

## **From Lao-tzu to King Kong: A Selected Tour of Lost Worlds**

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### **Lotus eaters**

Legends of places lost in time, isolated pockets of alternative reality detached from the known world, are as old as storytelling. In the West, the tradition originated in Homer. Odysseus's visit to the land of the lotus-eaters engendered a genre that found expression in every narrative form and endures to the present day in popular fiction and film. In Book IX of the *Odyssey*, after an ill wind drives Odysseus and his fleet off-course, they find shelter on the shore of a country inhabited by the Lotophagoi, people who live on an exclusive diet of lotus fruit. Odysseus sends an advance party inland, where the Lotophagoi greet the men in friendly fashion and feed them with lotuses. After eating the honey-sweet fruit, "all they wished for was to stay where they were with the Lotus-eaters, to browse on the lotus, and to forget that they had a home to return to." [FN1] Odysseus removes them by force and confines them in irons on the ships, under the rowing benches, and commands the rest of his crew to set sail immediately, before they too eat the lotus and lapse into oblivion.

Homer offers no particulars about the Lotophagoi beyond their forgetfulness and consequent freedom from earthly cares. Yet sketchy as it is, the episode established the matrix of a primary narrative of philosophical literature: A wanderer loses his way and stumbles upon an uncharted territory inhabited by people who are insensible to everything beyond the narrow confines of their community, where they live in a timeless state of tranquility. Homer's prototype diverges from the mainstream of the legend in that his hero flees before he is ensnared by the attractions of the lost land. Typically, the wanderer is enchanted and gives up any intention to return to the outside world, like Odysseus's men who eat the lotus fruit. Alternatively, the wanderer escapes but soon finds that he wants to return to the lost land, yet searches in vain to find his way back. The tale is typically embellished by an elaborate, often satirical description of life in the hermit community, which at first seems to be a terrestrial paradise but is eventually revealed to be a land of dangerous illusions.

An incidental aspect of the legend of the Lotophagoi, arising from Homer's own prestige, is that centuries after the poem was composed, the belief persisted that it was a real place. Herodotus, in his magisterial *History*, writing four hundred years or more after the composition of the *Odyssey*, gives a brisk description of the geography and natural history of the land of the Lotophagoi. He locates it in Libya: "A promontory jutting out into the sea from the land of the Gindanes is inhabited by the Lotophagoi, who live entirely by eating the fruit of the lotus. The lotus fruit is about the size of that of the mastic tree, and in sweetness is rather like the fruit of the date-palm. The Lotophagoi even succeed in making wine from this fruit." [FN2] Herodotus evidently never visited the place: most of his book, as he freely and frequently admits, is based on second-hand accounts (or seventh-hand gossip). His assertion that the Lotophagoi subsist entirely on a diet of lotus is simply a restatement of Homer.

The Greek geographer Strabo, writing nearly five hundred years after Herodotus, followed Homer just as closely. He located the land of the Lotophagoi on the island of Meninx, modern Djerba, off the coast of Tunisia, whose inhabitants, Strabo says, follow a way of life that corresponds closely to that of the Homeric Lotus-eaters. Strabo consults Homer in the way a modern writer would look up something in an encyclopaedia. He writes that "truth is the aim of the historical portion" of Homer's poems, citing the Catalogue of the Ships in Book II of the *Iliad*, which lists every Greek community that sent a ship to join the fleet in the war against Troy, with brief geographical commentaries. Any deviation from strict factual accuracy in Homer, Strabo asserts, "should be attributed to change, or to misconception, or to poetical license," for, he concludes grandly, "mere fabrication would neither be persuasive nor Homeric, and we know that his poem is generally considered a scientific treatise." [FN3]

Strabo's description of the *Odyssey* as a scientific treatise is not as ridiculous as it sounds. Here I have quoted H. C. Hamilton's translation, first published in 1854, which is faithful to the Greek, taking only such liberties as were required to make the text intelligible to contemporary (i.e., early Victorian) readers. The phrase "scientific treatise" is Hamilton's translation of ποίησιν φιλοσόφημα, which literally means "philosophical work," but that would be a misleading translation. For the Greeks, philosophy was not confined to abstract thought, like that in Plato's dialogues and Aristotle; it conveyed a broader meaning, seeking after the truth, in the sense that scientists carried out their investigations in the mid-nineteenth century — an era when doubts about the historical accuracy of the Book of Genesis were still heterodox.

Although the Lotophagoi episode is one of the briefest in the *Odyssey* (indeed, at twenty-three lines, it can scarcely be called an episode, to rank with the poem's detailed narratives of the eponymic hero's encounter with the Cyclops, for example, or his descent into the Underworld); yet it is among the most frequently referenced passages in Homer. One of Alfred Tennyson's earliest major poems, composed when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge, in the early 1830s, was based on the myth. "The Lotos Eaters" opens with a lavish, evocative scene setting:

In the afternoon they came unto a land  
In which it seemed always afternoon.  
All round the coast the languid air did swoon,  
Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.

