

# DRAGONISH THOUGHTS IN OUR HEARTS: DRAGONS AS MIRRORS OF THE HUMAN

Junius Johnson on Our Internal Tension

“Here be dragons to be slain, here be rich rewards to gain; / If we perish in the seeking, why, how small a thing is death!”<sup>1</sup> There is something stirring in these lines, and they underscore what every writer of fantastic literature has always known: that dragons are the ultimate foe. From the book of Revelation to the Wingfeather Saga, the path to a happy ending lies through confrontation with the dragon.<sup>2</sup> They are the most fearsome foe, and also the most desirable: indeed, most desirable because most fearsome.

In “A Final Knight to Her Love and Foe,” Amal El-Mohtar considers the contradiction of our love for dragons: do we love them for what they represent (glory, wisdom, power, wonder) or for what they can

---

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, “Desdichado,” in *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2008), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Peterson, *The Wingfeather Saga* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2020); Revelation 12-20.

bring us (fame and great renown)?<sup>3</sup> “Do I love you more when you roar or speak?” the speaker asks; “Do I love you more ridden or devouring?” In short, is the glory of the dragon the dragon itself, or the dragon’s defeat? The speaker is unable to decide, and concludes: “I love you living / And I love you dead.”

But why do they exert such a pull on our imagination? Why this literal running towards the fire, this accounting of death as a small thing, if only it be death *by dragon*? Is it not because we learn or show something about ourselves in the doing of these insane things? Dragons are not just antagonists, then, but also mirrors for human nature. And if they are mirrors, especially given their presence at the beginning of our misery in Genesis and the end of our woe in Revelation, then we must also speak of the redemption of the dragon.

### Dragons as Antagonists

We begin in a place one would not think to look for a dragon: on the fields of Troy. In the *Iliad*, we see a strange scene playing out. Though Troy’s walls are fated to fall, Zeus makes Hector invincible in battle, continually turning the fortunes of war against the Greeks and forbidding the other gods to intervene.<sup>4</sup> Not until Book 15 does he explain his actions: he is raising up Hector so that Achilles, in killing him, can seize glory like no other.<sup>5</sup> Zeus understands that the way to

---

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Strahan, ed., *The Book of Dragons* (HarperCollins: New York, 2020), 289-90.

<sup>4</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1990), 231-2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 390-1.

measure a hero is by the worthiness of his foes, by the greatness of those he overcomes.

Dragons are our Hectors. Our desire to challenge and overcome them is rooted in our desire to make a lasting name for ourselves, to prove ourselves to be among the number of the world's great heroes. We long for the title "dragonlayer" because there is no more lofty title.

There is more to the story, however. Dragons are not just the mightiest of foes, they are also the original foe. In Genesis 3 we read of a serpent who goes about on legs and who is craftier than all the other creatures.<sup>6</sup> Revelation 20:2 glosses this serpent as a dragon: "the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan." "Ancient serpent," that is, the serpent of old, from the very first of times, the original foe of our race. Never have we forgotten the great woe his evil counsels worked upon us, nor have we forgotten the great prophecy that one of us should bruise his head.<sup>7</sup> The dragon has been our enemy since before we knew we had an enemy, before we even knew what enmity was. It was he who first taught us hate.

There is in this tale, however, something of the massaging of the truth so characteristic of human behavior since the Lord called our first parents to account for their actions, to which both the man and the woman responded with blame-shifting. In the account of our enmity with the dragon Satan, we come off looking rather good: we are victims, we did nothing to inspire or deserve such enmity, and it is on the strength

---

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3:1.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 3:15.

of the promises of God that we uphold our ancient grudge. But the Scriptures constantly paint our actions not with the nobility of a victim bravely bearing up under immense pressure, but with the unbearable shame of a sinner and a criminal. When we tell our own story, we tend to think that when we rebelled against God, we struck out on our own, plotting our own course. But we were not the first to rebel against God, or to go outside of God's law: Satan was. He is the great hero who has pioneered the path of God-defiance (if indeed it can be seen to be either great or heroic to mar the beautiful and became the very engine of ugliness and falsity). And so, when we did likewise, we became not pioneers or captains of our own souls, but imitators of Satan. Our first sin is already a turning towards the nature of the creature that tempted us; it is already to strive to be wyrms rather than men. And that first sin is archetypal, and is repeated over and over again, countless billions of times each day and each moment in its many inheritors.

