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Sacred fantasy in *Game of Thrones*

1 Omens of faith

Three major religious forces, each aligned with magical systems, define natural and supernatural realities in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. A primordial religion of the trees – consisting of old gods of the wood – marks the beliefs of the north of Westeros, including the Stark family and the wildlings living north of the Wall in a treacherous wintery wilderness. An imported religion of the Seven, in which believers worship and pay homage to a set of seven archetypal gods, brought to Westeros long ago from Essos, the eastern continent, has seven gods for seven kingdoms, overseen by priestly septons at their temples; this is the dominant religion of the land. Somewhat more remotely, but growing as a result of evangelical fervour, there is the worship of R'hllor, the Lord of Light, a fire god imported from Essos, who is locked in a dualistic, eternal combat with the forces of darkness. (Worshippers of R'hllor say prayers of welcome to the sun each morning as well as prayers of warding as the sun departs each evening.) Each of these religions connects to a potent magical system in Westeros and Martin's created world more broadly, just as one or more characters enact apocalyptic change through or in spite of the religion at hand. These interactions of religion and magic, character and apocalypse, transpiring in a dynamic, intermediating zone where all these elements intermingle, define the plot and its ramifications in Martin's novels.

One of the first glimpses of the religious realities that permeate Westeros comes in the second chapter of *A Game of Thrones*, which is narrated by Catelyn Stark, born of House Tully, an ancient noble family from the mid-southern part of the continent, and who is married to Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, scion of another ancient noble family that has ruled over the north for centuries. It was a legendary Stark ancestor, Brandon the Builder, who erected the 700-foot wall of ice that separates the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros from the wild unruly wilderness to the north of it, legendary domain of giants, shapeshifters, wild free folk, and the mysterious Others – White Walkers neither dead nor alive but as lethal as frostbite and who have recently awakened from a dormancy of several thousand years. In this second chapter, Catelyn, who has never felt at home in the north, prepares to find Eddard – called Ned, familiarly – who in the first chapter of the novel has, in his role as Lord of Winterfell, beheaded a young man found guilty of deserting his duties as a man of the Night's Watch, an ancient order of Westerosi men, mostly

outcasts and derelicts, who take vows to protect the Seven Kingdoms against the menaces that lurk north of the Wall. Winterfell is south of the Wall, but located nevertheless in an unforgiving north country of bitter cold nights, windswept days, and hard-scrabble existence. The people at Winterfell live by the prophetic motto of House Stark, *Winter is coming*; even the noble people who benefit from life inside the walls of Winterfell are of a sort tougher than the people to the south, or at least that's the implication.

Catelyn knows where to find Eddard: he will be in the godswood. Growing up at Riverrun, the castle of House Tully, she knew bright and airy fields, flowing rivers, and a godswood 'where tall redwoods spread dappled shadows across tinkling streams'.¹ Making her way into Winterfell's godswood, she feels something different: a kind of uncanny dread. 'The gods of Winterfell kept a different sort of wood,' she ruminates. 'It was a dark, primal place, three acres of old forest untouched for ten thousand years as the gloomy castle rose around it. It smelled of moist earth and decay . . . This was a wood of stubborn sentinel trees armored in grey-green needles, of mighty oaks, of ironwoods as old as the realm itself . . . This was a place of deep silence and brooding shadows, and the gods who lived here had no names.'²

At the centre of the godswood of Winterfell is what Eddard calls 'the heart tree', a weirwood, which is a species of deciduous tree that grows across Westeros, with bone-white wood and blood-red leaves and sap. 'A face had been carved in the trunk of the great tree,' observes Catelyn, 'its features long and melancholy, the deep-cut eyes red with dried sap and strangely watchful.' Customary in godswoods of the north are these carved faces: eerie, anthropomorphising, and ancient. The weirwood trees in Winterfell's godswood are old enough to have seen Brandon the Builder set the first stone of the castle, which is to say thousands of years old. 'It was said that the children of the forest had carved the faces on the trees during the dawn centuries before the coming of the First Men across the narrow sea.'³

Eddard Stark belongs to an old faith whose primordality is ascertained from legendary implications: children of the forest, an heroic ancestor, the dawn of time. These elements belong to what Mircea Eliade, characterising sacred time, called the *illud tempus*, that time in which not only the world but reality itself has its origins, when the cosmos gushes outward into existence, 'the stupendous instant in which a reality was created, was for the first time fully manifested', and to which, Eliade insists, humans seek periodically, through the creation, invocation, and reactualisation of sacred time and space, to return.⁴

