

THE AFTERMATH OF ENLIGHTENMENT from Gothic to Hermetic

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In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss.

- Heidegger.

According to C.G.Jung, 'all art intuitively apprehends coming changes in the collective unconscious' and it is indeed illuminating to compare aspects of cultural and artistic activity to trends in political history and developments in social evolution. Taken in its entirety the period under consideration may be viewed as a continuum from the French Revolution (1789-1804) to the outbreak of World War One in 1914. This was the first epoch of artistic modernism, a century punctuated by successive spasms - the revolutions of 1848, the war and Paris Commune of 1870/71, and closing the final years (the fin-de-siecle), the Bolshevik Revolution. Throughout the period the rise of state nationalisms and the struggles of oppressed minorities undermined the great dynastic empires of the Romanovs The Hapsburgs and the Ottoman Turks.

Jung asserted that a key characteristic of this period was a deepening concern with the inner world of the mind. A turning away from religious solutions based upon blind faith to other doctrines based upon initiated Gnostic Knowledge (for example Jung regarded Theosophy as 'pure Gnosticism in Hindu dress'. Some critics (eg Webb) have identified Jungian Psychology as a form of Gnosis). He wrote:

There can be no doubt that from the beginning of the nineteenth century - ever since the time of the French Revolution - the psyche has moved more and more into the foreground of man's interest, and with a steadily increasing power of attraction.

The official overthrow of Christianity and the enthronement of The Goddess of Reason by French Revolutionaries symbolises a telling configuration of ideas. A startling factor being that far from heralding a new era of utopian enlightenment Rationalism, the revolution of 1789 triggered an outburst of fanatical terror perpetrated by ideologues of a new calibre: Marat, Maximilien Robespierre, Saint-Just, and Jaques Roux. Total politics and the cult of the guillotine. It is significant that the idea of Nihilism first appears at this time, in Mercier's Dictionary of 1801 where it was defined as a "product of the evil philosophy that flaunts itself in the fat Dictionnaire..."

"What does it want to make of us? Nihilist's!" The term originated in Germany where some philosophers predicted that Cartesian Rationalism would lead to a terrifying solipsistic nihilism.

In the arts these upheavals were reflected in the works of a few key figures. In painting Fuseli and Goya and in literature the horrors of popular fantasy in the form of the Gothic Novel.

Goya represents the first 'modern' painter in a very special sense, for his works after 1790 displayed a grim new vision, a radical break with the past. His 'Black' paintings and engravings like The Caprichos (1793) depicted a universe of terror and grotesque realism. To quote Gwyn A. Williams:

Goya's new vision was a dark one, a realism twisted by manic passions, ferocious struggles spotlighted in a sombre world, an inhumanity which was all too human, an explosion of violence and unreason into the world of tapestry and portrait and enlightened discourse.

Goya's subject matter comprised themes such as shipwrecks, insanity, brigandage, cannibalism, witchcraft, plagues, massacres and mindless cruelty - and his counterpart in the world of literature was the Marquis de Sade.

De Sade exemplified the terrors of the Revolution and sublimated them into works of hedonistic nihilism written whilst incarcerated in the Bastille: Justine (1791), Aline et Valcour (1795), Philosophie dans le Boudoir (1795) and La Nouvelle Justine (1797). Called 'the Divine Marquis' his works were as savage and incoherent as the age of turmoil in which he lived and they were to exercise a covert influence over subsequent poets and artists, from Petrus Borel (Champvert, contes immoraux, 1833) to the Late Gothic of Julien Green (Adrienne Mesurat, 1927).

Sade's world, like that of Goya showed links with the writings of popular fantasy which also signified the destruction of a world of enlightened discourse by an eruption of violence and unreason. The Gothic Novel and its offshoots is widely perceived by critics to reflect the social and political stresses of the breakdown of Enlightenment culture, introducing, at the dawn of the modern era themes of cultural disintegration, anomie, irrationalist millenarianism, supernatural occultism, primitivism, sadism, transformation and global disaster which were to permeate various dark currents of 'modernism' and the 'fin-de-siecle'. Books like Walpole's Castle of Otranto (1764), Beckford's Vathek (1786), Ann Radcliffe's Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), M.G.Lewis's The Monk (1796), Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) and Charles Robert Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer (1820).

