an enviable collection of eighteenth-century books inherited from his grandfather, and desired to see England and America reconciled. Indeed, little enough of the real world meant anything to him. His construction of a social and intellectual golden age in colonial New England, however, was profoundly and abidingly real to him. He professed an early love of supernatural literature such as Greek mythology, but also insisted that:

> [F]or me books and legends held no monopoly on fantasy. In the quiet hill streets of my native town, where fanlighted colonial doorways, small paned windows and graceful Georgian steeples still kept alive the glamour of the eighteenth century, I found a magic then and now hard to explain. Sunsets over the city's outspread roofs, as seen from vantage-points on the great hill, affected me with especial poignancy. Before I knew it the eighteenth century had captured me more utterly than ever the hero of "Berkley Square" was captured; so that I used to spend hours in the attic pouring over the long-s'd booked banished from the library downstairs and unconsciously absorbing the style of Pope and Dr. Johnson as a natural mode of expression. ('Some Notes on a Non-Entity' 208)

There is a parallel here with George MacDonald's abiding pride in his Scottish heritage, and with Wolff's claim that MacDonald yearned for a time when being a member of Clan MacDonald had practicable significance (Wolff 381-382). Lovecraft,

whose job applications involved wittering for paragraphs about his pure Anglo-American ancestry and cultured upbringing (de Camp, *Lovecraft* 208-209), probably took the idea further than his Scottish predecessor, and probably suffered more as a result. This parallel between two such different authors is worth noting. The most important thing to take from "Some Notes on a Non-Entity", however, is the enduring symbolic power Lovecraft found in his perceptions, accurate or otherwise, of his own local history. These adolescent impressions stuck with him throughout his life. Upon moving into a two-bedroom flat with his aunt in 1933, the 43-year-old Lovecraft rejoiced in the fact that he could set up his desk "under a window affording a splendid view of the lower town's outspread roofs & of the mystical sunsets that flame behind them" (quoted in Joshi, *A Life* 533). Although built in the early nineteenth century, the house had been outfitted in the colonial style upon which Lovecraft doted. the language Lovecraft uses to describe these sorts of experiences demonstrates the heights of emotion he felt when his ideals were fulfilled. Belief in the beauty and grace of eighteenth-century New England, and discovery of the dwindling remnants of the era, grounded Lovecraft's emotions in the face of disruption and pessimism in much the same way as MacDonald's faith saw him through his difficulties.

Lovecraft viwed the nineteenth century, by comparison, as a long period of decline, and the twentieth as a chaotic, degenerate, heterogeneous mess. In fact, the Georgian era was a fairly earthy and free-spirited age, but the value of Lovecraft's rose-tinted view of a paradise of ordered, rationalistic thought and impeccable artistic taste – given literary form in Arkham – has little to do with historical accuracy. Rather, it is very close to the sort of symbolic value MacDonald found in the Bible; something of which the truth transcends empirical fact or contingent expediency and is a joy for ever. Even if its factual existence could be, for argument's sake, assumed, this era was long gone; Lovecraft turned to literature to get it back. Literature in general and fantastic literature in particular was the one forum in which the imagination held sway over fact. He noted as much in a long-winded reply to correspondents who criticised his story "Dagon" – an early and rudimentary attempt to articulate the anti-Darwinian blasphemy of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" – as unrealistic:

> The imaginative writer [ie the writer of fantasy] devotes himself to art in its
> most essential sense. It is not his business to fashion a petty trifle to please the

children, to point a useful moral, to concoct superficial "uplift" stuff for the mid-Victorian holdover, or to rehash insolvable human problems didactically. He is a painter of moods and mind-pictures – a capturer and amplifier of elusive dreams and fancies – a voyager into those unheard-of lands which are glimpsed through the veil of actuality but rarely, and only by the most sensitive. He is one who sees not only objects, but follows up all the bizarre trails of associated ideas which encompass and lead away from them. He is a poet of twilight visions and childhood memories, but sings only for the sensitive. All moods are his to reproduce, be they light or dark. "Wholesomeness" and "utility" are to him unknown words. ("In Defence of Dagon" 47)

In this defence of fantasy, Lovecraft argues for a second, somewhat oppositional value for fantasy; it allows the author to articulate essential truths in a way that is denied to writers troubled by concerns of plausibility. As seen earlier, Lovecraft used the fiat of the supernatural to articulate the limits of human perception. Cthulhu and Yog-Sothoth operate on physical and epistemological principles that realism, by definition, cannot support. Only by divorcing ourselves in some measure from reality could we truly make sense of that reality, and our perceptions of it. This is very close to MacDonald and Eddison's common argument that the search for perfection in literature helps us cope with imperfections in the primary world. As "a devotee of the past" ("In Defence of Dagon" 49), Lovecraft saw imperfection in the gap between himself and a vanished epoch. One of his wishes as an adult, therefore, was "somehow to vanquish time and turn it backwards" (de Camp, *Lovecraft* 57).

And yet the past is one of the chief sources of horror in Lovecraft's fiction. In many of his stories, including *At the Mountains of Madness* and "The Call of Cthulhu", the entire narrative is focused not on any contemporary threat or activity but on the discovery of an ancient disaster that took place in the immemorial past. *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931) is an excellent example of this pattern. The novella takes the form of a submission to the governing council of Miskatonic University, in which Professor Dyer pleads that the institution undertake no further exploration of Antarctica. His pleas are justified by his belated disclosures of what his own expedition of some years past found in the interior of the frozen continent – an ancient, alien city:

The things once rearing and dwelling in this frightful masonry in the age of the dinosaurs were not indeed dinosaurs, but far worse. Mere dinosaurs were new and almost brainless objects – but the builders of this city were wise and old, and had left certain traces in rocks even laid down well-nigh a thousand million years ago…rocks laid down before the true life of earth had advanced beyond plastic groups of cells…rocks laid down before the true life of earth had existed at all. They were the makers and enslavers of that life, and above all else the fiendish elder myths which things like the Pnakotic Manuscripts and the *Necronomicon* affrightedly hint about. They were the Great Old Ones that filtered down from the stars when the earth was young – the beings whose substance an alien evolution had shaped, and whose powers were such as this planet had never bred. (268)

Much of the story is given over to explaining the history of these gargantuan, plant-like beings, gleaned by Dyer and his assistant Danforth from the murals and sculptures of the colony, which has been abandoned for at least half a million years. Before their extinction, this civilisation lasted so long that their architecture evolved to take tectonic drift into account. The members of Dyer's expedition swore each other to secrecy, an oath Danforth abides by even after the cataclysmic nervous breakdown caused by the knowledge that humanity's perception of the universe has been so woefully shortsighted. This discovery constitutes a heresy against the rationalistic (and, in spite of Lovecraft's own convictions, humanistic) theocracy of Arkham. Says Professor Dyer,

Every incident of that four-and-a-half-hour flight is burned into my recollection because of its crucial position in my life. It marked my loss, at the age of fifty-four, of all that peace and balance which the normal mind possesses through its accustomed conception of external Nature and Nature's laws. Thenceforward all ten of us – but the student Danforth and myself above all others – were to face a hideously amplified world of lurking horrors which nothing can erase from our emotions, and which we would refrain from sharing with mankind in general if we could (224)

That "accustomed conception of Nature" refers to the rationalistic, humanistic perception of the universe as fathomable, finite, and offering a privileged position to humanity. It is also a precise analogy to the secret, forbidden lore that lies at the heart of many Gothic novels. And it comes to light via an unwholesome survival from the distant past.

In "The Rats in the Walls" (1923), Walter de la Poer discovers that such secrets can have profound personal ramifications. The historical reference in the protagonist's name is quite deliberate, as Lovecraft had been a devotee of Edgar Allen Poe since childhood (*Selected Letters* 2.109) and accorded him an entire chapter in "Supernatural Horror in Literature". The actions of de la Poer, a Virginian gentleman, in returning to Exham Priory, the ruined, ill-omened seat of his disgraced medieval ancestors, perhaps recalls the nebulous, Gothic, old-world geography of some of Poe's stories. Readers are invited to applaud him for restoring and redecorating the family pile in medieval fashion, going to the extent of installing "electric bulbs which so cleverly counterfeited candles" (97). Within days of taking possession of his new home, however, the restlessness of his cats leads him to explore the sub-basements of the castle, pulling back layer after layer of architecture – Jacobean, medieval, Anglo-Saxon, Roman, Celtic – and mystery. Finally he hits both geological and genealogical bedrock, learning the justification for his family's loathsome reputation. The lowest level of Exham Priory is a massive subterranean slaughterhouse where, for untold centuries, the de la Poers have conducted horrifying cannibalistic rituals in honour of "Nyarlathotep, the mad faceless god" (107) who serves as the chaotic anti-Christ to Lovecraft's ordered scientific materialism. At this discovery, de la Poer's mind snaps, leading to a spectacular display of cultural and linguistic devolution; his account is written from the padded cell to which he is carted after being pulled off the half-eaten corpse of a companion.

"The Rats in the Walls" is open to interpretation as a fable on the dangers of atavism, although this would be an odd thing to issue from the pen of a man who encouraged his lawfully-acquired wife to address him as 'Grandpa Theobold' (Joshi, *A Life* 324). It is, in fact, a genealogically specific example of a pervasive theme in Lovecraft's work: exploration of the past reveals secrets that will destroy us all.

We have already seen that, in his own way, Lovecraft was in fact possessed of a narrow but abiding and at times almost frantic interest in the course of human civilisaton. That course, as Lovecraft saw it, was going to be bumpy. The future, both

in terms of the social degradation he saw everywhere and in the possibility that forthcoming discoveries could harm us, is also used as a source of horror in his work. In "Supernatural Horror in Literature", Lovecraft notes,

> For those who relish speculation regarding the future, the tale of supernatural horror provides an interesting field. Combated by a mounting wave of plodding realism, cynical flippancy, and sophisticated disillusionment, it is yet encouraged by a parallel tide of growing mysticism, as developed by the fatigued reaction of "occultists" and religious fundamentalists against materialistic discovery through the simulation of wonder and fancy by such enlarged vistas and broken barriers as modern science has given us with its intra-atomic chemistry, advancing astrophysics, doctrines of relativity, and probings into biology and human thought. (105-106)

Or, more succinctly, conflict between past and future can make for a really good fright. At this point it is worth reproducing the pensive and celebrated opening paragraph of "The Call of Cthulhu";

> We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (139)

Lovecraft, of course, had few cheerful things to say about the prospects for humanity, either in the short term (since his Yankee ideal was being swamped by hordes of babbling, scheming immigrants) or in the long term. We have already seen how the Great Old Ones and Cthulhu, in demonstrating the existence of pre-human civilisations on Earth and areas of science that humanity can never hope to comprehend, have destroyed the rationalistic, Arkhamite peace of mind of their discoverers. Lovecraft's adherence to scientific materialism, with its ultimate conclusion that the universe owes nothing to humanity, did more than grant him carte

blanche to *create* the most alien of aliens. In adhering to this idea, Lovecraft had to have these aliens win. As personifications of the chaotic, impersonal cosmos outside Arkham, they will, ipso facto, have us, mind, body and soul. All they need is time, and they have more of that than we can comprehend. As *Necronomicon* notes, "That is not dead that can eternal lie" ("The Call of Cthulhu", 156). After discovering his true, alien ancestry, the now insane narrator of "The Shadow over Innsmouth" records among his own ravings the chilling observation that "It would be a city greater than Innsmouth next time" (334). Meanwhile, the groundbreaking research of the brilliant Walter Gilman in "The Dreams in the Witch House" serves only to bring him to a sticky end:

> Possibly Gilman ought not to have studied so hard. Non-Euclidean calculus and quantum physics are hard enough to stretch any brain; and when one mixes them with folklore, and tries to trace a strange background of multi-dimensional reality behind the ghoulish hints of the Gothic tales and the wild whisperings of the chimney-corner, one can hardly expect to be wholly free of mental tension. Gilman came from Haverhill, but it was only after he had entered college in Arkham that he began to connect his mathematics with the fantastic legends of elder magic. (654-655)

Gilman is, in short, asking for trouble, which arrives in a spectacularly gory fashion later in the story as his body becomes a gateway out of the fourth dimension. Although "The Dreams in the Witch House" is a muddled work, not especially well-regarded by Lovecraft scholars (Joshi, *Lovecraft* 516-517), it provides a perfect example of another pervasive theme in his fiction – that further discoveries, especially groundbreaking work of the sort done by Dyer and Gilman, seem almost inevitably to lead to the discovery of devastating ancient secrets. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, Dyer's monograph is written in an attempt prevent further Antarctic research that would make his terrible secret common knowledge. Although Lovecraft neglects to point this out, it is a safe bet that the researchers who examine the imponderable meteorite in "The Colour out of Space" are losing sleep.

Punter (*Literature of Terror* 283) has queried what Lovecraft feared more, the centuried sinister past or the ravening, chaotic future. It seems not to have occurred to him, Joshi or de Camp, that Lovecraft was in fact calling – one might say pleading –

for stasis. In his work, Lovecraft seems to have fused past and future into a single terrible, incomprehensible humanist blasphemy, with past and future merging into a single unbearable maelstrom sure to doom the human race. It seems that Lovecraft was, in his heart of hearts, a man who spent his life waging a personal war upon everything *else*.

The self-styled gentleman of Providence was a man given to ideas considerably larger than the mind from whence they sprang. And yet despite this expansive intellectual view of the universe, he was a man open only to a very narrow range of personal, cultural or sensual experiences. He remembered the essentially forced sale of his grandfather's evidently beautiful house in 1904 in this manner:

> I felt I had lost my entire adjustment to the cosmos – for what indeed was HPL without the remembered rooms & hallways & staircases & statuary & paintings & yard & walks & cherry-trees & fountain & ivy-grown arch & stable & gardens & all the rest? How could an old man of 14 (& surely I felt that way!) readjust to a skimpy flat & new household program & inferior outdoor setting in which almost nothing familiar remained? (*Selected Letters* 4.365)

Lovecraft knew himself to be, from a very early age, a creature of habit, much happier working within a series of firmly inculcated cultural boundaries and routines. He was suspicious and derisory of anything new, and clung to a very narrow and dogmatic perception of the inherently noble character of his home state of Rhode Island. He was, it seems, convinced that he could not adequately function elsewhere. A portrait of this realisation in action can be found in his novella *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1927), a dream-fantasy Lovecraft wrote as, essentially, a stylistic tribute to Lord Dunsany. It tells of Randolph Carter's adventures in dreamland, a fantastical place where Carter hobnobs with ghouls and moonbeasts, rides zebras up the slopes of hidden plateaus and sojourns in palaces and temples built from jasper and onyx. As creative (and often well-handled) as this imagery is, it pales somewhat after the first twenty or thirty pages, leaving all but the most devoted fans slightly bored in the last half of the novella. Carter feels the same way, finding the journey increasingly arduous before he finally reaches the storied city of Kadath. There he meets with Nyarthotep, here cast less as the screeching cosmic anathema of "The Rats

in the Walls" than as a rather genial aesthetic psychopompos, who tells Carter why he has become so jaded;

> New-England bore you, and into your soul she poured a liquid loveliness which cannot die. This loveliness, moulded, crystalised, and polished by years of memory and dreaming, is your terraced wonder of elusive sunsets; and to find that marble parapet with curious urns and carven rail, and descend at last those endless balustraded steps to the city of broad squares and prismatic fountains, you need only to turn back to the thoughts and visions of your wistful boyhood. (133)

Carter wakes to a particularly lovely Massachusetts sunrise. His dreams are mere extrapolations of the exquisite aesthetic sense that his Novanglian upbringing has given him. True, fundamental beauty lies there, in his home in the real world. Joshi (*A Life* 413-415) has suggested that the sensory overload in the second half of the novella may be a deliberate attempt to make this point, arguing that *Unknown Kadath* constitutes something of a cultural autobiography of a man reaching aesthetic maturity. But for the trivial caveat that Carter is a native Bostonian, this is probably a sensible suggestion. Tellingly, it was the last significant story Lovecraft wrote in the Dunsanian idiom; subsequent tales were firmly rooted in Arkham.

A few years earlier Lovecraft had been given cause to put his belief in the surpassing importance of Novanglian atmosphere into practice. In 1924 he was offered the editorship of *Weird Tales*, probably the most lucrative job offer he ever received. Whether he could have performed in this role in an interesting question, but in any case, upon learning that the job would require him to move to Chicago, he turned the offer down. Joshi (*A Life* 332) has praised him for this refusal, noting that at the time the magazine was suffering managerial upheavals that very nearly led to its collapse. Had the magazine folded, the hapless Rhode Islander would have been stranded in a city in which he had few prospects. There may be something to this, but Lovecraft's stated reason for turning down the position was that it would have required him to relocate to a city that lacked the antiquarian atmosphere upon which he so thrived. That Lovecraft, at that stage newly married and facing the realities of having to contribute to household finances, turned down such a lucrative offer for this reason clearly demonstrates his remarkable sensitivity to environment.

In one sense this episode speaks well for Lovecraft, portraying him as a man with a very clear understanding of his own limitations and intellectual and spiritual needs. Although this manner of thinking contributed to some deeply unattractive aspects of his character, such self-knowledge is in itself probably admirable – indeed, it recalls MacDonald's laudable acceptance of the difficulties of his theological manifesto. It was as a result of this knowledge, furthermore, that Lovecraft decided the Chicago job was not for him. Besides, in 1924, when the offer arrived, he had only recently resettled in New York with his wife Sonia. This had been a considerable jump for a man who lived with his mother until the age of 28, and he was quite within his rights to cry off another, even more adventurous relocation. Nevertheless this refusal, and the line of thinking from which it resulted, clearly demonstrate that Lovecraft, so fond of *intellectual* effort, was not going to broaden his *cultural* horizons without very good reason. He was, in short, happy in his small, inherently elitist world. Arkham is an encapsulation of this world. Much like MacDonald, whose secondary worlds follow the laws of the emotionally-motivated, childlike God who grounded the Scotsman's perception of the universe, Lovecraft used world-building to give voice to this intense, abiding emotional connection to his homeland.

Lovecraft held other, essentially incompatible opinions almost as strongly. He received these ideas from his long-standing interest in science, especially astronomy and chemistry. He began his career as a published writer by contributing amateur astronomy columns to a local newspaper and lectured his friends frequently and at length on the intrinsic merit of scientific materialism. He was often tellingly shrewd in acquiring and presenting evidence for his materialistic view of the cosmos. When Einstein demonstrated the relativity of energy and matter, Lovecraft familiarised himself with the theory and, noting its implication that all energy must be by definition detectible, trumpeted it as a debunking of the concept of the human soul (*Selected Letters* 2.266). That he was able to think through the philosophical ramifications of a notoriously obtuse scientific theorem so thoroughly indicates a grasp of the physical sciences quite beyond the norm. Despite his accompanying tendency to co-opt scientific ideas as buttresses for his existing biases, his lifelong dedication to continually expanding his understanding of the natural world is considerably to his credit. Fitful attendance at secondary school (the result, Lovecraft always maintained, of self-diagnosed nervous fragility) and the collapse of the family fortune prevented him from ever attending Brown University – an institution he loved

in the abstract – but he was not going to be forbidden from living the life of the mind. His scientific essays rarely constitute more than a sort of materialist housekeeping – charting the movements of certain stars, for example – but the very fact that they exist in sufficient quantity and quality to warrant an entire published volume of their own is eloquent testimony to his abiding interest in the natural world. This interest never failed to impress upon him the sheer enormity and complete impersonality of the cosmos, points upon which he had made up his mind with some fervour:

> Life, or at least life upon the earth and the other planets of the solar system, extends but a little distance, relatively speaking, into the past; for the nebular hypothesis of Laplace can trace the ancestry of the sun and planets to a gaseous, incandescent mass which could under no circumstances support the vital principle. And this condition, removed from us by innumerable years, is obviously but a matter of yesterday as eternity is reckoned. Nor is the future prospect of much greater extent. In a few billion years, a mere second in eternity, the sun and planets must lose the heat bequeathed to them by the parent nebula, and roll black, frozen and untenanted through space. Therefore the very existence of life and thought is but a matter of a moment in unbounded time; the merest incident in the history of the universe. An hour ago we did not exist; in another hour we will have ceased to be. ("Time and Space" 1918, 30).

