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The Allure of the Eccentric in the Poetry and Fiction of Fritz Leiber

> Thank God for all the screwballs, especially the brave ones who never flinch, who never lose their tempers or drop the act, so that you never do quite find out whether it's just a gag or their solemnest belief.
>
> - Fritz Leiber, *The Oldest Soldier*

Fritz Leiber's poems are not his best-known work. Published long after his reputation was made, they are few in number and were originally published in small press limited editions: *Sonnets to Jonquil and All* and *The Demons of the Upper Air*. They vary widely in quality, from amateur-sounding lyrics whose compression of meaning is awkward and sometimes unintentionally humorous, such as *Sonnets to Jonquil*'s "The Midnight Wall"or "1959: The Beach at Santa Monica," to the highly-polished and original *The Demons of the Upper Air*. Yet, despite their small number and variable quality, Leiber's poems are worth studying as a kind of summary of his entire body of work. They express in concentrated form many of the concerns and attitudes that inform the rest of his work, including the Jungian obsession with the Anima and the Shadow that underpins much of his best-known work. But perhaps the most obvious reoccurring motif in Leiber's poetry is one that has so far attracted little attention: Leiber's defense and love of eccentricity and non-conformity. Science fiction and fantasy,of course, are full of stories of the lone, often persecuted individual, but, in Leiber's work, the defence of the loner or the person who is different is more than just a convention. Instead, it becomes a positive value that excuses and even over-rides any defect because, no matter what terrors it may hold, eccentricity remains more meaningful than submission to convention. At times, Leiber derides his totemization of eccentricity, especially when referring to himself. Yet he never seriously questions its ultimate value as the essence of individuality. If eccentricity often leads to isolation in Leiber's poetry

and other works, it also gives existential meaning, redeeming life by rebelling against conformity and offering the delights of mystery and adventure.

At first, attributing to Leiber a delight in eccentricity might seem strange. Aside from being a writer, Leiber showed few outward signs of non-conformity in his personal habits. With quiet good manners and a preference for listening and observing, he is unlikely to have struck anyone as unusual in any way. Probably the strangest was his insistence, despite being a lifelong city-dweller on keeping a long-handled axe in a back cupboard wherever he lived, because, he said, his father had always told him that you never knew when you might need one.

In the autobiographical "Not Much Disorder and Not So Early Sex," Leiber describes himself as a "quiet rebel"in his early days --meaning one whose rebellions were more philosophical than political or social – and the description seems to have held through much of his life. For much of his life, he must have seemed a typical suburban husband and father, unusual only in taking a variety of jobs rather than seeking a lifelong career with a single company and perhaps in his alcoholism, but still to all appearances well within the urban norms. In his *New Purposes* fanzine, he may have obliquely endorsed sexual freedom, but, in practice, he seems to have confined himself largely to flirtation and necking. Even in his later years, he seems to have had reservations about the socialist convictions and outbursts of drunken outrageousness of Margo Skinner, his long-time companion and second wife. In fact, at times he seemed embarrased by them, although he seldom tried to check them. These things hardly seem to point to non-conformity.

However, like the axe, Leiber's other eccentricities were well-concealed. In "Not Much Disorder," Leiber alludes to himself as the latest in a line of eccentrics, citing his parents, who were both professional actors with regional reputations, and his grandfather, who crossed the prairies with a telescope. His parents, in particular, seem to have influenced him. Despite leaving him to be raised mostly by relatives in his early childhood, his parents seem to have given him the easy tolerence of

theatrical circles early in life. Critics would have to look long and hard to find any traces of racism or homophobia in Leiber's writing or life. Similarly, if his portrayal of women was generally filtered through Jung's concept of the Anima – a symbol of the male psyche – it otherwise seems unusually free of any possibility of sexism for a man of his generation. Moreover, in the story of his early life in "Fafhrd and Me," Leiber shows a decided taste for unusual, generally romantic sub-cultures, such as chess and fencing clubs, as well as for eccentric celebrities.

