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The Gate

I

From childhood to the present, on this Earth and in worlds fantastic, I have searched for the tunnel formed of bowing trees, the circle of menhirs standing aloof in a sunlit vale, and the painting whose brushwork hills the hand can touch.

Thresholds, borderlands, portals and gateways are primordial to my imagination. But though I have dwelt on them for years, I have yet to obtain a complete understanding of them. This lack of comprehension arises not only from the myriad forms and meanings of these places of passage but from a deeper struggle to understand the nature of a place that lies within.

That is why I must return there—submit to katabasis. Having arrived at my destination, I hope to look with greater understanding upon that locus of power I call *The Gate*.

II

Ossian's Cave at Glencoe; the National Showcaves of Wales
The limestone archway of Durdle Door
The entrance to a badger sett
A gap in a hedgerow
A crack

A keyhole
A beloved book, open
The scrollwork mirror on my wall
St Paul's Cathedral Tercentenary Gate, Richmond Park
The Great West Door of Westminster Abbey with its sculpted martyrs

In nature, places of ingress result from the movements and behaviours of animals, geological formations, the growth forms of plants, and human interactions with the land. I have observed all these and more on ecological surveys, countryside management tasks, and during solitary walks or on hikes with my twin. And while it is true that the walker of wood and glen can be absorbed by such sights—the human animal is instinctively driven to know what lies beyond the next hill or to feel the thrill of peering over a ledge—to certain minds, these places are imbued with deeper meaning. Indeed, for most people the image of a shadowy cave or a dappled clearing may swiftly fade, but to those whose eyes look with longing, it will linger.

Passageways are to be found in architectural elements and works of construction and of art, literally and metaphorically. But it is only when the desire to escape swells in our souls that looking through a window or stepping beyond a door's lintel takes on the utmost significance. Even in the act of engaging with a creative work, such as looking at a landscape painting, the casual observer, having wandered listlessly into

a gallery, may not feel any great stirring of the breast, but, to the yearnful one, that land is all.

When we yearn it is often because we wish for something from which we feel we are separated, and a spell of enchantment enraptures us when we give ourselves to the contemplation of the desired place, object or person. Enchantment can itself be couched in spatial language. As Patrick Curry writes: 'Enchantment is a matter of relationship. That in turn requires each party to be distinctive and therefore different, creating a gap between them over which they can meet.' [1]

It is in the synthesis produced by this meeting that a third thing is made, be it a profound emotion or novel mode of understanding. Indeed, Curry goes on to suggest that this type of generation most often occurs at liminal and boundary spaces. Thus, if I find myself drawn to the interstices of this world, it is because I wish to see differently.

III

Some have argued that for the ancients everything was charged with symbolic meaning; the world as a text to be deciphered, the phenomena of experience signifying some higher function.[2] It is little wonder, then, that boundaries and passages, which point toward the brink of revelation, figured prominently in the lives of people for whom nature was, as it were, naturally enchanted.

These places are significant in pilgrimage, initiation and commemoration. They separate the sacred from the profane, the natural from the supernatural, the past from the future. Of divination, I am reminded of the oracular cult caves of Greece; of events celebration and the sanctification of paths, Rome's triumphal arches and the royal procession toward the Ishtar Gate of Babylon; of instruction, the marvellously

sculpted didactic doors of any medieval cathedral; and of rituals and rites, everything from the removal of shoes at thresholds to the smearing of blood on doorposts.

Further evidence is seen in the worldwide convergence of liminal deities serving as the figurative representations of the supersensible domain, or as the personification of movement, transition, and change. Such beings included, among many others, Enodia, Hecate and Hermes of the Greeks; Rome's two-faced Janus and Cardea of the doors; Nordic Heimdall (who guards the Rainbow Bridge) and the messenger god Hermóðr; the Chinese menshen, protectors against evil influences; and Egypt's twenty-one deities of the Secret Portals of the Mansion of Osiris in the Field of Rushes. But it is not gods and guardians I seek to understand. Instead, it is the entrances for which they stand that most captivate me, for I am the guardian of my own gateway.

The dark mountain portal Gilgamesh entered to reach the divine
The numinous Dyfed frontier abutting Annwn, the Welsh Otherworld
A sìdh burial mound, conduit to Irish Tír na nÓg, Land of Promise
Jacob's Ladder and The Pearly Gates, beyond which lies Heaven...