Ever since this moment, we have been less than human. We are bad examples of humanity, incomplete specimens at best, missing that which is most vital to true humanity: something not easy to name but easy to see if we only turn our eyes upon the only true human to come into the world this side of the Fall, the Lord Jesus Christ. In revealing to us the true glory of the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, he also reveals how far short we fall of that mark. Something in the very middle of our being is missing: A certain wildness that is all the wilder for being held within proper bounds, a freedom that is free from anxiety because it is free not to have to be all things; in short, a heart unfettered by over-reaching. But even before we look into the mirror of

Christ, another mirror lies close to hand, capable of showing us what we have become, in what direction our flight from humanity has taken us. Christ is a mirror polished and spotless; but dragons are also a mirror, though one darkened and warped. This is the deepest reason for the ineluctability of the dragon in our stories and hearts.

## Dragons as Mirror

*“If I, like Solomon . . .*

*could have my wish —*

*“my wish . . . O to be a dragon,*

*a symbol of the power of Heaven — of  
silkworm*

*size or immense; at times invisible.*

*Felicitous phenomenon!”<sup>8</sup>*

Dragons exert a profound pull not just on the human imagination, but on the human soul. Marianne Moore does not perhaps stray far from the longings of each of our hearts in the lines above. Ursula LeGuin takes the longing a step further in her *Earthsea* novels, developing a mythology in which humans and dragons

---

<sup>8</sup> Marianne Moore, “O to Be a Dragon,” in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 177.

are two sides to the same coin.<sup>9</sup> Originally one species, we split into two based upon our differing desires:

So among the dragon-people some became more and more in love with flight and wildness, and would have less and less to do with the works of making, or with study and learning, or with houses and cities. They wanted only to fly farther and farther, hunting and eating their kill, ignorant and uncaring, seeking more freedom and more. Others of the dragon-people came to care little for flight, but gathered up treasure, wealth, things made, things learned. They built houses, strongholds to keep their treasure in, so they could pass all they gained to their children, ever seeking more increase and more. And they came to fear the wild ones, who might come flying and destroy all their dear hoard, burn it up in a blast of flame out of mere carelessness and ferocity. . . . So those who had been both dragon and human changed, becoming two peoples — the dragons, always fewer and wilder, scattered by their endless, mindless greed and anger, in the far islands of the Western Reach; and the human folk, always more numerous in their rich towns and cities, filling up the Inner Isles and all the south and east. But among them there were some who saved the learning of the dragons — the True Language

---

<sup>9</sup> Ursula LeGuin, *Earthsea: The First Four Books* (Penguin: London, 2016).

of the Making — and these are now the wizards.<sup>10</sup>

Neither humans nor dragons fare particularly well in this description. They are joined by a desire for “more . . . and more:” Dragons long for more freedom, humans long for more increase. Here we see what we ought always to have known: that the greed of dragons is the greed of humans. Yet the wizards, who alone among humans speak the True Language of the Making, guard what turns out to be a specifically draconic knowledge, for the True Language is the regular language of dragon speech, indeed, is the only language they have. And so the wisdom of dragons is also the wisdom of humans.

Earlier we found that we abandoned imitation of God for imitation of Satan in the form of the serpent; as a result, the *imago draconis* (“image of the dragon”) is stamped on the human heart. It is not the only image stamped there: the *imago Dei* cannot be erased by any created power, whether human or demonic. The *imago draconis* is, as it were, superimposed, blurring and confusing but never effacing the *imago Dei*. Nevertheless, this superimposition is sufficient to make the dragon a fitting mirror for showing us what we have done to ourselves in all of our lust for self-making. What do we learn when we look into that mirror?

Dragons have no religion: they follow the law of their own nature and their god is their belly.<sup>11</sup> They do not concern themselves with right and wrong; rather, whatever they can achieve through their own powers is

---

<sup>10</sup> Tehanu in *Earthsea: The First Four Books*, 492-3.

