



## REALMS OF THE UNREAL: THE IMAGINARY WORLD OF HENRY DARGER

BY DEBORAH MARKUS

*I do not think I can get any nearer than this to the sources of my storytelling; I can only say that the process, though it takes place in some secret region on the sheer edge of my consciousness, is always illuminated by the full light of my critical attention. What happens there is as real and as tangible as my encounters with my friends and neighbours, often more so, though on an entirely different plane. It produces in me a great emotional excitement, quite unrelated to the joy or sorrow caused by real happenings, but as intense, and with as great an appearance of reality; and my two lives, divided between these equally real yet totally unrelated worlds, have gone on thus, side by side, equally absorbing, but wholly isolated from each other...*

—Edith Wharton,  
*A Backward Glance*

Edith Wharton was a worldly woman: independently wealthy, impetuous and adventurous, a divorcee and a best-selling novelist back when either title could entail having the door of respectable society shut firmly in one's face. So it came as a shock, in the midst of her otherwise conventional and name-droppy autobiography, to stumble into a tiny chapter called "The Secret Garden," in which Wharton confesses that the characters in her books came to her, fully formed and anxious to tell their stories, in a mental world as populous and full of interest as the more mundane one she inhabited; and that she had lived with one foot always in this world quite happily and sanely for as long as she could remember.

I have been infatuated with imaginers of this sort since I first read about the Bronte siblings and the make-believe lands they played in together as children. Their invented realities were influenced by Byron and other Romantic poets, and influenced in

turn the writing of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, which novels might be seen at least in part as doorways into Charlotte and Emily's private worlds. The idea of carrying about a reality no one else can see is an enchanting one.

So I was riveted when I heard about a man named Henry Darger, who lived a life of menial labor and left when he died, thousands of pages of paintings and writings based on his own inner world, the Realms of the Unreal. When a collection of some of his works was published, it was a coffee-table book and not cheap. I didn't care. I wanted to know what this Unreal world looked like. I wanted to read about its inhabitants and see why he had been so fascinated with them. I have read since of people who have fallen in love with Darger's work after seeing his pictures in various "Outsider Artist" exhibits, but I was caught not by any particular image but by the idea of an imaginary whose existence



was as compelling to one individual as the “real” world.

Darger’s world, like those of Wharton and the Brontes, relies on a concept many are uncomfortable with, at least past childhood: that something can be significant, even crucial, without possessing an objective reality. Children are able to make this emotional investment effortlessly, and the rest of us, while not always understanding their strange affections, don’t trifle with them — only a monster would stomp on a best-loved doll, no matter how inexpensive or easily replaced. But our respecting the toys, or rather the deep emotions evoked by such trinkets, is politeness on our part, such as we might display toward symbols of a religion completely foreign but inoffensive. But our tolerance has its limits: many parents are distinctly squeamish about imaginary companions, and past a certain age the continued possession of one is seen more as a sign of neurosis, than of a healthy imagination. It is a laudable step into adulthood when the infant finally puts away childish things and

is able to give up the toy the loss of which would once have been the stuff of nightmares.

Darger harbored no illusions that his inner world existed anywhere but in his head, as is clear from the fact that he called his magnum opus *In the Realms of the Unreal*. He also had no trouble in allowing these realms to be the most important thing in his life. He never married and had only one real friend who died years before Darger did; an unsuccessful attempt to adopt a child seems to have been his only active effort to acquire some sort of companionship. As for career ambitions and worldly accomplishments, he was drafted into the army during World War I and promptly discharged for eye trouble; after that he spent half a century working variously as janitor, dishwasher, and bandage roller. His home was a one-and-a-half-room apartment in Chicago. He was intelligent, sensitive, and strange. His loneliness and desire for love and respect were set against the fact of his being a ferocious loner, and in the midst of that struggle the Realms of the Unreal were born.

The Realms of the Unreal, according to Darger, are “an unknown or imaginary world... with our earth as their moon.” This world is possessed of “four great Catholic nations, there being no Protestant nations.” One of these nations, Abbiennia, is at bitter war with the land of Glandelinia in which “three quarters of the population are as wicked as wickedness can be.” The cause of the war is Glandelinia’s monstrous practice of child-slaving, the motives for which seem not so much economic as emotional. The Glandelinians are evil, enjoy committing evil deeds, and like the idea of giving the Christian nations a symbolic slap in the face.

