

A Simulacrum of Gods

Dustin Geeraert, University of Manitoba

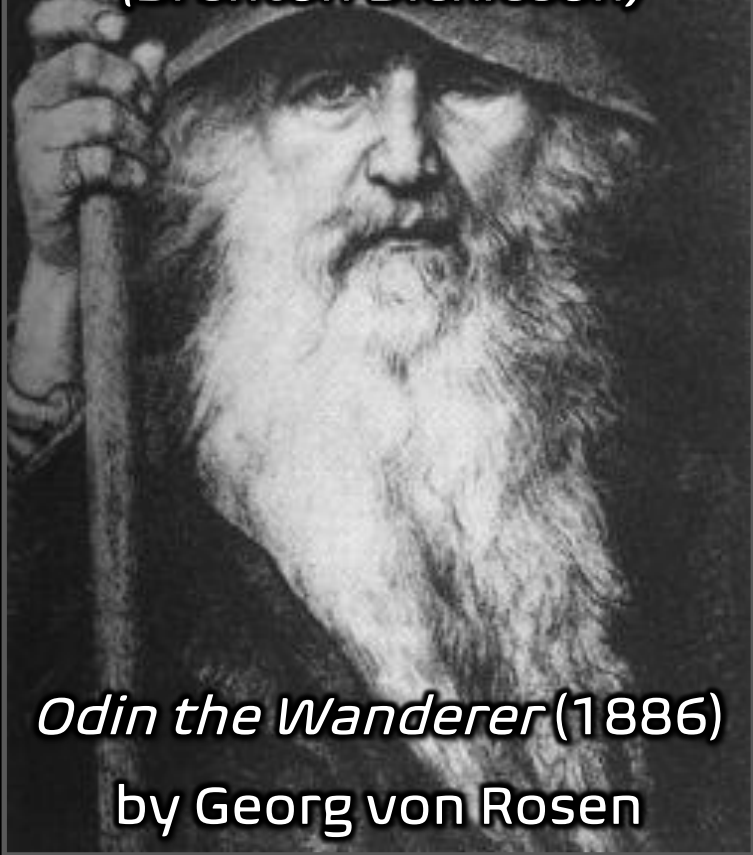
Illustrations: Keith Henderson's Cover Art for

E. R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922)

Sidney Sime's illustration "Lo! The Gods!" from

Lord Dunsany's *Time and the Gods* (1906)

*Why do they quote
Shakespeare on Mercury?
(Brenton Dickieson)*



*Odin the Wanderer (1886)
by Georg von Rosen*

Einar Haugen: "The root of the name is a Germanic word *wōðu- meaning 'frenzy' or 'madness,' as was still clear to the Christian writer Adam of Bremen in the eleventh century, when he translated it into Latin as *furor* or 'frenzy.' The word *wood* meaning 'mad' is good Old English also and was known in English as late as Shakespeare's time." (*Edda*, 1983)

Now they rose up and took their weapons and muffled themselves in their great campaigning cloaks and went forth with torchbearers to walk through the lines, as every night ere he went to rest it was Spitfire's wont to do, visiting his captains and setting the guard. The rain fell gentler. The night was without a star. The wet sands gleamed with the lights of Owlswick Castle, and from the castle came by fits the sound of feasting heard above the wash and moan of the sullen sleepless sea.

When they had made all sure and were come nigh again to Spitfire's tent and Zigg was upon saying goodnight, there rose up out of the shadow of the tent an ancient man and came betwixt them into the glare of the torches. Shrivelled and wrinkled and bowed he seemed as with extreme age. His hair and his beard hung down in elf-locks adrip with rain. His mouth was toothless, his eyes like a dead fish's eyes. He touched Spitfire's cloak with his skinny hand, saying in a voice like the nightraven's, "Spitfire, beware of Thremnir's Heugh."
(c.f. Morris)

Spitfire said, "What have we here? And which way the devil came he into my camp?"

But that aged man still held him by the cloak, saying, "Spitfire, is not this thine house of Owlswick? And is it not the most strong and fair place that ever man saw in this countree?"
(c.f. Njála)

"Filth, unhand me," said Spitfire, "else shall I presently thrust thee through with my sword, and send thee to the Tartarus of hell, where I doubt not the devils there too long await thee."
(c.f. Faustus)

