

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

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**From the Selected Works of kirby farrell**

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traumatic heroism.doc

Kirby Farrell



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## **Part One**

### **Victorian Monstrosity:**

#### **Predatory Parent, Cannibal Child**

"Strange though it may seem, in 1870 a small group of islands off the mainland of Europe dominated a large part of the world. . . . Their influence was ubiquitous. A century later, with a few small exceptions, the British were confined to their islands. No other people in the modern world has experienced such a dramatic change."

--Keith Robbins, *The Eclipse of a Great Power*

A sense of vagueness, of incoherence, and indirection, grows on us as we watch the eighties struggling for a foothold in the swirl and wreckage of new ideas and old beliefs.

-- G. M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age*

## Chapter One

### Traumatic Heroism

We all fail to do what we want here on earth. We all fail to be the persons we dreamed and wanted. . . . Who ever gets enough life???? (i.e., fucking, fame, joy).

--Ernest Becker<sup>1</sup>

As an opening to the post-traumatic mood of the 1890s, here is Max Nordau's diagnosis of fin de siècle "morbidity." "Christendom," he reports, "is held to be a creature reeling to its death presumptively in dire exhaustion." A millennialist "horror of world-annihilation has laid hold of men's minds," and "more highly developed" imaginations dread that "mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the middle of a dying world." This is the mood of "a sick man, who feels himself dying by inches . . . the envy of a rich, hoary voluptuary, who sees a pair of young lovers."<sup>2</sup>

Degeneration blasted celebrity Decadents like Oscar Wilde as well as misfits, criminals, and lunatics for subverting conventional values. Nordau's moral tonic may look quaint or neurotic now, but his attack on pessimism and panic electrified the public. Degeneration exorcises anxiety by repudiating "morbid" thoughts labelled irrationality, perversity, anarchism, pessimism, nihilism, and so on. As a behavior, the book is a rallying cry for its readers, bonding "us" into a sensible vigilante crowd that can rout degeneracy from "our" midst. Whatever their particular sins, morbid types compromise "our" defenses against fear of chaos and death as well as unhealthy appetites. Presumably morbid people are not actually "rich, hoary voluptuaries" but only feel exhausted and doomed, so their envy of young lovers means that they can't feel desire and have nothing to live for. Their "horror of life," as the Decadents called it,<sup>3</sup> is real but a disease that must be isolated and managed lest spreading panic overwhelm natural "fight or flight" responses and destroy "our" will too.

In its dynamics and core themes, Degeneration has much in common with late Victorian studies of trauma. Once underway, "morbidity" is a disease process that induces helplessness, traumatic "freeze," and loss of will. Nordau invites "us" to counter panic with a surge of adrenalized militancy--the nervous system's "fight response." His book can be seen as a highly sublimated form of mob action for the respectable classes; a prescription for measured arousal; a nerve tonic to cure feelings of ennui, alienation, faltering self-esteem, and dread. In the newspapers and in everyday use, "morbidity" identified "an enemy within, an internal threat to the organism."<sup>4</sup> Like all scapegoats, the supposed "enemy" is a cognitive trick that enables "us" to explain psychic dissonance and sharpen our definition of "healthy" values. In policing culture with this medico-military trope, critics like Nordau operated as part of a semi-official public health campaign. The underlying metaphors surface in a cartoon of 1882 that depicts a savior of public health, the medical scientist Robert Koch, as the chivalric warrior St. George trampling the dragon tuberculosis.<sup>5</sup>

St. George makes a useful marker for the conflict between heroic will and morbidity. The popular tableau shows the Saint rescuing the daughter of a prince whose walled city is besieged by a dragon associated with Satan and death.<sup>6</sup> Since the maiden's fertility objectifies the city's future and the knight wins her and comes to rule the city, his triumph is effectively the act that grounds civilization and identity. Yet St.

George is doomed. After governing successfully, according to the canonical story, he enlisted in the crusades and was martyred by enemies, boiled in lead and sawn in half, among other horrors. Folk tradition portrays the Saint springing back to life so irrepressibly that in his Praise of Folly Erasmus mocks those who use him as a magical talisman.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the undersong in the story insinuates that no triumph is enough, and sooner or later restless heroism will prove futile. As a character in a novel by John Davidson puts it, "Is there anything that is not morbid? Life is a disease: the moment we are born we begin to die" (Stokes, 26). Or as Punch captioned a cartoon showing worms evolving into the eminent, soon to be dead Darwin: "Man is but a worm."<sup>8</sup> And food for worms.

In the course of the nineteenth century the sense of heroic doom rises fitfully in meditations on fallen knights, from the memorial cult of Prince Albert and Tennyson's Idylls of the King to Pre-Raphaelite elegies<sup>9</sup>; from Oscar Wilde's dismembered Happy Prince to Wagner's twilight of the gods. Paradox and double-bind confound the hero's will. Passion could doom him to a Liebestod, yet manly self-control could lead to "race suicide."<sup>10</sup> Nor did he suffer alone, since the public also sorrowed for Dante's doomed Beata Beatrix, the Lady of Shalott, expired Elaine, and many desolated Ophelias. In berating Burne-Jones for the "indescribable sadness" of his women, art critics were working out fears of sexual futility and blocked will. The painter's Venus seemed to them traumatized and numbed. "The very body is unpleasant and uncomely," one critic growled, "and the soul behind it, or through it, is ghastly. It is a soul that has known strange tortures; a body that has writhed with every impulse of sickness."<sup>11</sup> As an artistic genre, deathbed illness could be implacably idealized, as in Henry Peach Robinson's popular photograph Fading Away (1858), but by the end of the century a painter like Edvard Munch could define authenticity through the horror of the sickroom. After Albert's death Queen Victoria ritualized futility with a funereal spell that transfixed the nation for years and kept women like H. G. Wells's mother Sarah in widow's black for much of their lives.

