

Let us not take pride as if we had merely outgrown
a childish fear. Let us examine the matter
without bias. Let us beware of judging hastily
the monsters of old, in new disguises.

Guy Endore, *The Werewolf of Paris*

INTRODUCTION TO *THE GETTY FIEND*
BY MICHAEL DU PLESSIS

Ken White's *The Getty Fiend* invents, in its title, the one thing (or perhaps, in museum terms, the one "acquisition") that both Getty Museums have sorely lacked: a fiend. To the Opera its phantom, to Paris its werewolf, to the Notre Dame its hunchback, and now, to the Getty, its fiend. Were it for this contribution to museology and monstrosity alone, *The Getty Fiend* would be a *necessary* book.

Yet White's book is necessary not only for its title. It is, paradoxically, necessary also for its sheer luxury, for the luxuriant profusion of its excess—*The Getty Fiend* is an excessively witty and excessively beautiful invention. A Getty-area comedy of manners turns into a "medieval melodrama" (as White's subtitle marks its genre). Or is it the other way round? Various werewolves fuse into one "Beast" called Kveldulfur to haunt the Getty via a miniature verse epic, a mock epic that is not without melancholy. The necessity of *The Getty Fiend* is not the dourness of the gloomily inevitable and the glumly expected. Instead, White's book (impossible to pin down or "[pinion]" in its genres, "Behold *The Beast* pinioned," p. 13) offers its fortunate readers an over-abundance of wit, of melodrama overflowing into comedy, camp even, were "camp" not (in its current commonly used sense) a reductive category to control its excess. There are whiplashes of epigrammatic incisiveness and incision: the lines, "It's a Sky Mall classic. Hollywood Forever/all over Gower" (p. 14) sound like acid descriptions of the soon-to-be Garcetti Los Angeles. There are passages of intricate gorgeousness, where LA appears under the spell of White's language:

To the north, an unreadable postcard: HUGE WHITE LETTERS claim hillbrow's de facto altar with inscrutable signifying idols. Far ahead, scrim of haze, sepia and pink. Ocean's dim teal hem.
(p. 6)

Or:

Rightly so there came verily by the holy telescope
at roost over the spangled worm of Western
Avenue in its sinuous gold-lit gossamers and lurid stoplights
and brake lights and green lights and come-hither headlights
the evening gown of the ball python, marigold and lavender. (p. 26)

Camp can hold both “the evening gown of the ball python, marigold and lavender,” the “scrim” and “hem” and the “Sky Mall Classics” simultaneously and cumulatively in the same conflicted space.

(But we will have to return, shortly, to camp and its questions.)

At least three werewolf tales turn into an Oscar Wildean adventure of language, of imagination, of wit, in all and every sense of wit: canny—and uncanny—inventiveness, seductive cleverness and exquisiteness of form.

The excess of *The Getty Fiend* depends, in one of the text’s many glorious contradictions, on exquisite formal precision. White’s line breaks are precise and sharp as pleats and folds of haute couture: the following passage displays—and with what wit!—overlay of the sartorial and the poetic, the medieval and the contemporary:

[Then he donned
a mackintosh of red sendal,
mayhap by YSL, mayhap
by D&G, and bare a
mantle upon his shoulder
that was furred with
marten or with mink—lined
in the high and ridiculous
Burberry plaid—he’d seen
all grown and smoking hot
smoking fucking hot
Hermione Granger in the
ad—and the leer knight
said unto the blear knight:
Sirlet, my stunned
confection, do attend...] (p. 26)

The book’s eye for detail cuts, to mix metaphors (for *The Getty Fiend* invites its readers to do so), sharp as a razor. An acid lucidity etches the beautifully funny description of the Getty:

—on a looming motte rests white-gold Camelot in fossiled block.
Banners snap in sea wind atop buttercream barbicans. Smooth
serpentine bailey gleams above broad green moat of succulents.
Lesser structures scatter the foliate hillside.
Locked in chain, segments of the endless millipede. Ten lanes of

besiegers strangulate the hill, grind unpredictable stop-and-go patterns to baffle castle sentries, flash shields emblazoned with battle cry in perpetuity: Interstate California 405. (p. 7)

Once we have encountered such a marvel, will we ever ascend to the beige travertine of the Getty without White's words accompanying and echoing our ascent?

Restless in its inventiveness, for *The Getty Fiend*, a single "Fiend" is not enough. At the very least, three werewolves—Marie de France's 13th-century shapeshifter, Guy Endore's early 20th-century lycanthrope, and Kvedulfur, a wolfman of Norse legend—inspire *The Getty Fiend*, with Kvedulfur lending his magnificently tolling and resonant name to the central character of White's text.¹ The Getty becomes a medieval keep, a stronghold of the Middle Ages and surely the spectacular historical melodramas of Cecil B. DeMille cannot be far off. After all, White's text intermittently assumes the language, layout and typeface of the screenplay, the quintessentially Los Angeles literary form. Wholly written as screenplay, printed in the bombastically earnest typeface and formatting that seem to be part and parcel of the form, the prologue primes us for cinema, for movies. Screen and play: the text reverts at times to this form before turning again into poetic astonishment—much like the werewolf's reversion to its true shape. But is that wolf or human? Is *The Getty Fiend* a screenplay masquerading as poetry or poetry assuming the shape of a screenplay?