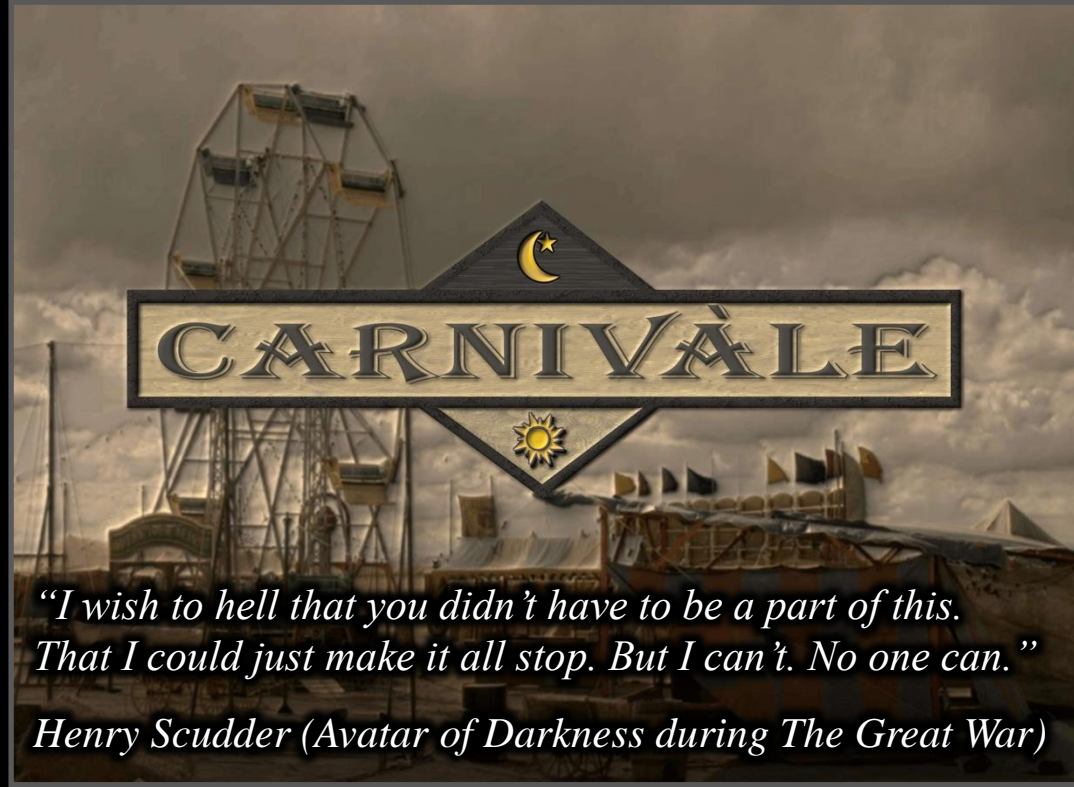
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Zigg spake: "The thin habit of spirits is beyond the force of weapons."

"Pish!" said Spitfire. "Was this a spirit? I hold it rather a simulacrum or illusion prepared for us by Witchland's cunning, to darken our counsel and shake our resolution." (*The Worm Ouroboros*, 1922)

“Archetypes, in spite of their conservative nature, are not static but in a continuous dramatic flux. Thus the self as a monad or continuous unit would be dead. But it lives inasmuch as it splits and unites again. There is no energy without opposites!” -Jung



*“I wish to hell that you didn’t have to be a part of this.
That I could just make it all stop. But I can’t. No one can.”*

Henry Scudder (Avatar of Darkness during The Great War)



1934. The Dust Bowl. The last great age of magic. In a time of titanic sandstorms, drought and pestilence - signs of God’s fury and harbingers of the Apocalypse - the final conflict between good and evil is about to begin. The battle will take place in the Heartland of an empire called America. CARNIVALE follows a traveling carnival as it wends its way across the Dust Bowl, focusing on a mysterious young fugitive with hidden talents who is taken in by the carnival, and on the charismatic, shadowy evangelist who will ultimately cross his path. It is a time of worldwide unrest, with evil on the rise around the globe, and the Great Depression wreaking economic and social havoc. As they become aware of their abilities, Ben Hawkins and Brother Justin Crowe find themselves wrenched from their lives to realize that the world they thought they knew - this tenuous, prosaic reality shared by humankind - is actually a chessboard upon which is played the ancient conflict between Light and Darkness - and they are key players in the battle.

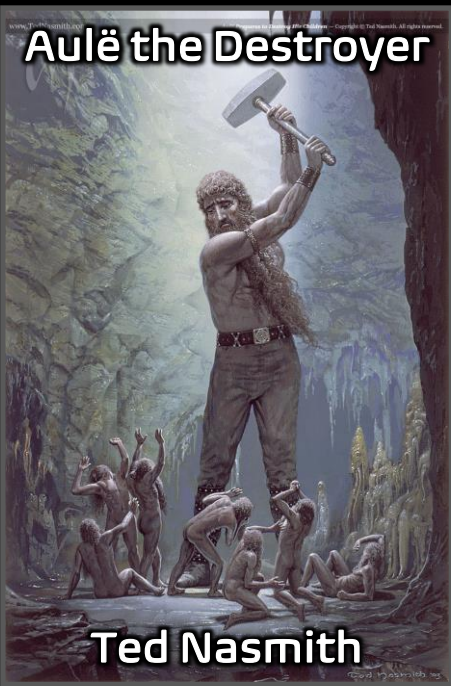
Opening Credits to *Carnivàle* (2003-2005)

