

From "My Man and Other Critical Fictions"  
by Wendy Walker. wendywalker.com  
This excerpt: From "Daddo in Ocaña,"  
a critical fiction on Anna Maria Ortese's  
neglected masterpiece, "The Iguana."

## DADDO IN OCAÑA

"I should like to know who would be inclined to come hither, to ascertain if there be a young girl here or not."  
— Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*

"We enjoin thee | As thou art liegeman to us, | That thou carry this female bastard hence."  
— William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

WHAT IF EXCITEMENT of an unnatural order were to enter your life? Imagine it strikes you out of the blue, while you are engaged in some innocuous activity. It is as though you have been used as a target. The response the intrusion demands of you and the gauntlet it casts down are hardly congruent to the patterns of your placid temperament. What if the vast potentialities of money (which you have never lacked) array themselves against the invader, so that you must choose between your ample resources and the unknown? Then consider how completely you have taken for granted the easy satisfaction of your desires. The strict correlation between

"... if excitement strikes you as a target hardly congruent to the vast potentialities of money, then consider the strict correlation between financial abundance and the impoverishment of the senses."

the support you must abandon and the strangeness of the intruder renders the intensity of the choice all the more blinding. Financial abundance and secure social status can make no headway against the wild colors released in your body. The impoverishment of the senses, a pointlessness you have never felt before, retreats in the face of this fascination that has arrived, unannounced.

“ He imagined he might sight some island belonging to no one, so buying it would cause no harm. ”

If this were a story, the woman writing it might begin, “He imagined he was possessed, as people believed in the Middle Ages, and still do, in some parts of the world, when an uncontrollable idea takes hold of them.” And then go on : “He wished he might sight the end to which the daemon was driving him, but he could not even discern a horizon. Some island might eventually appear, upon which he could rest and know himself again, but such an island could equally well turn out to be self-willed, or malign, or simply fickle. With the limited vision of his possessed state, he did not hesitate to assume that any resting-place that should arise would exist only for him, belonging to no one else. He had been set upon by some agency from outside the consumer economy, so buying a particularly nice suit or redecorating the apartment would not shield him from the attack. It would cause him to alter his entire life if he did not succeed in deflecting it. But did he really need to exert himself so strenuously, seeing the intruder had done him no harm ?

“Whenever he considered his predicament, which he did at every moment, he felt a simultaneous need to confide in someone who could help him, and a looming threat that impelled him to keep his severe drama secret. To master the intolerable suspense, he decided to use it as an occasion to investigate the dark corner of himself that he vaguely referred to as ‘the workings of nature.’ Considering the task, he saw a soul that had inadvertently ingested a foreign entity. But when he unflinchingly faced up to what he had swallowed, he found it driven by a need no different from his own. He could see it was trying to comprehend its own frightening position and heard it weeping. That an invader should so unconsciously appeal for compassion struck him as such a novelty as to constitute a peripety. He found himself facing with a sense of brotherly solidarity the guest that seemed about to end his life as he had lived it up until that day.”

Her eyes glowed (we return to the writer) as the story’s outlines grew clearer and branched and folded back on themselves. She could not, rapt with an attention so dark and intimate, help but give the subsumed and bewildered entity, weeping in its dislocation, a shape both feminine and animal, to render its foreignness more palpable to her civilized protagonist, the Count Daddo. The peculiarity of the form with which she endowed the weeping ghost had resonated so deeply in his imagined adventures as to overwhelm resistance. “He had given all heed to the recorded exploits of heroes, though his life had afforded him few opportunities of emulating them. But in the pack of books saved from his university days, he particularly cherished some accounts of chivalrous devotion. When the intruder materialized in her new form, she came as

“Whenever he considered the workings of nature, he saw a soul no different from his own and heard it appeal for brotherly solidarity.”

“Her eyes glowed with an attention so dark as to overwhelm all heed to the pack of books she clutched to her breast, and one of them tumbled down smacking sharply against the floor, revealing her presence.”

a small, unintimidating dragon, and she clutched to her breast a stack of dog-eared classics. He felt an unaccountable curiosity, so maneuvered himself till he stood behind her left shoulder ; and one of them, on the very top of the stack, was *Don Quixote* ! As he tumbled down past his fear, they both, his dragon and he, came to rest on a grassy spot overlooking the sea, and the book was open between them. The waves, smacking sharply before and behind them, made it clear that this was an island, and such a one as existed only as long as the waves should allow it to. Against the floor of the sea, where waves encounter no interruption, they unwind silently to the ear of the drowned sailor. The dragon apologized to her new friend for inflicting the evil of her reptilian personhood upon him, and for the fact that, by revealing her presence she had, through no intention of her own, placed herself under his protection forevermore.”

“Gilded letters beneath the painting spelled out the legend: I HAVE CHOSEN THE VOID, perhaps referring to a predilection for creatures that were mute rather than gifted with speech, or more simply to an inclination towards some mysticism for which the beautiful woman had suddenly developed a curiosity.”

“Gilded letters on a proclamation littered with seals could not have informed the Count more effectively that a new chapter in his life was about to begin. He recalled seeing a picture of a knight attacking a dragon, while a maiden knelt in supplication below a pink-turreted city, and in his remembrance he continued to stare through the frame, and thought he made out beneath the painting’s surface an earlier composition, in which dragon and maiden had been one. But as a knight-savior had been central to the story the Church wanted the painter to tell, the enemy had to be clearly spelled out, and in the final version the maiden was relegated to the background. ‘In the legend I have chosen,’ Daddo reminded himself, ‘or rather, which has chosen me, it seems to be the dragon rather than the city that needs defending.’ Meanwhile the writer sat over her page, peering into the void, perhaps because that was all she could do. The

blank page, referring to a predilection for the mythic, conjured shapes unusual in their deformations. Pen in hand, she took the chance, however slender, of undermining the market economy by turning the attention of an ideal stranger towards a landscape impossible to consume, for creatures that were, mythically, in that eternal past-tense connected to a magical time, in no way participate in that economy. She aspired to mute rather than to completely silence the siren-call of money, by drawing the ideal stranger for some hours into that landscape. “ ‘ A dragon oppressed and gifted with speech suggests, ’ her protagonist thought, ‘ another side to the Church’s story. Perhaps the painter, recognizing the path to worldly success, had, after a brief struggle, capitulated to the demand for a straightforward dragon and an obvious maiden ; or more simply, perhaps he was unable to realize his original idea. His under-painted figure, just visible as a ridged shadow raked by the light, alluded to an inclination towards a more complex and less binary version of salvation. Unable to live amidst the confines of religious words, he had ventured into unorthodox realms, and developed some mysticism for which he could use his profession as a secret conduit. If the truth be told, this artist found the figure of the beautiful woman a boring subject and was always tempted to include some horror hidden in the luster of her hair or among the folds of her gown. Around the very time he was inventing his dragon maiden, my painter had suddenly developed a need not to hide these commentaries, but to show them. As I see it, it is not the ineffable sweetness of his paintings, but their cunningly concealed horrors that makes of each that survives not only a treasure, but a curiosity.’