Concrete or ephemeral, hidden or apparent, subterranean or celestial, what these diverse locations have in common is a way of seeing that looks beyond the given, capable of multiplicity and alteration. We moderns have forgotten much of this lost knowledge of the gateways. And is that any surprise when ours is a world of homogeneity and cacophony? Imposing slabs of stone and faceless towers of glass hem us in as we suffer under a regime of blinding lights and grating noise. We cannot even see in front of us, let alone envisage different realities; and we cannot change our thoughts because we find it difficult even to hear them. The only passage we experience is that of being swept along in neat lanes by a dizzying modernity.

Thus, the remembrance of these venerable places is vital for an enchanted way of seeing. However, as elements of mythology and folklore they are shared and diffuse. That is why I must now turn from the mythic *many* to the imaginative *I*. Not only is it here that we have any significant engagement with such entrances today, but I believe the nature of *The Gate* itself to be bound up with individual yearning.

IV

Los enters the Door of Death by William Blake
The portal paintings of Zdzisław Beksiński
Gustav Doré's Paradiso, Canto 34
Caspar's Woman at a Window
Alan Lee's Gray Havens
Varo's Insomnio

Journeying onward and inward, I cannot but dwell on all those portals and passageways I have discovered in art, and on those minds that, having conceived them, stood before them first. Paintings that juxtapose different worlds (literal or metaphorical), or that depict the means by which one might reach them, endlessly inspire, but as a writer, it is the written word that comes closest to the effect produced when I exist in that place wherein stands *The Gate*.

In comparing reading to visual art, Edmund Burke contended that a drawing can only present a concrete representation of the subject and is therefore limited in its capacity to affect the observer. He elaborates: 'On the other hand, the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger emotion by the description than I could do by the best painting.' [3]

Though my structure is a kind of image, its serves more as a concept, and its existence within me has the same quality of fuzziness that all prose exhibits. Furthermore, Burke's description encapsulates a sense of holding a world within, a feeling that all readers know, and which is essential to my understanding of *The Gate*.

According to C.S. Lewis, himself the maker of an iconic wardrobe-portal: 'We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own. We are not content to be Leibnitzian monads. We demand windows. Literature as Logos is a series of windows, even of doors.' [4]

For me, this statement rings even truer when read literally, that is to say, when one reads fiction which emphasises those very windows and doors. When I walk with a contemplative character through a beautiful landscape or building, I begin to see as they do, and my observational skills are strengthened so that I can better appreciate and retain the beautiful when I encounter it in life. In experiencing the yearning of others at thresholds, my heart is enflamed against the sedentary and the unchanging, and my eyes are opened to the possibility of possibilities. Fantastical fiction—the literature of enchantment—only heightens these effects, for mundanity is rendered strange and there is greater disparity between desirer and desired.

In Alveric's nostalgic quest to pass 'beyond the fields we know' and rediscover the twilit border of Elfland in Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, I see not only my own wanderings in nature but also my drive to understand *The Gate* in the mind. Lord Dunsany's portal thrums with magic, an amorphous force unconstrained yet nevertheless acting as a barrier between two worlds: 'It stretched across the fields in front of him, blue and dense like water; and things seen through it seemed misshapen and shining.' [5]

Similarly, in Robert Holdstock's mythopoeic novel *Mythago Wood*, ancient Ryhope Wood, small from above, grows vast upon traversing an interior, scarcely perceived and bewildering border. The wood itself plays host to the archetypes of mythic figures, such as King Arthur and Robin Hood. In recalling this complex work, I draw yet closer to *The Gate*, for, like Ryhope Wood, it holds the images of things: 'In these ancient woodlands, *primary woodlands*, the combined aura forms something far more powerful, a sort of creative field that can interact with our unconscious. And it's in the unconscious that we carry what he calls the pre-mythago – that's *myth imago*, the image of the idealized form of a myth creature.' [6]

Closer still, Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* is the story of a man who spends his life wandering an infinite house in contemplation of statuary, investing each carven form with meaning. The house itself, a kind of Platonic realm, is accessible through secondary portals by travellers' succumbing to a state of child-like wonder. But it is the notion of the statues within informing Piranesi's experience of the world without that speaks to me the most: 'I wanted to seize hold of him and say to him: In another world you are a king, noble and good! I have seen it.' [7]

And then there is Clark Ashton Smith's *The City of the Singing Flame*. This narrative concerns the passing of the writer Angarth through a gateway, formed of two boulders standing in the Sierra Nevada mountains, only to find himself in a strange and alien world. He is drawn by a haunting voice toward a monolithic city and a temple where, surrounded by countless otherworldly pilgrims, he beholds a shrine: 'In the center, amid the pavement of mammoth blocks, there was a circular pit, above which seemed to float a fountain of flame that soared in one perpetual, slowly lengthening jet. This flame was the sole illumination, and

also, was the source of the wild, unearthly music.'[8]

That sensitive beings are drawn across wide gulfs of space, through various inferior gateways, to immolate themselves in the Singing Flame represents to me the rapturous desire for release that all creative forms of expression strive to affect. Such a dissolution represents the passing over of the final threshold into the ultimate escape.

