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David Lindsay's A Voyage to Arcturus: An Anti-Fantasy

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Abstract

This is a study of David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) in which I argue that the novel is an *anti-fantasy*, that is, a fantasy that negates certain tropes common to the genre as part of the author's wider intentions for writing. I contextualize Lindsay by comparing him to several authors of his time who also worked in the mode of fantasy, then explain how the generic traits of the novel are handled unconventionally to promote Lindsay's personal philosophy. I explore Lindsay's treatment of the basic generic traits of the hero and his quest, the imaginary world, and the novel's themes regarding the nature of reality, the concept of identity, and the individual's purpose or destiny. Lindsay's intention was not to write an entertaining or imaginative story but to express his sincerest convictions about the nature of the Absolute. The result is a dense, idiosyncratic novel that is often overlooked for being challenging and defying generic expectations. My thesis offers a lens to readers designed to make *Arcturus* accessible and strives to do so in an equally accessible manner.

Keywords: David Lindsay, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Robert E. Howard, fantasy, science fiction, sublime, Absolute, hero, quest

Dedication

Just as in the acknowledgements below, this thesis is dedicated to my fellow graduate students and to my professors. Everyone who helped me stay on course through the program and keep my eyes on the end goal: writing this thesis! I am proud to say that we *all* made it through what was certainly an unconventional time to be in a graduate program. May you all find success in your future endeavors.

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Additionally, although Murray Ewing does not know that I or my thesis exist, I am grateful for his website, *The Violet Apple*, which has been an invaluable resource for finding materials and keeping up to date on Lindsay studies. The very existence of Ewing's site shows that Lindsay enthusiasts are out there and that they care.

Contents

Introduction: The Philosopher Fantasist

David Lindsay's first and best-known novel, *A Voyage to Arcturus*, has been difficult to place since its publication in 1920. For readers and publishers, it has never been easy to understand or easy to market commercially. Even the seemingly trivial difficulty in defining it as either science fiction or fantasy has contributed to its lack of reach and appeal. A contemporary of the likes of Tolkien and Lewis, Lindsay is ostensibly one of the forerunners of modern fantasy fiction. It is Tolkien's and Lewis's treatment of genre-defining tropes, such as imaginary lands and the hero and his quest, that differed from their earlier influences and laid the foundation for the literary tradition that has now thrived for over a century. Lindsay, however, has never enjoyed the widespread and enduring attention of generations of fans and critics; *Arcturus* is simply too different, too arcane, and too pessimistic, and its author does not fit the cozy image of a classic fantasy author made popular by the Oxford dons. Although Lindsay was never widely read, even in his day, *Arcturus* is the sort of novel that the influential names in fantasy hold in high esteem: Tolkien, Lewis, and Moorcock have all expressed admiration for its uninhibited introspection and examination of the human condition. Today, the boundaries of fantasy fiction have been tested and pushed: the departures from earlier modes by the likes of Moorcock and the movements of the 1960s and 70s—grey morals, unreliable narrators, ambiguous or tragic outcomes—have become expected features. It is arguable that, once demystified, it might actually be *easier* to place Lindsay's work comfortably on the family tree of genre fiction, at least in hindsight. Thus, Lindsay's first novel has maintained a cult status since its publication, remaining largely obscure and difficult to define generically, even though it is one of the seminal works that helped to make the genre what it has become. But the trouble in categorizing it arose early, when it could only be compared to its contemporaries.

What does not seem to have occurred to those attempting to label and package *Arcturus* is that Lindsay might not have intended to work in any particular mode at all. In examining his motives for creating *Arcturus*, we will find that he is not interested in creating imaginary worlds for their own sake, nor is he interested in validating common notions of what a hero is meant to be. We might consider the novel as an anti-fantasy—*anti* in the sense that it employs the now-familiar tropes of fantasy fiction—heroic quests, otherworldly locations and characters, inhuman feats—in order to *negate* them. It is not a comment on a single trope, as Michael Moorcock's Elric of Melniboné is an intentional anti-heroic comment on R.E. Howard's infallible superhuman, Conan the Barbarian—sickly and weak without the life-stealing power of his evil sentient sword. It is not even a comment on the genre of fantasy as a whole, which was only a nascent literary trend when Lindsay was writing. Rather, as an organic and uninhibited act of creativity, *Arcturus* is the result of Lindsay using the tropes of the budding fantasy genre as a toolset for communicating his beliefs on the meaning of life itself.

Origins: An Unexpected Novel

Lindsay lived from 1876 to 1945. Because his father abandoned the family when he was still young, forcing him to take a position with a financial firm in London to support his household, Lindsay was unable to pursue a career as an academic, though he was a gifted student with scholastic ambitions. Still, even as he distinguished himself in the financial sector and was well-liked by his employer, he also became a deep thinker well-read in German metaphysics who was obsessed with the nature of reality. The title of Colin Wilson's book-length study, *The Haunted Man: The Strange Genius of David Lindsay* (1979), offers an apt description of the temperament of Lindsay, the solitary middle-class author: vast philosophical questions occupied him constantly, causing him to remain aloof from society and to have few real friends (and this

not unintentionally). Because of this introverted lifestyle, Lindsay's thoughts went largely unshared for quite some time. Before turning to fiction, Lindsay wrote some five-hundred-plus aphorisms he called *Sketch Notes for a New System of Philosophy*,[1] currently housed at the National Library of Scotland, which showed him to be particularly keen to dissect everything from social life to music with particularly Schopenhauerian sympathies (that is, through a lens of philosophical pessimism). Literature was very important to Lindsay, but biographer Bernard Sellin has suggested that, if not for the influence of his much younger, much more naïve and optimistic wife (who firmly believed that her husband's success as an author was assured), he may never have tried his hand at a writing career (20). It is unclear what Lindsay might have done with the philosophical system he had been developing otherwise; but he must have eventually felt some need to share his thoughts with the world, for as J.B. Pick writes, in 1920 "ten years of intense brooding thought" erupted and formed into Lindsay's first and arguably best novel, the colorful, grim fantasy *A Voyage to Arcturus* ("A Sketch" 13).

In a nutshell, *Arcturus* is a pessimistic philosophical quest story based on Lindsay's disgust with the insincerity—what Sellin terms the "dissimulation"—that Lindsay found so pervasive in everyday experience (101). Convinced (rather easily) by the unlikeable Krag that he will see great wonders that will alleviate him of his Earthly dissatisfaction, the protagonist, Maskull, travels to the planet Tormance, which orbits a fictionalized Arcturus system, featuring two suns. There, instead of being built up and validated like the familiar Campbellian hero, Maskull is ground down, literally to nothing, until he has no identity at all. This painful loss of personal identity, somehow, is the boon he is supposed to take back with him and give to the

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[1] Some ambiguity surrounds the official name of Lindsay's *Notes*. *Sketch Notes* will be used here for consistency. (See Ewing, "Non-fiction").

world as a sort of Prometheus (a myth to which the novel directly alludes several times). The novel is constructed as a series of episodes across singular landscapes featuring unique characters that represent some mode of belief, some way of living and seeing the world, that Lindsay dissects mercilessly. Nothing on Tormance behaves as we would expect—not even the primary colors. As such, it is a disquieting book that plays with the notion of stability, repeatedly establishing expectations—of what is good, what is right, and what is even real—only to cut them down. The result is a jarring read that can vex the unassuming reader looking for a planetary adventure in the vein of Burroughs or Verne.

Arcturus is about the nature of reality and humankind's place in the universe, and it reflects its author's all-consuming desire to attain unequivocal knowledge of the Absolute, or ultimate reality. In the novel, the phenomenal world, with its contents both material and ideological, is revealed to be entirely illusory, the byproduct of the malevolent entity Crystalman who processes and distorts the substance of the *real* world of the Sublime, called Muspel. Through an episodic plot, Maskull travels north, through surreal landscapes, acquiring and losing inhuman sensory organs that help him to experience the natural world in accordance with the ideologies of the characters he meets. Each episode consists of some attempt to encourage Maskull to accept the "truths" he has encountered, yet some conflict of ideas leaves him dissatisfied and ready to leave for the next experience. Eventually, he becomes aware that Muspel in the north is his ultimate goal, though he does not entirely understand what Muspel is.

Placing Lindsay: Fantasy or Science Fiction?

Why, we might ask, should we seek to define *Arcturus* in generic terms at all? Since serious scholarly inquiry into Lindsay began at the end of the 1960s, thanks in large part to Colin Wilson, it has been commonplace to set the man and his work apart with adjectives like "mystic"

and “strange” because of the deeply personal nature of the metaphors and the strikingly surreal imagery Lindsay employs, none of which seems to parallel or allude to that of his contemporaries or predecessors. Perhaps playing up Lindsay’s singular traits has made him more intriguing to some readers, but it has undoubtedly made it harder for his legacy to stand out in the world of fantasy fiction, and it has likely deterred many potential readers. With the perspective provided by the passage of time, we can see the development of what would become commercial fantasy on both sides of the Atlantic during the first few decades of the twentieth century. The historical distance allows us to better see how Lindsay fits into the inchoate genre and how he compares to his contemporaries in Britain as well as in America (known to him or not). In doing so, it will become apparent that Lindsay is not so much an outsider as is popularly accepted, and that his *Arcturus* is perhaps best described as an *anti-fantasy* that pulls against the tendencies that other authors of his time followed. Negation, the exposure and cancelling out of falsehoods, is the running theme in both Lindsay’s philosophy and in his fiction. As I will argue, the strain of romance, whimsy and sentimentality that can be found (sometimes blatantly) in his contemporaries is not present in his own fiction—not unless he is nullifying it in some way. The tropes associated with fantasy fiction are employed by Lindsay, but for reasons other than those established by his contemporaries as hallmarks of the genre. Merely putting him in context might, at the very least, bring him to the attention of more readers who will then give *Arcturus* the chance it deserves.

Although the separation between fantasy and science fiction is one that largely serves the purposes of merchandisers and catalogers, and it can often oversimplify what these terms even mean, I will take for granted that *Arcturus* relates to fantasy more so than to science fiction from here on. *Arcturus* seems to have first been associated with science fiction when it was reissued in

1963 as part of Macmillan's line of adult science fiction reprints (Wolfe 8). This was around the time that fantasy and science fiction were becoming commercially popular, and genre labels were beginning to solidify, amidst much debate. Prior to this, labels were more fluid. Yet there is no need to label *Arcturus* a science fiction novel. As Sellin notes, on the night of departure for the Arcturus system, "[s]cientific laws are shamelessly mocked" when Krag proceeds to pilot a crystal spaceship by means of Arcturan "back-rays" of light that are pulled back to their source. Indeed, throughout the book, there is very little in the way of rationalization of anything that happens. While it might be *like* a cosmic novel in the vein of Wells or Verne, as Sellin suggests, *Arcturus* shows that Lindsay was not much interested in technological explanations available to him for answering just how Maskull and the others travel to Tormance (141). The back-rays themselves function more as foreshadowing of the forces acting upon the protagonist than as world-building elements. Throughout the novel, objective science is never considered a satisfactory answer to any of the questions or conflicts that Maskull encounters. In fact, science, when it does appear, is subjected to the same withering scrutiny as every other system of belief and mode of living. The traits of the novel that might today cause readers to label it science fiction are superficial: the action takes place on a distant planet that the characters reach by way of a spaceship. But Lindsay did not choose this setting or this method of transport to explore actual possibilities for humankind's colonization of the stars; he did so to show that the questions that trouble us on Earth will trouble us anywhere we go. If anything, Lindsay is critical of science's claims to objective knowledge.

