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Desired Darkness in the Mirror: R.K. Morgan and J.R.R. Tolkien

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Abstract

R.K. Morgan's grimdark fantasy trilogy *A land fit for heroes* explicitly and clearly challenges some of the fundamental imaginative pillars of Tolkien's poetics, drawing on an 'alternative' tradition that looked to the paths previously trodden by Eddison, Anderson, Moorcock, and to the attempts of noir and cyberpunk to express a postmodern sense of tragedy in new forms, in explicit dialogue with the questions raised by George Steiner and not only. But it is precisely this stark contrast that highlights, in a way that is by no means obvious, the profound dialectic woven into Tolkien's own work.

Keywords

J.R.R. Tolkien, R.K. Morgan, Grimdark, Tragedy, World War 1.



Desired Darkness in the Mirror: R.K. Morgan and J.R.R. Tolkien

Edoardo Rialti

*The inhabitants of the sky... when they saw that man,
standing in the midst of the vertigo of the universe,
demanding a mad battle, they were speechless,
overcome with amazement, and turned pale, doubting
the power of lightning.*

Statius

*The sword that Dido used.
It tries to speak, A bird with Dido's sworded breast.
Its beak Clangs and ejaculates the
Punic word I hear the bird-priest chirping like a bird.
I groan a little. "Who am I, and why?" It asks,
a boy's face, though its arrow-eye
Is working from its socket.
"Brother, try, O Child of Aphrodite, try to die: To die
is life."*

Robert Lowell

1. Premise. Howling against the storm. Hated sweet death.

*Ringil lifts his head and lets the blood patter down on
his face like rain. He howls, counterpoint to the
keening wind, a lament for everything that never was
and now has gone away. His bloodied gaze drops to
the ranks of the dwenda facing him.*

Richard Morgan

The ship travelling is called Agony 937.

Giorgios Seferis

Antigone screams. In front of the palace of Thebes, which in Jean Anouilh's 1944 version is also—significantly—Nazi-occupied France, torn between partisans and collaborators. She screams her uncompromising contempt as the infernal and petty machine of bourgeois power closes in on her like a trap: «You all disgust me with your happiness! With your life that must be loved at all costs. Like dogs licking everything they find. And this little fortune for every day, if you're not too demanding»¹. That cry had already been taken up by the Chorus in a broader, even calm meta-literary reflection on the genre of tragedy itself, on the ultimate nature of its dynamics and what it arouses in the spectator, on the emotional, cognitive and action landscape in which it places or reveals them, as if lifting a curtain on the vast emptiness of the steppe.

In tragedy, one is calm. First of all, we are among ourselves. We are all innocent, in short. It is not because there is one who kills and one who is killed. It is a question of distribution. And then, above all, tragedy is restful, because we know that there is no more hope, no dirty hope; that we will be caught, that in the end we will be caught like a mouse, with the whole sky above us, and that all that remains is to cry out – not moan, no, not complain – to shout at the top of our voices what we had to say, what we had never said and perhaps did not yet know. And for nothing: to say it to oneself, to learn it for oneself. In drama, one struggles because one hopes to get out of it. It is ignoble, it is utilitarian. Tragedy is gratuitous. It is for kings. And in the end, there is nothing left to try!²

What is the nature of that cry at the top of one's voice against everyone and no one in particular, blasphemy or whatever else it is, what does it imply and express? As in Sylvia Plath's verses about the statue of the Virgin contemplating a stretch of sea known for its sunken ships and dead, even human prayer and the deafness of the universe seem to feed off each other, caught together by the same flash of imagery:

Souls, rolled in the doom-noise of the sea.
They bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them.
They go up without hope, like sighs.
I walk among them, and they stuff my mouth with cotton.
When they free me, I am beaded with tears.
Our Lady of the Shipwrecked is striding toward the horizon,
Her marble skirts blown back in two pink wings.
A marble sailor kneels at her foot distractedly, and at his foot

¹ Anouilh 1960.

² *Ibid.*

A peasant woman in black
Is praying to the monument of the sailor praying.
Our Lady of the Shipwrecked is three times life size,
Her lips sweet with divinity.
She does not hear what the sailor or the peasant is saying —
She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea³.

Wondering about the ‘attenuation’ of the tragic mode in relation to other more rational and often consoling outcomes of the progressivism inherent in modern and contemporary literature after Rousseau, connected to the persistence of monotheistic religious confessions or even more to their ideological-political substitutes such as Marxism or psychoanalysis, George Steiner reflected that for an ‘authentic’ modern tragedy, different from mere ‘drama’ and its happy or dark outcome, it is necessary

to start from the fact of catastrophe. Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This again is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved by technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy. More pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of Agamemnon; social psychiatry is no answer to Oedipus. But saner economic relations or better plumbing can resolve some of the grave crises in the dramas of Ibsen. The distinction should be borne sharply in mind. Tragedy is irreparable⁴.

From this perspective, the progressive reduction of the human position in the cosmos to a mere market, where everything can be subject to transition and mediation, even pain and death, would exclude an authentic tragic view, and both a providential reading of existence (as in Christianity) and confidence in the outcome of the political, intellectual and social struggles of reformist movements would participate in the same repression, with artistic outcomes centred precisely on drama or melodrama. Not that the terrible contemporary events of individual and collective history are not ‘tragic’, but our vocabulary has become impoverished in expressing them, lacking that metaphysical laceration between man and the cosmos. Steiner’s position has been and continues to be the subject of profound debate, both because of the accusation of ‘Aristotelian elitism’ levelled at him by Raynard Williams and because of the attempts by complex theologians such as Balthasar or (Rowan) Williams to

³ Plath 2018.

⁴ Steiner 2013.

justify a possible *Christian tragedy*, perhaps taking its cue from authors cited by Steiner himself (whose reflections on the subject are fluctuating and ambiguous), such as Racine, Marlowe or Shakespeare. It is precisely with a quotation from Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* on the perennial silence of the sea—as in Plath's verses—that R.K. Morgan's *The Dark Defiles*, the final volume of his fantasy trilogy *A Land fit for Heroes*, opens. It is an unusual choice to use a literary essay on Sophocles, Hegel and Brecht as the epigraph for a novel about elves, radioactive dragons and resurrected sorcerers. The grimdark genre or subgenre itself is often reductively described as 'ugly, dirty and nasty' *post-Tolkien fantasy*, influenced by trailblazers such as G.R.R. Martin—to name the most famous and conspicuous—which would distort and overturn, or at least contaminate, the tropes of classic *high fantasy* with elements of noir, western and historical fiction in an atmosphere of moral relativism. The verb 'defile' in the title of Morgan's trilogy—following *The Steel Remains* and *The Cold Commands*—also seems to allude to a meta-literary dimension, an action performed 'on fantasy' itself, an impression reinforced by the review of another famous author associated with *grimdark*, Joe Abercrombie: «Bold, brutal, and making no compromises—Richard K. Morgan doesn't so much twist the clichés of fantasy as take an axe to them. Then set fire to them»⁵. All this would seem to be *iuxta propria principia* in explicit contrast, at least, with certain precepts of Tolkien's work, which remains, to a large extent, the decisive watershed in the history of contemporary fantasy. In Morgan's specific case, we will see how this reversal began precisely with an explicit challenge to Tolkien's moral universe. But is it Tolkien *himself* or certain elements of his wider reception in the vulgate? This is also a question worth reflecting on. Perhaps it is precisely such a radically *different* view from Tolkien's (or from any trivialisation of him), which aims to draw on and express in a contemporary language a tentatively 'tragic' worldview in the Steinerian sense, that allows us, as if looking in a mirror, to better grasp the complexities of the contested source and also the choices that have been made from it in relation to a complex and ambiguous pre-existing material. Tolkien himself, in coining the term he believed to be at the heart of fairy-tale "consolation" in his essay *On Fairy Stories*, declared that *Eucatastrophe*, the sudden irruption of saving joy, does not circumvent or deny the catastrophe proper to tragedy, but rather presupposes it. Galadriel's words, «for ere the fall of Nargothrond or Gondolin I passed over the mountains, and together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat»⁶, overlap with the author's own confession in a letter: «Actually I am a

⁵ Abercrombie 2008.

⁶ LotR: 357.

Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’—though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory»⁷. Yet, to summarise the *leitmotif* of his *legendary work* and the emotional tone that runs through it, Tolkien would have resorted not to the words of Augustine or Newman, but to the ‘tragic’ reflection – here too in the Steinerian sense? – of post-war French existentialism, summarised by the atheist and feminist Simone de Beauvoir in *A Very Sweet Death*: «There is no such thing as a natural death; nothing that happens to Man is ever natural, since his presence calls the world into question. All men are mortal: but for each man his death is a chance accident, and even if he knows it and consents to it, an undue violence»⁸.