While it is vivid in its own right, the mood of heroic futility is also implicated, like a virus stimulating antibodies, in different compensatory reactions: not only the Decadents' misogyny, aestheticism, and consuming irony, but also the drumbeat of philistine criticism and more literal-minded militarism. Broadly speaking, in post-traumatic terms, Decadent figures withdraw from the horror of life and attempt to overcome numbness through aestheticism, while surrogate warriors--think of Wells's Time Traveller slaughtering Morlocks--run amok. As a kind of St. George attacking "morbidity," Nordau rallied considerable support. Yet even this success reflects the conflicting attitudes toward heroic will. His readers believed, or wanted to believe, in the crusade. Yet Nordau's vehement alarmism also suggests how strong people felt the "enemy" to be.

Like Nordau, the writers of "invasion novels" were also tacitly crusading to reinvigorate heroic will. The genre of invasion or future-war novels developed in reaction to the German conquest of France in 1870.<sup>12</sup> Colonel Chesney's The Battle of Dorking (1871) imagined the Germans crushing England and so alarmed the public that Gladstone himself had to caution against hysteria in terms that sound like President Eisenhower's warning against America's mushrooming military-industrial complex.<sup>13</sup> In these novels Britain's defeat or near-defeat confirmed Nordau's diagnosis of fatal decay and loss of will. And like Nordau, Chesney and his imitators sought to rouse public morale. In this context St. George is a contested symbol in a debate about group

morale, the relative claims of hardiness and comforts, sacrifice and affluence, defense budgets and commerce. Which is why in Part Two I will argue that we can hear the clanking of St. George's armor in the post-traumatic rhetoric of the Reagan years.

The tragic paradox of the post-traumatic St. George is that debate about heroic will seems to have polarized into "morbid" and warrior-superman attitudes. In seeking to wake the public to a menacing reality, the fantasists of future-war contributed to the mood of dread and messianic aggrandizement that armed Europe to the teeth and exploded in World War I. One proof of this is what Clarke calls "the first great legend of the war" (92). After British sharpshooters stopped the German advance at Mons in August 1914, Arthur Machen published a short story called "The Bowmen," in which British soldiers find a visionary host of heavenly warriors fighting on their side. One soldier "heard, or seemed to hear, thousands shouting:

'St. George! St. George!'

'Ha, messire; ha! sweet Saint, grant us good deliverance!'

'St. George for merry England!'

'Harow! Harow! Monseigneur St. George succour us.'

'Ha! St. George! Ha! St. George! a long bow and a strong bow.'

'Heaven's Knight, aid us.'"

At which point the soldier sees "a long line of shapes, with a shining about them. They were like men who drew the bow, and with another shout, their cloud of arrows flew singing and tingling through the air toward the German hosts" (92).

Clarke sees this story as the end product of half a century of imaginary wars. He points out the irony that all the writers' efforts to rouse the nation's military will culminated in a wishful popular fantasy. The St. George of 1914 evokes Agincourt, but also Shakespeare's self-deluded Richard II, with his frightened boasts that God has "in heavenly pay" glorious angels who will fight Richard's enemies (3.2.60). The legend of 1914 is still reacting against the undersong of futility in the 1890s: the legacy of bloody revolts in the colonies, General Gordon's sensational death in the Sudan (1885), and the Boer War. Like the 1914 war itself, the legend promised group transcendence of the creeping death-anxiety which Nordau had targeted for his thrilling scorn.

While George never enjoyed the same veneration as Ireland's St. Patrick or Scotland's St. Andrew, in the time of Edward III he became patron of England, and in this chapter I regard his story as one of Britain's basic accounts of its identity and destiny. Like the "pacification" that created Great Britain, the nation's imperialism justified its predatory violence--its heart of darkness--as a civilizing crusade against bestial others, on behalf of tender maidens, executive nobility, and immortal posterity. In this context St. George represents something like "victory culture" in America.<sup>14</sup> And as with victory culture, whose crash a century later is a focus of Part Two of this book, the decay of the dragonslayer's story meant pain and disorientation--and presaged what Tom Engelhardt would call a "crisis of storylessness." The historical forces which outlawed slavery, challenged imperialism, extended suffrage, and gave maidens other career options than dragon-captivity also made St. George an ambivalent and increasingly irrelevant figure. At the same time, not surprisingly, his "injury" and the collateral cultural damage seemed in some quarters to justify redoubled imperial ambition as a regimen to prevent "race suicide" and "impotent, decadent manhood" (Bederman, 200-01).

The tableau of the triumphal dragonslayer often omitted his eventual defeat, torture, and martyrdom. To think of the hero's ultimate futility as traumatic might

suggest a concern less with post-traumatic reactions to earlier events than with dread of future doom. But this is the century-old puzzle described in my Introduction, and it begins to untangle if you think of trauma as an interpretive event that breaches basic defenses against death-anxiety, since then trauma necessarily entails dread of the future. For a survivor the past may be safely past, but survival also cues the now vigilant imagination to the death sure to come someday. In this respect the idea of trauma can allow existential terror to be displaced into the past and reassuringly (if painfully) contained in a specific "injury." At the same time even the triumphs of scientific progress could entail psychic injury, since they undercut traditional immortality systems and read the eventual extinction of humankind in the fossil record.