Such labeling can confuse the positioning of Lindsay's contemporaries as well, who are regarded as the founders of modern fantasy. If merely taking place on a distant planet is enough to call a book science fiction, then E. R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922) is a science

fiction novel because it takes place on Mercury. There is nothing, of course, even remotely scientific in Eddison's novel, and the reader soon forgets all about Mercury as it might really be. Even the mode of transportation (a hippogriff-drawn chariot) is utterly unrealistic. Eddison had entirely different motivations for writing his story than speculating about our advancement as a species into the solar system—rather personal reasons that are not far removed from Lindsay's, as we will presently see.

The first part of this study is a comparison of Lindsay and fantasy authors of the early to mid-twentieth century to better understand how he, his work, and his motives relate to theirs. In this section some of the basic themes and craft decisions found in Lindsay's work are examined and contextualized. The second part explains Lindsay's philosophy and places it in context of his use of fantasy tropes. The third section aims to tie everything together with a final examination of that aspect of Lindsay's philosophy that relates to the individual (the fictional hero, in this case) and attempts to clarify at least one of the trickier paradoxes: that of the individual who relinquishes himself to find himself. Taken together, these sections all show how Lindsay's philosophy drove his fiction, rather than the other way around, and resulted in a novel so unique that it can be defined as an anti-fantasy.

It is my intention in framing Lindsay's philosophy generically to make him accessible rather than aloof. Decades of mythologizing him have had the affect of perpetuating an outsider status while doing little to prepare a reader familiar with the moves of competent genre fiction to understand and even enjoy a novel so dense and self-referencing as *Arcturus*. At worst, such exclusion runs the risk of disappointing readers' expectations of what is "weird," if their sensibilities are not satisfied. Puzzles are enjoyable, but outright frustration is not. The connotations of genre labels have shifted many times in the century since *Arcturus* was

published, and genre fiction has seen its share of eccentric, supposedly undefinable authors, most of whom become known as influencers in their own right. Rather than vacillate between *is* and *is not*, I have chosen to bring Lindsay closer to a tradition rather than to examine him from afar, with the hope of inviting readers to try *Arcturus*, instead of holding them at arm's length.

Literature Review: A Brief Overview of Lindsay Studies

A look at the scholarship on Lindsay will indicate the simple fact that it is impossible to remove the author from his work: any study of *Arcturus* is a study of David Lindsay as well. Lindsay scholarship initially began in the late 1960s, coinciding with the popularization of fantasy and science fiction and the two genres' growth into viable commercial entities. J.B. Pick, E. H. Visiak, and Colin Wilson at first paralleled one another before becoming aware of their shared interest and joining together to publish a collection of their writings in *The Strange Genius of David Lindsay* (1969). Arguably the first among them, Pick initially focused on Lindsay's importance to Scottish literature, while Visiak, a Milton scholar, was in the unique position of having been among Lindsay's few friends in life and felt it important that Lindsay not be forgotten. Wilson found in Lindsay something that resonated with his own eccentric existentialist views. These authors set the stage for the scholarship to come, focusing primarily on Lindsay's uniqueness of character and vision. Each was something of an apologist for Lindsay and for his choice to write genre fiction; and while they sought to legitimize him in the eyes of readers and scholars, they also promoted him as an iconoclastic, misunderstood mystic, possibly as a way to excuse him for writing in a mode deemed unserious at the time. Although it might simply have been a rhetorical device, this mythologizing of Lindsay became something of a hallmark of Lindsay studies itself.

Explanation of the events of the novel became expected features as well. The early 1980s saw the publication of Bernard Sellin's book-length biography, *The Life and Works of David Lindsay* (1981), and Gary K. Wolfe's *David Lindsay* in the Starmont Reader's Guide series (1982). These focused on the objective history of Lindsay's life and writing career and attempted to provide satisfactory answers to the questions surrounding his intentions for writing. While

they proposed to answer questions about Lindsay's philosophy, they looked to his own notes on the subject, providing much needed clarification from Lindsay himself. These works now provide the quickest (though not comprehensive) access to his *Sketch Notes*. While Wilson, Pick, and Visiak sought to legitimize Lindsay, Sellin and Wolfe implicitly accepted his status as an author worth reading, and their biographical criticism helped flesh out the picture of Lindsay and his life.

A first, unprimed reading of *Arcturus* does create a desire to know exactly what is going on. The search for concrete answers necessarily leads back to Lindsay and his arcane personal philosophy, but it is entirely possible to zoom in and do a deep reading of any single element that strikes a reader as memorable. Robert H. Waugh has published several such articles: "A Speculative Dictionary of *A Voyage to Arcturus*" deals with Lindsay's idiosyncratic naming conventions, and "The Drum of Arcturus in Lindsay's Strange Music" finds correlations between Lindsay's themes of music and color. These are collected and reprinted in *The Tragic Thread in Science Fiction* (2019). Still others have related Lindsay to established disciplines and schools of thought, as did Kathryn Hume's "Visionary Allegory in David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*" (1978) and Adelheid Kegler's "Encounter Darkness: The Black Platonism of David Lindsay" in the Spring 1993 issue of *Mythlore* (which, by virtue of that journal's scope implies Lindsay's place among the milieu of Tolkien and Lewis). Such studies as Waugh's, Hume's, and Kegler's serve to break Lindsay studies out of the dominant mode of biographical criticism, with Kegler's quite possibly referring to formal schools of thought that Lindsay himself would have been familiar with and directly influenced by.

Religion, though not dealt with in detail in my study, has often been a theme in Lindsay scholarship. Harold Bloom's *Agon* (1982) cannot resist the Gnostic reading that is as popular as

the Buddhist one. Visiak's "*Arcturus* and the Christian Dogma" points to obvious parallels between Lindsay and the dominant Biblical mythology he would have been brought up with. Given the moral structure of the cosmos in *Arcturus*, the religious reading is understandable, and the implications of theological readings of the book are intriguing.

General interest in Lindsay persists, and in 2020, the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh held remote conferences on Lindsay to coincide with the centennial anniversary of the publication of *Arcturus*. Currently, artist Murray Ewing runs the unofficial internet information hub for all things Lindsay, *The Violet Apple*, which is currently the best source for biblio- and biographical information and news regarding events and publications relevant to Lindsay and Lindsay studies. One particular challenge has been access to the *Sketch Notes*. These are not readily available in full, being held at the National Library of Scotland. Publications that have included a selection are also not readily available; these include David Power's *David Lindsay's Vision* (1991) and the Savoy deluxe edition of *Arcturus* (2002). References in my study to the *Sketch Notes* rely on those that have been published in other scholars' work.

In nearly every instance of scholarship, the adjective "genius" seems to have subconsciously become a dominant feature of Lindsay studies, a trend which continues into the present. In the article, "The Alienness of Atmosphere" (2002), Michael Moorcock refers casually to Lindsay's "God-questioning genius," for instance. The word has become almost flippantly associated with Lindsay but is justified only by implication. There is nothing wrong in its use other than that it is affective rather than qualifiable. I have made an effort to avoid this sort of elevation (or mythologization) of Lindsay, preferring to respect him as an intelligent, self-driven, but otherwise ordinary (if shy) human being who wrote a very interesting book.

Lindsay and Contemporaries

An unlikely champion of Lindsay's is literary critic Harold Bloom (whose only attempt at fiction was a poor copy of *Arcturus* called *The Flight to Lucifer*). In *Agon,* Bloom notes that, in the nineteenth century, the antecedents of modern fantasy saw a shift in which "the Sublime replaced theology" (201). According to Bloom, by the end of the Enlightenment (and the beginning of the Romantic era, and thus the beginning of the modern era), the sublime was "psychologized negatively, into a vision of terror in both art and nature, an oxymoronic terror uneasily allied with pleasurable sensations of augmented strength and indeed of narcissistic freedom" (206). In the form of the mysterious northerly realm of Muspel, the object of Maskull's quest, the Sublime takes on exactly these features. As we will see in the following comparisons between Lindsay and other fantasy authors of his day, a thread of "narcissistic freedom" can be found running through his and his contemporaries' work, making him ostensibly one of the tribe: the individual and their experience of sublimity is paramount in their fiction, regardless of the features that sublimity takes on. We will find, however, that even though Lindsay's fiction responds to similar motivations and features the same tropes, it always trends toward negation of those themes and tropes. Lindsay, driven by his deepest convictions more than any creative impulse, always pulls against the grain, a piece of the mosaic that only fits snugly from a certain perspective.

One of Lindsay's fellow British fantasists, Eric Rücker (E.R.) Eddison, similarly based his work on a personal philosophy. Both men were well-to-do Edwardian gentlemen, although Lindsay was unable to have the kind of education that Eddison did because of the desertion of his father when he was only a teenager. Eddison, like Lindsay, was dissatisfied with reality's inability to live up to his standards and sought to correct its inadequacies through an invented

world of his own. But while Lindsay's Tormance is a monstrous place, Eddison's Zimiamvia is one where "magnificence, grandeur, splendor, ceremony, opulence, and luxury surfeit the senses and the soul's longing for material beauty" (Thomas xxvii, xxvi). Like Lindsay, Eddison built his fictional universe as a kind of reflection or fragmented emanation of a numinous source: a divinity comprised of the two halves formed by a god and goddess. Paul Edmund Thomas explains that Eddison's universal driving force is love and that a god's (Zeus) striving for the object of his love, a goddess (Aphrodite), is what drives every action in the fictional universe: Zeus is capable of eternal love—but love must have an object—and Aphrodite is that object, capable of both eliciting and receiving an eternal supply of love (xxix-xxx). This pair of divinities is essentially Eddison's analog to Lindsay's Muspel. They are the source, and the characters who populate the two finished and one fragmentary novel that comprise the Zimiamvia trilogy (*Ouroboros* is only tangentially related) are all made of different mixtures of the qualities and characteristics of these two divinities. In examining Eddison's own illuminating introduction to the second volume, *A Fish Dinner in Memison,* Thomas writes that "The gods [being only Zeus and Aphrodite] extend themselves throughout all of Zimiamvia. All animate and inanimate things live as partial incarnates of the gods, and each thing possesses in its substance some singular amount of the nature of the deities," and "Ever-changing flux is the never-changing situation intrinsic to the godhead" (xxxiv).