2. Broken swords. Battle in the Perilous Realm.

“Legends are written down by mortals, floundering in the details of their world, seeking significance for their acts where usually there is none.” The corpse hobbled back to its seat by the fire. “You would do well not to set too much store by such tales.”

R.K. Morgan

Let us therefore take the subject of epic poetry from stories of true religion, but not from those of such authority that they are unalterable.

Torquato Tasso

«Faithful heart may have forward *tongue*» admits King Theoden regarding his nephew Eomer's rebellion. «‘Say also,’ said Gandalf, ‘that to crooked eyes truth may wear a wry face’»⁹. In Tolkien, it is often those who transgress the “letter” of even a hierarchical relationship who save its “spirit” in a Pauline manner. This is true of Éomer, and it will be true of Faramir and Beregon towards Denethor, and even more profoundly of Sam towards Frodo and the Ring. It is tempting to read this profound dynamic of Tolkien's narrative as a kind of *a priori* commentary on Tolkien's own legacy. As Henri De Lubac noted, the difference between a disciple and a son lies precisely in what the son brings to the table beyond the mere devout imitation of the disciple. It has often

⁷ *Letters*: n. 195.

⁸ De Beauvoir 1985.

⁹ LotR: 521 ff.

been the rebellious heirs—who are not limited to slavishly reproducing Tolkien’s framework but translate-betray his most significant artistic challenges and achievements into a different horizon, which includes additions and modifications, and even contestations and different perspectives on certain fundamental axes—who have “saved” Tolkien, grafting his vision and all its fruitfulness onto a new imaginative landscape, capable once again of speaking as much to the present as to the future. This has been the case, to varying degrees, for S. King, U.K. Le Guin, J.K. Rowling and, once again, G.R.R. Martin, to name but a few of the names that have had the greatest impact on subsequent generations of authors and readers. It is precisely the 'betrayals' committed in Dumbledore with regard to Gandalf or Roland of Gilead towards Aragorn/Frodo that express and allow for a more complete and profound loyalty to Tolkien's essence. But what can be said of those who have instead tackled the legacy of the previous work head-on, judging it not as a source of admiration to be integrated into their own particular perspective, but merely the reverse side of a tapestry, whose threads they would tear apart for the authentic colours of a painting in which we might indeed glimpse a faithful expression of our existence on earth, emerging only in a few places through this filter-concealment? Not merely by appealing to their own different and subsequent (more evolved or vast) vision of the world and art, but even by accusing the other, previous vision of having removed and dulled a much older and more comprehensive imaginative tradition?

To reflect on an important path taken by *post-Tolkien fantasy*, we must first return to the *pre-Tolkien fantasy* world, specifically in England, on the threshold of its definitive change due to the release of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s. «*Private worlds have hitherto been mainly the work of decadents or, at least, mere aesthetes. This is the private world of a Christian*»¹⁰, wrote C. S. Lewis about Tolkien’s work to Charles Brady in 1944. Lewis was certainly thinking of W. Morris and R. Haggard—at least in part contrasting them with the “Faerie romances” that had spread from Spenser’s moral Tudor allegories to F. Novalis and then to “his Virgil”, the Scottish pastor G. McDonald—and even more so he was referring to his contemporary E.R. Eddison, who was even a guest of the Inklings, including Lewis and Tolkien, at an evening of readings at Magdalene College. Lewis (and Tolkien himself) admired the imaginative power and mixture of «Nordic harshness and Renaissance sensuality»¹¹ in Eddison's works set in *Zimiamvia*, although Lewis himself was careful to explain how distant he found the underlying “superhuman” philosophy. Lewis’s reading of Tolkien (both in its most authentic complexity, for which reference

¹⁰ Lewis 2006.

¹¹ Lewis 1983.

should be made to the decisive review of *The Lord of the Rings* itself, and in its most superficial reception) has often divided opinion, and not only among critics, leading to detractors not only among the standard-bearers of so-called realistic literature (E. Wilson, etc.) but also among travellers in the “Perilous Realm” itself, by those who felt themselves to be the spokesmen and heirs of another tradition of *fantasy*, drawing on both ancient sources and more recent works, in the light of which Tolkien's synthesis and transformation no longer constituted *the* fantastic but only *a* very specific fantastic, infused with a sensitivity and moral perspective that they did not recognise at all as unique or predominant. In the same year that *The Fellowship of the Ring* was published, another novel appeared overseas, which also included poetic interludes similar to those in Norse sagas and about a mythical weapon that had been broken, like the Narsil of Elendil and Aragorn: *The Broken Sword* by Paul Anderson, a work that only partially fitted into *the heroic fantasy genre* already attempted by R. Howard or by R. Haggard, and which, in its refined stylistic texture, managed to revive some of the complex *topoi* of the genre, albeit in a decidedly more ambiguous key than Tolkien's metaphysical horizon and, in some ways, even more faithful to how these elements came from fairy-tale folklore and sagas at the twilight of Norse paganism. The story featured an elven prince who agreed to copulate with a troll hag to produce a 'changeling' to replace the human child he would raise as his heir in his land of pleasures and enchantments, making him a poet-magician and lover of nymphs, while the other would become a cursed and deadly *berserker* like Hrevor or Siegfried.

It is precisely this dark tale of fratricidal hatred, incest and mad gods in exile that M. Moorcock explicitly refers to in *Wizardry and Wild Romance* when he rails against the middle-class *Old Merry England* of what he saw as a kind of single bloc, ChestertonBellocLewisTolkien and the bourgeois-Christian-imperialist traditionalism that C. Kilby had in turn superimposed in a conservative key, even venturing to merge the success of *The Lord of the Rings* with the general emotion at W. Churchill's funeral. From this perspective, Tolkien would be the most successful example of a long post-Victorian compromise, the Bible mixed with Winnie the Pooh, according to Moorcock's own famous expression, an epic *quest* in pocket-sized and reassuring form that would confirm the certainties of his own small Western Christian middle class. Moorcock opposed this with another fantasy, ancient and new, so to speak, capable of repropounding what he felt was a more fruitful dialogue with the critical demands of a contemporary world—which the 'return to order' of Lewis and Tolkien would have done nothing but circumvent or defuse—and the cognitive, moral, sexual and political postures capable of delving into a world that, starting in the 1960s, contested or rejected these old values *altogether*. In this summary 'relay race', it was Moorcock's works, with their heroes persecuted by fate,

incestuous, drug addicts, evoking the very demons they oppose, that would strike the imagination and sensibility of a British boy in the 1970s, who many years later, having himself become a successful writer in that supposed realm of fantasy and science fiction, would write a preface in honour of the man who had conceived Elric of Melniboné and his ill-fated sword Stormbringer.

3. Full of noise and fury: a chat on the steps of Cirith Ungol

'Francisco Franco,' said Kawahara, mistaking the direction of my gaze for focused interest. 'Petty tyrant a long time back. He built this place.'

'Trepp said it belonged to the Catholics.'

Kawahara shrugged. 'Petty tyrant with delusions of religion. Catholics get on well with tyranny. It's in the culture.'

R.K. Morgan

This war has the very quality of the war my generation knew. It is all here: the endless, unintelligible movement, the sinister quiet of the front when 'everything is now ready', the flying civilians, the lively, vivid friendships, the background of something like despair and the merry foreground, and such heaven-sent windfalls as a cache of choice tobacco 'salvaged' from a ruin.

Clive Staples Lewis

In his preface to an online fantasy anthology, more recent than his own fantasy trilogy and a programmatic and clearly oppositional intervention with respect to Tolkien, which sparked a certain debate—it certainly cannot be said that Morgan is averse to or shies away from controversy—Morgan resorted to a simile to describe the creative process of fantasy authors and the illusion they manage to cast on the reader:

In the end, we're conjurers.