Catelyn, as a southerner, belongs to a different faith, the imported religion of the Seven, in which believers worship and pay homage to a set of seven archetypal gods – the father, the mother, the warrior, the maiden, the smith, the crone, and the stranger – brought to Westeros long ago from the eastern

continent across the Narrow Sea. This faith has seven gods for seven kingdoms, overseen by priestly septons at their temples and by tutelary septas in the homes of the noble families. The faith of the Seven is the dominant religion of the land. ‘Catelyn had been anointed with the seven oils and named in the rainbow of light that filled the sept of Riverrun,’ we learn. ‘She was of the Faith, like her father and grandfather and his father before him.’ In contrast to her husband, Catelyn’s gods had names, ‘and their faces were as familiar as the faces of her parents’. For Catelyn, faith consists of a censer smoking with incense, a septon incanting prayer, a service in a sept. ‘In the south,’ she thinks, ‘the last weirwoods had been cut down or burned out a thousand years ago’.⁵ Adherents to the faith of the Seven, we are to understand, are suspicious and even frightened of the uncanny Old Faith of the north.

To these two religions, Martin adds a third, another import from the east, in this case a dualistic faith of light and dark, in which an all-powerful God, R’hllor, the Lord of Light, wages an accelerating cosmic battle against the forces of darkness actualised by the night itself. The religion of R’hllor combines monotheism and dualism in an original synthesis: R’hllor is an all-powerful god – the one creator God, in fact – but reliant on his adherents to contribute to the outcome of a profoundly consequential cosmic battle between forces of good and evil. Not surprisingly, his followers are prone to fervour. In *A Game of Thrones*, we encounter Thoros of Myr, the ‘red priest’, a cartoonish figure in the high court at King’s Landing, who brandishes a sword he lights on fire during royal jousts. He abides, at least in the first volume of the series, as a colourful oddity, whiffing of otherness. But mainly, we learn of R’hllor through the figure of Melisandre of Asshai, a priestess devoted to the Lord of Light who has become the counsellor of Stannis Baratheon, the Lord of Dragonstone, a lonely island in the Narrow Sea. Stannis is the younger brother of Robert Baratheon, king of the Seven Kingdoms, whose death in *A Game of Thrones* triggers a crisis of leadership in the land the subsequent books in the series chronicle. Stannis believes himself to be the rightful heir to the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms because he has learned, through the detective work of Eddard Stark, that the children believed to be the offspring of Robert and his wife Cersei, of the conniving House Lannister, are in fact bastard children sired by Cersei’s twin brother Jaime, from which sin (in the Greek tragic sense of *hamartia*) the entire plot of Martin’s novels develops. (Eddard Stark will be beheaded for his discovery before the conclusion of *A Game of Thrones*.) Adding to Stannis’s feelings of entitlement are Melisandre’s convictions that Stannis is the second coming of Azor Ahai, an archaic hero who forged a sword of unequalled power, called Lightbringer, tempered by having been driven through the heart of the hero’s wife, and used to drive back the Others to the frosty northern

wastes in a battle that took place in a primordial foretime. In Melisandre's reckoning, Stannis embodies the power to save the land by driving its supernatural enemies back into the far north and uniting its peoples in a way as much prophetic as it is heroic. As Azor Ahai, Stannis is an instrument of R'hllor. In this respect, he bears no small resemblance to the Mahdi, the hidden Twelfth Imam, whose coming is prophesied by many Shi'ite Muslims, the figure of a pre-eternal covenant whose appearance, marked by eschatological signs, signals the beginning of the End of Days. The Mahdi, writes Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'is also the secret master of this world and can appear to those who are in the appropriate spiritual state to see him'.⁶ Hence Melisandre.