Eddison's heavenly playground for the dual godhead echoes Lindsay in some interesting ways. There is a sublimity that is constantly striven for, and there is fragmentation of that sublimity into all the things that make up the phenomenal world in which the action takes place. In Lindsayan terms, however, Zimiamvia is just another *crystallization* (an important term that I will explain below). Constant change and variety smacks of Tormance's chaotic region of

Matterplay and its aimless creative energy, always churning out new forms that are destined only to burn out and disappear. Lindsay would have found the whimsical play of Eddison's divinities unsatisfactory because anything that influences us, *especially* subliminally, is antagonistic. Intriguing and attractive though Eddison's version of the Sublime world may be, it becomes a mere stop along the way compared to Lindsay's absolute and fundamental Muspel, and a merely illusory one at that.

In Eddison's myth, Aphrodite is a kind of Muspel for which Zeus must strive. The god does this by essentially playing in their shared universe of Zimiamvia, in which all characters are, in various ways, striving to return to the divinity of Aphrodite (much like all things are striving to return to Muspel in *Arcturus*). As Thomas notes, paradoxical relationships, things not being cut-and-dry, are taken for granted in Eddison's world-building, suggesting they are expected and even sought for their evocativeness (xxxiii). Lindsay, on the other hand, tackles contradictions headlong, which makes the ultimately unknown quality of Muspel (the sublime world) simultaneously more jarring and effective. A similarity exists in that the Zimiamvians are, like the inhabitants of Tormance, all at varying levels of ignorance or elucidation of their own divine natures; yet all that they do is in accordance with the push and pull of Zeus and Aphrodite, whether they realize it or not (xxxiv, xxxviii). This sounds rather chivalrous, which is nice; but Lindsay would naturally have nothing to do with such a system unless he had devised a way to expose it as inadequate, as he does in *Arcturus* when he sees through the divinities that supposedly reside in the region called Threal as nefarious illusions made by Crystalman.

How seriously we are expected to take Eddison is unclear; he states that he only ever intended to write a story and nothing more (Winter xvii). Still, a great deal of thought went into this system of gods and demi-gods, and not just in the extensive explanatory introduction

provided by the author mentioned above. There is in fact one blatant authorial intrusion in the same novel in which Eddison (in the guise of his protagonist, Lessingham) rants to his real-life brother about the virtues of being a Viking, or at least a Tory (481-3). That is, there must be something of the author in this vast philosophical framework, purportedly designed just to tell an entertaining story. This need to say something about life and experience is a trait common to both Lindsay and Eddison. In the end, it is interesting to discover that Lindsay and Eddison shared a similar preoccupation with uncovering the Absolute. Eddison took from Immanuel Kant a fascination with "the impotence of reason" and its inability to answer questions about our personal experiences (Thomas xli). Instead of pessimistic resignation, however, Eddison found his answer in Keatsian subjectivity (xlii). For Eddison, the Absolute is reached by accepting poetic truths, unique to the poet: following his own "heart's desire for beauty," he could express some purportedly concrete conclusions about the nature of reality (xliii). Eddison had similar concerns as Lindsay, but he gave in willingly to whimsy. His fictional world is built on fundamentals that Lindsay could never accept: that all actions that serve "beauty" are good actions, for instance, which takes for granted a universal definition of beauty (xxxviii). Given the nature of his musings, Lindsay had much more difficulty embracing his poetic impulse than Eddison—he naturally did not trust it, just as he trusted nothing else.

It can be argued that both authors concluded that the Sublime world that influences the phenomenal one is ultimately unknowable, but Eddison's outlook seems to suggest that even the barest experience of that ulterior world is better than none at all. Lindsay might respond to that assumption with his character Slofork's "blessing" of the idealistic Panawe and tell him: "You will never rise above mysticism…. But be happy in your own way" (61). Lindsay's *Arcturus* represents the antithesis of Eddison's whimsical world-building, but both authors still made their

worlds in order to express what they believed to be the true way to view reality. Each author's insistence that there is a correct way to experience "truth" indicates the presence of their own assertive individualities in their fiction.

The individual in a personal dialogue with the universe is in fact a trait of fantasy. It distinguishes itself from science fiction in this sense because, while authors of either might project their own values onto the question of humankind's purpose in the grand scheme of things, the conflict is more or less objective in science fiction but very much a personal concern in fantasy. In the latter, the universe takes on a moral structure rather than an impersonal one. We can see this in the work of George MacDonald, who according to Lindsay's friend, scholar and writer Harold Visiak, was among his most important literary influences ("Lindsay as I knew Him" 98). In his 1895 novel *Lilith*, a Mr. Vane travels through his mirror into an enchanted realm in which the majority of the magical elements and characters as well as the very conflict they engage in are decidedly Biblical. It is more overtly Christian than even Lewis. In the end, Mr. Vane does not get to live out his days in beatific heavenly paradise, but he catches glimpses of it every so often after his visit there; and they inspire and elevate him in his daily existence as they allude to something better than the mundane reality in which he moves. The parallel world he visits is magical but based entirely on a Biblical/Christian sort of magic. Lindsay's sixth chapter, "Joiwind," reads almost as a critique of all that he must have found troubling or dissatisfying with *Lilith*. Not only is this the beginning of Maskull's Arcturan adventure proper, but it is perhaps the episode most clearly allusive to *Lilith*.

Water features heavily in both the Joiwind chapter and in *Lilith*. It is not quite clear what it means in MacDonald, but the fantasy world that Mr. Vane finds himself in is devoid of naturally occurring water above ground, and it is stated that it was stolen by Lilith herself (75).

The children he leads drink water for the first time only later in the story, and the effect it has on them is almost holy (196). There is restorative and redemptive power in that water that could be a kind of metaphor for purity and cleansing of sin in a Christian mythological system. For MacDonald, water is a symbol of life and positive growth, at any rate. Maskull encounters gnawl-water on his first day on Tormance, the only sustenance Joiwind and her husband Panawe take; it awakens his senses, empowers his first set of new sensory organs, and helps him to begin to see the world as his new acquaintances do: magnanimously (48-49). This water also seems to form the basis for the Well of Shaping, where Joiwind and Maskull offer a seemingly benign prayer (45). This water, being a major part of the very first experience Maskull has on Tormance, is necessarily the vehicle of delusion, a drug that befuddles the mind even as it reminds of the divine water of MacDonald's imaginary world.

The moral of *Lilith* is unambiguous. There is one God—a Christian God—and one correct way to be in the universe. Lovingkindness, the sacrifice of oneself and service to others, is the key to the correct and best mode of living. Mr. Vane is only ever subject to his own imperfections and his own bungled attempts to do right: he is the weaver of his own veil from the light of Truth, as we see on the several occasions when he disregards Adam's instructions and warnings to act on his own impulse. Lindsay's treatment of lovingkindness questions the simplicity of MacDonald's conclusions. "You reduce life to extreme simplicity…but it is very beautiful," he tells Joiwind (47). Hers is the most optimistic philosophy on Tormance, and the very first one, farthest from the truth of Muspel away in the north. Maskull will think back to her during his trials, but he will never meet someone as pure and optimistic as she is, and he will very quickly fail to live up to the standard she sets.

As Joiwind's is the first episode on Tormance, it appears that it will be the foundation of the book's philosophy and the basis for its action, maybe establishing an alliance between hero and oppressed population or some other relationship which will put our protagonist in the role of protector or benefactor, like Mr. Vane to the children in the forest in which they live under the thumb of the Neanderthal-like grown-ups. But Joiwind's little corner of the world is not anything so pulpish, and its reality as a barely passable shroud over the undercurrent of contradiction and darkness running through Tormance is apparent, especially upon subsequent readings. Joiwind's explanation of the spiritual aspect of Tormance reveals her misconceptions immediately. Though the first-time reader is not aware yet that Krag is Surtur, they are very likely to be confused by the conflation of Surtur, Shaping, and Crystalman, the latter having already been established to Maskull as the overseer of Tormance and independent of Surtur (13). Shaping, however, is a new name, adding an additional layer of mystery to the assertion that Surtur and Crystalman are one and the same. Already the questions are compounding, for both protagonist and reader alike, when Joiwind suggests that Krag is akin to the Devil, "the author of evil and misery" (46). Joiwind's prayer at the Well of Shaping shows the danger of good intentions based on mere faith over objective knowledge: "Don't spare him pain, dear Shaping, but let him seek his own pain" (45). Joiwind should be careful what she wishes for, for Shaping, in her spiritual system, is indeed Surtur, who we learn in the end is also Krag—also known as Pain on Earth (268). Joiwind and her husband, it seems, would rather not know the truth, because it risks obliterating the optimistic outlook they have that allows them to live in harmony with everything that is alive.

Panawe has met one person, Slofork, who knows that the universe is in fact "a conjuror's cave"—a foreshadowing of the knowledge to come that it is indeed Crystalman's canvas (46). He is troubled by his encounter, which suggests that the tangle of deception and confusion

outlined by the who-is-who above is closer to reality than the happy life he lives, but he chooses to stay in his place with his wife rather than grow beyond his comfort zone. Perhaps their greatest piece of wisdom is that desire (in this case for the possession of knowledge) breeds suffering. When Maskull asks how she and her husband can live without excitement, Joiwind responds, "Before long I hope you will understand what sort of question you have asked" (48). For Joiwind and Panawe, ignorance is bliss, but this cannot be the case for Maskull, because the truth is all he desires, more than complacency or sitting still and accepting what "truths" he finds without further questioning them.

This first encounter on Tormance is reminiscent of MacDonald, but it only becomes apparent later that it is a critique of that author's positive outlook. What must have both vexed and inspired Lindsay in MacDonald's *Lilith* is that the protagonist, on the cusp of ultimate truth, is ripped away and sent back to his mundane library to question whether the reality he had been promised was truly the Absolute. Just when Mr. Vane enters the City of Heaven, he is ushered back into the mundane world unexpectedly and spends the rest of his days believing that he may yet find a way out of our world and back into perfect reality: "Such a dream must have yet lovelier truth at the heart of its dreaming!" (251). His magic guide, Mr. Raven, who is revealed to be the Biblical Adam, assures him that his eternal sleep is a series of false awakenings which are in fact dreams of the magnificence of eternal life to come (234-35). Whatever MacDonald's intentions, this snatching away of the promised reward, this riddling obfuscation, must have greatly affected Lindsay, because it suffuses his *Arcturus*. Joiwind's philosophy of lovingkindness, therefore, opens Maskull's adventure to show that all such journeys into truth begin optimistically but must either stagnate or cast off their naivety and confront the pain of truth.