Magicians of stage or street, depending, perhaps, on how venerable and well-appointed the furniture of our act turns out to be. Mr. Tolkien, now—he's an old school stage gent, with his intricately painted hardwood cabinets and baroque mirrors bought a great cost from Venice; snow white

doves, a beautiful assistant or two, Toledo blades that glitter in the low theatre lights.¹²

It almost seems like the proverbial olive branch extended in partial peace or honour of arms, seasoned with a touch of condescension, if you will, towards an old-school exponent who is nonetheless highly respected. Years earlier (around the time of the release of *The Steel Remains*), Morgan had been much more radical and explicit in expressing his aversion to Tolkien's moral and imaginative cosmos, which China Miéville also defined as ethical and metaphysical "absolutism". This was the decade following Jackson's film trilogy, with its many imitators, including in the publishing world. The objection, as we have seen, was not new and was part of a debate that predated the *fantasy revival*. Perhaps the most relevant element to note, however, is the detail from which Morgan takes his cue, a scene from Tolkien's own novel, praised in contrast to the rest, and which, in certain linguistic respects, had already been analysed with a somewhat similar perspective by *Tolkien scholar* T. Shippey in his *Trees and Branches*, namely the dialogue overheard by Sam between the two Orc sentries on the stairs of Cirith Ungol:

I'm not much of a Tolkien fan – not since I was about twelve or fourteen anyway (which, it strikes me, is about the right age to read and enjoy his stuff). But it would be a foolish writer in the fantasy field who failed to acknowledge the man's overwhelming significance in the canon. And it would be a poor and superficial reader of Tolkien who failed to acknowledge that in amongst all the overwrought prose, the nauseous paeans to class-bound rural England, and the endless bloody elven singing that infests *The Lord of the Rings*, you can sometimes discern the traces of a bleak underlying human landscape which is completely at odds with the epic fantasy narrative for which the book is better known... The orcs are disenchanting, poorly informed and constantly stressed by the uncertainties that lack of information brings. They suspect that the war might be going badly for their side, and that their commanders, far from being infallible, seem to be making some serious errors of judgment. They worry that if their side loses, they can expect scant mercy from their victorious enemies. They mutter their misgivings sotto voce because they know that there are informers in the ranks and a culture of enforcement through terror bearing down from above. They also seem possessed of a rough good humour and some significant loyalty to the soldiers they command. And they're not enjoying the war any more than Frodo or Samwise; they want it to be over just as much as anybody else. For me,

¹² Morgan 2017.

this is some of the finest, most engaging work in *The Lord of the Rings*... The great shame is, of course, that Tolkien was not able (or inclined) to mine this vein of experience for what it was really worth – in fact he seemed to be in full, panic-stricken flight from it. I suppose it's partially understandable – the generation who fought in the First World War got to watch every archetypal idea they had about Good and Evil collapse in reeking bloody ruin around them. It takes a lot of strength to endure something like that and survive, and then to re-draw your understanding of things to fit the uncomfortable reality you've seen¹³.

And it is precisely from a line spoken by the Orc Gorbag that Morgan draws the epigraph for *The Cold Commands*. That dark and sharp fragment of a larger and fiercer reality, capable of breaking through any moral chessboard, from which Tolkien would have deviated (out of “cowardice”, Moorcock had accused him, Morgan's judgement is at least more equitable), would be precisely what Morgan aspired to confront and express in his own way. Not merely “*fantasy* from the side of the Orcs”, but *fantasy* in which that hinted note served as a *leitmotif*. *A Land Fit for Heroes* (with its bitter reference to Lloyd George's post-war rhetoric and to the numerous songs about First World War veterans) comes after Morgan's first cyberpunk trilogy and a few more or less related stand-alone novels in a chronology of humanity's colonial expansion into space that spans centuries, if not millennia. The primary source of inspiration for *Altered Carbon* and its digital consciousness was obviously Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The connections with the openly *fantasy* setting of the subsequent trilogy remain a subject of speculation and debate among readers and, although some hints and references are explicit, the author himself wanted to leave a fair amount of room for interpretation. Another primary source for *Altered* was the *noir* of Ellroy and, before that, Hammett and Chandler, whose detectives, broken by life and little better than the criminals and murderers they investigated, owed much to the world of veterans in the 1920s, *trench* coats included. At one point in the first volume, the protagonist Takeshi Kovacs, a former soldier, ex-criminal and new and rebellious private investigator—on whose name we will return to later—is branded by an adversary with a Shakespearean quote «Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing»¹⁴, a definition that somehow fits many, if not all, of Morgan's heroes, in their mixture of anger at the cruel obtuseness of human power and the perennial tendency of individuals to self-deceive, violence and secret anguish for the wounds they

¹³ Morgan 2009.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V, v.

carry and hide, disillusionment, lost loves, betrayals and wrong choices. As he explained to this same writer in an interview,

Many of my characters, and certainly Kovacs, are spectators of other people's happiness. At best, he can try to help someone else be happy, or escape from something, precisely because he knows that this is now denied to him. He has surpassed this possibility, there are too many wounds, too much in his past that prevents him from doing so. It is as if he has been cut off. If you cannot fix your own life, you can at least try to fix someone else's a little. A primary human impulse, I would say, and since I became a father, I feel it even more intensely¹⁵.

So if, to a certain extent, even this initial basic setting draws on and echoes the same devastating historical circumstances that gave rise to both Chandler's Marlowe and Tolkien's Beren and Lúthien, what seems so far removed from Tolkien's universe and its themes actually shares some of its fundamental questions. Death, Machines and Immortality. The world of *Altered Carbon* is also permeated by the same question about what happens to our identity and existence when they are altered by an extension in space and time, what it means to love, to die, to leave something meaningful in the world in the face of the potential prospect of indefinite prolongation and the disappearance of what seem to be the natural and even beneficial limitations of our relationship with the universe.

To a certain extent, one might argue that even the intuition of carrying out dynamics that are now entirely human—and post-human, given the presence of artificial consciousness—on planets where the ruins of a lost ancient Martian civilisation still emerge, towards which anxieties and desires for emulation are projected- distant dialogues against the increasingly evanescent *elven* backdrop of Tolkien's narrative.

4. The Great War I

Ringil glanced about - the Yhelteth flank, crumpling and tearing like cheap armour under repeated blows as the reptile advance slammed into them, the criss-cross panic of fleeing soldiery from the shattered lines and the screams of those broken or burnt or ripped apart all along the beach, the landing barges fleeing back across the bight, evacuating those lucky

¹⁵ Morgan 2018.

enough to make the shallows ... Yeah, he told Naranash. We're winning.

R.K. Morgan

Where I was, if I really had to die, I would have liked music that was more mine, more alive to face that moment. You can't change. You can still kick the bucket, but to exhaust poetry, poetry is everything that comes before, all the slaughter, the tribulations, the tortures that precede the final strangulation. So you have to be very brief or very rich.

Louis Ferdinand Céline

The four quotations at the beginning of the trilogy are taken respectively from the aforementioned Anderson, Tolkien, Steiner and from Ian Banks' experimental novel on amnesia and imagination *The Bridge*, tracing the framework of meaning of the entire narrative fresco and the underlying cognitive and moral perspective:

‘I think you look on death as your friend,’ she murmured. ‘That is a strange friend for a young man to have.’ ‘The only faithful friend in this world,’ he said bitterly. ‘Death is always sure to be at your side.’¹⁶

‘I tell you, it’s no game serving down in the city’¹⁷

Call for justice or explanation, and the sea will thunder back with its mute clamour. Men’s accounts with the gods do not balance.¹⁸

Dinnae ask me how majic works ... but wun way or the uthir it canny be oll its craked up tae be or ah suppose the wurld woold be toatally fukin wunderffil an happy an aw that an folk woold live in peece an harminy an so on; thatill be the day, if ye ask me. Enyway its no like that ataw, so it isnay, an just as well to, say I, coz utherwyse thay wooldnae need peepil like me (an itid be ded fukin boarin to). Naw, ahm doin no to bad these days; servises mutch in dimand ...¹⁹

We are in the years following a terrifying war—in its atavistic terror of being devoured alive—which saw different human cultures laboriously and

¹⁶ Morgan 2008.

¹⁷ Morgan 2011.

¹⁸ Morgan 2014.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

precariously united against the invasion of the Scaled People, while the clouds of a new conflict gather, or rather two overlapping conflicts, one purely political, the other supernatural: the rekindling of hostilities between the League of Free Cities and the Empire of Yeledeth—which owes much to the Istanbul where Morgan lived for a long time—in the usual deadly mixture of ambition, oppression and greed, and, far more fearsome, the return of the mythical Dwenda Elves, who centuries ago ruled the world and humans with magic and now seem on the verge of invading once again in the wake of a prophesied wizard-king: «A fight is coming, a battle of powers you have not yet seen. A battle that will unmake you, that will tear you apart. A dark lord will rise, his coming is in the wind off the marsh»²⁰. Both planes are intertwined like blocks of granite rotating in an even more complex geometry, the diagrams traced by a pantheon of ancient gods—themselves partially sidelined by the centralising monotheism of the Southern Empire—whose names eerily echo those of the *still-human* protagonists of the previous sci-fi trilogy. Dakovash-Takeshi Kovacs, Kelgris-Quellcris, Firfidar-Virginia Vidaura... So where are we? In a world that *has moved forward* and then *backward*, where only the luminous trail of what was once the moon shines at night, pulverised by what atomic conflict? Have some digital consciousnesses expanded so far into time that they have become forces of the universe, subject in turn to greater and more inscrutable powers, like the Norse or Greek gods were to the Norns or Moirae? What difference is there, after all, between magic and technology? In a partial departure from his previous works – *Black Man* had already opted for this approach – the story here alternates regularly between three different protagonists and, like his *sci-fi noir* detectives, Morgan's 'heroes' are veterans of trenches not unlike those known to Tolkien and Ungaretti in the post-war period and the 'Return to Order' so opposed by Moorcock and his ilk, and it is precisely in the war behind them that their very different solitudes have come together and bonded in deep friendship and, at an even more radical level, which emerges in semi-silent fragments and gestures that make it even more intense, whatever you want to call it, love. Three archetypes overturned or broken, three rejections of their own environments, of which they are both the fulfilment and the contestation. Ringil Eskiath (a name that includes both an explicit Tolkien reference, taken from one of the ice pillars of the world and then from the sword of the elven king Fingolfin, and an acronym from the aforementioned Takeshi...) is a charismatic and handsome knight of the Free Cities, an intrepid leader bordering on recklessness, and an outcast from his family and community because of his homosexuality, which he flaunts with a brazenness that is perhaps

