

## Reenchanting the World

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Noting that our demythologized culture has been drained of meaning, Peter Lowentroun argues that the fiction of fantasy writers such as Mircea Eliade (1907-86) can restore a sense of the sacred to our lives and reenchant the world.<sup>1</sup> Imaginary worlds that revive wonder and religious awe are quintessential, for as Eliade tells us, it is through the imagination that “space becomes sacred, hence preeminently *real*.”<sup>2</sup> Eliade’s *A Great Man*, first published in 1948 and written three years earlier in his native Romanian, in what Eliade calls “the language of my dreams,”<sup>3</sup> is a novella that, in the tradition of fantasy as metaphysical discovery, explores an existential dimension fraught with terror and wonder. Like H.G. Wells’ *Invisible Man* or Franz Kafka’s human cockroach, Eugen Cucoanes, the protagonist of “A Great Man,” becomes estranged from others because of an extraordinary change in his physical properties. Eugen disappears at the end of the novella, leaving the reader to imagine his fate.<sup>4</sup>

The unnamed first-person narrator of the novella describes how Eugen, his former classmate, turned up at his home one day to tell how he had inexplicably begun to grow taller within the last few days. Although Eugen proceeds to see many doctors, none can explain, let alone cure, his “macranthropy.” Rational explanations for his sudden growth, such as tuberculosis of the bones or possession of a gland that disappeared in the Pleistocene Age, lead nowhere. Soon, curious onlookers and journalists gather in front of his house. Although he hardly eats anymore, Eugen continues to grow by about a centimeter a day, and needs new garments.

Eugen’s fiancée, Lenora, and a friend, the narrator, are the sole visitors of Eugen, who is cloistered from public view. Eugen will soon experience a tragic inadequacy: he has difficulty hearing and his voice becomes almost unrecognizable: “His laugh seemed totally changed and was ceasing to resemble human laughter; it had taken on a strange overtone, of a tree snapping, or a forest bent double by the wind” (41).<sup>5</sup> Rather than end his life, Eugen decides to abandon his home and head for the mountains “to see what Mother Nature is capable of doing to me, how far she is capable of going” (49). By then, the sounds of his voice had taken on non-human characteristics and “were beginning to resemble infra-phonic explosions, the hiss, the whispers and the groans familiar in the natural world. They seemed now the far-off murmur of a brook, now the fall of a cascade, now the wind passing over a cornfield or stormily bending the branches in a lofty forest” (53). Eugen has embarked on a primal elemental return.

Looking intensely at the narrator “as if he were trying for the last time to seal his lips and bury his secret” (47), Eugen asks him to look after Lenora. The secret heralds a new

consciousness: “Sometimes I have the feeling that I’ve lost my wits – but, there it is, I hear strange things. I seem to hear a clock ticking all the time, but it’s not exactly a clock; it seems to be *something else*, which beats regularly like a pulse and beats in everything at the same time” (45). This description of a pulsating world spurs our imagination as the animate and the inanimate disappear as conceptual categories. We sense that the world is alive, not just in the sense that molecules vibrate and pulsate, but because we belong to a living universe.

The narrator takes Eugen, who has the haggard “air of a prophet of apocalyptic horror,” first in a taxi to his house and then in a van to the mountains. The narrator creates the illusion of verisimilitude by alluding to the well-known press accounts about the trip. In the mountains, the narrator witnesses how Eugen “lifted his arms to heaven, creating a terrifying prophetic figure, and began to talk, to roar, to shout, to sing, addressing himself direct to the valleys and mountains” (59). In the midst of his cosmic communion, Eugen utters words resembling the expressions *Vox populi* and *Vox clamantis in deserto*. The latter expression recalls the story of St. John the Baptist, who preached in the desert, and certain biblical passages that illumine the exile of Eugen, who preaches in and to the wilderness:

There is a voice that cries:

Prepare a road for the LORD  
through the wilderness,  
clear a highway across the desert for  
our God. (*Isaiah* 40:3)<sup>6</sup>

We also recall those passages in *Isaiah* that conflate the life cycles of humanity and vegetation:

A voice says, ‘Cry,’  
And another asks, ‘What shall I cry?’  
‘That all mankind is grass,  
they last no longer than a flower of  
the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows  
upon them;  
the grass withers, the flowers fade,  
but the word of our God endures  
for evermore.’ (*Isaiah* 40:6-8)<sup>7</sup>

