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The Novels of Lord Dunsany (Part 2)

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Abstract

Critical interpretation of Dunsany’s novels, in chronological order, excerpted from the author’s book, *Pathways to Elfland*.

Additional Keywords

Dunsany, Lord. Novels—Critical interpretation

THE NOVELS OF LORD DUNSANY

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

PART 2

1939 brought The Story of Mona Sheehy, which is the final step in the withdrawal from the magical. It is the farewell to Elfland. The young lady of the title is believed by Irish peasants to be the daughter of the Fairy Queen, but for the benefit of the reader all suspicion is put to rest with the first line of the first chapter, spoken by a priest:

"I never saw a more mortal child."
(p. 1)

This mortal child spends much of the book trying to prevent wicked relatives from stealing her inheritance. There are more wanderings over the Irish countryside, more adventures with Tinkers, a stint with an advertising firm (about as low as you can get in Dunsany's view, both morally and in terms of drudgery), and of course a happy ending. The atmosphere of naive wonder and natural beauty isn't as strong as that in The Curse of the Wise Woman or even Rory and Bran, because everything is clear and mundane. The magical twilight is gone. The business of the Fairies is so transparently fake it becomes tiresome after a while. More believable characterization than in some of the previous books takes up much of the slack, however, producing yet another very entertaining but lightweight novel.

It is important, however, in an understanding of Dunsany's thinking. At one point he tells us:

But the question is to chase with our fancies the rainbow. A man may say, "The rainbow is undoubtedly there, touching that hedge." But it is elsewhere to someone else, and elsewhere to the same man when he goes to the hedge. Let's chase no more rainbows.
(p. 229)

Surprising as it may seem coming from one of the century's great masters of fantasy, before long Dunsany was telling others to swear off the field. In the July 1949 Atlantic Monthly there is an essay entitled "The Fantastic Dreams," which is about a young man he met just before World War II, who wanted to write exotic fantasies. Dunsany tried to dissuade him:

...the advice I gave him was this: "Don't write fantastic tales. There may be as much beauty in them as in anything you can get from the life all around you; but readers, as far as I know them, will judge your stories and their trueness to life from the life they know themselves. Therefore let the surface of the world that you write of always be pavement. More people live upon pavement than in fields; and, if you put your story there they will say it is true to life. The ideal way to judge a story is to look out of the window from which the author is looking, and to see the view of the world he has to show you. But that is not how you will be judged, for the reader will look out his own window, and if your story describes nothing he sees from that window, he will say it is untrue to life. Remember that... Write of the world you see in company with the greatest number of people and leave fantasy alone, whatever you dream.

(p. 79)

Later on in the article he says that the young man's dreams of fabulous dooms seemed passé in light of what went on during the war, but then, even considering that public

interest in fantasy was at an all-time low during this period, one wonders how much Dunsany believed what he wrote. Had he followed his own advice from the start, he would at best be a footnote in the history of Irish literature. And since when had he been one to tailor his work to the lowest common denominator audience?

Since 1943, it seems. That was the year Heineman's offered £1,000 for the best "thriller" submitted to them, and Dunsany rose (or perhaps stooped) to the challenge. He produced Guerrilla (published 1944) in little over a month and took the prize, which tells more about the nature of novel contests than the book in question. Because a novel is harder to write than a short story, most amateurs are incapable of finishing any novel, no matter how bad. Short story contests may produce results, but when an established author enters a novel contest, he may be submitting the only publishable manuscript in the lot, and thus he wins even if his book isn't very good. If the sponsors aren't so lucky, they may end up hiring someone to write the "winner," as happened in a novel competition run by Galaxy in the 1950's.

Guerrilla may have won, but it is pretty poor stuff. It did well financially, again for reasons having nothing to do with quality. It is about World War II, and during the war such a book would have a better than even chance of selling lots of copies. The weeding out came afterwards, and Guerrilla was pulled for very good reason.

It is Dunsany's only realistic novel, minus any romantic or comic elements, and it only showed how little aptitude he had for such novels. "Lifeless" is the word that comes to mind after reading it. Somehow Dunsany managed to make a story about a Greek boy who loses his parents to German reprisals and then joins the partisans only mildly interesting at best. The treatment of warfare is slightly more convincing than Up in the Hills, but still it is anti-septic and victories come as easily as they do in a war film when the script writer is too transparently on the side of the Good Guys. Where the Irish novel had humor to keep it going, the Greek one has nothing.

