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**Rereading *Tarzan of the Apes*;
Or "What Is It," Lady Alice Whispered, "A Man?"**

"I had this story," Edgar Rice Burroughs begins, "from one who had no business to tell it to me, or to any other." And I in turn had my second-hand copy of Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* from one who had no business to sell it to me, or to any other child my age. I was too young even to suspect the implications of Tarzan's fight with Terkoz the bull-ape, when Jane Porter, "her lithe, young form flattened against the trunk of a great tree, her hands tight pressed against her rising and falling bosom, and her eyes wide with mingled horror, fascination, fear, and admiration — watched the primordial ape battle with the primeval man for possession of a woman — for her."

I am told that no one is that young anymore. But when I happened upon a paperback rack full of the reprints of the Tarzan series, I remembered being that young. I remembered shedding the outside world as Tarzan always shed his clothes at the edge of the jungle. I remembered taking to the trees and swinging hand over hand through the forest branches. I even remembered that Burroughs claimed to have pieced together the story of Tarzan from a "musty manuscript", from the "dry official records of the British Colonial Office", and from "the yellow, mildewed pages of the diary of a man long dead". And I remembered buying Burroughs' book in an equally dusty place, a used-book store run by a little goblin of a man, one-eyed and missing some fingers from his right hand. Like Childe Roland's hoary cripple, his mouth was "pursed and scored" with the attempt to suppress his glee "at one more victim gained thereby". I picture him writing my epitaph in the dust of his counter after I left; but what is certain is that I returned to his shop, which was hidden in the shadow of the not-yet-deserted train station, seeking more than one further adventure of the ape-man.

The rack of paperback reprints was in a bookstore which was both clean and collegiate, full of beermugs and sweatshirts, but I bought a copy of *Tarzan of the Apes* anyway – because it suddenly occurred to me that just as Tarzan taught himself to read in the jungle, so I learned to read while reading Burroughs' two dozen Tarzan books. My education, in other words, was hardly classical: for Perseus, Andromeda, and the sea-monster, I had Tarzan, Jane Porter, and Terkoz the bull-ape.

The point is, I think, worth making. We are, all of us, but especially those of us who wandered into civilization and culture instead of being brought up there, too apologetic about the youth we misspent in the bush country outside of literature.

Not everyone, of course, would agree. When I paid for my paperback copy of *Tarzan of the Apes*, the clerk, who affects the voice of an FM radio announcer, asked: "Light reading?" But since I have learned, perhaps from Tarzan himself, to tolerate the overly civilized, I kept my fingers and fangs to myself.

I took the book home and tried to recapture my youth. But Wordsworth is right: there is always a tree, of many, one, which reminds us that nothing can bring back those splendid hours. Rereading *Tarzan of the Apes*, I toppled out of that very tree against which Jane Porter pressed herself while Tarzan battled to save her from the less than honorable intentions of Terkoz. I suddenly remembered that every Burroughs book – be it about Africa, Mars, Venus, or the centre of the Earth – is about a woman fleeing from rape and also pursued by the hero whose lust for the lady is legitimized by love. And when I recalled that standard plot, the tree against which Jane Porter flattened herself – her eyes wide with mingled horror, fascination, fear, and admiration – became a phallus of enormous size; I realized that I have long since lost an innocence as difficult to regain as the one Burroughs' heroines are always ready to die to protect. I may never again be able to read a Tarzan story.

