

# The Cross Plainsman

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## Wonder & Wanderlust: Exotic and Historic Places in the Sonnets of Robert E. Howard

“Much have I travelled in the realms of gold  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen . . .”  
—Keats, “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer”

There is no frigate like a book  
To take us lands away,  
Nor any coursers like a page  
Of prancing poetry.  
This traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of toll;  
How frugal is the chariot  
That bears a human soul!  
— Emily Dickinson

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In continuing this series of short essays on Robert Howard’s use of the sonnet, REH’s virtuosity and skill at this ubiquitous most revered poetic form in Western literature has been one of my theses.

Sub-categories that I’ve examined have been rather arbitrary in some ways, but, I believe, defensible as distinct types — even if lacking a consistent principle of classification. I have pointed out Howard’s use of the sonnet as a narrative poem (decidedly breaking from the tradition of the sonnet as expressive lyric), his experimentation with the form itself in exploring new variants and permutations (what I called his “ballad sonnets” blending two traditional patterns into the fourteenner frame, his experimentation with both longer and shorter lines than normal, and even his use of something close to a variant of G. M. Hopkins’s “curtal sonnet.”), and his sonnets about women (including a couple in what is close to the romantic lyric of the sonnet of tradition).

So, poetic mode, variances in manufacture, and subject matter have been touched upon. For a change, I’m going to stick with subject matter as a unifying principle in this essay, examining Howard’s

sonnets that can be grouped under the topic of exotic and historic places.

While Bob Howard did some travelling during his short life — being nothing like the reclusive or isolated small town yokel portrayed in some less-than-thorough biographical accounts or brief commentaries — it is, nonetheless, fairly safe to assert that he travelled physically to far fewer places than he would have desired, but made up for that with an imagination that not only travelled to distant climes, but also to distant times. More than that, he recorded what he saw and experienced in these mental and spiritual excursions of wonder and wanderlust. More than that, his mind travelled not merely to elsewhere and “elsewhen,” but was also able to explore and depict those “neverwheres” and “neverwhens” of his powerful mythic fiction. In doing this, I believe he also found, formulated, framed, and forwarded to posterity some of the “everywheres” and “everywhens” that are the touchstones of lasting literature.

In the compressed and exacting frame of the sonnet, that square of text on the page the sides of which are sense, spirit, seriousness, and sound, Robert Ervin Howard found what was, perhaps, his favorite poetic form and a challenge to his poetic prowess.

To begin the present discussion on sonnets of exotic and historic places, the only proper place to begin is with what Howard says is his first sonnet. In a letter to Tevis Clyde Smith of August 21, 1926 (unpublished) REH writes: "I have attempted a sonnet; my first. And extremely worthless." It is important to note that Howard by his own statement here began his craft as sonneteer at the age of 20. It is also important to note yet another characteristic use of the "modesty topos" (see Curtius, EUROPEAN LITERATURE AND THE LATIN MIDDLE AGES for a great catalogue of a multitude of the narrative moves, motifs, and auctorial postures of the Western tradition. Howard pretty much always undervalues his own efforts with expressions of false modesty or even of disparagement of his own efforts. I, for one, don't believe much of that maneuver, but in any event, this first poem — like the great majority of sonnets that would follow it — is by no means "extremely worthless." This first sonnet is "Twilight on Stonehenge":

#### TWILIGHT ON STONEHENGE

Great columns loom against the brooding sky  
 Like giants of another world they stand  
 Flinging their shadows far across the land -  
 Across the sunset's path their shadows lie;  
 Above, between, the lone, gray sea-gulls fly.  
 And now the moon rides like a smoldering brand  
 And mid those shadows, hewn by Titan's hand  
 Glides shades of eld, ghost shapes, dim-seen and sly.

The crimson moon rides higher o'er the brake,  
 The darkness fades, the shadows merge and melt;  
 Across the fen the sea-wind's whisper comes  
 Bearing the discord of forgotten drums -  
 That speak to ghosts alone where bird and snake  
 Drowse in the last, lone stronghold of the Celt.

(published in *Shadows of Dreams*, p. 62)

This poem is important on several levels. First, as a self-proclaimed "first" sonnet, it shows Howard's preference for the Italian/Petrarchan form of the poem over the simpler rhyme pattern of the English/Shakespearean. It also shows his willingness, even from the beginning of his career as sonneteer, to experiment with and not be confined by or enslaved to form and tradition. While the octave rhymes in

the expected *abbaabba* pattern of the Italian sonnet, the sestet is unusual in its *cdeecd* pattern (the norms being *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*) — this while observing the rule that excludes a rhymed couplet at the end of the poem.