He stuck with this perception in his fiction, departing from the boundaries of literary realism in order to visit what he regard as the self-evident enormity, uncertainty and impersonality of intellectual realism on humanity. Doing so required the 'casting off' of the human frame of reference. In numerous letters and essays, Lovecraft insisted that he had done so. This drew occasional barbs from his readers. Among the critics whom he answered in "In Defence of Dagon" was a correpondent named Mr Wickenden, who scoffed at Lovecraft's denial of teleology – his denial, that is, that the universe was a mechanism set up to serve a central purpose. Calling on his knowledge of physics and astronomy, Lovecraft tartly dismisses the idea as immature, sentimental nonsense;

He sees a process of evolution in operation at one particular cosmic moment in one particular point in space; and at once gratuitously assumes that *all the cosmos* is evolving steadily *in one direction* towards a fixed goal. Moreover, he *feels* that it must amount to something – he calls it a thing of "heroism and splendour"! So when it is shewn that our world will (relatively) soon be extinct though the cooling of the sun; that space is full of such worlds that have died; that human life and the solar system itself are the merest *novelties* in an eternal cosmos; and that all indications point to a gradual breaking-down of matter and energy which will eventually nullify the results of evolution in any particular corner of space; when all these things are shewn Mr Wickeneden recoils, and…cries out that it's all nonsense – it just *can't* be so! (51-52)

He stuck to this point in a lengthy addendum to the essay several months later (55-58). This dismissal of any central value and purpose to the universe appears, notably, in the very same essay in which Lovecraft argues for the value of fantasy in isolating and portraying one.

So here we have a man who from adolescence is writing essays emphasising the enormity and mechanical impersonality of space-time, and yet from a similar age is also intractably, almost neurotically convinced of the surpassing nobility of a tiny and, to his mind, embattled outpost of humanity. He scoffed at the existence of the human soul, but endowed a certain, geographically and ethnically delineated group of human accomplishments with significance probably best described as spiritual. Lovecraft may have repeatedly sworn allegiance to a fearsomely glum brand of scientific materialism, but his pride in his own cultural heritage, however accurately or inaccurately he perceived it, was clearly far too strong for him to ever entirely manage to divorce himself from ultimately spiritual human concerns. It seems reasonable to suggest that he took to composing secondary-world fiction as a way of reconciling these contradictions. But for the fundamental pessimism of the content, these reasons strongly recall those of ER Eddison; he wished to create an artificial place in which his worldview could be put into practice in something akin to laboratory conditions that could never be found outside a text.

Arkham is a fragment of colonial America that could never have existed. As we have seen, it is a place in which the Puritan religious motivations of the original

settlers have been replaced with rationalistic, observational science and staunchly adhered to into the present day. It is also entirely culturally homogenous, something few parts of America ever were. Arkham is entirely populated by resolute, Anglo-Saxon Yankees. It is therefore a bastion of Lovecraft's worldview. Bastions, however, are only worth writing about if their defences are going to be tested. Lovecraft tests Arkham's defences with his aforementioned cosmic witch-hunt. Here we must remind ourselves that it was reasonable, open-minded supposition, not fancy or ignorance, that led medieval cartographers to mark the edges of their maps with "Here Be Dragons". Lovecraft knew Arkham did not exist, otherwise he would not have created it. But he was reasonably certain that dragons existed, *somewhere out there*. He is, in a sense, trying to work out if the civilisation he so loved could withstand the battering it stood to receive from the expansion of its own – indeed, *his* own – intellectual horizons. Generally speaking it cannot. Once given an opportunity to meditate on the results of his research into the Cthulhu cult, Francis Thurston realises that all human accomplishments are as of nothing. Deprived of any illusions to the contrary, he can take pleasure in nothing. "I have looked upon all the universe has to hold of horror", he says, "and the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me" (169).

Somewhat like ER Eddison, Lovecraft is demonstrating what happens when people used to operating in accordance with lofty symbolic ideals (the Arkhamites) are put up against the vicissitudes of reality. The stout intellectual yeomanry of Arkham are unfailingly characterised as good people, and as we have seen, Lovecraft's notionally amoral stories are very firmly rooted in human morality as he perceived it. Given his use of the undoing of these good people as a source of horror, Lovecraft clearly had very strong ideas about who he *wanted* to win. The Arkham district has, notably, none of the criminal immigrant underclass he portrays as infesting New York ("He" 119-120) or Dunedin, New Zealand ("The Call of Cthulhu" 162-163), but it must contend with quislings such as those present in "The Dunwich Horror". In that particular case the men of Arkham win a marginal victory by, intellectually speaking, taking Dunwich off the map. Nevertheless, in "The Colour out of Space", "The Shadow over Innsmouth", "The Shadow out of Time", "The Dreams in the Witch-House", *At the Mountains of Madness*, "The Thing on the Doorstep", "The Whisperer in Darkness" and "The Call of Cthulhu", Arkham falls. Without such a bastion of goodness, the world will inevitably crumble, as Lovecraft

portrayed most startlingly in the conclusion of the 1920 prose-poem "Nyarlathotep",
itself actually predating the Arkham cycle.

> A sickened, sensitive shadow writhing in hands that were not hands, and
> whirled blindly past ghastly midnights of rotting creation, corpses of dead
> worlds with sores that were cities, charnel winds that brush the pallid stars and
> made them flicker low. Beyond the worlds vague ghosts of monstrous things;
> half-seen columns of unsanctified temples that rest on nameless rocks beneath
> space and reach up to dizzy vacua above the spheres of light and darkness.
> And through this revolting graveyard of the universe the muffled, maddening
> beating of drums, and thin, monotonous whine of blasphemous flutes from
> inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond Time; the detestable pounding and
> piping whereunto dance slowly, awkwardly and absurdly the gigantic,
> tenebrous ultimate gods – the blind, voiceless, mindless gargoyles whose soul
> is Nyarlathotep. (33)

This is what happens if Nyarlathotep is given free rein on Earth; the universe
as a whole disintegrates into a chaotic jumble of impersonal cosmic wreckage,
presided over by "tenebrous ultimate gods" whose rule, such as it is, is characterised
by a succession of adjectives of disaster – "revolting", "maddening", "detestable" and
above all 'blasphemous'. Here, before the witch-hunt has properly gotten under way,
Lovecraft's earlier experiments in materialist magic seem to have revealed to him the
importance of humanity. This sickening cosmic disintegration is what happens when
the infinite, unfathomable laws of space-time are indulged without steadfast human
souls to rein them in. As Galbreath notes (60-61) , the destruction of the "primitive
myopia" ("In Defence of Dagon" 53) Lovecraft decried in humanistic fiction causes
the end of the world. Lovecraft ultimately could not divorce himself from notions of
humanity's privileged position in the universe. In fact, as the repeated metaphors of
corporeal degeneration in this apocalyptic vision ("hands that were not hands", "pallid
stars", "corpses of dead worlds with sores that were cities", "blind, voiceless,
mindless") demonstrate, what he did was flip traditional religious notions about
human autochthony on their heads by creating a universe whose true, summative
nature is wrought in our image, rather than vice versa. Lovecraft's universe cannot
function without us. Humans are not, as he once wrote, "an excrescence on the body

of infinite progression like a wart on a human hand" (*Selected Letters* 1.16). We are, in fact, the auto-immune system. For all our fragility, we must be preserved. So much, it seems, for Lovecraft the detached materialist.

One will occasionally hear the informal theory that the longevity of *Romeo and Juliet* is a consequence of Shakespeare making his protagonists so likeable that the audience is prepared to believe that these star-crossed lovers might just make it if we watch the play one more time. It is almost as if Lovecraft, for his own sake, was attempting the same trick, obsessively revisiting this scenario time and again in the hopes that he could preserve the symbolic truths of his perceptions of New England from the factual truths of scientific materialism, of which he was also convinced. The horror in his fiction ultimately stems from his almost invariable conclusion that symbolic truth could not endure in the face of fact. His willingness to come to this conclusion so often might be read as bravery or honesty on his part, in something of the manner of a long-suffering scientist prepared to repeatedly publish the sobering results of his research. The fact that he kept attempting the experiment, however, turning out much of his best work in the process, indicates that this was something that preoccupied his imagination. Whatever the case, his need for an artificial, self-contained stage upon which to perform these experiments serves as a compelling answer to the question of why he wrote secondary-world fiction.

This also serves as a strong point of contact between his work and that of MacDonald and Eddison. All three men used the secondary world as a device to illustrate a particular idea in clearer terms than the primary world could allow. All three used allegories – in Lovecraft's case the contrasting characterisations of alien races personifying noble and ignoble human traits – to demonstrate their points. In order to really make those points, however, they had to place individual examples of the device in particular frames of reference for which realism was ill-suited. In the cases of MacDonald and Eddison, this involved the creation of thoroughly self-contained fictional cosmoses operating on ontological principles more sound than those apparently at work in the primary world. Lovecraft, who attached profound ontological significance to a primly sanitised version of a primary-world culture, did not quite see the need for that; everything he ever wanted existed or (he could convince himself) used to exist in New England. The place merely needed cleaning up and sorting out. The sort of clean-up it required, however, involved a clearing away of the clutter of real life and its replacement with a substantially fictional culture

constructed via appeal to art and literature as much as history. Although it draws on Lovecraft's perception of reality, this idealisation could not work in the primary world, for much the same reason that the Land of Seven Dimensions and Zimiamvia could not. It requires acceptance that there are certain central ideas – very simple, parochial ones in Lovecraft's opinion – that serve as an enduring, infallible yardstick for the value of everything else. Once that standard of truth is accepted, furthermore, the value of everything else can be reckoned in relation to it. That which denies that standard or detracts from it is evil. Just as MacDonald's Shadows and Eddison's Dexris can be reckoned as evil because of their inapplicability to the purpose of a central celestial consciousness, Cthulhu is a monster because he has upset the placid frame of reference enjoyed – indeed, embodied – by the men of Arkham.

Where Lovecraft parts company from MacDonald and Eddison is in his fearsome, ultimately rather brave pessimism. Those world-builders built worlds in order to illustrate how everything really ought to work. Lovecraft, by contrast, created his world as one half of an equation designed to determine whether symbolic truth really had the capacity to outlast the onslaught of factual truth. He offered his readers little comfort on this issue, repeatedly insisting on the eventual victory of chaotic, impersonal philistinism. The 'Cthulhu Mythos', to give Lovecraft's Arkham stories their frequently-used misnomer, are essentially stories of the forces of reality invading and overrunning Fairy Land, and therefore a stern warning about the fragility and potential irrelevance of symbolic truth. Unlike MacDonald and Eddison, Lovecraft undoubtedly saw evil as a force unto itself, and a very dark and powerful one, even if its darkness was only evident in relation to the shining, benevolent beacon of Arkham. Demonstration of this point required, however, an engagement with the notion of symbolic truth and the considered construction of a literary prototype of it. In embodying that truth, Arkham stands as further evidence for the essentially Romantic idea that art exists to bridge the gap between that which exists and that which ought to exist.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Lovecraft died in his forties, from intestinal cancer resulting, most likely, from a lifetime of childishly picky eating. The fact that he died without any literary reputation, regarding himself as a failure and a non-entity, is the jumping-off point for

more than one biography (Joshi, *A Life* ix, and "Introduction" 1; see also de Camp, *Lovecraft*, 4). This lack of self-esteem on his part may have less to do with his lack of respectable or gentlemanly publication than his inability to reconcile the two halves of his ideology to the extent he was clearly aiming for. In that light his eventual fate is somewhat sad. Lovecraft is more famous now than he ever was in life, but mostly thanks to the willfully misapprehended, semi-comic oral tradition to which his best stories have given rise. An internet search for 'Cthulhu' will turn up more "Cthulhu for President" campaign posters ("why vote for the lesser evil?") than serious discussion, or even sincere fan appreciation, of the story itself. It seems likely that for every copy of *The Annotated Lovecraft* that is sold, three pairs of Cthulhu carpet slippers will be purchased by self-styled fans whose actual knowledge of his work is limited to rote-learned jokes about spending a spring break in Innsmouth. Entertaining as those jokes may be, Lovecraft's witch-hunt deserves better than such third-hand trivialisation. These stories are open to various criticisms, to be sure, but they are the product of a brave, keen, albeit fallible intellect engaged in a reasoned and directed, albeit self-limiting, attempt to make sense of the real world. We would do well to question some of the assumptions upon which Lovecraft based this effort, but the effort itself was entirely sincere.

Lovecraft is also quite obviously a contributor to the American Gothic tradition. His adoration (and, in the early stretches of his career at least, imitation) of Poe, and his corresponding fondness for other contributors to the genre such as Hawthorne and Machen, make this a fairly uncontroversial point. Lovecraft handled Gothic themes and tropes tolerably well, expanding them cleverly to his broader cosmic canvas, but his use of them in an examination of the remoteness and potential vulnerability of symbolic truth is neither particularly surprising nor wholly innovative. The genre can, broadly speaking, be characterised by its abiding interest in such matters. Consequently little has been made of Lovecraft's Gothicism in the preceding analysis of his work. In the case of our fourth subject author, however, use of the Gothic is a major issue. Unlike Lovecraft, this author's use of the genre appears, on the surface, somewhat inadvertent. Like Lovecraft, however, Mervyn Peake was to use the genre in an innovative and, in some lights, damning criticism of the tyrannies of reality.

Mervyn Peake's Archipelago of Souls

The writers examined so far in this thesis are all known to history primarily for their fantasy fiction. George MacDonald was reputedly a gifted and inspiring orator, but this talent obviously could not outlive him. Only his writings remain, and of those, he is best known for his fantasies. In his own lifetime, ER Eddison was decorated by his king in his capacity as a public servant, but that service would be forgotten today were it not for his productive hobby writing of worms and warriors. HP Lovecraft may not have rated many of his own stories, but it is due to their influence that fantasy fandom has turned his name into an adjective. All these men are known primarily for their penning of narrative fantasy.

The same cannot be said of Mervyn Peake (1911-1968). Peake was a singularly creative artistic polyglot whose life's work included contributions to book illustration, painting, sculpture (although no examples of his sculpture survive; Winnington, 2000, 13), drama, short fiction and lyric, comic and narrative verse. He was applauded for these in his day, but was largely forgotten by the time he slipped into his prolonged final illness in the mid-1960s. His friend Michael Moorcock recalls hearing the unkind story that his eccentric artistic visions had driven him mad (17); in fact, he suffered from early-onset Alzheimer's disease at a time when that affliction was even less well-understood than it is today. In the years since his death his work in various fields has become the topic of a small but gradually increasing number of books and monographs. Interest in his broader corpus is strong enough to warrant the publication of a multidisciplinary journal of *Peake Studies* (although this journal is not yet peer-reviewed and therefore, like *Lovecraft Studies*, has not been consulted here). Although Peake sometimes had trouble making a living from his creative work, since his death it has become clear that he possessed one of the most fecund, versatile and idiosyncratically powerful imaginations of his time.

Nevertheless it would be fair to say that Peake is primarily remembered for the remarkable work of secondary-world fantasy, *Titus Groan* (1946), and its two sequels *Gormenghast* (1949) and *Titus Alone* (1958). It is in his capacity as the author of these novels that he will be examined here; like George MacDonald's theological essays, his other work will be referenced only insofar as it illustrates, his career as a writer of secondary-world fantasy. Peake's acts of world-building, accomplished

primarily in the first two of these novels, are chronologically among the last pre-Tolkienian examples of the craft. The world he created as the setting for *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* (*Titus Alone* being of peripheral interest for our purposes) is of such a weirdly elemental and all-encompassing type, furthermore, that it is difficult to see how the current discussion could omit it.

Peake is also unique among the fantasists examined in this thesis in that his prose work is undeniably modern literature (unlike that of George MacDonald[2]), widely read (unlike that of ER Eddison) and principally contained within a small, manageable corpus of three (arguably two) major novels, unlike HP Lovecraft's. Consequently this chapter is, unlike its predecessors, written with the assumption that readers are already largely familiar with Peake's Gormenghast cycle. What follows is an attempt to position Peake's work within three successive theoretical systems.

Firstly, I will examine Gormenghast Castle in order to determine exactly what makes this secondary world different from the primary world. As our analysis of the other authors in this thesis has demonstrated, resonant secondary worlds differ from the primary world in ways considerably more subtle than mere geography. Ascertaining the precise differences between Gormenghast and our world is an important preliminary step in answering the question of how this singularly odd world came to be. Secondly, there is the issue of Peake's Gothicism. Although some see the inclusion of Peake among the modern Gothic novelists as spurious (Gilmore 23), viewing his novels in light of the theoretical framework that has been erected around the Gothic reveals that these books in fact work in close accord with the precepts and ideas with which the genre is concerned. These parallels provide a useful point of departure for discussion of Peake's own ideas about reality and humanity, and how he expressed them in his novels. Like MacDonald and Eddison, Peake strove for symbolic truth in his works; but like Lovecraft, he found himself ultimately more concerned with the practical and spiritual difficulties to be surmounted in finding it than with the solace it provides. Having turned to art to circumvent serious flaws inherent in reality, Peake used world-building as a way of illustrating those flaws in action.

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[2] As evidence, note that George MacDonald's fairytales have been published as Penguin Classics, while Peake's books have been reprinted in the Penguin *Modern* Classics series.

Gormenghast as a Secondary World

Examination of the worlds of MacDonald, Eddison and Lovecraft has shown that the invented geography of a secondary world is seldom the most fantastic thing about it. Arkham is an invented place, certainly, but Lovecraft invented not a street map so much as a set of cultural and intellectual preoccupations, which serve as axiomatic postulates for the activities of its inhabitants. Arkham's chief function is therefore not as an invented *place* so much as an invented culture, a particular group of people who behave in ways quite unlike anything that exists or could exist on Earth. Much the same could be said of the invented worlds of MacDonald and Eddison, which are populated by people who interact with each other and the world in accordance with ideals quite alien to those of Earth, or at least wholly impracticable here. Isolating these new motivating principles is an important step in understanding these worlds, and tracing their origins. It is, after all, the freedom to manipulate these principles that seems to have attracted many world-builders to the practice.

In strict geographical terms, however, few world-builders can have staked a claim more daringly remote from the fields we know than Mervyn Peake. Gormenghast Castle is simply nowhere, existing outside both primary-world geography and history. Both the rationalistic innovator Steerpike and the unhinged conservative Flay are described as having arrived or been sent to the castle in their youth, and Countess Gertrude must have been born into from a family prepared to marry a daughter into this singularly odd, isolated clan, but no details are given of the places from which these characters must have come. Exiling Flay, the Countess describes him as "over" (274), since by depriving him of a place in the castle she has effectively destroyed him; there is nowhere else for him to go, and indeed he cannot truly leave. Arkham, Zimiamvia and the Land of Seven Dimensions are all located, cosmologically if not cartographically, in some sort of relation to the primary world; but not Gormenghast.