Game of Thrones (2011-2019)



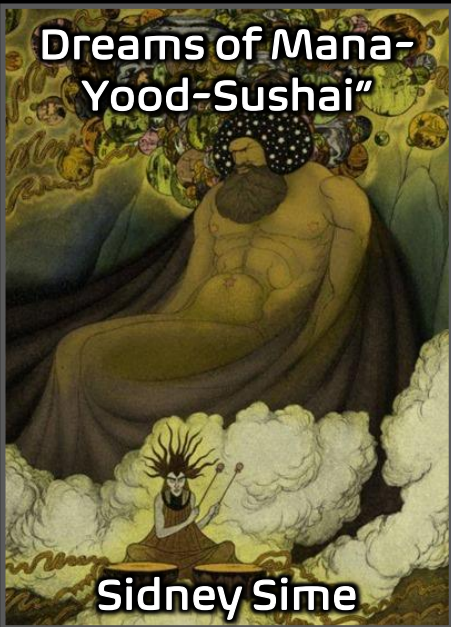
Summers span decades. Winters can last a lifetime. And the struggle for the Iron Throne continues. It stretches from the south, where heat breeds plots, lusts and intrigues, to the vast and savage eastern lands, where a young queen raises an army. All the while, in the frozen north, an 800-foot wall of ice precariously protects the war-ravaged kingdom from the dark forces that lie beyond. Kings and queens, knights and renegades, liars, lords and honest men...all must play the 'Game of Thrones.'

Opening Credits to *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019)



Aulë the Destroyer

Ted Nasmith

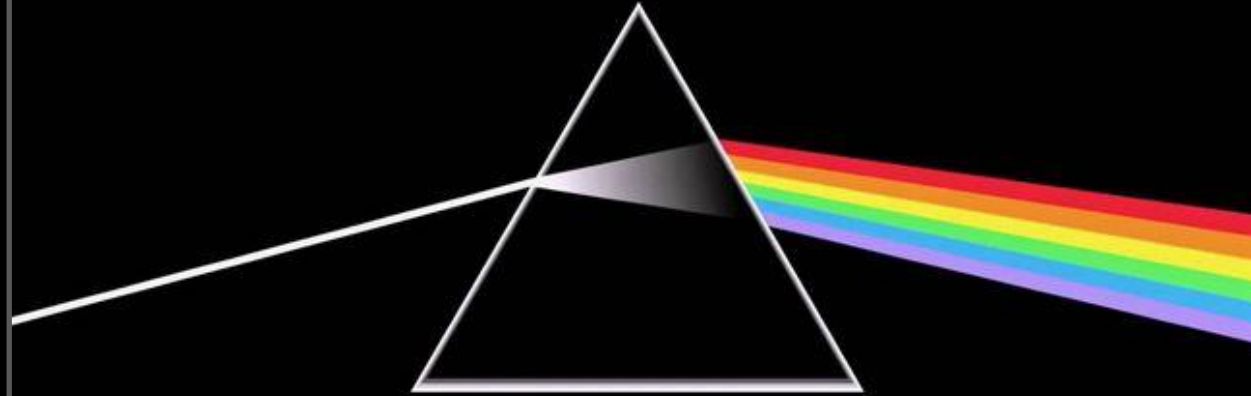


Dreams of Mana-Yood-Sushai"

Sidney Sime

Sub-Creation: “Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose. Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World.” (*On Fairy Stories*, 1939)

Game of Thrones follows in Tolkien and Dunsany’s footsteps



What are the religious implications of Sub-Creation?

“Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light through whom is splintered from a single White to many hues, and endlessly combined in living shapes that move from mind to mind. Though all the crannies of the world we filled with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build Gods and their houses out of dark and light, and sowed the seed of dragons—’twas our right (used or misused). That right has not decayed: we make still by the law in which we’re made.”

“And We play with the Worlds and the Sun and Life and Death until MANA arises to rebuke us, saying: ‘What do ye playing with Worlds and Suns?’

“It is a very serious thing that there be Worlds and Suns, and yet most withering is the laughter of MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI.