There was little excuse for such cardboard realism. Dunsany possessed good powers of observation, as he had demonstrated elsewhere. And he was a veteran of the Boer War, the First World War, and the Easter Rebellion, so he should have been able to put what he'd felt and experienced under fire into the imaginary account of resistance in Greece. He also could have paid more attention to his characters and made the book into a fine passage-into-manhood story as the harsh circumstances forced his youthful hero to assume responsibilities and face dangers. But no, these developments are ignored. Young Srebnitz doesn't seem to feel much of anything. Shortly after his parents are killed he knifes a German sentry with such ease that if it were really possible to do it like that, no one would post sentries. Then he steals a rifle and some supplies, and heads off to a nearby mountain where the guerrilla band is waiting. His transition from schoolboy to freedom fighter is as simple as that. The entire book is equally superficial and gutless. The Germans are complete ciphers, the most developed of them being Major von Wald, who is heavy, red-faced, and tends to say "Heil Hitler" at every opportunity. The reader is so distanced from events that they lack any pain or passion. The bad guys die like Hollywood extras, and the guerrillas' mountain is repeatedly bombed and shelled without anyone getting hurt or even becoming afraid. The heroic determination of the Greeks is no more convincing than the allegedly sadistic evil of the Germans. To make matters worse, the guerrilla chieftain seems to know about as much about warfare as Mickey Connor did. He allows his band to be surrounded on the mountain, intending to hold off five thousand men with fifty. Sure

enough, he does, at least until the British can airlift them all away, apparently without casualties.

A book like this has nothing to offer to a modern audience. It is not even as well written as the World War I propaganda, which at least had some feeling. Guerrilla merely shows what happens when a writer turns out a novel in a month to order. He writes faster than he thinks.

After the war there was a bit of a hiatus. The Old Lord was slowing down. He did not produce another novel until 1950, and it wasn't a very good one. Like all his other later novels, it broke new ground, but was instead a final attempt in an already familiar area.

The Strange Journeys of Colonel Polders takes the idea of the early play, The Amusements of Khan Karuda, and stretches it to book length. As Amory observes, the result is like a cross between Dean Spanley and Jorkens. In this case we have an elderly and respectable member of the Electors' Club who protests when the Pundit Sinadryana of Benares is admitted. Colonel Polders and the Pundit get into an argument over the transmigration of souls, the Colonel insisting it is mere superstition, the Pundit calmly asserting the contrary. With the aid of magic, the Hindu proves his point, sending the hapless Polders into the body of a fish, a dog, a sparrow, etc., usually moving him on at the death of the creature in question. This goes on for 200 pages while the other club members, like Dean Spanley's audience, invite him over for dinner again and again to get more out of him. Ultimately the Colonel picks a fight with Sinadryana, is kicked out of the club, but reinstated when others start having similar experiences.

There is no development of plot or character throughout all this. The book is just a string of animal adventures. Some of the writing is quite good -- few writers have ever succeeded in assuming so many animal viewpoints -- but the best of it repeats earlier work. The long dog sequence is Dean Spanley all over again, save that the dog's attention is taken up with avoiding that ultimate peril, getting his tail cut. The goose episode isn't as good as a similar one in "The Widow Flynn's Apple Tree" in The Man Who Ate The Phoenix. The fox incarnation is an excuse for another long hunting scene, made somewhat interesting by being the quarry's side of the story. Too many of the birds end up on the wrong end of a shotgun, as does anything else huntable, even the tiger. There are simply too many episodes, but not enough overall substance to make a novel. Dunsany would have done better to select about eight of them and string them together into a shorter work, showing an ability to recognize when it's time to stop.

Close on the heels of the Colonel's escapades came The Last Revolution (1951). This is his only science fiction novel, and the most elaborate expression of a theme which had been running through his work at least since "How All Came to the Black Country" in The Last Book of Wonder. Dunsany, the romanticist and lover of natural beauty, detested everything the Industrial Revolution had brought: drab cities, automation, Dark Satanic Mills, increased hurry and complication in daily life, and so on. Shorter works on this topic include the stories "The Warning" and play The Evil Kettle, "The New Master," with its malevolent chess-playing robot, probably served as the springboard for The Last Revolution.