Just as Gormenghast cannot be placed in space, it cannot be located in time. The use of that great concrete manifestation of medievalism, the castle, vaguely connotes a pseudo-medieval setting, but with no corresponding geographical bearings, working out a date would be fruitless. Even within its own terms, the world of Gormenghast has no history; the Groans have qashed or repelled all outside influence for seventy-seven generations; the Countess's rigid adherence to the traditions and rituals of her home has utterly erased whatever previous life she may have had. The

few dates and murky historical facts mentioned are discussed in terms of their significance for life within the castle – the annual ceremony of the Bright Carvings on June 1st, for example. Despite their use of the primary-world calendar and their occasional Christian oaths, the populace of this strange place are very much an isolated, alien culture, "an all-but forgotten people: the breed that was remembered with a start, or with the unreality of a recrudescent dream" (8). And looming over every aspect of their existence, literally and figuratively, from the first sentence of the novel, is Gormenghast itself. MacDonald, Eddison and Lovecraft begin most of their works by giving us some basic philosophical bearings; Peake tells us where the shadows fall.

Such a beginning is hardly surprising from an imagination with such a firm rooting in the visual arts, and so given to elaborate visual metaphor. Nonetheless the castle is entirely central to the first two Titus books. Titus has no idea what the *else* he yearns for could possibly be. Despite Steerpike's early plea "Give me daylight and I'll go away" (27), he stays, clambering up both the tangible and institutional elements of the castle, obviously fascinated. When the castle floods, it does not occur to its inhabitants to evacuate, even temporarily; they go to the ridiculous and dangerous effort of shifting their civilisation upstairs (691-694), clearly at a loss for anywhere else to go. The ostensible ruler Sepulchrave considers the castle part of his body, or perhaps even vice versa (41-42; see also 301). Sepulchrave's rule can only be called ostensible because, despite his place as the head of the Groan dynasty, his actions, down to his choices of wardrobe and refreshment, are governed minute by minute by the demands of the Groan lore. Titus's christening in water drawn from the castle moat, and ceremonial envelopment within the great book of ritual, is presumably the same as Sepulchrave received in his infancy, and the symbolism of that ceremony is fairly clear. In this fictional society, all people, from the Earl himself to the Grey Scrubbers who ceremonially clean the castle kitchen, exist as animate extensions of their environment. The burning ambition of the Bright Carvers is not to produce art or beauty (what little description is given of their tradition indicates that it is unnervingly ugly) but to create something to make their involvement in the ritual more enduring. Their reward for doing so, the cause of bitter feuds and rivalries, is the right to traverse a section of the battlements a few times – the right to be more closely connected to the castle. In few works of fiction is this idea of humans as cogs in a machine better evoked.

Peake's desire to dehumanise his characters is further demonstrated by their incisively unpleasant, objectifying nomenclature (it would be hard to imagine a better name for the librarian of such a castle than Sourdust), which is furthered by the way he describes these people. Peake frequently likens his creations to animals, objects or grudging conglomerations of disparate parts. Of Flay, for example, it is said:

His black suit, patched on the elbows and near the collar with a greasy sepia-coloured cloth, fitted him badly but belonged to him as inevitably as the head of a tortoise emerging from its shell or the vulture's from a rubble of feathers belong to that reptile or that bird. His head, parchment coloured and bony, was indigenous to that greasy fabric. It stuck out from the top window of its high black building as though it had known no other residence. (25).

Flay's nemesis Swelter, peering around a corner, is described thus:

His eye, moving around the panel of the door, is like something detached, self-sufficient, having no need of the voluminous head that follows it nor for that matter the mountainous masses undulating to the crutch, and the soft, trunk-like legs. So alive is it, this eye, quick as an adder, veined like a blood-alley. What need is there for all the cumulus of dull, surrounding clay, the snow-white hinterland that weighs behind it as it swivels among the doughy, circumscribing wodges like a marble of raddled ice? (262)

Even Prunesquallor, the avuncular doctor who, with his "undamaged brain" (377), is one of the more sympathetic of these eccentrics, is not spared this treatment. He has a "hyena laugh" (377), and when he smiles he "exhibit[s] two brand new rows of gravestones between his lips." (74)

The interpersonal relationships these people enjoy and endure furthers our sense of their dehumanisation. Residents of Gormenghast adore things – birds, books, rituals, the institution of marriage, the vast conglomeration of junk in Fuchsia's attic, Steerpike's swordstick – but have difficulty relating to each other (Manlove, 1983, 118), usually either quarrelling or simply failing to heed anything the other says. Fuschia, Sepulchrave's under-employed and bratty teenage daughter, is an excellent instance of this. Her relationship with her nurse, Nannie Slagg, although loving, is

also handicapped in that neither of them seems capable of adjusting their statements and actions in relation to those of the other woman. Slagg is introduced in a conversation with Fuschia where the teenager is muttering hotly about the significance of the number of clouds in the sky while the servant tries to take her breakfast order. When, after a page of nonsensical musing, Fuschia finally places that order, Slagg is "scrutinizing a wart on her left forearm" (48). When, late in *Titus Groan*, Fuschia pines for her missing family retainer, referring to him as "Dear Flay" (330), we are surprised not just because anyone could describe the seemingly unlovable Flay in such terms, but that someone like Fuschia has the emotional capacity to do so. After all, we are told elsewhere that "In her short life she had been brought face to face with so many forms of weirdness" that her father's slippage into insanity barely registers with her (250). All she knows is this castle. Someone from such a singularly odd (and oddly singular) background could be expected to be out of sorts in her perceptions.

In fact, the lack of any external frame of reference could explain a lot about this society as a whole. Observing Titus's Earling ceremony from afar, for example, the curator Rotcodd gets an eerie sensation:

> As though, somewhere, there was *treason*. Something unhallowed, menacing and ruthless in its disregard for the fundamental premises of *loyalty* itself. What could be thought to count, or even have the meanest kind of value in action or thought if the foundations on which his house of belief was erected was found to be sinking and imperiling the sacrosanct structure it supported. It could not be. For what *could* change[?] (363)

The castle and one's place in it is all there is. These people do not care for family, or art, or religion. Thus, to attack the castle, physically or institutionally, is to challenge not just one institution but the foundations of anything and everything that the average citizen of Gormenghast could possibly understand.

Sepulchrave's valet Flay serves as the best instance of this idea in action. He leads a life that many would find harsh and dismal – permanently on duty, with no personal space to call his own (236), and so devoid of a personal life that the sight of him taking tea with another servant (142-144) seems discordant, not to say faintly pathetic. Nevertheless he seems quite happy with his lot – indeed, rather proud that he

works in such sustained, close proximity to the Earl himself, even if his lord seldom speaks to him (214). "I want *nothing*" (11), he spits within moments of being introduced. Flay serves the castle, period. He has no other loyalty because there is nothing else to be loyal to. Thus, while he has no real life of his own, his pride actually makes perfect sense. This also goes a long way to explaining the reflexive, paranoid conservatism with which he is initially characterised (13). His murderous and, at first glance, puerile rivalry with the other senior servant, Swelter, also begins to make sense in this light. If the castle is all there is, one's position within it becomes hugely significant, especially given this society's obsession with ritualistic precedence. What little room is left for individual ambition and interpersonal competition can only be expected to become a stage for vicious pettiness. Single-minded lust for power in the only aristocracy in the world has reduced Titus's aunts Cora and Clarice to the condition of automatons, their faces described as "the preliminary lay-outs for faces waiting for sentience to be injected" (76). Give Fuchsia another thirty years and it is easy to imagine her going the same way. The process is not complete, at least not with regard to the current generation, but the all-encompassing nature of Gormenghast is warping its inhabitants. This castle is a *sine qua non*; people here cannot leave and can be said to exist only insofar as their world has a place for them. It does not permit them to have identities of their own.

This in itself is a very cruel position for a writer to put his or her characters in, but Peake is not finished yet. Incarcerating his characters in this remarkable, inescapable prison, he then forces them to act in accordance with the Groan lore, an immutable set of demands laid down in the immemorial past. This pattern is well illustrated by the discussion of one of the various fatuous ceremonies the Earl must undertake:

> …[T]he biannual ritual of opening the iron cupboard in the armoury, and, with the traditional dagger which Sourdust had brought for the occasion, of scratching on the metal back of the cupboard another half moon, which, added to the long line of similar half-moons, made the seven hundred and thirty-seventh to be scored into the iron. According to the temperaments of the deceased Earls of Gormenghast the half moons were executed with precision or with carelessness. It was not certain what significance the ceremony held,

for unfortunately the records were lost, but the formality was no less sacred for being unintelligible. (213)

Even the codices of the Groan lore are ridiculous, featuring symbolically blank volumes (44) among their prodigious page count. These rituals are nevertheless all-important, with their observation and continuance transcending all other priorities, including the identities of the participants ("Find a substitute for the boy from the tyro's benches", says Gertrude blankly when Titus absconds from a ceremony; *Gormenghast*, 500-501). Again, in the absence of any other frame of reference these people exist only insofar as they have some role in these ceremonies. There is no place for Titus except in his capacity as Earl, in which, like his father, he is subject to a cyclical series of utterly meaningless, tragicomic obligations that must be carried out even in the face of significant public danger (661). The ridiculousness of this situation is underlined by the ease with which ceremonies within the ritual can be modified to fit less than ideal circumstances: Sourdust, for example, is buried with a calf's skull substituted for his own (*Titus Groan* 244-245; see 45 and *Titus Alone* 952-953 for other examples of such substitutions). Even if the sanctity of the ritual could be accepted, there is no real reason for Titus to actually participate. The apparent ease with which Steerpike, and after him The Poet, adapt to their roles as Masters of Ritual indicates that the same could be said for the other participants. And yet everyone acts as though this ritual is of the utmost importance. In the face of such consensus, it may as well be. Titus, who thinks otherwise, is the odd one out here. He eventually discovers that his position in untenable, and leaves the castle, since there is no place there for his iconoclasm. In such an environment, the ritual may as well be as all-important as Sourdust clearly thinks it is. "Gormenghast is not merely a castle", says Brogan, "it is a way of life" (1,048-1,049).

There is no progress here, no provision for or encouragement of personal ambition, passion or growth, merely the ritualistic continuance of a barbaric irrelevancy from the immemorial past. Gormenghast is not only so large that its physical dimensions are effectively infinite, but so old that the notion of anything beginning or being instigated there is equally irrelevant. As Punter has noted (*Literature of Terror* 377-378), there is no need for literal ghosts here; rather than a story of the dead impinging on the rights of the living, Peake spins a tale of the living shambling about, devoid of both the means and inclination to make any impact on a

world they have ceded the dead. Peake juggles the eighteen-month time-frame of *Titus Groan* to further the effect, causing the events of Titus's birthday and a few other significant dates to be continuously revisited from different angles, creating an odd recursive effect whereby much of the fairly busy and eventful novel actually takes place over only a handful of widely-separated days (Gardiner-Scott 15-16). Months and years pass, but this has no effect on anyone or anything except the progress of the ritual, which is essentially cyclical, beginning again with each new year. The passage of the seasons is marked by changes in the character of the castle rather than the natural world (140, 304, 589, 620), underlining the extent to which this pile constitutes the universe, and in the seventeen-year time-span of the first two novels, only Titus is ever referred to as having aged.

Gormenghast therefore differs from the primary world on a quite startling and elemental level: Peake has stopped time. The castle is not only completely isolated in space, but caught in a tight, recursive temporal loop rendering all of history, internal or external, quite inconsequential. Even the universal primary-world experience of growing old and dying is rendered trivial by a world that, in making its absolute, inviolate, cyclical demands on its each and every inhabitant, cares not a whit for such biographical irrelevancies. Like the castle itself, the ritual strips people of any right or capacity to be individuals (Sanders 1,076-1,077). Like Eddison, Peake has created a world that works on an entirely different principle to our own. Indeed, this remarkable paradigm shift makes Gormenghast, devoid as it may be of fairies, hippogriffs, aeranths, oreads or supra-intelligent time-traveling mollusks, perhaps the strangest of the fantasy worlds discussed in this thesis.

Into this alien realm of rust, cobwebs and lunatics, Peake places two recognisable human beings, to whom time *does* mean something, both determined to kick against the suffocating effects of the institution of Gormenghast. In their attempts to do so, Titus and Steerpike are the staging-posts, the Tolkienian 'mortal men' that this secondary world requires to function, or in this particular case to *not* function, in a way readers can relate to. In contrast to their cellmates, they see the Ritual as foolish or spurious, and the castle – as both location and institution – as unusual. For this reason they are also the two characters who do the most to push the plot along. In trying, from their opposing directions, to assert their own identities as distinct from that of the castle that has subsumed their fellows, they are trying to restart time. It is

through the sparring of these characters, with each other but more importantly with their environment, that Peake's story moves.

The more straightforward of the two is Titus, whose childhood objections to the Groan lore initially take the form of troublesome omens (83, 360). Only as time passes does Titus's apostasy come to any fruition, because what Titus really does over the course of the first two novels is age, growing from fractious infant to difficult schoolboy to adventurous, self-assertive youth. By allowing time to pass over Titus while keeping the other characters locked in recursive loops, Peake draws attention to the young Earl, placing him on a different level of consciousness than his resigned father – our level, the level that can see the castle as the fantastic idiocy it is. In working on this level, acquiescing to the passage of time rather than adhering to the loop mandated by the Ritual, Titus asserts himself, eventually discovering that the only way to actualise his individuality is simply to leave the castle.

From the other direction comes the villainous and amoral Steerpike, whose power stems from his consistent ability to assay and grasp opportunities for self-assertion. He does this via his frequently-invoked gift for the application of physical and intellectual effort to practical ends (119, 189-190, and 657, et al) – that is, his ability to use his time constructively. Sepulchrave, Sourdust, Gertrude and the other characters never think to do this. While they busy themselves with ridiculous observations of reverence for moat-water and iron cupboards, Steerpike applies himself to executing ruthlessly efficient, coolly rationalistic plans. Rationalism vies with self-interested opportunism as Steerpike's defining quality. Consider the way Peake characterises his forging of the designs for the thrones he promises the Twins:

> Steerpike had, of course, made the drawings himself, spending several hours longer on them than he had intended, for once he had started he had become interested, and had the Doctor or his sister opened his door in the small hours of this same morning they would have found the high-shouldered boy bending over a table in his room, absorbed; the compasses, protractors and set square neatly placed in a row at the side of the table, the beautifully sharpened pencil traveling along the ruler with cold precision (249).

Thus Steerpike's use of time is cleverly nuanced – he is prepared to spend more time on something than it strictly needs if it really interests him, but he gets interested only in things that have utilitarian power.

The precise motivations of both Steerpike and Titus fluctuate over time to an extent that strains credulity, illustrating the difficulty Peake seems to have had in articulating the internal lives of his characters (Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 232-249). Paradoxically, however, the most noteworthy example of this weakness, appearing at the beginning of *Gormenghast*, actually throws Steerpike's humanity into focus. Although Peake tells us in almost as many words that Steerpike is purely evil and has no conscience (378), the "arch-fluke" actually has a sense of self and a capacity for genuinely meaningful activity that make him one of the sanest, most sensible, *least* alien characters in the castle. He is certainly a favourite of readers, described by one reviewer as "Mervyn Peake's best character" (Davies 126) and has become more recently the object of an online fan club distinct from that dedicated to Peake himself.[3] Despite this, however, and all his ruthless rationalism, he is eventually cornered and killed. By finally reaching the limit of the prodigious elbow room this environment has allowed someone of his mindset to exploit, he is defeated as much by the castle itself as by its inhabitants. Like Titus, he cannot assert his individuality here; Gormenghast outcrumbles all.

"Everything", sneers Countess Gertrude as Titus gallops from the castle, "comes to Gormenghast." (752). The environment and institution of Gormenghast shape the perceptions, activities and fortunes of the characters within it. It is as much a character in the first two Titus novels as any of its inhabitants, fiercely resisting attempts at innovation or change, and ultimately succeeding in preserving its fearsome stasis. So all-consuming is this influence that it has even been suggested that the widely perceived decline in the quality of the novels (Byron and Punter 154; Punter, *Literature of Terror* 376; Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 256-257) stems in part from Peake's growing distraction from the castle; as he diverted his attention from that which fired his imagination as a novelist, it is argued, his ability to push that imagination faltered (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 125-126). In the end, therefore, it

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[3] It should perhaps be admitted that this fan club, run under the auspices of the social networking website facebook.com, exists largely anecdotally, with only a handful of members as of this writing. Nonetheless, in the absence of any such club celebrating Titus, Fuchsia or Prunesquallor, the point probably stands.

became a case of life imitating art, as Peake tried and – so the consensus runs – failed to escape this secondary world (Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 217). Some commentators, and not necessarily unsympathetic ones, have noted that after the publication of *Gormenghast* Peake suffered increasing difficulty in his professional life, and have gone so far as to describe his career as climaxing at the same time as Steerpike's (Winnington, *Vast Alchemies* 202). If we accept this notion of Peake's creative spark as a novelist dimming with Titus's departure from Gormenghast, then the all-encompassing nature of the castle becomes precipitate, impinging even on matters outside the text. To a very meaningful extent, Gormenghast *is* the novel, the thing under discussion. As the comparative weakness of *Titus Alone* attests, this story could not happen anywhere else; its world is operating on entirely different principles to that of reality.

These books are, therefore, works of speculative geography – world-building in a very pure form – as much as narrative fiction. Irritating as they sometimes become, Peake's struggles at portraying character and activity (at least in prose) throw his talent as a world-builder into high relief rather than detracting from it. This is a book about a particular world – a static, unyielding world that is not subject to any particular historical, religious, political or geographical set of circumstances – and the effects it has on its inhabitants. In setting up his world, Peake has completely denuded society of any peripheral constituent parts. In the absence of any external frames of reference, we are spared commentary on or critique of any given government or creed, or the physical inconveniences of any geography. Peake's critiques of reality – implicit, as I have argued, in the act of writing fantasy – therefore take place in a universe focused exclusively on exceedingly elemental and eternal difficulties that existence inflicts upon the existent. In seeking to portray and address these concerns, he required the same laboratory conditions as did MacDonald or Eddison. However much the precise conditions he required differed from those needed by other authors, a very similar principle appears to be at work.

Gormenghast is a self-contained universe operating under its own laws, those being clearly and definably different from those of the world outside the novels. Whether the act of stopping time, bringing a society to a grinding halt and crushing its individual members under the resulting, dehumanising spatial and temporal stasis is unnatural or supernatural is an interesting but ultimately more or less irrelevant question. Doing so is what gives these novels their distinct character; the stupendous

Gothic pile is not just a brilliantly-realised backcloth, but a no-man's-land between reality and the imagination. What makes it so are the simultaneous attempts by two reasonably sane, human characters to use human means to achieve human ends in a world where the wisdom of doing so is open to question. As well as giving the weird, alien castle something to be alien to, they and their efforts foreground an implicit critique of reality and humanity's place within it.

The notion that Peake required a hermetically sealed, elementally isolated environment in which to make such a critique serves as a useful preliminary answer to the question of why he built Gormenghast. The worryingly pessimistic nature of this critique has been implied above, during our discussion of how Peake's artificial reality characteristically reduces its inhabitants to impersonal functions of their environment. In this pessimism he found common cause with a particular, pre-existing school of fantasy. Examining his thematic links with these writers sheds further, valuable light on his ambitions and practices as a world-builder.