progressed via the upheavals of 1870 towards the apocalypse of 1914 genres of popular fantasy were to proliferate, impinging upon both the subculture of the occult and the struggles of the artistic avant garde. A pivotal figure in this process was Edgar Allen Poe who infused the European-American Gothic tradition with his own brand of necrophiliac soul-sickness with tales like Ligeia (1838), The Fall of the House of Usher (1839) and The Masque of the Red Death. Translated into French by Baudelaire (starting 1847) these stories exerted a powerful influence over subsequent horror fantasy literature: the crumbling Gothic castles of the original romances become the haunted 'inner rooms' and 'dream chambers' of the hypersensitive initiate engaged in half-understood rituals of death and transformation. Thus Poe became one of the grand masters of Decadence when his aesthetic ideas, which defined the poetic procedure as 'an ecstatic presience of the glories beyond the grave...' percolated into the literary cenacles of the French maudits. Poe's combination of intellectual dandyism, morbid introspection and prototype Aestheticism illuminates some of the mutually reinforcing links that existed between fantasists, occultists and the avant-garde maudits of Decadent Hermeticism. After 1870 many exponents of the new poetry found themselves exiled to the limits of cultural acceptability. It is understandable that writers such as Rimbaud, Huysmans and Andrei Bely should be influenced by occultism of Eliphaz Levi and Rudolf Steiner, whilst others, such as Villiers de l'Isle Adam, William Morris or Maurice Maeterlink should themselves exert an influence over the literature of fantasy and horror that grew from the original Gothic.

Writing about fantastic literature Rosemary Jackson (1981) has identified the essential characteristic of the movement as a "severance of the connecting lines of meaning". She uses a quote from Becket to illustrate her point: "There could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names." She asserts that a "gap between sign and meaning" is a dominant concern of modernism and reveals a zero point of culture where meaning itself - no longer supported by traditional modes of discourse - evaporates into a "void of non-meaning" or an abyss of "non-signification". In the face of this 'void' the various subgenres of the fantastic mirrored the increasing desperation of the secularised, alienated inhabitant of the modern world. The poet, the fantasist, the occultist and the magus were all outsiders, some searching in vain for a religious alternative to de-Christianisation and Darwinism, all exhibiting symptoms of a deep-rooted anxiety; the "unspoken terror" of

the era. The period 1890-1914 witnessed the emergence of 'modern fantasy' as we know it today. Several major writers contributed to the field, for example, Henry James with the classic ghost story The Turn of the Screw (1898), Oscar Wilde with The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) and William Morris with a series of works which inaugurated a completely new strand of fiction which could be called 'Alternative Worlds Fiction': The Glittering Plain (1891), The Wood Beyond the World (1895) and The Well at the World's end (1896). These works were illustrated by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, setting the precedent for the emergence of a whole school of fantasy illustrators linked to the emergence of new techniques of reproduction and book production.

Both in England and on the continent a host of other authors produced works in a diverse range of sub-categories: Occult Fantasy, Grotesque Fantasy, Cosmic Horror, tales of degeneration and sexuality, and pioneer Science Fiction. Occult Fantasy was represented by the works of the Austrian Gustav Meyrink, a keen alchemist and a member of a Theosophical Lodge in Prague called the Lodge of the Blue Star. Meyrink was originally inspired by occult Freemasonry and also wrote grotesque tales in the manner of Poe and E.T.A.Hoffmann. His most famous book was Der Golem (1915) but he also wrote numerous other Gnostic-Theosophical allegories and tales like Das grüne Gesicht (1916), Walpurgisnacht (1917), and Der Engel vom Westlichen Fenster (1927), a novel about Elizabethan magus Dr. John Dee. The chief precursor of occult fantasy fiction was Bulwer-Lytton whose Rosicrucian novel was called Zanoni (1842). Lytton was a friend of Eliphas Levi and was said to have been initiated into occultism by the English magus Francis Barrett. Occult initiates themselves also wrote occasional fictions to promote their work. For example H.P. Blavatsky wrote a tale called A Story of the Mystical (1875), and W.B. Yeats contributed to the genre with a story called Rosa Alchemica in 1897 which combined initiated alchemical themes with motifs of fin-de-siecle Decadence.

The particularly English form of supernatural horror was best represented by M.R.James, whose Ghost Stories of an Antiquary appeared in 1904. His immediate precursor was J.S. Le Fanu whose first collection of ghost stories appeared in 1851 and who spent the final years of his life as a recluse immersed in the writings of Swedenborg. Swedenborg provided Le Fanu with a philosophical framework for his supernatural fictions which were published in anthologies throughout the later years of the century: In a Glass Darkly (1872) and The Purcell Papers (1880). Franz Rottensteiner describes Le Fanu's work in terms which reinforce the Jungian notion of increasing subjectivism as the psyche increases its power of attraction:

... island in an ocean of

supernaturalism; the supernatural is always prepared to break through when man's resistance has been weakened... he was obsessed by the materials of his imagination...