One thing, however – to continue the almost irreverent parallel with Wordsworth – does seem to remain behind. Having read again a little of Burroughs, I think he is better than generally supposed, that we were not stupid as well as young, the thousands of us who grew up reading about the ape-man. But let me use the second book of the series, *The Return of Tarzan*, as an example of what I mean. The last half of the

book, which features the lost city of Opar and a white high-priestess, must have been derived from Rider Haggard; but the probable debt to Poe for an earlier chapter entitled "What Happened in the Rue Maule" is more interesting. In that chapter, Tarzan, who is exploring the back streets of Paris on his first visit to civilization, is lured to an upper room by a woman's cries for help. It is a trap, of course, the sort which always proves to Tarzan that civilization is worse than the jungle; and he is set upon by apaches. The thin veneer of civilization drops from him, Tarzan reverts to the beast, and the thugs — who expected only a routine ambush — find themselves trapped in a small room with a wild animal. When the police arrive, they find Tarzan's attackers broken in body as well as spirit and the ape-man fled, out the window, up a pole, and over the rooftops. Surely this parallel between Tarzan and the orangutan of "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" was intentional; more to the point, a writer who can use a literary echo to intensify and clarify a scene — Tarzan does not become *like* a beast, he becomes again the ape he was raised to be — such a writer may have been worth misspending a little youth on.

In the original book, when John and Alice Clayton, Lord and Lady Greystoke, the parents-to-be of Tarzan, are marooned on the wild African shore, one of the frightful sights they are forced to confront is that of a great figure standing erect and dimly silhouetted against the deeper shadows of the jungle. "Look," Lady Alice whispers, "what is it, a man?" She might well ask the same question about her son, who will be orphaned in his first year and raised by Kala the she-ape; Tarzan's mother is in fact asking a question about a future she can only glimpse and will not live to see. Burroughs is not only pulling off a nice bit of narrative foreshadowing, Lady Alice's question also seems to me an answer, an explanation of why we continued to read Tarzan books long after we discovered the pattern of the plots — long after we realized that this blow to the head had caused amnesia, that this double had tried to impersonate the hero, that even these lost cities had been found before. Like most books which endure for more than fifteen minutes, the Tarzan books are about what a thing is man, how like an angel and how like an ape.

Tarzan has to discover that he is more man than ape. He learns it from the books in his father's cabin, from the cannibal warrior who kills his foster-mother, and from Jane Porter, to whom he finally says:

"I have come across the ages out of the dim and distant past from the lair of the primeval man to claim you — for your sake I have become a civilized man — for your sake I have crossed oceans and continents — for your sake I will be whatever you will me to be."

Tarzan has to come so far because his parents were forced back down the evolutionary ladder by the mutineers who deserted them on the savage African coast. "John, if it were only you and I," sobs the already pregnant Lady Alice (without, however, musing either her subjunctive verb or her subjective pronoun), "we could endure it I know; but ——" "Yes, dear," he answers gently, "but we must face it. . . . Hundreds of thousands of years ago our ancestors of the dim and distant past faced the same problems which we must face, possibly in these same primeval forests. That we are here today evidences their victory. What they did may we not do? And even better, for are we not armed with ages of superior knowledge, and have we not the means of protection, defense, and sustenance which science has given us, but of which they were totally ignorant?" "I only hope you are right, John," she answers. "I will do my best to be a brave primeval woman, a fit mate for the primeval man."

The rifles given to them by science only protect the Claytons for a while. They build a tree house and then a cabin, thus halting for a year or so the regression from civilization to savagery; but finally Lady Alice weakens and dies, leaving behind an infant and still nursing son. Clayton, grown careless with grief, is killed by the apes, one of whom then adopts Tarzan (the name given to the little Lord Greystoke by the apes). Devolution is complete: in killing his father and adopting him, the apes seize Tarzan's identity, deny his origins, and insist upon his deeper origins.

Tarzan is raised by Kala the she-ape. "That the huge, fierce brute loved this child of another race is beyond question, and he, too, gave to the great, hairy beast all the affection that would have belonged to his fair young mother had she lived." "In a dim, vague way Kala explained to him that his father had been a strange white ape, but he did not know that Kala was not his mother."