The content is variant too in that here we have (as with the other poems about places) the device called *topographia* [literally, from the Greek, a picture of a place, a description] by the traditions of rhetoric. We've seen REH use the sonnet as narrative poem; here we see his use it as the vehicle for vivid description.

While being decidedly descriptive, the young poet finds ways to pack this poem with action or seeming action. There is a great amount of movement in the poem and life — this in stark contrast to what one might imagine from the theme of a sonnet on the ring of cold, stark stones. Howard achieves this by the heavy use of personification, bringing the ring of stones and its natural setting to life. The columns begin by simply "looming," but they loom against a "brooding sky." By the second line, the columns are likened to giants and action verbs like "fling" begin to infuse this depiction of a static thing. The mention of the "sunset's path" is interesting, likely showing Howard's awareness of the earliest theories of Stonehenge as observatory (since fairly well substantiated that the seasons and certainly the summer solstice are calculable or observable). The sea gulls fly above. The moon "rides" and the shadows and "ghost shapes" glide through the scene.

Typical of the *volta* or "turn" between the octave and the sestet (but with the unifying bridges of the moon — now crimson but still "riding" — and the new mention of the sea (hinted at by the gulls in the octave), there is a shift in the last six to what now must be viewed as a later time, indicative of a long vigil or long contemplation of the scene under the riding moon. While nothing close to "worthless" as a poetic effort, especially for a first sonnet, the poem does have its rough spots and problems, especially in the sestet. We can overlook the grammatical subject verb disagreement in the octave of "glides shades," especially since this poem was part of the body of one of the many letters to T. C. Smith. Harder to overlook is the fact that "crimson" moons happen as the moon approaches horizon (just like the atmospheric effect of the sun). But we might allow the license of a magical, mystical, or supernatural event, or the reddish moon that happens in times of eclipse. Harder still to connect are "discord" and "Drowse" and even the use of "discord" with reference to "drums."



ments about 400 A.D. and more likely were done between 1200 and 1500 A. D., but the impression that most had in Howard's day, fed by the unusualness of them the unimaginable effort in creating and erecting them given the population that the island seemed to support, and interest in "lost worlds" and "lost continents" in general in that epoch of the late Victorian and early modern age, all likely contributed to Howard's first account of them in the poem "Easter Island":

### EASTER ISLAND

How many weary centuries have flown  
 Since strange-eyed beings walked this ancient shore,  
 Hearing, as we, the green Pacific's roar,  
 Hewing fantastic gods from sullen stone!  
 The sands are bare; the idols stand alone.  
 Impotent 'gainst the years was all their lore;  
 They are forgot in ages dim and hoar;  
 Yet still, as then, the long tide-surges drone.

What dreams had they, that shaped these uncouth  
things?  
 Before these gods what victims bled and died?  
 What purple galleys swept along the strand  
 That bore the tribute of what dim sea kings?  
 But now they reign o'er a forgotten land,  
 Gazing forever out beyond the tide.

*(Always Comes Evening, p. 46*

Compiled by Glenn Lord

San Francisco: Underwood-Miller, 1977)

Again we have the Italian sonnet with variant sestet. Aside from its ultimate archeological, anthropological, and historical inaccuracy (things of little importance in the world of the imagination), we again have the contemplation of the physically unseen scene, known in impressionistically — perhaps "expressionistically" — rendered by Howard. Again we have the contemplation grounded on stone.

There are two particularly incongruous or grating elements in the octave. The use of the word "hoar" for great age is particularly unfortunate in its linkage of the metaphoric "hoar" for frost, hence connected with grey or white as in "hoary-headed." Frost and the South Seas just don't connect and show a stretch for a rhyme. And "drone" is a particularly unfortunate word for the sound of surf or waves coming in.

But after the volta and the typical turn of topic to the sestet, the more fortunate speculations are found. The people of Rapa Nui were indeed (as were many Pacific Islanders) cannibalistic, and traditions and science have both linked the island to the practice of both human sacrifice and cannibalism. Hence, it is an apt location for the Howardian theme of the natural state of barbarism. The sestet is rich in speculation on the mind's that could conceive of the "uncouth" effigies, of the supposed "sea kings" demanding tribute, of the practice of bloody sacrifice.

The companion poem, "The Gods of Easter Island," is even more obviously historically inaccurate based upon modern knowledge, but it is richer as a demonstration of REH's imaginative speculation and in its wide-ranging attempt to bring many ancient cultures together in the presentation of an imaginative bigger picture:

### THE GODS OF EASTER ISLAND

Long ere Priapus pranced through groves Arcadian  
sunlight kissed  
 The gods of Easter Island were born out of the mist.  
 Before the Elder deities from Egypt's fogs were born  
 The gods of Easter Island stood up to greet the morn.  
 Before Mylitta knew the light or ever Bel had birth  
 The gods of Easter Island were rulers of the earth.  
 Before the bulls of Nineveh were hewn out of their  
stone

The gods of Easter Island stood silent and alone.