“And when he arises from resting at the Last, and laughs at us for playing with Worlds and Suns, We will hastily put them behind us, and there shall be Worlds no more.” (*The Gods of Pegāna*, 1905)

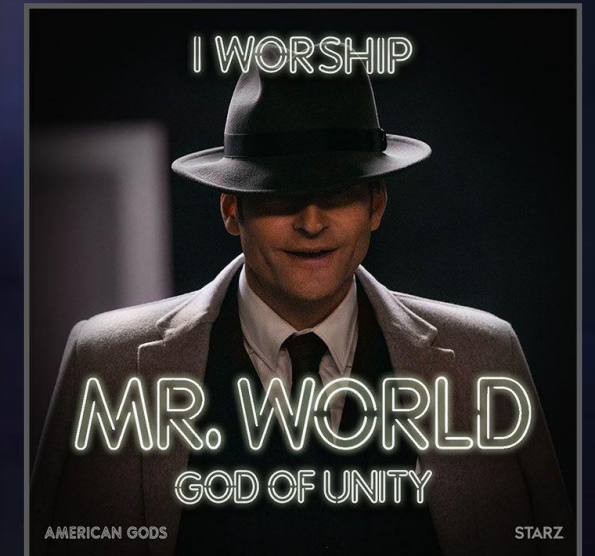
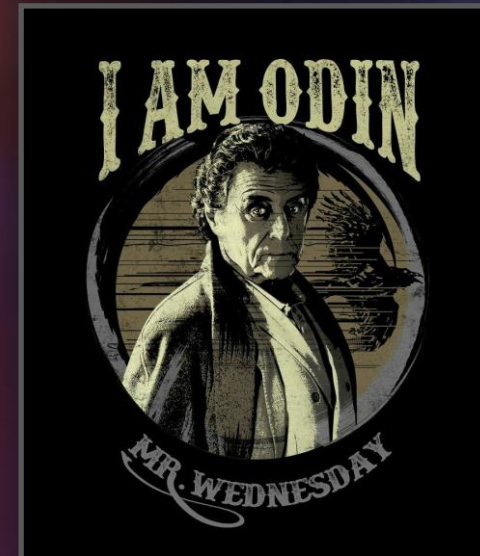
In *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman offers a postmodernist take on concepts developed by neo-Romantic writers such as William Morris, E. R. Eddison, Lord Dunsany, H. P. Lovecraft, Jorge Luis Borges, and J. R. R. Tolkien.

A M E R I C A N G O D S

“Deities are powerful anthropomorphic beings that have control over various aspects of the world. They are thought-forms who have been created by the collective beliefs and imagination of humanity. The gods are main focus of both the *American Gods* TV series and the novel of the same name. Deities and other mythical beings get their power from worship. Their effectiveness and strength vary from god to god depending on the amount of worship, belief, faith, prayers, and sacrifices they receive. Gods cannot be killed or destroyed by conventional means (i.e. aging, diseases, ailments, man-made weapons, etc.)... Without any form of worship, they may weaken, contract diseases, age, and eventually fade away into a place known as the Hall of the Forgotten Gods. They mostly appear in human form and come from different religions created by humans throughout history. The gods are recognized and known by two main groups: Old Gods and New Gods.” (*American Gods Wiki*)



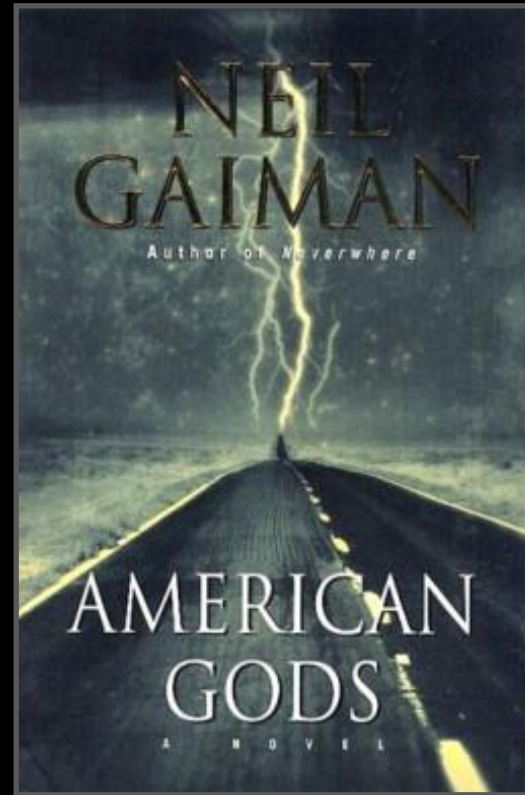
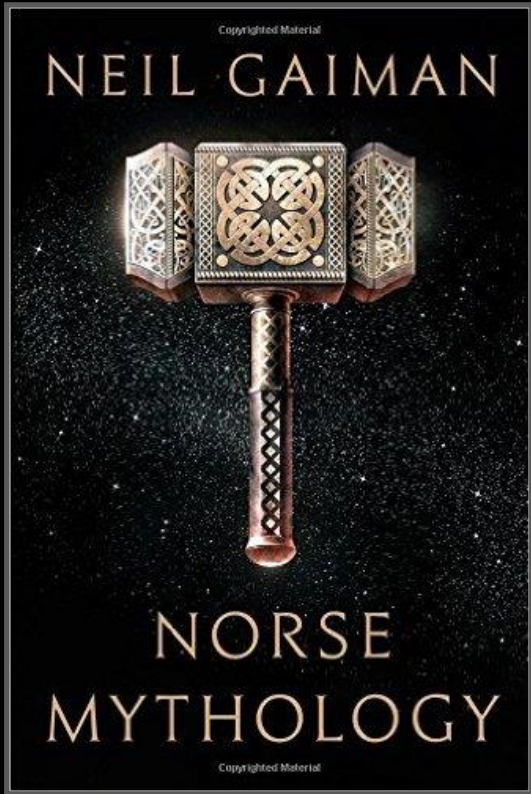
The “Old Gods” are led by Odin, pictured here as a Western Outlaw.