It is "a land of streams," some "slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn," others mighty waterfalls "rolling a slumberous sheet of foam below." Three mountains

Stood sunset-flush'd: and, dew'd with showery drops,  
Up-clomb the shadowy pine above the woven copse.

In Tennyson's poem, the Lotophagoi come down to the shore to greet Odysseus and his men at sundown:

And round about the keel with faces pale,  
Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,  
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.  
Branches they bore of that enchanted stem,  
Laden with flower and fruit, whereof they gave  
To each...

The sailors eat the lotus, and soon lapse into a dreamy lassitude,

Then some one said, "We will return no more";

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And all at once they sang, "Our island home  
Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam."

At this point, the narrative gives way to a lament of the burdens of earthly life, and an ironic defense of the abandonment of duty that eating the lotus brings:

Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore  
Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;  
O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

The fifth chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, usually called "Lotus Eaters" (though Joyce himself did not give titles to the chapters of his novel), abounds with instances of forgetfulness and narcotic references, as Leopold Bloom listlessly daydreams of evading his responsibilities, specifically those at home, in the form of sex with his wife. Floral imagery and language proliferate, concluding with Bloom in his bath, where his limp floating penis is likened to a lotus blossom. By the twentieth century, retellings of Homer's myth had made the food of the lotus-eaters the plant's flower, not its fruit; Tennyson's lotus-eaters were a transition, proffering both to the mariners.

In *The Lightning Thief* (2005), Rick Riordan's novel for young readers, the hero, a twelve-year-old demigod named Percy Jackson, finds himself at the Lotus Casino, a luxury hotel in Las Vegas. The lobby is a fabulous playground with a water slide, bungee jump, and every spectacular video game the book's readers could dream of. Percy and his companions are installed in rooms on the fortieth floor of the hotel, equipped with hot tubs, waterbeds, and a free mini-bar stocked with candy, chips, and soda. After they eat of the lotus flowers that are constantly on offer to the casino's guests, Percy and his friends soon forget the mission they are on. The hero returns to reality when he meets a boy his age dressed like an Elvis impersonator, who checked into the hotel thirty years before. This incident adduces the ancillary myth of a lost land whose inhabitants do not age. [FN4] Riordan's mythology-based novels have sold more than 30 million books in the United States, and have been translated into forty-two languages. [FN5]

### **A Taoist village**

An early parallel to the Lotophagoi in Chinese literature is the subject of one of the most famous poems of Chinese antiquity, “Peach Blossom Spring,” by T’ao Yüan-ming, who took as his pen name T’ao Ch’ien, T’ao the Recluse (365 – 427). T’ao sets up his poem with a tale in prose. The wanderer is a river fisherman on a pleasure trip, who suddenly finds himself in the midst of a peach orchard in glorious bloom. [FN6] He rows on to see how far the orchard extends, until he comes to the stream’s source, a spring in a cavern. He disembarks to explore the cave. At first the path is so narrow that he can barely make his way, then it debouches into a sunny plain, where (in David Hinton’s translation) “austere houses were graced with fine fields and lovely ponds. Dikes and paths crossed here and there among mulberries and bamboo.” [FN7] Chickens and dogs noisily call to each other. The village’s inhabitants, “whether they were old with white hair or children in pigtails, were all happy and of themselves content.”

They are amazed to see the visitor, and greet him hospitably with food and drink. They explain that their ancestors fled here to find sanctuary from the ruin wrought by the civil strife of the Ch’in dynasty (221 – 206 B.C.), and the community has kept itself secluded from the world outside ever since. They press him with questions about events in the world, having heard no news for five hundred years. “As the fisherman carefully told them everything he knew, they all sighed in sad amazement.” After a few days’ repose, the accidental visitor takes his leave. His hosts ask him not to reveal the location of their earthly paradise, but he disregards the request and takes careful note of landmarks on his return, so he can find his way back. When he gets home and reports what he has seen, a party is organized to find the enchanted place, but they soon get lost and give up the search. A famous recluse named Liu Tzu-chi, an aristocrat who resigned his court position to wander the mountains in search of medicinal herbs, when he heard about the village “joyfully prepared to go there,” but he died before he could make the attempt. The tale concludes, “Since then, no one’s asked the way.”



“Peach Blossom Spring,” painting from the Long Corridor of the Summer Palace, Beijing  
[high-res file available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Peach\\_Blossom\\_Spring](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Peach_Blossom_Spring)]

For T’ao Chi’en, the hermit community is not the lost land; it is the outside world that has lost its way. Details of his description make explicit allusion to Lao-tzu’s characterization of the tranquil life in the ideal community, free from all concerns outside its own domain, translated here by D. C. Lau: “Though adjoining states are within sight of one another, and the sound of dogs barking and cocks crowing in one state can be heard in another, yet the people of one state will grow old and die without having had any dealings with those of another.” [FN8] The reference to barking dogs and crowing cocks in “Peach Blossom Spring” alerts the erudite reader that the lost village is an exemplar of the Taoist ideal of a self-sufficient polity.