²⁰ Morgan 2008.

only the aggressive flip side of his ultimate inability to hope to be loved and lovable:

You think it took northern sorcery to make me the way I am now? You think it took a war? Those things were tonic compared to what came before. Desperation and deception were waiting for me at the nursery door, took me by either hand as I walked out into my youth, have been my constant companions since²¹.

Egar Dragonbane, a barbarian Majak of the steppes, halfway between a Sioux warrior and an Anglo-Saxon or Norse giant slayer, who, on the threshold of middle age, begins to suffer the limitations of old age (including sexually) and, above all, the restlessness of the homeless, unable to truly find his place either in the great metropolises of the south, where he fought as a Varangian and learned about culture and broadened his horizons, or in the tribes where he should be the traditional clan chief. Archeth Indamarinarmal is the last surviving half-breed of the immortal Kirath people, black-skinned aliens who arrived on Earth in spaceships that harness the heat of volcanoes. Left alone as advisor to the new Emperor, she is tasked with the arduous and exhausting task of helping a brutal theocracy evolve towards more humane and advanced structures, while at the same time struggling against her own sense of abandonment in a potentially infinite life, in the arduous and exhausting task of helping a brutal theocracy evolve towards more humanitarian and advanced structures, while at the same time struggling with her sense of abandonment in a potentially infinite life, her drug addiction and her ill-concealed lesbianism. She is accompanied by obscure fragments of her people's knowledge, technological prodigies such as the Helsmen, artificial intelligences or demons harnessed in metal—once again, in a broader perspective, what is the difference?—whose intelligence perhaps works secretly to make her renounce all scruples and establish her own absolute monarchy that will sweep away obscurantism and human tribalism. A trio not unlike, in some ways, that of Harry, Rupert and Hermione in Rowling's novels, one might even argue. Interviewed at Eurocon 2016 by Sara Martina Alegre, who asked him why all his male protagonists were monsters of self-destructive violence, Morgan replied that he was fascinated by the apparent speed with which violence seems to “cut short” the tangled knots of situations that envelop most people and situations, even though this then turns out to be another form of chain that imprisons his characters. The case of Archeth is a different one, in which he wanted to represent, among other things, the immense effort and long-term commitment of women and feminist movements to move society forward

²¹ Morgan 2014

towards further achievements, often accepting compromises and minimal advances. Hence the internal tension of a character who has all the means to impose herself on the world around her.

These fucking humans, Archidi. If we stay, they're going to drag us into every squalid fucking skirmish and border dispute their short-term greed and fear can invent. They're going to turn us into something we never used to be. But what if, Archidi, that wasn't the truth of the revulsion in his voice at all. What if the truth of Grashgal's fears was that these fucking humans are going to turn us back into something we haven't been for a long, long time²².

In her, we also encounter a first variation on the theme of 'elven immortality', the burden of surviving again and again—as in *Altered Carbon*—in a changing world, binding oneself to much more ephemeral existences. From the atheistic and evolutionary perspective of the Kiriath, it is even possible to see a reinterpretation of the myth of Eden in the light of Darwin, one might say, and how this nevertheless provides the basis for a wholly secular creative option not unlike that of Tolkien's Elves, who are themselves “in exile”:

We are what we build, Grashgal once told her cryptically, in the brief months between the end of the war and the Departure. Forces older and darker than knowing forced knowing upon us and long ago locked us out of paradise. There is no way back. The only victory against those forces is to build. To build well enough that, when we look back along the path of exile we have engineered, the view is bearable²³.

5. The madness which comes from the Nymphs

And then the cool mouth fastened on his, levered his lips apart once again, lozenges of light and dark seemed to slide across and through him, and then the whole world went over sideways in sparks, like a table-top candelabra swiped flat amidst the laden

²² Morgan 2008.

²³ Morgan 2011.

*plates of a feast abandoned in the gloom and waiting
for anyone with the inclination to come and plunder.*

R.K. Morgan

*So I said, and she immediately swore as I wished,
and when she had sworn, the formula completed,
then I alone climbed into Circe's beautiful bed.*

Homer

What initially appears to be merely an “investigative” search for a girl who has disappeared and been sold into slavery, intertwined with a political conspiracy, sees the arrival of the very Dwenda or *Aldrain*. Their presence in remote centuries has now become a subject of antiquarian curiosity, complete with amateur historians and even *proto-cosplayers*. But along the edges of that faded legend flickers the ill-concealed, semi-occult fear of the Kiriath, who went to war against the Dwenda, pitting their “science” against the “witchcraft” of the others, with results, costs and violence no less terrible than the rule of spells and sacrifices they sought to break. And the Dwenda are returning, secretly summoned by those among humans who have not entirely forgotten them and are asking them for revenge for the abuses dictated by racism and xenophobia. «They come to us in ghost form, striking snake-swift out of phantasmal mist, and when we strike back they return to mist and they laugh, low and mocking in the wind»²⁴, the shocked soldiers on guard report their incursions. Not only that. The first real account of what it means to encounter one up close strikes an even deeper chord than bewilderment and mere terror.

‘And what do these trustworthy men have to say about our Aldrain friend? That his eyes are black pits? That his ears are those of a beast? That he flickers with lightning as he walks?’

‘No. What they say is ...’ Another hesitation. Milacar’s voice had grown quiet. ‘He’s beautiful, Gil. That’s what they say. That he’s beautiful beyond words.’²⁵

And when, before even crossing blades, Ringil finally found himself facing one, threatening to strangle him, it was something that radiated from both the creature and himself, as if meeting each other.

It walked towards him like fire on paper, the dwenda, like a dancing blue rainstorm a dozen feet across, radiance falling and splashing back up

²⁴ Morgan 2008.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

off the floor again, jagged little fissures of brighter light in amidst the general glow, eating up the normality of the courtyard paving and the chilly air like the sun chasing out shadows. And it laughed as it came; it chuckled and hummed to itself like a craftsman bent to a task he knew well, like a mountain stream or a well-fed fire, like all of these - the comparisons came to Ringil fully formed - but with an edge to the sounds that invaded his ears like stinging insects, set up a vicious, ringing echo, and left a tight, indefinable ache under his ribs²⁶.

That torment thrown upon him is a mirror spell, that of our own desires.

It was not a man, it was not anything like a man. The eldritch, lordly creatures in Shalak's manuscript scraps and illustrations dropped away in his mind like puppet theatre mockeries as the puppet master rises from behind his curtained façade for applause. The dwenda came on, it murmured at him, it sang to him and it shivered; it would have him for its own, and now he identified the ache that lay behind it all. Loss. It was the blue-tinged taste of a regret so deep you could never plumb its depths.... It was every wrong decision he'd ever made, every path he'd failed to walk, fanned out and held up for him to understand, and it hurt. It ate into him like dragon spit as he stared it down²⁷.

All this is the new and contemporary rendering of something much older, the feared and at the same time longed-for otherness of the Nymphs and Elves, the first fundamental danger of the fairy realm, its heart-rending beauty. Far from being pale copies of our natural life, elves and fairies seduce and captivate precisely because what is fleeting and perishable in us seems constant in them. It was Lewis and Tolkien who made this decisive element explicit in some of their theoretical and literary criticism essays. Lewis, in *The Discarded Image*, devotes an entire chapter to *the Long-Lived* of medieval and Renaissance imagination, pointing out that

If we call them 'supernatural' we must be clear what we mean. Their life is, in one sense, more 'natural' -stronger, more reckless, less inhibited, more triumphantly and impenitently passionate-than ours...In all this one may suspect a certain vulgarity of imagination-as if to be a High Fairy were much the same as being a millionaire. Nor does it obviously mend matters to remind ourselves that Heaven and the saints were often pictured in very similar terms. Undoubtedly it is naïf; the charge of vulgarity

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

perhaps involves a misapprehension. Luxury and material splendour in the modern world need be connected with nothing but money and are also, more often than not, very ugly. But what a medieval man saw in royal or feudal courts and imagined as being outstripped in 'faerie' and far outstripped in Heaven, was not so. The architecture, arms, crowns, clothes, horses, and music were nearly all beautiful. They were all symbolical or significant-of sanctity, authority, valour, noble lineage or, at the very worst, of power²⁸.