By the above comparison between *Arcturus* and *Lilith*, we can see how specific regions of Linday's Tormance are like microcosmic representations of the invented universes of other fantasy novels. Another such comparison can be found in the Hyborian Age of American pulp writer Robert E. Howard. This era, meant by its author to be a kind of precursor to our own on Earth, with familiar socio-political and geographic features, represents its author's whimsical view of a Golden Age long gone. Howard lived in Depression-era Texas and longed for the days of rugged individualism represented by the Frontier of what was then the relatively recent past. His most famous creation, Conan the Barbarian, is "a figure of muscle and steel, fierce and free, unencumbered by the mechanistic punch-clock of the 9-5 job and artifice required of urban living" (Murphy 77). The famous and influential "age undreamed" is Howard's whimsical revision of history, based entirely on his own values. While Lindsay might appreciate self-reliance and isolation, the Hyborian Age would be a globe-spanning Ifdawn Marest: "all hammer-blows" and "nothing soft and gradual" (78). It is too comfortable in itself—too crystalized—to be anything more than one small region in the vastness of Crystalman's universe. Lindsay's Oceaxe, Crimtyphon, and Tydomin are all characters who solve their problems with violence or domination in the sorts of conflicts to be found in the pages of Howard's pulp adventures. But, by reducing that worldview to just one region of many on Tormance, Lindsay exposes their worldview as myopic and self-perpetuating.

Like Eddison, Howard takes a different angle to the same questions that Lindsay does. The individual's struggle to reach their potential is taken as a universal law of nature. But no author is more a champion of individual freedom than Robert E. Howard. Howard's barbarians, Conan, and Kull before him, embody all of his distaste for decadence, bureaucracy, cowardice, and anything else that civilized man hides behind in his abuse of the world and its free peoples.

Howard considered the universe an impersonal one that would not help an individual, but more likely hinder them. In light of the fact that Howard's fictional Hyborian and preceding Thurian Ages are both past epochs of Earth doomed by impending cataclysm, Murphy writes that Howard's heroes "will ultimately lose," in the grand scheme; for something, be it a force of nature or a tide of barbarians at the gates of empire, will stamp out the individual flame, just as it will crush the mightiest empire (64). The outlook that one should laugh in the face of this inevitable demise must come in part from the same Nordic sagas that so influenced writers like Lindsay and Eddison. But Conan lives for the day, which Maskull could never do.

Howard and Lindsay might share the pessimistic conclusion that all we do is doomed to fail in time, but Lindsay takes this conclusion as a personal offense. For him, the phenomenal world is entirely illusion, and everything therefore must be held to the highest scrutiny in order to justify casting it aside—as cast it aside we must. This is the purpose for our existence, and in Lindsay's outlook, we lessen ourselves by giving in to a single mode of living or a set of comfortable answers. Howard does not waste any worry on such cosmic musings when they confront him, as this famous speech of Conan's from "Queen of the Black Coast" exemplifies: "I know this: If life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and I am content" (qtd. in Murphy 51).

Perhaps with the exception of MacDonald, a major influence but still a writer of the previous generation, all of the above authors share similar influences in common: the Norse sagas, the adventure fiction of H. Rider Haggard. Though they came from different backgrounds and might never have known of one another, their protagonists accommodate Bloom's notion of self-centered individual freedom each in their own way. While MacDonald sought to bring his prot*agon*ist into accord with a morally structured, divinely derived universal order, Lindsay,

Eddison, and Howard all began to look inward and to see the moral structure of the universe as somehow derived from within the individual. In the above comparisons between *Arcturus* and other fantasies near to it, we see exactly this playing out in some way or other, be it Eddison's godhead and universe of beauty-seekers, or Howard's uninhibited, irrational ideal superman traversing a primal world of wonders to be subdued by force. Although each author's view of what is sublime is different, each still considers the individual's experience of it to be paramount. As Bloom notes, there is a conflation of the Prometheus myth and the Narcissus myth, in modern fantasy. The hero, if they reach true enlightenment of any kind, discovers that "the only fire they can steal is already and originally their own fire" (212). Bloom rightly directs the reader to the final chapter of *Arcturus* when Nightspore (the spiritually reborn Maskull) reaches the object of the book-long quest and discovers that "Muspel consisted of himself and the stone tower on which he was standing" (266). The tantalizing glimpses of Muspel-light, ever out of reach, are not penetrating from another plane of existence, but emanating out of the protagonist himself.

Based on Bloom's insights into *Arcturus*, it seems that Maskull is a special kind of anti-hero we might term a *negated* hero, who shows the flaws of heroism, himself open to the analysis to which Lindsay subjects everything else. He is not so much like Elric, who is flawed but still effective, he is rather a kind of mock-Conan, a strong "giant," "but of broader and robuster physique than most giants" (7). But Maskull spends his quest always only edging near the truth, never quite finding it. Maskull is always looking for Muspel externally, for a glimpse of Surtur (who, ironically, he has already seen plenty of, because Surtur is Krag). Lindsay spends nearly the entire book following the "adventures" of an ironic hero toward the opposite outcome of what we might expect of a more triumphant hero story. This sense of negation is central to Lindsay's philosophy. It infuses every episode of *Arcturus*, and in the end, his protagonist

reaches the summit of the universe, only to find an all-encompassing, leering darkness—no triumphant pose on the mountain peak brandishing his sword and the severed head of his nemesis. Maskull's first day on Tormance includes the relation of Panawe's story and his meeting with Slofork. The object of the quest, Muspel, is described as "another world" where "another order of things reigns. That world we call Nothing…but it is not Nothing, but Something" (61). It is this curious paradox of the nothing that is something that we must turn to next.

To The Roots of the World

We have reviewed some examples of how Lindsay fits into the general climate of fantasy fiction of his day. Like his countryman E.R. Eddison and even his unknown American counterpart, Robert E. Howard, Lindsay wrote in the mode of fantasy to express something about how he viewed the world. But unlike those other authors, Lindsay's views are far less whimsical and self-assured. He is not content to choose a system of beliefs and defend it to the end; he dissects and anatomizes all systems instead, finding the flaw in each one that renders it inadequate. It seems commonplace to assume that the creative act of writing brought some measure of satisfaction to these three writers. Howard is remembered for his storytelling skill, and Eddison's prose is outright poetic, showing his impressive literary knowledge and skill with the written word. (At least a third of the Dell omnibus of the Zimiamvia trilogy is dedicated to an extensive notes section to account for all of his arcane allusions.) One would assume that, as a lover of literature, Lindsay too would have written simply because it felt good to do so. Yet J. B. Pick explains, in his "A Sketch of Lindsay's Life as Man and Writer," that Lindsay had no stomach for "literature for literature's sake [or] art for art's sake" (20). He writes that Lindsay was not interested in writing for the joy of it at all ("The Work" 171), which perhaps explains

why he did not take to fiction until he was nearly forty, preferring to jot down his insights gleaned from observation and study in the form of "aperçues," or compact written insights (Ewing). These became his *Notes on a New Philosophical System*, which remain unpublished in their entirety today.[2] Bernard Sellin tells us that Lindsay's fiction, rather than mere fun or expression, is the result of "imagination in service of beliefs" (148). Lindsay did not turn to the fantasy genre for the aesthetic freedom it affords, but because he felt it was the necessary vehicle for expressing his views on the nature of reality.

Ironically, words were an inadequate medium, according to Lindsay. He characteristically made a sharp distinction between satisfactory and unsatisfactory art based on how well it dealt with the problem of absolute reality, and the art of fiction was no exception. In a note intended to accompany his later novel, *Devil's Tor*, he explained his approach to writing fantasy fiction by comparing "two orders of imaginative writers": the first are the "poets" who only dress "familiar things in new and striking lights" and are both more numerous than and inferior to the other; the second are concerned with "passion, emotion…the elemental forces generally," and their compulsion to write comes from a desire to discover "the roots of the world" (qtd. in Pick, "A Sketch" 27). For Lindsay, the act of writing a fantasy puts the author in a precarious place: how does one express the inexpressible? The "roots of the world," in Lindsay's terms, *are* inexpressible, so rather than make an attempt doomed to be trite and ineffective, he chose to make his first and most imaginative novel an exploration of just how difficult getting to those roots can be.

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[2] Lindsay's *Sketch Notes on a New Philosophical System*, or *Philosophical Notes* are housed at the National Library of Scotland. They have never been published in their entirety and are referenced here through the work of other scholars.

This was Lindsay's great preoccupation: the supreme challenge of finding and comprehending the ultimate truth in a universe actively seeking to obscure and disguise it; and he wrote *Arcturus* to express the depths of this challenge. At its center is a conflict between three sentient agents: Crystalman the creator god of planet Tormance; The Sublime world called Muspel that is the raw material Crystalman works with; and Maskull, the solitary truth-seeker, torn between the influence of the two. At some point in his early adulthood, Lindsay struck upon the notion that our experiences are mediated by our bodies and the suggestion that reality might not be what we experience at all, and he was profoundly disturbed. He wrote, "One must regard the world not merely as the home of illusions, but as being *rotten* with illusion from top to bottom" (qtd. in Wilson 10). The pessimism of *Arcturus* can be explained by Lindsay's revulsion regarding what Sellin terms the "dissimulation" he encountered in society wherein "[f]alsehood… is the foundation of all human and social relationships" (107). This malign brand of falsehood is not limited to human interaction, it suffuses our every experience in the phenomenal world. Not only do we lie to each other, our specialized senses also "lie" to us through their limited capabilities. Lindsay's notes tell of his genuine belief in his Muspel concept: "The Sublime world is not a metaphysical theory but a terrible fact, which stands above and behind the world, and governs all its manifestations" (qtd. in Sellin 177). Likewise, the "rot" cannot be explained away by the dumb mechanisms of a disinterested clockwork universe: it is the deliberate deceit of a con-artist with an agenda of his own.

The King of Poets

John Clute rightly refers to Tormance as "an arena specifically *designed* to test" the protagonist (xii), for the entire magnificent planet, which represents the whole phenomenal world, is the creation of the usurper, Crystalman. Contrary to the expectations set up by the likes

of MacDonald, Eddison, and Howard, Tormance is no self-indulgent dreamland into which we are invited to escape the mundane but a nightmare world, the point of which is to get *out* of. MacDonald's ulterior world in *Lilith* is a goal that Mr. Vane will hope to attain again for the rest of his days after leaving it; Eddison's Mercury and Zimiamvia are unabashedly hyper-romantic; and Howard's Hyborian Age has a rough sort of grandeur that is still attractive in its impressive natural features and works of men. Lindsay's world is utterly unlike any of theirs. Tormance, whose very name rings of both "torment" and "romance," is far more inventive than any of these authors' fantasy worlds, all of which resemble an enhanced, idealized Earth. It is not to enchant us, however, that we are confronted with twin suns (one of them blue), new primary colors, and geography that defies physics. This truly unimaginable world, that even the most seasoned reader of adventure, fantasy, or science fiction would have a difficult time predicting, is a denunciation of the romantic landscape trope. It is entirely the work of Crystalman, and while the reader may not know it until they reach the very end, Tormance is not a Wonderland but a trap.

Crystalman is rather like one of Lindsay's first-order fantasy authors. Tormance is his world, and it is the world of the senses that Lindsay so distrusts and despises. As the creator god, Crystalman is neither Biblical nor pagan-classical in his characteristics. There are no tablets of law, no Ten Commandments, and no temples on Tormance. Crystalman's methods are closer to those of an artist, which makes him disturbingly human and relatable: he enjoys *making* things and seeing the effects of those things on others. Like a fantasy author himself, he delights in the believability of his invented world, having succeeded when the audience's disbelief is fully suspended.