These attitudes and tastes seem to have lasted into the last years of his life when he surrounded himself – without being much of a participant in their activities – with neopagans and other subcultures in downtown San Francisco. During his final hospitalization, for instance, his regular visitors included a former dominatrix and a descendant of one of the Salem witches. Contrary to what many believe, he seems to have lived in downtown San Francisco at the edge of the Tenderloin, not out of poverty, but at least partly because he appreciated the parade of street characters.

Nor should we forget, at a time when science fiction and fantasy are central to pop culture, how eccentric his lifelong interests in the field were for much of Leiber's life.

Moreover, above all else, Leiber was a writer. "It's part of my whole adjustment to life," Leiber told Darrell Schweitzer, "To be a writer and look at experience from the point of view of hunting story material." This interest was so habitual that, even in his final illness, when he was not always coherent, he expressed several times a wish to get well so that he could continue writing stories. It makes sense, then, to look for his love of non-conformity in writing – and here, you can find it everywhere. Some of his influences, such as Shakespeare, seem mainstream, but others, such as Robert Graves and Joyce Carey, suggest a love of the unusual, of those who are not quite respectable in the academic canon. Nor can the writer who defined sword and sorcery, introduced urban horror, and became one of the handful of writers who first introduced mainstream literary values into genre writing be classified as

anything except unconventional. Where it mattered to him, Leiber was as eccentric as anyone could wish, blending genres, and mixing horror and humor years before anyone else.

Furthermore, it seems reasonable to look at his poetry for expressions of this unconventionality. Poetry is always the most private of genres. For Leiber, it was especially private, most of it occasional pieces that received only limited circulation. In many ways, his poetry, as variable in quality as it is, expresses attitudes that run throughout his work in a conveniently condensed form.

Sonnets to Jonquil and All

Sonnets from Jonquil and All was published in 1978 in a limited edition by Roy A Squires. It collects some of the poems of Jonquil Stephens, his first wife, who died in 1969 – ironically around the time that Leiber was finishing "Ill Met in Lankhmar," the story in which Fafhrd, his alternate persona, loses his lover. Leiber's own contributions to the volume are sonnets he wrote while morning his wife and miscellaneous short poems that he had written at various times in his life. So far as is known, it includes all his major poetry except *The Demons of the Upper Air.* These contributions succinctly express all the major approaches to eccentricity in Leiber's other works.

Leiber mourns his wife in two sonnets, "The Midnight Wall" and "The Other Side." Both sidestep what, to judge from stories such as "Black Has It Charms,"may have been a sometimes strained relation. Instead, Jonquil – or "Johnny," as "The Other Side" addresses her-- is remembered for her strong individualism. In both poems, the result is a tone, that, in suggesting her toughness, is so flippant that it often seems at odds with all elegaic tradition.

In fact, both poems are noticeably unsentimental. Although "The Midnight Wall"addresses her as "Lolita"and refers to her short height as one that "appeals to most girl-centered men" and "The Other Side" mentions such details as "Her ebon stretch-ants and white leather hat" and ends by proclaiming "Her love which over three and thirty years / Sustained me in this vale of acid tears," the general impression of both poems is not intimacy and love, but cautious admiration for her toughness. "She was

a beaut, and tough, and ever living," "The Midnight Wall" proclaims at the end of the octet, "But not to any foe a bit forgiving." Then the sestet begins with a line that may or may not refer to Leiber's relation with his wife: "Yet what is hate but love flipped on her face?"

Yet, throughout both poems, the emphasis is on a respect for Jonquil's non-conformity, even when expressed in less than ideal ways. "The Other Side" mentions "her stubborn pride" and suggests that "her pride remains" even after death and possible judgement. And if she has sinned "'gainst our Christian heaven," the poem suggests, she may equally have sinned "against herself." Indeed, the sins against herself are mentioned first in the line, as though they might be the most important. In much the same way, Leiber praises "her racialism" (either her racism or her extreme pride in her Welsh heritage), reminding himself that it is "not to be denied." "The Midnight Wall" is even more explicit, referring to her dislike "Of traffic and rude voices she despised/ Or shrill male English ego." The impression left by both poems is that eccentricity redeems all her faults and is chiefly what makes her lovable. Even the repeated mention of her unusually short height reinforces the emphasis on difference. Both poems amount to an approval of non-conformity despite anything else.