Accidental Gothic

Gormenghast Castle is the alpha and omega of Peake's secondary-world fantasies. Its name is the first word of *Titus Groan*; its capacity as Titus's home is emphasised in the last sentence of *Gormenghast*. In between those two statements the castle is a lead player in the development of the plot, character and mood of the novels. *Titus Alone*, the troublesome third volume of Titus's life story, is in large part the tale of the young apostate discovering, uneasily, how far the shadow of the Tower of Flints really falls. In these novels, Gormenghast is the world.

It is also, of course, a castle. In stark contrast to most world-builders – MacDonald, Eddison and Tolkien among them – Peake's secondary world is not an expansive natural environment but an enclosed, claustrophobic building of absurd and unnatural size and age. Such an unusual choice of setting is worth investigating, as the creation of such a dank, unpleasant environment (and one that has such ghastly effects on its inhabitants) must surely be deliberate. Understanding Peake's reasons for choosing a castle as his secondary world, and the consequences of that decision, further illuminates his reasons for resorting to world-building in the first place.

One popular idea is that Gormenghast was inspired by Peake's early life (Gilmore 23; see also Watney *Peake* 33, Batchelor 12-13, and Winnington *Vast Alchemies* 25). Peake was initially brought up in an isolated, semi-enclosed

environment surrounded by artisans whose aesthetic tradition he was taught to regard as unusual. He was the younger surviving child of a couple of members of the London Missionary Society, a Congregationalist organisation, whose field posting was to China; Peake was born there, in the hill city of Kuling. Peake's father, a surgeon, ran a mission hospital there, and also served as a Red Cross doctor during the violent rebellion against the ruling Manchu dynasty that broke out in the area shortly after Mervyn's birth. In the wake of this war the Peakes were relocated to the Treaty Port of Tientsin, on the southern edge of the Gobi desert. Dr Peake and his wife ran another hospital there, bringing up their two sons in a mission compound set aside for the city's tiny population of expatriate Europeans. They returned to England in 1922, when Peake himself was eleven. The combination of early immersion in and separation from (by means of the European compound) a notionally foreign culture made an impression on Peake, In 1951, aged forty, he recalled how "the rickshaws would rattle by in the sun, while we tried to remember the name of the longest river in England, the date of Charles II's accession, or where one put the decimal point" ("Notes for a Projected Autobiography", 475). There have also been attempts to draw parallels between the life of Titus Groan and that of the cloistered boy-emperor who served as a puppet-like figurehead for the bureaucracy that ruled China at the beginning of the twentieth century (Winnington, *Vast Alchemies* 31).

The difficulties that Peake faced in finding a productive role in society, especially during World War II, might also be seen as having contributed to the formation of Gormenghast. He was conscripted in 1940, but suffered during training and proved singularly hopeless at a series of assignments. Distracted, fragile and accustomed to setting his own frequently unpragmatic spiritual and artistic priorities, Peake was a troublesome recruit who had a dreadful time adjusting to the rigid, utilitarian discipline the military required. He was eventually diagnosed as having suffered a nervous breakdown, and was invalided home in 1943 (Watney, *Peake* 116-117). His widow Maeve Gilmore also recalls a number of semi-comic incidents demonstrating his essential inability to abide by rules, regulatory systems or conventional, even rational paradigms of thought. In 1952, having owned and (on a good day) operated a car for a year, the Peakes were pulled over by a policeman who discovered they were, quite sincerely, ignorant of the need for car insurance, a driver's licence or any other such paperwork. This so amused the authorities that they escaped any censure, instead being told to buzz off and read up on their civil

responsibilities (Gilmore 94). Conversely, this lack of worldliness sometimes got them into trouble, as when, displaying a charming ignorance of even fairly basic financial jargon, they took out a foolishly large mortgage on a house (95). They eventually gave up the house, but the debt would handicap them for some years thereafter. Peake's mind's eye was, in something of the same manner as George MacDonald's, firmly fixed on artistic, non-rational truths. The tempting supposition is that this, and his consequent difficulty with rules and systems, led to his composition of these richly evocative novels about a society hide-bound by inane rituals and meaningless prohibitions. His unusual upbringing in China might well also have predisposed him to a castellated setting.

At first glance, therefore, Peake's early life provides several neat and tidy explanations for his creation of Gormenghast. At this point, however, it is worth remembering our conclusions in analysing the origins of MacDonald's regard for the Perilous Realm; although MacDonald was raised in a society famous for its fairy folklore, those traditions were not what got him writing fantasy. Peake must have been aware of the parallels between his secondary world and the society of early twentieth-century China, but to suggest that the one was decisively inspired by the other is superficial at best. Apart from anything else, in all his prose about the castle, there is only one marginal instance of Peake characterising any aspect of Gormenghast as reminiscent of any form of Chinoiserie (we are invited in passing to imagine Gormenghast Mountain "shining like a jade carving"; 422). Gilmore recalls that Chinese sculpture left a great impression on her husband (24), but Chinese sculptors traditionally work in stone, not the wood of the Bright Carvers. In a writer with such a keen eye for visual detail and the niceties of artistic composition (consider the discussion of Swelter's navel, "that pivot for the draughtsman's eye"; 327), this silence is telling. It also puts him in stark contrast to MacDonald, Eddison and Lovecraft, who were happy to explicitly refer to German folklore (*Phantastes* 121-122), medieval rhetoric (*Mistress of Mistresses* 169-170 and 396) or Gothic pseudoscience ("The Call of Cthulhu" 142), sometimes at length, when they thought that such signposting of influences would serve a purpose. Peake offers no such references. Burgess (1-2) rightly places *Titus Groan* alongside *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a major work of twentieth-century fantasy, but also points out a fundamental difference between Peake's work and Orwell's: Gormenghast is a self-contained secondary world. As Orwell's work neatly demonstrates, such a setting is not

necessary to stage a critique of red tape and institutional cruelty. Likewise, Peake's childhood in China does little to explain why he built a world that operates according to the wholly alien motivating principles delineated in the previous subchapter. In short, Peake's early life provides only vague explanations for his decision to begin world-building, just as George MacDonald's Scottish ancestry fails to account for the deeper philosophical content of his fairytales.

Just as Gormenghast bears little resemblance to a Chinese fortress, it has little of the utilitarian capacities of a European one. Seven centuries of warfare shaped by wall-shattering chemical explosives make it easy to forget that the core purpose of a castle was not aesthetic grandeur, but defence from outside attack. Gormenghast offers little such security. High as they may be, its walls are in questionable repair, have no garrison to man them, and present a battlefront many miles long. Any one of these attributes would defeat the whole point of a real-world castle. Although a large armoury is referred to with conspicuous frequency (8, 34, 213, 694), the armaments stored there have long been neglected; when weapons are needed they must be labouriously reclaimed from the rust and dirt of centuries (161). Notably, the cast of characters includes no castellan or armourer to live in and maintain the armoury in the manner that Rottcodd meticulously (but pointlessly!) curates the Hall of the Bright Carvings. This particular contrast is illustrative. By the end of the description of the Ceremony of the Bright Carvings (7-8), one begins to develop the impression that the House of Groan has a castle more because they need somewhere appropriately grim and atavistic to engage in their inane ceremonies than because they value their security. This castle therefore exists primarily as a venue for ritualism rather than defence. There is, consequently, no reason to impose any conventional trend in European castle-building – such as a central keep or graduated bailies – upon Gormenghast. It is not a working castle – it merely looks and feels like one.

If this point seems rather mechanistic or unliterary, it is worth noting that other fantasists working around the same time as Peake *did* pause to make reference to the conventions of military engineering. Tolkien's Minas Tirith (*The Return of the King* 21-23), and TH White's Castle of the Forest Sauvage (*The Sword in the Stone* 10) are hardly realistic citadels, but they are obviously military installations, and attention has been paid to how they might conceivably repel an assault. ER Eddison places the formidable Parry family in the great castle of Owldale, fortifying the pass of Hornmere. Anyone seeking to traverse this pass must brave "walls and towers

[that] commanded that passage way for shooting and casting down of fire and boiling pitch" (*Mistress of Mistresses* 69) – and good luck to them. Peake ignores such matters. He had neither the nostalgia for the Middle Ages that at least partly prompted other fantasists to write about castles (Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy* 93; see also Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* 39-40), nor the antiquarian knowledge needed to write about them accurately.

Peake's own non-fictional writings are of limited help in tracing the sources of Gormenghast, or the reasons for its creation. Although he wrote a textbook on *The Craft of the Lead Pencil* (1946) and was interviewed about his artistic methods on several occasions, he seems to have struggled with expository prose just as MacDonald did. The closest equivalent Peake offers to MacDonald's 'The Fantastic Imagination' or Lovecraft's 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' is his brief introduction to the 1947 volume of *Drawings by Mervyn Peake*, which opens with a poem:

> The paper is breathless
> Under the hand
> And the pencil is poised
> Like a warlock's wand
> And the white page darkens
> And is blown on the wind
> And the voice of the pencil
> Who can find?

> The voice of a pencil.. Its lilt; its pitch; its suave and silver argument of the husky stuttering of a leaden dagger. The voice of ink, or chalk, of pigment or stone. What are they, these varying voices that, soundless, can be like tumult or as faint as a whisper in the next room? (237)

This evocative, intensely mystical passage is Peake's idea of a reasoned introduction to an explanation of his creative methods and ambitions. Drawing is, he says, "ultimately sorcery" (238). He goes on to offer another thousand words or so of impulsive, consciously unapologetic prose-poetry on the necessity of an artist to grow and develop.

If I am asked whether all this is not just a little 'intense' – in other words, if it is suggested that it doesn't really *matter*, I say that it matters fundamentally. For one may as well be asked, 'Does *life* matter?' – 'Does *man* matter?'' If man matters, then the highest flights of his imagination matter. His vision matters, his sense of wonder, his vitality matters. It gives the lie to nihilists and those who cry 'Woe!' in the streets. For art is the voice of man, naked, militant, and unashamed. (240)

It would follow that a naked, militant, unashamed voice would have something to say about the true nature of the world. For Peake, it seems, the ability to speak with this voice offered much the same non-rational but profound edification that MacDonald found in his communions with God. With a pencil in his hand, he was able to communicate ideas in ways that, at least from the perspective of the one speaking, could communicate emotions and spiritual truths more effectively than reasoned exposition possibly could. By doing so – again like MacDonald – he could make life worth living.

This is not an explanation as to why Peake composed (much less *wrote*) fantasy. The introduction to *Drawings* contains none of the fulmination against rationalism or mimesis that marks MacDonald's various mission statements. Peake acknowledges that "there are no rules" (241), but does not take the next step and suggest that departure from rationalism or realism is an inherently good thing. Art did not need to depict Fairy Land to stir the passions. Unlike MacDonald, a great many of Peake's finest contributions to posterity are grounded quite firmly in reality. Peake was, as Moorcock notes, "as deeply sane an individual as you could hope to meet" (13). Art allowed him not an escape from reality but a clearer and more efficacious method of dealing with it.

What this does explain is the compulsive, multidisciplinary torrent of art Peake produced from adolescence to his premature invalidity in the 1960s. His various biographers – Maeve Gilmore, John Watney, G. Peter Winnington and Malcom Yorke – all emphasise this aspect of his character; Collis notes how "His most casual letters, and even those addressed to bank managers, were embellished [with illustrations]" (1,038). He simply felt very strongly about the capacity of art to communicate ideas and emotions.

The pressure he felt to make use of this method of communication is well articulated in his wife Maeve Gilmore's strikingly intimate portrait of her husband in her memoir *A World Away* (1970). In this book, Gilmore quotes several of her husband's letters, including this remarkable statement of intent. His goal as an artist was, he said,

> (I) To canalize my chaos. To pour it out through the gutters of Gormenghast. To make not only tremendous stories in paint that approximate the visual images in Gormenghast, but to create arabesques, abstracts of thrilling colour, worlds on their own, landscapes and roofscapes and skyscrapes [sic] peopled with hierophants and lords – the fantastic and the grotesque, and to use paint as though it were meat and drink.
>
> To restore to painting the giant groupings of the old masters – Tintoretto, Goya, Velasquez.
>
> To make studies and cartoons for each canvas. To find myself by ploughing headlong into a genre, and by doing so to evolve a way of painting ANYTHING, from an angel to an apple.
>
> To incorporate within the canvases, that in themselves would be masterly and original, still lifes [sic], or boys or buildings, and skies based upon perception. (quoted in Gilmore 107).

There are a number of interesting aspects to this passage, not least the fact that Peake seems to have started planning a list of points (as the initial '(I)' demonstrates) but simply lost track of such a linear method of codification in his enthusiasm for throwing down ideas. Verbs like "pouring" and "ploughing headlong" make it clear here that we are dealing with an acutely restless artistic soul whose goal in life was to establish some sort of system by which to relieve the burden of his impulsive, preternatural creativity. Gilmore continues by quoting his poem on this theme (108). The number of artistic media and genres that Peake worked in over the course of his career would seem to bear witness to this effort. His creative urge, however, seems to have ultimately been too strong; a spiritual or artistic bottleneck of sorts appears to have developed as one human being in one body bound by the rules of the real world struggled to give voice to an unrelenting torrent of ideas. Such a soul would naturally

be frustrated with reality. A great deal would seem to have been lost in the translation of this vast, amorphous reservoir of energy into any recognisable form of art.

Gilmore suggests the Titus books began as one of these attempts. *Tttus Groan* was, she says, "written as only, I think, true things are written, because it *had* to be" (49). In doing so Peake has followed his own instructions by, as he says in the letter quoted above, "ploughing headlong into a genre". His depiction of his castle as a dark, ignoble, atavistic place of cold grey stone, corrosive tradition, immemorial barbarism, lost souls and crushing, all-encompassing antiquity makes that genre apparent. Despite protestations from more than one commentator (Gilmore 23; see also Mills 69-70, Ochocki 1,127 and Watney *Peake* 130) and his own irritation at the label (Winnington "Introduction" 1,028), Peake has been afforded an entry in Byron and Punter's comprehensive roll call of significant contributors to the Gothic tradition (154-155), and his castle is used as an exemplar in their discussion of the type (261). The preposterous size, age, isolation and ubiquity of Gormenghast makes it a 'naturalised' Gothic castle. Unlike Otranto, Castle Dracula or Steven King's fiendish Overlook Hotel, this creepy old castle is the natural state of things and the outside world the deviant other; the characters struggle to conceive of an existence independent of it. Even Titus's incredibly brave apostasy is complicated by his own indelible links to the castle. Although he does ultimately manage to assert his individuality, the effort nearly costs him his sanity, and victory is gained only by his acceptance that he cannot wholly delete his own past; "He carried Gormenghast within him" (953). This comment is made in reference to the fact that he does not need to return to the castle at the end of *Titus Alone*, but the reason such a return is unnecessary is that he has reestablished in his mind that the castle is real, and an indelible part of his identity (Gardiner-Scott 273). This realisation frees him from the resigned mindset of his father, who believed himself – first in crushing neurosis, then genuine insanity – to be part of the castle. Characters such as Swelter, Nannie Slagg and the Twins make little to no effort to free themselves from similar ideas. Swelter is a useful example, serving as a function of his environment; a dark, dangerous, gargantuan castle kitchen naturally requires a dark, dangerous, gargantuan head chef. Nothing else about him is relevant. With their identities variously merged with or comprehensively squashed by this mighty institution, they have allowed themselves to become victims of a barbaric demand made centuries before they were born.

Day's remarks about how "the Gothic world comes to dominate and control the protagonists, whatever their course of action, reducing them to a state of nonbeing and absorbing them into the Other" (19) seem to describe Gormenghast Castle very well. Gardinier-Scott is suspicious of Gormenghast's Gothicism in a general sense, but notes that Steerpike's career is the epitome of that of the Gothic villain (157-158). Day, who challenges the division between villain and anti-hero in the Gothic and defines such figures by their "egotism and monomania" and desire to "dominate their world, rather than accommodate themselves to it" (17) would probably agree. Peake's novels look like Gothic ducks and walk like Gothic ducks. It is therefore worth examining, at some length, the extent to which they quack.

Like the Romantic fairytale, Gothic fantasy is a complicated literary form presenting various problems of definition and analysis. Also like the fairytale, Gothic fantasy has its roots in attempts by writers to use literature to come to terms with the far-reaching but often double-edged effects of the Enlightenment on the human condition. The two forms were not originally distinct, with various poets contributing to both, but with the rise of the novel they did become more distinct. Furthermore the Gothic has, perhaps to a greater extent than Romantic fantasy, remained a part of our literary landscape since the late eighteenth century, popping up in altered but unmistakably recognisable forms every few decades. Peake's novels are undoubtedly a part of this long tradition, so it is worth examining what it is that the Gothic fantasy does that Romantic fantasy as espoused by George MacDonald does not.

The rationalism that gained primacy within the intellectual culture of the mid- to late eighteenth century had great effects on literature, including on writing focused on the Perilous Realm. These effects were responses to the rigidity of the Enlightenment thinkers in their attempts to establish the nature of truth. The Reformation of the previous two centuries had been, in an abstract sense, a conflict over the best way to align utilitarian fact (the political and spiritual institutions of humanity) with accepted truth (God). In the eighteenth century, partly as a response to the bloodshed the Reformation had caused, thinkers increasingly moved in the opposite direction, ascertaining fact (measurable, comprehensible scientific data) as precisely as they could via logic and experiment, and then revising their conception of truth (metaphysics and spirituality) in accordance with their results. The result was two or three generations of remarkable intellectual and technological progress, but also relatively sudden spiritual decompression. The mechanistic rationalism of the

Enlightenment had little use for the intangible, the imponderable, or the numinous. By around 1820, therefore, the technological fruit of the Enlightenment had made humanity the master of its material circumstances, but the epistemology through which this power had been gained had also robbed many people of any clear, unifying sense of their metaphysical status.

The degree of conflict between science and religion in the 1700s should not be overstated, as it was probably less intense than it is today. Nevertheless, the work of the Enlightenment raised troubling questions in that it made symbolic truth subservient to observable, mechanistic fact (Byron and Punter 20-21). Sensitive souls baulked at the notion that they could or would have to live without a universally accepted, spiritual equivalent of magnetic north. That compass point has often been provided by religion, but can be defined more broadly as a conviction that the universe is, despite empirical evidence to the contrary, a good and just place. This perception relies on the existence of notions of self-evident rightness and justice that are not open to the empirical inquiry or quantitative measurement that Enlightenment thinkers often practiced. Romanticism as a literary movement is commonly held to have emerged as an assertion of the at least theoretical existence of such truth, at the expense, if necessary, of mean fact. As we have seen, the Romantics turned, in time, to the fairytale, which by agency of writers such as MacDonald and Morris would evolve into modern fantasy; that ball would eventually be passed to the Inklings and their successors. Concurrently, however, there have always been writers whose creative spark led them not to strive for truth but to ruminate on the consequences of its absence. Since the publication of the second edition of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1765, this literary school has been referred to as the Gothic.

The term stems from the Enlightenment fashion for using the word "Gothic" to refer to "anything obsolete, old-fashioned, or outlandish" (Clery 21). More specifically, the terms "Gothic" and "Medieval" were often regarded as more or less synonymous (Byron and Punter 7-8). In the context of the English Enlightenment, "Gothic" could refer to almost everything between the fall of Rome to the wars caused by the Protestant Reformation, or any depiction or artistic response to the same long period. This was generally characterised as a long dark age of ignorance, fear and superstition, substantially abetted by the Catholic church, which had (not altogether fairly) been declared Public Enemy Number One by influential Enlightenment rationalists such as Voltaire (Clery 22).