The child slaves, however, rise up in rebellion. In particular they are helped by the Vivian Girls, brave and beautiful children “who had been several times seized by the Glandelinians and cruelly treated.” The Christian nations eventually triumph, and the Glandelinians are chastened and repentant. There are strange dragons and great storms so ferocious that whole cities are wiped out by them, but on the whole the storyline resembles the American Civil



War, greatly romanticized. (Darger was aware of this himself, and even makes references to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.)

The impulse to classify is a strong one, and Darger's work can be called Outsider art, Catholic art, Comic art, and even fine art, with varying degrees of accuracy. My interest in it is as art of make-believe, and my interest in Darger is in how he is related to, and how he differs from, others who have lived in worlds of their own making, and who have struggled to bring to the "real" world a glimpse of that other plane.

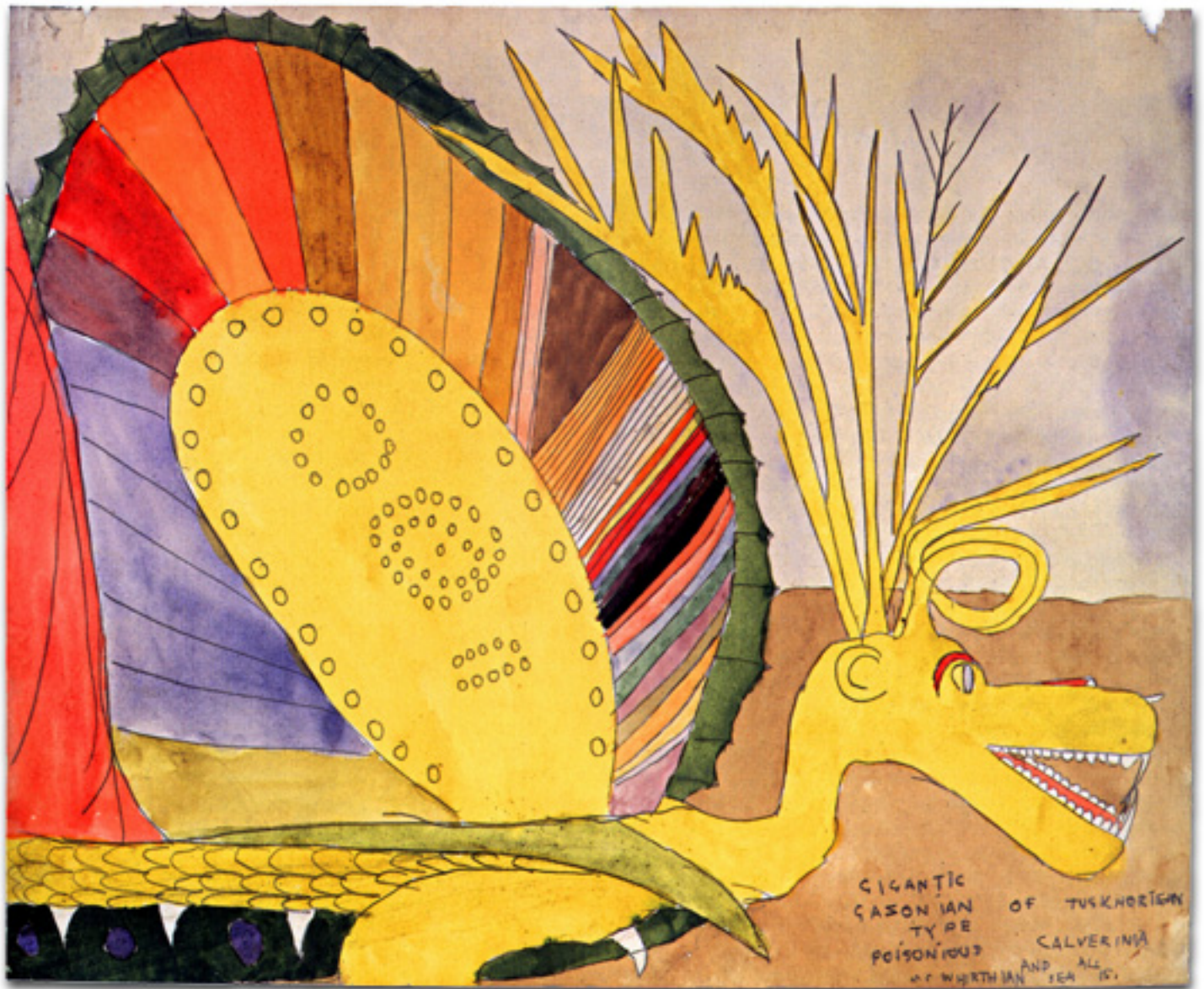
It is often difficult to know when this latter is being attempted. When an artist paints a picture that seems both like our world and unlike it, both recognizable and obscure, is he lifting the curtain to another realm or merely displaying his own take on this one? Unless the artist tells us in so many words, we have no way of knowing. As for writers, it is easy to imagine that