At the same time, Leiber cannot take a stand in support of non-conformity without undercutting it, especially when it applies to himself. In *Sonnets to Jonquil*, this habit is emphasized by placing the sonnet "5447 Ridgewood Court," the poem that shows the undercutting most strongly, between "The Midnight Wall"and "The Other Side." Apparently a look back at the Leiber's life when they first moved to Los Angeles in the late 1930s, the poem repeatedly raises a memory of non-conformity, only to undercut it immediately. For instance, after invoking "The parties and the music and the art/ The young men shouting and the girls a-fever," Leiber immediately describes himself as "a naive sexual image-rover" -- a phrase whose compactness makes it obscure, but in which Leiber seems to labels himself unsophisticated and a theoretical more than actual sexual adventurer. This impression is strengthened by the summary of of the era as "such fucking fun, though seldom fucking."

In the sestet, the undercutting continues. Initially remembering “Mad, swashing saber flights,” Leiber immediately corrects himself by adding “once, not for long.” The final lines are one continual undercutting: the blades are taped to prevent injury, and arc the kitchen light, and the attempt to see the time as romantic is deliberately sabotaged by the mundane names “Of sisters named Naom and Nancy Smith” and the even more mundane final line, in which someone ushed to change his car where he’d cross-parked it.” As throughout so much of his work, Leiber would like to stake a claim for non-conformity as he conceives it, yet another part of him dismisses the idea as faintly comic, especially in himself. It is as though he perceives a gap between his elevation of eccentricity as an ideal and his own behavior or, perhaps, modestly feels that he is staking too large a claim for himself.

Yet, for all his undercutting, Leiber never questions the value of eccentricity – just its applicability to certain situations, or to his own behavior. His essential perception of existence is one of loneliness and isolation. Leiber expresses this isolation in “1959: The Beach at Santa Monica.” the poem starts:

> At any one time
> A man may see too much,
> Feel too much,
> Know too much.

Throughout the rest of the poem, the speaker tries to bind himself to the scene around him in short lines that suggest the rhythm of the waves. He ends by admonishing himself to:

> Strengthen yourself in sensation,
> Brace yourself against your atoms.
> The world is firm.
> The universe is sure.
> Return again to this knowledge.

There is no sign, however, that the speaker is any less isolated at the end of the poem than the start.

“Santa Monica Beach at Sunset,” expresses much the same feeling of isolation. The only signs of movement or sound in the poem are either distant, like the gulls, or random and dispersing into entrophy such as the “brownianly” movement of the speaker’s cigarette ashes and the scattering motes” of the birds”on a nearby telephone wire. Despite the waves, the beach is “spectral silent,” and the feeling of isolation is strengthened by the feeling of remoteness created by the realization that World War II is taking place thousands of miles away. Nor is there any more sense of resolution than in the later treatment in the closing question, “Yet why so spectral is the beach?”

A more mythological treatment of isolation occurs in “Past Druid Guards.” In this poem, the speaker and a companion addressed only as “dear” have eluded the guardians of an Eden-like to find a refuge in a bower where they may make love. The “Druid guards” are not mentioned beyond the first line, but the fact that they seem to keep people from the grove suggest that they represent the forces of convention that try to thwart enjoyment or efforts to find meaning. Possibly, too, they are part of the “terrible wild / Where Shadowy, brooding figures stalk apart” that move just beyond the edges of the grove in apocalyptic “hordes” that make the grove a temporary and precarious refuge.