We first encounter the significance of Melisandre's convictions in the prologue to *A Clash of Kings*, the second novel in the series, narrated from the perspective of Cressen, a Maester of the Citadel. The knowledge of the maesters occupies a place of importance parallel to that of religion in Westeros. The maesters are an order of scholars, healers, messengers, and forecasters who learn their art at the Citadel in Oldtown, a city in the far south of Westeros. Maesters serve the noble families, teaching their children and advising kings and queens, lords and ladies about what they should do and how they should do it. There is an anticipatory quality to their knowledge that exceeds scholarship to verge into something like fortune telling. It's up to the maesters, for instance, to discern the change in the seasons in Westeros, which relate not to the rotation of the planet they inhabit but to a magical system hidden in shadow. When *A Game of Thrones* begins, summer has been lasting for more than a decade, something not uncommon in the history of Westeros. (As the series develops, there are intimations that the length and intensity of the seasons are connected to the lives of dragons, which have been lost to the world until Daenerys Targaryen, a teenaged queen across the Narrow Sea in Essos and potential heir to the Iron Throne herself, hatches three dragon eggs, reinvigorating the world with draconian magic.) In this respect, the maesters bear a similarity to the Mentats in Frank Herbert's *Dune* books. (And comparisons to *Dune* don't end here; structural similarities abound, as well even as some narrative strategies.)

Cressen is the Maester associated with Dragonstone; he serves Stannis Baratheon as his counsellor and healer. When we encounter him, he is ageing and anxious with foreboding that the world is disintegrating and Stannis won't be capable of surviving it. Stannis's younger brother Renly is also making a claim for the Iron Throne. While Stannis is sullen and taciturn, Renly is charismatic and adventuresome. Stannis writhes with loathing toward his brother as Cressen counsels him to broker a deal with Renly or with Robb Stark, oldest-born of Eddard and Catelyn Stark, called 'The King in the North' by his followers, despite being only a teenaged boy. Stannis

angrily refuses Cressen's counsel. Instead, he intends to gather his followers and wage war on the impostor kings of Westeros, including and especially Joffrey Baratheon, bastard son of Cersei Lannister and her twin brother Jaime, but heir to the Iron Throne as Robert Baratheon's supposed first-born son. Behind this impulse, Cressen suspects Melisandre, who has ingratiated herself as the adviser to Stannis's wife Selyse as well as to Stannis himself. 'The woman was the heart of it,' fumes Cressen. 'Melisandre of Asshai, sorceress, shadowbinder, and priestess to R'hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow.'⁷ Cressen schemes to poison Melisandre, pitting, it seems, the wisdom of the Citadel against the religious fervours of the East. The maester loses: Melisandre somehow transforms the deadly poisonous crystals he has sprinkled in her wine into a weapon. What she swallows is harmless, but when Cressen takes a swallow, he wilts to his death. Melisandre's devotion cannot be trumped by a scheme. From this moment, her prophetic intensity magnifies in Stannis, whom she convinces eventually to turn his attention away from fighting battle in the Seven Kingdoms to pitting his powers against the supernatural forces massing beyond the Wall.

In these two scenes, Martin presents his readers with a major thematic thrust of the novels in *A Song of Ice and Fire*; namely, a long-standing agitation between the natural structures and orders of the world (weirwood trees, for instance), ones whose archaism portends supernatural power, and the pursuit of civilisation by interloping humans (the so-called 'game of thrones'), who have brought with them from afar their own ideas of religion. It's tempting, of course, to map elements of our world onto Martin's Westeros: Eddard Stark radiates a pre-Christian Gaelic-Nordic intensity arising from a virtuous pagan cosmic order. The Starks and the other northerners are like the Druids in Blake's prophetic poems. Catelyn Tully's faith involves clearly Christian trappings of ritual, hierarchy, and ecclesiology, reminiscent of the medieval Catholic Church above all, but with Byzantine glamour thrown in for good measure. The Seven feel like the Holy Trinity as innovated in a session of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Likewise, the religion of R'hllor combines the cosmology of Zoroastrianism with the eschatology of Islam into a theodicy of conflagration: the Lord of Light will burn the imperfect world into new life. But the value of the implications of the religious systems in Martin's world, which include these and several others, lies not in the ways we might attest to an allegory at hand but rather in the verisimilar ease with which Martin includes religion as an essential cosmological fact in the narrative project of his world building. Put another way, while it's compelling to think about the ways religion is involved in Martin's series of fantasy novels, it's more interesting to think about what Martin's imaginary world tells us about religion.