"He was nearly ten before he commenced to realize that a great difference existed between himself and his fellows." At first Tarzan is ashamed of being hairless, of "that tiny slit of a mouth and those puny white teeth", but then he comes upon his father's cabin and the books

therein. Gradually he begins to understand that he is a B-O-Y. "He did not accomplish it in a day, or in a week, or in a month, or in a year; but slowly, very slowly, he learned after he had grasped the possibilities which lay in those little bugs, so that by the time he was fifteen he knew the various combinations of letters which stood for every pictured figure in the little primer and in one or two of the picture books." "No longer did he feel shame for his hairless body or his human features, for now his reason told him that he was of a different race from his wild and hairy companions. He was a M-A-N, they were A-P-E-S, and the little apes which scurried through the forest top were M-O-N-K-E-Y-S."

As Tarzan leaves the cabin after his first chance discovery of the wonders that it holds, he is met by a huge gorilla which rises up out of the dark jungle as if to claim him. He is only able to survive the ensuing battle because "in one hand he still clutched the knife he had found in the cabin of his father, and as the brute, striking and biting, closed upon him, the boy accidentally turned the point towards the hairy breast." Using the brain, in other words, and the books and the weapons which are the legacy of his father, Tarzan begins to assert his manhood and to deny his bestiality.

That other hairy breast, at which Tarzan nursed, is also pierced — not by Tarzan, who is ever the grateful child — but by an arrow from the bow of the first man Tarzan ever sees, a cannibal warrior. As the primer from which Tarzan learns to read puts it:

A is for Archer
Who shoots with a bow.
B is for Boy,
His first name is Joe.

As Tarzan learns that he is a boy and not an ape, his foster-mother, Kala the she-ape, falls victim to the terrible inevitability of plot and theme.

Tarzan eventually wins the kingship of the apes, but he abdicates in order to seek out his own kind; it is as a man among men that Tarzan must complete his evolution from the apes. He does not hesitate to revenge the death of his foster-mother; but he finds that he is unable to eat the body of the savage, even though animals eat their kills and these

savages (the only men Tarzan has ever seen) are cannibals. And when he rescues Jane Porter from the bull-ape, he refrains from the "possession" Terkoz had in mind because he wants to act as men are supposed to act. "True, it was the order of the jungle for the male to take his mate by force; but could Tarzan be guided by the laws of the beasts? Was not Tarzan a man? But what did men do? He was puzzled; for he did not know."

Which is to say that blood tells, as it always does in Burroughs. When Jane raised to her lips a locket he had given her:

Tarzan did not know precisely what she meant, but he guessed correctly that it was her way of acknowledging the gift, and so he rose, and taking the locket in his hand, stooped gravely like some courtier of old, and pressed his lips upon it where hers had rested.

It was a stately and gallant little compliment performed with the grace and dignity of utter unconsciousness of self. It was the hall-mark of his aristocratic birth, the natural out-cropping of many generations of fine breeding, an hereditary instinct of graciousness which a lifetime of uncouth and savage training and environment could not eradicate.

When Jane was frightened by the prospect of having to spend a night alone with him in the jungle:

Tarzan of the Apes did the only thing he knew to assure Jane of her safety. He removed his hunting knife from its sheath and handed it to her hilt first, again motioning her into the bower.

The girl understood, and taking the long knife she entered and lay down upon the soft grasses while Tarzan of the Apes stretched himself upon the ground across the entrance.

And thus the rising sun found them in the morning.

And thus Tarzan is as natural a knight as Perceval, his sword of chastity more honest than that of Sigurd or of Tristan, and his savagery noble indeed. His final act in *Tarzan of the Apes* — his refusal to claim his rightful title as the true Lord Greystoke because Jane Porter is engaged to the false Greystoke — is both a pretended denial of manhood ("If it's any of my business, how the devil did you ever get into that bally jungle?" 'I was born there,' said Tarzan quietly. 'My mother was an Ape.')" and at the same time a noble gesture proving his true humanity. "Fingerprints prove you Greystoke. Congratulations," cables Tarzan's friend D'Arnot; but it does not take the imprint of four ink-begrimed little fingers in the margin of John Clayton's diary to prove Tarzan worthy of any House of Lords.