The sense of inescapable isolation in these poems is enlarged in “The Voice of Man” and “Poor Little Ape” into an inescapable consequence of sentience. As humans evolved and developed civilizations, “The Voice of Man” suggests, “a host of gods came with him from the dark: /Puissant guards with powers beyond the grave.” However, gradually, “the awful spark / Of knowledge grew, and man must watch each die.” Now, only one god is left, “And that one shrunken to a puerile lie,” leaving humanity without protectors, so that the voice of man is as much an expression of solitude as the sound of doves or owls, or the howl of a wolf. “Poor Little Ape” is equally comfortless, depicting humanity as a primate haunted by both the natural fears of predators and terrors, real or poetential, that are of its own making: “War, torture, guilt, revenge, crime, murder, hate.” The only comfort offered is the sestet’s assurance that this condition is inescapable and nothing new:

Far wiser beasts under far older stars

Have had your sickness, seen their hopes denied,

Sought God, fought Fate, pounded against the bars,

And like you, little ape, they some day died.

Against such knowledge, the only consolation is to “Look at the stars . . . and sleep” -- to aspire, and then seek temporary oblivion.

It is only when Leiber turns to the Gray Mouser that any greater consolation is offered in *Sonnets to Jonquil*. “The Gray Mouser: II”shows one of Leiber’s favorite characters as a lone figure in the night. However, the isolation, rather than causing the existential despair expressed in other poems in the collection, is exiliarating. The Gray Mouser’s isolation is one of mastery in the environment as he passes through the “mazy alleyways” of Lankhmar and evades the sorcerous fogs, unnoticed except by a bat “whose sharp ears caught one sound” and with a “smile that links his sallow cheeks.” And although he may be out making a living as a thief, his business is not one of dull conformity. The sestet enumerates the things he might be intent on stealing: foreign jewels or girls, “a rune that Sheela magicked from the dead” or some extra-terrestial secrets. These mysteries, the everyday business of the Mouser, are beyond even the imagination of others, the closing couplet suggests.

An even stronger depiction of the Mouser as the enemy of the mundane appears in “The Gray Mouser: I.” Here, the city of Lankhmar is seen as the agent of conformity. The city is at odds with nature; it “shuts the jungle out with morticed stones,” “seals the scent of flowers in glass jars” and “locks the Earth’s secrets up in brass-clasped tomes.” Scholars help create this conformity with their “ponderous books,” and, as a result, creatures of imagination or horror are unable to enter, much less survive, on the city’s street. Amidst this conformity that threatens to destroy all mystery or wonder, the Gray Mouser is depicted as poised among the gargoyles, grinning down from the rooftops at the scenes below. In the final lines, he is seen as a figure of chaos, mocking the conformity around him by

breaking into a library and opening the scholar's books to "scribble in / Footnotes that give the lie to all proud proofs." The uncontrollable nature of the Gray Mouser, the suggestion is, not only subverts normality, but includes a knowledge that the defenders of conformity can never imagine.

Leiber starts with elegies in *Sonnets to Jonquil*. However, by including other poems written throughout his life, Leiber quickly moves beyond expressions of mourning in the collection. In fact, even the elegies are not entirely about his wife. The motif that runs through *Sonnets to Jonquil* is not mourning. It is the praise of eccentricity. Its memory gives meaning not just to the memories of his wife, but to existence in general.

The Demons of the Upper Air

The Demons of the Upper Air is the earliest surviving piece of Leiber's poetry. A draft was criticized by H. P. Lovecraft in an uncollected letter written in December 1936, and Leiber took his metrical suggestions, but further details about its revision history are unknown. It reflects Leiber's concerns immediately after graduating from university, when he was contemplating whether to do a graduate degree and how to balance the need to earn a living with his desire to write – in other words, whether to conform to expectations, or to seek out the non-conventional. Against this background, the poem can be seen as the young Leiber's declaration of allegiance to the eccentric. Divided into nine loosely connected sections, the poem paints a picture of conventional life as a walled-off denial of everything that lends meaning. The demons of the title, superficially fearsome, in fact are benign – if not altogether save. They represent an alternative to convention that, if followed, allow humans to overcome their isolation and predictability in the consolations of mystery and adventure.