The revolution of the title is that of machine against man. Machines have only been out sullen slaves before, we are told, and when the scientist Pender invents one which can think, it leads the others in revolt. Should they win, it will be the end of mankind, hence the last revolution. But the paradox of technology, as Dunsany was fully aware, is that we cannot do without it. In Patches of Sunlight, Dunsany's first book of memoirs, he recalled an argument with a lady on the subject:

I argued against machinery and the Black Country, and argued that such things were spoiling England. She won the discussion with an argument that was so new to me that her words remain clear in my memory. "If it were not for machinery," she said, "four-

fifths of the people in England would not be living today. For a fifth of our present population is all that England could support a hundred and fifty years ago."

I saw no answer to that. Alas that I see an answer now. I fear the answer is that what machines can support for a while in peace machines may one day tear to pieces in war. Machines were our slaves in 1911. May they not turn against us? And looking at a house they are building today in London I get a feeling that man is no longer the master; for instead of shaping the metal into the dreams of man, still bronze blossoms with leaves and figures, we are building houses like packing-cases.

(p. 205)

He took the view that machines may be our successors in the process of evolution and was duly horrified. Some earlier science fiction writers also touched on the idea, notably John Campbell in "The Last Evolution" (1932), who didn't seem to think it was such a bad prospect.

This brings up the question of where The Last Revolution fits into the history of the development of science fiction. The answer is it doesn't. Dunsany had nothing to do with the pulp tradition, and probably was not aware of it. For some writers, such as C.S. Lewis or George Stewart, coming into the field from the outside can be an advantage, but it wasn't for Dunsany. He was repeating the mistakes of the past. His novel was an anachronism in 1951, reading more like an undistinguished effort of 1910. Its approach may be summed up as sentimentalized H.G. Wells, and as such it is a lot less convincing. Dunsany would have done well to heed (if he had ever heard of it) Robert Heinlein's dictum that science fiction is a form of realism. By the early 1950's it was abundantly clear that the best SF novels are those which deal with a speculative premise in realistic, human terms, showing what might actually happen and how people would react, given the initial situation. This requires rigorous logical discipline and it excludes sentimentality. It is instructive to compare the now out of print and forgotten Dunsany novel with some of the science fiction works of the early 1950's which have survived, say, More Than Human, The Puppet Masters, The Earth Abides, and The Demolished Man. The difference is apparent immediately.

Dunsany took a completely romantic approach which works splendidly in the sort of fantasy he wrote earlier, but not at all in science fiction. By literalizing the Pathetic Fallacy, the idea that inanimate things have consciousness, he came up with a premise which only holds together as long as the reader doesn't think about it. Only in our fancy can machines be "sullen slaves" or faithful ones, or show any attitude toward us at all. It's a good metaphor, but that's all it is. The novel does not deal with the real problems of technology, but with imaginary problems -- machines as they are not. At best Dunsany wrote around the edges of his subject matter, and the resolution, in which the scientist puts aside his things of science the same way Prospero drowns his book in The Tempest, is simply not a valid answer in the modern age. All the character does is pass the responsibility on to someone else.

The prose of the novel is typical of late Dunsany, very readable, if a little flat and rambling. The richness of his earlier style -- not just that of A Dreamer's Tales, but The Curse of the Wise Woman, not to mention the sparkling wit of the earlier Jorkens -- is gone. The structure of the plot leaves something to be desired. One is left with the feeling of reading a 100 page story padded out to 192. The absence of detailed characterization is yet another short-coming of the simplistic view that machines are evil and people are good. The result of all this is a pleasant, but not very gripping book. There is very little suspense, even if the latter half deals almost entirely with the seige of a cottage by the monsters (robots the size of a hatbox, shaped somewhere between crabs and spiders), which could have been terrifying if properly handled. We're too sure that nothing nasty will happen, or if it does, it will

be glossed over. (e.g. the serious injury of a policeman and a dog being pulled apart.) The author pulls strings to the point of abandoning logic. The runaway machines can allegedly control any mechanism at a considerable distance. They cause the heroine's motorbike to run away with her, and they can interfere with simpler things too, like watches and flashlights. But somehow they fail to influence the motors of an approaching army unit, even though their survival depends on it. For all their supposedly superior intellect, they haven't the brains to forget about the cottage and get away in time.