And Tolkien, years earlier, in his famous essay *On Fairy Stories*, revealing his aversion to the process of “dwarfing” and “evanescence” that Shakespeare himself had inflicted on the fairy world with Puck and Ariel, referred to a metaphor by Gower who described a beautiful and sensual young mortal as *fairy*:

This is a young man of mortal blood and bone; but he gives a much better picture of the inhabitants of Elf-land than the definition of a “fairy” under which he is, by a double error, placed. For the trouble with the real folk of Faerie is that they do not always look like what they are; and they put on the pride and beauty that we would fain wear ourselves. At least part of the magic that they wield for the good or evil of man is power to play on the desires of his body and his heart²⁹.

Beauty and danger. The passionate intensity of an existence that relegates human experience to a dull and stammering dream, the trap of another world in which we lose our ordinary knowledge of space, time and even what is right or wrong, giving free rein to a desire for 'escape' in which we free ourselves from our physical and moral constraints - are they not intertwined?- like a dirty, sticky garment. Dionysus and the Maenads, like the other Olympian gods and demigods, kidnapped mortals, involving them in banquets that were also rapes and vice versa, leaving them consumed and distraught. Eating and being eaten. The same thing happened, or dangerously bordered on happening, in many medieval ballads and poems, from *The Green Knight* to *Sir Thomas the Rhymer*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this will certainly be 'purified', not only by Tolkien's moral and Christian perspective, but also by the narrative dynamic itself, which will make his Elves, still in Middle-earth, survivors-exiles washed away by long centuries of exile and suffering for their own faults, greater or lesser. The ambiguous element of desire will thus remain present and active but confined

²⁸ Lewis 2012.

²⁹ MC: 112 ff.

to the projective imperfections of fallen human nature, as emerges from some exchanges between Boromir, Eomer and Aragorn and from a decisive reflection by Sam with Faramir.

‘And now we must enter the Golden Wood, you say. But of that perilous land we have heard in Gondor, and it is said that few come out who once go in; and of that few none have escaped unscathed.’

‘Say not *unscathed*, but if you say *unchanged*, then maybe you will speak the truth,’ said Aragorn. ‘But lore wanes in Gondor, Boromir, if in the city of those who once were wise they now speak evil of Lothlórien. Believe what you will, there is no other way for us – unless you would go back to Moria-gate, or scale the pathless mountains, or swim the Great River all alone.’

‘Then lead on!’ said Boromir. ‘But it is perilous.’

‘Perilous indeed,’ said Aragorn, ‘fair and perilous; but only evil need fear it, or those who bring some evil with them. Follow me!’

[...]

‘Then there is a Lady in the Golden Wood, as old tales tell!’ he said. ‘Few escape her nets, they say.’

[...]

‘Then she must be lovely indeed,’ said Faramir. ‘Perilously fair.’ ‘I don’t know about perilous,’ said Sam. ‘It strikes me that folk takes their peril with them into Lórien, and finds it there because they’ve brought it. But perhaps you could call her perilous, because she’s so strong in herself. You, you could dash yourself to pieces on her, like a ship on a rock; or drown yourself, like a hobbit in a river. But neither rock nor river would be to blame³⁰.

In Morgan’s *Dwenda-Aldrain*, Tolkien’s filters collapse once again; his Elves are an invention or modern reworking of what we encountered in Anderson even further back. More passionate and intense than mortals, their lives in the interstices of time at a crossroads called the *Grey Places*, which includes the ghosts and echoes of the different outcomes of our choices, are a mixture of aristocratic martial pride and total abandonment to their sensual impulses. Proto-fascists like Mishima’s samurai and sorcerer-aesthetes who look with contempt on human brutality and obtuseness as if *it were* that of poorly evolved primates—«They’d execute you on a spike for your choice of bed partner, and call it righteousness; they’d watch it done and toast your agony with tankards and songs, and dedicate it to their idiot gods. They’re brutal, moronic, they have the ethical consciousness of apes and the initiative levels of

³⁰ LotR: 338, 432, 680.

sheep»³¹—yet at the same time capable of bonding with some of them with consuming passion, bestowing on their chosen ones power, knowledge and their own love, while others are chosen for ritual sacrifices involving torture and abuse, which in turn constitute an “honour” both for those who impose them and for those who suffer them and aspire to them. Because they are the same mortals, as in Aztec cultures or ancient rural rites, who want to give their blood, who do not oppose mutilation and death because this also makes them part of benefits and, above all, removes them from the mere cycle of earthly existence, giving them a sense of election. Far beyond the path of a secular science *semper reformanda* and the social progress of the Kiriath, humans “want” magic, miracles, the ring that does not hold in Montale’s chain, the escape and consolation of Tolkien’s *On Fairy Stories*, as a Dwenda declares in a clearly meta-literary passage where the fantasy genre looks at itself in the mirror:

Tell that to every soul that cannot endure the arid modern march your Black Scourge masters have imposed on humanity, every soul that secretly craves the darkness and the sweet delirium it brings. You have understood nothing, mortal—you kneel and beat your breasts in your temples and shrines, you seek the spirit within—we are your eternal soul, we, the dwenda, the eternal ones. We are your darkness, we are your soul. We have haunted your dreams since the beginning of time, we bring you the gift of dark joy and escape. If we are your masters, it is because you cannot live without us³².

As Plato’s Socrates already noted about the possession that nymphs and gods bestow on mortals, ultimately “mania is better than wisdom”.

6. Kidnapped by fairies

*For Oberon is passing fell and wrath,
Because that she, as her attendant, hath
A lovely boy, stol’n from an Indian king;
She never had so sweet a changeling.*

William Shakespeare

³¹ Morgan 2008.

³² Morgan 2014.

'Let us call him simply the Illwrack Changeling, since it was that Aldrain clan who raised him in the Grey Places. Taken from a humble home on the marsh for the dark glimmer the dwenda prize so much in humans, brought up an Aldrain warrior and ultimately given command of a dwenda legion, he rose to—' 'You know,' Jhiral showing signs of real irritation now. 'I've heard this humble beginnings crap a few times before, Helmsman. Funny how no one can ever actually point to a living example, isn't it? Funny how in the end they're all legendary and dead.' Anasharal paused, delicately. 'Oh, the Illwrack Changeling is not dead, your Imperial Radiance. Far from it.'

Ringil himself, only partially adhering to his role as an undercover agent, “sleeps with the enemy”. Kidnapped by Prince Dwenda Seethlaw, who introduces him to the Grey Places, much more than he would like to admit, he too is conquered and seduced by a passion free from the violence and rejection that have marked his life as a boy and a man. The Grey Places themselves respond to his presence with a radical, sinister welcome, as if he were predestined to grow in magical knowledge there so that he could take revenge on those who broke his heart. He could become Seethlaw's new unstoppable human favourite, while in the background, as his double and future final antagonist, in a past that gradually re-emerges like the ghost island that is also his sarcophagus in suspended animation, looms the figure of another perfectly accomplished wizard-king, the Illwrack Changeling, who was in turn Seethlaw's great human past love.

The Changeling, then, was singled out by a young Illwrack scion more or less from the cradle. They say the child was so beautiful that the Aldrain lord was bewitched despite himself. That he fell in love with all the impulsive passion of his people, and would not be denied. Bided his time for the brief cycles of human youth, taught and shepherded the boy through what he would need to see and know, took the resulting young man and ushered him through the Dark Gate younger than any the Aldrain had ever taken before. Gifted him early, you see, wrapped the first of his own cold legion about him while he was still in his teens. He must, just as the legend says, have been very smitten to bestow such power. But then, the

Changeling's eyes, they say, were the green of sunlight through tree canopies, his smile, even as a child, could turn your heart over³³.

However, Ringil finally tears himself away from that possibility, with terrible consequences, as if pulling his hand away from a spiked gate, refusing to ignore yet another radical disappointment: cloaked in glory and beauty, exempt from hypocritical human morals, even the Dwenda inflict suffering like the most brutal of torturers and the most cynical of politicians. They are no better than mortals, although they want to believe and be believed that they are. For them, too, the elven spell and mythology are mirrors and veils with which *to tell themselves a story* that involves the unhappiness of someone else. Even that lie must be betrayed and challenged, then, even if it means facing and even killing those who seem to promise you everything you aspired to and could not even confess to yourself, in order to cling to those few human relationships of genuine love and devotion known among so many disappointments, hoping that sacrifice will protect someone else from the same violence that has already ruined your life. Yet the anguish aroused by the enchantment remains, for it is as costly to face your desires as it is to turn your back on them. And the magic has now taken hold, so much so that the threat you thought you were facing outside yourself is none other than yourself. What steps led Sauron or the witch-king of Angmar to become what others say they are?