The poem that follows is a brief (sixteen couplets in translation), bittersweet meditation that mildly offers the moral to be drawn from the fisherman’s adventure:

A marvel

hidden away five hundred years, this  
charmed land was discovered one morning,  
but pure and impure spring from different  
realms, so it soon returned to solitude.  
Wandering in the world, who can fathom  
what lies beyond its clamor and dust. [FN9]

T'ao Chi'en laments that his contemporaries have abandoned the peaceable contentment of a simple rural life based on Taoist principles, exemplified by the hermit community. Another translation of the last line of the prose introduction, by James Robert Hightower, makes this sense of loss more explicit: "Since then, there has been no one interested in trying to find such a place." [FN10]

Homer says nothing about the history of the Lotophagoi, how long they have lived lost in their lotus dreams; "Peach Blossom Spring" introduces the key element of permanence to the myth of the lost land. The tranquil Taoist way of life in the secluded village has endured, immune to change for five hundred years, and T'ao Chi'en implies that it will persist indefinitely, untouched by the stresses of life in the outer world, changeless to the end of time. T'ao Chi'en was almost as influential to Chinese poetry as legendary Homer was to the Western tradition: he established the paradigm of the literatus, the poet-scholar living in genteel rural retirement. David Hinton writes in the introduction to his anthology of classical Chinese poetry, "T'ao effortlessly lived everyday life on a mountain farm as an utterly sufficient experience of dwelling. T'ao's poems initiated the intimate sense of belonging to natural process that shapes the Chinese poetic sensibility." [FN11]

### **A French synthesis**

The Breton poet and novelist Victor Segalen (1878 – 1919), the founding theorist of exoticism, devoted much of his mature career to mastering the Chinese language and imitating its literary classics in French, thereby attempting to construct a conceptual bridge between the two cultures. A medical doctor with a commission in the French Navy, he took up the study of Chinese in his late twenties and made such phenomenal progress that less than a year after he had begun, he passed the examination required for a posting in Peking. Dedicated to the Decadents in literary matters, Segalen was conservative in his politics, and found life at the court of the Ch'ing dynasty quite congenial. Within a year of his arrival, Segalen received the highest honor that could be bestowed upon a foreign resident: he was granted an audience with the Emperor, Son of Heaven, in the company of a French delegation.

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In 1914, Segalen set off on an archaeological expedition in Shansi province, with financing from the French Ministry of Education and Fine Arts and the backing of a prominent collector, Jacques Doucet. He made some important discoveries, which formed the basis of a classic monograph, *Chine: Le Grande Statuaire*, illustrated with photographs he made using the latest technology, provided by the Lumière company, a firm owned by the cinema pioneers Auguste and Louis Lumière. In addition to searching for ancient artifacts, the expedition was also commissioned to create a topographical map of uncharted regions of the country. Before he set out, Segalen wrote a friend, “The journey has decidedly acquired for me the value of a genuine experience: a confrontation in the field between the imaginary and the real.” [FN12]

The fruit of this philosophical investigation is *Escapade (Equipée)*, subtitled *Travels in the Land of the Real*, an unusual book that, like most of Segalen’s best works, transcends conventional generic categories. It takes the superficial form of a narrative of a real journey, his expedition, but the writer’s imagination anticipates real events and the imaginary insinuates itself into the literary world. *Escapade* comprises twenty-eight numbered episodes situated at different points along the Imaginary–Real continuum. The longest chapter, Number 20, falls deep in the fanciful end [FN13].

The narrator, a ghost of the author, finds himself at a fork in the road. He takes the path less traveled by, abandoning the main highway for an overgrown trail, “the road to the impossible.” [FN14] Below him he sees a commercial village called White Salt Wells, the last location marked on the map; the region above him is a blank. Ancient chronicles mention that there was once a town there called Black Salt Holes, which is now *fei*, meaning fallen, failed, defunct. The path hugs a purple cliff, sinuous as the spine of a dragon, traversing a dark wood. The traveler stumbles blindly through the dense brush until he emerges into a clearing. At first bemused by the bright light, he hears dogs barking and then sees the smoke of hearth-fires rising in the clear, sweet air.

The erudite twentieth-century French narrator has, in effect, rediscovered the lost Taoist village of “Peach Blossom Spring.” It is not merely an allusion; Segalen’s tale is a close paraphrase, which is made clear when the narrator recalls to himself the passage from Lao-tzu describing the tranquil life of the ideal village, quoted above.

