

Many Worlds: David Lindsay and alternative realities

By Stuart Kelly

Although his two greatest works, *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) and *The Haunted Woman* (1922) were re-issued as Canongate Classics in the 1980s, the work of David Lindsay has never achieved either the critical or popular acclaim he deserves. Born in 1876 in Lewisham, his parents came from Jedburgh and he spent much of his childhood there. His life was poor and frustrated, and he found it increasingly difficult to get published—when he died in 1945 (from septicaemia caused by a tooth abscess; not because a bomb fell on his house while he was in the bath, as urban myth has it—though one did) he had not appeared in print since 1932. He and his wife had a peripatetic existence, moving from Cornwall to Sussex, where they ran a guest house. Lindsay became increasingly melancholic and in all probability suffered a nervous breakdown as he obsessively attempted to finish his last novel, *The Witch*—his sister wrote to a friend saying that he had locked himself in an upper room and refused to eat for ten days.

Yet, in retrospect, Lindsay's unique and disturbing vision was incredibly influential. His idiosyncratic mixture of science fiction, fantasy, theological speculation and impressionistic fable inspired C S Lewis's pre-Narnia Space trilogy, especially *Out of the Silent Planet*. I am more concerned here with his position within an occult tradition in Scottish writing concerning the use of parallel realities and how the idea of the self is radically altered within that tradition. The current strength of Scottish weird fiction has its roots in Lindsay's surreal and stricken work, rather than the fey and sentimental books of his more famous contemporary, George MacDonald. Colin Wilson overstated the case when he called *A Voyage to Arcturus* "the greatest novel of the twentieth century"; but its cult status is undeniable. Lindsay ought to be considered alongside writers like Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson and H P Lovecraft as one of the great proponents of cosmic horror.

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ontology. Arcturus may have five primary colours—“Just as blue is delicate and mysterious, yellow clear and unsubtle, and red sanguine and passionate, so he felt ulfire to be wild and painful and jale to be dreamlike, feverish, and voluptuous” (did this influence Lovecraft’s “The Color Out Of Space”?)—but the phase-shifting interior of Runhill Court in the Sussex Downs is an infinitely more unsettling prospect. In the novel, Isabel Loment, a girl listlessly engaged to a dull man, arrives at the rambling manor house, owned by the mysterious Henry Judge. The topography of the house keeps changing—a staircase comes and goes, sometimes allowing access to a door into another time—and in that parallel space, Judge and Isabel become lovers, but with no memory of their attachment when they return to the “real” world. It builds to a gruesome and life-changing conclusion, and, like the best ghost stories, it manages to inject a sense of awfulness into very everyday occasions. *The Haunted Woman* seems to imply that in modern life, individuals are intrinsically and irredeemably divided, between propriety and desire, between common sense and fantasy, between past and present. This, apparently, was Lindsay’s attempt to write a more commercial book. Both *A Voyage to Arcturus* and *The Haunted Woman* use a transformation of the nature of space to reassess the idea of the self. In each case we are presented with a character who both is and is not what they were before the torque-like twisting of external space.

Lindsay didn’t invent the idea of a parallel world—he does, however, pip H G Wells, whose own parallel universe book, *Men Like Gods* came out in 1923—nor is the first Scot to envisage them. Indeed, it could be argued that Sir Walter Scott’s *Redgauntlet* is an “alt-history”, imagining a parallel history where Charles Edward Stuart attempts a final Jacobite rebellion in the 1780s. Lindsay’s place within a distinctively Scottish tradition is upheld by his appearance—albeit misspelled as Lyndsay—in Alasdair Gray’s short story, “The Magic Terminus”; and the far more obvious, though unacknowledged (even in the Index of Plagiarisms) influence on *Lanark*. The doubled structure of *Lanark* (1981), with Thaw/Lanark in Glasgow/Unthank, went on to influence Iain Banks, in *The Bridge* (1986), where the “realist” story of Alex is refracted twice, in both Orr’s account of life on the Bridge and in the parables of The Barbarian.