Where Romantics such as those who inspired George MacDonald valued the medieval past as an innocent, polysemous wonderland best approached with a sense of childlike wonder, Gothic writers valued it for its capacity to edify the imagination through the inspiration of terror. In their view symbolic truth had not been found in the Middle Ages; it had been groped after by a populace enthralled to an evil, opaque institution. They depicted the medieval world as a dark, unknowable time in human history, when ignorance reigned and evil clerics laid nefarious plots. Magic existed in many cases, but when it occurred it was characterised not as a signpost of spiritual fulfillment but as a spooky, evil holdover from the old order that, while on the run from modern rationalism, might well sneak back into relevance and trap or harm the unwary. This is, on examination, a very delicate mental balancing act: the perceived irrational excesses of medieval culture were to be indulged, but judged from a moral, rather than intellectual, standpoint very closely informed by modern, rationalistic, journalistic modes of thought (Clery 23-24). Writers did not have to look very far in searching for a venue in which to present these dark tales. More so in the eighteenth century than today, the landscape of Britain and Europe was dotted with castles, cathedrals and castellated manses and abbeys. They and their denizens were seen, in the thinking circles of the self-consciously rational 1700s, as firmaments and agents of the chaotic, irrational, barbaric past before the Enlightenment.

The key word here is *chaotic*. Quite unlike the castles of fact, which stand or fall depending on their utilitarian construction and strict maintenance, the castles of Gothic fiction are imponderable mazes of gloomy corridors, forgotten cellars, rusting hinges and hidden chambers protecting foul secrets. Decrepitude, darkness and unpredictability are their essential characteristics; the reader is meant to forget that this is a man-made environment and see it as some sort of wilderness that has always existed (Byron and Punter 259-260; see also Cornwell, "European Gothic" 28). The mazelike nature of the physical environment was symbolic of a broader spiritual problem: the absence of the numinous. (Day 35-37). The genre might gesture towards symbolic truth, but methods of perceiving, reaching or even wanting it are consistently stymied. For one thing, those individuals traditionally entrusted with this effort, the clergy, are generally turn out to be sadistic, inhumane ideologues whose mechanical adherence to the letter of doctrine comes at the expense of any consideration of its spirit. Without this philosophical equivalent of magnetic north, compasses of all kinds spin; a society without truth has no measure by which to

ascertain fact. Adopting the rationalistic, journalistic morality of the Enlightenment while indulging the perceived irrational darkness of the Middle Ages, Gothic writers marooned their characters in a horrible universe in which there is no surety, and nothing can mean anything. This total loss of symbolic truth – with its accompanying structural concern with the gaps, lacks and shortfalls to which people fall victim in trying to reach it – might well be the central defining feature of the genre.

Certainly, it is applicable in the case of Mervyn Peake's fantasy fiction. Peake uses the fiat of the fantasist to create a castle of essentially infinite size and absurd, unintelligible form. We have already noted that Gormenghast is slowly crumbling, and that parts of it (*Titus Groan* 45) are no longer fit for any purpose. Even though it is home to hundreds of people, Gormenghast is obviously and cavernously under-occupied. Although areas like the Great Kitchen are crowded, entire 'districts' have been abandoned (*Gormenghast* 402), and others, it seems, utterly forgotten. "[A]way to the south", Steerpike tells Fuchsia, there are "granite domes elbow-deep in moss" (*Gormenghast* 386). Other regions are built as bizarre, faintly sinister follies (*Titus Groan* 145) – constructed, one imagines, in accordance with some arcane cross-reference in the all-important Groan lore. Gormenghast's decrepitude demonstrates its stasis and lack of conviviality, and above all its age, as it belongs to the past much more than the present. We are reminded at various points that there are no records of the castle's construction, or of the institution of its attendant customs and rituals (119, 145, 213). As noted earlier, this castle is not haunted, but the extent to which the living have ceded their home to the dead means it may as well be. The past holds sway here, asserting its ludicrous and sadistic demands upon its residents. Although some commentators think otherwise, it is my contention that Peake's castle is thoroughly, if inadvertently, Gothic.

Peake's adherence to the Gothic tradition goes much further than his appropriation of the great, ancient, possibly haunted castle as a backcloth. Within the twisting, unknowable morass of rooms and corridors we find various characters – both human and inhuman – making their homes. Fuschia has her attic, Sepulchrave his library, the Twins their Room of Roots, Barquentine his fetid lair and the Prunesquallors their prim Edwardian townhouse. Steerpike, as he claws his way up the hierarchy of the castle, establishes himself in a series of homes – at the beginning of *Gormenghast* he is lairing in a disused museum-like space a manageable distance from Fuschia's suite of rooms (387-388). Their relative positions are seldom more

than hinted at, and they are therefore lost in a "hinterland" (144) of indoor wilderness so vast that its extent can only be guessed at, by characters and readers alike. People lose track of each other. Barquentine is "unearthed" (238) – located within and extricated from an amorphous mass of elemental material – after having lived, unobserved, in a not especially remote room for sixty years. Beyond this act, however, very little exploring is done by anyone *except* the protagonist, Titus (405-406), and his nemesis Steerpike (88-101), the two Tolkienian "mortal men" of the piece. Most of the characters stick rigidly to those districts they know, venturing seldom into the darkness beyond. In the second half of *Gormenghast*, however, a third homeless character, an unexpected ally of Titus's and therefore a locus of sympathy, has set himself a quite fascinating task:

> Before him is spread a great sail of paper that not only covers the table, but descends in awkward folds and creases to the floor on every side. A portion near its centre is covered with markings, laboriously scripted words, short arrows, dotted lines and incomprehensible devices. It is a map; a map which Mr Flay has been working upon for over a year. It is a map of the district that surrounds him – the empty world, whose anatomy, little by little, he is piecing together, extending, correcting, classifying. (621)

In a book criticisd for inconsistent and shallow characterisation (Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 238-245), Mr Flay is a quite charming exception. His loyalty to the institution of Gormenghast is unshakeable, and has corroded his individuality to the point where he simply cannot fathom the young Lordship's independent streak (*Gormenghast* 472). Yet it is his unhinged conservatism that makes him, long before anyone else, suspicious of Steerpike's heretically self-improving motives. It is this suspicion, coupled with his ongoing concern for the institutional stability of the castle, that leads to the unmasking of Steerpike as the villain he is. Doctor Prunesquallor, with his "undamaged brain" (*Gormenghast* 377), makes no such connection, even when Countess Gertrude gropes after it (399-400). Flay possesses, in a sense, the fractured wisdom of a benevolent madman; his unhinged love for the castle has bred a hypersensitive, and in time thoroughly vindicated, suspicion of anything which may threaten it. Mills (75) notes Flay's name in light of his action of gashing Steerpike's face (*Titus Groan* 273-274); his role in finally laying bare the schemes of the young

rebel perhaps makes this grotesque pun all the more appropriate. Like George MacDonald's Mister Vane trying to teach empirical knowledge to the Little Ones, however, he does not grasp the nature of what he is trying to protect. In a world without truth, fact is irrelevant; it is no use trying to make a map of a world that exists as a locality of trackless internal chaos.

Accordingly, Flay's attempt comes to very little. In masterminding the upstairs migration during the great flood, Countess Gertrude must similarly work with only a fragmentary and barely adequate map (694-695). Gormenghast resists these intratextual attempts at comprehension because, as a Gothic castle, it is designed to be incomprehensible. Human souls, insofar as they still exist, are meant to clatter about amid gargantuan, sepulchral silliness, essentially lost and at the mercy of a harsh and frightening environment. Thus Peake quietly declines to link the various parts of the castle into a cohesive whole. Only scattered pieces of the castle are ever discussed, and no two of the handful of broader portraits of the whole complex are really of the same place (Sanders 1,074-1,075). As noted by Gardiner-Scott (223), Peake does the same thing with regard to the city in *Titus Alone*, although with diminishing returns.

This course of action is not the result of any temperamental aversion to fantasy cartography. Among Peake's earlier drawings is a map of the Three Principalities of Soz, Foon and Che (*Writings & Drawings* 13), an intricately-rendered fictional archipelago that was apparently to serve as a setting for a lost or aborted poem or story (the Plains of Ho were subsequently labeled in an illustration to "This is the lair of the Mastermire", one of the "Moccus Poems" (102)). The map is as detailed and imaginative as any drawing Peake ever produced; one rather wishes the project had come to more. The point is that Peake clearly had no problem with the idea of drawing maps of fictional places. This would indicate that his failure to do so in connection with his most celebrated work, and to have the characters within that story explicitly fail to redress this lack, is quite deliberate. Punter is, therefore, wholly correct to note the lack of any appended map of Gormenghast as demostrative of Peake's intentions (*Literature of Terror* 377). Maps prompt comprehension; a reader of *The Lord of the Rings* is implicitly invited to trace the Fellowship's movements, while one of the maps in *Mistress of Mistresses* (403) actually has the course of Lessingham's military campaign against Barganax marked out upon it. Extending such an invitation to the reader of *Titus Groan* would fundamentally alter the character of the book, so Peake, consciously or otherwise, has withheld it. The

resulting rather impressionistic idea of a vast, trackless labyrinth is just as deliberate on the part of the author as the random, imponderable nature of the secondary worlds of George MacDonald. As with MacDonald, it is hard to see how Peake could have created such an environment in a realistic novel.

But where the unmapped, random nature of MacDonald's Fairy Land is a clear connection between his work and Romantic philosophy, that of Gormenghast connects Peake to the Gothic tradition. Peake does not allow his characters the solace of any systematic religious or ethical catharsis (Sanders 1,071). With its supposed symbolic truth, the great Ritual, existing as a series of tragicomic impositions placed upon the sympathetic characters by a succession of foully unsympathetic bullies, the world of Gormenghast has this disarticulation between humanity and the numinous in common with the internal worlds of many Gothic novels. Cruel, impersonal and explicitly described as an animate fragment of the dark institution he serves (*Titus Groan* 241), Peake's Barquentine has something in common with the brooding, impersonal Inquisitors of various earlier Gothic pieces (Day 32). The alternative characterisation of clerics in the Gothic tradition is of cynical, worldly apostates out to further their own (often sexual) ends, a description that applies to Barquentine's bloodstained successor Steerpike, scheming to seduce Lady Fuchsia, as much as it does Victor Hugo's Frollo. In a Gothic universe, the spiritual equivalent of magnetic north does not exist, and consequently, maps do nobody any good. When truth becomes irrelevant, fact follows suit. These people are not supposed to know where they are because they are not supposed to *know* anything.

There are further consequences of this absence of symbolic truth. All three of our previous fantasy authors have ultimately defined identity – and therefore existence – as a consequence of accord with a central, imponderable yardstick of being. MacDonald has his God and Eddison his Goddess, and while Lovecraft is less optimistic about the durability of human accomplishments, his adoration of them led him to attribute deep ontological significance to them. The characters in their stories are characterised as good, and indeed as real, depending upon their alignment with Romantic truth. But without this measure of truth, nothing can be known for certain. Peake has offered no such gold standard of existence. Those who align themselves with the empty rituals of Gormenghast actually cease to exist as people and become functions of their environment. This is in stark contrast to the worlds created by MacDonald or Eddison, where symbolic truth has practicable significance, allowing

the universe to serve a purpose. Pointedly and deliberately bereft of any such purpose, those who ally themselves with the world of the Gothic are unable to distinguish between self and Other and becomes an amorphous part of a larger, meaningless vacuity (Day 30). This, clearly, is what has happened to Sepulchrave. The process seems dangerously advanced, possibly beyond help, with regard to Lady Fuchsia. By the time she dies she is in her early thirties, but still thinking and behaving like a poorly-disciplined teenage girl, at one with the chaos around her, and incapable of asserting her existence. Examination of Fuchsia in *Gormenghast* provides sobering insights into the torpid intellects of Gertrude and the Twins in *Titus Groan*.

The nature of Gormenghast, and the vicissitudes it visits upon those who have consented to become its prisoners, closely match those of the typical Gothic novel. This pattern continues, furthermore, when attention passes to the actions and characterisations of the characters who do *not* acquiesce to a meaningless existence as part of the castle. Titus and Steerpike ultimately have little more control over space than their dehumanised housemates, and remain affected by Gothic ideas with regard to the one tool they can use that those housemates have given up on – time.

In stark contrast to his sister, Titus spends his time in the castle growing up. Indeed, growing up – passing through and enduring time – is most of what Titus does. Until his apostasy, he certainly shows himself to be a restless soul, but not one capable of acting much on his independent urges. As an infant he offers worrisome omens (83, 359-360), but nothing more. His acts of schoolboy truancy invariably come to nothing; he is found, scolded by one authority figure or another, does penance of a sort in the Lichen Fort, and then life goes on. When Steerpike's villainy is finally revealed, Titus in fact works *for* the old order, playing a pivotal role in hunting down and eliminating this threat to the institution he so loathes. Otherwise, Titus *wants* to be free, and certainly moans a lot, but does not actually *do* much.

This – once again – links Peake's work to the philosophical content of the Gothic, and specifically the Gothic protagonist as described by Day. This character is, as Day notes, incapable of effective action (18), because of the chaotic and amorphous quality of the Gothic world. Gothic heroes tend to enter this 'underworld' (Day uses the term) voluntarily, and are driven to attempt, unsuccessfully, to dominate and control this unknowable environment (17). The heroines, by contrast, sit out the storm, and tend to fare better as a result. Titus and Steerpike, certainly, are both male, Steerpike quite pointedly so. The more passive Titus could easily be

construed as his retiring, notionally feminine counterpart. Tracing this line of argument to its conclusion demonstrates its tenability. "Thrust into the underworld" – that is, the world where characteristic Gothic chaos defeats any active or rational attempt to improve one's own lot – "through no apparent fault of their own" (Day 16), Gothic heroines have little to do but weather the battering their minds, bodies and identities will consequently suffer. Eventually they return to the world where rationalism and conventional morals reign. All that is actually required of them is to wait out the storm (19). Pain, degradation and frustration might well follow, but release is assured and identity is eventually re-established. The career of the Seventy-Seventh Earl of Groan certainly follows this pattern. Titus, whose capacity to use time marks him as different from his fellows, chooses to use it in very much the same way a Gothic heroine would. He establishes his own existence not because he actively fights for it, but because he waits for it. Waiting is, by definition, the passive allowance of time to pass.

Steerpike's defining quality, by contrast, is his restless, concerted activity; he is, as Day claims he would, "attempting to realise [his] desires through the efforts of [his] own will" (17). He is, in his own grotesque way, the dashing, active male principle Fuschia firmly believes to exist somewhere, and curries favour with her by playing this part. He is forever working or acting in some way, either on abstract ideas that appeal to him or on schemes to further his position in the castle. In the former case, we may recall the aforementioned, unexpected pleasure he finds in designing the thrones he claims to be building for Cora and Clarice (*Titus Groan* 249) With regard to his schemes for self-advancement, his methodical, labour-intensive preparations for the arson of the Great Library take up an entire chapter (189-194). The periscope mechanism he rigs up to spy on his housemates in *Gormenghast* (379-380), but then seems to promptly forget about, is probably also an example of this quality. Steerpike always does something, and always seizes the initiative, whether or not this works to his advantage. His goading of Flay over the Earl's escalating madness, for example (273-274) earns him little more than a nasty facial injury and the temporary handicapping of one of his antagonists.

The time he buys in this way ultimately does him no good. Were this the real world, Steerpike's ability to do practical things would be his greatest strength. In a Gothic world, however, constructed as an unknowable, truthless labyrinth for the entrapment of both bodies and souls, his sensible, linear, empirical methodologies

ultimately find no traction. He enjoys passing success against some of its agents, but not the world itself, and the backlash he eventually inspires becomes his undoing (Yeoman 1,135). This is because, like Vane attempting to control and direct affairs in the Land of Seven Dimensions by way of active rationalism, he is fundamentally misinformed about the principles upon which this world runs. Gormenghast, "the largest, wildest, and least well-defined of all Gothic edifices" (Byron and Punter 261) is built specifically to thwart the cold, mechanical rationalism Steerpike brings to his self-appointed tasks. Like Flay's groping attempts at cartography, this attempt to impose rationalistic control on fluid chaos for self-interested ends (to *steer* his way like a predatory *pike*, so to speak) was doomed from the day Steerpike absconded from the kitchens. By trying to use his time productively (instead of waiting out the difficulties of the Gothic world as Titus does), he actually wastes it, and is eventually cornered and killed (Sanders 1,081-1,082). "The male protagonist always enters the Gothic world of his own free will", cautions Day, "even though he surely does not understand what he is getting into. His attempts to assert his power leads him to this world, and his actions there lead to his destruction" (17). *Sic semper tyrannis*.

Gormenghast's Gothic nature has been examined at such length because it demonstrates a great deal about the apparently random nature of the castle, its inhabitants and the novels that tell their stories. It establishes why this place is such a labyrinth, why it is so large, and why we have no map of it in the way we do of Middle-earth and Zimiamvia. This is a world characterised by alienation from symbolic truth – an idea Peake very clearly gestures towards by putting his characters in the thrall of a meaningless, menacing institution and its malevolent custodians. Without a spiritual gold standard of truth that can be taken for granted, any plan based on rationalism is bound to fail. Thus one character wins by efficacious passivity, and another suffers a defeat that, in the real world, he would neither suffer nor, probably, deserve. Peake's characters, criticised for their inconsistent motivations (Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 243-246), are in fact in close accord with a recognisable and enduring set of literary archetypes; however inadvertently, Peake is closely following the Gothic tradition in terms of philosophy, characterisation and plot as well as interior decoration. These are undoubtedly Gothic novels.

Placing Gormenghast within the Gothic framework it fits so neatly casts an interesting light on the question of why it was built in the first place. The abiding concern of the Gothic tradition is, in broad terms, the fundamental chaos and

alienation that emerges in the absence of symbolic truth. Gothic writers have for many years built themselves weird, labyrinthine places the better to focus on such concerns, and in doing so they have often departed from realism. Peake's secondary world, as shown above, operates in a manner that mirrors such concerns closely, and indeed, in its wholesale departure from reality, does so to a much greater extent than its predecessors. As noted in the previous section, Peake's reservations about reality were with reality itself; to his mind such divisions as Catholic or Protestant, English or Italian, rationalist or mystic were trivial complications to a much broader issue. Thus he went one step further than most previous Gothic writers, and built his undeniably Gothic labyrinth completely outside the real world, where such matters could not distort our perceptions of the problem he was trying to discuss. Peake was therefore critiquing a fundamental lack in reality, an absence or inapplicability of something that really ought to exist, if its subjects are to be said to exist as well. His perception of reality therefore acknowledges profound ontological handicaps that could not be depicted in the primary world. To truly understand that world, after all, one occasionally needs to take a step back.

The question of the precise nature of the problem Peake saw in the real world remains to be addressed. Lovecraft, as has been shown, used a secondary world in a self-consciously unsuccessful attempt to reconcile what should exist with what obviously did exist; he was unable to convince himself that symbolic truth was as eternal or practicable as he would have wanted. Examination of Peake's wider body of work suggests a broadly similar preoccupation on his part, and a similar lack of confidence about its eventual success. Unpacking these ideas, however, requires a new section.