In another passage from *Isaiah*, perhaps the inspiration for this novella, we can envision Eugen striding across the land:

Who has gauged the waters in the  
palm of his hand,  
or with its span set limits to the  
heavens?  
Who has held all the soil of earth  
in a bushel,  
or weighed the mountains on a  
balance  
and the hills on a pair of scales? (*Isaiah* 40:12)<sup>8</sup>

The narrator returns to Bucharest that day with papers for Lenora from Eugen. Lenora wants to see Eugen again, convinced that she will understand him. When Lenora and the narrator return to Eugen's hiding place in the mountains a few days later, Eugen is already six or seven meters tall: "When he raised his shoulders from the valley, he looked like Neptune rising from the billows. Such a fearful sight ended by striking one dumb. It was not properly speaking terror, but a strange wonder which took one out of time and projected one into a mythical dawn" (65). Since Eugen can no longer hear him, the narrator gives Eugen a slate, on which Eugen writes cryptically, "It's good." The mystery deepens, as it should, for as Vladimir Solovyov tells us, "the distinguishing characteristic of the genuinely fantastic [is that] it is never ... in full view," for the fantastic insinuates rather than compels belief in a mystic interpretation of events.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator wants Eugen to elucidate the eternal questions: "Tell us whether God exists and what we ought to do so that we too may know him. Tell us whether life continues after death and how we are to prepare for it. *Tell us something!* Teach us!" Eugen can only hint at a momentous reality, for as Alfred North Whitehead observes, the nature of religion is something that is the "greatest of present facts ... and yet is beyond all reach."<sup>10</sup> When he points to the sky, the narrator writes a question on the slate: "What exists *there?*" and receives the reply, written with difficulty, "Everything!" (69). Like the narrator, the reader is bewildered and this perplexity will turn into insight.

Eugen breaks off three twigs from a tree branch and gives one each to Lenora, the van driver and the narrator, who describes the moment: "We took them in great fear, as though we had guessed, as in a dream, that an earth-shaking mystery was being revealed to us" (69). The narrator does not elaborate, for it is the reader who must interpret the image of the twig, evoking

as it does the Tree of Original Knowledge and life's cycle of growth, decay and renewal. The image recalls the Golden Bough, the magical branch of mistletoe that Aeneas gave Persephone in order to enter the underworld (Virgil recounts this episode in *The Aeneid*). It suggests that the self is illusory, that we are more than ourselves since we partake of a sentient universe.

The twig is a hierophany, an object in which the sacred is incarnated and revealed, and which, in the words of Eliade, “shows, makes manifest, the coexistence of contradictory essences: sacred and profane, spirit and matter, eternal and non-eternal.”<sup>11</sup> The symbolic image of the twig overflows the limits of a system of thought, like a poem, and as Archibald MacLeish says, “A poem should not mean / But be.”<sup>12</sup> The twig recalls the Buddha's gift to a disciple,<sup>13</sup> and the quest for meaning that Daud Kamal expresses in “The Gift”:

I have read  
somewhere  
that Buddha  
gave a handful  
of yellow leaves  
to Annanda  
and told him  
that besides those  
there were  
many thousands  
of other truths  
scattered  
all over the earth.  
It was autumn  
and from far away  
came the sounds  
of oxen-bells.  
I, too, have tried  
to plumb  
the depths  
of my being  
but found nothing –  
neither  
brittle truths  
nor lush green

lies.<sup>14</sup>

Though the writer in him “refused any conscious collaboration with the scholar and interpreter of symbols,”<sup>15</sup> Eliade conjures myths and cosmogonies through his art. Eliade believed that his scholarship on religion, written in French, and his fantastic fiction, written in Romanian, sprang from a common impulse, since “art is nothing other than a magical transcendence of the object, its projection into another dimension, its liberation through magical realization and creativity.”<sup>16</sup> He regarded his scholarly research and literary imagination, respectively, as diurnal and nocturnal modes of the spirit, as interdependent categories of spiritual activity.<sup>17</sup> “The literary imagination is the continuation of mythological creativity and oneiric experience,” Eliade observed, and “just as all religious phenomena are hierophantic (in the sense that they reveal the sacred in a profane object or act), literary creation unveils the universal and exemplary meanings hidden in men and in the most commonplace events.”<sup>18</sup>

Eugen gives the narrator and Lenora the twigs, laughing as if at a great cosmic joke. Lenora screams and covers her eyes in terror when Eugen tries to kiss her, and she realizes, like the narrator, that it is time to leave. Eugen spurns the last trappings of civilization when he refuses the tools and provisions that the narrator has brought. In the following days, the narrator hears many contradictory rumors regarding Eugen’s appearance and whereabouts, suggesting the limits of human knowledge and rational understanding.