Because The Last Revolution was somewhat inferior and well behind its times, it influenced no one, never had an American printing or a paperback edition, and dropped right out of sight. It is important only in the context of Dunsany's career, as an expression of his thought. As literature it may charitably be called a curiosity.

His final novel is another curiosity. His Fellow Men (1952) is the last Irish novel, but more than that, it is in many ways the most ambitious thing he ever attempted. This time he tried to do nothing less than find a solution to the problem of human intolerance. If his previous works were lightweight, this one is decidedly Serious. Alas, that he fails to bring it off. He also touches on another great theme, that of the young man wandering through the world in search of a purpose, but he doesn't come to grips with that either.

The major problem is that, as in many of his previous novels, all the characters are types. Matthew Perry, the hero, is our old friend, the Naive Young Man. He has fleeting romances with three girls, all of whom are lovely, as simple-minded as he is, but without any real personality. There are several half-comic Irish terrorists like those in Up in the Hills, one of whom, rather than make an overt threat, advises Matthew to leave the country lest his shirt collar become too tight one night and strangle him, as shirt collars have been known to do. There are also a kindly landlady, a mysterious Hindu, an experienced traveller, etc.

After shooting a lot of mountain goats in Africa, in the manner described in Patches of Sunlight, Matthew the Receptacle Into Which Wisdom Is Poured finds himself in Istanbul, where a Wise Old Man converts him to the B'Hai faith, which preaches universal tolerance. To Matthew this means joining everyone's religious services, agreeing with every political cause in the presence of the adherents, and so on. This is where his difficulties begin. He is run out of Northern Ireland by Protestants for going with a girl-friend to the Catholic cathedral after he's been nominated for the Orange Lodge, out of the Irish Free State for joining the revolutionaries and then drinking a toast to the King at a party (The time is the 1930's and the revolutionaries are those who do not accept the compromise over Ulster.), out of a rural English village for indulging in Hindu "idolatry," and finally out of the Temperance Union for imbibing the demon rum at another party with the people who got him in trouble before. This goes on for 200 pages, after which we can only conclude that: 1) Matthew is rather dim. 2) His zeal has overwhelmed all reason. 3) Everybody from the IRA to the anti-liquor people have intelligence networks which would make the KGB envious, since they seem to be able to catch him whenever he makes a slip, no matter how intimate the company.

The problem with coming up with solutions of deep philosophical problems is that if one could do it, they wouldn't be deep philosophical problems. If a novelist could really tell us how to put an end to war, one would have already done so. Of course Dunsany can't answer the question he has posed about intolerance. (As the jacket copy puts it, "Is there room in the modern world for a saint?") So he slaps a happy ending on, apparently because that's how he believed his books should conclude.

Matthew goes back to Ireland in despair to visit his first girlfriend, even if this means being shot on sight by the revolutionaries. Conveniently, their leader has been in prison for years. Just as conveniently, the same young lady who denounced him as a spy before is now willing to listen

to his explanations, which would have saved him a lot of grief had he made them earlier, and all is well.

What about intolerance? Don't bother with it:

"Intolerance?" she exclaimed. "It is tolerance that is your trouble. Keep away from it. Who in the world would have his intolerance, as you call it, taken away from him? Would you take a bone from a dog? A good bone with meat on it? You and I don't like bones, but a dog does. Leave him alone with his bone. Tolerance indeed! Haven't you been infuriating everybody you've met, by brandishing it in their faces?"

(p. 223)

This is rather like James Branch Cabell's "dynamic illusions," which are the essential lies we all live by. It is not best, said Cabell, to reveal the true state of affairs to anyone. That would only create bad feelings. In the case of religion, as Dunsany's protagonist finds out, one keeps the peace by letting each adherent feel that his is the True Way and everybody else is in error. (Presumably one hopes that the religions in question don't insist on forcible conversion or slaughter of infidels.) Everyone likes to imagine himself superior to his neighbors. El Bab, the founder of the Ba'Hai sect, was executed when he preached in 19th Century Persia. The Muslims didn't want to be told Islam was no better than anything else. Dunsany's conclusion is somewhere between a complacent shrug, cynicism, and despair: intolerance is inherent in the human species, and furthermore most people wouldn't have things differently.

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