Into the Archipelago

Like its Gothic predecessors Otranto and Castle Dracula, Gormenghast is a castle only in the abstract, used to evoke ideas of age, weight and atavistic foreboding in the post-Enlightenment imagination. Mervyn Peake uses such ideas masterfully, fostering a sense of discomfort and disquiet among characters and readers alike. The Gothic tradition, after all, is not about flowers and sunshine. It thrives on loss, lack and shortfall, and the physical, emotional and spiritual consequences thereof. The number of points of contact between Peake's novels and those of writers such as Walpole, Poe and Stoker make it fairly clear that Peake is a contributor to this tradition. Driven to

tell a dark, somber tale, he naturally set it in a dark, somber castle. The fact that Peake seems to have slipped into the idea of using a castle as a venue for his fantasy may be taken as an indication of the strength of the Gothic tradition through to the middle years of the twentieth century.

Peake's novels are therefore part of a long tradition within Western literature of looking to notions of the imagined past in order to confront and treat artistic and spiritual wounds, notably those left by the Enlightenment. The question that remains is why he was driven to such a dark vision.

This question is complicated by Peake's lack of exposure to earlier Gothic fiction. Gilmore never refers to her husband having read any and, unlike Lovecraft, he seldom refers to the tradition in his own writing outside his novels. He illustrated Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in 1949, and therefore must have been familiar with that tale, but it seems to have left little lasting impression on him. Living in the twentieth century, he had no immediate exposure to the literary or spiritual quandaries raised by the Enlightenment and therefore can hardly have consciously felt quite the same creative drives that propelled the original Gothic writers. The two World Wars, disasters that prompted many modern writers to pessimistic fantasy, are unhelpful substitutes. Living in far-off China, Peake appears to have had no great concern about the First World War. The course and aftermath of the Second World War would leave an impression from which he probably never fully recovered (Gilmore 59-60), but by the time he was sent to Belsen as a war artist, *Titus Groan*, his most interesting novel, was already complete. There are certainly allusions to Peake's experiences in Germany in *Titus Alone*, with Titus tragically unable to assuage the suffering of the Black Rose (859), a character quite clearly inspired by what Peake saw in Belsen (Binns 1,067). The culpability of the apparently heroic Muzzlehatch in the death of civilians and the efficacy of Titus's violence against the evil Veil have also been noted as examples of Peake gesturing to the physical and moral destruction with which he was confronted in Germany (Mills 216-221). Darkness in the primary world would come to inflect Peake's secondary world, therefore, but it was not what prompted its creation. Peake was more interested in broader, deeper questions of existence itself, rather than specific events or ideologies, whatever their magnitude.

Peake does seem to have been constitutionally given to the abandonment of realism. Fanciful creatures turn up in his drawings from a young age, and fantasy

novels and stories (such as *The Hunting of the Snark* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) feature prominently in the bibliography of books he illustrated. His own first published piece of fiction, *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* (1939), takes place on an imagined sea full of imagined isles, populated with outlandish creatures such as the Guggaflop and the "loathsome" Squirmaritins. Then there is the map of the Three Principalities of Soz, Foon and Chee, drawn when Peake was just nineteen. This delightful map is littered with imaginary places: the Tomb of the Garble, the Cave of the Four Tumultuous Winds, and a swimming bath at the end of a short road leading to another area labeled "It is always night here" – "Here too", he notes nearby (*Writings & Drawings* 13). These places contravene realism not only by failing to exist outside the map that depicts them, but by doing (or, by their names, implying) things that could never possibly exist anywhere. Like ER Eddison before him, Peake seems, from a young age, to have been quite happy to leave realism at the door when he worked. Peake's profound personal artistic bottleneck discussed earlier would only have been exacerbated had he confined himself to subjects that exist in cold fact. This is not an explanation for why Peake wrote fantasy, but it does reveal him to be the sort of person who might well have been expected to do so.

The fact that Peake's mysterious Three Principalities (which he imagined to the point of mapping them) constitute a fictional *archipelago* is not altogether surprising either. In chasing down Peake's own literary idols, one name – and indeed one book – comes up repeatedly. As a young child Peake knew Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* "almost by heart" (Watney, *Peake* 27). He is said to have read the copy in the Tientsin mission compound incessantly as a child (Watney, "Introduction" 16). In his teens, after returning from China, he would often lead his relatives in word games based on the book – one player would recite a sentence from the novel, and the others had to guess the context (*Peake* 42). The level of familiarity with the text required for this game to have worked demonstrates that Stevenson's novel was a firm family favourite, and was especially beloved by young Mervyn. This would carry over into a broader fascination with pirates, sailors, ships, islands and castaways that would stay with Peake for much of his life. In 1949 Peake himself would contribute to the ongoing social and literary resonance of *Treasure Island* by turning out an especially lavish and impressive set of illustrations for an edition of the book (reproduced in part in plates 62-69 of *The Drawings of Mervyn Peake*, 1974, and plates 6-11 of *Peake's Progress*, 1981), using his family as models (Gilmore 75).

Long before realising what must have been something of a boyhood ambition, Peake, born hundreds of miles inland, was driven to draw, write and evoke oceans, beaches and islands. The map of the Three Principalities is only one of dozens of such references in his wider body of work. Peake's picture book *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* (1939) deals extensively with islands. In addition to his work on *Treasure Island*, he illustrated editions of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (in 1943) and *The Swiss Family Robinson* (in 1954). His comic novel *Mr Pye* takes place on the Channel Island of Sark, with much discussion of its coastline – Peake and his family lived there for several delightedly happy years after World War II, and his youngest child, Claire, was born there. Accordingly, when he adapted the novel as a radio play for the BBC, the script was subtitled "An Island" (517). The motif also turns up in his poetry. Of the thirteen poems in modern editions of *Rhymes Without Reason*, three ("Upon my Golden Backbone", "All over the Lilac Brine" and "I wish I could remember") feature explicitly maritime settings. Consider the first stanza of "I wish I could remember":

> Along my weary whiskers
> The tears float fast and free
> They twinkle in the Arctic
> And plop into the sea (22)

The accompanying illustration (23) is of a lachrymose walrus weeping over the edge of an iceberg. The illustrations to two more poems in the collection, "The Sunlight falls upon the Grass" and "The Hippopotamus", depict littoral scenes despite the poems in question making no specific reference to such settings. A sixth poem, "It makes a change", tells of a whale forsaking the sea and crawling onto land by night for the voluptuous pleasure of spending his evenings perched on an English mantelpiece (16-17). Earlier editions of the book contain "The Giraffe", the title character of which is depicted sitting on a beach, and "How mournful to imagine" in which elephants sit on a beach complaining about pirates who are in the habit of cutting off their ears to use as sails (Howe and Winnington 130-131). Almost half of the pieces in the collection, therefore, deal with islands, seas and the question of whether and how to cross the boundaries between them. This theme fascinated Peake throughout his life. As Winnington also notes (*Voice of the Heart* 57), he tended to

presuppose an insular environment in his works as much as actively promote it. Shorn of its illustration, a poem such as 'I wish I could remember' bears this out. Whether or not we are meant to imagine this miserable, whiskered character as a walrus, he is obviously close enough to the shore for his tears to 'plop into the sea'. This matter of a littoral setting will prove crucial.

G. Peter Winnington's book *The Voice of the Heart* (2006) includes a substantial chapter (56-78) on Peake's fascination with islands. Winnington argues that islands, being by definition separated fragments of a larger whole cast away in the inherently chaotic, trackless nullity of the ocean, fascinated Peake as ideal illustrations of his deeper concerns about the human condition. Peake, Winnington asserts, was abidingly concerned by the misunderstandings and alienations that sprang from separate identities (57), and yet equally appalled at the possibility that one might lose one's own identity in an attempt to bridge these gaps. What he sought, says Winnington, was a method of creating meaningful links with other people. Before that was possible, however, one had to have something of one's own worth linking to, a private world that could maintain its own integrity while establishing contact with those of others.

Peake's many and varied contributions to the arts were his vehicles for engineering this communion, but they also display an abiding concern with the difficulties involved in the attempt to do so, often at the expense of any emphasis on the solace provided by the success of this endeavour. As Winnington notes (*Voice of the Heart* 31), only a small proportion of his paintings and drawings depict more than one figure. Isolated individuals, frequently perched on an insular mountaintop or crag, predominate (65-68; see also "Husband and Father" 59). Peake's widow Maeve Gilmore selected 112 drawings for *The Drawings of Mervyn Peake* (1974), of which 87 are of a lone figure or head, five are landscapes, and only twenty are group portraits, and of those only seven could be said to depict figures interacting in any remotely pleasant manner. Illustration 68 of that volume, for example, is Peake's illustration of Long John Silver dragging Jim Hawkins behind him – but the rope merely extends off one side of the picture, and young Hawkins is not actually depicted. Illustration 97, dating from 1950, also underlines Peake's concern with alienation. It depicts a pair of people, presumably a mother and child, with the mother holding a smiling mask in front of her face to hide a genuine expression of anguish. The two figures have their hands extended toward each other, but are not actually

touching, and it is difficult to judge whether they have just broken contact or are trying to establish it. Peake has sought to depict not empathy or communion, but a pointed and frustrating absence of those qualities. This drawing encapsulates Peake's concern with the way people are isolated or obfuscated from each other, even when they are together. In Peake's art, although they might try (or sometimes pretend) to do so, people do not enjoy each other's company. Only one painting in *Rhymes Without Reason* (illustrating "I Waxes and I Wanes, Sir") depicts two human beings even coming close to making eye contact, and since that painting depicts the doctor from behind, the precise angle of his vision is hard to judge. The theme continues in his fiction, with Captain Slaughterboard finding some solace in non-human companions but having no luck with his own species. Captain Slaughterboard's human shipmates, so loving rendered in illustration, are crisply dispensed with in the narrative, allowing the Captain himself to abide in the enjoyable, but oddly once-removed, company of the anthropomorphic (not actually human) Yellow Creature. Islands provide the perfect artistic or literary metaphor for this concern with the isolation of the human soul.

The people of Gormenghast are also isolated from one another as well as from any outside world. In Gormenghast, large group gatherings are only ever related to the mechanical and pointless ritual, and their potential as venues for empathy or communion are largely foiled. Consider Titus's christening; the ceremony itself might provide the guests with a temporary excuse not to interact, but afterwards…

> None of the company attempted to make conversation, but stood silently
> eating or drinking in different parts of the room, or stood by the bay window,
> munching or sipping as they stared across the spreading lawns. Only the twins
> sat in a corner of the room and made signs to Swelter when they had finished
> what was on their plates. (*Titus Groan* 86)

These people have no interest in each other's company, and the Twins, being simulacra of each other, hardly constitute a valid exception. It is also worth recalling their recent perambulation on the lawn outside the Cool Room:

Their figures dwindled as they moved away on the striped emerald of the shaven lawn. Like toys; detachable, painted toys, they moved each one on his own mown stripe.

Lord Sepulchrave walked with slow strides, his head bowed. Fuchsia mouched. Doctor Prunesquallor minced. The twins propelled themselves forward vacantly. Flay spidered his path. Swelter wallowed his (85).

Gardiner-Scott (31-32) has perceptively noted that the use of radically different verbs, some of them neologisms, to describe the motion of these various people serves to heighten our sense of their alienation from one another. Not only are they rigidly, physically separate, their actions are only grudgingly, inadvertently, and superficially similar. Gardiner-Scott has also observed (32) that the chapter 'The Reveries' (285-292), a compilation of stream-of-consciousness musings from the guests at The Dark Breakfast, is almost completely devoid of second-person pronouns. These people are not only not speaking to each other, they are scarcely *thinking* about each other. The meals they share, far from being welcome opportunities for social congress, are conducted in awkward, introverted silence.

This leads to some interesting episodes of pathos. Bringing a message to Nannie Slagg, the grim, taciturn, rigid, stoic Flay is partly distracted by the "pot of tea, toasted scones, currant bread, butter, eggs and…jar of honey" (143) that the old maid is about to share with Fuchsia. One imagines that Flay, a man who has spent his life sleeping on the bare floorboards outside his master's bedchamber, has seldom enjoyed such simple pleasures. This unexpected and endearingly pathetic impression of someone struggling to countenance such modest indulgences is furthered by the obvious awkwardness of the trio in their sharing of the meal; not a word is spoken. As he stands to leave, Flay inadvertently knocks a plate off the table; it breaks on the floor.

At the sound he clutched the back of the chair and his hand shook. Titus screwed his face up at the noise as though about to cry, but changed his mind.

Fuchsia was surprised at so obvious a sign of agitation in Flay whom she had known since her childhood and on whom she had never before noticed any sign of nerves.

"Why are you shaking?" she said. "You never used to shake."

Flay pulled himself together and then sat down suddenly again, and turned his expressionless face to Fuchsia, "It's the night", he said tonelessly. "No sleep, Lady Fuchsia." And he gave a ghastly mirthless laugh like something rusty being scraped with a knife (144).

Fuchsia's concern for Flay is clear, but her inability to articulate it is equally so; note that she "says" her question rather than asking it. For his part, Flay deflects the question with an "expressionless" face, a "toneless" voice and a "mirthless" laugh. The relationship between these two characters in particular is cleverly and touchingly rendered as one of trust, and perhaps even love, deferred by a complete lack of any ability to communicate and by an unquestioning deferral to outside pressures (see also 120 and 334). Fuchsia's relationships with her brother (*Gormenghast* 480-481) and father (*Titus Groan* 250-252) follow much the same pattern. The relationship between Fuchsia and Flay is agonisingly close to empathy, but incapable of actually reaching out towards the emotional or intellectual support they are both obviously gagging for. In Peakean terms, therefore, no isthmus is formed; two islands remain insular.

Peake himself carried this metaphor over into his novels, employing appropriate imagery on numerous occasions. Even laying aside its preternatural isolation, he routinely characterises Gormenghast as an island, or at least a mountain surrounded by water, insofar as these two concepts differ. In the first paragraph of *Titus Groan* we are told how the innermost huts of the Bright Carvers cling to the castle walls "like limpets to a rock" (7). During his odyssey (the term seems appropriate) over the roof of the castle, Steerpike surveys "a roofscape of Gormenghast, its crags and its stark walls of cliff pocked with nameless windows" (95). Later he eavesdrops on The Poet, listening to him recite a work about a meeting "on a sharp archaic shore" in a voice "as strange and deep as the echo of a lugubrious ocean" (98). Given his lifelong residence in an apparently landlocked castle, the very fact that The Poet sets his work on the coast is striking. Sepulchrave's beloved library is off in the east wing, which protrudes "like a narrow peninsula for a distance out of all proportion to the grey hinterland from which it grew" (144); its walls have ""braved a hundred storms" (145). We also learn, gradually, how wet the landscape around the castle is; a lake comes right up to the walls on one side, a turbulent river flows nearby, acres of marshland stretch away in at least one other direction (196-197). The castle is surrounded at least partly by a stagnant moat, the waters of which

are put to symbolic use in more than one of the ceremonies of the Groan lore (86, 501).

In *Gormenghast*, this notion of the castle as an island in a vast, turbulent sea becomes more prevalent – it floats in "a sea of nettles" (373), its margins are "irregular as the coastline of a squall-rent island" (379). Later in the narrative, when Peake draws several years out in the space of a single chapter, we learn that "the sense of unreality in each individual was different; different in intensity, in quality, and in duration, according to the temperaments of all who were *submerged* [emphasis added]…Others were drowned in it, and walked like ghosts" (625). Titus, brought up in this environment, is "wading through his boyhood" (623). Abandoning the Twins to their deaths in a remote dungeon, Steerpike returns to the main body of the castle along "something very like an isthmus – a corridor with circular windows on either side that gave upon the outer darkness" (566). He then murders Barquentine and later lies, scarred and exhausted, on the shore of the moat "like a fish thrown up by the sea over whose minute and stranded body the great cliffs tower, for the walls of Gormenghast rose high above the moat, soaring like cliffs themselves into the upper darkness" (576-577). Eventually a titanic storm floods the castle's lower stories, leaving only towers and taller walls above the waterline. Boats and canoes are built, and Titus paddles through "Great islands of sheer rock weather-pock'd with countless windows, like caves or the eyries of sea-eagles", "[a]rchipelagos of towers, gaunt-fisted things, with knuckled summits" "a long stone headland" and "a great bay – to where (had it been in reality a bay) the sands might well have stretched" between "line[s] of cliffs" (699-700). In the novel's final chapter, an observer at Fuchsia's funeral high on the slopes of Gormenghast Mountain might glance over their shoulder:

> From this location the castle could be seen heaving across the skyline like the sheer sea-wall of a continent; a seaboard nibbled with countless coves and bitten deep with shadowy embankments. A continent, off whose shores the crowding islands lay; islands of every shape that towers can be; and archipelagos; and isthmuses and bluffs, and stark peninsulas of wandering stone – an inexhaustible panorama whose every detail was mirrored in the breathless flood below. (747).

Gormenghast is imagined and designated as a castle as a flag of convenience; the motif carries connotations appropriate to the mood of stasis and decay that Peake hoped to evoke. At the end of its part as an active influence on the life of Titus, however, it has finally become, as literally as possible, the island it has always been in metaphor and simile.

The effective difference between a castle and an island is also worth briefly examining. Castles were, as has been noted, military installations. Their walls were designed to keep intruders out, their towers to provide platforms to observe and harass approaching enemies, and gatehouses to permit the supply of a garrison through only the smallest, most defensible gap in that perimeter. Assaulting a castle – as opposed to starving the defenders out – was a risky business akin to the daunting, costly amphibious assaults of modern warfare (this parallel seems all the more appropriate given that the bulk of such modern actions have been attempts to storm islands). Building a castle could be veiwed as an attempt to create an island in a landlocked environment and force invaders to engage in inland equivalents of difficult, dangerous amphibious warfare. In this sense Peake, in creating his artificial world, is essentially having his cake and eating it too – he is able to exploit the generic properties of a great Gothic castle, and place his characters on what amounts to an artificial island. The mighty flood that almost drowns the place at the end is little more than a literalisation of a preexisting condition – brought about, one suspects, by a writer finally giving in to the native compositional impulses that are abundantly clear in the rest of his work.

Alice Mills takes a psychoanalytical approach to all this talk of islands and oceans, noting the symbolic link between oceans and the feminine (specifically maternal) principle (36) and seeing the motif as indicating a common desire among Peake's male characters to break free of dreaded maternal figures (54). This line of argument is worth mentioning, especially in light of Mills's accompanying examination of the sexualisation and ambiguous gender identity of Swelter (84-92). This would give the apparently motherless and sexless Mr Flay a feminine quantity to dread and loathe, just as Titus and Steerpike kick against the imposing, repressive Countess and Prunesquallor expresses ongoing exasperation with his twittering sister (and her objectionably feminine hips; *Gormenghast* 437). Such Freudian symbolism is obviously applicable to Peake's work, although for our purposes it is perhaps best to note it in terms of its abstract connotations; if islands in Peake's work represent

individual identities, as Winnington suggests, then being immersed in water is symbolic of losing those identities. Those who step outside the castle are "wading out of the tides of limitless *negation* [emphasis added] – the timeless, opaque waters" (*Gormenghast*, 379). The isolation and dehumanising potential of Gormenghast, standing alone amid both literal and metaphorical waters, is therefore once again emphasised.

