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Lord Dunsany: The Potency of Words and The Wonder of Things

Abstract

Analyzes Dunsany's technique, particularly his prose style and use of archaic language, to demonstrate how his fantasies evoke the "sense of wonder."

Additional Keywords

Dunsany, Lord—Style; Dunsany, Lord—Technique; Dunsany, Lord—Use of Language; Dunsany, Lord. "The Fortess Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth"

Lord Dunsany: *The Potency of Words and The Wonder of Things* *Angelee Sailer Anderson*

The first requirement of good fantasy, whether fashioned in the mold of high myth or of simple fairy-tale, is that it awake in the reader a sense of wonder. This may be achieved by artistry of language or choice of content, and no fantasist has been more a master of both than Lord Dunsany.

What content must a fantasy have to succeed in its high calling? On the surface, the wonder of fantasy would seem to lie solely in what it contains of the supernatural or magical, and there is no question that the presence of magical things in a story does evoke wonder. However, those who love and understand fantasy know that its virtue can be much greater than this. J. R. R. Tolkien, in his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," says:

Fairy-stories deal largely ... with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting.... It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.

Fairy-stories enable us to grasp anew the goodness of the "natural," by placing it in another context in which the pall of familiarity falls from it and its inherent beauty and wonder shine forth. Tolkien called this ability of fairy-stories "Recovery."

As realism in literature is primarily concerned with the particular, fantasy is primarily concerned with the universal and the elemental. In a good realistic story, a detailed description of a tree may impress us with a clear vision of that particular tree and its worth. The best fantasy impresses us with the idea of "tree," or "stone," or "fire," or "wine," so that the worth we find in the idea may be applied to every particular embodiment of "tree," "stone," "fire," or "wine" we encounter. The best fantasy does this, while at the same time impressing us with ideas of things we may never encounter: trees that walk, stones that speak, fire that blossoms, wine that transforms into gold. Whether natural or magical, fantasy deals primarily with things or concepts whose value and potency have been recognized by men in all times and all places. It is upon the re-experiencing by each reader of this universal experience of recognition that the emotional effect of fantasy depends.

The fantasy of Lord Dunsany succeeds highly, first because of his gifted use of universalities. For example, "The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth," a Dunsanian short story from which all illustrations in this essay are taken, begins thus:

In a wood older than record, a foster brother of the hills, stood the village of Allathurion; and there was peace between the people of that village and all the folk who walked in the dark ways of the wood, whether they were human or of the tribes of the beasts or of the race of the fairies and the elves and the little sacred spirits of trees and streams.

Here at once, Dunsany introduces a wealth of words which strike a common chord in human hearts.

"In a wood older than record ..." One of Dunsany's favourite universal themes is that of time, both the romance of the things from which it separates us and our frailty in the face of its passing. In "Sacnoth," describing the door of the Fortress Unvanquishable, he compares its vastness to that of "the marble quarry, Sacremona, from which of old men cut enormous slabs to build the Abbey of the Holy Tears." (p. 55) He speaks of Queens with jewels in their hair, "each jewel having a historian all to itself, who wrote no other chronicles all his days." (p. 59) This sense of history pervades all that Dunsany wrote, and sheds a light of immense significance upon the things and persons which populate his stories. It also casts a shadow of poignancy and loss, reminiscent of the world-weary pessimism of Ecclesiastes. The concluding passage of "Sacnoth" is typical of Dunsany:

"The gardener hath gathered up this autumn's leaves. Who shall see them again, or who wot of them? And who shall say what hath befallen in the days of long ago? (p. 68)

Dunsany delights in painting pictures for us of the wonders of mighty cities built by man, but never ceases to remind us that they fall. So at the destruction of the dream-palace of the magician Gaznak:

... the tall pinnacles went down into the earth, and the wide fair terraces all rolled away, and the court was gone like the dew, and a wind came and the colonnades drifted thence, and all the colossal halls of Gaznak fell. And the abysses closed up suddenly as the mouth of a man who, having told a tale, will forever speak no more. (p. 67)

The sense of distance in time which Dunsany uses to captivate us is mirrored by an equivalent sense of distance in space. He is acutely aware of the overwearing effect of the vast on little man. He speaks of "cloud-abiding gables," "mighty vaults," and "lofty rafters," of "innumerable arches" vanishing into gloom, of "inner darkneses," "profound precipices," and "abysses full of stars." (pp. 55, 62, 59, 57, 61) An almost giddy sense of height and depth characterizes his descriptions, as in this one of the dream palace:

Beyond the wide court slept a dark abyss, and into the abyss there poured a white cascade of marble stairways, and widened out below into terraces and balconies with fair white statues on them, and descended again in a wide stairway, and came to lower terraces in the dark, where swart uncertain shapes went to and fro. All these were the dreams of Gaznak, and issued from his mind, and, becoming marble, passed over the edge of the abyss as the musicians played. And all the while out of the mind of Gaznak, lulled by that strange music, went spires and pinnacles beautiful and slender, ever ascending skywards. (pp. 65-66)