<sup>11</sup> Philippians 3:19.

permissible for them.<sup>12</sup> Religion is a binding that puts constraints on the worshippers, thereby setting their lives into a certain context.<sup>13</sup> Dragons lack this binding, and so lack a check to their desires. Indeed, at their most intense, dragons are pure appetite; as LeGuin put it, driven by the longing “for more . . . and more.” This is the truth of the dragon hoard: it is an expression of an appetite that knows no bounds, that is lacking in moderation (what we might call “degree”) because it is entirely disordered. Concerning this, Shakespeare has Ulysses say:

Take but degree away, untune that string,

And, hark! what discord follows; each thing  
meets

In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters

Should lift their bosoms higher than the  
shores,

And make a sop of all this solid globe:

Strength should be lord of imbecility,

And the rude son should strike his father  
dead:

*Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong*

—

---

<sup>12</sup> “‘The strong take,’ growled the dragon, ‘or they prevent others from taking. I was not prevented. That is all. The meat is mine, this place is mine’” (Scott Lynch, “Maybe Just Go Up There and Talk to It,” in *The Book of Dragons*, 532).

<sup>13</sup> From Latin *re + ligo*, “to tie back.”

*Between whose endless jar justice resides —  
Should lose their names, and so should justice  
too.*

Then every thing includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
*And appetite, a universal wolf,*  
*So doubly seconded with will and power,*  
*Must make perforce a universal prey,*  
*And last eat up himself.*<sup>14</sup>

C.S. Lewis seizes upon this idea that unbounded appetite at last devours itself in the song of the northern dragon in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, where he says that “worm grows not to dragon till he eat worm;” or again in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: “There is nothing a dragon likes so well as fresh dragon. That is why you seldom find more than one dragon in the same country.”<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> A self-loathing that issues in self-cannibalism is, according to both Shakespeare and Lewis, the natural end of unbounded appetite.

And yet dragons are not without redeeming qualities. Some of them are quite accomplished:

---

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.112-27, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 192.

<sup>16</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Harper Collins: New York, NY, 1980), 93-4.

Kenneth Grahame's reluctant dragon writes poetry, and Fafnyr Goldenwings, late of Lonely Island, Maine, is proficient at the pianoforte, art, is quite well read, and is a notable (though not noted) botanist.<sup>17</sup> They are often wise and lovers of beauty: Fafnyr Goldenwings has learned through the years about keeping promises, about enriching others by sharing, and about looking out for the less fortunate, and out of this wisdom teaches others. They are even balancers of nature, particularly eastern dragons, which might be worshiped for bringing rain and taming the spirits of an area.<sup>18</sup> A dragon's great power and intellect need not be deployed to grow the selfish hoard: it can also be deployed to enrich others.

A dragon, therefore, is not a monster, but a being of great power that may become either a monster or a hero. As Screwtape says, "The great (and tooth-some) sinners are made out of the very same material as those horrible phenomena, the great Saints."<sup>19</sup> If the greater part of dragons choose to be monsters, that should be no surprise, for the greater part of humans choose to be sinners. And so in this, too, they are a great mirror for us.

In both their lawlessness and their magnificence, therefore, dragons provide a fitting image of fallen humanity. Our lawlessness hardly needs to be argued

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kenneth Grahame, "The Reluctant Dragon," in *Dream Days* (Orinda, CA: SeaWolf Press, 2020), 81-108; Rebecca Rupp, *The Dragon of Lonely Island* (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> For an example, see Zen Cho's "Hikayat Sri Bujang, or, The Tale of the Naga Sage," in *The Book of Dragons*, 25-48.

<sup>19</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Macmillan: New York, 1982), 157.

for: every page of human history cries it forth. And though the Church must chide humanity for constantly making so much of its magnificence, we must never say that we are not magnificent. For even though we have lost much of it, yet have we not lost it all. If to be such as we are is “shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth,” yet enough honor remains to us “to erect the head of the poorest beggar.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, for every hero dragon in literature you will find dozens of villain dragons, and our ancient enmity with the first dragon means that at the end of the day, the draconic is more an image of our sinfulness than of our original goodness.