Tormance must be experienced by the senses, and Crystalman's first trick is to bombard the newcomer with sensory data, making it seem that more senses means more truth. In

Lindsay's view, our sensory experience and our beliefs are codependent: what we experience physically influences our conscious experience and informs the patterns we come to accept as universal laws. Each region of Tormance and the characters inhabiting it express a certain philosophical outlook regarding the "truth" of the nature of the universe and human existence in it. The "extraterrestrials" are all basically human, with additional sensory organs, which Maskull acquires or sheds as he enters each new location. In Joiwind and Panawe's region, Maskull is equipped with the three organs he needs to see all life as lovingkindness and filial harmony. He, Joiwind, and Panawe all have a tentacle connected to their heart called a *magn,* bulbs on their neck called *poigns,* and a bump in the forehead called a *breve.* Through these organs, Maskull sees the world as an idyllic place; but it does not last even a day. The next several episodes, taken together, each read as a false start in which Lindsay challenges the reliability of the senses. While the augmented senses are inventive and suggestive of elevated sensitivity, the truths they purport to make clear instead obfuscate, ignore, contradict, and negate those of other regions and their associated organs.

After leaving Poolingdred and entering the Lusion Plain, Maskull meets Oceaxe, the woman of Ifdawn Marest. At her insistence that it would be "suicide" to enter Ifdawn with a *magn* and a *breve*, he cauterizes them with a hot magic stone. He awakes the following day with a third arm and a third eye called a *sorb*, by which "he [sees] nothing as self-existent—everything [appears] as an object of importance or non-importance to his own needs" (71-2). Since viewing Ifdawn from the heights of Poolingdred, Maskull has been feeling its pull, its "magical attraction for his will," making him restless to compete and assert his influence (68). His new organ completes the transformation, and he is able to experience—if not to accept entirely—the deadly, manipulative, self-serving society of Ifdawn Marest. In this region of

violence and competition, tomorrow is not guaranteed. People are driven by their basest motivator, a sort of corruption of Nietzsche's and Schopenhauer's will combined, which causes them to act impulsively and believe in their own supremacy over others. It is the complete opposite of Joiwind and Panawe's tranquil worldview, and Maskull learns through killing the cruel Crimtyphon that such tyranny, malevolence, and selfishness is brutish and empty. Where one tyrant falls, another may easily rise.

Maskull has by now learned two jarringly opposite systems of living in the world through a set of augmented organs that accord with each. In both Poolingdred and Ifdawn, Crystalman (or Shaping) is invoked by residents as the creator, and their systems of belief are attributed to him without question or explanation. The next set of organs, however, introduces him for the first time to a system that rejects Crystalman and so is closer to the hidden world of Muspel that is the true object of his quest. After leaving Ifdawn, Maskull meets Spadevil, on his way to bring the new gospel to his homeland of Sant, where the ascetics dwell. By Spadevil's insistence, Maskull's sensory organs once again are changed, this time two *probes* replace his *sorb* and he comes to see reality as defined by duty to others through servitude. The new doctrine is passed along from one person to another, through the *probes* that are like membranous eyelids on the forehead, "like a smooth-running stream of clean water which had hitherto been dammed by his obstructive will" (119-20). When Maskull meets him, Spadevil is on his way to revolutionize the ascetic way in Sant. In Sant, he says, there are men who have renounced pleasures as illusory and misleading creations of Shaping (Crystalman) and chosen to brood upon pain as a means to keep those deceptions at bay; only in their fervor they have deceived themselves directly back into Crystalman's hands: "they hate pleasure, and this hatred is the greatest pleasure to them" (122). Spadevil preaches renunciation of worldly pleasures, and specifically suggests that such pleasure

should simply be ignored. The key to achieving this is "iron obedience to duty" (125). But when he confronts Catice, an influential person in Sant and adherent to the old ways, a battle of two laws commences. The ability to see one "truth" over the other comes down to the number of *probes* one has. Spadevil suggests that Catice can simply allow him to add a second one to him, which will then cause him to see things *his* way. But instead Catice suggests they destroy one of Maskull's *probes* and allow him to decide which will be the new law in Sant (130). In doing so, Maskull comes to view Spadevil's duty as "a cloak under which we share the pleasure of others" (132). He renounces the teaching of Spadevil's secular law, and Catice swoops in to influence him with his religious one.

In this episode, Maskull's new inhuman organs, like all the rest, do something to shape and filter the phenomenal world and the interactions he has therein, causing them to appear unshakably *logical*. It is in Sant, however, that he comes to realize the illusory nature of this kind of truth and gets his first inkling of the nature of the struggle between Crystalman and Muspel, wherein Crystalman is the manipulator. While not all of the organs Maskull acquires in these first episodes are eyes, they all function in a manner that allows Maskull and the characters he meets to *see* certain modes of living that are always ostensibly foolproof in their logic until a new set of organs comes along. That all it takes is one or two *probes*—one or two of the same specific organs mediating their material and social experiences—to settle their beliefs in stone and pit them against each other is a telling revelation. Lindsay uses the affordances of the fantasy genre to create a "reality" that is in fact a condemnation of the kind of reality a fantasy author would create: one of sensory delights designed for their own and others' pleasure. For Lindsay, this is all only so much emptiness and not far removed from the literal world we already inhabit,

with our senses and our neighbors deceiving us and multiple "truths" existing side by side, contradicting and canceling one another whenever they meet.

Tormance is not Lindsay's artistic playground but Crystalman's, where he paints the mundane in "new and striking lights." Signs of him are everywhere, and the farther Maskull ranges the more Crystalman's style becomes apparent. The crystal is the obvious motif. Tormance is like a jewel as Lindsay would have it: colorful, bright, and attractive, but ultimately the inert object of meaningless desire, devoid of real value. Lindsay took from Schopenhauer the distinction between life that follows a blind motivating force—or will—and life that guides and molds this force with its own intentions—called idea or representation. Crystals, like plants, grow to a point of completion based on a preset pattern defined by nature, and they do so without fail in every iteration. Neither plants nor crystals can make any conscious effort to guide their own development, and crystals are actually lesser than plants because they do not do anything in the way of regeneration after they mature. This is damning for Crystalman, who is obviously a conscious entity with creative intentions. The implication is that his creative manipulation of the proto-stuff of the Sublime world of Muspel is simply not good enough, and his intentions in doing so at all are base. As Maskull will discover in Matterplay, Crystalman's creativity is self-indulgent and aimless.

Matterplay is a place where Muspel-stuff is made into all kinds of whimsical forms. This region is very much a foreshadowing of the final vision of revelation at the end of the book, in which we learn that Crystalman is basically parasitizing Muspel. On the surface, Matterplay looks like a garden paradise, a riot of color and spontaneous life-generation resulting in a sort of "eye chaos" (174). Maskull intuits that this is an expression of Crystalman's creative process: "He has intelligence, for all his shapes are different, and he has character, for all belong to the

same general type" (180). That is to say, Crystalman knows what he is doing, and he has a recognizable style. But it is still all wrong: Matterplay is one-hundred percent fertile. There is so much life, and it pops into being so fast, that the next round of living things simply chokes out the old one; it is directionless chaos, and so Maskull concludes, "How this sordid struggle for an hour or two of physical existence could ever be regarded as a deeply-earnest and important business, was beyond his comprehension" (177). Crystalman's implementation of his creative powers and of the precious raw Muspel-energy is flippant, and while Lindsay considered action and change to be the hallmark of the Sublime (qtd. in Pick "A Sketch" 21), Matterplay characterizes Crystalman's work as careless and valuing quantity over quality. Fittingly, many of the creatures he sees here are part animal and part plant, implying that the plant-nature is dominant and designating them automatons of a sort.

Crystalman is an artist, and in Lindsay's terms that is no better than any other dissembler. He is vain and finds satisfaction in the success of his deceptions, as evidenced by the fact that, each time one of his "children" dies, their faces are twisted into the horrible Crystalman Grin: an expression somewhere between horror and malevolent glee that gives the lie to every conviction by which they live and shows Crystalman to be a sadist who finds it all very funny. Near the end of the quest, Surtur and Crystalman accompany Maskull in their forms of Krag and Gangnet. Krag calls Crystalman "the king of poets" and "a common thief" (254), pointing to the connection between his acts of creativity and his practice of obscuring and taking credit for the Sublime world he uses as his medium. Tormance is, after all, Crystalman's "distorted copy" of Muspel, a far more potent reality where the concerns of the phenomenal world are nonexistent (205). Taken in this light, the sympathetic characters in the works of authors like Eddison and Howard begin to appear as deluded, their creators monsters rather than benevolent "gods." Often,

a fantasy world is invented as an alternative to the mundane and its miseries and to function as a glimpse of what is true and worthy of praise and protection. Lindsay, however, inverts this escapist tendency and makes his fantasy world an extension and magnification of the mundane world. By challenging the credibility of the senses to perceive objective truth, he establishes the expectation of something else, which lies behind it, something that must be experienced indirectly and perhaps not by the body at all.

Not Nothing, but Something

Tormance appears sublime: it is imposing, hyperbolic, and operates on its own physical laws, but Lindsay created it to show that, no matter how awe-inspiring or whimsical the phenomenal world—*any* world in the universe of our sensual existence—it is always only "a shadow on the face of Muspel" (267). But what exactly is Muspel? Catice tells Maskull that it is our true "home" to which we are trying to return through the deceptions of the phenomenal world (134). Lindsay was never quite clear in his descriptions as to what Muspel is, and that is a key point: it is "an inconceivable world," so different from ours that the laws that govern it are beyond our ken, where there is "neither will, nor Unity, nor Individuals" (qtd. in Wilson 10). The presence of this world or force struggles to be noticed through the layers of deception thrown up around it, which try to replace or divert our attention from it. And it does so primarily through the one sense that can pierce the veil: the aural. Sellin names the eye "the organ of illusion" and the ear as Lindsay's "narrow door leading to ultimate reality" (204). Muspel manifests in several ways throughout the book, but it is always sound that brings Maskull closest to the truth. Although it is commonly encountered by Maskull as a singular, blinding, colorless light, only music, which Lindsay called "the experience of a supernatural world" (qtd. in Sellin 204), is really capable of describing Muspel.