As noted earlier, this crazy artificial island cannot be effectively mapped. The castle's defining internal quality – and also its most obvious point of contact with the Gothic tradition – is its trackless, labyrinthine nature. The great, impressionistic jumble of corridors and hidden rooms separates each of the characters from their fellows in the castle and symbolises their tortured isolation, not from any outside world, but from each other (Gardiner-Scott 25). Their inability to communicate when they meet may be a consequence of this isolation, but the fury at inadvertent meetings (as when The Poet discovers Steerpike eavesdropping; 100) is a buttressing of the predominantly solitary lifestyle they inescapably take as axiomatic. The Gormenghast accent so thickly spoken by Flay and Fuchsia (and the bickering Prunesquallor siblings, among others) is therefore *obviously* one of testy, pessimistic frustration born out of systematic alienation; other people are problems rather than companions. Living as they do, these people have no reason to expect anything from each other, and they converse accordingly. The notable exceptions, once again, are Steerpike and Titus, who respectively exploit this pitch of interaction and despair in it, providing points of contrast that remind the reader just how pathetic their housemates are. In having his characters talk in this way, Peake perhaps deserves to be included alongside Tolkien, Eddison and Dunsany in Le Guin's roll-call of writers who successfully use "the fairyland accent" (148) to evoke their worlds. This might be seen as a useful parallel with writers more conventionally defined as fantasists.

The symbolism of souls clattering about in a labyrinth, looking for a bit of love and compassion, is difficult to miss. Peake would be worthy of some applause if he had simply written a heavy-handed but effective allegory of characters being unable to 'find' each other because they are trapped in such a maze. Gormenghast defeats *humanitas* on other levels as well. As in the more conventional Gothic novels, there is no truth in this society, no beacon of spiritual edification; the Ritual pointedly presents a hollow mockery of the concept. Margaret Ochocki, who is skeptical of Gormenghast's supposed Gothic character because of the absence of the supernatural

in the castle, nevertheless underlines this point by referring to the Ritual as a "demerited fairytale" (1,127-1,128; see also Harris 86). Her use of the term is significant; Romantic fantasists turn to fantasy in a quest for symbolic truth, while Gothic fantasists do so to demonstrate its remoteness or irrelevance. In the absence of such a quality, fact loses power; maps, as we have seen, are virtually useless. This is a sharp contrast to Captain Slaughterboard, who carries on his ship a "Map of Some of the Islands I have Discovered so Far" (noted by Winngington, *Voice of the Heart* 71; *Captain Slaughterboard* is not paginated). Slaughterboard is an adventurer and an explorer, crossing seas keen to find new islands and the inhabitants, actively pursuing the Yellow Creature when it proves initially reticent to meet him and finding a collegial solace with it that he did not seem to enjoy with his human shipmates. Once such a connection is made, in fact, further exploration and violence is unnecessary, and he settles down on an island with his pixyish companion. What the Captain wanted, it seems, was a friend. Flay, Fuchsia, Titus and their cellmates clearly want the same thing, but they cannot get it, at least not regularly or reliably, because they have no map, literal or metaphorical, to each other's metaphorical islands. Nor will any such map be produced. Meaningful human contact is impossible in Gormenghast. A universe suffering this deficiency must have been a fairly close approximation, to Peake's mind, of hell.

It is a hell characterised by wateriness rather than the usual Dantean inferno, however. In the absence of a map such as Slaughterboard's, maritime exploration becomes a matter of thrashing about randomly in an attempt to gain some purchase on a fluid, imponderable medium. Despite Gormenghast's nominal designation as a castle, this medium is not stone, earth or dust. Rather, many of the most important scenes of both love and war in Peake's novels take place with unrestrained or flowing water sloshing and splashing somewhere in the piece. Take for example the evolving relationship between Steerpike and Fuchsia; they become acquainted when she splashes dirty water on his face (110-111), he ingratiates himself with her while washing the mess off with clean water (115-116) and furthers their relationship on occasions that continue to involve him getting wet, either in the rain (199-200, 386-387) or the lake (344). Upon learning the truth about Steerpike, Fuchsia contemplates suicide by drowning (709). In the course of this contemplation she accidentally drowns herself, succumbing, in her romantic naivety, to the dangers of the appalling no-man's-land that surrounds any island or soul.

Steerpike, for his part, ultimately fares no better. His plan to run Barquentine through fails; in the event he drowns the repulsive dwarf in the castle moat, pulling him underwater and holding him there for almost as long as he can stand himself (575-577). The symbolism of an episode of self-assertion going awry and just barely being salvaged from disaster is hard to miss. Steerpike meets his own end at Titus's hands while treading water in the flooded castle (742-744). Similarly, Titus meets his eventual saviour, Flay, in the middle of a river ford (471-472), and his climactic meeting with the Thing takes place while they shelter from the pouring rain (683-687). Keda, Titus's ill-fated wet-nurse, makes love to one suitor while rain falls outside (171-172); her two lovers then kill each other in a duel that takes place in a damp, dewy hollow (203-206). Swelter also dies blubbering about in knee-deep water after a long fight that takes place during a torrential downpour and is awash, so to speak, with marine and nautical imagery;

> The floorboard beneath Flay's feet lifted, and a wooden ripple ran from one end of the passageway to the other, where it broke on a cliff of plaster. (307-308)

> As pirates in the hot brine-shallows wading, make, face to face, their comber-hindered lunges, sun-blind, fly-agonied, and browned with pearls, so the timbers here leaned, moonlight misled and the rank webs impeded. (312)

> Flay did not trouble to remove [the sword]. It remained like a mast of steel whose sails had fallen to the decks where, as though with a life of their own, unconnected with wind or tide, they leapt and shook in ghastly turbulence. At the masthead, the circular sword hilt, like a crow's nest, boasted no inch-high pirate (318).

Batchelor characterises the entire Flay-Swelter subplot of *Titus Groan* in nautical terms, seeing Swelter as a pirate and Flay as the honest mariner who hunts him (82). This is a valid point, and might be repeated in some measure with regard to Titus's duel with the sinister Veil in *Titus Alone*, which takes place in ankle-deep water and in front of an audience of "human oysters" and "castaways" (853). At the end of the fight, the defeated Veil is likened to a crippled ship; his injured leg trails

him like driftwood and "his face had capsized" (858-859). Occasionally Peake can find no excuse for the presence of actual water, so he employs metaphor and simile. In *Titus Alone*, Muzzlehatch blesses Titus's evolving relationship with Juno in such terms – "Wade on, my boy" (835). When Peake's characters make their feelings clear to each other, they do so surrounded by wild water. This use of moisture to symbolise emotional effort has precedence outside Gormenghast; one of the Rhymes Without Reason, "The Jailer and the Jaguar", finds its two titular characters "wandering through the rain" ("Five Rhymes Without Reason" 114) in search of wives who abandoned them out of boredom. Peake, haunted by the appalling gaps between individuals and given to the use of isolated islands as a metaphor for this concern, repeatedly attempts to turn his most famous trackless labyrinth into an uncharted archipelago.

Not everybody in Gormenghast is capable of navigating such waters. Some assume they are, but fail. Irma Prunesquallor, the tragicomic spinster frantically hunting for a husband for the sake of having one, is an obvious instance of such an individual. In "trying to play the role of the sentimental heroine" (Gardiner-Scott 89), Irma is lost in self-delusion, convinced that playing such a role will turn her into such a person. Accordingly, she and Professor Bellgrove make up their minds, sincerely but foolishly, to be swept off their feet by each other (*Gormenghast* 519 and 554-555). The resulting marriage, devoid of actual emotion, quickly turns sour. What is noteworthy for our purposes is that, unlike the passionate pairing of Keda and Rantel, neither Irma nor Bellgrove ever get wet, and that an excuse to get them wet is quite conspicuously passed over. Irma, bless her, has tried to enhance her gawky figure by stuffing a hot-water bottle down the front of her dress. The bottle slips, but despite the potential for a hilarious mishap to further this comic subplot, however, it remains sealed; no water flows. Emotions are thus contained rather than shared. Compared to the upending of a vase over Steerpike by the naïve but unquestionably honest, open-hearted Fuchsia, this decision on Peake's part seems very deliberate.

Genuine traffic between islands requires a boat, or something similar. This symbolic importance of watercraft may explain Titus's apparently disproportionate fury in *Gormenghast* when Steerpike steals his canoe (714; see also Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* 214-215). It also explains a metaphor from much earlier in the same book. When, as a boy, Titus is imprisoned in the Lichen Fort for his apostasy, Fuchsia's

visits him, and their awkward, incipient sibling affection is discussed in the following terms:

> The silence of the Lichen Fort was around them like deep water, and their fingers touching might have been the prows of foundered vessels which grazed one another in the sub-aqueous depths, so huge and vivid and yet unreal was the contact they made with one another (480-481)

The episode is a thoroughly charming example of Peake depicting frustrated interpersonal interaction, and one that particularly stirs our sympathies with these two youngsters (Fuchsia is still only 23 at this point). The important thing to take from this particular passage, however is his use of nautical imagery to describe sincere emotional endeavor. One uses a boat to reject the status of a castaway, leave an island and venture into the trackless wilderness hoping to discover others.

Peake's inadvertent use of Gothic themes and tropes stands as evidence that he was critiquing a deficiency in reality. Examining his other work makes it clear that he saw such a deficiency – an absence of, or at least severe difficulty in engineering, meaningful interpersonal communication – and turned to art to rectify it. His literary fantasies are shot through with references to this problem, and if this correlation were in any doubt, Peake seldom passed up an opportunity to put those references in terms of the island/coastline/sea metaphor so prevalent in his visual art.

We must recall here Todorov's prohibition (33) against interpreting compositional flourishes as fantasy. Peake's attraction to water imagery as a signpost of emotional effort or honesty could have been satisfied in a memetic novel, and are not what make Gormenghast a fantasy world. Its capacity as a Perilous Realm has already been established in the first section of this chapter. Peake's attachment to this watery theme is highlighted here as a clear point of contact with the rest of his work, and an equally clear indication of the deficiency in reality he was critiquing. The theme combines with the symbolism of the Gothic maze in which he maroons his characters to highlight the same problem depicted so often in his poems and drawings: elemental, unavoidable difficulties involved in extending or obtaining meaningful empathy to or from another person.

Literary fantasy in general allowed him to depict this problem through narrative action in a manner that visual art does not. The use of visual media to relate a narrative is of course possible, but seldom easy. Brogan addresses the point well:

[Peake] had visions that could not be expressed fully, anything like fully, by his drawing, brilliant and passionately individual though it was. The visions needed to be expressed with a fullness and a visual precision that could only with great difficulty be combined. Film could be of no use, for it entails its own conventions, above all the photographic ones (this must be said, however trite) which are death to the artist accustomed to controlling by his own style the representation of reality (1,047).

"Words", Brogan continues, "were the only answer". This provides a succinct answer to the question of why a talented young painter and illustrator accomplished what has become his most enduring and defining work in a non-visual medium. As Winnington has pointed out (*Voice of the Heart* 33-36), the conventions of visual art, painting in particular, seldom allow the artist to profitably depict the sort of chaotic nullity Peake saw surrounding us. However minimalist a style a draughtsman might develop, visual art struggles to depict *nothingness*, and a man as fiercely artistically literate as Peake clearly appreciated this. An author may gesture towards such abstract concerns and, with appropriate setting of mood – a subdiscipline of prose composition at which Peake might be said to have excelled – trust he reader to imagine the rest. Never systematically connected to each other, the yawning and artificial spiritual and physical wildernesses of Gormenghast are thus depicted. Prose happened to be the best mechanism for conveying Peake's abiding concerns as an artist.

The fact that these chasms are so consistently evoked via oceanic and insular imagery in his fantasy novels serves to place them within Peake's broader artistic quest to examine, illustrate, and at least attempt to bridge the terrible gaps that existed between us. This focus on gaps may also explain why Peake used a Gothic castle rather than an actual island as a secondary world. Islands are cohesive units that beg to be mapped, while Gothic castles are weird, unknowable places that defeat such attempts at comprehension. Peake could keep his characters lost, and more convincingly so, in the shadow of towers than in those of palm trees. Further, islands provoke community and capability; stuck together on an island, individuals tend to

come together more effectively than they do on the mainland. Robinson Crusoe and Friday form a very effective partnership, while the Swiss Family Robinson do a good job of pulling together to tame their new home. Even the pirates and naval officers of *Treasure Island* manage to form a constructive – albeit fragile – entente, ushering the castaway Ben Gunn into that fold in due course. Peake could not afford to allow such alliances to form among his characters. More so even than William Golding (whose *Lord of the Flies* details a violently divided island society), he wanted them alone, scared and frustrated. Such a concern focuses on a fundamental failing in reality, a gap between what exists and what ought to exist. Gothic fantasy is an ideal medium in which to articulate such concerns. In contrast to the Romantic fantasies written by George MacDonald and ER Eddison, Gothic fantasy hinges on the notion that evil, far from being a self-limiting glitch in a fundamentally sound system, is a prevalent and enduring feature of an essentially flimsy, amoral world. Such fantasies gesture towards symbolic truth, but emphasise its remoteness and potential inapplicability. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Peake began writing such a fantasy. Being concerned with fundamental problems of existence rather than historical, biographical or epistemological trivia, he isolated his discussion of those problems from the primary world as thoroughly as he could, by becoming a world-builder.

Having now said that Peake built a Gothic world in prose to put in motion a plot that could not be adequately served by visual media, I must conclude my discussion of his work by examining the behaviour of the characters who push that plot along. Here Peake ran into a complication long accepted as universal to world-building as a creative endeavour. Like MacDonald, Eddison and Lovecraft, Peake required a point of contrast with which to demonstrate his point. Having posited a world where absence of symbolic truth renders everyone constitutionally incapable of meaningful interpersonal interaction, he placed within it two human beings who seem not to suffer from this problem. These are his Tolkienian "mortal men", Titus and Steerpike. These two men are both explorers and, within their individual limits, conquerors of the indoor seas of Gormenghast. Titus explores forgotten parts of the castle, claiming them, however trivially, as his own (405-406), in contrast to Sepulchrave hiding in his library and the Twins brainlessly haunting their apartment in the South Wing. He also discovers the tunnel that provides a means of ingress for the banished Flay (who then, in his own less practical way, does some exploring of his own). In an essentially identical manner, he reaches out to his mother, sister and

foster-sister – an act that is in sharp contrast to Fuchsia's thwarted empathy with Flay. All three of these actions take place amid untamed waters, partly metaphorical (*Gormenghast* 480-481) but mostly quite real (686-688, 714), making Titus a true Peakean mariner. As with his explorations, these actions are largely futile, but the very fact that he makes attempts clearly indicates that Titus is working on a different level to most of his housemates. He is a real person or being, searching for independent confirmation of his reality. In keeping with Peake's perceptions of the problems of reality as a system (and the conventions of the Gothic tradition, which hamstrings its protagonists), this search is inconclusive at best, but we applaud the effort. Peake clearly wanted Titus to be a sympathetic character. The characterisations of monsters such as Swelter and Barquentine make it obvious that he had no trouble depicting physical hideousness or ontological perfidy. Apart from Prunesquallor's initial assertion that Titus was an ugly baby (33), the young Earl is never characterised in this way; we are meant to like him.

We are also meant to loathe Steerpike. His explorations and utilisations of his environment are considerably more expansive and effective than Titus's. Escaping from the kitchen with nothing but the clothes on his back, he rises to become the Master of Ritual, the custodian of what feeble excuse for symbolic truth this world has. By doing so he establishes himself in a series of increasingly amenable homes and offices. One in particular serves as a useful example of how such behaviour contrasts with that of the other denizens of the castle. By the opening chapters of *Gormenghast* he is hatching his plots in a part of the castle habitually used by the Countess herself:

> Reaching the double door, he ran his hands through his dripping hair and turned down the collar of his coat; and then, passing through and veering to the left, followed a corridor for some way before he reached a stairhead. No sooner had he peered over the banisters than he started back, for the Countess of Groan was passing through the lamp-lit room below. (388)

In a world populated by human beings, Steerpike would have to find a much more remote part of the castle than this in which to hatch his plots. Gormenghast, however, is populated only by anthropomorphic fragments of their environment, a point demonstrated by the fact that they do not explore the uncharted realms outside

their individual homes. It would likely never occur to the Countess to vary her route through that chamber and find out what is at the top of the stairs above it. Consequently Steerpike's temporary headquarters is quite safe.

Like Titus, Steerpike has much more of an ontological presence than Sepulchrave or Swelter. Unlike Titus, however, Steerpike has no interest in contacting other people or other 'islands'. A true predator, Steerpike uses his powers of exploration for piratical rather than moral ends. Although he gets wet as much as anyone, he does so in the pursuit of violence (*Gormenghast* 575-577, 742-744) or of a cynical, counterfeit intimacy with the impressionable Fuchsia (*Titus Groan* 115-116, 198-202, 386-387) that Peake would probably have considered abominable. We know Steerpike is a duplicitous, callous, murderous villain; his evil is so self-evident that Peake takes the unusual step of explicitly conceding the fact at the beginning of *Gormenghast* (378). This second novel was, it must be remembered, written in the aftermath of Peake's traumatic time touring liberated post-war Germany – including the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp – as a war artist. Peake returned from this trip shaken, and with a renewed and sobering understanding of what humanity was capable of, given the means to act on their instincts (Watney, *Peake* 125-127). Steerpike, who begins to ascend through the castle largely as a result of his realisation that he is intellectually and temperamentally capable of doing so, could be seen as an example of this in action. His more chilling excesses certainly carry an air of arrogant, fascistic sadism, as in this startling episode towards the beginning of *Gormenghast*;

> The Twins, acting together, rose from their chairs and stated moving across the room. They paused for a moment and turned their eyes to Steerpike in order to make sure they were doing what was expected of them. Yes. The stern finger of the young man was pointing to the heavy damp carpet that covered the floor of the room.
> Steerpike derived as much pleasure in watching these anile and pitiful creatures, dressed in their purple finery, as they crawled beneath the carpet as he got from anything. He had led then gradually, and by easy and cunning steps, from humiliation to humiliation, until the distorted satisfaction he experienced in this way had become little short of a necessity to him. (404)

Murder, duplicity, institutional and personal corruption, sadism, the disciplined, amoral pursuit of poorly-defined ends – even without *Gormenghast's* inescapable status as a post-war novel it is easy to imagine Steerpike in jackboots. He does evil things because he *can*, in much the same way that an atmosphere of hyperbolic nationalistic licence led the entirely sane, sensible people of Germany to countenance the inhumanities of Nazism. Direct, conscious inspiration is unlikely, but Peake does seem to have applied himself to the long-standing question – demanded by the revelations of the later stages of World War II – of whether one becomes evil by committing evil acts, or vice versa. It seems, in fact, that Steerpike's evil deeds are consequences, not causes, of an intriguing aspect of his character. Despite his capacity to reach out and touch others, as any true person must, he actively spurns the second half of the task, refusing to form real links with others and slipping into "the skin of a *solitary* [emphasis added] Satan as easily as if he had never known the flourish of language, the delights of civil power" (702). His ability to become one with the wilderness of Gormenghast has been noted by Mills (69-70) as detracting from the Gothicism of the novel, although it actually strengthens the Gothic reading by turning Steerpike, the doomed antihero, into a function of this fiendish, antagonistic environment. If Titus is an example of what a dedicated, enduring human soul can accomplish, even with so fabulously unpromising a starting point, Steerpike can easily be positioned as an example of what *not* to do. With just a bit more of his characteristic diligence, he might have become as supremely, conclusively real as Titus. He has the means but refuses to use them. Where Sepulchrave, Fuchsia, Flay and the Twins have demonstrated an inability to link with each other, Steerpike *chooses* not to – and what is a conscious refusal to live up to one's human responsibilities but a demonstration of evil?