The “New Gods” are led by Mr. World, a Google-like Transhumanist.

Opening Credits to *American Gods* (2017-2021)

“Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.” George Orwell



American Gods draws on Memes. “Who controls the memes, controls the Universe.” Elon Musk (Mr. World?)

In *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Richard Dawkins explains: “I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged. . . . It is staring us in the face. It is still in its infancy, still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate which leaves the old gene panting far behind. The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate *mimeme* to *meme*. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’, or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with ‘cream.’ Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain, via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”

GAME OF THRONES

Sub-Creation



Archetypes



Nature versus Nurture: Cosmos, Mind and Metaphysics in Modern Mythologies

“I usually end up getting what I want: on average, over time. It’s all about getting people to believe in you, it’s not the cash it’s the faith. Take this plane, for example, this 80 ton hunk of metal, seat cushions, and Bloody Mary mix has no right to be soaring through the sky but along comes Newton, explains something about “the air flow over the wing creating an uplift” or some such shit, none of which makes a lick of sense, but you’ve got 82 passengers back there who believe it so fiercely, that the plane continues its journey safely. Now what’s keeping us aloft? Faith? Or Newton?”

–Mr. Wednesday (Odin), *American Gods*



A Test of Belief: (Why) Do Planes Fly?

“Show me a cultural relativist at 30,000 feet and I'll show you a hypocrite... If you are flying to an international congress of anthropologists or literary critics, the reason you will probably get there - the reason you don't plummet into a ploughed field - is that a lot of Western scientifically trained engineers have got their sum right.”

–Richard Dawkins, *The River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (1995)



Josephine Wall



William Blake



Neil Gaiman

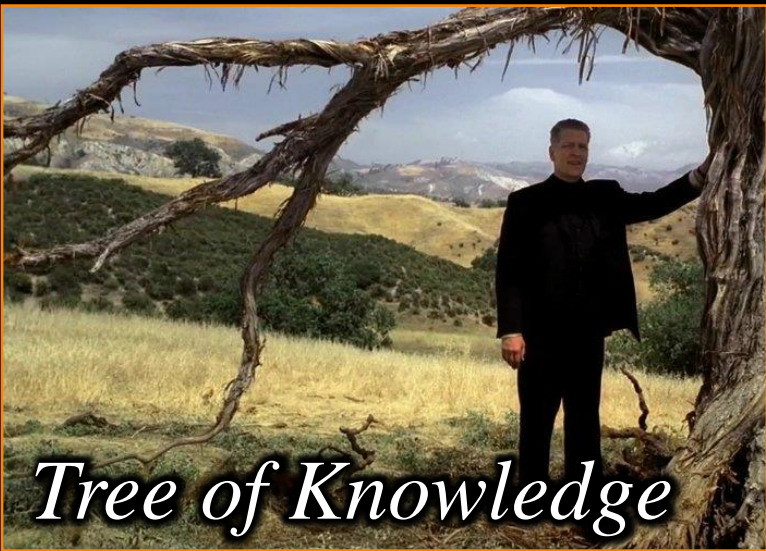
“Ultimately, everything is all systems interlaced, a single product manufactured by a single company for a single global market. Spicy, medium, or chunky. They get a choice, of course. Of course! But they are buying salsa.” –Mr. World

“If (as Dawkins argues) deceit is fundamental in animal communication, then there must be strong selection to spot deception and this ought, in turn, to select for a degree of self-deception, rendering some facts and motives unconscious so as not to betray—by the subtle signs of self-knowledge—the deception being practiced. Thus, the conventional view that natural selection favors nervous systems which produce ever more accurate images of the world must be a very naïve view of mental evolution.”

-Robert Trivers, *Foreword to The Selfish Gene*

“The brain constructs a virtual world which is more complete than the picture relayed to it by the senses. The information which the senses supply to the brain is mostly information about edges. But the model in the brain is able to reconstruct the bits between the edges... This economy is only possible because uniform patches exist in the world. If the shades and colours in the world were randomly dotted about, no economic remodeling would be possible... Information, in the technical sense, is surprise value, measured as the inverse of expected probability. Redundancy is the opposite of information.”