The existence and importance of Muspel does not remain a secret for long, and Crystalman does not shy away from including facsimiles of it in his bag of tricks. It is strange and otherworldly, and it calls to the seeker in ways that seem at once both familiar and alien. As a kind of uncorrupted Platonic original (as the name Muspel should indicate, being the originating realm of primal fire in Norse mythology), Muspel is Lindsay's Sublime realm or entity, representing "not beauty but something else, which is related to beauty, yet transcends it" (qtd. in Sellin 176); Muspel is also the one and only thing that cannot be reduced to constituent parts, and so the emotion associated with it is one in which such opposites as pain and pleasure are melded into a former, purer state (Sellin 187). But Muspel is only one strange thing in a world of many layers of novel and strange things. Crystalman is able to play on Maskull's weakness, which is that he is always trying to *see* the truth, even after he learns there is a difference between Muspel and Crystalman. This is why Alppain is Crystalman's "trump-card" (251). It is a false Muspel that causes Maskull's emotions to grow "restless and noble" and to inspire a sense of pain and longing (55-6). It pulls him northward from the very beginning of his journey on Tormance, and he wonders at one point whether he will be able to bear anything more than its afterglow, as even that causes "a feeling of disintegration—just as if two chemically-distinct forces were simultaneously acting on the cells of his body" (144). This is a similar feeling that Muspel inspires in him when he has his first real encounter with it in the Wombflash Forest, though the presence of music there represents an important distinction between the two events.

Because, as Bloom tells us, the Sublime fire of Muspel comes primarily from within, Maskull's outward seeking keeps him rooted in his bodily limitations. He tries always to *see* Muspel and its emissary, Surtur, with his eyes and to retain his identity while he does so, setting

himself in opposition to it as an external observer. Yet in his first experience with Muspel in the Wombflash forest, he feels as if his soul is leaving his body, and he passes out in a deathlike faint (140). Prior to coming to Tormance, Nightspore tells Maskull always to listen closely for Surtur's drum, the steady pulse in four-time that acts as an "undertone of reality" (55). Usually obscured and only playing on the edges of his perception, Surtur's drum becomes clear and part of a complete piece of supernatural music during his vision in the forest. This music, characterized by "awful harmonies…[following] hard one upon another, like the waves of a wild, magic ocean," is accompanied by a foreshadowing symbolic vision in which Maskull is killed by Krag, and Nightspore continues on toward Muspel. In this episode, Maskull has opened himself to his "home" and the rejoining of the two entities into one indivisible one very nearly takes place. Presumably, Maskull faints because he is not yet ready to give up his sense of individual self, which is a requirement for experiencing the Sublime. Maskull maintains his reliance on his visual faculties and his role as observer. Even though the music is the most important manifestation of Muspel in this episode, as the name of the location suggests, the light—the *flash*—of Muspel-light is what Maskull focuses his attention on. The mostly true vision of the three apparitions remains double-edged. While it is true that Maskull will die and Nightspore will continue to the final stage of the quest, it is not really Krag who kills him. The visual symbolism, that painful sacrifice is necessary for transcendence, can be interpreted here as a possible attempt at deception. The lesson that Muspel must be experienced by other means is equally hard-won, as the next experience with it will show.

On Swaylone's Island, Maskull comes closer to understanding the internal nature of the Sublime and the fact that the human body can only experience it properly via auditory means, but he still bungles the attempt by using music to conjure a vision of Surtur. It was Lindsay's

belief that a true experience of the Sublime could only come about in solitude, wherein the inner fire can rejoin its “home.” Society and interaction with other people establish our sense of individual self; who we are is as much defined by our limited faculties as by our interactions with other human beings: “The beautiful may be enjoyed in society, but the sublime demands solitude,” for it is “an emancipation from individuality” (qtd. in Sellin 245, n11). Because Krag/Surtur directly influences the music made on Swaylone’s Island, it is the nearest thing to its Platonic original. As it is as unfiltered as it can possibly be in the experience of the imperfect human body, it is as close as it can be to a direct communion between the individual and Muspel, and so it is unendurable by anyone but the solitary soul producing it. This Muspel-music is not founded on the principles of the pleasure that consonance provides, but “on painful tones; and thus its symmetry is wild, and difficult to discover; its emotion is bitter and terrible” (166). Naturally, Maskull is the only one left alive on the island after his performance, but he is still unsatisfied in his quest, because he has still not given himself up. He tries to use the surreal music, which produces “shapes” rather than themes (169), to see Surtur, either to learn what he looks like or to ask him directly what this whole nightmare journey is about, and again sets himself up as an individual defined by and contrasted with another. Maskull once again resorts to the eye, and looks to Muspel-light, "vivid, peculiar, and awful” and “of no colour, and resembling nothing” (240), for an answer. He strives to see the entity he has never seen, and it appears as if it is working: one section of the light appears to coalesce into an even brighter spot, almost as if it is taking a shape, but then the spell breaks and Maskull is left with nothing but a barren wasteland and a ruined instrument (170). Maskull has come close in this episode, but he has still not learned that the key is to give up his sense of self entirely—to stop trying to be the observer of an object and to become the object itself. It is not clear yet, either to him or to the

reader, whether Muspel-light is actually anything real. In a world defined by stunning visuals, can Maskull trust even the apparent visual manifestation of the Sublime? The end of the quest suggests not.

E. H. Visiak recalls a conversation with Lindsay in which his beliefs as he described them represent an "unimaginable contrast to normal experience, sense, sensation; the absolute negation of mundane conditions." To Visiak, Lindsay's whole outlook could be characterized by the word "*dark*" ("Lindsay as I knew Him" 101, 100). Considering this in a quasi-literal or symbolic sense in a reading of *Arcturus* is not difficult. Maskull is taken in by light, both in his experiences of Muspel and Crystalman's Alppain, which offers him an experience designed to mimic that of Muspel, from which he escapes only by dying and becoming Nightspore. In the blue glow of Alppain, Maskull feels a sense of "intensest joy" as he realizes he is "nothing" (256). As Crystalman's creature, he is to die here, bathed in holy light, feeling that he is nothing and Crystalman is everything and overwhelmed with the glorious feelings inspired by Crystalman's beautiful Creation. That is, until Muspel-light appears, along with its drums, and devours the beatific vision entirely, exposing Crystalman as the slavering self-serving god he is (257). Maskull recalls Muspel in the nick of time, and when he dies, Nightspore is there to carry on the quest to its true ending. Nightspore's portion of the journey sees him rise up and out of a symbolic body, the tower, where he first "sees" Muspel-light for what it really is, "not light, but passion" through the tower's windows (264). Once he attains the top of the tower and exits onto the roof, he finds that the windows functioned as eyes, mediating his experiences, albeit in a manner that showed him the truest visual representation of the relationship between Crystalman, Muspel, and the phenomenal world. For at the top, expecting to finally encounter Muspel in all its glory, he instead finds "*[t]here was nothing*" (266). He is surrounded by darkness, with no

light at all, because Muspel-light never *was* light; it is the dark nothing-that-is-something, emanating all the time from the tower—from himself. Muspel-light, as it came to Maskull always had the qualities of darkness, obscuring rather than illuminating. In keeping with Muspel's alterity, light and dark are inverted in Lindsay's philosophy. Crystalman is a "bright shadow," consuming and refracting Muspel-energy (265), while Muspel is nothing detectable by any faculty other than the soul and its direct conduit, the ear; and it has the capability to erase phenomena given shape and definition by light.

As Maskull is fond of repeating in so many words, what the seeker often sees is something that only has the appearance of the truth, based on the expectations established by a myriad of confusing external influences and preconceptions. The real truth is behind and beyond, defined by laws and phenomena of an entirely different nature and free of those elements of influence. Thus, in the above example, Crystalman's version of nothing is a belittling one whereas Muspel's is empowering. This is a direct result of the presence or absence of an interactive relationship between two entities. Throughout the journey toward Muspel, there is a constant tension between Maskull's desire to retain his identity while possessing Muspel and the growing conviction that this retention is impossible if Muspel is to be attained. Maskull/Nightspore is, as I have claimed, a negated hero. How Lindsay accomplishes this characterization will be further examined in the next section. We will find further examples of Lindsay's contradictory logic but also explore the interactions between Lindsay's small but important cast of main characters, including the role of Krag/Surtur.

To Steal Muspel-Fire

We have now seen how Lindsay inverts two tropes common to fantasy fiction: the imaginary world itself is a hell rather than a heaven, with damning connotations for the real

world against which it is offered as a better alternative; and the quest-object or boon is revealed to be absolute negation and renunciation of everything right down to the hero's ego. Now the role and fate of that hero becomes unclear. A typical fantasy, if the boon is not to be the expected one, will provide something *better* that further validates the hero, keeping them aligned with societal values: Jason gets the Golden Fleece, but Gilgamesh learns humility and that even kings are mortal. Maskull, however, dies and becomes Nightspore in a rebirth that is as grim as it is elucidating. Just as Bloom suggests, the fire of ultimate truth comes from within the quester; but if that quest-object, Muspel, is synonymous with the soul, and Muspel is ultimately nothing, then the soul—the quester—is also nothing. Resignation of the ego as the proper way to respond to an existence made entirely of illusions and deceptions is what led Colin Wilson to suggest that the "basic thesis" of *Arcturus* is "Buddhistic world-rejection" (10); and the Buddhist connection has remained popular ever since. Two commonplace assumptions about Buddhism overlay neatly onto the novel: Enlightenment, or Nirvana, fits over Muspel; and renunciation of ego offers a blanket interpretation of what Maskull is doing and why he becomes Nightspore. But these are unsatisfactory conclusions when examined more closely. The qualities of Lindsay's protagonist and his relationship to Muspel further set *Arcturus* apart from the fantasy of his contemporaries while also illuminating those aspects of Lindsay's philosophy that explain the nature and purpose of personal identity.

We have noted in some detail already that Maskull is the opposite of the kind of hero a fantasy author of Lindsay's milieu would likely create. A kind of critical comment on brawny, resourceful heroes who are always right, he begins his quest as a beefy giant; but by the end, instead of being validated by his experiences, he is destroyed by them. Adelheid Kegler explains why this makes Lindsay's Muspel incompatible with the Buddhistic Nirvana: if you reject the

world entirely, as Buddhists do, you "kill all the disease, [and] kill the patient" too (30). But the patient cannot be killed if Lindsay is to make his final point. If Maskull's experience were to align with commonplaces about Buddhistic enlightenment, he would shed his cares and go happily into the Everflow, and there would be no need for Nightspore at all. This in itself would be contrary to convention, but Nightspore's arrival is a pull back in the direction of a typical hero trope. He is the elephant in the room, and he aligns with Bloom's observation that attainment of the Sublime, which is found within the seeker, is synonymous with "narcissistic freedom" (206). The opposite of evolution in Matterplay, where all is aimless chaos, Nightspore is the *correct*, quasi-Nietzschean super-form to which an individual must aspire. It is out of him that Muspel comes, making him the center of the universe. His existence makes the ending an unhappy one because of the persistence of agency and the resulting conflict that would otherwise be escaped by a Buddhistic perspective.