This would go some way to explaining the somewhat phrenological demonisation of this red-eyed, claw-fingered man (attributes correlated by Gardiner-Scott 64-65). It would also explain why the shrewd, sensible, active Steerpike eventually succumbs to the moping, inactive Titus. We have already seen how Steerpike is, in effect, arguing across Gormenghast by attempting to use logic and rationality to conquer a world singularly set up to resist those ideas. Such activity is par for the course among Gothic antiheroes, and like his ancestors in that tradition, it leads to his destruction. But the Gothic is also concerned with reinforcing conventional morality, including the widespread notion that evil contains within it the

seeds of its own destruction. Steerpike, the piratical individualist who, in the fullness of his career arc, luxuriates in his ability to actively spurn opportunities to do good, is undeniably evil. With just a little more insight and effort he could have asserted his identity as effectively as Titus, via great suffering, manages to do. He could, in short, have become real. Instead he passes up this opportunity for ontological affirmation and deliberately becomes as much a function of his evil environment as Sepulchrave and Flay. This nugatory career path can, in Peake's imagination, have only one end. One of the most puzzling things about the Titus books, in the final analysis, is why the Countess's boatmen bother retrieving Steerpike's body from the flood (*Gormenghast* 745). After all, in rejecting good, Steerpike has ultimately rejected existence – in Peakean terms, he has sunk.

Certainly, ER Eddison and George MacDonald would have recognised this concept. Like those writers, Peake set himself the task of constructing an allegory that works on a grand cosmic and spiritual scale to demonstrate a critique of nothing less than the nature of reality and those who dwell in it. In its specifics, however, Peake's work bears scant similarity to that of MacDonald or Eddison, as it does not depict a world in which all can be made well by means of an epistemological gear-change into accordance with the purpose of a personified symbolic truth. Peake's novels are a great deal closer to Lovecraft's jittery vision of a truth that must – but might not – survive the battering it stands to receive from fact. That parallel is not especially close either, however; where Lovecraft the conflicted materialist meditates on the question of whether truth will endure, Peake the questing, restless artist, seems to have been convinced that it would. To his mind, the problem was not the endurance of truth but our dreadful separation from it. Humans, to count as such in Peake's mind, must confront the terrifying gaps between each other, and attempt to cross them. Those who submit to the dangers and difficulties required to do so will receive external affirmation of their existence – will become real – while those who refuse to do so may as well never have existed. The respective fates of Titus and Steerpike clearly demonstrate that Peake had no clue as to which was more likely in any given case. Like Lovecraft, he offered a warning about the difficulties and dangers of our situation rather than an illustration of how they could be overcome. The only comfort he presented was the notion that, if he was right, only the good would survive. The evil, by their very nature, would become lost in the archipelago for which there is no

map. The world of Gormenghast was set up to illustrate this idea in a manner that no mimetic depiction of the primary world really could.

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As both artist and writer, therefore, Mervyn Peake is concerned with the spaces between truths, the absolute necessity to bridge them, and the inevitable spiritual dangers presented by this effort. Forced by his own overwhelming artistic drive to venture into this territory, he naturally found himself occupying the literary place where humanity and its imagination engage in a dialogue between what exists and what, despite evidence to the contrary, surely must exist – the Perilous Realm. Unlike MacDonald and Eddison, however, Peake feared that symbolic truth might not be reachable, and was abidingly appalled by the risks inherent in the journey towards it. Consequently he offers his readers not a beautiful, lustrous realm aligned to the guidance of a single, benevolent, shining beacon, but a dark, imponderable sump of connotations and evocations, in which humanity may or may not find itself, and has little control over the outcome of the search. Thus his concern was not, as in the case of HP Lovecraft, with the vulnerability of symbolic truth. His constant artistic endeavours are proof enough that he took that on trust. What worried him was the dangers involved in finding that truth. The space between fact and truth was inherently trackless, as ghastly a blank as any sheet of canvas or drawing paper Peake sat in front of in his career as a visual artist. Although he possessed the rare gift of being able to turn this nullity into a repository of intellectual, emotional and spiritual energy, to reach others through such a medium was a risky and torturous undertaking. To him, therefore, the Perilous Realm, the no-man's-land between humanity and its imagination into which we must venture to gain our individual eucatastrophes, was a grim, dark place. It was our spiritual responsibility to try to cross this chasm, however terrifying; Peake spent his life planning and executing such jumps and was well acquainted with the anxiety of doing so. Were it ever necessary to reduce his verbose masterpiece to a single phrase, one could do worse than "Mind the gap".

Conclusion

I began this thesis posing myself the question of why a writer would create a fantasy world in the absence of any commercially obvious audience for such work. As case studies, I chose four very different writers, with four very different bodies of work. In all four cases I have reached a broadly similar conclusion. Each of these men created a secondary world in order to critique the primary world. Setting their fiction in such a world allowed them to look at reality from outside and thus make their critiques of reality as a whole rather than as a collection of parts. Although researchers are occasionally tempted to see (or manufacture) consensus among disparate figures where none actually exists, this generalisation seems quite justified.

There are, of course, considerable differences between these four authors. All of them arrived at fantasy via different routes, and all came to distinct conclusions. Convinced of the validity of Christianity but unsure of the validity of his own faith, George MacDonald sought a way to God unencumbered by intellectual argument. Finding one in the richly symbolic fairytales of the German Romantics, he began writing his own and swiftly found himself questioning the nature of reality as a whole. The questing, inconclusive, emotional epistemological method demanded by this literary form made the world make much more sense than did his rationalist education. ER Eddison similarly sought a new definition of virtue and valour that could be held up as an immutable gold standard of human behaviour, untroubled by utilitarian circumstance. The problem with isolating such a quantity was that the laws of this universe are themselves utilitarian contrivances that generally thwart rather than further what Eddison saw as our core philosophical responsibilities. He therefore spent his literary career carefully polishing his vision of a utopian world in which the doers of good deeds could count on just rewards, and therefore reach their full potential as people. His own resolute optimism in the real world about the course and outcome of World War II stands as firm evidence for the way in which the search for perfection in art helps people weather the imperfections of life.

HP Lovecraft expressed from childhood an abiding love for literary fantasy, but also a deep, emotional, arguably spiritual attachment to a very narrow slice of reality. This attachment clashed with his conviction of an impersonal, materialistic universe. His concern that the parochial idyll represented by Arkham might not be the

eternal, immutable entity he clearly wished it to be led him to create an artificial, conglomerated laboratory sample of the social, philosophical and aesthetic qualities he admired. Bravely, he spent his literary career subjecting Arkham to a series of rough epistemological shakings. He emerged from the exercise convinced of the value of his idyll, but increasingly concerned about its capacity to endure the inevitable. The most recent of these writers, Mervyn Peake, appalled by the confusion and imprecision of conventional means of interpersonal communication, found in himself a language in which those difficulties could be constructively, if not conclusively, addressed. Still concerned, however, he turned that skill to an illustration of the problem, which took the form of a world in which the impossibility of meaningful empathy rendered all other human accomplishments null and void. Such a literary creation demonstrated his fears more clearly than did any of the numerous drawings or poems he produced to quell those fears.

These four writers, therefore, were all possessed of a degree of intellectual and emotional uncertainty that could not be ignored, and could not be adequately addressed by any nakedly expository form of expression. Such uncertainty could be said to be the wellspring of all literature, but our four subject authors took the matter further. All of them were concerned not with any given aspect or component reality, or any specific state of affairs within it, but with the shape and systemic, motivating principles of reality itself. They therefore sought an opportunity to stop, draw breath, take a step back and take a look at their perceived problems in the broadest possible terms. All found their concerns to be inadequately addressed by realism. So they created imaginary worlds as a way of gaining the all-encompassing view of reality their interrogative natures and creative drives ultimately required.

This drive to interrogate reality by dispensing with its attendant ephemera and concentrating on its essential qualities – good and bad – should go some way to silencing criticisms of escapism and remoteness from human experience that have been leveled at world-builders. Acknowledging that a problem exists and attempting to assess its gravity involve more engagement with reality than escape from it. A person who cannot understand (and therefore, on some level, cope with) the primary world cannot invent a secondary world worthy of any readership. Secondary worlds arise not because their creators deem reality "too real". They arise because someone feels the real world is not real enough, and sets out to explain how it could be. It is certainly possible to put together a shoddy secondary world offering easy answers and

an absence of meaningful evil, but none of the four authors examined here do so. Eddison, it will be recalled, tries and fails, accepting that evil must exist for good to exist or be illustrated in any meaningful way. He and MacDonald are certainly very optimistic, but both offer theodicies of a rather daring sort, arguing not for the non-existence of evil but its long-term impotence in the face of prevailing goodness. Lovecraft and Peake, meanwhile, are preoccupied with the imperfections of reality and have created their worlds to throw the flaws of the primary world into the highest possible relief. These four men are not denying the existence of evil in the slightest, merely probing it for weaknesses, and publishing the results of those enquiries, whether they serve to reassure readers (and authors) or not. This is surely a brave thing to do. More to the point, this practice serves as a damaging counterargument to Rosemary Jackson's suggestion that secondary worlds are "relatively autonomous, relating to the 'real' only through metaphorical reflection and never, or rarely, intruding into or interrogating it" (42). These imaginary places are, by their very nature, intimately connected with reality and almost unfailingly concerned with interrogating it. Their connections to the primary world take place on such a level, however, that the engagement can easily be overlooked.

It is perhaps because the functional, interrogative features of secondary worlds can be overlooked in this manner that world-building has additionally been criticised as being a reactive, conservative form of literature. Jackson for one accuses Tolkien and those who have followed (and, presumably, preceded) him of somehow undoing the subversive, liberal work that she insists is the core business of fantastic literature (153-156). Dividing the discourse of a work of fiction from reality to the extent that world-building inherently does is, says Jackson, simplistic wish-fulfillment of a sort only an irresponsible social commentator would indulge in. Jackson's accusation could be seen to gain a modicum of strength in light of the biographical details of MacDonald, Eddison, Lovecraft and Peake. All of them – two sons of major local landowners, the pampered scion of a deeply self-aware clan of Old Americans, and the privileged son of a doctor in an isolated missionary hospital – were raised apart from the circumstances of the bulk of humanity, in some approximation of petty aristocracy. However, none of them fit the aristocratic mold precisely. The MacDonalds were the richest family in their native Huntly, but that made them big fish in a decidedly modest pond; as a child George considered himself lucky to have a bedroom with floorboards, and enjoyed only sporadic material security as an adult.

Lovecraft's pretensions to colonial blue-bloodedness rarely met external validation, because they were, in fact, mere pretensions; he spent much of his life living up to an ideal of no practicable significance for his time or place. Peake had a comfortable and secure childhood in a mission compound, but his privileges stemmed from his father's faith and education rather than birth; he was the son of a surgeon, not a baron. Eddison, a proud Etonian and Oxford scholar, comes closest to the stereotype of the well-heeled, upper-class gentleman, but he lived as sensible and productive an everyday life as any of these four men. On the basis of the examples examined here, world-building could be described as a hobby of the displaced aristocracy. Much the same could be said about socialism, if one takes practitioners such as Lenin, Mao and Guevara as examples.

This observation does not fully answer Jackson's criticism, however. Just as Marxism, when put into practice, tends to devolve into counterproductive dictatorship, world-building might be seen as conservative in the event, as a mechanism for the deposed and disinherited to fulfill wishes for social and material power that reality has denied them. L Sprague de Camp's misinformed appraisal of the Zimiamvia novels (see pp. 126-127) shows this idea in action. The existence of such arguments demonstrates that world-building, confronted with accusations of conservatism, certainly has a prima face case to answer.

World-building can only be classed as a conservative form of literature if conservatism can be defined very broadly and literally – as a belief in, and a desire to conserve, ideas, values and institutions that are, in themselves, sources of inherent, enduring value. All four of my subject authors believed passionately in such ideas. If this definition can be accepted (in place of the more common, rhetorical definition, which sees the term applied to a narrow range of social and political opntions) then world-building can indeed be classed as a conservative craft. It does not earn this label because it allows would-be tyrants to play out their desires in prose, however. Rather, it allows the imaginative and open-minded to set up laboratory conditions within which they can illustrate and test the precise nature of that which they wish to conserve. The writers who turn to this method do so because they feel that their ideals are a source rather than an example of true value. Consequently, to illustrate their points of view, they must propose new standards of value that illusrrate not who should enjoy physical or material wealth or temporal influence, but how such benefits can be reckoned as worth having. Writers who build secondary worlds are setting up

systems whereby these new standards of value and existence can be illustrated and, in many cases, tested.

Thus, while MacDonald's protagonists routinely sojourn amid material splendor, such episodes serve only to illustrate his lofty spiritual ideals. His books – at least, his fantasies – were chiefly concerned with the explanation of those ideals and the encouragement of others to work towards them. Eddison's novels might be superficially concerned with the articulation of luxury, but careful reading and reference to his working papers demonstrates that his main concern was not who gets the gold but why gold and the pleasures it undeniably brings can be measured as worth having. This value is achieved by Aphrodite's approval of it; again, the crux of the matter is the apportionment of philosophical and spiritual, rather than material or political, riches. Less optimistically, but even more clearly, Peake strove, in his life, art, poetry and fiction, to present fair warning of the difficulties and dangers people faced in their search for love and empathy. Those warnings, significantly, are never accompanied by an admonition against attempting that search. Peake is concerned not with the constitution of a political tyranny but the disestablishment, where possible, of an emotional one.

The odd writer out here is Lovecraft, whose concern for the preservation and lionisation of a given set of human accomplishments, often evident in his work, certainly does expose him as a grizzling elitist. His elitism, however, does not preclude him from eventually adopting a stance of reluctant humanism, granting humanity and its works a small but crucial place in his perception of the universe. A genuinely out-of-touch, would-be aristocrat probably would not acknowledge this place. Whether that end justifies his sometimes ugly means is something for individual readers and critics to decide, but Lovecraft cannot be *simply* dismissed as a spoiled brat. He sought to conserve something of essentially metaphysical importance and turned, as did MacDonald, Eddison and Peake, to a literary form that has a long history of utility in articulating such concerns.

For this reason, if pre-Tolkienian secondary-world fantasy is to be seen as a conservative form of literature, then this is more an observation on the essential nature of the genre rather than a criticism of it. Writers who use the device do so more to isolate, portray, and in many cases firmly interrogate the essence of what they wish to conserve, and the threats to it. More often than not this involves full-scale revisions

of ontology. These in turn require exercises of the intellect, emotions and imagination, usually of a magnitude quite beyond that required for mere wish-fulfillment.

The world-builders presented in this thesis are not fulfilling wishes, except perhaps in an incidental sense (Eddison and Lovecraft certainly go out of their way to create worlds that conform to lofty, or at least precise, aesthetic ideals). Rather, they are addressing the issue of why they have wishes at all. These four all found themselves querying what it was to be real. In the course of doing so all came across a *sine qua non* – MacDonald's God, Eddison's Goddess, Lovecraft's parochial fervour, Peake's drive for interpersonal communion – the absolute, game-breaking importance of which could be neither clearly illustrated nor convincingly supported by empirical explanation or realistic depiction. Relocation into the realms of the imagination was required. Since these people were critiquing the nature of the universe as a whole, even the common rhetorical technique (as WR Irwin would class it; 63) of placing supernatural elements in our world would not suffice. Whole new worlds had to be set up on motivating principles that would portray these ontological absolutes, either in terms of their immediacy and applicability (as in the works of MacDonald and Eddion) or its potential remoteness (as in the works of Lovecraft and Peake).

Pointedly, however, all four world-builders also insert ordinary people, accustomed to conventional standards of ontology, into these new worlds. The only exception to this rule is Eddison, who does the precise opposite by bringing (or, depending upon which position on Eddison's great intercosmic loop the reader feels most comfortable, returning) his gods to Earth. While this might seem to be a potent exception, it actually accomplished exactly the same thing – the forms, fates and motivating principles of the invented world and the real one are placed in direct and deliberate contrast to each other. Eddison's inverted strategy in fact counts as arguably its most powerful exemplar – he was quite *explicitly* comparing Earth with Zimiamvia. MacDonald, Lovecraft and Peake all do something very similar – Anodos, Vane, the faculty at Miskatonic, Titus and Steerpike are all, despite important differences contingent upon their respective contexts, of a piece. Their job is not simply to provide the supernatural with something to be super to, which would be the case if their creators were merely doing what Eddison is accused of doing – wittering about the exotic and the fanciful. What these characters, these Tolkienian mortal men, do is provide a crucial control sample in the ontological experiments inherent in a fully-realised secondary world.

The essential absence of any such character from *The Worm Ouroboros* (Lessingham disappears from that narrative after a few pages) may well have something to do with the small following Eddison has so far acquired. Without any such control sample, the bellowing supermen of Mercury have nobody to slow them down, but conversely have little to offer readers beyond a series of histrionic stunts. Readers who, reasonably enough, start their exploration of Eddison's work with his first novel are within their rights to dismiss him as a mere prose pyrotechnician. Without reading further, however, they would miss out on Eddison's remarkable later novels and their very direct, explicit focus on Lessingham and his respective fates in two worlds operating on two different motivating principles. In maintaining (and progressively refining) this focus, Eddison grew into a world-builder, and Zimiamvia into a world, of substance, just as the other writers examined in this thesis eventually became. What the presence of such characters as Lessingham, Titus or Professor Dyer does is focus attention on the differences between the world the writer has invented and the one in which he lives. Such characters venture – willingly, intentionally or otherwise – into, as Lovecraft's Nahum Gardner puts it, "some place whar things ain't as they is here" ("The Colour out of Space" 185) in order to directly contrast reality and imagination. The fact that Eddison did this later in his career – and in reverse to the other authors, placing a god on Earth instead of a man in heaven – should not be taken as a point against him. He was, quickly enough, pushed into using the same pattern as other world-builders. All of these writers were chronicling of an expedition into the no-man's-land between ideals and realities, seeking to determine the precise extent and nature of the gap between that which exists and that which should exist, and indeed the standards by which anything can be said to exist at all.

Fantasy is marvelous fun. Those writers and readers who enter Fairy Land on working visas, however, will find that they can vastly broaden their intellectual, emotional and spiritual horizons. As pulp fantasist RA Salvatore said in an interview I quoted in my introduction, "Fantasy fans are wonderful. They're strong readers, they're hungry readers. They are people who seem to want a little more out of the world than what they've been seeing. Many of them are incredible idealists" (Weinlein 84). Salvatore formed that opinion through his interactions with readers of his own Drizzt Do'Urden novels – books written to order for a publisher seeking to commercially harness a preexisting intellectual property. That such seemingly straightforward literature appeals to an audience with such profound and far-reaching

demands is an indication of its artistic worth and an endorsement of fantasy as a genre. Salvatore and most of his fellow genre fantasists freely concede their debt to JRR Tolkien, but they stand upon the shoulders of more than one giant. The reasoned and responsible use of the Perilous Realm, as practiced by George MacDonald, ER Eddison, HP Lovecraft and Mervyn Peake, allows us to see reality as a whole from outside and interrogate it in startling and penetrating ways. For writers who depict our own world in a genuinely new way, illustrating not only incidental flaws or attributes such as an absence of dragons or vampires but the basic, fundamental merits and flaws of reality itself, it presents an invaluable tool. Such concerns are by their very nature wide-ranging, and illustrations of them, properly rendered, are consequently very powerful. They present absolute necessities that realism cannot accurately depict. And necessity is, after all, the mother of invention.

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