someone like, say, Lewis Carroll might have his own private retreat, an imagined Wonderland to visit after a long day of teaching mathematics; but his writing is too satirical, too of this world even in mocking it, to support such an idea. More importantly, Carroll is too willing to accept the basic limitations of fiction writing: a recognizable beginning and end, something in the middle to connect the two, and perhaps some higher point made in the course of creating all three, some metaphor or set of symbols that draws the work together and makes it more than the sum of its parts.

Darger, working purely for his own pleasure, rejected any such strictures. Anyone who goes on for more than ten thousand pages on one subject is clearly not too concerned with what others may find amusing. To Darger, the process was the point. He was so little troubled by conventional ideas of chronology that those interested in his

work have had some trouble sorting it into the most basic categories of before and after. The plot, if it can be called that, doesn't follow neat lines of this-happened-which-led-to-that-happening. Darger wrote what he felt like writing at any given moment, and if it suited him to have two characters meet for the first time, then he introduced them, never minding that they already knew one another.

I had no idea of any of this when I bought Michael Bonesteel's *Henry Darger: Art and Selected Writings*, and so I hope I can be forgiven some disappointment, though not in Bonesteel's work as an editor and guide through Darger's tricky realms. His introductions and explanations are solid, his inferences modest but illuminating. And not in Darger's art, which is fascinating and deceptively simple. But I had gathered, from the reviews I had read, that Darger's writing was a body far more



coherent and cohesive than it is; and it was his writing, his records of his inner worlds, which had drawn me to him in the first place.

Reading Darger is like listening unrelievedly to a child chatter all day long. There are going to be funny bits, even brilliant ones, and little unexpected phrasings that will make you smile or blink; but by nightfall, those clever moments are going to shimmer as oases in a vast desert of repetitious nonsense. Children never find their own stories and songs dull, no matter how often they voice them. And Darger was a man who never, ever wanted to grow up, which is ironic considering what a hideous botch job his childhood was.

Darger was born in 1892 to working-class parents. His mother died in childbirth when he was three, and the baby, a girl, was

given up for adoption. It should come as no surprise to learn that Darger's work is fraught with images of lost children, mostly girls. (It is more surprising that those girls often sport tiny penises, but I'll address that later.) In early childhood Henry "hated baby kids," as he recounted in his "History of My Life," and was often cruel to them; but when he grew older, he had a complete change of heart and he and his best friend formed the Child's Protective Society, who were "terrible enemies of all those who prove themselves child haters or who do the children any kind of harm," as he wrote later in his records of the Unreal. Darger was baptized into the Catholic church when he was eight years old, and later in life would make it a point of pride to attend mass several times a day. He was committed at the age of twelve or thirteen to the Asylum for Feeble-Minded

Children in Lincoln, Illinois. A few years later, his father died. Shortly afterward Darger ran away from the asylum, got work as a janitor, and his outward life ceased to have much in the way of distinguishing characteristics. His inner life came to a full boil, and the results of this complete drawing inward are the works we are left with today.

It is possible to make too much of the inherent nastiness of Darger's early life in terms of explaining his life's work. While it is absolutely true that his less-than-optimal upbringing was certainly a contributing factor to the content of his art and writing, it can't explain the bare existence of the work. The world is littered with horrible childhoods — on a global and historical scale, they are the majority rather than the exception — and we are not in any danger of being inundated with memorable, com-

elling art as a result. Darger was an intrinsic pretender, a make-believer, and his life would have been fuel for his fantasies regardless.