Late-Victorian invasion novels foretell traumas that straddle the past and future, since the catastrophe to come originates in existing and individually irremediable faults. Terry Gilliam's Twelve Monkeys (1995) dramatizes the paradox of "future trauma" by having a plague-stricken twenty-first century society force a "volunteer" to return through a time machine to the 1990s in order to search out the source of the trauma. The hero is suffering an injury that is simultaneously past, future, and present, and he is pointedly diagnosed in the 1990s as a madman.<sup>15</sup> His attempt to save his civilization is finally a traumatic rescue. To be St. George in the unfolding moment is one thing. To be compelled to emulate his example knowing his eventual doom is another. Cognitively, this is a condition like combat stress, since even if the immediate rescue from death succeeds, futility darkens the larger horizon.

The next few chapters investigate the particular forms that traumatic heroism took in some late Victorian texts. In effect, the writers illustrate conflicts over morbid will tried out in the safe, consoling space of imagination. In the rest of this chapter I want to show how deeply traumatic heroism is rooted in basic cognitive issues. That means putting things in a wider cultural context--in a sense, the widest context of all.

## 2.

Western culture is grounded in traumatic stories.<sup>16</sup> In Genesis divine light rends the primordial void. Creation, as in the division of cells, ruptures and differentiates categories. Born perfect in paradise, Adam degenerates into mortal growth. He and Eve acquire self-awareness through the brutal alienation of the fall. Expelled from Eden, humankind discovers itself "outside" the natural world and sentenced to death. Seduced by the serpent's invitation to compete with the Lord ("ye shall be as gods"), Adam and Eve aspire to overleap a forbidden boundary only to fall.

The crash of the first couple produces the curse of consciousness: alienated will (labor), painful childbirth, and awareness of death. Adam and Eve react with post-traumatic symptoms: anxiety and guilt ("I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid"); withdrawal ("I hid myself"); aggression (the Lord "will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed"); intrusive re-experience of the trauma ("Because thou hast . . . eaten of the tree . . . in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life"); discovery of the conventional nature of reality and the possibility of deception (invention of clothing, names, role-playing and identities); self-alienation (lest Adam live forever, "the Lord drove out the man"); and the core symptom, poisonous death-anxiety (Genesis 3).

The Genesis stories make history itself post-traumatic: an original injury endlessly re-experienced, so that all being is stained by that originary guilt and dread,

and rescued through divine grace. Many Victorians had a keen appreciation of original sin, and conceptions of childhood were evolving away from an Augustinian vision of the child as a polluted creature in need of purifying discipline.<sup>17</sup> When Cardinal Newman looks out his window, he sees suffering and confusion as an aftershock: "the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator."<sup>18</sup> Although the scientific reappraisal of geological evidence shattered Christian Europe's conceptions of space and time, it perpetuated the sense of originary trauma. In his influential *Epoques de la nature* (1778), for example, Buffon concluded that humans had emerged some six to eight thousand years ago. "Naked in mind and body, defenceless against the elements, they underwent calamities which left an indelible mark on human consciousness. These included local inundations, which were transformed in memory into a universal catastrophe."<sup>19</sup>

Nor has the conviction of a traumatic fall disappeared. It flourishes not only in fundamentalist Christianity but in all sorts of sophisticated secular thought.<sup>20</sup> In Christianity the Savior heals the trauma of the fall. Medieval theology allegorized Christ as the perfect knight, the model for ambiguously secularized warrior-heroes such as the legendary St. George, whose exploits mingle venerable folk tales with the myths of Perseus and Heracles, wrestlers of monsters and liberators of maidens.<sup>21</sup>

The Saint's rescue condenses many levels of meaning. Among other things, it can represent Christ's liberation of the Church from Satan; spirit's ascendancy over the flesh; culture's defense against death; the recovery of fertility from a lord of the underworld akin to Hades; a suitor's defeat of a rival to win a wife; an aristocratic hunter's triumph over nature's tooth and claw; and European civilization's conquest of barbarian Others. The story of St. George illustrates the human need for enemies in order to consolidate group identity and political organization. In effect, the dragon as predator causes humankind to band together and develop those skills--rhetoric, hypocrisy, diplomacy--by which the city controls explosive civic rivalry.<sup>22</sup> In novels of the 1890s Dracula effectively creates the "band of light," even as the cannibal Tonga brings together the genteel "family" Sherlock Holmes takes under his wing.

But there is another aspect of this system worth exploring. As psychic topography, the walled city recalls some clinical definitions of trauma, including psychoanalytic metaphors that envision the ego under siege: "A postulated stimulus barrier or protective shield is breached, and the ego is overwhelmed and loses its mediating capacity."<sup>23</sup> Despite the elusive passive verbs, the assault on a fortified self makes the ego a citizen of a walled city. In this topography the warrior hero functions as the ego's "mediating capacity," defending against encroaching death. Our term for a blow or sudden impression on the mind that radically alters perspective--"shock"--developed as a metaphor out of the military terminology for a clash of armed forces (a meaning still with us in the expression "shock troops"). The word appeared in English as a term for the collision of armies or two jousters (OED, 1565), then expanded to denote any blow, and more specifically a sudden, usually painful disturbance of the mind or feelings (OED, 1705), on its way to its nineteenth-century medical application to conditions of nervous exhaustion and overstimulation (OED, 1805), and finally its designation of electrical stimulation of a nerve (OED, 1818). The nervous system response we call "fight or flight" likewise takes its terminology from violent conflict. The etymologies suggest that in combat, trauma is never far away. And in fact trauma may spur panicky flight, an immobilizing "freeze," or berserk rage capable of destroying a dragon.