It is strange that Maskull and Nightspore spend the first several chapters of the novel existing side-by-side as separate entities. The answer to this puzzle is mainly symbolic: They represent the same person at different stages of the quest. Maskull is fresh, unlearned, and wide-eyed; Nightspore is disturbed, preoccupied, even jaded with knowledge. The more pressing question is not so much one of how Maskull/Nightspore can exist alongside and interact with one another but of how Nightspore represents anything anti-egotistical, as he must have already experienced the events of the final pages of the novel in order to exist at all, and he is very clearly an individual himself. To suggest that the final revelation of Muspel is Buddhistic is to ignore the almost Lovecraftian assault of destabilizing horror it is meant to convey. Maskull's death does not lead to a peaceful dissolution into the Infinite All. His experience with the false Muspel, Alppain, just before his death is one in which he becomes what he once denounced

Spadevil for: one who shares in the pleasure of another, namely Crystalman's. There is a criticism of both Christian and Buddhistic beliefs in Maskull's death, in that Crystalman is feeding off of Maskull's relinquishment of his own hard-won achievements, taking the glory for himself and leaving Maskull a husk who bathes in his God's beatific splendor as if it were the very essence of the universe. As Nightspore will find, Muspel is "no all-powerful Universe, tolerating from pure indifference the existence side by side with it of another false world" but a beleaguered ideal synonymous with the lone spirit of the hero, "fighting for its life" against crushing odds (267). When Maskull gives up his life to the Everflow, Crystalman remains, reigning over all, the sole beneficiary of all the work and sacrifice. Nightspore sees that such a dissolution achieves no harmonious balance and no destruction of the universal hierarchy in which Crystalman is a malevolent parasite and which is itself a sham. Yet his realization of his own importance does nothing to stop Crystalman from carrying on as he has been. The proper experience of the Sublime Muspel, then, as opposed to the false one offered by Alppain, is one of horror from which the freed spirit can never look away ever again.

By now, it should be apparent that Lindsay's understanding of the obliteration of the Self is not total, otherwise, the untold post-Tormantic journey the final pages of the novel indicate would lack its agent, Nightspore. Relationships with other phenomena, especially other people, are what define an individual in Lindsay's belief system. Ego might be an imposition of such relation between a person and other influences, but Lindsay's concept of Self, as it is cleansed from Nightspore by Muspel-fire, is not the same thing as *self-awareness*. He remains steadfastly Western in orientation in that he takes for granted a kernel of ever-present personal identity that can never be expunged. For Lindsay, there is no question that there is such an inner awareness; the possibility that even consciousness might be an illusion does not seem to have occurred to

him. This is why he believes that the Sublime is only to be experienced in solitude. All other influences, being false, are capable of corrupting the inner kernel of identity that is buried but always there. Therefore, Lindsay's concept of Self is nearest to a kind of Leibnizian monadism, perhaps never fully expanded upon in *Arcturus*, but present all the same. The struggle of the individual against the world and its influence is not uncommon to the fantasy of his contemporaries, but Lindsay's is different in its admission that the truth may destroy the hero's assumptions of what is good or what is right, rather than affirm them. If anything can be said to be Buddhist about *Arcturus* it is that central tenet that says *let go*: let go of preconceptions and those beliefs that make us comfortable and complacent. Only, in a very non-Buddhist turn, the quest-boon is a hard-won opportunity to return—*as the same but altered entity*—to achieve our fullest potential, whatever that may be.

Although undefined, this potential is in direct conflict with all of Crystalman's work—the final stage of relation between two active agents. Muspel is not to be held aloof and admired; it is to be used in action to express the inexpressible—the "passion" that Nightspore experiences through the eyes of the tower (264). Lindsay, like Eddison, valued action as the hallmark of the Absolute: "The true Sublime exists only in energy and activity. Therefore, the sea and music are Sublime, but mountains and architecture are pseudo-Sublime" (qtd. in Sellin 176-77). Again, this damns Crystalman considerably, as he cannot be said to be idle or to lack a creative impulse; he is in fact a busy body, and the phenomenal universe is his work. It is just that he is exemplary of doing it *wrong*. Nightspore, as Dreamsinter says, "came to steal Muspel-fire, to bring a deeper life to men—never doubting if [his] soul could endure that burning" (139). This is metaphorical to a degree: the "burning" is the belief-shattering knowledge Nightspore gains; the theft is the ability to tap into, direct, and focus the Muspel-energy that was already there in him to the best

possible ends (a theft because it is done so despite Crystalman, who takes credit for and claims as his own all Muspel-energy). According to the Dreamsinter encounter in the Wombflash Forest, those ends are possibly messianic. It is worth mentioning that, compared to Eddison, for whom competition and conflict represented a natural, desirable push and pull between yin and yang, in Lindsay "the struggle is hopeless," defined by the ascendancy of Pain incarnate (Krag/Surtur), by whose admission "nothing will be done without the bloodiest blows" (267). After a nightmare journey through an alien world, after his own death and rebirth, Nightspore, as emissary of the Sublime, must *make* works potent enough to break Crystalman's spell of delusion, possibly for all the inhabitants of the phenomenal world.

The comfortable kind of hero found in Eddison and Howard and a multitude of other fantasy authors is one who represents a sort of grounding or focal point in the moral and ethical structure of the universe. Their outlook is rhetorically elevated, and the reader can expect to sympathize to some degree. Lindsay's hero, however, goes through stages of extraction from these sorts of expectations on his way to shedding ego and becoming an example not of confidence rewarded but of sacrifice endured. When he first arrives on Tormance, he tries to be a traditional sort of protagonist. Joiwind represents an ideal, a goodness that it seems Maskull wants to champion. But as we have noted, his chivalry barely begins to blossom before he is beset by the pull of Alppain as well as his own inner Muspel-flame, calling him home. As Maskull progresses, he gradually begins to push people away from him. Gleameil, the "grand-souled girl" Maskull reveres for listening to "her inner voice, and to nothing else besides" (233), shows that he cannot even travel with a likeminded companion, because their solitary experiences of Muspel will be incompatible (and deadly for Gleameil). By the time Corpang attaches himself to him, after an experience of Muspel's light and Surtur's drums, Maskull is

quick to tell him, “I make no promises. I don’t ask you to come with me […] if you have any doubts about it, you had better not come” (205). Maskull is aware now, through his experiences, that whatever it is, the Muspel-quest cannot be shared by others, and he cannot be expected to guide anyone when he does not even know everything about what he is seeking.

Involving others in the solitary Muspel-quest is an invitation for stifling complications, such as conflict and loyalty. As they near the epiphanies of Swaylone’s Island, Maskull and Gleameil discuss the problem of causing harm to others in the pursuit of one’s own fulfillment. Gleameil is disturbed by her compulsion to leave her family behind to seek Muspel; Maskull agrees that running away from those responsibilities is “wrong and base” but repeats the conviction that such notions of interpersonal relation are meaningless in the context of the Sublime experience (161). Similarly, while Lindsay may value the strongmen of his favorite Norse myths, as the Eddisons and Howards of his time did, physical violence against others in such a personal quest is undesirable. Fighting prowess is a source of shame and tragedy for Maskull, even as such conflict is revealed to be a terrible and unavoidable fact of life between individuals. Each “victory” through bloodshed is depicted as a murder rather than a triumph, tainting Maskull and complicating his dealings with others, including the emotional harm the knowledge of his fall would cause Joiwind, whom he respects a great deal. Those characters he meets whose ideals are as lofty as his own suffer an even more terrible fate when they are *sorbed*, perhaps because their thoughts and ideas are too affective to be forgotten. Their influence is undesirable in itself, but to kill and absorb them not only harms them, but mingles their experience with that of the quester’s, polluting it. Finally, Sullenbode is a tragic reminder that, while it may be “wrong and base” to harm others in pursuit of Muspel, it may be

unavoidable, even in the most cherished of relationships. Her death comes because of her absolute devotion to Maskull and his lack of adequate reciprocity in favor of his quest.

Crystalman's origins are uncertain, but it is suggested that he might be what vanity does to potential in the enigmatic moment when Panawe produces the green jewel (crystalized Muspel-light?) from his mouth and casts it aside (53). Thus, he is a cautionary tale of sorts. His entire world is dependent on the adoption of his creations by his subjects, who then clash with one another in their attempts to validate this or that mode of living or interpretation of the Absolute. The resultant suffering and confusion are a joy to Crystalman, which is why each person who dies for one of his illusory "truths" bears his mocking grin after the spirit has fled. Not only is it folly to buy into his deceptions, and therefore to fall victim to conflict, loyalty, love, and all the other human entanglements, it is folly to be like Crystalman, because the need for validation warps what he makes of Muspel.

In a by-the-numbers hero story, we might expect some validation for the protagonist from some quarter. But as we have seen, each character that Lindsay introduces us to is just a bit off center, from the negated chivalric muse (Joiwind) to the negated rescued damsel (Sullenbode) and everyone in-between. We find out that the only person who truly knows what is best for Maskull is, surprisingly, crusty no-filter Krag. There are holy hermits all over Arthurian legend who have provided the archetype for the "magic guide" character in modern fantasy. They are isolated, eccentric, but ultimately wiser to the ways and needs of humankind than is humankind itself. They see something in the protagonist that others do not but that those others may ultimately benefit from, and the protagonist becomes a bridge between his own and the magic guide's reality. At the start of the novel, Krag, who we later learn *is* the enigmatic Surtur, seems to be little more than an initiatory magic guide. It is also unclear what his motivations are, and he

seems like he might just be a Trickster figure, occupying a gray area in which he might help or hinder Maskull at various times. But, while he *is* the magic guide, he must be a negated one, in keeping with Lindsay's treatment of fantasy tropes.

Krag has a clear origin. We are told by Gleameil that he was born simultaneously with Crystalman's creation of the phenomenal world, out of the elements of Muspel that Crystalman could not find a use for (that is, the dark, disturbing parts of the Sublime experience he was not sophisticated enough to value). His purpose since then has been to keep step with Crystalman, everywhere exposing or attaching something unpleasant in connection with the usurper's pleasurable creations: "to intellect, madness; to virtue, cruelty; and to fair exteriors, bloody entrails." Krag's presence in the universe, according to Gleameil, is necessary for true beauty to exist "in its terrible purity" (162). He is the kind of guide one would shy away from because what he teaches is neither affirming nor comforting. While MacDonald's Mr. Raven (actually the biblical Adam) is generally welcoming, one part mischievous, one part wise and fatherly, Krag is always somewhat repellent. Adam's power to protect Mr. Vane is unquestionable; it is always Vane's refusal of Adam's advice that gets him in trouble. Krag, by comparison, is of little direct help to Maskull. As Surtur, he is the embodiment of enlightenment through pain. He is a kind of spontaneous manifestation of Muspel, but at his first appearance he is just a rough-edged, ugly creature, akin to one of Machen's spirits of the pagan past. Dark, unnerving, and unsettling, he is indeed similar to a character Machen would have written, being a primal, uncivilized element, but one whose purpose is ultimately liberating instead of threatening. In keeping with the solitary nature of the Muspel-quest, however, Krag is necessarily absent for most of Maskull's experience on Tormance. Instead, Maskull searches for *him*, in his true form of Surtur, all the way to the end and never learns the truth (until he transitions to Nightspore). Because of this,

Krag's purpose is craftily hidden, and we the reader wonder, much as Maskull does when he turns up again in Barey, why we have to put up with him at all.