2 Sacred fantasy

The *Zohar*, or Book of Splendour, is a 700-year-old mystical ‘homiletical commentary in Aramaic on all the portions of the five books of the Pentateuch, as if they were ancient midrashic works’, in the words of Joseph Dan, a scholar of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism.⁸ When the book appeared in southern Spain in the late thirteenth century, supposedly translated by the hand of Rabbi Moses de León, it was presented as the work of an ancient wisdom, written in lyrical Aramaic, drawn from some forgotten historical well. When de León died in 1305 and his followers appeared at the door of his house, asking his wife to see the Aramaic manuscripts from which the rabbi had made his translations, she reported to them that her husband ‘wrote from his own mind’, and that there was no source from which he was copying.⁹ The sophisticated literary structure of the whole, which involves a series of nested, sagely, disputatious, and metaphorically dense conversations between Rabbi Shim’on and Rabbi El’azar, was entirely invented by de León, presenting a simultaneous theogony, cosmogony, and cosmology in one unified myth, describing how the ‘universe reflects in its structure the divine realms, and events in it, in the past and in the present, parallel the mythological processes of divine powers’.¹⁰ Rather than being unlike anything else in the sacred literature of the world, the *Zohar* epitomises that literature, thriving because it takes such obvious, euphoric advantage of the tropes of religious language and thought.

Arthur Green, a scholar of Jewish mysticism, has written, ‘The *Zohar* is a work of sacred fantasy.’¹¹ He means by this nothing less than what he says: the *Zohar*, one of the greatest works of mystical thought in the Abrahamic canon, is a work of fantasy, in which an imagined world envisioned in the mind’s eye of its creator, erupts into reality and in some senses, because of the forcefulness of its vision, supplants and redirects that reality. That this happens rarely is less intriguing than that it happens at all; and that, howsoever rare, it keeps happening, especially at the hands of gifted fantasists (both religious and literary).

Martin is not writing sacred fantasy in the same mode. Rather, in his own reckoning, he is writing ‘adult fantasy’, by which he means fantasy in which sex, violence, incest, cunning betrayal, lavish description, much feasting and whoring, and merry-making and war-mongering are rampant. As John Lanchester points out in an enthusiastic review that appeared in the *London Review of Books* in 2013, ‘The violence in [Martin’s books] is not Tolkienian sword-fighting between warriors and orcs: it is long on murder of the innocent, poisoning and rape. It’s not a world any sane person would want to live in, not for a moment’.¹² Nevertheless, it is fantasy. And because of the convictions with which religion is represented in that fantasy, it abuts Green’s

declaration of the Zohar as ‘sacred fantasy’. ‘To say this about [the Zohar] is by no means to impugn the truth of its insights or the religious profundity of its teachings,’ writes Green. ‘The Middle Ages are filled with fantasy.’¹³ He includes angels, demons, heavenly chambers, secret treasures, and ‘esoteric domains without end’ in this fantasy. The literary imagination in religion is thereby extraordinarily rich.

If Martin is not explicitly composing sacred fantasy, he is certainly writing fantasy in which the sacred plays a crucial role. The sacred, in Eliade’s conception, is typically a manifestation of terrible power. He draws his sense of the sacred from Rudolf Otto’s notions of ‘the holy’ (*das Heilige* in German), which appeared in 1917 in his book *The Idea of the Holy*. Eliade, as did Otto before him, ‘finds the *feeling of terror* before the sacred, before the awe-inspiring mystery (*mysterium tremendum*), the majesty (*majestas*) that emanates an overwhelming superiority of power; he finds *religious fear* before the fascinating mystery (*mysterium fascinans*) in which perfect fullness of being flowers.’¹⁴ For Martin, religion is the thing that creates this awe-inspiring mystery and fear: it’s the power that emanates from Melisandre’s prophecies and compels Stannis to action; it’s the uncanny moral core of Eddard Stark’s convictions; and it is emblematised (Eliade would say ‘hierophanized’) in the colossal ecclesial power of the churches of the Seven, which order the reality of Westeros and inspire devotion and shame among its followers. ‘No wonder, then,’ as Daniel Mendelsohn astutely observes in his essay on the novels and the television series in the *New York Review of Books*, ‘that the action of *A Song of Ice and Fire* seems to be leading not only to the resolution of the dynastic question, but to a grand showdown among three major religions whose histories, theologies, and ritual practices Martin evokes in impressive detail.’¹⁵

