

MS Fragments Retrieved from a Garbage Disposal

by strannikov

Part III, Chapter Three

The creaking four-wheeled vardo plying the road north to München from Benediktbeuern Abbey was shown on both sides to be the traveling establishment of a Doktor Myrmidon. Even this late in the century, this was the traveling address obviously of some mountebank, festooned as the dingy canvases draping the cart were with alchemical and astrological hieroglyphs (his name and title in Gothic script of purplish red, the alchemical signs in Delft blue, the astrological signs in Meissen black).

With infrequent twitches of ears and tail, the cart's grey nag clopped along in no hurry. If the man seated at the reins was Herr Doktor Myrmidon himself, he had been obliged to leave the vicinity of the ancient abbey after bothersome incidents of making rabbits materialize from curled codices and manuscript rolls in the abbey's library. Earlier, he had pulled anxious and perplexed rabbits from placid bowls of cabbage-and-potato soup before startled patrons in a local tavern. The same figure had just earlier attracted local notice for extracting excitable rabbits from the maw of a large snake housed in a private menagerie just northwest of Kochel.

As the cart lumbered north, bright flowers not native to the region sprouted along the roadside, just as years earlier wisteria had sprouted inexplicably from a public fountain as the same cart had passed through Starnberg. (A “Doktor Myrmidion” [sic] had been cited at about the same time as having caused crocuses to sprout from a tapestry hanging above a staircase in a residence along the east bank of the Isar, north of Bad Tölz. Plausibly, this could have been the same “Doktor Myrmidin” said to have caused tulips to sprout roughly contemporaneously from a carpet gracing the entrance to a modest house once standing near Grunwald.)

As the cart neared München from the south, suspicious and embarrassing odors began to emerge from a butcher's shop, then as it soon passed from the shelves of a private library across and up the road just a bit, and soon enough from the guts of a busy print shop it passed. The cart rolled slowly into the city in mid-afternoon and was last spotted at dusk heading generally for Augsburg by two field hands amazed at the violets that seemed to sprout spontaneously on both sides of the road as it passed: even more astounding, the violets exhaled the fumes of some delightful beer.

Part IX, Chapter Four

"When people today assert such things or hold that such-and-such a case in fact is some case meriting attention—that some cited circumstance or case is palpably phenomenal, they seem to intend—they somehow succeed in conveying only a sense of 'as if'. Though they seem intent on signifying 'be' or 'are' or 'is' and thereby accord ontological status to the cited phenomena, the significations and ascriptions remain tentative at best and therefore unreliable.

"Refusing to distinguish ontology from oneirology, these folks only make trouble for themselves and for anyone reading their commentary. Failure to assiduously distinguish ostensive states of being from active dream states entails considerable and inevitable risks.

"The proper investigation of imaginary states with objective protocols at hand is at least slightly preferable to studying objective states by means of imaginary protocols. I therefore now proceed to illustrate my argument copiously with citations culled from the Oneirocritica of Artemidorus."

This anonymous monograph, thus prefaced, continued for a concise fifty-three pages (single-sided) of handwritten text: it lay in a cedar box beneath a printed version that appeared in a concise edition of thirty-eight pages, omitting the rambling recto title page and its facing verso page with a cryptic dipintura worthy of a Bacon

or a Vico. (The main title given in both the autograph and the printed copy was "A Guide to Human Anthropology".)

The author's commentary on passages from the Oneirocritica commenced only after stern and overwrought commentary on the passage Deuteronomy 23:12-14 and hence concerned not only Artemidorus's passage on implements and tools from Book 4, chapter 58, but also the unfortunate passages culled from Book 2, chapter 26 (the section concerning dreams about manure, ordure, and defecation). "When copious amounts of human manure are beheld, numerous and various bad things are signified", true enough, no doubt, but although the commentary did finally conclude with the cheery observations concerning dreams of happily voiding the bowels while seated sturdily on a chamber pot, closing with the witticism that such a propitious dream indicating safe travels is called "a pleasant outcome" or "the way out", these illustrations of the author's argument concerning the psychic malady termed "constipation of the soul" did not significantly enhance the commentary, no matter how aptly applied in support of the argument.

