

## THE REAL AND THE UNREAL

Our culture is stuffed with fantasy and romances in potent new media not invented when Plato fretted over the question of the utility of stories. Cultural critics, uncomfortable about the uselessness of such masses of imagined worlds with no goal or purpose but delight, tend to rank them instead by their truth-telling qualities. Those most disconnected from our shared social universe and its physics and politics, and most frank in their deployment of the tropes of romance, are classed as escapist, a word that implies that those who spend too much time within them are evading or forswearing the duty we all have to work for justice or betterment or at least survival.

There is a case to be made, too: The old Irish Celts, who have been conceived of as dreamy and romantic, perceived a danger in the attraction to other worlds, worlds of delight, excitement and gratified desire, and represented the danger in the many tales about what becomes of careless wanderers who allow themselves to be drawn into the land of the Sidhe within the earth: They emerge years later, pale and empty-eyed, no older or more mature than when they went in and having gained nothing except a permanent dissatisfaction with the everyday world that their coevals have been all along struggling with — sort of like young people emerging from years of obsession with Star Wars or video games or, well, *fairies*, reading tome upon huge tome of news from Neverland and never growing any older. To picture worlds that are either Edenic and impossible, or lawless and in ruins, might be to weaken a reader's allegiance to the world as it is and the possibilities it really contains, particularly for those whose connection to it is tenuous to begin with.

“Better is the sight of the eye than the wanderings of desire,” says Ecclesiastes. Hamlet says that the business of art, of theater art anyway, is to hold the mirror up to

nature, to “show Virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” But of course the most important thing about the image in any mirror is that it’s reversed, as Lewis Carroll knew, and opposite to what it reflects. So perhaps this can point us to an escape, from escapism as well as from Knowing Better: Couldn’t it be that those works (like Shakespeare’s comedies, or the pastorals of Watteau, or the fantasies of Ronald Firbank) are not evasive encodings of social power, inauthentic assertions of freedom canceled out by the very contradictions they are created to hide, but are actually conscious mirror-reversals of those dilemmas that we suffer — social, cultural, political, maybe biological or mammalian even? That could be instructive in itself, a revelation, like that famous map you can buy that shows the Western Hemisphere upside-down, with Tierra del Fuego and the South Pole at the top, and our own weirdly diminished country looking rather insignificant toward the bottom. Creating a world where power has no power, where only love has power — does it refresh our senses somehow, so we can see more clearly our life on earth, where (as we all know very well) power indeed has power, and love is often, maybe usually, not enough?