Martin’s novels ingeniously combine this kind of sacred, apocalyptic fantasy with a more familiar kind of fantasy literature, partaking directly in what Lanchester describes as the English literary tradition of fantasy. ‘When you ask people why they don’t read fantasy,’ he muses, ‘they usually say something along the lines of, “because elves don’t exist”. This makes no sense as an objection. Huge swathes of imaginative literature concern things that don’t exist, and as it happens, things that don’t exist feature particularly prominently in the English literary tradition. We’re very good at things that don’t exist . . . There’s no other body of literature quite like it’.¹⁶ He’s right, of course. Mendelsohn points to Martin’s ‘imaginative linguistic evocations of his invented cultures’ as essential to the appeal of his fantasy, noting the quality of ‘the compound coinages that replace standard English (“sellsword” for “mercenary,” “holdfast” for “fort”), the ingeniously quasi-medieval diction and spellings of names, the perfumed language – the horses called destriers and palfreys, the gowns of vair and samite – that give you a strong sense of the concrete reality of this imagined world.’¹⁷ The feeling of that tradition

propelling Martin's writing forward is surely one of the pleasures of reading his books, especially the ways that this traditional fantasy in combination with a violent sacred fantasy suggests something new to the tradition, compelling in readers an immersive experience of escape.

Which begs the question: escape *into* what? Typically, we understand escapist literature in terms of what we are escaping *from*. To read Tolkien or C.S. Lewis or Ursula Le Guin is to escape for a period from the ordinariness (or dreariness) of your life. But when you read a fantasy novel for escape, just what are you escaping *to*? The intellectual objection to fantasy (even more so than to science fiction) can be seen in the response Lanchester includes in his caricature: *elves don't exist*. You can replace elves (which don't exist in Martin's world) with any number of other beings or forces to preserve the formula: dragons, alchemists, underground shamanistic seers, a 700-foot-tall wall of ice, White Walkers, even giants. When you read Martin, you are escaping *to* a fantasy world, one generated by the same principles that visionaries and mystics engage to create the sacred fantasies that enable the dynamism of religious faith.

In *De Anima*, Aristotle insists, 'To the thinking soul images serve as if they were contents of perception.' He goes on, 'That is why the soul never thinks without an image.'¹⁸ Marina Warner, meditating on Aristotle's declaration, adds, 'The imagination creates images as well as fantasies, but for many purposes the word "image" is too broad a term for the imagination's products – and not fantastic enough, because memory also retains and communicates in images.'¹⁹ She points out that *phantasmata*, Plato's word for images, entered English 'strongly tinged with the supernatural and the psychological', adding that *fantasy*, derived from Plato's word, 'has acquired a stream of distinct associations with the result that shades of difference now operate to distinguish the imagination from fantasy in common usage.'²⁰ Specifically, the word *imagination* is regarded with authority while the word *fantasy* tends to be denigrated.

What's at stake, then, in calling Martin's novels a fantasy akin to the sacred fantasy to be found in the Zohar? In part, a return to what Aristotle means when he says, 'The soul never thinks without an image.' (*Phantasmatos* is the word he uses in Greek.) Namely, the enduring property of the imagination itself: fantasy. In reading Martin's novels, we don't escape from reality into some irrational fantasy; rather, we move from the mundane shell of reality into the inner core of its liveliness, to a world of invention and image.

A heresy that plagued the early Christian churches was Docetism, a theological doctrine claiming that Christ had 'merely the appearance of a physical body, without corporeal reality.'²¹ The problem of the heresy stemmed from a pervasive anxiety that material reality is evil and for Christ to incarnate is to take on flesh stained in evil. Gnosticism, with its doctrine of

a fallen world in which human souls have been imprisoned by an evil overlord, partook of a docetical viewpoint. In ‘The Prophetic Tradition’, a cunning essay about William Blake’s poetry and the prophetic strain in Western religious thinking, Norman O. Brown hypothesises that because Islam lacks a priesthood, a sacerdotal organisation, and ‘theurgic sacraments’, its believers have magnified visionary experience over the centuries into a theophanic language. Borrowing a phrase from Henry Corbin, the scholar of Islamic mysticism, he calls this ‘the work of a Creative Imagination’.²² He goes on to call Docetism an alternative to the Incarnationism that informs Christianity historically, providing the possibility of ‘a devotion to appearance, apparitions, visionary experience, to vision. In Eternity all is Vision. It is not disparagement of the body but glorification of the imagination’.²³ For Brown, this commitment to a visionary reality drives Islamic thought in such a way that the ‘line from Jesus to Blake goes through Muhammad’.²⁴ He means the apocalyptic vision embraces the body, is magnified through the body. Vision is our somatic birthright. As Ronald Johnson has written, ‘But we have always known the eye to be unsleeping, and that all men are lidless Visionaries through the night.’²⁵ Could the stakes of fantasy be any higher?