Given trauma's robustness as a trope, especially in early medical lore, it is only a short step from these military images back to the Lord's curse on Adam and Eve. Treating hysterics in his clinic at the Salpêtrière, for example, Charcot hypothesized that "a fear of imminent death, of crippling injury[,] was translated into an electrical shock that spread through the nerves and so brought down the nervous organization." Charcot was impressed by a veteran whose symptoms had seized him when a peal of thunder associated with cannon fire had terrified him. The resemblance to the ancients' fear of Zeus's thunderbolts prompts one medical historian to call this "the Zeus myth" of neurosis.<sup>24</sup> The Zeus myth links military metaphors (cannon shot, breached psychic defenses) with the dread of a god's annihilating wrath in Greek myth and in Genesis. They express terror rooted in infantile experience and the ground of being. Like the city, the dragonslayer himself is enclosed. The knight's armor is akin to the Neo-Freudian metaphor of "character armor" or defenses.

The tableau implies a social drama that sheds light on this paranoid imagery. As God's soldier, the youth is vulnerable to combat trauma. Even the quasi-religious code of courtly love shows the dynamics of trauma since in the platonic theory, love at first sight imprints or stamps the lover's imagination, with a sense of the body being shocked and invaded, and will be overthrown. To "fall" in love, stricken by love's arrow, is to suffer an obsession as consuming as any illness. But the knight is also a suitor fighting a bloodthirsty rival for the woman. He can be defeating a projection of his own evil potential, or an ogreish father-figure expressing the envious rage that Nordau personified in the "rich, hoary voluptuary, who sees a pair of young lovers making for a sequestered forest nook" (3). Even the Virgin could contribute to the implied Oedipal conflict since she is both maiden and mother of Christ/Saint George.<sup>25</sup> This triangle echoes the strife in the Garden of Eden, in which the outraged father confronts a rebellious young couple. In evolutionary terms both Genesis and the St. George scenarios describe the division of a family group when a clash over dominance leads a rivalrous son to start a new family or tribe. Within the walled city of traditional society the father is law. The dragon can be seen as his mirror inversion, a tyrant of appetite, who jealously seizes the fertile daughter for himself in what today might be called incestuous abuse. Fear of death makes the father a predatory monster feeding on the vitality of others like Stoker's patriarchal vampire.

In this context St. George dramatizes generational antagonism and social competition. However insidiously, the rival's ambivalence shadows the hero's project, potentially crippling his will. Heroic rescue can be seen as a strategy for controlling this conflict. The dragonslayer is messianic. As martyr, he is the loyal, self-sacrificing son. The ancient world, from which the Bible takes its roles--Lord, servant, and the like--polarized authority into extremes of dominance and submission. In such systems succession is not a gradual transition but a reversal. The patriarch falters and dies, and suddenly empowered youth takes his place. Until that moment the tension of parental suspicion and youthful impatience threatens social stability. Greek and Roman myth registers that stress in stories of familial atrocity, as when a predatory parent such as Saturn or Laius tries to destroy potentially parricidal children. The fear of death and usurpation tempts the father to identify with death, increasing the polarization and peril.

The Christian story handles the problem by making the supreme father an unmoved mover, an incontestable conscience figure or judge actively defended by the sacrificial son. This system redirects competition, delegating to the son the struggle against enemies. The Son not only resists Satan's temptation to personal ambition, he



projects onto him and kills the antagonism of the father. By sacrificing himself in a climactic rescue, the Son saves humankind--the other children of the Lord--and dies atoned with the Father, identifying with him and sharing his power. The rescue absolves the Son of suspicion as a rival, and his submission earns the Father's love.<sup>26</sup> Just as God resurrects the crucified Son, the Leicestershire mummers' play makes St. George's father, the "King of England," witness his son's death and then summon the doctor who saves him.

Christianity reconciles these conflicts by fusing the resurrected son with the heavenly father. The residual tension in the solution can be seen in the millennial themes which the dragonslayer also allegorizes.<sup>27</sup> Christ's second coming as apocalyptic warrior undoes the original crucifixion in another "final" triumph over demonized rebellion and death. Once victimized by the bloodthirsty mob, the scapegoat comes to rule the world. Triumphal mastery preempts sacrificial love, celebrating a righteous cosmic slaughter akin to traumatic berserking. At Judgment Day, echoing the traumatic Edenic curse, the Father will separate his children into the saved and the damned, the beloved and the spurned. Then the militant Christ will once more rejoin the cosmic father. This vindictive nightmare makes sense as an effort to impose closure on life, but especially at historical moments of great uncertainty, irrationality, and injustice. In the 1890s, when the old boundaries of time and space were in flux, speculation about ultimate ends was rife. H. G. Wells's mother was devoutly obsessed with millennial themes, for example, and her son's popular *Time Traveller* actually drops in on the end of the world.

The Saint's story attempts to balance self-aggrandizement and effacement. The son saves the father-prince, marries the maiden, and rules the walled city until a crusade (for the Father) summons him to pay his debt to the Father. But in practice, messianic heroism crowded out the epilogue. In Britain, through the Order of the Garter, George harnessed aristocratic youth to the discipline of government.<sup>28</sup> Even in the nineteenth century, for a culture nervous about change, nostalgic for medieval verities, and ambitious for chivalric refinement, the warrior saint was a veritable engine of idealization.<sup>29</sup> As hybrid warrior-saint, son and hero, he met a crucial Victorian need to civilize instinct. In effect, his self-effacement made manly violence respectable.