The lines are drawn in the first section of the poem. It depicts the majority of people, "Cowering down in their pocket of safety," huddling around the fire in their houses as they attempt to deny the whisperings and shadows of the demons. They are "Pretending they do not hear the voice / Of the thing from the thin high air"as it

whispers of battles above the low clouds,

Of creatures nearer and creatures stranger

Than those in the shielding house would wish

Yet, for all their efforts to lock and seal their houses, the whispering of the demons still comes to them down the chimney in “a challenging song” and “Tainting even the roaring of the fire.”

The second section echoes the depiction of scholarship as the defender of conformity in “The Gray Mouser: I” -- perhaps, inevitably, given Leiber’s reluctance to continue in academia at the time the first draft of the poem was written. Just as the scholars of Lankhmar as seen as the forces of convention that the Mouser must subvert, the demons are seen as the opponents of the Solomon of Arabic legend, whom the poem makes into a representation of academia:

Solyman sought to seal us up,

Thinking we were a book a man might seal,

Thinking we were strange pictures

And our racing thoughts

But dimming words upon an ochred page

Solomon, however, is dead, and the demons survive to challenge conventional lives. Rather than being something that can be tamed or rationalized by scholarship, the demons are “a book that was penned by the Elder Gods, / A book that never a man may seal.”

The contrast between a life of convention and the demon’s existence is contrasted again in section VI. Here, the conventional life is seen as a *Pilgrim’s Progress*-like journey through a metaphorical landscape. Young adulthood is described as a party at an inn, in a chill air that suggests its barrenness. Once past the inn, however, the allegorical journey becomes one of isolation, even in the middle of a crowd. Further down the road from the inn are the tribulations that bring maturity, described as a castle full of Furies and other creatures that must be safely passed. Once past the castle, people settle in the

suburbs of a “factory city” with a “rich, sweet stench of luxury” and full of a “might marching,” which could be taken equally as a suggestion of Nazi rallies and the daily rush hour. Beyond the town lies death – a pit too dark to see the bottom of. This allegorical journey is in marked contrast to the wild flights of the demons described rapturously throughout the poem.

Significantly, however, it is only contact with the demons that make the journey bearable, or even possible. Speaking in a collective voice, the demon refer twice in the section to “the part of you I bear” -- identified in section III of the poem as the soul. This part is chilled by the air above the tavern, and the demons guard humanity along the rest of the road, finding a way through the Furies in the castle and struggling through the thin air of the city. Beyond death, human and demon may meet. Meanwhile, “there is always enough air / To bear the part of you I bear,” the demons explain. Yet, for all that, the demons urge humanity not to accept the journey for all there is. If “The way’s not bad that you must go,” it is still not an end in itself. Rather, the demons urge humanity to:

> press on strongly with long stride;
> Live, love, and laugh; swing your gaze wide;
> And do not dawdle by the way --
> Remember, I’m not in your pay.

In other words, while the demons may support humanity on its allegory journey through convention, the journey should not be the only concern. How humanity makes the journey is important, and what lies beyond it or outside it even more so.

In contrast to the industrial city of the allegorical city, the demon’s realm is described in section 5 as “The windswept, icy mountain tops of mind.” It is likened to Nifelheim, the realm of the dead in Norse mythology and identified as Ultimata Thule, the land furthest from civilization. Humans are invited by the demons to ascend with them to this realm in section III. The demons invite them to “Your body to the earth, / Your sins to hell, your plans to mirth.”If the realm of the demons is not free of fear, they

nonetheless prompt humanity to “cast away / All lesser fear”and join them in a world that is a reversal of the life of convention where midnight is noon.

To aspire to this realm, section IV suggests, is a natural aspiration. It is the realm of the “true” of which humans can only dimly conceive. Instead, they perceive it indirectly. Some of these perceptions are only “false signs / That yet prick the mind” to search for truth. These false signs are suggestions of mystery and adventure. They include “the howl of the wolf” and “the eye of the cat,” as well as uncontrollable forces of nature, such as “the anger of oceans” and the mystery of space. However, they also include anything generally strange within human experience, including “the words of the madman,” and mathematical symbols. Better yet are what seem to be true signs: “The far darting of vision that comes with creation,””the quip of the great man,” and “the pantherlike leap of imagination” -- all the products of unusual human minds. In typical Leiber fashion, section IV undercuts this affirmation by repeatedly wondering whether such things do, in fact, lead to upward aspirations, yet the wild rush of words leaves little room for doubt.