The cool night breeze came to find him from the opened window. It carried a faint note of salt. A dark lord will rise, his coming is in the wind off the marsh. He stared at himself. A dark lord will rise. 'It's like that, is it?' he whispered. The muslin drapes stirred, the breeze blew through the quiet room. He wiped his hands and the dragon knife on Grace-of-Heaven's silk sheets, and put the weapon away again in his sleeve. He settled the Ravensfriend a little more comfortably on his back, shifted the pommel a fraction of an inch for a cleaner pull. Then he faced himself in the mirror once more, and found he was no longer afraid of what he saw looking back at him. He waited, patiently, for the flicker of blue fire to show itself again, and for whatever else might come with it³⁴.

³³ Morgan 2011.

³⁴ Morgan 2008.

7. A face to lose yourself in at night. *Intermezzo* on style.

When finally, under the red foliage of the tall autumn trees, forty men arranged themselves in a circle with their flutes, and a strong alpine wind shook the pine trunks, adding its wild harmonies to their music, and amid the swirling fallen leaves, the Blue Sea Dance suddenly broke out in all its dazzling splendour, all the spectators were seized by a rapture bordering on terror.

Murasaki Shikibu

Lathkeen has taken a fresh grip on the Illwrack sword, both hands this time. He raises it reverently a moment, as if offering it to the sky, then drives the blade down a foot into the ground of the stone circle, a couple of yards from where Ringil is bound. A cold plaintive cry breaks through the air, like some solitary gull lost over an endless leaden ocean. It's impossible to tell where it comes from, it seems to sweep in on the wind from all corners of the sky. The sword trembles in the ground.

R.K. Morgan

The style of a novel is, to a profound if not absolute extent, the novel itself. Morgan's trilogy is harsh, brutal, deliberately mixed and 'tainted' by *noir* realism, yet at the same time intense and rich. He also masters the painful irony of *noir* very well, although the smirks at some of the jokes are still through gritted teeth. The laughter is mostly bitter, if you can call it laughter, very different from explicit *vis comica* and carnivalesque humour of an Abercrombie, for example. The reversal of easy expectations often underlying the genre can be highlighted in some passages that nevertheless remain examples of a larger harmonious whole. Like a rugged, black cliff that suddenly widens into a gentle, silent bay, the reversal and contamination, the dirt that the narrator does not clean away from human experiences- whether it be a duel or a night between lovers - is also precisely what allows what is the object of interest and passion in the genre itself to stand out with renewed force, tearing it away from clichés and thus restoring the ferocity of the fighting, the power of magic, the terror of the gods, the intensity of the feelings that are expressed in gestures even more than in words. When one would expect stench and poisonous miasma, we are instead told that

Nothing in the known world reeks like this. Ringil's seen grown men piss themselves in terror at the smell, seen hardened soldiers turn pale beneath their campaign tans. It is unmistakable. Those who've faced it, never forget. Those who haven't, feed on the handed-down tales, and misrepresent it as a foul stench, which it is not. At sufficient distance, in fact, it's drowsily pleasant – a sun-baked summertime blend of spice and perfume on the wind, sharp notes of aniseed and cardamon rising through a backdrop of sandalwood and there, right there, the wavering but ever-present hint of scorching... Dragon³⁵.

When the dark powers descend upon Ringil, the sudden reversal of forces against the Dwenda themselves is resolved with an image drawn from domestic violence that suddenly diminishes those who seemed superior in supernatural strength:

Blood rained down. Blood splattered his face. Blood trickled in the gritted teeth of his grin. He howled at the shattering ceiling, worse than any sound Seethlaw had ever made. He lowered his head and looked for Risgillen. Found her struggling to stay on her feet, sword held sagging in both hands before her. There was blood on her bone-white Aldrain face, a jagged gash in her brow he didn't remember putting there. Behind her, Altamire crawled from where he'd fallen, dragging a leg snapped the wrong way at the knee. Menkarak lay beyond, half trapped under rubble. Ringil raised the Ravensfriend. He screamed at them, over the sound of cracking, crumbling stone. The two dwenda stared at him from where they lay on the floor, like small children facing a drunken father's fury³⁶.

Meanwhile, in what remains one of the most moving scenes in the trilogy, truly capable of evoking in the reader the same feelings as the characters involved, Egar, who cannot even see Ringil under the Dwenda spell, nevertheless leaps to his side with a devotion that precedes any thought or calculation.

'It is me, Eg,' he was yelling. It fucking is me. Get the girl.'

Later, tears would squeeze into his eyes as he recalled the Majak's reaction. Egar's lips peeled off a snarl, he surged back in at Ringil's side. The dirk came out, broad dark glint in the dancing light from the flames now loose in the straw on the floor. He brandished it at the stumbling dwenda.

³⁵ Morgan 2011.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

‘Right you are, Gil,’ he roared. ‘Who wants this right up their fucking arse? Fucking magicking old cunts.’³⁷

Perhaps it is not entirely subjective to attribute to another passage a meta-literary significance like the Dwenda’s statement about humans and magic, this time in reference to the entire narrative dynamic sought by Morgan and his writing itself. In the encounter with the queen of the Dark Court pantheon, a sort of Elbereth or diabolical Juno, who has secretly guided Ringil’s steps as a sorcerer and leader of ghost warriors, once again it is the mirror of desire that is turned towards the protagonist, revealing through him and in him a perennial knot in our basic human experience, that which exposes us most and makes us vulnerable. The goddess has animated a dead man to confer with him, but which one?

Very slowly, the corpse lifted both hands to the edges of the cowl it wore. Lifted the dark cloth back and up, away from the visage it covered. The breath stopped in Ringil’s throat. With an effort of will, he looked back into Firfirdar’s eyes. It was not that the corpse she had chosen was hideous with decay—far from it. Apart from a telltale pallor and a sunken look around the eyes, it was a face that might still have belonged with the living. But it was beautiful. It was the face of some fine-featured, consumptive youth you’d readily kiss and risk infection for. A face you might lose yourself in one haunted back-alley night, then wake without the next day and spend fruitless months searching the stew of streets for again. It was a face that gathered you in, that beckoned you away, that rendered all thought of safety and common sense futile. A face you’d go to gladly, when the time came; no regrets and nothing left behind but a faint and fading smile, printed on your cooling lips. “Do you see me, Ringil Eskiath?” asked the hissing, whispering voice³⁸.

This mixture of horror and unexpected longing, of contagion accepted in order to reach out and embrace the ghost of a happiness sought and expressed in the stammerings of our desires, is ultimately a more than effective description of Morgan’s style itself.

³⁷ Morgan 2008.

³⁸ Morgan 2014.

8. USB swords

'And how exactly did you come by that murderous little item?'

Ringil reached up and touched the pommel of the Ravensfriend, where it rose at his shoulder. 'It was forged for me at An-Monal by Grashgal the Wanderer.'

'Yes—actually, I was talking to the sword.'

R.K. Morgan

He saw, on a pile of tools, a blade endowed of victory, an ancient sword of giants, a mark of prestige for any warrior, the pearl of weapons

Beowulf

If swords could talk. In Morgan's trilogy, they do. At the end of a long journey, as if turning the knob of an audio dialogue that has been going on for years. *The Ravensfriend*, the Kiriath blade given to Ringil in his youth, is an integral part of his personality, intertwined with it in a relationship similar and dissimilar to that of Elric and his *Stormbringer*, to cite an explicit reference, or Turambar and his black blade Gurthang. Morgan himself admitted that one of the sources of inspiration for Ringil and the Friend of Ravens was the demonstration of a young Australian man with the art of the sword, as he explained how that discipline had given him a space of autonomy and freedom. Within the reach of that blade, no one could impose anything on him that went against his choices. This echoes in the full and authentic name of the Ravensfriend, as well as in the sword itself, which ultimately reveals itself to Ringil as an autonomous entity, a person in its own right, composed of certain traits of its psyche and the human relationships most deeply embedded in it, such as his conflicted but intense love for his mother.

My name is a complicated thing... I am Welcomed in the Home of Ravens and Other Scavengers in the Wake of Warriors, I am Friend to Carrion Crows and Wolves, I am Carry Me, and Kill with Me, and Die with Me where the Road Ends, I am not the Honeyed Promise of Length of Life in Years to Come, I am the Iron Promise of Never Being a Slave³⁹.