The Saint flourished in Anglophile American culture too. After the trauma of the Civil War and the collapse of Southern aristocracy, St. George lent his equivocal authority to vigilante berserking on behalf of injured self-esteem and white womanhood in the fantasies of the Ku Klux Klan and D.W. Griffiths' *Birth of a Nation* (1915).<sup>30</sup> Reform-minded organizations and fraternal orders styled themselves knights of Pythias or of labor. In *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* (1900), the ruthless Andrew Carnegie turns the millionaire into a self-sacrificing St. George who expires in his life's project of "bettering" the world.<sup>31</sup> In the epic mural Carnegie commissioned in Pittsburgh, the knight is an idealized steelworker. The poor man's model was the Aspiring Young Rescuer of Horatio Alger's novels<sup>32</sup> and stage melodrama, who routed and saved disguised versions of the father. As in Britain, the aristocratic mystique of chivalry made it useful as an instrument for "civilizing" the middle and lower classes, even as the unresolved status of the warrior-son could make the story's aura of gentility seemingly democratic.

And yet the myth was slowly decaying. During the Renaissance, St. George was already a nostalgic consolation for changes that had shrunk the scale of aristocratic heroism and made the armored knight a pompous sitting duck on the battlefield. In

Shakespeare's day English nobles still pumped up heroic self-esteem by jousting, but the cult of chivalry was already becoming an exercise in bravura histrionics and solemn doublethink.<sup>33</sup> The longer the cult of St. George persisted, the more it became an ornament of class privilege and an empty gesture.<sup>34</sup> Mark Twain ridiculed it. In stained glass windows and namesake schools at home and throughout the empire, the Saint lent his emblematic shield to the service of a declining church. His impersonality gave him utility as a universal tool even as it reduced him to a generic abstraction. As in his lineal descendants, Superman and the 1990s Mighty Morphin Rangers, the hyper-idealized warrior became progressively unable to hide his roots in infantile wishes. By the end of the century the conviction had mostly drained out of Queen Victoria's cult of Albert as fallen knight.

For a society "nerved up" by the stress of individualistic competition and the early skirmishes of "the sex war," the trope of the dragonslayer was especially equivocal and unstable. With his impressive steed and armor intimidating as the horns of a stag, the knight is putting on a courtship display for the benefit of the damsel and the spectator, just as paintings of St. George advertised the patron who could afford to display it. In evolutionary terms, male adornment in sexual displays "has an imposing and aggressive, not just a seductive meaning. Male dances are typically war dances. Male ceremonial tends to serve another general interest that can also get out of hand--the competitive taste for impressing, terrifying, and outdoing possible rivals. Where this taste takes charge, people may . . . be caught in an inconvenient and unbalanced pattern of life."<sup>35</sup>

The perfunctory character of chivalry for the late Victorians made its decay as myth also a sign of the impotence and marginality of men. Like the lamia or Stoker's white worm, the demonized lineaments of the erotic woman in Gothic romance signal depths of ambivalence the categories of heroic rescue could not manage. Dracula's paladins save Lucy Westenra from her own vampire-appetite by driving a stake through her heart like St. George skewering the dragon.<sup>36</sup> In his scandalous white slavery report, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," the journalist W. T. Stead invoked the blood sacrifice of maidens to the Minotaur, himself tacitly in the role of Theseus-St George, although that didn't prevent him from serving three months in prison for abduction.<sup>37</sup> Brother knights, Pre-Raphaelite and Wagnerian, came to fascinate male homosexuals of the day.<sup>38</sup> Even without the complications of feminism or romance scenarios which dispatch the maiden to rescue the knight<sup>39</sup> or, in Amazon variations, master him, the knight was already mired in paradox. After all, while the maiden remains passive in the dragonslayer tableau, she indirectly dominates the scene, not only as the embodiment of fertility and immortal posterity, but also as the justification of the knight's glorious, immortalizing violence. Without the maiden to valorize civilization, Teddy Roosevelt's noble imperialist would be just another predator, as the subject of Sir Frank Dicksee's painting Chivalry (1885) could be fratricidal competition, Cain and Abel.

Put the courtship-rescue in a Darwinian context, and the disenchantment becomes all the more unmanageable. St. George's triumph is no longer a celebration of noble will but an evolutionary compulsion. As in Oscar Wilde's nightmare image of the puppet theater, the knight is slave to a ruthless determinism. The discovery of our creatureliness has post-traumatic impact, for in the dragon St. George attacks the mortal body that must devour other living creatures in order to live--in Victorian iconography, the savage beast, cannibal, Martian, Morlock, and stealthy vampire. These images dissociate the awareness that we are "naturally" predators: that, in

Becker's eloquent account, "life on this planet is a gory spectacle, a science-fiction nightmare in which digestive tracts fitted with teeth at one end are tearing away at whatever flesh they can reach, and at the other end are piling up the fuming waste excrement as they move along in search of more flesh."<sup>40</sup>

The fantasy of St. George is a cultural effort to deny that reality by affirming the primacy of symbolic immortality. Even the Punch cartoon of Darwin as evolved worm sanitizes this terrifying reality by euphemizing the coiled, predatory, fanged digestive tract as the lowly, "friendly" worm. For late Victorians the dragonslayer's perfunctory, honorific status had become a sign of his defeat. This is one reason that Oscar Wilde's "Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) seems not simply subversive but desperately ingenious in identifying Nihilist heroism with "real Christianity." Very few of his contemporaries could look the traumatic Medusa in the eye--anymore than people could in the 1990s, where the Darwinian shock was beautifully euphemized in Jurassic Park (1993), for example, whose Darwinist-grandfather, manipulating evolution, recreates the voracious dinosaurs that drive the hero's family from the Edenic island park.