Or consider this example, in which the distance spanned is even greater:

And when the baying of the remotest dragon had faintly joined in the tumult, a window opened far up among the clouds below the twilight gables, and a woman screamed, and far away in Hell her father heard her and knew that her doom had come. (p. 56)

In this sense of distance, as in that of time, there is also sometimes a sadness: "Scarce audible now at all was the sound of his heart: it was like a church bell tolling beyond hills for the death of some one unknown and far away." (p. 54)

Returning to the opening of "Sacnoth," we see Dunsany's juxtaposition of the magically mysterious and the naturally familiar, a technique which not only makes the magical seem more wondrous by contrast, but which bestows borrowed wonder on the natural. "Woods," "hills," "villages," "trees," and "streams" are things near and very dear to man, and Dunsany has a way of constantly bringing us back to these intimacies from the remotest distances: "Then the sun set and flamed in the village windows, and a chill went over the world, and in some small garden a woman sang..." (p. 54) Fairy-tales generally end with their heroes achieving a purely natural happiness—marrying their true love, or coming home. So in "Sacnoth" the events which attend Leothric's homecoming from his quest are the singing of birds and the breaking of dawn, natural wonders both, but wonders nonetheless.

Yet Dunsany speaks not only of the woodland paths that are familiar to us, but also of their "dark ways," inhabited by beasts and fairies and elves and sacred spirits that are strange and perhaps dangerous to us. For all his gift of mystifying the commonplace, Dunsany's imagination provides us with a veritable menagerie of the anything-but-common; in "Sacnoth" we have magicians, dragons, gargoyles, a giant spider, wolves rushing around the wainscoting, vampires giving praise to Satan, a procession of men on camels, women weirdly beautiful. The lure not only of Elfland but of the more exotic locales of earth is strong in Dunsany. In giving us a sense of the Middle Eastern, he does not bombard us with details of geography and culture, but gives us the fleeting yet indelible image which would impress us if a troop of Middle Eastern personages passed by:

There appeared a procession of men on camels riding

two by two from the interior of the fortress, and they were armed with scimitars of Assyrian make and were all clad with mail, and chain-mail hung from their helmets about their faces, and flapped as the camels moved. (p. 56)

A widely travelled man, Dunsany's experience of many lands sharpened rather than dulled his fascination with the alien. To whatever extent that fascination is universal, Dunsany casts an irresistible spell.

In choice of content, then, Dunsany draws upon a huge reservoir of ideas and things which universally evoke wonder. But what of the function of the language which expresses that wonder, the potency of the words themselves? Among readers of fantasy one can find a huge divergence in taste as to writing style. There are those who prefer "plain" language, where no strong sense of style is in evidence; there are others who find an aid to wonder in the "high" style, which is generally both more poetic and more archaic. Dunsany's style falls into the latter category, and on his part it was not a random choice.

The deliberate use of archaic language strikes many modern readers and critics as clumsy and affected. There is no doubt that it can be so in the hands of a poor writer, whose work may read as though it had been written in modern language and then "translated." In the case of Dunsany, however, the archaisms flow so naturally and are of such a piece with the content they express, that it is apparent that he is speaking in his native tongue.

Dunsany claimed that his prose was influenced by the Bible, and one does not have to look far to find passages in him which might have come directly from the King James version: "besought him to tarry"; "caused them to praise Satan openly with their lips"; "danced to cymbal and psaltery"; the occasional "thou" and "doth." (pp. 60, 49, 52) Besides word-oriented archaisms — "fell" for "deadly," "straightway" for "right away," "ere" for "before," "writ" for "written," "oft" for "often," "fain" for "gladly," "wot" for "know" — there are archaisms in the choice of sentence structure as well. One of these is the inversion of common word order: "Leothric did not drop down," rather than "Leothric did not drop down"; "other light there was none," rather than "there was no other light"; "not with the edge smote Sacnoth," rather than "Sacnoth did not smite with the edge." (pp. 66, 62, 63) Another feature which readers of the King James Bible may recognize is the tendency towards run-on sentences with many connective and's, which modernly is considered a technical fault, but which is used by word-masters like Dunsany to hold the reader suspended and rapt within a hypnotic flow of images:

And so Leothric came into a well-lit chamber, where Queens and Princes were banqueting together, all at a great table; and thousands of candles were glowing all about, and their light shone in the wine that the Princes drank and on the huge gold candelabra, and the royal faces were irradiant with the glow, and the white tablecloth and the silver plates and the jewels in the hair of the Queens, each jewel having a historian all to itself, who wrote no other chronicles all his days." (p. 59)

The success or failure of Dunsany's archaisms in conveying the wondrous must be judged individually by each reader. But can anyone doubt that power would have been lost if, instead of, "Then spake Leothric, son of the Lord Lorendiac, and twenty years old was he," Dunsany had written, "Then Leothric, the twenty year old son of the Lord Lorendiac, said"? (p. 50) The archaic in Dunsany's style serves to bestow the same sense of history and weight on his language as does his use of the theme of time on his content.