The *fei* settlement is enclosed on all sides by mountains, completely cut off from the outside world. Shy villagers come forward, astonished by the appearance of their first visitor in

three hundred years. They ask for news about the Grand Mings who rule the world: Who is now Emperor in the Northern Capital? The narrator hesitates to tell them that the Ming dynasty was deposed by barbarians. For a moment he thinks he hears the approach of one of his muleteers and takes fright. The villagers will see the man's greasy queue hanging down to his heels, signifying his subservience to the Manchu. "They will know that their right to live has passed, their lives are in fact out of date, their city decommissioned by imperial decree and moreover nonexistent. Perhaps these sweet, quavering elders will crumble into dust at my feet." The traveler takes his leave, vowing never to tell anyone about his experience or record the location of "this paradoxical place, perhaps imaginary."

*Escapade 20* is a lucid parable on the eternal, uneasy cohabitation of the Real and the Unreal. It is a relationship usually conceived in the West in Platonic terms, with the Ideal opposed to the feeble earthly emanations of it in perceptible reality. Segalen considers the matter in Chinese terms, as alternative realms seeking to coexist in harmony. His tale diverges most significantly from "Peach Blossom Spring" in its ending. T'ao Chi'en takes a realistic view of human nature, recognizing that mortals feel an instinctive urge to acquire anything that has value and make it their own, whereas Segalen romanticizes the story by having the interloper recognize that the lost village is a precious place, liberated from history, and honors it by protecting its isolation.

The attitude of Segalen's narrator arises from the Enlightenment view of relict "primitive" societies, which evolved after the first encounters between European mariners and Polynesian islanders. Louis de Bougainville's *Voyage Around the World*, published in 1771, and travel memoirs by Captain James Cook and members of his expedition described a real place, Tahiti, that was "lost in time," as reckoned by Westerners, a society whose only history was orally transmitted mythology. The utterly alien, preliterate culture of the Polynesians presented a formidable challenge to the perceived wisdom of the West, which equated complexity with progress. Like the reclusive Chinese literati, the Polynesians lived an ethical, rewarding life without the advanced technology of Christian Europe and the strict code of moral behavior that came with it. Denis Diderot's fictional *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* formulated the basic Enlightenment concept that humankind in its pristine condition possessed a moral superiority over the "civilized" citizens of Europe. Diderot imagines a debate between a Tahitian elder and Bougainville. Here, the old man addresses the admiral sternly:

And you, chief of the brigands who obey you, quickly push off your vessel from our shore. We are innocent, we are happy, and you can only spoil our happiness. ... Leave us to our customs. They are wiser and more just than yours. We have no wish to exchange what you call our ignorance for your useless knowledge. We possess all that is necessary and good for us. Do we deserve contempt because we have not known how to create for ourselves wants in superfluity? [FN15]

These ideas, tantamount to a Western equivalent of Taoist principles, maintained a robust life until Segalen's day, forming the basis, for example, of Paul Gauguin's primitivist vision of Polynesia, which inculcated the desire to conserve what he perceived to be an innocent way of life, isolated from the world of manufactured wants in superfluity.

Segalen's accomplishment was overlooked throughout his life and for many years thereafter, because Chinese culture was regarded as hopelessly inaccessible to Westerners on account of the formidable linguistic challenge. The art of the Far East, as it was called in Europe, was known almost entirely through borrowed artistic motifs in the decorative genre of *chinoiserie*. Precious little of its literature was translated until the end of Segalen's life; Arthur Waley's pioneering collection *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* appeared in 1918, a year before Segalen's death at the age of forty-one. Among Segalen's most enthusiastic early supporters was Jorge Luis Borges, whose philosophical *ficciones* dissecting the confrontation between the imaginary and the real bear key points of resemblance to Segalen's experimental compositions. Borges once scolded the French: "Don't they know that in Victor Segalen they have one of the most intelligent writers of our age, perhaps the only one to have made a fresh synthesis of Western and Eastern aesthetics and philosophy?" [FN16] *Escapade 20* is the most persuasive proof of Borges's assertion in Segalen's oeuvre.

A story quite similar to that of *Escapade 20*, which predates it, is *Germelshausen*, a novella by Friedrich Gerstäcker (1816 – 1872), a popular German author whose travel books and adventure novels were based on his experiences in the American West, Polynesia, Australia, and North Africa. Published in 1860, *Germelshausen* is a sentimental love story set in Saxony, which makes no philosophical pretensions and marks the beginning of a new life for the tale of the lost land, in popular light literature. The wanderer is a vagabond artist named Arnold, a character

closely based on Goethe's young heroes, who wears a broad-brimmed hat atop his curly blond hair, which falls to the shoulders of his threadbare black velvet jacket. [FN17] He stops to rest by an ancient stone bridge, where he meets a pretty young village woman. She is shy, but charming Arnold puts her at her ease and soon they are chatting amiably. He asks her to sit for a portrait in pencil; when he finishes it, the girl is amazed, even a bit frightened by its faithfulness.