In the late 2000s, the use of parallel realities as a way of breaking away from purely social realist novel-writing, and as a means to investigate the nature of the self, became oddly widespread. Scottish examples would include Andrew

Crumey's *Mobius Dick* (2004) and *Sputnik Caledonia* (2008), although it is worth mentioning that he first introduced a parallel universe where Britain became Communist after World War II in *Music In A Foreign Language* in 1994; Iain Banks's *Transition* (2009), which appeared under his science-fiction moniker of Iain M Banks in the United States; John Aberdein's *Strip The Willow* (2009) with its dystopian city of Uberdeen; Andrew Drummond's *An Abridged History* (2004) and *Volapuk* (2006); Alan Campbell's *The God of Clocks* (2009) and Kevin MacNeil's *A Method Actor's Guide to Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (2010) as well as such graphic novels as Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son* (2003), an ingenious reworking of the Superman mythology with the Kryptonian landing in a Ukrainian collective farm and teaming up with the USSR's own Man of Steel, Josef Stalin. It is not of course a uniquely Scottish phenomenon—one could cite China Miéville's *The City & The City* (2009), Adam Roberts's *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2009), Nick Harkaway's *The Gone-Away World* (2008) and Scarlett Thomas's *The End of Mr Y* (2006). The best-known example—*His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman—is perhaps the least critically interesting in this context, as the psychologies and personalities of the characters remain a constant across the fluctuating parallel realities.

Andrew Crumey's deployment of parallel realities is perhaps the most nuanced, particularly since his own background is in physics and he has written non-fiction reviews, and an ongoing web project *Constellations*, on the impact of quantum physics on what is sometimes referred to as Hugh Everett's many-worlds theory. *Mobius Dick*, like *The Bridge* (and Crumey's other novels), has a tripartite structure—a clear example, by the way, of the slightly over-played Scottish binary oppositions—in which a contemporary physicist, a patient with amnesia and extracts from various novels which resemble those of Thomas Mann, but with significant changes (in, for example, the section from Professor Faust, it is Edwin Schrödinger, the quantum physicist, not Hans Castorp who is convalescing in a sanatorium up a Magic Mountain) are braided together. The denouement (in fact, the reason for the bifurcating universes) has the author of Professor Faust, Heinrich Behring, arguing against the many worlds theory: "Are you not glad that the revolution succeeded, and that we do not live in the sort of world the Nazis wanted ... are you not relieved that scientists do not advocate a multiverse of realities; that university professors do not claim a pop song is worth as much as the symphonies of Beethoven; and that political leaders—holding offices bought for them by big business, and considering themselves guided by divine right—do

not wage war against helpless nations whose dictators are fictions, possessing weapons of mass destruction that are fictions? Is it not a blessing that the world I have described, and its characters, are but a fable?" The strong and radical inference—that it is our reality which is somehow the wrong turning of history—has also been used by American novelists, particularly those trying to write political fiction in the wake of the September 11 attacks: both Ken Kalfus in *A Disorder Peculiar To The Country* (2006) and Lydia Millet in *Oh Pure And Radiant Heart* (2005) use the tactic of insisting on the fictionality of our reality.

This approach also typified the work of the avant-garde novelist and conceptual artist Tom McCarthy (who was born in Scotland but grew up in Greenwich). In his novel *Remainder* (2005), the unnamed protagonist has come into a great deal of money as compensation for an unspecified accident which has left him with amnesia. A chance occurrence at a party gives him a sense of déjà vu, but without access to the memory supposedly being felt again. He uses his wealth to great an iterative loop, attempting to experience again and again the feeling of having had a memory; and in doing so both re-creates the world and further diminishes his precarious grip on selfhood. McCarthy has written eloquently about the "antipsychology" of his novels, the specious attempt to provide motives and emotive reasons for the behaviours of characters that would never be attributed to "real" individuals. As such, his work provides the most intense modern variant of the insight of David Lindsay: that the self and its beliefs are in perpetual flux, that desire is only possible through deferment and self-blinding and that there is a cosmic horror, an epistemological vertigo at the heart of trying to apprehend reality. Although his two greatest works, *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) and *The Haunted Woman* (1922) were re-issued as Canongate Classics in the 1980s, the work of David Lindsay has never achieved either the critical or popular acclaim he deserves. Born in 1876 in Lewisham, his parents came from Jedburgh and he spent much of his childhood there. His life was poor and frustrated, and he found it increasingly difficult to get published—when he died in 1945 (from septicaemia caused by a tooth abscess; not because a bomb fell on his house while he was in the bath, as urban myth has it—though one did) he had not appeared in print since 1932. He and his wife had a peripatetic existence, moving from Cornwall to Sussex, where they ran a guest house. Lindsay became increasingly melancholic and in all probability suffered a nervous breakdown as he obsessively attempted to finish his last novel, *The Witch*—his sister wrote to a friend saying that he had locked himself in an upper room and refused to eat for ten days.

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