The one thing that might have been different, had his early life been a gentler one, was that he might have matured into a genuine artist, a true writer. I have neither the interest nor the qualifications to engage in an in-depth analysis of the merits of Darger's visual work. It is unforgettable and intriguing, but Michael Bonesteel may have overstated the matter when he pronounced Henry Darger "a great artist," though he did not at least go so far as to use a capital G. Darger's gifts were his eye for composition and his endless patience. As a freehand artist, he was severely limited — compare a picture of one of his dragons, which he drew entirely on his own, to one of his sweeping portrayals of dozens of little girls, which were traced from coloring books, magazines, and anywhere else he could find what he wanted. Left to his own devices, he could not have drawn one of the girls who populate his pictures so generously. Art may be more than just knowing how to draw, but knowing how to draw sounds like a pretty good place to start.

But this is quibbling. When I speak of Darger maturing — or rather failing to do so — as an artist, I am speaking of his moving forward from being a simple imaginer to acknowledging himself as a creator, one whose work might be seen and enjoyed by others than himself. It is ironic that much of the appeal of his visual work is the very personal, childlike feel of it; while these qualities are exactly what make his written work so dense and difficult. Perhaps this is why his writing has been largely ignored in favor of his pictures. And it shouldn't be. Darger was as much a writer as an artist. As well as chronicling the Realms of the Unreal, he wrote thousands of other pages: autobiography, weather diaries, a sort of sequel to the Unreal in which many of the characters there are brought to Chicago. His writing is intimately connected to his art, yet more self-sufficient. No one can speak of his pictures without mentioning the stories behind them — the seven Vivian girls, for example, young sisters united in the ongoing war against the child slavers who held sway over much of their planet. The art always

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harks back to the writing; the writing can be read on its own, at once fascinating and tedious.

Darger wrote like a child in love with his subject, innocently arrogant. "This description of the great war, and its following results, is perhaps the greatest ever written by an author," he declares solemnly, signing off as "Henry Joseph Darger. The author of this thrilling story." He was in love, like so many children, with tiny boring details and repetition. His chapters about the dragons of his world, Bleglglomenean Serpents (Blengins for short), are replete with physical descriptions: length, color, and temperament, over

and over and over. He also possessed a child's love of unwieldy numbers. The tail of one of his dragons is "over seventeen thousand feet in length." His imaginary planet is "a thousand times as large as our own world and the largest body of water known as the Angelinian Seas could hold scores of our own worlds and still have room." As well as images of children, battles, and children in battle, Darger drew many maps of his world, labeling the different countries and cities in a crude, careful hand.

This childlike quality extends more subtly to the content of his work. Every minor event in Darger's life, and past childhood most of his life's events were minor, shows up magnified and exaggerated in the Realms. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of Darger's losing a picture he had clipped from a newspaper of the unfortunate five-year-old Elsie Paroubek, who had been kidnapped and murdered. Darger had created a character inspired by this photo, christened her Annie Aronburg, and made her a child rebel leader and ultimately a martyr to the cause. When he lost the picture, he furiously blamed God and took revenge the only way he could — by turning the tide of the battle against the Christian armies of the Realms. Elsie had been strangled to death, and there are a great many images in Darger's works of children with gaping mouths and bulging eyes struggling against adult hands clutching at their throats.

More important, though, than specific details is the general sense of children being exploited and abused in Darger's world. The great plot point of the entire narrative is that child-enslavement has become widespread in a world where a Golden Age to end all Golden Ages once reigned supreme. Some of Darger's best writing is devoted to the lot of the child slaves — not merely the torments they suffer, but their courage and ingenuity. Far from being passive victims, they make daring escapes and become full-fledged soldiers in the armies fighting for their freedom. They overcome their natural fear of their masters and learn to use weapons, track foes, and conceal their own trails. Where adult and child soldiers interact, there is no distinction drawn between the youthful "scouts" and the older, more experienced warriors. The children are accepted as equals. The only characters who differentiate between children and adults are the

Blengins, who are violently protective of the young.

Darger's work in its entirety is a not-so-subtle hint that the man himself never moved past a childish insistence on being the center of the universe. His protectiveness of children is a protection of himself. Much has been speculated regarding the fact that many of the girls in his pictures — and they *are* girls — possess penises. Bone-steel lists the “possible explanations” for this, “none very satisfying.” Missing from the list is the idea that Darger blatantly identified himself with every character in his Realms, male, female, or dragon. He was the enslaved and mistreated — and clever, courageous — child; he was the soldier who fought in epic battles, rather than being humiliatingly dismissed from military service for a minor physical disability. He was the Blengin, possessed of “the membrane that looks so much like a long lance,” which gave special power to children and other innocents struck by it. He was creator, participant, historian, victim, savior, slaver, and murderer.