Perhaps to compensate for the fearful implications of the world of gothic terrors exposed by the horror fiction of ghost and vampire tales, another subgenre of the fantastic arose during the 1890s. This comprised the sagas of semi-mythical universes and parallel dimensions which find their first expression in the works of George MacDonald such as Phantastes (1858), and Lilith (1895). The form was more firmly established by William Morris with the books previously noted, all of which were published between 1891 and 1896. As mentioned the fantasy fiction of Alternative Worlds also provided an outlet for many new book illustrators who took advantage of new forms of picture reproduction to produce apposite pictorial material across the whole range of fantasy literature, from children's books, to tales of legend from the world of ancient mythology and oriental demonology. The first and greatest of these illustrators was Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) who set high standards with his mass-produced illustrations for Malory's King Arthur (1894), Oscar Wilde's Salome (1894), Pope's Rape of the Lock (1896) and The Works of Edgar Allan Poe (1894). Another major artist of the time who pioneered illustration for fantasy works was Charles Ricketts (1866-1930) who also produced drawings for the fairy tales and parables of Oscar Wilde. Following Beardsley and Ricketts were a host of minor artists like Robert Anning Bell, John Batten, Arthur Rackham and S.M. Sime who was closely associated with one of the most famous of all Alternative Worlds Fantasists: Lord Dunsany (E.J.M. Drax Plunkett, 1878-1957). His collections of short stories like The Gods of Pegana (1905), Time and the Gods (1906), The Sword of Welleran (1908) and many others were all illustrated by Sime in suitably bizarre style.

Alternative Worlds fantasy moves to the opposite end of the spectrum from the works of Le Fanu, M.R. James and the terrors of Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897). In place of intimate, personal horrors and manias, or the violation of sexual taboos, this subgenre provided the public with epic sagas of the marvellous, compensating for the void of unbelief and the abyss of non-meaning by indulging a 'nostalgia for lost moral and social hierarchies' (Jackson) while still expressing symptoms of alienation and Post-Darwinian angst. These fictions of other worlds also belong to the prehistory of science fiction, as represented by the scientific 'prophecies' and eschatologies of H.G. Wells (The Time

The link between these purveyors of gratuitous semi-occult fictions and the world of Morris and Dunsany was provided by E.R. Eddison whose Alternative Worlds saga, The Worm Ouroboros was published in 1922.

Whereas many of these fantasies moved away from the unnerving revelations of the hard-core Gothic Horrors and sought escape in pseudo-moral and religious allegory (for example in the more recent cases of the Christian fantasies of C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams) other writers during the turn-of-the-century era created works which attempted to plumb even greater depths of fear and menace. These were the purveyors of Cosmic Horror: William Hope Hodgson (1875-1918), Arthur Machen (1863-1947) and M.P. Shiel (1865-1947). These three writers published works during the final decades of the period and their lives encompassed both world wars (except for William Hope Hodgson who was killed at Ypres). In the works of Machen (a minor member of the Golden Dawn) nature in the Post-Darwinian world is presented as the lair of non-human, primal beings who reduce to gibbering idiocy (or worse) all mortals who dare penetrate their secrets. It has been observed that Machen's theme was 'the awful transmutation of the hills' (quoted by David Punter) perpetrated by daemonic forces which manipulate the process of evolution. Machen is famous for works such as The Great God Pan (1894), The Three Imposters (1895) and tales of evil faerie lore like The Shining Pyramid. The luckless victims and intruding forces in his works represent the tendency of biological entropy, the ability of all things to 'revert' to 'primal slime' to descend 'even to the abyss of all being'. It has been observed that his obsessions with vestigial elder races of pre-human or sub-human beings inhabiting isolated parts of rural England may correlate with proto-fascist occult root-race theories peddled by Dion Fortune and H.P. Blavatsky. The other writers of Cosmic Horror in the period before 1914 externalised the despair of Europe as its institutions teetered on the verge of annihilation. In The Yellow Danger (1898), M.P. Shiel described the atrocities of all-out race-war, and then wallowed in the consummate morbidity of global destruction in his next novel, The Purple Cloud (1901). More extreme, perhaps, was William Hope Hodgson's The Nightland (1912), which like his other novel The House on the Borderland (1908), developed the theme of the cosmic seige, Man fallen prey to nightmare forces of eldritch evil closing in from the depths of darkness. The Nightland was a 'future history', set millions of years hence in an epoch after the extinction of the sun. It describes how the last vestiges of humanity eek out their days in a vast fortified pyramid called 'the last redoubt' surrounded by impenetrable darkness and besieged by unspeakable terrifying entities - the first manifestation of those ultimate 'nameless things' which haunt the works of

embodying, the disintegration of all normal referential categories; conventional dimensionality, and basic polarities such as animate/inanimate, life/death or self/other. A gigantic extrapolation of the personal degradations and metamorphoses of Stevenson, Wilde and Bram Stoker's Dracula.