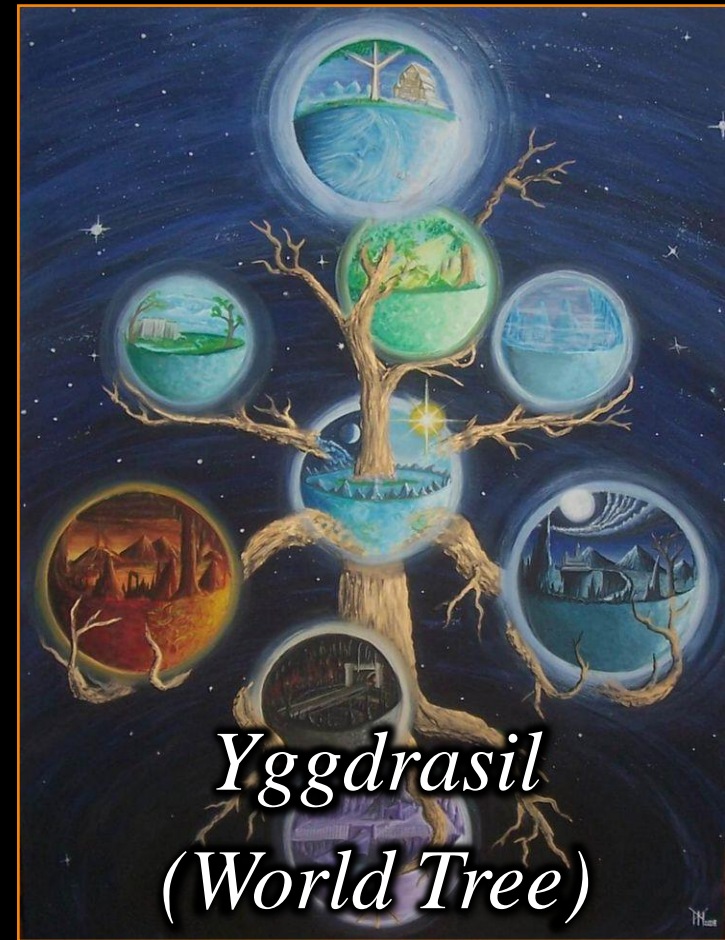
-Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*



Tree of Knowledge



Weirwood Tree



*Yggdrasil
(World Tree)*



“Art is the Tree of Life. Science is the Tree of Death.”

William Blake

“I am at home among trees.”

J. R. R. Tolkien



Carnivàle



Game of Thrones



American Gods

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Appendix: The Hall of Forgotten Gods (Prose Fragments and Excerpts)

The Hall of Forgotten Gods, Fragment 1: An Odinic excerpt from *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922) by E. R. Eddison

Now they rose up and took their weapons and muffled themselves in their great campaigning cloaks and went forth with torchbearers to walk through the lines, as every night ere he went to rest it was Spitfire's wont to do, visiting his captains and setting the guard. The rain fell gentler. The night was without a star. The wet sands gleamed with the lights of Owlswick Castle, and from the castle came by fits the sound of feasting heard above the wash and moan of the sullen sleepless sea.

When they had made all sure and were come nigh again to Spitfire's tent and Zigg was upon saying goodnight, there rose up out of the shadow of the tent an ancient man and came betwixt them into the glare of the torches. Shrivelled and wrinkled and bowed he seemed as with extreme age. His hair and his beard hung down in elf-locks adrip with rain. His mouth was toothless, his eyes like a dead fish's eyes. He touched Spitfire's cloak with his skinny hand, saying in a voice like the nightraven's, "Spitfire, beware of Thremmir's Heugh."

Spitfire said, "What have we here? And which way the devil came he into my camp?"

But that aged man still held him by the cloak, saying, "Spitfire, is not this thine house of Owlswick? And is it not the most strong and fair place that ever man saw in this countree?"

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Zigg spake: "The thin habit of spirits is beyond the force of weapons."

"Pish!" said Spitfire. "Was this a spirit? I hold it rather a simulacrum or illusion prepared for us by Witchland's cunning, to darken our counsel and shake our resolution."

The Hall of Forgotten Gods, Fragment 2: Ragnarok (1960) by Jorge Luis Borges

In dreams (Coleridge writes), images take the shape of the effects we believe they cause. We are not terrified because some sphinx is threatening us but rather dream of a sphinx in order to explain the terror we are feeling. If this is the case, how can a simple account of such imaginings communicate the dread and the thrills, the adventure, anxieties, and joys conjured by last night's dream? I am going to attempt to do this all the same. Perhaps the fact that the entire dream consisted of a single scene will erase or ease this fundamental difficulty.