For the reasons I have sketched and more, St. George suffered grave injury at the end of the century, and the shock registered widely, although it took another decade before chivalry succumbed in the carnage of World War I. Heroic conviction is finally a social behavior. To be substantiated, for its energy to be synergistic for others, heroism needs witnessing. For two decades Burne-Jones worked over his painting of women grieving for King Arthur on his bier (1881-98). Like many other Victorian laments for lost heroes, this unfinished project of bereavement seems to signify not only parent-child mirroring (the figures posed as a Pieta, women and King reciprocally substantiating each other as parent to child), and not simply the power of pain and eulogy to confirm passing values, but also a fear that the lone maids' witness is poignant because heroism is "dead" and consensus gone. After all, among other things, Burne-Jones's farewell to Arthur was a feat of deadpan repression, screening out both implacably "healthy-minded" critics and the throngs of unruly ironies that were disturbing sentimental life everywhere outside his studio in the 90s. The year he began the painting (1881) the Magazine of Art was already deploring his art's "effeminacy" and its "union of pessimism and laxity."<sup>41</sup> In Vietnam-era America public voices fired off the same sort of moral salvos in denial when the American victory story was going the way of St. George.<sup>42</sup>

One sign of the impairment in heroic conviction is "the craze of suicide" which more than one newspaper reader felt was "palpably on the verge of breaking out among us."<sup>43</sup> The "craze" rushed into the void between impossible ideals and baffled will. As the alarum in the Daily Chronicle added, "The conditions of life are daily narrowing the relationship between the imagination and the will, with a too obvious consequence, namely the subjugation of the latter to the sensuous and mysterious potency of the former" (Stokes, 120). This coded attack on Decadent "genius" anticipates Nordau's protest that too much imagination is unravelling everyday "healthy" repression. Which is another way of disconfirming public worries that cultural models like the dragonslayer story were collapsing under the weight of contradictions. At the same time the protest ambivalently excuses readers too distressed for wholehearted repression by flattering--in the dragonslayer vocabulary--the imagination's "mysterious potency" and heroic drive to "subjugation."

The feeling of being suicidally overwhelmed by uncontrollable forces was exacerbated, as Stokes points out, by the massive scale of scientific studies like Henry Morselli's Suicide: an Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics, which seemed to confirm a frightening determinism at work. "The sense of panic that pervaded the coming of the fin de siecle was by no means unconnected with the way that statistical categories tended, in the hands of scientific enthusiasts like Morselli, to proliferate almost beyond control" (Stokes, 121). At the same time, as Weber argued, you can trace this obsessive rationality back to "the radical monotheism of the Bible, with its tendency to desacralize the natural order and to secularize the political order."<sup>44</sup> The following chapter takes up the suicide craze more closely, and argues that Conan Doyle used Sherlock Holmes's encyclopedic genius to tame the terror of thinking on a scientific, globalized scale.

Not that we are done mourning for St. George today. In the 1990s a "Christian thriller" could imagine St. George's dragon literally prowling the landscape of a depraved America.<sup>45</sup> Any number of dragonslayers have followed Flash Gordon into outer space. In Star Wars (1977, 1997), Luke Skywalker obeys the benevolent father Obi Wan Kenobi and uses a laser sword to defeat the predatory parent Darth Vader. In the Pyrrhic, post-traumatic Independence Day (1996) the warrior-knights have to annihilate the walled city (Houston) in order to stop the alien invader. Like these bracingly moralized scenarios, the 1990s fantasy of traumatic Satanic abuse is a version of the Saint's story inasmuch as it imagines predatory parents sacrificing children to the devouring demon as the walled city's inhabitants do, while the trauma victim, carried by a therapist-steed, takes the knight's role.<sup>46</sup>

For the rest of this book St. George serves as one index against which to measure historical change. Sherlock Holmes, for example, acts out a version of the knight's rescue, recovering a treasure chest with connotations of social power and absolute value. But the chest is empty. And just as St. George's triumph implies his martyrdom, so the novel concludes with its hero fighting despair with drug addiction, very like Nordau's "sick man, who feels himself dying by inches" in a dying world.