Much more than a mere extension of his arm, the Sword has fed on him, providing him with external support, a casing - like the cortical stacks for

³⁹ *Ibid.*

consciousness in the previous sci-fi trilogy, which also guarantee a sliver of survival. *Steel remains*. It is possible to use it as a metaphor for writing or the creative process, but this is clearly reductive. In this dynamic, Morgan embodies a constant dimension of our nature as a technological species, which has always been capable of transforming itself into tools that extend the range of our relationship with the world and, at the same time, alter our very individuality. Unlike Tolkien's Ring or Rowling's Horcruxes, such a process remains morally neutral, so to speak, and its positive or negative outcome depends on circumstances and perspectives. Freedom or imprisonment, defence or drug addiction? Every mechanism of growth and strength through which we have learned to survive, as individuals or as a community, every technique or art or tool or magic, every beloved book or discipline learned, can also be a prison. But it can also be an ally and even a friend, in which there persists a mysterious fusion of something outside us that is capable of sustaining what already exists within us, and which only in this way are we able to focus on. At the same time, we and not only us.

The half-grasped chilly dance of the glyphs he touched in the fissure has left its tracteries in his mind, touched his fingers and throat with what they are required to do to open that door once more. He's as ready as he'll ever be. And the Ravensfriend, leaning there against the cliff wall, like some louche friend in a Harbor End alley, awaiting decision from him on where next to take their carousing⁴⁰.

Even prison, we said. It is in another sword that the consciousness of the Illwrack Changeling has been preserved, alluding to the possibility that even the divine magic of the Dark Court is nothing more than the echo of the cortical stacks of Altered Carbon. And it will be within the digital space of the sword that Ringil will finally fight with the Changeling for possession of his own body, in a duel that will cause him to lose some of his fingers in a bite, just like Frodo with Gollum on the edge of Mount Doom, being saved by the consciousness of the sword that now lives in him, that is him. We are what we create, an old Kiriath had said to Archet. This is both a resource and a limitation. "Being" a hero, becoming a sword, also involves the isolating tragedy of perhaps not being able to be anything else. As the goddess Firfidar herself replies to Ringil with a smile and a shrug, "There are worse fates, are there not, than being forced into a place where your choice of acts is limited to those that cause your

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

soul to burn the brightest”⁴¹. Achilles or Beowulf could have been asked the same question.

9. The crown of iron and thorns. Frodo, Christ and Capaneus.

‘Mark me. A fight is coming, a battle of powers you have not yet seen. A battle that will unmake you, that will tear you apart. A dark lord will rise, his coming is in the wind off the marsh.’

R.K. Morgan

No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Gospel of John

Easy definitions on book covers or back covers often try to express what is new and different about a work by combining two elements that we already know and that seem distant, if not irreconcilable. *War and Peace* written by Kafka, *Les Misérables* in Mao's China... if we wanted to try our hand at such a game, we could say that *A Land fit for Heroes* is a reinterpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* in the light of Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, one of the great classics of materialist evolutionism. There are several reasons for this.

We have already mentioned Takeshi Kovacs' acronym in Ringil Eskiath, but also in relation to the Dark Court of the Gods, where we learn that it is referred to as *Ahn Fhoi*, a corruption of the term *Envoys*, which referred to genetically modified soldiers in the sci-fi trilogy. And the same god-demon Dakovash-Takeshi hints that he has changed skin over the centuries and was involved in the war that left in the sky a faint echo of what is remembered only as *Muhn*. So we are thousands of years after the events of *Altered Carbon*, and even the gods are nothing more than the future, all-powerful version of mere human beings, enhanced by digital transfers? Their power, however great, is still the result of even more complex forces, which brought it about through selection and survival? The ancient theogonic myths, according to which the gods—Greek, Norse, Indian—are part of the fabric of creation and not external to it, thus find a new materialistic and Darwinian expression. This ultimately depends on the perspective one takes, since someone's god may be only the future self of someone else, or what remains of it. If a new Viking encountered a digital bot, could he not fall to his knees in reverence? In the same way,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

someone's hero is someone else's monster, the hero of another story or perspective. In the final encounter with the Lord of Darkness himself, the Changeling, the first and almost only sentence Ringil hears him utter is not addressed to him, but to the Changeling's beloved Dwenda Seethlaw, whom the other does not suspect is already dead. «See, Seethlaw. I'm coming home»⁴². That is, to you. After millennia of exile in a non-place of madness and loneliness, that creature who *was once* human, endowed with frightening powers and at the same time broken, jammed like a broken record, still remembers and in a sense still manages to exist for a love story. «I'm coming home». The same phrase that, in different ways, is also the secret desire of Gil, Eggar and Archeth, each in the specificity of their journey and their unresolved wounds, whether this is still possible or not and to what extent. Once again, the fundamental issue is how we tell a story and who is telling it.

This literally explodes in the final revelation about the Dwenda. Even the sinister and seductive Elves, so proud of their superiority over mere mortals, did nothing but believe in a fairy tale in order not to face a gradually forgotten truth: that they were the heirs of the human squads sent into the interstices of time during a catastrophic war in a past that for the reader is even more remote than the future depicted in *Altered Carbon*:

The cadres recoiled. They could not believe, would not believe that after all they had done, after all that had been done to them, to fit them for purpose—that now there was no need for any of it. They believed instead, chose to believe instead, that they had been betrayed. They fell back into the Grey Spaces, and they took the weapon with them. Here, they had the whole of time and space to hide in, to roam, to use the weapon if need be to defend themselves, but holding back its full force, haunting the margins of all human history instead, dipping in, dipping out, listening, always listening for true word from the High Command, to deploy at full strength and then to return home in triumph. But they stayed longer away than they knew, stayed far longer than had ever been planned. And in time, the Gray Spaces changed them, made them something else entirely. They bred and dispersed, formed clans and alliances, became a whole race unto themselves. And as they grew into their new existence, as memory faded with the unnumbered centuries, so they lost all track of what they once were. Mission brief *became legend, legend became myth, myth became unquestioned truth*. They went everywhere with their new truth, and finally they came home behind it—only to find home unrecognizable. In place of the glorious homeland their myths spoke of, they found a shattered world and only the primitive remnants of the mortal race to which they

⁴² *Ibid.*

once belonged. And there they raised an overlordship built on the myths they thought they remembered⁴³.

The sentence in italics (mine) is itself an explicit and significant quotation, not from Tolkien, however, but a variation from Jackson's first film *based on* Tolkien's work, with a screenplay by Philippa Boyens and Fran Walsh («History become legend, legend became myth...»), in the prologue narrated by Galadriel, undermined from within by any claim to substantial objectivity by the addition of «myth became unquestioned truth». Here is the crux of the matter, stripped of every consolatory veil, every Tolkienian *evasion*, every narrative as self-deception. *The shadow of the past* in the second chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* conceals nothing more than the perpetual human attempt to confer metaphysical meaning on far more obtuse and repetitive dynamics. Elves and Orcs are only a distorted mirror in which we can contemplate ourselves better or worse than we would like. Angels or demons are still preferable to the pain of knowing that we are «monkeys in the mist», as the Dwenda contemptuously called humans, just to tell ourselves a fairy tale. «Monkeys in the mist», the entire course of evolution. Aware of all this, Ringil could make it his own, rise to the status of new wizard leader of the Dwenda themselves, the lord of darkness he believed he had to face, humiliate those who ruined his life and protect, if not exalt, his friends, loved ones and loves. So here we are at Tolkien's *Mount Doom* “in” Morgan. Horned with iron and thorns like the witch-king of Angmar in Jackson's trilogy and, at the same time, like Christ, Ringil, like Frodo, says “No” to the fulfilment of what seemed to be his path up to that point, only that, unlike Frodo, his is, once again, a reversal. If, at the very end of his gruelling journey, the hobbit took up the title of Ringbearer, arrogating to himself the object of power, Ringil, just when he became “the Changeling”, rejects the story woven around him by the gods and the satisfaction he would derive from it. He repudiates the Ring. He even *repudiates to repudiate*. Even the reversal of the stereotype would in turn be an imposition and a lie. He seals himself in the interstices between times, thus imprisoning the Dwenda with him.

He looks down the slope at the waiting Dwenda horde. At the expectant Dark Court personages and their eager, welcoming smiles. The silent stones that ring him, the bleak rushing sky overhead. Could be worse. Fuck

⁴³ *Ibid.*

all of you gods, he says tiredly. I'm done with you. Codes—dissolve the bonds, turn the Source loose. He sees the shock rip across their faces⁴⁴.