Gertrud, as she is called, leads him to her village, Germelshausen, where her father is the mayor. "Over the village lowered a thick mist, which Arnold had already perceived from afar, and it dimmed the bright sunshine, which fell upon the gray, old, weather-beaten roofs with a weird yellowish light." [FN18] After dinner at her father's house, she takes Arnold for a stroll in the village cemetery, where her mother is buried. According to the gravestone, Gertrud's mother died in 1228. By now deeply in love, the two young people hurry home, for there is to be a festival, and as the mayor's daughter she must lead the dance. The atmosphere at the inn is excessively merry, almost frenzied. When Arnold laments that he must leave in the morning, Gertrud says, "Don't trouble about that; we shall be together longer — longer perhaps than you like." Just before midnight, she takes Arnold's hand and leads him to the edge of the village, where she points out a hill beyond its perimeter and asks him to promise that he will wait there until midnight. When the church bell tolls, she says, he must hurry back to the village, where she will be waiting for him. Arnold is mystified but agrees.

However, at midnight a storm blows up, and he cannot find the village, thwarted by darkness and boggy terrain. Germelshausen has vanished. The next morning a forester finds him resting by the side of the road. He tells Arnold that Germelshausen is a cursed village that sank fathoms below the surface of the earth centuries ago; once in every century it rises to the surface for twenty-four hours before sinking back into perdition. Arnold has only his drawing of Gertrud to console his broken heart, and to prove that his experience was real.

The similarities to "Peach Blossom Spring" and *Escapade* 20 are obvious, though it inverts the morality of the Chinese legend (and its Decadent French shadow story) by making the lost land a terrestrial purgatory, nothing paradisaical about it. The tale's most pronounced departure from the mainstream of lost-land literature is that the central motive is one of romantic love, which makes no moral judgments about the relative virtues of the hermit community and the outside world, much less any philosophical points about the relationship between the Real and the Unreal.

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Narrative affinities are even more pronounced between *Germelshausen* and the Broadway musical *Brigadoon*, with a book by Alan Jay Lerner and score by Frederick Loewe, which sets virtually the same story in the Scottish Highlands. The musical has a conventional happy ending, with the errant traveler staying at the side of his newfound love in the lost village when it sinks back into oblivion. The plot closely follows Gerstäcker's tale, without the moralistic overtones. *Germelshausen*'s doom resulted from a papal anathema, while *Brigadoon*'s escape from the world was an answer to a parson's prayer that the village be delivered from evil sorcerers who were making mischief in the Highlands, a plot device closer to the farmers fleeing civil strife in "Peach Blossom Spring." There are a few trivial departures in the story, but memorable details from *Germelshausen*, such as the old stone bridge, are retained; the stage directions of *Brigadoon* call for the stage to be "filled with a misty gray-yellow light" when the village sinks into the earth. The play's close resemblance to *Germelshausen* was not lost on the influential theater critic George Jean Nathan, who accused Lerner in the *New York Times* of "barefaced plagiarism." Lerner stoutly denied that he knew Gerstäcker's novella until it was pointed out to him, after he had finished writing the script. We need not believe him, or care; the play was clearly not a case of plagiarism. [FN19]

### **The pulp legacy**

By the end of the nineteenth century, legends of lost lands had evolved from mythology charged with philosophical implications into high romance, in a thriving genre of light fiction with equal portions of adventure and romantic love. In English, this process was consummated in popular novels by H. Rider Haggard. Haggard spun his modern myths out of his own, real classical scholarship, which gave his stories a glamorous aura of believability in an era when classical education was still dominant. *She*, the first of a series of books about the living goddess Ayesha, "She Who Must Be Obeyed," is one of the bestselling novels in English. Since it was first published in 1887, *She* has surpassed every modern myth preceding J. R. R. Tolkien in popularity, with sales exceeding eighty-three million copies in forty-four languages by the mid-1960s. [FN20]

The story begins with a fireside confession at midnight. Vincey, a dying man, tells his friend Horace Holly, a Cambridge professor, a fantastic tale: his “sixty-fifth or sixty-sixth lineal ancestor was an Egyptian priest of Isis, though he was himself of Grecian extraction,” [FN21] named Kallikrates, whom Herodotus described as a youth of extraordinary beauty. He became the lover of a “mighty Queen of a savage people, a white woman of exceptional loveliness,” the ruler of an ancient kingdom in East Africa, who later murdered him in a fit of jealousy. Vincey charges Holly to adopt his son, Leo, whom he has not seen since his mother died giving birth to him. Vincey expires in the morning, and Holly, a bachelor, undertakes the guardianship of his friend’s son. On Leo’s twenty-fifth birthday, following Vincey’s deathbed instructions, they open a locked iron box, which contains a mysterious potsherd with a Greek inscription. The Sherd of Amenartas confirms Vincey’s story and provides directions to “a hollow mountain, where a great city had been and fallen,” which is ruled by Ayesha, “a magician having a knowledge of all things, and life and loveliness that does not die.” She became immortal after immersing herself in a subterranean pillar of fire, thousands of years ago.