But the whole power of his style does not lie in its archaisms. More perhaps than that of any other writer of fantasy, the prose of Lord Dunsany sings. Dunsany is aware and makes use of the rhythmic and tonal qualities of words in a way more common to poets than to storytellers. To achieve his musical effects, he uses repetition – as in "Sacnoth," with the repeated phrase "the cindery plains of Hell" – (p. 49) and, more often, alliteration and assonance. Consider this passage, in which the repeated consonants and long vowel sounds create such a resonance that we can almost hear the tolling bells of which Dunsany speaks:

Along the narrow corridor hung huge bells low and near to his head, and the width of each brazen bell was from wall to wall, and they were one behind the other. And as he passed under each the bell uttered, and its voice was mournful and deep, like the voice of a bell speaking to a man for the last time when he is newly dead. Each bell uttered once as Leothric came under it, and their voices sounded solemnly and wide apart at ceremonious intervals. For if he walked slow, these bells came closer together, and when he walked swiftly they moved farther apart. And the echoes of each bell tolling above his head went on before him whispering to the others. Once when he stopped they all jangled angrily till he went on again. (pp. 64-65)

The sudden short, harsh sounds in the words "jangled angrily" interrupt the mood exactly as Dunsany intends.

This same consciousness of the power of word sounds is evident in Dunsany's invented names. The Germanic-heroic quality of Leothric and Lorendiac, the sweetness of Allathurion and Sacremona, the weightiness of Sacnoth, the sinister humour of Wong Bongorok and Tharagavverug all convey to us something of the quality of the things Dunsany is naming – not to mention the name of the evil magician, Gaznak, whose harsh consonants are those of Tolkien's language of Mordor.

Dunsany's "native tongue" is so rich in associations and evocative in sound, that he has no need for the frequent use of simile or metaphor to add to its power. When he does use them, it is to compare one potent image with another equally as potent. Sometimes he juxtaposes a fantastic thing with a natural one: the noise made by a dragon's tail is "as when sailors drag the cable of the anchor all rattling down the deck" – a strong image for use in fantasy because of the romance of ships and the sea. (p. 63) The track left by a dragon's tail is "like a furrow in a

field" – strong because of its connection with the soil and man's fundamental need to grow food. (p. 51) At other times, Dunsany heightens the fantastic by relating it to a thing equally fantastic: a dragon's cry is "like the sound of a great church bell that had become possessed of a soul that fluttered upward from the tombs at night – an evil soul, giving the bell a voice". (p. 52)

It may be that there is as little of a consensus on the use of poetic language in fantasy literature as there is on the use of archaisms. This reader, for one, is happy that the dragon Wong Bongorok did not merely "die," but "lay still to rust." (p. 64)

If the main substance of Dunsany's style is in his masterful use of archaism and poetic technique, he has another excellence which, though arguably not necessary to the fantasist, is delightful as a sort of "dessert." Dunsany is musical, Dunsany is majestic – and Dunsany is funny. Sometimes his humour derives from the archaism of his style, as in this amusing if frightening bit of dialogue:

The Lord Gaznak has desired to see you die before him. Be pleased to come with us, and we can discourse by the way of the manner in which the Lord Gaznak has desired to see you die. (p. 57)

At other times the humour depends on unexpected word choices, such as dragons with "leather gums" who "bark" and "slobber" their master's hand. (pp. 56, 63) This humour is made more effective by its contrast with Dunsany's poesy. In this sentence, he builds a sombre mood for several lines, only to topple it with a sheer frivolity at the end:

And the spell was a compulsive, terrible thing, having a power over evil dreams and over spirits of ill; for it was a verse of forty lines in many languages, both living and dead, and had in it the word wherewith the people of the plains are wont to curse their camels, and the shout wherewith the whalers of the north lure the whales shoreward to be killed, and a word that causes elephants to trumpet; and every one of the forty lines closed with a rhyme for "wasp." (p. 49)

For all lovers of fantasy and believers in its purpose, there is much to be learned from Lord Dunsany's success in evoking wonder. Those who write, by studying the "what" of Dunsany's content and the "how" of his style, may come to an understanding of his excellencies and apply them to their own work in their own way. Those who read, by their deep imaginative and emotional response to him, may recognize and find joy in the secret longings of their hearts, which are those of all hearts that beat.

NOTES

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, (Oxford University Press, 1947; rpt. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 75.

2. Lord Dunsany, "The Fortress Unvanquishable Save for Sacnoth," (London: George Allen & Sons, 1910), in *At the Edge of the World*, (New York: Ballantine, 1970), p. 48. Hereafter cited in text.