This puts the longing with which we began into perspective. Though it is understandable that we long ever so much to be truly a dragon, far greater and better a thing were it to long to be truly a human, for nothing that we want of dragons is not already in us, whether for good or for ill, and it is the glory of each creature to be most truly what it is, what God made it to be.

## The Redemption of Dragons

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, when Eustace is transformed into a dragon, it might seem that his problem is his outward draconic nature.<sup>21</sup> After all, he cannot very well sail on the ship as a dragon (he will not fit), let alone return to England (however much good it might do his parents to see a real live dragon). And yet, the real problem that needed to be dealt with was an

---

<sup>20</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (Harper Trophy: New York, 2000), 218.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 82-113.

inner draconic nature that predated his outward transformation. He is only given the outer dragon nature to spur him to begin the reformation of the inner dragon nature. And so, in the case of Eustace, redemption looks like having one's humanity ever-more restored as more and more layers of dragon flesh are peeled away.

And this is true for us as well. Our sinful nature runs deep, so deep that when Christ at last cuts deep enough to utterly remove it, the cut is so deep that we think we must be killed by it.<sup>22</sup> And indeed, if we have embraced an identity as monsters "cut off from the whole human race,"<sup>23</sup> then we will find that it does kill us. If we have become monsters rather than heroes, then grace and mercy, which must ever keep an eye to the good of the whole (for they must ever be just), must deny us a place in the consummation of all things, lest, by making space for the monster, they mar the whole. But if we have done as Eustace did and begun the process of rejoining the human race, longing and acting upon the longing "to get back among humans and talk and laugh and share things," then we will find that a hair's breadth exists between where the dragon ends and where we begin, and that Christ's incision stops exactly there, so that not a bit of dragon is left and the humanity is at last freed to be true humanity.<sup>24</sup>

You see, we cannot set the dragons aside before they are redeemed, any more than the lord of the harvest will

---

<sup>22</sup> "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart" (*Dawn Treader*, 109).

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 92.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

risk the pulling of the tares while the wheat is still growing.<sup>25</sup> We cannot set the dragon aside because we *are* the dragon, and no amount of scratching off of our skin will change our identity. No, we must look into the pool, even though the wicked face that stares back at us makes us shudder; for in facing what we have wrought with our desires for more and more, we can begin the work of removing the impediments to a grace that knows that we must decrease.<sup>26 27</sup> It is not we who will slay the dragon, though we may aid in the bruising of its head: it is we who will emerge from the smoking ruin when the dragon has been slain.

---

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 13:24-29.

<sup>26</sup> "He shuddered whenever he caught sight of his own reflection as he flew over a mountain lake" (*Dawn Treader*, 102).

<sup>27</sup> John 3:30.

# Bibliography

## Dragonish Thoughts in Our Hearts Dragons as Mirrors of the Human

Cho, Zen. "Hikayat Sri Bujang, or, The Tale of the Naga Sage." In *The Book of Dragons*. Edited by Jonathan Strahan. New York: HarperCollins, 2020.

El-Mohtar, Amal. "A Final Knight to Her Love and Foe." In *The Book of Dragons*.

Grahame, Kenneth. *Dream Days*. Orinda: SeaWolf Press, 2020.

Homer, *The Iliad*, Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1990.

LeGuin, Ursula. *Earthsea: The First Four Books*. London: Penguin, 2016.

Lewis, Clive Staples. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1955.

———. *Prince Caspian*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

———. *The Pilgrim's Regress*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

———. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: Macmillan, 1982.

———. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. New York: Harper Collins, 1980.

Lynch, Scott. "Maybe Just Go Up There and Talk to It." In *The Book of Dragons*.

Moore, Marianne. *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*. New York: Macmillan, 1982.

Peterson, Andrew. *The Wingfeather Saga*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2020.

Rupp, Rebecca. *The Dragon of Lonely Island*. Cambridge: Candlewick Press, 1998.

Sayers, Dorothy L. "Desdichado." In *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*. Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2008.

Shakespeare, William. *Troilus and Cressida*.