There are characters by the name of Darger on both sides of the battle all through the work. The Realms of the Unreal bear an uncanny resemblance to a short story by Robert Heinlein, “Hey, All You Zombies!”, in which the reader gradually discovers that every character in the piece is actually the same person.

Darger's writings also bear some resemblance to the Bronte juvenilia mentioned earlier. The worlds of the Bronte children — Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne — had their origin in some toy soldiers given to Branwell, which were pounced upon, claimed, and named by his sisters. Charlotte's writings from this period survive and tell of a land of fearsome battles, colonization, and love won and lost by the kind of larger-than-life figures Darger populated his own worlds with. (Charlotte, incidentally, generally tells her tales through a male narrator; for a time there are no female characters at all in her make-believe land.) The Brontes illustrated their imaginary adventures, though not to the extent that Darger did his, and wrote them out in script so small that several words of their miniature handwriting could easily fit on the smallest fingernail of an adult hand. Intriguing on sight, they are disappointing in content, sharing with Darger's writing the flaws of repetition and essential unbeliability.

There is in the Bronte's imagined lands of Angria (Charlotte and Branwell's world) and Gondal (Emily and Anne's), as in the case of Darger's worlds, a sense of secrecy, though (as in Darger's case) there were very few to know or care what the children were up to. More mysterious still were what Charlotte passingly referred to as “bed plays.” “Bed plays mean secret plays,” Charlotte explains; “they are very nice.” Though to modern ears this sounds rather naughty, the surviving documentary evidence suggests instead bedtime as a time with no grownups around to ruin the fun, and ongoing whispered role-playing in the small hours of the night.

Edith Olivier, a more recent and much less-known (and lesser) writer, describes such bedtime play quite explicitly in her early twentieth-century novel *The Love Child*, in which an imaginary friend miraculously comes to life. Agatha Bodenham, at the age of thirty-two, is left alone and lonely by the death of her mother. She casts about for comfort and finds herself remembering Clarissa, her make-believe companion from childhood, “forgotten for many years, and now coming back to mind as a memory, not of a possession, but of a loss.” Agatha's days are occupied with dull paperwork and the upkeep of the house, but her nights are pure enchantment:

She found herself looking forward to bedtime as if something wonderful was going to happen... in the night, as she lay in that half-sleeping state when the spirit wakes because the mind is weary, when impossibilities seem possible, and when dreams come true — then, all of a sudden, she found that she was playing with Clarissa, quite simply and naturally.

...Clarissa hadn't grown a day older, and Agatha found that she could play with her with all the zest and spirit of her own childhood, and yet there was something added. Between her and Clarissa there stood the memory of eighteen middle-aged years, for she knew she had never been young since she lost Clarissa. She felt as if she was playing with a baby, and she knew that the baby was her own.

Here is all the solipsism of Darger's world, all the admission of oneness with her creation. Hermione Lee, in her intro-

duction to the Virago Modern Classic edition of the novel, dismisses this passage as sexually symbolic. “Something wonderful” happening at bedtime can mean only one thing, apparently. Yet Lee admits a few pages earlier that Edith Olivier and her sister Mildred played “endlessly at the kinds of imaginary games which gave rise to and characterise the relationship of Agatha and Clarissa.” The evidence that the passage above isn't symbolic of anything but itself is there, but Lee passes right by it and wonders that this “extremely unusual novel,” in which an imaginary character is ultimately destroyed by too much reality, is so difficult “to categorise or to forget.”

The Brontes, Olivier, and Edith Wharton are prime examples of imaginers who started off, as all children do, every bit as self-absorbed and self-centered as Darger did. The difference between their successful writing and his obscurity is probably not a question of intrinsic skill — Darger shows flashes of real brilliance in his writing. In describing one species of Blengins, he writes simply and beautifully, “Their voice is a proverb.” Ample talent is evident, as is self-discipline — anyone who could put in the hours of writing he did after grueling days of mindless labor could hardly be called a slacker.

But he was unwilling or unable to take the final step of leaving childhood behind. The above-mentioned authors never lost their love of make-believe, but they turned that love to the service of art. They accepted the challenge of simultaneously keeping true to their inner visions and writing works that could be of interest to others, for nothing is more boring than someone else's fantasy. And nothing is more unnerving than seeing a child's capacity for obsession retaining all its force in adulthood. Darger's work is striking and significant, but one turns away from it with the uneasy sense of having looked upon something not meant for others' eyes. ~