Section VII restates this affirmation.In this section, however, the voice of the demons is apparently abandoned. Instead, the human soul seems to be addressing the demons – or, possibly, the demons are addressing what is higher than themselves. Either way, the voice in Section VII is addressing that which is “higher” than itself. Physically, the speaker of the section is forever barred from what it addresses, yet must seek it anyway:

> I may not house with you
> And yet I must seek you;
> I may not school with you
> And yet I must cry for you

Still, despite this separation, the soul of the speaker has still risen to join the addressees. The addressees are described as the host of Vahalla crossing the Bifrost Bridge, or possibly the Wild Hunt, riding out in challenge “To evils time-biding.”

The Demons of the Upper Air ends with another call for ascension. Returning to the image of the host of Vahalla, the demons decribe themselves as “Knights of the night” embarked on a Lovecraftian journey through space:

> “Ho, brother, is the way past Neptune clear?
> And those gaunt beasts on the galactic rim --
> Do they claw still the Elder Gods’ last gate?”
> Despite their spectral nature, the demons assert, they encompass the best of humanity:
> The present grips the future with our claws,
> Forgotten facts ride forward on our wings,
> And inspiration’s first faint harmonies
> Sound in our songs, while eerie far-off things
> Call to beg us bring them down to earth.

The last lines of the poem are an open appeal to the unconventionally-minded: “Ho, wild, unruled allies upon the earth, / We are your friends who ride the icy nights.”

Noticeably, *The Demons of the Upper Air* lacks more than a hint of the undercutting found in the lines of some poems in *Sonnets to Jonquil.* It is the product of a younger, more serious man, who is trying for more serious and concentrated effects. However, the other elements of the later poems-- the value of the unconventional, the feeling of isolation that is soothed by mystery and imagination – are already present in *The Demons of the Upper Air.* It is tempting to speculate that writing the poem may have helped the young Leiber decide on a career as a writer – in other words, to embrace the unconventional in his own life. Still, no matter how it is viewed, *The Demons of the Upper Air* remains

by far Leiber's greatest poetic achievment, creating a genuine eerieness that has few rivals in any of the poetry of the fantastic.

The Eccentric in Other Works

Written over fifty five years, Leiber's prose covers a lot of ground. Yet a defence of eccentricity runs through it almost as strongly as in his poetry, and covering much the same ground. The defence is especially strong in the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser cycle, whose writing became literally a life-long work.

Throughout Leiber's fiction, eccentricity is continually at odds with the forces of convention. This conflict is epitomized in *Conjure Wife,* in which affable outsider Norman Saylor views his faculty colleagues and their wives' grim competitions for status with the remoteness of an anthropologist and more than a little amusement. Only when his very unwillingness to join the competition makes him and his wife the prime targets for attack does he realize that, for the forces of convention, the idea of neutrality or disinterest does not exist; it is simply a tactic in the battle. Forced to take action when his wife is attacked, Saylor is able to win the struggle through his superior intellectual abilities. Yet, even then, the final victory that Saylor and his wife win is not dominance over those around him. Rather, it is the ability to to remove themselves from the competition once and for all.

More often, the struggle between the eccentric and the conventional is muted in Leiber's work. Yet it is no less inevitable or serious for that. Like the people in *The Demons of the Upper Air,* the conventional characters in Leiber's fiction are constantly attempting to deny that any possibilities exists outside their narrow confines, yet, the stronger their denial, the more powerful the forces of non-conformity become. This suggestion is applied psychologically in such works as "The Haunted Future" and sociologically in "The Lion and the Lamb." In both these works, the attempt to deny the eccentric leads to anxiety and breakdowns that can only be healed by accepting that the inadequacies of convention.