Holly and Leo undertake an expedition to find the place. After they are shipwrecked, they undergo a series of exciting adventures and eventually make their way to the land of the Amenartas. Savage warriors take them prisoner and bring them to the lost city of Kôr, the capital of a great empire that preceded the ancient Egyptians. The interlopers are brought to Ayesha, who reclines behind a partition and wears a veil, because her beauty is so great that it maddens any man who sees her. Nonetheless, she yields to Holly’s entreaties and allows him to gaze on her face, and he is instantly enchanted by a worshipful love. Ayesha tells him that she has abided in the catacombs beneath Kôr since its fall, awaiting the reincarnated return of Kallikrates. Handsome young Leo, of course, bears a remarkable resemblance to his ancestor. Ayesha commands that he too become immortal and stay by her side forever, and leads him to the subterranean cavern to bathe in the flames of eternal life. To allay Leo’s fears, Ayesha immerses herself in the fire for a second time. This second exposure has the effect of making her mortal again, and she dies horribly, as she ages thousands of years in a few minutes.

As she dies, her hideous, shriveled husk croaks to Leo, “Forget me not, Kallikrates. Have pity on my shame; I shall come again, and shall once more be beautiful.” Her prophecy is fulfilled in *Ayesha*, the sequel to *She*.

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Haggard's novel is firmly based in Victorian morality and imperial fantasies of power, race, and sex that have long since been discarded. The savagery of the Africans, docilely submissive to a white queen; the recurring emphasis on Leo Vincey's godlike blond beauty; and the cult of youth provide rich grist for the mills of feminist and postcolonial critics. Haggard's prose style, encompassing every lurid shade of purple, was the butt of scorn even when the popularity of his books was at its peak, but he disarms his critics with occasional flashes of self-deprecating humor. However, there has never been any doubt about his ability to propel a suspenseful narrative. The Ayesha books, together with Haggard's Allan Quatermain novels, beginning with *King Solomon's Mines*, created the pattern-book of imagery and plot complications for twentieth-century adventure fantasy fiction, such as Robert E. Howard's pulp stories about the exploits of Conan the Barbarian, set in a fictional primeval era after the fall of Atlantis and before recorded history, which is not governed by any moral code.

*She* has been filmed at least ten times. The earliest adaptation is *La colonne de feu* (*The Pillar of Fire*), directed by Georges Méliès. Haggard took an active part in a production of *She* in 1925, directed by Leander De Cordova and G. B. Samuelson, by writing the film's intertitles himself. The most lavish and well-known film adaptation of the novel is that produced by Merian C. Cooper, in 1935. The script, by Ruth Rose, relocates Ayesha's lost kingdom of Kôr from Africa to an arctic wasteland, and she carries a torch for an Elizabethan English lord rather than an ancient Greek — which actually makes a slight improvement to Haggard's story, for Leo Vincey, played by dashing Randolph Scott, thus more plausibly bears a resemblance to his ancestor, which the plot requires. Cooper's spectacular production just catches the barbaric grandeur of Haggard's vision, with menacing, colossal idols and a large cast of lissome dancing girls in chiffon and muscular warriors wearing kilts and Aztec headdresses, pointing up Haggard's sources in historical fiction, going back to Flaubert's vision of pagan Carthage in *Salammbô*.

Cooper's best-known film is *King Kong*, released in 1933, one of the most successful modern myths in any genre. The film begins in a lost world, Skull Island, an uncharted speck in the Indian Ocean off the west coast of Sumatra, where Haggardesque savages live in submission to their ape king. Like the barbarian realms detailed in the pulp novels of Robert E. Howard, with which it is contemporaneous, Skull Island is a micro-society without civilization. The giant ape, a durable symbol of almost unlimited dimensionality for critical and anthropological theorists,

has absolute power over the human inhabitants of his dark realm, rendering any code of morality impotent. In the end, the technology of the modern world slays Kong, notwithstanding the movie's famous, sentimental last line of dialogue: "It wasn't the airplanes, it was beauty killed the beast."