In *The Return of Tarzan* the ending of the first book is reversed — Tarzan does finally win and wed Jane — but before he does he returns to the jungle. “He told her then of his life since he had returned to the jungle — of how he had dropped like a plummet from a civilized Parisian to a savage Waziri warrior, and from there back to the brute that he had been raised.” In *The Beasts of Tarzan*, the third book of the series, Tarzan is marooned by his enemies on a jungle island (which is more than a little like throwing Br’er Rabbit into the briar patch), and he again — for Jane — fights his way up the evolutionary scale, conquering the beasts and the beast in himself, and thus regaining civilization. In brief, the early Tarzan books copy the original story, of which Tarzan’s victory cry, the victory cry of the bull-ape, is a miniature. When Tarzan fights he becomes again an animal, and when he wins he puts one foot upon the slain foe and throwing back his head gives the horrible scream of the victorious bull-ape. Spectators, usually those whom Tarzan has just rescued, find themselves suddenly as afraid of their protector as they had been of their attacker; but then Tarzan always calms himself and speaks to them as a rational and civilized man.

In the fourth book of the series, *The Son of Tarzan*, Tarzan’s son (“Jack”) is forced by the twists of the plot — chiefly two killings in self-defense — to flee from civilization and into the jungle, accompanied by an ape he met at a circus (the latter surely an embodiment of his father’s past). Each time Jack tries to re-approach men, he is rebuffed, even shot at. He becomes so embittered that even the apes will have nothing to do with him, calling him “Korak the Killer”, a name of no little meaning in the jungle where all are killers. Korak is redeemed, as was his father, by the love of a woman, a small girl he adopts, protects, and learns to love as she grows to womanhood.

And Korak is also saved by his father, who arrives in the nick of time. “There is but one Tarzan,” Korak acknowledges; “there can never be another.” But if Tarzan’s son knows his place, imposter Tarzans do still sometimes appear in the series — at one point Jane Clayton herself is almost fooled (a variation on Burroughs’ threat-of-rape situation). Burroughs does not, however, allow false Tarzans before the real, and such machinations are always doomed by the last minute arrival of the ape-man. In fact, as the series continues, these providential appearances become Tarzan’s main activity. The later books focus upon people who are either going to be saved or destroyed by Tarzan; there is usually the

discovery of some lost civilization, always a likable young man and a beautiful woman, and several sub-plots which are slowly woven together. It is, in other words, highly ordered, this world of the later Tarzan books: Burroughs cuts from one set of characters to another — always at a moment of crisis — and finally Tarzan arrives, *deus ex machina*, usually back from being thought dead.

Acting like a god is, in fact, for Tarzan as for Odysseus, Hercules, or Beowulf, the hero's other temptation — other, that is, than reverting to the beast. The titles of several of the Tarzan books are suggestive in this regard: *Tarzan the Terrible*; *Tarzan, Lord of the Jungle*; *Tarzan the Invincible*; *Tarzan Triumphant*; and *Tarzan the Magnificent*. Like a god, like Jehovah in fact, is exactly how Tarzan does behave towards the cannibals who murdered his foster-mother. "If you ever chance to pass that far off African village," Burroughs tells us, "you will still see before a tiny thatched hut, built just without the village, a little iron pot in which is a quantity of food" — an offering ordered by the witch-doctor of the tribe to placate the terrible "evil spirit of the jungle". And like a jealous god, Tarzan is hard on other religions: he kills or defrocks a dozen witch-doctors in the course of the series. In each of Burroughs' series, for that matter, there are false gods supported by even more false priests; and two of his heroes, Tarzan and John Carter of Mars, regularly expose these whited sepulchres to the enslaved multitudes. The result — at least in the case of Tarzan — is that he, the redeemer, is always offered the chance to make a new testament, to become the new god or at least the new high priest. But like Spenser's Odysseus, "that long wandering Greek/That for his love refused deity," Tarzan always returns to Jane.