The prologue swoops in one long panorama over Los Angeles: "EXT. HIGH ABOVE LOS ANGELES, FALCON CAM – CONTINUOUS" (noting on its way, hilariously, a shabbier peregrine, "POV from the tousled shoulders of a peregrine," p. 6). Such a flourish recalls many a CGI opening fanfare, yet salvaged from banality here by its linguistic and imaginative exuberance:

EXT. GETTY RESEARCH PAVILION – CONTINUOUS

FALCON CAM wheels past scholars' cells, veers down a hidden curvilinear path, hovers at alcove, RAPS.

With audible CRACK, wall surface sheds stone chips. A narrow, handle-less door swings inward on silent hinges. (p. 10)

Gothic, indeed, as befits a book called *The Getty Fiend*, where falcons open secret doors but slapstick, too, as in Mel Brooks' parody of Hitchcock where a would-be panoptical craning shot turns to bathos when it gets its all-too-material comeuppance.

The Getty Fiend flirts enchantingly with preciosity and over-refinement, flirts, but never quite embraces. For it owes as much to Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* as it does to *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*, as much to Djuna Barnes as to *Spamalot*, to Thomas Malory as much as "Jabberwocky."

And to pile on paradoxes and metamorphoses, *The Getty Fiend's* comic richness shimmers with sadness like shot silk. This is comedy that will break the heart. Any text that begins,

OVER BLACK:

RUSH OF WIND.

Faint symphony of CAR HORNS grows louder...

FADE IN:

EXT. HIGH ABOVE LOS ANGELES, FALCON CAM - CONTINUOUS (p. 6)

And ends, "blizzard/of light/hush/susurratation/of slight/hush" (pp. 96-97), right before "FADE TO WHITE" (p. 97), knows its movies and its melodrama. For melodrama whispers, always, "too late." *The Getty Fiend* is untimely, wondrously and melancholically too late. Like comedy, melodrama turns on timing, albeit a different temporality.

Melodrama, as White shows so movingly, means holding back your tears until that penultimate moment just before the curtain falls, the houselights go up, the words "The End" appear on the screen or, mercilessly here, a simple "FADE TO WHITE." That we wish immediately to reread the text after such an ending, to read it back from an alert that is anything but a spoiler, must be the strongest of the multiple spells the book casts.

Melodrama is a mode of excess and here indeed *The Getty Fiend* makes good on its subtitle.ⁱⁱ Yet camp is a mode of excess that is not altogether (or perhaps not at all) distinguishable from melodrama. And here the Fiend of Camp I invoked earlier makes its comeback. Anything and everything in *The Getty Fiend* doubles, redoubles, becomes duplicitous, as shape-shifty as its titular fiend—we should bear in mind that the word "fiend" can designate Satan, the Adversary (*der Feind*), a monster, an addict ("dope fiend"), or a possessed and properly fanatical fan (a "movie fiend"). Names both in the text or in its immediate (exorbitant) orbit take on multiple meanings: Kveldulfur (whose name, it seems, means, in one of its senses, "evening wolf" [Baring-Gould, p. 43]). Bisclavret (whom Marie de France takes care to point out, is a particular Breton term for what the other vernaculars call "garwalf" [quoted in Baring-Gould, p. 60]), or the Parisian werewolf are all masks, metonyms, metaphors for a young 21st-century Getty scholar.ⁱⁱⁱ And the other way round too: a wolf in haute couture? Or a dandy in faux wolf fur?

And it is here, dear reader, that Susan Sontag makes her special cameo appearance. Her essay from 1964, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (note the frisson, the thrill, of the “scare quotes”) has become so canonized that we may miss its many ambiguities about ambiguities. Sontag offers 58 notes on camp.^{iv} (Yes, Sontag does number the notes, whether for campiness or not.) Note 16 remarks:

Thus, the Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not that familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice. (p. 281)

Camp hesitates, then, between a signifier that is wholly arbitrary in its arbitrariness and a signifier the signified of which seems to be a meta-signifier—that the sign is a construct, that the sign means “sign.” (Camp is “camp.”) From the arbitrary on to artifice: but surely a signifier recognized as artifice, artefact, as construct is tautological. On the one hand, a sign in its potential to mean “anything,” must float, indeed, even flutter, from signified to signified. On the other, camp is both made (“an artifice”) and made-up. These two hands juggle so skillfully that the bright balls move so rapidly as to appear as one.