Not for Martin. And not in a way that could be more fun. Never doctrinaire as far as religion is concerned (in an interview, Martin described himself as a lapsed Catholic), Martin draws freely from sacred traditions and disciplines in order to envision his world more completely and toward weaving the strands of his plot more closely. As a way of drawing the strands of my own argument together, I’d like to finish by looking at one of the plot lines in *A Song of Ice and Fire* that both intensifies and vexes the religious realities Martin so fastidiously presents in his novels.

3 Skinchangers and greenseers

The story of Brandon Stark (called ‘Bran’) is arguably the mysterious core of Martin’s novels. (‘Arguably’, because a similarly forceful argument could be made about Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen as well.) Bran’s story begins in the first chapter of *A Game of Thrones*, when he rides with his older brothers to witness his father execute a deserter of the Night’s Watch. After the beheading, while riding back to Winterfell, the riders notice a slain direwolf in bloodstained snow. A direwolf is another of Martin’s memorable inventions: enormous wolves nearly the size of horses that roam the northern reaches of Westeros and that serve as the symbol for House Stark. The carcass is seen as an omen. Bran’s older brother Robb shows him a direwolf puppy he has found, followed by four others, one for each of the ‘trueborn’ Stark children. As they leave, they hear a whimper on the wind; it’s a sixth, albino,

direwolf pup. This one will belong to Jon Snow, the Stark bastard. The omen of the slain direwolf yields six living totems.

Not long after, Bran, who likes to climb the walls and ramparts of Winterfell for sport, finds himself inadvertently listening in on a conversation he's not supposed to be hearing in an abandoned part of the castle he's climbed toward. The King of Westeros, Robert Baratheon, is visiting Winterfell to invite Bran's father to join him south in King's Landing to take on the role of the Hand of the King, his most trusted adviser. King Robert has brought with him his wife Cersei, as well as an enormous entourage, which includes Cersei's twin brother and lover Jaime, who serves as head of the Kingsguard. Bran in his climbing has placed himself in listening range of a private conversation between the queen and her brother. As their conversation quiets, he moves in closer to see who exactly they are (he's not sure at this point), only to find them naked, committing an act of incest. (He's too young to realise they are having sex.) Cersei, seeing Bran, lets out a scream, at which point Jaime quickly captures him and, in an act of perfectly refined malice, tosses him from the open window of the tower on which he has been climbing. Bran falls to the ground below, paralysed from the waist down by the impact.

In his immobilised recovery, Bran begins to have visionary experiences: he has distinct experiences of flying. He also begins to be haunted by dream visions of a three-eyed crow who tells him that he can teach Bran how to fly. As these visions of the crow and his feeling that they belong to ominous power increase, Bran discovers his connection to his direwolf pup, now a frightening, full-grown wolf, has intensified. The wolf, named Summer, is ferociously loyal to Bran. Over the course of the first three novels in the series, Bran begins to understand that he has the ability to inhabit the mind and experience of Summer. He awakens from dreams in which he spends the night padding through the woods, hunting for animals, capturing them, and devouring them with relish. At first, these visionary states come upon him involuntarily; before long, he learns that he has the power to control them, to enter into Summer at will. Bran is a warg, in Martin's parlance a 'skinchanger,' who has the power to enter into an animal consciousness at will.

Bran's vocation to skinchanging is answered, in part, by the appearance of Jojen and Meera Reed at Winterfell. In *A Clash of Kings*, they are teenaged siblings who have come to pledge their loyalty to Robb Stark after learning of the death of Eddard Stark at the hands of the Lannisters. Jojen quickly reveals to Bran that he has the 'greensight', which is the power of prophetic dreams, in which he is spoken to by a three-eyed crow. Jojen assures Bran that the abode of the magical crow is to the north, beyond the Wall. Bran, Jojen, Meera, Summer, and Hodor, a docile, oversized imbecile, depart from Winterfell in an attempt to locate the domain of the three-eyed crow. The

narrative of this journey becomes one of the repeated threads in Martin's tapestry.