The gods of Easter Island saw kingdoms come and go  
 And shrines and idols shattered as tides that ebb and  
flow.

They saw the kite-winged Horus sweep down the  
beach to drink.

They saw Atlantis topple and Lemuria sink.  
 They brood through Topaz eventide when tropic day  
is done;

I see them o'er the ocean, black in the dying sun.

*(Always Comes Evening, p. 98)*

Formally, the poem is important for its variation from the iambic pentameter norm. Indeed, it could easily be placed as well among the "experimental sonnets" covered in a former essay in this series. This is a "couplet sonnet" with interesting variation. The

rhyme, of course, is aabbccddeeffgg, but the couplets that comprise the poem are also distinctive and variant in that each first line of two is in iambic heptameter (7 beats or accents, usually with caesura after the fourth foot) and each second line of the couplet is in the iambic hexameter (Alexandrine) line, also with occasional pause between the first three feet and the last three.

There is interesting symbolism in the poem (the question worth considering for further study would be Howard's awareness of these symbols — were they contrived or intentional or were they accidental to a degree?). The Greek mythic effigy figure for Priapus (the god of procreation) is the erect phallus — hence, symbolically fertility, conception, and life. This would coincide with Arcadia to the extent that the pastoral Arcadian tradition at first seems filled with life and vitality, but the tradition of the pastoral also includes the elegaic — the famous motto being ET IN ARCADIA EGO (“And I [Death] am in Arcadia also”/ “And I too am in Arcadia.”). Hence, the symbolic juxtaposition of Life against Death.

Again, Howard is wrong in the dating of the age of the Easter Island heads, but his supposition that they are older than the “Elder deities” (Cthuluan “Old Ones”? or simply the gods of the Egyptians?) is intriguing.

“Mylitta” was the Babylonian/Assyrian goddess of fertility and childbirth, associated by the Greeks with Aphrodite. The “Bel” referred to is quite possibly the Celtic god of the spring and fecund youth, but there is also the Bel as a god appearing in the Conan background mythology. There is also the Bel of the Babylonian creation myth and connected to the apocryphal Book of Daniel and the story of “Bel and the Dragon.” Clearly, Howard might have had any or all of these in mind; just as possibly poems like this one might have helped him in working things out in his mind prior to or inspirational for — rather than derivative of — his fictions.

Certainly, the Egyptian craze was a big part of the era of Robert E. Howard. Carter's discovery of Tut's Tomb in late 1922 was very near the time of Howard's decision to become a writer.

Also worthy of comment are the references to both Atlantis (which clearly figures into the Howardian mythopoesis) and Lemuria (Mu), Atlantis's Pacific counterpart. Again, the chronology is off in “real” time, but in Howard's imagined “time” we can't really complain of the vision of this poem.

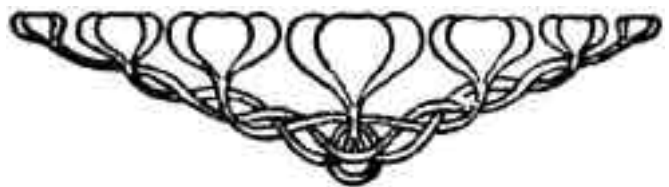
It's tidal swing of eons and of life and death in cycle are woven into much of Howard's work. “The

God's of Easter Island” is a poem of coming and going, ebbing and flowing, fertility and decay, of empires rising and sinking, with the voice drifting over the stone gods of Easter Island, “black in the dying sun,” reminding us: “And I am here also.”

Though factually wrong, this sonnet is the finest wrought of the group and the most interesting on the several points mentioned. That it is historically inaccurate matters no more than the mistake Keats makes at the end of the poem of the epigram, “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer”: It was Balboa and not “stout Cortez” who, along with his men, “discovered” the Pacific after crossing the Isthmus of Panama, but the human potential for discovery — even through the secondary experience of books — to lead us to “wild surmise” was amply personified in Robert Ervin Howard.

In summary, these descriptive sonnets of exotic and historic places help us to see more clearly the imaginative and poetic powers of Robert E. Howard and the enthusiastic wonder and wanderlust that Howard had to satisfy through books, using those “vessels” of human experience and spirit to take him “lands away” and into the “realms of gold.” Of course for Howard this was not enough. He had to make the transformation from traveler to ship builder, from passenger to poet.