### **The legend of Shangri-La**

The most conspicuous feature of invented mythologies such as those of Haggard and Howard is that they shun the principal mission of mythology: to propound a religion with a positive moral code. Kôr is a cult of personality, dedicated to the worship of its queen, whereas Conan follows a cruel war god, Mitra, who represents no virtue except victory. The deities of Conan's enemies are bloodthirsty demons who demand mass human sacrifice. Yet in 1933, the year that King Kong was released, James Hilton published *Lost Horizon*, a novel that attempts to restore a philosophical dimension to a narrative of a relict community. He called his terrestrial paradise Shangri-La, which has proved to be among the most durable of modern myths. Many millions of copies of *Lost Horizon* have been printed since the book was first published in 1933, and it was long regarded as a modern classic.

Hugh Conway, a British diplomat, boards the last flight out of a city in India in the midst of a violent revolution. His plane is hijacked and flies across the Himalayas into Tibet. After a crash landing, the dying hijacker tells Conway that he must seek a lamasery called Shangri-La. Stranded in desolate mountains deep in snow, the passengers have no idea which way to go, until a party of monks finds them and leads the way. After an arduous climb, the path suddenly levels, and they step out of the freezing mist into clear, sunny air (as the fisherman did in "Peach Blossom Spring"). They have entered the valley of the Blue Moon, which enjoys a pleasant, springlike climate. The hills of the valley are miraculously cloaked in green vegetation. Shangri-La rises before them: "A group of colored pavilions clung to the mountainside with none of the grim deliberation of a Rhineland castle but rather with the chance delicacy of flower petals impaled upon a crag. It was superb and exquisite." [FN22]

The wayfarers are greeted with lavish hospitality in Shangri-La, which in Hilton's description sounds like a luxury resort devoted to middlebrow culture. A library, "lofty and spacious," is stocked with "the world's best literature," specializing in Western philosophy. In the music room, the postulants play Bach and Mozart on harpsichords and grand pianos. "The

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whole atmosphere was more of wisdom than of learning, of good manners rather than seriousness.” No religious observances of any kind take place in this lamasery, and neither the visitors nor the author take note of their absence.

The plot revolves around the squabbles of Conway’s fellow passengers, an ensemble of stock characters, when they realize that they will not be permitted to leave Shangri-La. Conway is granted the rare honor of meeting the High Lama, “a small, pale, and wrinkled person, motionlessly shadowed and yielding an effect as of some fading antique portrait in chiaroscuro,” who initiates him into the mysteries of the place. The great mystery of Shangri-La, as everyone knows, is that the valley of the Blue Moon magically endows its inhabitants with extreme long life. The High Lama eventually reveals that he is a Capuchin missionary from Luxembourg, who discovered the valley more than two hundred years before, while he was roaming the Himalayas in search of converts. His name is Perrault, and he, in fact, is the founder of Shangri-La. The heart of the book is a long monologue by Father Perrault, in which he explains his philosophy of life.

“Shangri-La” has entered the vernacular as a synonym for an exotic haven of tranquility, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* “an earthly paradise, a place of retreat from the worries of modern civilization,” a phrase that could aptly describe the Taoist communities in “Peach Blossom Spring” and *Escapade* 20. Because of its Tibetan setting, the name often carries mystical overtones, but in fact the “philosophy” of Shangri-La is painfully mundane and so vaporous as to be almost nonexistent. The guiding principle is moderation in all things, including virtue. Father Perrault, attempting to persuade Conway to stay in Shangri-La and take over as high lama when he himself finally expires, notes lasciviously, “For the benefit of our younger colleagues, the women of the valley have happily applied the principle of moderation to their own chastity.”

In the big pay-off, Father Perrault tells Conway,

“Here we shall stay with our books and our music and our meditations, conserving the frail elegancies of a dying age, and seeking such wisdom as men will need when their passions are all spent. We have a heritage to cherish and bequeath. Let us take what pleasure we may until that time comes.”

“And then?”

“Then, my son, when the strong have devoured each other, the Christian ethic may at last be fulfilled, and the meek shall inherit the earth.”

That’s it: good manners, moderation (but sex is readily available), and the “Christian ethic,” which is conveniently left undefined. Father Perrault’s discourse bears no trace of mystical influence from its surroundings, nor is it softened by a pleasant gloss of religious tolerance. At the age of ninety-eight, he tells Conway, he began to study Buddhism and devoted many years to writing a book attacking it “from the standpoint of orthodoxy.”

*Lost Horizon*, it must be said, is a shallow, confused, pretentious book. To begin with, why does a Catholic missionary call himself a lama? Based on his novel, it seems unlikely that Hilton had any knowledge of lamas and lamaseries. A lama is a priest of Mahayana Buddhism as practiced in the high Himalayas of Tibet, India, and Nepal, a position that involves a strong dose of primeval shamanism — in the parlance of the Roman Catholic church, which ordained Father Perrault, a heathen cult. Centuries of reading philosophy and listening to amateurs play Mozart is no one’s idea of paradise; it just sounds brainy and grand.