Escape.

I run from the word even as I come closer to understanding.

No longer.

V

Endless are the waking visions in which I discover some arcane entrance whose very presence brings a flood of tears. What awaits me as I step through, I invariably imagine, is a bright apotheosis in which all my fears are washed away, and, reborn into another, better world, I experience solace absolute. *I have seen ancient kings in starlit glades and heard men speak the languages of water and wind. My skin has been warmed by the sight of noble creatures fawning upon their masters in perfect happiness. They all come from a world not like this world, always seeming so fair, so light, so full of silent grace. But I know they are figments, nothing more.*

Just as multitudinous are the paradises beyond these perennial portals we have dreamt up to guide us to them. Some I have already mentioned, but many more exist, from the Elysian Fields and Cockaigne of myth and religion to much-beloved fictional realms in which the sensitive wile away their days. I will not hide that I still long for these places, yet I am also aware that such sentiments readily

produce accusations of juvenility and escapist fancy. It is true that to seek a gateway to another world is in a way to be unsatisfied with the natural and human-made beauty that does exist, in pockets, on Earth, and such a realisation often brings feelings of shame and embarrassment. What is more, only this world exists. That is why, unlike the portals in fantastical fiction, there is no passing through *The Gate*. It leads nowhere because it leads everywhere.

And so, wandering through a realm of quiet darkness in which no other object exists, I arrive before a marble arch adorned with the figures of roving wild animals and human artists at work. In truth, this structure has taken many forms in the past, some of which I have attempted to put into stories. But it is impossible to put *The Gate* into any story, for to do so would contradict its meaning.

If what I carry inside is a symbol of possibility, why does it not appear amorphous, boundless? In the form of a gate, I am reminded of the existence, in the real world, of places of escape and that, crucially, I have the ability to change how I perceive things. Further, a gate as portal leads somewhere, in this case to ideas, designs, yearnings, while pure unbridled possibility stands for and contains nothing at all. The figures adorning the structure, representing nature unmarred and human artistry at its peak, fuel and give form to my creations. In a sense, all that I have ever created and will ever create lies beyond *The Gate*, and I write for it as much as for myself or anyone else.

This construction of mine does not need to exist but it can, and that is the point. As a creative person it is only fitting that I should seek to fashion within myself a shrine to the imagination, to erect a structure whose meaning is the realisation of new opportunities. I might even be compelled to worship so lofty a symbol were I not in danger of sentimentalising my own creative capacity. Or is that what the

realists, the scorners of enchantment, want me to think; that there is nothing admirable in seeking escape, even inwardly?

As I have grown older, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of inspirational symbols and myths, and of conditioning the mind to think in certain ways that reinforce unique perceptions. This is especially important for those who do not have the means to affect change in the world. If nothing else, I advocate for immersive contemplation of something held dear within the self, for that which is within is the only thing that cannot be taken away. It is as the poet Edmund Waller wrote:

> In such green palaces the first kings reign'd,
> Slept in their shades, and angels entertain'd;
> With such old counsellors they did advise,
> And, by frequenting sacred groves, grew wise.
> Free from th'impediments of light and noise,
> Man, thus retired, his nobler thoughts employs.[9]

And though potentially redundant in the face of *The Gate*, since that symbol is all-encompassing, in recent times I have made a concerted effort to dwell upon the likes of a beautiful tower or a stirring mountain and to carry it with me wherever I go. But it is this inward portal, source of inspiration for my own creative work and bringer of the awareness of other ways of seeing, that I value most of all. By meditating on its existence, every wall becomes a frame, every prison a temple.

Author's Notes

1 Patrick Curry, *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life*, 2019, p. 13.

2 Gary Lachman, *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*, 2017.

3 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1990, p. 55.

4 C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 1961, pp. 137–38.

5 Lord Dunsany, *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, 2020, p. 13.

6 Robert Holdstock, *Mythago Wood*, 2014, pp. 39–40.

7 Susanna Clarke, *Piranesi*, 2021, p. 244.

8 Clark Ashton Smith, 'The City of the Singing Flame' in S.T. Joshi, ed., *The Dark Eidolon and Other Fantasies*, 2014, p. 63.

9 Edmund Waller, 'On St. James's Park' in Robert Anderson, ed., *Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain: Containing Milton, Cowley, Waller, Butler & Denham*, 1792, p. 464.