It took place in the Humanities Building, at dusk. As often happens in dreams, everything was somehow different: everything had been affected by a slight enlargement. We were electing people to committees. I was chatting with Pedro Henriquez Urena, who in reality has been dead for many years. Suddenly we were assaulted by the racket of a street band or a demonstration. The cries of people and animals reached us from the Lower City. A voice cried: "Here they come!" then: "It's the Gods!" Four or five individuals emerged from the mob and took their places on the stage of the lecture hall. We all cheered, weeping: it was the Gods, coming back after centuries of exile. The stage made them taller: they threw their heads back and thrust their chests forward in haughty acceptance of our homage. One of them was holding a bough of the kind no doubt required by the simplistic botany of dreams; another made a broad gesture with his hand, which was a claw; one of Janus's faces looked apprehensively at the curving beak of Thoth. Stirred perhaps by our cheers, another one—I'm no longer sure which one—broke out in triumphant but incredibly harsh clacking, complete with gargles and whistles. From that point on, things began to change.

It was all due to our perhaps precipitous suspicion that the Gods did not know how to talk. Hundreds of years of living like animals on the run had atrophied their human dimension. The moon of Islam and the Roman Cross had been merciless with these fugitives. The decadence of the Olympic bloodline was evident in their beetling brows, yellowed teeth, patchy half-breed or Chinese whiskers, and bestial protruding lips. Their clothing spoke not of genteel poverty but of the flashy bad taste of the Lower City's back rooms and bordellos. A carnation bled from one buttonhole; we detected the outline of a dagger under a tight-fitting jacket. All at once we sensed that they were playing their last card, that they had grown sly, stultified and cruel like aging beasts of prey, and that they would destroy us if we allowed ourselves to be swayed by fear or pity.

We drew our heavy pistols (in the dream, they just appeared) and cheerfully put the Gods to death.

The Hall of Forgotten Gods, Fragment 3: Poseidon (1941) by Lord Dunsany

THE sun was slanting towards the Peloponnese when I came to the temple of Poseidon. Its columns by the sheer edge of the land appeared to be absorbing the gold of the sunlight, and almost to be about to turn into golden air. If that was a fancy, it faded when I drew nearer; and when I came to the columns the fancy was gone. Mountains and islands lay in a semicircle round the sea, and were beginning to draw imperceptibly about them the purple cloaks they are wont to wear at evening. When I went into the temple I saw no one there, but after gazing awhile over the sea, I noticed sitting among the weeds a little, quiet, old man. He never spoke a word till I spoke to him; and then, whatever it was that I said, he sighed and told me these days were not like the old days.

“What do you do?” I asked, thinking perhaps he followed some trade which changing times had ruined.

“Nothing now,” he said. “I have retired. I do nothing now.” He sighed and said no more.

“And what used you to do?” I asked.

“Ah,” he said. “Ah, I used to shake the earth. Literally shake it. I used to alarm men living miles inland.”

“Alarm them?” I said.

“Certainly,” he replied. “Nine miles inland, and even further than that. And they used to sacrifice to me in this temple. Bulls. Great numbers of bulls. Fine bulls that bled beautifully. And the very earth shaking while they sacrificed. Those were the days. I used to make storms in those days that shook the very earth.”

“Then you were...” I was beginning.

“Certainly I was,” he said. “This is my temple.”

“And they no longer sacrifice to you?” I asked.

“That, certainly, is the case,” he said. “That is the trouble. When they sacrifice again I shall shake the very earth. But men are neglectful and indolent, not like their grandsires. Why, I’ve seen as many as fifty bulls at one time in this temple.”

“And why don’t you shake the earth?” I asked him.

“Well, you can’t do much without the blood of bulls,” he said. “You can’t expect to shake the earth without the blood of bulls. OF course they will sacrifice to me again; probably quite soon, but just now they are indolent and neglectful.”

“But why should they sacrifice to you?” I asked.

“It is their duty,” he said sharply.

And then I did what you should never do when talking of any religion: I tried to argue.

But usen’t they to sacrifice to prevent you shaking the earth?” I asked.

“Certainly,” he replied.

“Then why should they sacrifice to make you strong enough to do it again?” I said. But the argument got me nowhere. Argument on such subjects never does. He merely lost interest, and as he lost interest he faded; till his outlines and face and beard and tattered cloak were little vividder than the evening air. And then a humming-bird hawk-moth came dashing up and hung by a flower upon vibrating wings, and the old god moved away from it.

“What is all its hurry about?” I heard him say petulantly. “Why can’t it be placid? I never hurry like that. There is no need for it, no need at all.”

And I think he pretended to me to depart of his own free will; but he was obviously wafted away by the draught, from the wings of the humming-bird hawk-moth.