Two weeks later, while traveling in a friend’s car, the narrator sees Eugen for the last time “outlined against the clear sky with his beard in the wind, like an apparition at the end of the world” (75). The final report of Eugen, seemingly unfounded, has him entering the sea, the source of life. The image of Eugen in the sea recalls both the Romanian title of the novella — “Un Om Mare”<sup>19</sup> — and Eliade’s own life as an exile. As Joseph M. Kitagawa notes, Eliade found in his own uprooted existence a metaphor for the modern religious experience of humanity.<sup>20</sup> When Eugen disappears, he leaves the reader, co-author of all stories, to imagine his fate and thus ponder humanity’s final anguish and first astonishment.

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### Notes

1. Peter Lowentrou, “The Rags of Lordship: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and the Reenchantment of the World,” *Mythlore* 41, Winter-Spring 1985, p. 47.

2. Quoted in Rachela Permeter, "Romantic Postmodernism and the Literary Eliade," *Changing Religious World: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*. Ed. Bryan Rennie (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), p. 98.
3. Quoted in Matei Calinescu, "The Function of the 'Unreal': Reflections on Mircea Eliade's Short Fiction," *Imagination and Meaning: The Scholarly and Literary Worlds of Mircea Eliade*. Eds. Norman J. Girardot and Mac Linscott Ricketts (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), p. 147.
4. Maupassant uses a similar narrative technique in his novella *Le Horla*, in which the first-person narrator describes how a spirit takes possession of him, only to leave his narration unfinished as he resolves to end his life.
5. All references to "A Great Man" are from Mircea Eliade and Mihai Niculescu, *Fantastic Tales*. Ed. and Trans. Eric Tappe (London: Forest Books, 1990).
6. *The New English Bible*. Eds. Samuel Sandmel, M. Jack Suggs and Arnold J. Tkacik (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 770.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 770.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 771.
9. Quoted in Calinescu, p. 149.
10. Alfred North Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World* (New York: MacMillan, 1931), p. 275.
11. Quoted in Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (New York: Garland, 1998), p. 79. The term *hierophany* combines the Greek *hieros*- ('sacred') and *phainein* ('to show') (Allen, p. 74).
12. Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica," *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. Vol. 1. Eds. Richard Ellman, Jahan Ramazani and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), pp. 515-16.
13. In his diary, Eliade recalls an autumn day when he contemplated some trees as he lectured on Buddhism: "I seem to see once again those large trees, and especially that oak in the university quadrangle that was losing its golden-yellow leaves one by one, and which fascinated me so much that I feared not finishing my sentences due to looking out the window ... Why was I thus so impressed by the context of my talk (autumn, falling leaves, the decline of all vegetation) when I was analyzing the therapeutic structure and function of the message of Gautama Buddha?" Mircea Eliade, *Journal III. 1970-78*. Trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.65.
14. Daud Kamal, "The Gift," *A Selection of Verse* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 15.
15. Permenter, p. 99.
16. Mircea Eliade, "Literature and Fantasy," *Waiting for the Dawn: Mircea Eliade in Perspective*. Eds. David Carrasco and Jane Marie Swanberg (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), p. 62.
17. Mircea Eliade, "Literary Imagination and Religious Structure," *Waiting for the Dawn: Mircea Eliade in Perspective*. Eds. David Carrasco and Jane Marie Swanberg (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), p. 19.
18. Quoted in Permenter, p. 102.
19. The Romanian adjective *mare* can mean 'tall,' 'great,' 'vast,' 'renowned' and 'long' (in time duration). The word is also a noun derived from Latin, meaning 'sea.'
20. Joseph M. Kitagawa. *The History of Religions: Understanding Human Experience* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 347