With a painful sense of inevitability, in the revolt that brings all the previous ones to fruition, Ringil can and wants only to 'get out', apparently out of contempt, but deeper down, out of love. For the love of Egar and Archeth, even his parents, and even more, secretly, for the love of Hijel, the gypsy prince exiled to the Grey Places in an unspecified future by the very wizard-king that Ringil was supposed to become and who, despite everything, out of love, taught Ringil to master the magic with which, in a past that has not yet come to pass, he will drive out his people. It is the last gesture of angry, silent love and substitution that runs through Morgan's work as much as, from a different perspective, Tolkien's, a prior and total identification with the life of the other, the only margin of freedom and choice that is still personal. Egar leaps to his feet to defend an almost invisible Ringil, Archeth carries on the revenge of a dead Egar against the Majak clan that betrayed him, Ringil rejects power and magic so that, perhaps, his friends and a love that does not even share his space-time may lead a slightly happier existence. Finding himself a prisoner with the Dwenda now determined to slaughter him, throwing himself at them in the final battle of his life, like Achilles or Siegfried, but also like a secular Christ who sacrifices his life or embraces with desperate strength the cross he has been carrying for so many years, the cry he directs at them and at the now closed black sky is the same as that of Antigone in Anohuil. The same refusal to bow to a lie, however sweet, the same desperate mourning for what life could have been, should have been.

Do you know, he calls down to them conversationally, how I can tell you're not demons or gods? You threaten the torture of children as a weapon, you call down fire and ruin on unarmed multitudes and you leave thousands weeping eternally in your wake. None of this shit is demonic, none of it. You don't need demons for that. Your acts—are the acts of men. Of lost apes, gibbering in the mist. That's all you are, it's all you ever were—and I've been killing men just like you, all my fucking life. He howls, counterpoint to the keening wind, a lament for everything that never was and now has gone away. His bloodied gaze drops to the ranks of the dwenda facing him. You are men—you are nothing more than men, he

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

yells at them. You're just like me. And now it's time to die. He storms down in savage joy, to meet all the waiting blades and hate⁴⁵.

All the blades and hatred he had encountered since he was a boy when he saw his first love impaled by the laws of the League. All the rejection and stupidity and cruelty imposed on others, staring back at him from those ephebe faces, eternally young, from those rainbow-coloured fingers. At that point, the story takes a twist. Precisely because Ringil dies but his sword remains, Hijel himself will be able to be born and survive, because of that “something” of Ringil that lingers in the sword itself. The great impossible love is therefore also another part of himself, his very name being yet another modification, a distortion of the other. Gil-Hijel. What was believed to be an action in the future is also an action in the past. In the Grey Places and, more importantly, in the love that finds its way there, time is recomposed. In one of the most emotionally profound insights of the trilogy, the first meeting between Hijel and Ringil is never narrated, but only remembered as what for one of them is already “the second” chance, just as it will be an aged Hijel after the mysterious end of their relationship—Ringil’s death, which will only occur in the third book—who will come to the aid of a still young Ringil in the second volume. By a sinister paradox, however, even Ringil’s final sacrifice will perhaps make possible another version of the prophecy he wanted to avert. «A dark lord emperor, they say. Or a sorcerer empress, a witch queen, it’s not always the same story. »⁴⁶. In fact, it will be Archeth herself, finally forced by petty imperial stupidity to embrace the much-rejected role of immortal sovereign, who will perhaps become the 'Sauron' of the gypsy legends, rejected for who knows what political necessity for her, or diabolical cruelty for them. No one is the monster of their own story. The novel ends with numerous details that point in this direction. Nothing is clear or unambiguous. It's not always the same story.

10. Postscript. The Great War II. Something to hold on to.

And men—those innocents—sticking pins in their eyes, banging their heads against the high wall, knowing full well that the wall will not give way or crack, so that they can see at least a little blue sky through a crack, unclouded by their shadows and by

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

time. And yet—who knows—where someone resists without hope, perhaps that is where human history, as we call it, begins, and the beauty of man among rusty iron and the bones of bulls and horses, among ancient tripods on which a little laurel still burns and smoke rises in the sunset, fraying like a golden fleece.

Ghiannis Ritsos

The dark queen's voice drifts, as if reciting some empty cant. The city you speak of will be built—will stand in all its undeserved serenity—on the bones of a billion unjust, unremembered deaths. Its foundation stones are mortared with the blood of ten thousand suffering generations that no one there recalls or cares about. Its citizens live out their safe, butterfly lives in covered gardens. and brilliant halls without the slightest idea or interest in how they came to have it all. She comes abruptly back to the here and now. Turns and flashes him a hard little smile. Do you really think that you could stand to live among such people?

R.K. Morgan

Sometimes a century “begins” a few years after its starting date, as Roberto Calasso pointed out in *L’Innominabile attuale*. The 20th century “really” began in 1915, and there are many elements today that make the anniversary of the first, if not the second, world war eerily relevant. When does a post-war period become a pre-war period? After a return to classic sci-fi with *Thin Air* and an attempted sequel that was then interrupted, about a year ago Morgan announced that he was instead devoting himself to a new fantasy, *No Man’s Land*, set in an alternative version of our *post-World War I* world, starring another “veteran”, explicitly linked to the same historical circumstance to which we owe the definitive blossoming of Tolkien’s adult imagination, the fertile collapse between the “secret vice” of the Language of the Fairies and the violence of technological conflict. It is significant, and not least, that the same event that gave rise to the most important fantasy saga of the contemporary era, and its complex questioning of what underpins a hope that would seem to be mere madness, remains the source of inspiration for a view that is, as we have seen, so openly opposed and oppositional. However, Pavese already taught us that *the opposite* of something is not necessarily its mere negation. It is precisely the criticism levelled at Tolkien's fantasy epic, at its horizon, at the reworking it has brought to the cauldron of pre-existing *topoi*, that allows us to bring out even more the specificity and complexity of his choices, which in turn are not limited to circumventing the questions posed by modernity or post-modernity

about the value of imagination, the possibility of a shared narrative, the position of humanity in the cosmos and the contribution of freedom to the plot that involves us all. It is always worth remembering that Tolkien himself, in his famous essay on *Beowulf*, reiterated that, from his own perspective, the Greek gods, the ultimate victors over primeval chaos, are more convincing philosophically, but less so on a dramatic and human level, whereas the Norse gods, destined for a final destructive conflict against the forces of darkness that will see them killed and killed, remain more moving and engaging, precisely because their final stand against evil is not supported by any hope of victory. And the aforementioned Lewis, in his review of the release of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, noted:

And after all the most obvious appeal of the book is perhaps also its deepest: “there was sorrow then, too, and gathering dark, but great valour, and great deeds that were not wholly vain.” Not wholly vain—it is the cool middle point between illusion and disillusionment⁴⁷.

It is premature to judge from the chapters previewed by Morgan so far, but from the author’s own statements and the poetics that run through the rest of his work, it is possible to recognise once again, in a different form, the almost constant themes of his horizon as a storyteller. Even in light of the elements we have tried to string together so far, it is possible to reiterate that every tradition remains an invention in hindsight. It is always us who choose “how” to read the past and “what” to look at in it as an active catalyst for the present. In this sense, talking about “neo-paganism”—as is sometimes heard—in relation to Moorcock’s anarchic-aristocratic grimdark and even more so in relation to Morgan’s is worse than reductive. A narrative such as that of *A Land fit...* is as much *post-pagan* as it is *post-Christian*, and if anything, it takes up certain elements of ancient epic and folklore, albeit in a secular and materialistic key. Morgan’s “tragedy”—to return to the question initially posed about its possibility in contemporary literature—consists, if anything, in the contrast between the violence implicit in all collective narratives and individual existence, the perennial human tendency to fall into one’s own unresolved, unsolvable knots, the very alphabet of an imperfect reality under the weight of unknowable forces that are perhaps blind or bound to logics that lead to the rejection of any kind of metaphysical and providential consolation or hope, and yet, at the same time, even beyond the bloody smile of defiance and blasphemy and suicidal heroism for the sake of others, the yearning we harbour for how we cannot help but feel that life *should be*, and which perhaps still surfaces in

⁴⁷ Lewis 1983.

fragments of rest, love and understanding: in sexual desire, in compassion or friendship, with those we have met in the dark waters of time, embracing our loneliness. A joint shared under a sun-drenched wall before a battle, a bath with an old lover, the silence of a morning spent watching eagles in the sky while drinking a cup of coffee... Ringil's first - and at the same time second - night of passion with Hijel could in turn be the dream of a return home like those that accompanied and contrasted the hallucinatory horrors of so many soldiers sunk in the bloody mud of the Somme or Ypres, but also the steps of Frodo or Sam climbing like mangy mice the slopes of Mordor:

After the marsh, after the Margins and the Grey Place ghosts, after all the groggy wandering, this is waking up. This is light pouring into morning chambers, and the stir of rested limbs against the sheets. This is life again...something to hold⁴⁸.

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