Tarzan is not, however, above taking advantage of superstition. In *Tarzan the Terrible*, both he and Korak claim to be divine, and Korak backs up their claim with the thunder and lightning of an Enfield rifle. In *Tarzan and the Leopard Men*, Tarzan, the victim of amnesia, goes so far as to forget not only who but what he is: when a savage warrior mistakes him for the ghost of an ancestor, Tarzan, lacking a better explanation of his prowess and his identity, assumes that the warrior knows what he is talking about. Typically, though, when Tarzan regains his memory, the savages respect him even more, because while they had thought to control the ghost through prayer, they have heard that no one can control Tarzan.

In *Jungle Tales of Tarzan*, a collection of short stories about Tarzan's boyhood, the ape-boy is called upon by the apes to save their god, the moon, which is apparently being devoured during an eclipse. Tarzan climbs to the top of a tall tree and fires arrow after arrow into the night sky. When the moon reappears, "In all the tribe there was but one who was at all skeptical about the plausibility of Tarzan's remarkable rescue of Goro, and that one, strange as it may seem, was Tarzan of the Apes." Such self-saving doubt is his throughout the series.

If for a moment Tarzan forgets himself, he always gets his comeuppance. In *Tarzan and the Ant Men*, Tarzan grows over-confident among the little people; he is then, of course, captured by the ant men and reduced to their size. In the later books, where his function is most godlike, Tarzan is always captured at least once, and the consequent threat upon his life reminds him of his mortality. Even the immortality pills of *Tarzan's Quest* (like the long life of Burroughs' Martians and the immortality serum of his Venusians) will not protect him against the possibility of a violent death.

Not only was Tarzan's upbringing nasty and brutish, then; but his life — like ours — is always in danger of being short. Thus, by one definition at least, Tarzan's life is the life of a man. Which is to say that, as I look back on it, the first Tarzan book, *Tarzan of the Apes*, seems to present an idea so potent that Burroughs spent the rest of his life explicating it, and so complete that it is an allegory of the whole series: Tarzan discovers that he is neither the beast of the apes, nor the god of the cannibals, but the man of Jane Porter.

But before I conclude in such positive fashion, I ought to acknowledge the charge of racism that is often made against Burroughs' Tarzan stories. It is not so much that Burroughs uses on occasion the comic darky stereotype (Stepin Fetchit, after all, is a comic rebel, a protester who succeeds through cultivated incompetence); it is more that Tarzan himself, as the only Anglo-Saxon, is so much more strong, agile, and bright than the black African savages against whom he is pitted that his race has to seem superior. And neither the handsome black Waziri of the later novels, nor the good Jews and bad Jews, good Germans and bad Germans, of the series as a whole quite counter the very real sense that in Burroughs as in Conrad the question is not whether the blacks will make a god of Kurtz but whether Kurtz will allow them to. The best thing that can be said about Tarzan is that, unlike Kurtz, he restrains himself.

The question does have one slightly more complicated wrinkle, however; while it is true that Tarzan means “white-skin”, Burroughs regularly reminds us that Tarzan has in fact been burnt bronze by the equatorial sun. Tarzan is more like the Apache of Burroughs’ other novels about the American Southwest, or like the red race John Carter finds to be dominant on Mars, than he is like his fellow white-skins. Burroughs’ racism is finally another example of that Caucasian envy Kafka so nicely called “The Wish to Be a Red Indian”. “If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind . . . until one shed one’s spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins”

If we now know that Burroughs has all the faults of the pulps, including a racism he shares with Poe and Haggard, and a sexism he shares with all adventure writers, then we really have grown in wisdom as in age. But we were not hopelessly wrong-headed when we were young — Burroughs did have a powerful and coherent imagination. Just as the boy Tarzan trying to learn to read presents to Burroughs “a picture filled, at once, with pathos and with promise — an allegorical figure of the primordial groping through the black night of ignorance toward the light of learning” — so growing up reading Tarzan books may be seen as a groping through the jungle of adventure toward the light of literature.