There might seem to be little gained by taking to task this lightweight work of commercial fiction, but *Lost Horizon* won the Hawthornden Prize, and as late as the 1960s it was taught in high schools alongside *The Red Pony* and *The Pearl*, by John Steinbeck, and Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, short novels that address Big Issues suitable for class discussion. Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts, the Hong Kong–based chain that operates more than a hundred luxury properties, most of them in Asia, places a copy of Hilton’s novel in guest rooms alongside the Bible and the Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha.

In hindsight, the mystery of Shangri-La is why *Lost Horizon* was ever taken seriously as literature. One explanation is that in 1933, most Western readers, even the well-educated, had only a rudimentary grasp of Buddhism and life in the Himalayas. The only reliable information commonly available came from *National Geographic* magazine. Indeed, one of Hilton’s principal sources for *Lost Horizon* was a series of photo essays for that magazine about life in the mountain of Yunnan, by the eccentric botanist Joseph Rock. When *Lost Horizon* was published, very few of its readers had a firmer grasp of Tibetan Buddhism than James Hilton did.

The transformation of the legend of lost lands from sacred myth to thrilling light literature may have resulted from the declining need for moral instruction and a rising desire for

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vicarious escape. In 1933, Fascism was on the rise in Europe, and the United States was impoverished by the Great Depression: the world was in a perilous state approaching chaos, which presented many troubles to be escaped. Homer's poems were not composed as imaginative literature; they were scripture of a sort, preceding the dogma of modern religions. His epics were not based on divine revelation, but they were nonetheless believed implicitly by the audiences of the rhapsodes who chanted them. For the ancient Greeks and classical Chinese (and Persians and Mayans and Polynesians and Scandinavians), myth defined civilization: it had the dual purpose of creating a national identity and inculcating the core beliefs of its people. The moral of Homer's myth of the Lotophagoi is plain enough: the pursuit of a life without pain and regret is an idle dream. The episode's companion piece, Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens in Book XII, is equally plain: a quest for unending ecstasy is a dangerous delusion.

By the time H. Rider Haggard wrote *She*, Darwin's theories about the origins of life and discoveries about the geological age of the planet engendered doubts about Christian revelation, and therefore the validity of the moral code it enforced. Haggard and many of his contemporaries, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, lost faith in the strictures of the Church of England and sought alternative belief systems in spiritualist phenomena and the world of fairies. Moreover, in the last age of empire the spiritual teachings of exotic cultures became widely available; by the mid-twentieth century, Buddhism and other Asian religions and philosophical systems were being studied by many Western people.

Ours is a secular era, which no longer feels the need for mythopoesis; we live amid a superabundance of conflicting moral codes. James Hilton's attempt to create a belief system for his modern myth was destined to be a superficial hodgepodge; if it had forcefully advocated a philosophical point of view, it would have alienated too many potential readers — hence the confection of a Catholic lama. Mythology has become little more than a fictional genre with a pedigree, and frequently a commercial proposition, at that; yet myth without a belief system undergirding it lacks the primal power that compelled it into existence.

## NOTES

1. *Odyssey* IX 94-98. Except where noted, all translations are my own.

2. *Historiae* IV.177.
3. Strabo, *Geography*, trans. H. C. Hamilton (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903) 1.2.17, p. 32.
4. Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), chapter 16.
5. Sally Lodge, "First Printing of Three Million for New Percy Jackson Book," *Publishers Weekly*, August 18, 2011.
6. The synopsis of "Peach Blossom Spring" and portions of the analysis that follow are based upon my book *The Glamour of Strangeness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).
7. *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*, trans. and ed. David Hinton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. 122-123.
8. Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 87.
9. Translation by David Hinton, in *The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 2005 ), pp. 30-31.
10. Victor H. Mair, ed., *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 365.
11. Hinton, *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*, p. 112.
12. Segalen to Jules de Gaultier, 11 January 1914.
13. The synopsis of *Escapade* 20 and portions of the analysis that follow are based upon my book *The Glamour of Strangeness*.
14. Et seq. Victor Segalen, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Henri Bouillier (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), pp. 301-306.
15. Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, vol. 2, ed. J. Assézat (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875), p. 214.
16. In the introduction to Victor Segalen, *Paintings*, trans. and ed. Andrew Harvey and Iain Watson (London: Quartet Encounter, 1991), p. vii.
17. The synopsis of *Germelshausen* and portions of the analysis that follow are based upon my book *The Glamour of Strangeness*.
18. Friedrich Gerstäcker, *Germelshausen*, trans. George C. Harrup, reprinted in *Zoetrope*, vol. 6, no. 1, Spring 2002.
19. Gene Lees, *The Musical Worlds of Lerner and Loewe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 47-51.
20. "Cinema: Waiting for Leo," *TIME*, 17 September 1965.

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21. Quotations from *She* are transcribed from an e-book published by Amazon Digital Services.

22. Quotations from *Lost Horizon* are transcribed from an e-book published by Open Road Media.

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