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- <sup>1</sup> "Letters from Ernest," ed. Harvey Bates, in The Christian Century (March 9, 1977), 227.
- <sup>2</sup> Max Nordau, Degeneration (London and New York, 1895, rpt. 1968, 1993), 2.3.
- <sup>3</sup> Roger L. Williams' phrase in The Horror of Life (Chicago, 1980).
- <sup>4</sup> John Stokes, In the Nineties (Chicago, 1993), 26.
- <sup>5</sup> See The American Scientist 81:3 (1993), 235. Koch's vaccine failed.
- <sup>6</sup> As in Renaissance paintings by Rogier van der Weyden, Carpaccio, Tintoretto, and Uccello. In a painting reproduced in my Play, Death, and Heroism in Shakespeare (1988), David Vinckboons depicts Death, reinforced by Father Time, assaulting a throng of citizens who are trying to defend the gate of their walled city (93).
- <sup>7</sup> E.g., the mummers' play of St. George in Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas, ed. Joseph Q. Adams (Cambridge, Mass., 1924), which was still being played in Leicestershire in the 1860s (355).
- <sup>8</sup> Punch (December 1881). Reproduced in Wolf Von Eckardt, Sander L. Gilman, and J. Edward Chamberlin, eds., Oscar Wilde's London (Garden City, 1987) 172.
- <sup>9</sup> Rossetti painted St. George more than once; Sir Edward Burne-Jones labored over his dead King Arthur for nearly twenty years (1881-98); while Herbert James Draper's The Lament for Icarus (1898) gives defeat and death an erotic, pubescent glow.
- <sup>10</sup> The sociologist Edward A. Ross, who coined the term "race suicide," warned that "the same manly virtues which had once allowed the 'Superior Race' to evolve the highest civilization [i.e., excessive self-discipline and sexual self-control] now threatened that race's very survival." See Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization (Chicago, 1995), 200.
- <sup>11</sup> Frederick Wedmore, "Some Tendencies in Recent Painting," Temple Bar 55 (July 1878), quoted in The Grosvenor Gallery: a Palace of Art in Victorian England, ed. Susan

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P. Casteras and Colleen Denney (New Haven, 1996), 84. For other samples of critical anxiety about morbidity see 81-86.

<sup>12</sup> The best survey of the genre is I. F. Clarke's Voices Prophesying War (Oxford and New York, 1962, 2nd ed. 1992). Although Clarke finds continuity in the genre across the 19th Century, in War Machine: the Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age (1993, rpt. 1996) Daniel Pick notes that "at other points [Clarke] acknowledges that 1870-1 marked a watershed" (118). Clarke and Pick provide detailed accounts of the panics that recurred in Britain until 1914.

<sup>13</sup> In a speech at Whitby on September 3, 1871, Gladstone inveighed against alarmist stories like Chesney's that "make us ridiculous in the eyes of the whole world. I do not say that the writers of them are not sincere--that is another matter--but I do say that the result of these things is practically the spending of more and more of your money. Be on your guard against alarmism. Depend on it that there is not this astonishing disposition on the part of all mankind to make us the objects of hatred" (Clarke, 34).

<sup>14</sup> Tom Engelhardt's term in The End of Victory Culture (New York, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> See section 5 of Chapter Twelve.

<sup>16</sup> In mystical Judaism the vessels broken at the world's creation are restored in the divine communion of tikkun. See Gershon Scholem, Kabbalah (New York, 1974), 142-43.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert Pattison, The Child Figure in English Literature (Athens, GA., 1978), 74, and also Lloyd deMause, ed., The History of Childhood (New York, 1975), chs. 1 and 2.

<sup>18</sup> Cardinal Newman, Apologia pro Vita Sua, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford, 1967), 218.

<sup>19</sup> Norman Cohn, Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought (New Haven and London, 1996), 101.

<sup>20</sup> In The Uncertainty of Analysis (Cornell, 1989) Timothy J. Reiss points out that the libertarian faith of "New Right" thinkers and extreme evangelical fundamentalism both

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"seem predicated upon a quasi-Rousseauesque notion of socialization as a Fall from Edenic grace and of religion as an offer of (political and cultural) redemption." He adds that "such demagogues as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and the rest are busy elaborating abstract myths that serve not only as concealing receptacles for despair but as simplifying mystifications of real sociocultural praxis in all its complexity. A similar phenomenon is at work, it would appear, in some feminist and/or psychoanalytic views of the socialization of the individual as a fall from its own wholeness (the Platonic myth of the undivided complete being is seemingly tenacious)." Reiss finds this dynamic in Cixous, Lacan, Kristeva, and Derrida (139-40). It is worth keeping in mind that Romantic love proposes that eros is a response to traumatic origins, since in Plato's myth the union of lovers recreates the original four-legged human animal that the gods had sundered in a stroke of originary violence.

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive survey see Joseph Fontenrose, Python (Berkeley, 1959, rpt. 1980), which is centered on the combat of Apollo with the dragon Python in the origin myth of Apollo's Delphic shrine. As for Christ, John Bale envisions him at Calvary defeating "the great Dragon, or captayn of all the vnfaithful sort, that olde croked serpent which deceyued Adam." John Bale, The Image of bothe churches (1548?), sig. e vii, STC 1297.

<sup>22</sup> "Consider the argument that group-living intensifies reproductive competition between individuals and requires continual pressure from some outside selective forces such as predators to persist. It implies that human society is a network of lies and deception, persisting only because systems of conventions about permissible kinds and extends of lying have arisen." Richard D. Alexander, "The Search for a General Theory of Behavior," Behavioral Science 20 (1975), 96. Although Alexander goes beyond this bleak vision of society in his account of human motives, the vision has a grain of truth worth noting.

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<sup>23</sup> See the entry "Trauma" (also "Traumatic Neurosis" and "War Neurosis") in Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts, ed. Burness E. Moore, M.D., and Bernard D. Fine, M.D. (New Haven, 1990). Freud discusses trauma in Moses and Monotheism, in the Standard Edition, 23: 3-137. Also see "Psychic Trauma," in Psychic Trauma, ed. S. S. Furst (New York, 1967), pp. 3-50.

<sup>24</sup> George Frederick Drinka, M.D., The Birth of Neurosis (New York, 1984), 114-15).