The Hall of Forgotten Gods, Fragment 4: Poseidon (1920) by Franz Kafka

Poseidon sat at his desk, doing figures. The administration of all the waters gave him endless work. He could have had assistants, as many as he wanted — and he did have very many — but since he took his job very seriously, he would in the end go over all the figures and calculations himself, and thus his assistants were of little help to him. It cannot be said that he enjoyed his work; he did it only because it had been assigned to him; in fact, he had already filed many petitions for — as he put it — more cheerful work, but every time the offer of something different was made to him it would turn out that nothing suited him quite as well as his present position. And anyhow it was quite difficult to find something different for him. After all, it was impossible to assign him to a particular sea; aside from the fact that even then the work with figures would not become less but only pettier, the great Poseidon could in any case occupy only an executive position. And when a job away from the water was offered to him he would get sick at the very prospect, his divine breathing would become troubled and his brazen chest began to tremble. Besides, his complaints were not really taken seriously; when one of the mighty is vexatious the appearance of an effort must be made to placate him, even when the case is most hopeless. In actuality a shift of posts was unthinkable for Poseidon — he had been appointed God of the Sea in the beginning, and that he had to remain.

What irritated him most — and it was this that was chiefly responsible for his dissatisfaction with his job — was to hear of the conceptions formed about him: how he was always riding about through the tides with his trident. When all the while he sat here in the depths of the world-ocean, doing figures uninterruptedly, with now and then a trip to Jupiter as the only break in the monotony — a trip, moreover, from which he usually returned in a rage. Thus he had hardly seen the sea — had seen it but fleetingly in the course of hurried ascents to Olympus, and he had never actually traveled around it. He was in the habit of saying that what he was waiting for was the fall of the world; then, probably, a quiet moment would be granted in which, just before the end and having checked the last row of figures, he would be able to make a quick little tour.

Poseidon became bored with the sea. He let fall his trident. Silently he sat on the rocky coast and a gull, dazed by his presence, described wavering circles around his head.

The Hall of Forgotten Gods, Fragment 5: The King of the Trolls (1978) by John Gardner

A BOOK AS WIDE-RANGING as this one needs a governing metaphor to give it at least an illusion that all is well:

It was said in the old days that every year Thor made a circle around Middle-earth, beating back the enemies of order. Thor got older every year, and the circle occupied by gods and men grew smaller. The wisdom god, Woden, went out to the king of the trolls, got him in an armlock, and demanded to know of him how order might triumph over chaos.

“Give me your left eye,” said the king of the trolls, “and I’ll tell you.”

Without hesitation, Woden gave up his left eye. “Now tell me.”

The troll said, “The secret is, *Watch with both eyes!*”

Woden’s left eye was the last sure hope of gods and men in their kingdom of light surrounded on all sides by darkness. All we have left is Thor’s hammer, which represents not brute force but art, or, counting both hammerheads, art and criticism. Thor is no help. Like other gods, he has withdrawn from our immediate view. We have only his weapon, abandoned beside a fencepost in high weeds, if we can figure out how to use it.

The traditional view is that true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us. I do not deny that art, like criticism, may legitimately celebrate the trifling. It may joke, or mock, or while away the time. But trivial art has no meaning or value except in the shadow of more serious art, the kind of art that beats back the monsters and, if you will, makes the world safe for triviality. That art which tends toward destruction, the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes, is not properly art at all. Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy. It is a tragic game, for those who have the wit to take it seriously, because our side must lose; a comic game – or so a troll might say – because only a clown with sawdust brains would take our side and eagerly join in.

Like legitimate art, legitimate criticism is a tragicomic holding action against entropy.

Art builds temporary walls against life’s leveling force, the ruin of what is splendidly unnatural in us, consciousness, the state in which not all atoms are equal. In corpses, entropy has won; the brain and the toenails have equal say. Art asserts and reasserts those values which hold off dissolution, struggling to keep the mind intact and preserve the city, the mind’s safe preserve. Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness. Criticism restates and clarifies, reinforces the wall.

Neither the artist nor the critic believes, when he stands back from his work, that he will hold off the death of consciousness forever; and to the extent that each laughs at his feeble construction he knows that he’s involved in a game. As long as he keeps the whole picture in mind – the virtues and hairline cracks in the wall, the enormous power of the turbulence outside – the artist and after him the critic can do what he does with reasonable efficiency. The moment the artistic or critical mind loses sight of the whole, focusing all attention on, say, the flexibility of the trowel, the project begins to fail, the wall begins to crack with undue rapidity (we expected all along that the wall would crack, but not like this! Not there and there too and even there!) and the builder becomes panicky, ferocious, increasingly inefficient.

Despite the aha’s of some modern philosophers, metaphysical systems do not, generally speaking, break down, shattered by later, keener insight; they are simply abandoned – sometimes after endless tinkering and clumsy renovation – like drafty old castles. This is of course part of Kafka’s joke in *The Castle* and elsewhere; and Kafka is often cited as one of the artists who “show us” the failure of traditional thought, how the castle of metaphysics has proved a ghastly mistake though expanded, patched, and toggled, century on century, by people working in increasing desperation and despair. But Kafka’s art is more subtle, more comic and ironic, than such a reading admits. Much of the power of Kafka’s work comes from our sense as we read that real secrets have been forgotten, real clues are being missed, a wholeness of vision that was once adequate has been lost and is now tragically unrecoverable.