Part XIV, Chapter Five

Mrs. Death was walking in mountains where everything around was still. Mr. Death? —in another hemisphere, wandering (last she'd heard) through a vast forest.

Where Mrs. Death walked, nothing was alive, only silent minerals crunched underfoot, only silent mountains loomed in every direction. She'd never cared much for lowlands, not even when things still thrived there. Here, nothing had lived for vast ages, so long a time that she could not recall, but no one expected her to remember things like that, certainly not Mr. Death.

As the dead Moon rose over one crest, Mrs. Death smiled, she smiled every time the dead Moon came into view, as she had . . . for a long, long time. The dead Moon again shone full, casting its pale quiet light over the generally dark and all-quiet mountains.

Then from around a boulder, who should appear but—the Devil! Certainly, she had not seen him in ages upon ages, not since the last of those pesky bipeds had all succumbed ages upon ages ago. “Devil!” she smiled anew as she greeted him.

She had not changed one bit, the Devil saw instantly, she had been born young and strong and tempting just like her husband—just like he himself, truth be told—and the universe's chronons had not touched her once across all the time of her . . . existence. The Devil walked alongside her with a stylish cane, not out of decrepitude, certo, but because of his old injury.

“You are as beautiful and as charming as ever, my dear,” the Devil spoke in his clear bass baritone. “Your husband is at work in a forest, I understand.”

“Yes, he said he could manage it alone and somehow preferred to. If he wants my assistance, he knows where to find me.”

The Devil looked away at the dead Moon, he had not stood under its light for ages and ages. “I suppose he's in no great hurry, since he'll be finished up here soon anyway.”

Mrs. Death stopped and turned bodily to face him. “You don't mean?”

The Devil frowned slightly, though short of a full grimace. “Well, look around, my dear. Most of the planet is now as dead as the Moon.”

The Devil had his own extensive network of connections, Mrs. Death well knew, she was generally so single-minded she didn't bother herself with extraneous details.

“I've often envied you and your husband, you know,” the Devil confessed with uncharacteristic candor. “You were both here long before I got here, and my job here, as you know, ended ages and ages ago, but apparently my talents were applicable elsewhere.” Though his companion had stopped, the Devil kept up his pace, his cane grinding into the cracking rocks underneath. “I only get to deal with embodied souls, always the same old story, or almost always, whereas you two have been here from the very beginning of things, dealing with anything and everything that has ever lived.”

“—that has ever lived” somehow, escaping from the Devil's mouth, seemed to hang in the still air as Mrs. Death strode up from behind to catch up.

“Then the time has come?” she asked, still a bit uncertain but already captive to the Devil's logic, which she well knew was not worth the trouble of arguing with.

“Yes, my dear,” said the Devil, “as soon as your husband has finished with that last forest.” Mrs. Death did not look sad exactly, but for the first time in quite a while she actually looked down.

“It's not that I'm sentimental,” she explained, looking back into the Devil's deep and penetrating eyes.

“No, of course not,” the Devil replied, instantly flashing a brilliant smile. “And don't even think about worrying—I've put a word in on behalf of you both, and you'll both be getting a transfer soon to a fresh planet in this same galaxy, not very far away.”

The Devil, Mrs. Death found yet again, was perhaps her greatest comforter, more so even than Mr. Death, reliable as he was.

“Of course,” here the Devil's voice lowered to a confidential tone, “I've put a word in for myself as well, conditions there promise to become much as we've both found them here.”

The dead Moon, never permitted to express joy or frivolity, pity or sympathy, did slightly smile down on them both, as upon Mr. Death in his forest, since of necessity, for such a planet as the Devil had just alluded to, it too would have a long, long role to play nearby.

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