Bran's (and Jojen's) powers are essentially shamanistic. Traditionally, shamans have powers to heal illness, to travel through astral and infernal realms, and to change into animal forms, which they manage through ecstatic trance. They gain these powers when they recover from initiatory ordeals, ones typically involving terrific psychic or somatic injury. Mircea Eliade calls this set of skills 'archaic techniques of ecstasy', suggesting, 'for certain religious consciousnesses in crisis, there is always the possibility of a historical leap that enables them to attain otherwise inaccessible spiritual positions'.²⁶ This leap might more properly be understood as 'transhistorical' because the shaman, whose religious consciousness is balanced in a state of permanent crisis, has the power to access a primordial foretime in which sacred fantasy perfectly overlaps sacred reality. Eliade fortuitously refers to these sorcerers as 'technicians of the sacred', for whom 'sicknesses, dreams, and ecstasies in themselves constitute an initiation'.²⁷ Put simply, when Bran was tossed from the tower by Jaime Lannister (to protect the secret of his incestuous love for his sister Cersei), the trauma that ensued initiated Bran into a higher form of consciousness whose omens and numen he was able to perceive because of his altered physical state. Jojen and Meera are both signs of this initiation as much as they are actors in its fulfilment.

Together, they journey arduously beyond the wall to seek out the abode of the greenseer. According to Winterfell's Maester Luwin, whom Bran queries about his dreams, greenseers are the wise men of the 'children of the forest', primordial first inhabitants of Westeros, with whom the First Men from the East waged war to gain control of the land. The children of the forest are responsible for weirwood trees, with their eerie faces, but by the time of the novels they have faded into folklore to become the stuff of old-wives' tales to frighten children. Discussing the power of these greenseers with Maester Luwin, Bran asks, 'Was it magic?', to which Luwin responds, 'Call it that for want of a better word, if you must. At heart it was only a different sort of knowledge.' Of the nature of this knowledge, Luwin – a maester trained in the rational arts at the Citadel – is sceptical. No one really knows what it is, he tells Bran. 'The children [of the forest] are gone from the world, and their wisdom with them. It had to do with the faces in the trees, we think. The First Men believed that the greenseers could see through the eyes of the weirwoods. That was why they cut down the trees whenever they warred upon the children. Supposedly the greenseers also had power over the beasts of the woods and the birds in the trees.'²⁸ Luwin goes on to caution Bran that magic isn't real. 'Perhaps magic was once a mighty force in the world, but no longer. What little remains is no more than the wisp of smoke that lingers in the air after a great fire has burned out, and even that is fading. Valyria was the last ember, and

Valyria is gone. The dragons are no more, the giants are dead, the children of the forest forgotten with all their lore.²⁹ In short, the world has ‘thinned’, as critic John Clute would put it. (‘Fantasy tales can be described, in part, as fables of recovery,’ as he writes in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*.³⁰) ‘This sense of thinning,’ writes Michael Chabon, ‘of there having passed a Golden Age, a Dreamtime, when animals spoke, magic worked, children honored their parents, and fish leapt filleted into the skillet – has haunted the telling of stories from the beginning.’³¹ As it turns out, Luwin couldn’t be more wrong. Martin’s books revolve around the violent, apocalyptic, and sudden upsurgings of this magic power recovered into the world in which dragons, giants, and children of the forest are beginning again to thrive.