Krag/Surtur seems like a troublemaker at first, but his pessimistic, pain-centric outlook is actually the model the protagonists are supposed to learn to emulate. Krag never gives anything, he only leads Maskull and Nightspore to critical decisions and leaves it to them to choose what they will do next (the reader will notice that Krag can only point to the door in the tower and direct Nightspore to enter it). Because it is necessary to leave Maskull to his own devices, Krag is only direct in the beginning and in the end of the novel, and though he may appear to be a verbally abusive bully at times, he never forces anyone to do anything. Maskull is given an opportunity, and Krag simply chauffeurs him off-world, only to disappear immediately and take his time returning. Coercion is the tactic of Crystalman, and the mystery of Surtur will prove to be more alluring to the sensitive spirit than any bauble made by the usurper god. Krag's final redeeming trait, unknowable to a first-time reader but obvious to those who cycle back around for a second or third read, is revealed in the early pages of the novel by Nightspore who before leaving Earth tells Maskull: "I have never known [Krag] to lie" (17). Though he is reviled as a devil by those who know of him on Tormance, the great irony is that he is the only honest person in the universe. Crystalman's best defense against Krag's campaign to unravel his illusions is to pretend to *be* Surtur, himself—another of his obfuscating lies, which Catice calls his "masterpiece" (132). Krag is not necessarily an unborn Surtur in the way that Nightspore is waiting to be born out of Maskull; he does not reveal himself early on because Maskull would not know him until he had sought him in the proper way, shedding himself through trial and travail until he became Nightspore and experienced the revelations of Muspel described above. Crystalman has done enough so that Krag appears every bit the evil disrupter he is purported to

be, until the protagonist learns that real knowledge—absolute truth—is ultimately painful rather than pleasurable.

As Nightspore's ominous prediction—that Maskull will "meet death" (29)—proves true in the end, we see with finality that Lindsay's hero is a negated one. I have said that the quest-boon is "nothing" and a "grinding down" of sorts because what it represents is a two-fold resignation: the hero gives up his expectations about both the universe and himself in exchange for unsettling but unobstructed knowledge of *the* universal truth. His expectations, as well as ours, are overturned. What is more, there is no righting of the balance achieved by the struggle, no golden age initiated or returned to; there is only the bleak unending conflict to be repeated and endured by each lone soul. If not that, then there is the fate of living forever in Crystalman's illusions believing that one has found the Absolute and realizing, perhaps, the terrible truth upon our deaths and exiting life with Crystalman's grin on our faces (a feature which seems to suggest both the usurper god's malevolent glee in succeeding and the victim's awful realization of their own deception when it is too late). Again, to call this a Buddhistic rejection of the material world ignores the emphasis on individualism that the Muspel-quest maintains as its core. It is as if Lindsay stops just shy of the notion of letting go of ego and desire entirely, returning instead to anger and resilience to justify the eternal cosmic battle and humanity's place in it.

The End of Night

It is unclear what is at stake for those who do not reach a union with Muspel. Krag speaks of "the risk of total death" that the revelation of Muspel can cause (260), but as an alternative to a life of delusion, annihilation is no more acceptable a fate, in Lindsay's view. Yet Krag, by nature, cannot help what happens to those who make it to the final stage any more than he can help them at any other point of the journey. Because Nightspore is so much like Krag in his

jadedness when we first encounter him in the opening chapter, we can only conclude that the ending is an unhappy—though necessary—one for the lone soul who takes on the spiteful universe. Lindsay did not seem to know where to take his story after Nightspore and Krag head off back across Surtur's Ocean. The end of the novel is powerful in its obscurity, and all of the above explaining of what Lindsay might have meant by any of it does not leave a pleasant aftertaste. Krag asks Nightspore, "What do you mean to do?" but Nightspore responds with a question of his own (267-68). Nightspore is shaken rather than empowered, and we understand better why he is feeble and distracted when we first meet him at the séance as well as why he cannot explain anything to Maskull and why he does not argue with Krag. We do not know what Nightspore will do, which leaves us wondering if it will not all start again, in cyclical fashion, with another séance, another apparition, another abrupt entrance by Krag, and another trek north across Tormance. At Starkness, Maskull sees three beds, with "ancient impressions" of sleeping travelers from long ago (20). Are these Maskull, Nightspore, and Krag from a different time? Could Lindsay have envisioned some kind of cyclical aspect to the quest involving time travel? There are only suggestions provided by the text that hint at what Lindsay might have intended. At the end, Nightspore expresses fear of his impending "rebirth" as a fate worse than death (260), and he and Maskull exist side by side on Earth before the journey; but there is nothing in the intervening chapters to suggest that the entity that they both comprise is making one of several journeys, each one a greater cleansing than the last (a tempting interpretation). Nowhere during the revelation of Muspel does Lindsay explicitly suggest that the experience is familiar. In fact, it is, I feel, intended to be the most altering and unique experience a person can have. It is an illumination, the dawn of a new day after a lifetime spent in the dark of delusion and

ignorance, as Krag says (258). There can be no returning to life as it was after reaching the top of the tower at the edge of the universe.

For all its gravity, Lindsay's philosophy has its critics. Wilson, who it might be said inaugurated Lindsay studies and was his first modern champion, was as frustrated as he was inspired by him. His early studies are responsible for advancing the popular assumptions that Lindsay was both a "mystic" and a bad writer. We can easily call out *Arcturus* as a melodramatic story by which Lindsay meant to say, "everything would be better if everyone saw things the way I do." Part of what makes *Arcturus* successful is that, even as a call to action, it only hints at the depths of its author's convictions, which are fleshed out in his *Sketch Notes* and have therefore always been out of reach for most readers. To say nothing of the skill with which he handles the internal contradictions between characters, which cause first-time readers to keep pace with Maskull as he encounters, adopts, and rejects each new belief system, the conflicts in Lindsay's mind about his own beliefs are ever-present, like the "one long discomfort" he inflicts on Maskull at the start (30). Lindsay was hyper-focused, isolated, and troubled in his philosophy even as he was adamant about its validity. Wilson cites "intransigeance" in the face of other points of view as one of Lindsay's weaknesses (38), and this certainly answers for some of the contradictions and paradoxes in *Arcturus* while having the welcome effect of strengthening the aura of alienness surrounding Muspel and its qualities.

In the end, *Arcturus* does not succeed as an enduring work because its author provides us with a cut-and-dried explanation of its mysteries, but because it defeats its author's blatant attempts to do so. For all that Lindsay sought to demystify the human experience as defined by the limitations of the human being, he succeeds, rather, in highlighting the difficulty of untangling and isolating the human being from the universe of its experience. It might have been

Lindsay's intention to empower the reader in a way that aligned with the monomythic hero trope later popularized by Joseph Campbell and his influence on popular fantasy, but the lack of reconciliation and the absence of euphoria at the end of the quest cancel that effect. All of this is to say that the best reading of *Arcturus* is had by *not* taking Lindsay's philosophy at face value. The sensitive reader comes away from the book with more questions than answers. What makes a "good" life by Lindsay's standards? How much of Lindsay's pessimism is warranted, and how useful are his conclusions to us? Though Lindsay strives for a concrete answer, he does not find it, and *Arcturus* remains open to the interpretive experience of the individual reader.

This study has been necessarily broad. Just understanding *Arcturus* in a basic sense—what is happening and why—takes several reads and a good amount of extra-textual reading. My initial intention was to examine it as a nexus between the humanities and sciences. Lindsay's focus on the subjectivity of human experience, however, and his elevation of that subjectivity to cosmic truth, caused me to explore the novel as a fantasy rather than a work of science fiction. Recasting *Arcturus* as a science fiction can, however, provide interesting insights into many of the novel's most memorable creative elements: the role of color as one of the primary deceptions, for instance, and Lindsay's expansion of the visible spectrum to include colors that can only be described by how they make characters feel. At first, I looked for connections between Lindsay's concept of Nothing and modern philosophy on that subject, but again found Lindsay's treatment of it to be much too personal to compare. Still, given Lindsay's main preoccupation with the nature of reality, there are questions to ask that run parallel to modern metaphysics. For instance, does Tormance qualify as a simulation? It may be that, with today's scientific knowledge and understanding of human perception, we may be able to place Lindsay as a forerunner to modern schools of philosophy and cosmology. In redefining the novel

generically, we need not move so far from comparisons to other works of fiction. Many other fruitful comparisons could be made between *Arcturus* and other science fiction, fantasy, and so-called science-fantasy stories. Many later works by authors such as Michael Moorcock, Gene Wolfe, and Dan Simmons combine similar philosophical concerns as *Arcturus* with the broader acceptance of the material universe and its laws found in the hard science fiction that came after Lindsay. In my attempts to place Lindsay among his contemporaries, I have not compared him to these later authors in detail, but their work shows his influence and the importance of his contribution to the genre as it evolved.

Other than Robert H. Waugh's insightful articles on the role of music and color in *Arcturus* and early work on the novel's dream-symbolism by Kathryn Hume, there have not been many studies of the novel's internal poetics. Because he primarily referenced his own system of philosophy and his own syntheses of other thinkers' ideas, Lindsay's metaphors are worth further study on their own. The trend has been to market him as a "strange" outsider, which has not always helped his reputation or improved his accessibility. Authors like Lovecraft have benefitted from both hyperbolic marketing and decades of scholarship by dedicated readers, but Lindsay's aesthetics have been unfortunately miscast into a kind of NewAgeism because they neither fit those of his milieu nor those of the pulp authors, who are often bundled together as a school of their own. Explanatory material that focuses on the poetics of *Arcturus* may enrich the reading experience further by adding depth and complexity to what might otherwise come off as purely aesthetic.

Whether intentionally or not, Lindsay studies often imitate the abstruseness of Lindsay's fiction, analyzing it in terms more difficult than they need to be and further alienating readers from the author by implying a sense of exclusiveness regarding who can or cannot read or profit

by his work. Defining *Arcturus* as an anti-fantasy does justice to Lindsay and his intentions, but it also respects the book, as it stands by its own merits, as a novel. I have tried to draw Lindsay into a larger context and to reduce the emphasis on his isolation from other fantasy authors of his time, in the hopes of making his most iconic book more accessible to discerning readers. Lindsay is certainly different; but, like so many things on his Tormance, he fits into the larger picture when viewed from a particular angle. His choice of fantasy as a vehicle to convey his deepest convictions gave him complete freedom of expression; and we can see that, even if subconsciously, his negated versions of tropes such as heroes, quests, and imaginary lands resulted in a paradoxically outstanding work of imagination that ages well alongside those of his contemporaries. As we can see, *Arcturus* is not a light afternoon read; it requires effort to understand and understanding to enjoy; but enlightened enjoyment is often what makes a book memorable and inspires us to read it again and again. Over one-hundred years after its publication and subsequent commercial flop, *Arcturus* is more readily available than ever, in numerous physical and electronic editions and in translations as diverse as Russian and Japanese. With its centennial came a resurgence in scholarly attention, continuing the work of helping readers understand the novel's puzzles. And with a world full of eager and intelligent readers of imaginative fiction, now may very well be the dawning of *Arcturus*'s day.

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