[NOTE: The mention of Lemuria in “The Gods of Easter Island” brings up a possible angle of further investigation regarding influences on REH. That he read and was influenced by the work of Talbot Mundy is fairly generally acknowledged. But Mundy's philosophical positions may have had a deeper influence on Howard than has previously been supposed or investigated. Mundy became a Theosophist and so a believer in both reincarnation and “karma.” The possible influences of Mundy and of Theosophical leaders like Madame Blavatsky (with connections here in her writings to Lemuria/Mu), likely deserves further investigation. Of course the books of Howard's youth decidedly included the “Lost World” genre material of Doyle, Rider Haggard, Cutcliff-Hyne, and others and what I would call the “mythomorphic” respinnings of history by Mundy and others.]



# Some Thoughts on Howard's Suicide: Act of Desperation or Reasoned Choice?

"I see no light to lead my way .  
No gleam that heralds coming day."  
—Robert E. Howard, from "Life (1)"

unpublished sonnet in a letter to Tevis Clyde Smith

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There has been considerable discussion, both of late and from the beginning of Howardian studies, regarding the significance of his suicide and what that single event might somehow tell us about the object of our literary enthusiasm and attention — and the focus of this amateur press association.

I believe that it is important for all Howardians and any future critics of the life and literary accomplishment of Robert Ervin Howard to at least acknowledge the possibility of his suicide as a reasoned choice rather than an act of desperation, as a conclusion for conclusion. This, of course, must be set against the emotional background of the supposed loss in one sense and the impending loss in another of who were almost certainly the two people most important in his life. It is important to note Howard's personal philosophy, which was starkly in contrast to the orthodox beliefs of his neighbors and, evidently, the positions held by many of his commentators and critics (both personal and literary).

In an important letter to Tevis Clyde Smith, Howard writes:

Let us talk of life; I am damnably weary tonight. What are you? What am I? Listen, I'll tell you; Life is Power, Life is Electricity. You and I are atoms of power, cogs in the wheels of the Universal system. Life is not predestinated, that is, the trivial affairs of our lives are not, but we have certain paths to follow and we cannot escape them. Do you think we can? Then let me see you raise yourself even seven inches off the earth and remain there unsupported save by your own efforts; let me see you look at a star and tell me if grass grows there, with your naked eye; let me see you swim to the bottom of the ocean and back or walk on water; let me see you live a thousand years.

Listen, I'll tell you; we are sparks of star dust, atoms of unknown power, powerless in ourselves but making up the whole of some great power that uses us as ruthlessly as fire uses fuel. We are parts of an entity, futile in ourselves. We are merely phases of electricity; electrons endlessly vibrating between the magnetic poles of birth and death. We cannot escape these trails in which our paths lie. We do not, as individual entities, really exist, we do not live. There is no life, there is no existence; there is simply vibration. What is a life but an uncompleted gesture, beginning in oblivion and end-

ing in oblivion? What man of history ever really accomplished what he desired to accomplish? No, what men name life is simply the sparkle of an electron as it flashes from the pole of birth to the pole of death. There is no beginning, nor will there ever be an end to the thing.

(letter from REH to TCS, ca January 1928,

*Selected Letters: 1923-1930*, #9, p. 9)

From this perspective, we might view Howard's death as an attempt, eight years after this letter was written, at the self-completion of the "uncompleted gesture." He may well have seen it as fulfillment rather than fatality. His perspectives on the subjects of Life and Death were mystical rather than conventionally moral. This passage — along with others that suggest a belief in a universal Life Force or essence, and, elsewhere, clear evidences of a belief in reincarnation and what might be termed a "conservation of soul" much like the conclusions of many physicists (certainly in Howard's day) of a conservation of matter — present us with an image of Robert E. Howard that ought to hold sway over many emotional, moral, and pseudo-psychological explanations. Certainly, they present us with at least a different possible conclusion with ample supporting grounds that must be taken into account.

There is ample support in Howard's poetry and fiction to reinforce the statements made in this letter to Smith. We might view Howard as skeptic and cynic who saw "no gleam that heralds coming day," but his notions of oblivion were set against the vibrations of the never-ending energy and force of Life.

In the same poem from which the epigram of this essay derives (part of the same letter to TCS), Howard writes:

Oh, world of men, oh, world of men.  
I laughed, I dreamed my dreams and then  
I started on my road, the way  
O'er which my feet ever must stray,  
Must tread forever and for aye.

Perhaps we should cease with our critical fixations upon the moment of Howard's death and begin with earnest more fascinations upon the momentum of his life and the monument of his literature. ❧