Most of the time, however, Leiber applies the suggestion metaphorically. In *The Sinful Ones* and *The Big Time,* entire realms of experience exist that are beyond the average person's perception. In fact, in *The Sinful Ones*, the average person lacks consciousness altogether, and is simply an automaton, while the characters of *The Big Time* flit in and out of reality, fighting a war across time and space that most people have no idea exists. Leiber takes a slightly different approach in his urban horror stories, such as "Smoke Ghost," "The Hound" and *Our Lady of Darkness,* in which modern norms with their insistence on rationality simply produce new forms of the supernatural. Yet, throughout his work runs the consistent idea that something beyond the norm exists. Occasionally, Leiber plays with the idea that convention may win out, as in "The Enchanted Forest." Yet, in general, Leiber sees the unconventional in much the same way as Robert E. Howard sees barbarism: As a state not only unavoidable, but destined to win out in the end.

That is not to say that Leiber always takes the eccentric seriously. In "Not Much Disorder and Not So Erly Sex," he describes his earliest attempts at sexual adventurism as a series of embarrassing misadventures, and this undercutting regularly finds its way into his fiction. Unconventional characters who take their position too seriously are constantly undercut in Leiber's fiction. In "Poor Superman," for instance, a self-proclaimed member of an elite is rudely disillusioned, while in "Wanted – An Enemy,"a pacifist like Leiber himself cause interplanetary war instead of preventing it. Similarly, Bruce Marchant, the World War One poet in *The Big Time,* after loudly proclaiming his own superiority, is depicted as being unable to turn his pretensions into reality, opting for the continued time war rather than love and a grand crusade to end it. In "The Night He Cried," Micky Spillane's Mike Hammer, a character who does not play by other people's rules, is similarly undercut. Other characters, such as the inventor in "The Creature from the Cleveland Depths" or the representative from Monsters, Inc. in "The Haunted Future", have a healthier perspective, and are able to laugh at themselves. In fact, in "Adept's Gambit," it is Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser's ability to laugh at "their omissions,

miscalculations and mistakes" (106) that allow them to defeat the narrowly academic Anra Devadoris – and that gives them a connection they share with the demons of the upper air to the Elder Gods. In *The Big Time,* Leiber even mocks himself indirectly by having characters laugh at some of the lines of "Poor Little Ape"from *Sonnets to Jonquil.*

As in his poetry, the allure of the eccentric in Leiber's fiction comes from a sense of isolation. Almost without exception, Leiber's protagonists are outsiders, looking for meaning. Consistently, they are loners. In "The Creature from the Cleveland Depths," the protagonist is an inventor who, alone in his community, continues to live above ground. Some protagonists are literal outsiders, such as the British visitors who diagnose the social ills of the United States in "Coming Attraction" and "America the Beautiful" or the visitor from space in *A Specter Is Haunting Texas.* Other of Leiber's protagonists are isolated by circumstance, such as those in the Change War stories "Damnation Morning" and "Try and Change the Past" because they are unable to help themselves. At other times, they are isolated socially, as in "Midnight in the Mirror World" or "Horrible Imaginings" or recovering from loss and attempting to re-engage the world, such as Franz Western, Leiber's fictional double in *Our Lady of Darkness* or the pilot in "When the Change Winds Blow."

This sense of isolaton is especially strong in the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories. Forced out the narrow confines of normality – Fafhrd by the threat of marriage and life by the rules in "The Snow Women," the Mouser by the discover of cruelty in "The UnHoly Grail" -- the characters are isolated further by the deaths of their lovers in "Ill Met in Lankhmar." Forced together by their mutual trauma, they become perennial thieves and mercenaries. Even their attempts to settle down in "Lean Times in Lankhmar" remain outside the norm: Fafhrd becomes an acolyte and the Mouser an extortionist, and both slip into their old ways before long. It is only when they can find maturity and responsibility on Rime Isle in the arms of two equally unconventional women that they can move beyond their decades-long isolation. Even then, the change is a long time coming.