It’s not until the fifth novel in the series, *A Dance with Dragons*, that Bran enters into the training portion of his long initiation. After a series of adventuresome challenges, Bran and company find themselves north of the wall at the mouth of a forbidding cave, drawn in by a mysterious child (eerily reminiscent of the eponymous Green Child in Herbert Read’s masterpiece), who leads the company deeper into the earth, where they wend their way through a labyrinth of tree roots, earth, caves, enclosures, and deepening shadows. It’s much warmer down below. This child of the forest is leading them to the greenseer, the only one remaining in the world. The deeper they go, the thicker the roots. Bran marvels at the size of the weirwood taproots whose colossal extension makes a kind of throne room he enters into, where for the first time he lays eyes on the greenseer. It’s a vision worthy of Bosch. ‘Before them a pale lord in ebon finery sat dreaming in a tangled nest of roots, a woven weirwood throne that embraced his withered limbs as a mother does a child.’³² *The soul never thinks without an image*. This is what Aristotle means by *phantasmatos*. ‘In Eternity all is Vision.’ ‘What skin the corpse lord showed was white, save for a bloody blotch that crept up his neck onto his cheek. His hair was fine and thin as root hair and long enough to brush against the earthen floor. Roots coiled around his legs like wooden serpents. One burrowed through his breeches into the dessicated flesh of his thigh, to emerge again from the shoulder. A spray of dark red leaves sprouted from his skull, and grey mushrooms spotted his brow.’³³ Seeing him, Bran senses the depth of his power and immediately asks for his legs to be restored. ‘That is beyond my powers,’ replies the greenseer, promising Bran instead, ‘but you will fly.’³⁴

Bran learns that through his rootedness, the greenseer sees through the eyes of weirwood trees and with his metamorphic imagination, he enters the consciousness of animals and other creatures to keep vigil on the land, to protect its ancient powers. The greenseer announces his name as Lord Brynden (who appears to be a legendary ancestor of the Targaryens, tightening the narrative threads), and begins to teach Bran the art of greenseeing; Bran will obviously be his successor. ‘Only one man in a thousand is born a

skinchanger,' says Lord Brynden, 'and only one skinchanger in a thousand can be a greenseer.' Bran will oversee and caretake a vast collective memorious power; though his physical powers will diminish, his supernatural powers will augment steadily, prolonging his life indefinitely. Jojen explains to Bran that what books are for humans, the trees, especially the weirwood trees, are for these ancient powers: repositories of knowledge and memory. 'When they died,' explains Jojen, 'they went into the wood, into leaf and limb and root, and the trees remembered. All their songs and spells, their histories and prayers, everything they knew about this world. Maesters will tell you that the weirwoods are sacred to the old gods. The singers believe they *are* the old gods. When singers die they become part of that godhood.'³⁵

They *are* the old gods. It's here at the juncture of seeming and seeing that Martin's sacred fantasy thrives: the imagination's metamorphic power is enabled by vision to change into the thing seen. Bran will become rooted in these ancient trees. And he will become an old god. While the religions of Westeros vying for control of the land accelerate toward cataclysm, Bran will slow down to the sacred pace of the Old Faith, the taproots of whose trees extend into the ochre vaults of the earth itself. Though I'm not by nature a betting man, I wager that this divinising of Bran will oversee if not actually trigger the apocalyptic conclusion toward which Martin's epic fantasy most surely slouches to be born.

Notes

- 1 George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam, 1996), 22.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 23.
- 4 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 81.
- 5 Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 23.
- 6 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 72.
- 7 George R.R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 20.
- 8 Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 31.
- 9 Ibid., 30.
- 10 Ibid., 33.
- 11 Arthur Green, Introduction, *The Zohar*, vol.1, trans. Daniel C. Matt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), xxxi.
- 12 John Lanchester, 'When did you get hooked?', *London Review of Books*, 11 April 2013; <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n07/john-lanchester/when-did-you-get-hooked>.
- 13 Green, Introduction, xxxi.
- 14 Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 9.
- 15 Daniel Mendelsohn, 'The Women and the Thrones', *New York Review of Books*, 7 November 2013; <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/nov/07/women-and-thrones>.

- 16 Lanchester, 'When did you get hooked?'
- 17 Mendelsohn, 'The Women and the Thrones'.
- 18 Aristotle, *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 1947), 223. This comes from *De Anima*, bk 3, pt 7.
- 19 Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 122.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 423.
- 22 Norman O. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 53.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 25 Ronald Johnson, *ARK* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2013), 14.
- 26 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Bollingen, 1964), xix.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 28 George R.R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 440.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 442.
- 30 John Clute, 'Thinning', in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ed. John Clute and John Grant (New York: Macmillan, 1999), 942.
- 31 Michael Chabon, *Maps and Legends* (San Francisco: MacSweeney's Books, 2008), 68.
- 32 George R.R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* (New York: Bantam, 2011), 177.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 178.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*, 452.