<sup>25</sup> "Psychologically, the father-figure occupies a place analogous to that of the dragon, as does the monster in the story of Oedipus. In slaying the dragon and redeeming the kingdom, Redcrosse puts to death the Old Adam." James Nohrnberg, The Analogy of the Faerie Queene (Princeton, 1980), 185.

<sup>26</sup> And what of the maiden? In the folk tales, the rescuer marries her, assumes the throne, and becomes the next lord. In the Christian story the Virgin Mary mourns for her crucified son. In a painting by Hans Baldung Grien "Mary and Angels Weeping for Christ as man of Sorrows" (1513), she grieves for her suffering son in heaven, monitored from a distance by the faintly visible Father, while from the infinite horizon, flowing into the foreground as if released in fertile abundance by the sacrificial death of Christ, come swarms of infantile putti, fecundity released by obedient death. Sacrifice in the service of the father earns the son his mother's love. In effect, mother validates the sacrificial compact with tears that ambiguously reinforce the father's dominance and her own emotional bond to her son. This is one expression in Christian Europe of the misogynistic suspicion that women always have divided loyalties. It also confirms the trauma of the Edenic curse: that new life means the death of the old.

<sup>27</sup> For a history of millennialism, see Norman Cohn's The Pursuit of the Millennium (New York, 1961) and Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come (New Haven, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> See Nohrnberg, 139-41, 184-85. In The Faerie Queene he appears as Redcrosse.

<sup>29</sup> Blake's Preface to Milton epitomizes the call to otherworldly idealism:



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I wil not cease from Mental Fight,  
 Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand;  
 Till we have built Jerusalem,  
 In Englands green & pleasant Land.

The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.J., 1982), 95.

<sup>30</sup> The antebellum historical romances southerners such as George Tucker and William Gilmore Simms use a recurring plot in which a young planter rescues a planter's daughter from an "enemy" of her class. See Susan J. Tracy, In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Black, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature, (Amherst, Mass., 1995).

<sup>31</sup> In Carnegie's smarmy prose, the gospel of wealth "calls upon the millionaire to "sell all that he hath and give it in the highest and best form to the poor by administering his estate himself for the good of his fellows, before he is called upon to lie down and rest upon the bosom of Mother Earth." He will thus be incalculably enriched by "the affection, gratitude, and admiration of his fellow-men, and . . . soothed and sustained by the still, small voice within, which, whispering, tells him that, because he has lived, perhaps one small part of the great world has been bettered just a little" (Ch. 2).

<sup>32</sup> Alger composed an epitaph that assembles a mock-apotheosis for himself out of the titles of his novels: "Six feet underground reposes Horatio Alger, Helping Himself to a part of the earth, not Digging for Gold or In Search of Treasure, but Struggling Upward and Bound to Rise at last In a New World where it shall be said he is Risen from the Ranks." See the introduction to Ragged Dick and Mark, the Match Boy, ed. Rychard Fink (New York, 1962), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Shakespeare is full of jokes about chivalric pretensions, as when the absurdly shipwrecked Prince Pericles finds his father's rusted armor washed ashore and uses it to

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wow a hostile father-in-law in a jousting tournament. Then there is Montague whose wordplay describes the lovesick Romeo as "an artificial night" (RJ, 1.1.143).

<sup>34</sup> In the Lady Lever Art Gallery is a fatuous silver table centerpiece by Edward Onslow Ford, which depicts the saint standing atop the slain dragon with his sword raised in a the stilted pose suggesting a military parade.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Midgley, Beast, and Man: The Roots of Human Nature (Cornell, 1978), 264)

<sup>36</sup> In Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic (Chicago, 1995) Anne Williams notes the role of St. George in *Dracula* (pp. 133-34) and associates it with the "antifeminism" she finds in what she calls "the Male Gothic" (pp. 135-36).

<sup>37</sup> See Judith Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight (Chicago, 1992), Chs. 3, 4. On both sides of the Atlantic the Saint's walled city is a model for Victorian rescue homes for fallen women, including Angela Burdett Coutts' interestingly named Urania Cottage, which Dickens managed for over a decade. See Amanda Anderson, Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture (Ithaca, 1993), pp. 68-79; also Sally Mitchell, The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading, 1835-1880 (Bowling Green, 1981).

<sup>38</sup> See "Knights Errant," in Douglass Shand-Tucci, Boston Bohemia, 1881-1900 (Amherst, 1995), 415-55. Parsifal, claims Richard Mohr, became a "shadowy center of a world of male homosexual attractions." See Gay Ideas (Boston, 1992), 223.

<sup>39</sup> As when the heroine of Pretty Woman (1990) vows that once rescued by her knight, she would "rescue him right back." See Chapter 10, Section 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil (New York, 1975), 1.

<sup>41</sup> In Casteras and Denny, eds., 90.

<sup>42</sup> E. g., Spiro Agnew's famous "nattering nabobs of negativism." See the discussion of President Reagan's response to storylessness in the introduction to Part Two.

<sup>43</sup> Holden Sampson, Daily Chronicle (London), August 18, 1893. In Stokes, 120.

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<sup>44</sup> Richard L. Rubenstein, The Age of Triage (Boston, 1983), 2.

<sup>45</sup> Frank Peretti, The Oath (Word Publishing, 1995).

<sup>46</sup> See Chapter Seven. In Robert Zemeckis' comic recuperation of the story, Back to the Future (1985), a son travels back in time from the 1980s to the 1950s and saves his father from the traumatic bullying that would otherwise make him the emasculated, harried patriarch of the 1980s we see at the start of the movie. The son, that is, saves manhood from the fate which the fin de siècle dreaded.