

THE PASTEL CITY
(M. JOHN HARRISON)

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As can be seen from a casual glance at my book reviews, while I read little fiction, I am keenly interested in science fiction. Sadly, almost all contemporary science fiction is mere social justice agitprop. But there is some quite good relatively modern science fiction, and in particular, I am fond of (no surprise, I suppose) what is commonly called the “Dying Earth” genre, after the name used by Jack Vance in the 1950s. This book, *The Pastel City*, published in 1971, fits squarely into this genre, but is distinguished by the gem-like quality of its writing, elevating it above the average pulp of late twentieth-century science fiction.

As with all Dying Earth books, the story takes place in the distant future. The opening paragraph of the book is, I think, nearly unparalleled in science fiction opening lines. It may not be “Call me Ishmael,” but I don’t think it could be bettered as setting the scene for this book, and for its sequels (though I reject those as uniformly awful). “Some seventeen notable empires arose in the Middle Period of Earth. These were the Afternoon Cultures. All but one are unimportant to this narrative, and there is little need to speak of them save to say none of them lasted for less than a millennium, none for more than ten; that each extracted such secrets and obtained such comforts as its nature (and the nature of the universe) enabled it to find; and that each fell back from the universe in confusion, dwindled, and died.”

The story itself is about the Evening that follows—scavenger cultures, which beat the machines of their predecessors into swords and contest for supremacy among toxic, blasted lands, occasionally finding and using still operating advanced technology. Harrison sketches the backstory, of two queens, and of the defense of one queen (“Methvet Nian, known in her youth as Jane”), who rules the only extant major city, by the scattered remnants of her father’s paladins, against her cousin, Canna Moidart, who has assembled an army that includes awoken sentient killing machines. The story centers on one of the paladins, tegeus-Cromis, “sometime soldier and sophisticate of Viriconium, the Pastel City, who imagined himself a better poet than swordsman.” Living in retirement at his seaside home of Balmacara, he is drawn into the war

as the upstart queen's army approaches the eponymous capital city. He travels to war, though "he knew he would not come again, riding to the light out of battle, to Balmacara in the morning," assembling his few remaining comrades, in a hopeless, heroic quest.

All of this is extremely well written, even gripping. It especially resonates with me because my goal is avoiding the dwindling and dying of our own civilization, though I see no clear path to renewal of the West, a civilization whose accomplishments make all other human achievements seem slight and unimportant, but whose rulers and guiding lights have become men of the Evening before it was time. The weary assumption of duty by tegeus-Cromis seems like the common lot of those who today defend the West, lacking even a queen to defend. "Falling back in confusion" is the perfect characterization of our civilization. It is said that Harrison wrote *The Pastel City* as an anti-heroic book, an attempt to undermine the Tolkein revival. If so, it does not read as that fifty years later. True, it is pervaded by a sense of melancholy, with the world viewed through the resigned pessimism of tegeus-Cromis, who is fully aware that he is a man embodied in the Evening, without a future and in the shadow of the glorious past, yet is compelled by his code to come to the aid of the daughter of the king he served. But no aspect of this story is out of place in an archetypal Heroic Narrative; the hero may have a bit more world-weariness than most, and while he succeeds in his quest, there are implications of the seeds of future trouble being sown (tegeus-Cromis and his companions win the fight by reanimating men of the Afternoon), but those are small differences.

While Harrison suggests that the Evening may be followed by Morning, saying of the "resigned, defeated landscape, was it simply waiting to be born? Who can tell at which end of Time these places have their existence?," there is also a brief reference to an interesting and possibly insurmountable problem that our own successors might face, that of resource exhaustion by dead civilizations. One reason Evening culture cannot advance is not only that technology is lost, but that building blocks needed to rebuild are inaccessible, since the Afternoon stripped all metals from the surface of the Earth. Along the same lines, if our current civilization collapses totally, which admittedly does not seem likely, though plenty of books suggest the possibility, rebuilding industrial civilization would be much harder than was building it initially.

This is because we have long since depleted essentially all easy-to-access sources of dense energy, most importantly coal and oil, as well as metals. Without already having advanced industry, a civilization could not restart the Industrial Revolution, even if it had the knowledge of how to construct the necessary machines. Perhaps human ingenuity could find a way around this, but it seems likely that that any post-collapse civilization might be stuck indefinitely in a post-medieval, pre-modern equilibrium. Another good reason to avoid collapse, I suppose.

Aside from its plot, *The Pastel City* sits uncomfortably with the world of 2018, although I am sure its author did not mean it to. Critically, tegeus-Cromis is repeatedly described as keyed to reality, “more possessed by the essential qualities of things than by their names; concerned with the nature of Reality, rather than with the names men gave it.” The same theme, of the iron law of reality, recurs often, as in, for example, the reference in the opening lines to “such comforts as its nature (and the nature of the universe) enabled it to find.” tegeus-Cromis would find no place in America today, when reality, most especially of human nature and human biology, is overtly denied, both by the Left, who believe that the mere assigning and chanting of new names changes reality, and by transhumanists, who imagine that with technology human beings can be endlessly manipulated and remade without tearing the teleological fabric of man. Regardless of political implications, though, this emphasis on reality lends the book a solidity that it might otherwise lack, ensuring the book’s success.

Unfortunately, the delicate and successful balance that Harrison achieves here, between reality and heroism, is destroyed in the sequels that Harrison wrote in the 1980s. These are awful books, full of squalor and nihilism, morbidly bizarre, totally lacking the heroic edge and flashes of faded beauty and glory that make the feeling of unalterable decline in *The Pastel City* bearable for both characters and reader. It is as if Harrison was told that he was too bourgeois in his first book, and he needed to instead fight the Man through some form of deconstruction, spewing out precursors of the unreadable tripe that is most of today’s science fiction. And there are better modern Dying Earth books than *The Pastel City*, most notably Gene Wolfe’s exquisite *The Book of the New Sun*. Still, reading this book is worthwhile, and like all good fiction, it leaves the reader with a sense of transport, if only for a little while.