White cites particular works and authors in his notes but Djuna Barnes appears first of the single authors, a text all her own. Sontag considered Barnes one of her favorite authors and sent her a copy of *Against Interpretation* in which “Notes on ‘Camp’” first appeared. Barnes wrote to Sontag in very Barnesian terms: “I have been informed that seeing me on the village streets, you have refrained from addressing me, because someone has told you that I am a Demon of some violence and invective. Please do me the pleasure of speaking to me the next time?” Barnes’ biographer notes laconically: “Because of their mutual formality, they never met” (Herring p. 297, quoting Hank O’Neal p. 33).^v

One might imagine *The Getty Fiend* as the monstrous spawn of an encounter that never took place between “a [purported] Demon of some violence and invective” and the woman who invented the idea of inventing camp. (Sontag notoriously asserts, “Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn’t more or less invented camp, someone else would” [Sontag, note 53, p. 291]).

Indeed, Sontag’s one personification in note 16 is a meta-personification: “the Camp sensibility is one that is *alive* to a double sense in which some things

can be taken” (emphasis added). To personify is to make the inanimate alive and Sontag personifies a “sensibility” as “alive”: camp seems to require that the inanimate be alive twice over.

In a Golden Age of Zombies, *The Getty Fiend* reanimates that Camp sensibility. The fiendish vivacity with which White has called forth the vivacity of his fiend can stop the breath and the hearts of its readers. (As I have argued, it can break their hearts as well.) For White has done more than make camp come alive. Nor has White merely “reanimated” camp (as another zombie stumbling towards a niche market). His achievement is more remarkable.

Ken White’s *The Getty Fiend* reinvents camp for the 21st century.

Michael du Plessis

February 2017

Los Angeles, CA

-
- i. White notes, “The concept, intention, and occasion of *The Getty Fiend* is a distorted retelling of Marie Du France’s le lai du Bisclavret, composted and compounded with Guy Endore’s gothic horror pulp novel, *The Werewolf of Paris*, with the notable exception of featuring as its initial protagonist a storied Icelandic shapechanger from the Bronze Age—all set in contemporary Los Angeles” (p. 98). What he slyly neglects to signal is that Kvedulfur the “shapechanger” and Marie de France’s *Bisclavret* all have lycanthropy in common with Endore’s werewolf.
 - ii. “Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid” (p. 4), suggests Peter Brooks, for whom melodrama incarnates “the mode of excess” as his subtitle asserts. Melodrama involves “states of being beyond the immediate context of [a] narrative, and in excess of it” (p. 2). Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
 - iii. Sabine Baring-Gould’s *The Book of Werewolves* first published in 1865, provides an essential guide. For Bisclavret, see p. 60, for Kvedulfur, see pp. 43-47 (London: Senate, 1993 rpt.).
 - iv. Susan Sontag “Notes on ‘Camp’” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Delta, 1966) pp. 275-292. The original publication date (1964) is noted at the end of the essay.
 - v. Hank O’Neal, “*Life is painful, nasty and short...in my case it has only been painful and nasty*” (New York: Paragon House, 1990) quoted in Philip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Works of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Penguin, 1995). O’Neal appears to be the author of the remark about why the Sontag and Barnes were never able to meet (Herring p. 297).

<i>prelude</i>	<i>page 5</i>
<i>part one</i>	<i>page 11</i>
<i>part two</i>	<i>page 31</i>
<i>part three</i>	<i>page 57</i>
<i>part four</i>	<i>page 69</i>
<i>part five</i>	<i>page 91</i>

the getty fiend

(a medieval melodrama in contemporary los angeles)

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

KVELDULFUR: Prince of Cads, the Rightful Duke of San Vicente Avenue.

SORCHA: Duchess of Barrington, second in line for coronation.

KVELDULFUR'S ABSENCE: The Usurping Marquis; the Duke's ersatz advisor.

SORCHA'S QUESTION: Veritable interlocutor, pincer wielded under pince-nez.

THE RUNAROUND: The canyon complex of Sulci, a sly cartography of cortex.

THE ICONS OF SINAI: A broad and biased chorus.

ST. LUKE OF THE THROTTLED HALO: Your Momma so fat she eats Wheat Thicks.

THE ORIGIN OF THE TRUTH: An honest old counselor.

THE TRUTH: A savage and deformed slave.

THE NOTEBOOK: Peerless, blank.

THE READING LAMP: An Extra-Large Airy Spirit [courtesy of George Nelson.]

NYMPHS

REAVERS

WILL MUNNY: A cold blooded killer.

OTHER SPIRITS attending Kveldulfur.

THE GARMENT IN QUESTION: Pure occlusion, protean eclipse.

SETTING: The sea - *hey*, [the air - *ho*], with a laden merchant vessel; afterwards
a coastal island of pale damascene consisting of a single absent plain its void

well-defined by shapelessness

punctuated by

blizzard, oblit-
eration.