These works reinforce Rosemary Jackson's argument that

Fantasy points to... the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up... on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems...

Nineteenth century secularization ensured that the idea of the other or the 'unspeakable' was displaced from institutionalised theocratic fantasies of Heaven and Hell, to desperate domains of the world, or, eventually - as in Olaf Stapledon's nihilistic future histories such as Last and First Men (1930) or Star Maker (1937) - to the outermost reaches of conceivable space and time. The gradual internalisation of the imagination in the nineteenth century was mirrored by a gradual transition from the clumsy horrors of the original Gothic to the intangible menaces of Henry James and Walter de la Mare. While global panic was manifest in the conflicting fin-de-siecle subgenres of Cosmic Horror and Alternative Worlds Others sought relief in the Superman or the life-giving practices of ancient alchemical arts, aestheticised into a doctrine of total art (as in Dorian Gray, or Rosa Alchemica).

If the literature of fantasy in its varied subgenres reflected the crises of modernism and the modernist imperative to delve to the limits of experience (The New) unhindered by ancient prohibitions, the development of modern poetry throughout the same period was the most revealing symptom of all. It has been observed that the crisis of modernism was felt most acutely in poetry "because poetry, above all genres tends to experience changes of relationship and belief in a culture at the direct levels of subject-and-object relationship, and at the very base of form and language." (Bradbury and MacFarlane, 1976, p.331). Huysmans, the progenitor of the Decadent Movement linked the state of language to the state of culture as a whole when, in 1884, he wrote of "the Decadence of French literature... attacked by organic diseases... exhausted by syntactical excesses..." However, far from being the swan-song of a dying language, the experiments of the Decadents and Symbolists which gave rise to vers-libre and vers-prose were simply the forerunners of a stylistic tradition which pushed the powers of language to the very limits of the expressible. In some respects the poetic products of this modern tradition could be said to be the linguistic embodiments of the impulse to otherness more crudely expressed in the popular subculture by the writers of fantasy. Just as the Gothic fictions, and works of Sade and Goya coincided with the upheavals of the French Revolution; just as the

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most extreme outbursts of modernist avantgardism coincided with the First World War (eg Dadaism), so a number of other 'symptomatic' works coincided the convulsions of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune (1870/71). These were works by followers of Baudelaire: Rimbaud with Le Bateau Ivre and Lautreamont with Maldoror. Both these works encapsulated key ideas defining the position of poetic language in an age of cultural crisis. During this period also, Mallarme was working on his curious, metaphysical story-play, Igitur ou la folie d'Elbehnon which combined many of the themes touched upon in this section, being a combination of both the apparatus of Gothic Horror, refracted via the perverse lens of Edgar Poe, and the most refined Hermetic poetry.

Igitur is the archetypal symbolist hero. A fusion of Hamlet and Roderick Usher. His world is his room, which he has lined with heavy curtains to damn the flow of time. This room is the special creation of the symbolist hero; a private temple in which the hero engages in meditative rites of purification and projection, directing his mind through vistas of space and time. Igitur sits there, his life focussed on a clock with its hands raised to midnight, his eyes staring at his mirror. Igitur's objective is to gain a position outside time, just as, in broader cultural terms the entire thrust of the poetic and fantasy movements were to 'open up a space without/outside the cultural order' (Jackson). But Mallarme, in confronting the void which is then revealed - that zero point of culture beyond the determinism of chance - can only envisage himself as a discontinuous 'aptitude'. He was forced to realise that all absolute values are baseless and can only be understood as falsehoods - or fictions.

The central image of Igitur is the descent of a spiral staircase enveloped in shadow; an image that encapsulates the crisis of the nineteenth century poet facing the dissolution of all cultural reference points, thrown back into himself, into the indeterminate world of post-Christian uncertainty and suicidal Gothic absurdism. According to the critic R.G.Cohn (1981), this is a vision

of an implacably daring and stubborn explorer of the unknown... with echoes of Hamlet and of an immemorial occult tradition of initiation into life's rock bottom mysteries...

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