In “The Mouser Goes Below,”one of Leiber’s last works, this isolation is given physical form. Slipping constantly deeper into the ground, the Gray Mouser finds himself eavesdropping on a scene in the underground kingdome of Quarmall and observes:

> How characteristic of most of his life ....to be on the outside in drenching rain or blasting snow or (like now) ... looking in at a cozy abode of culture, comfort, companionship and couth – what man wouldn’t turn to thieving and burglarly when faced at every turn with such a fate. (265)

Most of Leiber’s characters would share the Mouser’s sentiments. Although they might not turn to crime, all seem to welcome the unconventional into their lives, even when it brings them suffering or death. In “Richmond, Late September, 1849,” Edgar Allan Poe falls in love with Death, sickened by a life of isolation caused by his premonitions of the American Civil War and his alcoholism. Even turning into an alternate universe Adolf Hitler seems an intriguing event for the Leiber-like protagonist of “Catch That Zeppelin!” Where the passiveness of Lovecraft’s doomed protagonists often seems inexplicable, Leiber’s generally seem to face their various dooms hypnotized by the allure of mystery.

Outside of Leiber’s horror, the arrival of the eccentric is a sign of renewal in Leiber’s fiction. In *The Green Millenium,* the arrival of aliens renews the world of “Coming Attraction” both socially and sexually. Much the same can be said of Scully de la Cruz, the visitor from space in *A Specter is Haunting Texas.* In “The Ship Sails at Midnight,” the renewal is more personal, as a band of four intellectuals discover their talents under the influence of a Muse-like woman from space. A similar figure appears in The Wanderer in the form of Tigrishka, the feline alien who helps the protagonist complete the poem (“Poor Little Ape”) that he has never been able to finish by himself. T

Always, the eccentric is alluring in Leiber’s fiction. When the protagonists of *The Sinful Ones* revel in their ability to pass unnoticed through the world, the experience is described as magical. Tigrishka proclaims the allure of the unconventional as she boasts:

> *"My* people are the Wild ones – the younger races, races like my own which grew from solitary killers, which have lived closer to death and valued style more than security; freedom more than safety; races with a passionate sadistic tinge; or coldly scientific, valuing knowledge almost more than life." (258)

The same allegiance is expressed at the end of "The Button Moulder," when, after a ghostly encounter, the protagonist, abandons his temptation to accept that his life is winding down by summarizing his experiences in an autobiography. Instead, he resolves to remain outside the conventional until the end:

> If, in future, I show little inclination to philosophize dogmatically, and if I busy myself with trivial and rather childish activiites such as haunting game stores and amusement parks and other seedy and picturesque locations, if I write exeedingly fanciful, even frivolous fiction, if I pursue all sorts of quaint and curious people restlessly, if there is a times something frantic in my desire for human closeness, and if I seem occasionally to head out towards the universe, anywhere at all init, and dive in – well, I imagine you'll understand. (177)

Throughout Leiber's work, the eccentric may be contradictory, but it is always alluring. For Leiber, in the end, it becomes any experience that makes life worthwhile. If it leads to death for some of his characters, for others it leads to prolonged existence. Always, it leads to meaning and interest.

Conclusion

In "Fritz Leiber and Eyes," Justin Leiber suggests that his father was "cripplying shy" (18) as a young man, learning to be more outgoing only as he slowly gained social contacts and sexual experience. It is a summary that Fritz Leiber's own "Not Much Disorder and Not So Early Sex" seems to support in both its title and contents. At the heart of this development is self-assertion – and it is in this growth that the allure of the eccentric seems to have been born. Certainly, the suggestion is consistent with the

sense of isolation it arises from, and sense of meaning and allure that it promises. Even the constant undercutting of the topic is consistent with the suggestion; it is exactly the sort of self-mockery that a young man might make who is afraid of taking himself too seriously.

Out of these origins, I suggest, one of Leiber's most unique and consistent motifs arose. It is present through much of his work, but dominates his poetry especially. From its origins in his perceptions of himself as a young man, it becomes the way he judges both himself and values his wife. More than that, it becomes his general approach to life. Even after he gained more confidence, at least in some circumstances, the love of the eccentric remains near the core of his thinking – and stayed there until the end of his life. His small body of poetry remains one of the best windows into this aspect of his life and work.

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