

“Fairy tales are more than true: Nor because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.” Neil Gaiman in the epigraph of *Coraline*, misquoting G.K. Chesterton.¹

For better or worse, many of us see the world around us as flat. Now I don’t mean flat in the sense of a “flat earth theory.” No I mean that the world, the universe, has become two dimensional. Modernity has rendered the world around us as predictable. That is not to say this is necessarily a bad thing. It is predictability which makes the scientific method so successful. Predictability helps us to explore the outer reaches of space and the vast depths of the ocean. Unfortunately, predictability can also lead to a sense of determinism. While this is not a necessary outcome, it is certainly a tempting one. The technocratic mind, conditioned by modernity, sees reality as something that is simply out there, just a brute fact.

Of course we could (disingenuously) diagnose this ailment as being an effect of modernity, neo-capitalist consumerism, or technocracy. While this may be true, I think it misses the role that certain forms of Christian theology have played in shaping this unfortunate picture of the world (I’m looking your idea of the *duplex ordo* Cardinal Cajetan!). We have lost our sympathy towards the magic of reality. Or (to use more terms more at home to Christian theology) we have lost the ability to discern the underlying mystery of creation, the mystery that flows into the mystery of God. We no longer “find God in all things,” to use a phrase from Ignatian spirituality.

On the whole, the majority of religions and most religious and/or spiritual people would reject this picture of the world. But rejecting this picture and living in a different picture are not necessarily the same thing. As a professional theologian I certainly *believe* that all things “live and move and have their being” in God (Acts 17:28). But believing this is not the same as *living* in the world that such a belief entails. We can intellectually tell ourselves that God is present in and through all things. We can argue that God is somehow “innermost”² to all things, and that the world around us is “transparent,”³ a kind of window to God. However, as Stephen King reminds us, “we lie best when we lie to ourselves.”⁴

Of course, we shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves, most of us have been conditioned from birth by the context of consumer culture (especially in the United States) to see the world in terms of utility and fact (the world is *just* there). This can be cause for despair, especially if it is coupled with a deterministic pessimism. If the world is just there, and it is a rigid product of uncaring cause and effect, what hope can we have of addressing the evils, big and small, that we see and experience around us? This picture tells a story, a fiction if you will, of “that’s just the way it is.” For me, fiction, especially horror fantasy, help to fight this unceasing narrative that empties the world around us of meaning, mystery, and hope.

¹ “Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear.” G.K Chesterton, “The Red Angel”

² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q 8. a 1. sed contra.

³ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, n 33.

⁴ Stephen King, *IT*, p 445.

In horror fantasy we often encounter characters who resonate with us, we can see ourselves in them. They live an ordinary life, with perhaps ordinary (or at least natural) troubles and challenges. They experience love and loss, joy and pain, struggle and triumph. But inevitably (otherwise it wouldn't be a horror story would it?) something comes along, a monster, a ghost, a boogie man, some supernatural horror which interrupts - usually in a terrifying manner - their average everyday life. I think what is most terrifying about this, is not what the monster does (though this may certainly be cause for fright). No, what is most terrifying is that it disrupts our neat and organized picture of the world. It shows that, *pace* the imagination of modernity, we cannot dominate and master the otherwise predictable world around us. It is, in fact, unpredictable, and this makes reality dangerous, but it is the unpredictability that lies at the heart of a great promise and offer.

Certainly, horror fantasy relies on this unpredictability to scare us, but in doing so, it reminds us that there is always something more to the world around us. There is something more in the trees and flowers, something greater in the birds and squirrels, a vast ocean of meaning and mystery in every human person. It is this "more" that shows itself as the cite of our freedom, our freedom to change the world and make it better. We all have our constraints, our limitations, imposed on us by our context and condition, but like the protagonists in horror fiction, we can fight back against the evil. This "more" of reality affords us the opportunity to be surprised, and in the surprise we can experience awe. This awe gives birth to hope. Hope that in a world so scary, so full of horror and tragedy, we can make it be otherwise. Because the world is unpredictable, it means it is also not determined. Evils can be overcome, social ills can be remedied, the sins of today don't have to be the sins of tomorrow. Yes, we live in a "universe of horror and loss" but we stand on "a single lighted stage where mortals dance in defiance of the dark."⁵

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May 4th, 2021

⁵ Stephen King, *11/22/63*, p 616.