

# THE BOOK OF IMAGINARY BEINGS

Jorge Luis Borges

with Margarita Guerrero

Translated by Andrew Hurley

Illustrated by Peter Sis

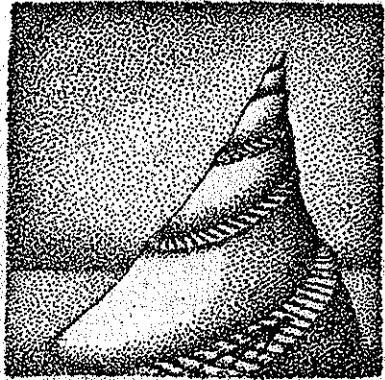
VIKING

of  
C  
I  
r  
G  
u  
E  
F  
c  
h  
F  
in  
ac  
av  
dr  
we  
Gl  
of

## The A Bao A Qu

If one wishes to gaze upon the most marvelous landscape in the world, one must go to the topmost story of the Tower of Victory in Chitor. There, one will find a circular terrace from which one commands a view clear to the horizon, all around. A spiral staircase leads up to this terrace, and yet the only persons who dare venture up the stairs are those who do not believe in the fable, which goes like this:

On the staircase of the Tower of Victory, there has lived from the beginning of time the A Bao A Qu, which is sensitive to the virtues possessed by human souls. It lives upon the first step in a state of lethargy, and comes to conscious life only when someone climbs the stairs. The vibration of the person as he approaches infuses the creature with life, and an inward light begins to glow within it. At the same time, its body and its virtually translucent skin begin to ripple and stir. When a person climbs the stairs, the A Bao A Qu follows almost on the person's heels, climbing up after him, clinging to the edge of the curved treads worn down by the feet of generations of pilgrims. On each step, the creature's color grows more intense, its form becomes more perfect, and the light that emanates from it shines ever brighter. Proof of the creature's sensitivity is the fact that it achieves its perfect form only when it reaches the topmost step, when the person who has climbed the stairs has become a fully evolved and realized spirit. In all other cases, the A Bao A Qu remains as though paralyzed, midway up the staircase, its body incomplete, its color still undefined, its light unsteady. When it cannot achieve its perfect form, the A Bao A Qu suffers great pain, and its moaning is a barely



perceptible murmur similar to the whisper of silk. But when the man or woman that revives the creature is filled with purity, the A Bao A Qu is able to reach the topmost step, completely formed and radiating a clear blue light. Its return to life is brief, however, for when the pilgrim descends the stairs again, the A Bao A Qu rolls down to the first step once more, where, now muted and resembling some faded picture with vague outlines, it awaits the next visitor to the Tower. The creature becomes fully visible only when it reaches the midpoint of the staircase, where the extensions of its body (which, like little arms, help it to climb the stairs) take on clear definition. There are those who say that it can see with its entire body, and that its skin feels like that of a peach. Down through all the centuries, the A Bao A Qu has reached perfection only once.

Captain Richard Francis Burton records the legend of the A Bao A Qu in one of the notes to his version of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

## Six-Legged Antelopes

The Eddas tell us that Odin's gray horse Sleipnir (which travels over land, through the air, and down into the lower world) is endowed with (or encumbered by) eight legs; a Siberian myth attributes six legs to the first Antelopes. With these six legs, the Antelopes were very difficult, even impossible, to overtake; so the divine huntsman Tunk-poj made a pair of special skates from the wood of a sacred tree which creaked incessantly and which had been revealed to him by the barking of a dog. The skates creaked as well, though they traveled with the swiftness of an arrow; to moderate their speed, Tunk-poj fitted them with chocks, which he made with branches from another magical tree. Tunk-poj pursued the Antelope across the entire firmament. Finally, the Antelope, exhausted, fell to the earth and Tunk-poj cut off its two hind legs.

"Men," he said, "are growing smaller and weaker every day. How can they hunt Six-Legged Antelopes if I myself can barely catch them?"

Since that day, Antelopes have had four legs.

## The Three-Legged Ass

Pliny reports that Zoroaster, the founder of the religion still professed by the Parsees of Bombay, wrote two million lines of poetry; the Arab historian al-Tabari states that the holy man's complete works, given eternal life by devoted calligraphers, required twelve thousand cowhides. We know that Alexander of Macedonia ordered that the manuscripts in Persepolis be burned, but the fundamental Zoroastrian texts were saved through the remarkable memory of certain priests. Since the ninth century these texts have been complemented by an encyclopedic work called the *Bundahish*, which contains the following passage:

Regarding the Three-Legged Ass, they say that it stands amid the wide-formed ocean, and that its feet are three, its eyes six, its mouths nine, its ears two, and its horn one; its body is white, its food is spiritual, and it is wholly righteous. And two of its six eyes are in the position of eyes, two on the top of the head, and two in the position of the hump; with the sharpness of those six eyes it overcomes and destroys. Of the nine mouths, three are in the head, three in the hump, and three in the inner part of the flanks; and each mouth is about the size of a cottage. . . . Each one of its three feet, when it is placed on the ground, is as much as a flock of a thousand sheep may lie in when they repose together; and each pastern is so great in its circuit that a thousand men with a thousand horses may pass inside. As for the beast's two ears, it is Mazandaran\*

\*A province of northern Persia.

which they will encompass. Its one horn is like unto gold and hollow, and a thousand branch horns have grown upon it, some befitting a camel, some befitting a horse, some befitting an ox, some befitting an ass, both great and small. With that horn it shall vanquish and it shall put to rout all the vile corruption brought about by the efforts of noxious creatures.

We know that amber is the dung of the Three-Legged Ass. In Mazdeic mythology this beneficent monster is one of the helpers of Ahura Mazda (Ormuzd), the principle of Life, Light, and Truth.

## The Bahamut

The fame of the Bahamut reached as far as the deserts of Arabia, where men changed and magnified its image. At first a hippopotamus or an elephant, at last it was transformed into a fish that floats in a bottomless sea; above the fish the men of Arabia pictured a bull, and above the bull a mountain made of ruby, and above the mountain an angel, and above the angel six infernos, and above the infernos the earth, and above the earth seven heavens. Here is the story of this creature, in Lane's translation:

The earth was, it is said, originally unstable, and therefore God created an angel of immense size and of the utmost strength, and ordered him to go beneath it and place it on his shoulders. . . . But there was no support for his feet: so God created a rock of ruby, . . . and he ordered this rock to stand under the feet of the angel. But there was no support for the rock: wherefore God created a huge bull, with four thousand eyes and the same number of ears, noses, mouths, tongues, and feet; . . . and God, whose name be exalted, ordered this bull to go beneath the rock; and he bore it on his back and his horns. . . . But there was no support for the bull: therefore God, whose name be exalted, created an enormous fish, that no one could look upon on account of its vast size, and the flashing of its eyes, and their greatness; . . . and God, whose name be exalted, commanded the fish to be a support to the feet of the bull. The name of this fish is Bahamoot [Behemoth]. He placed, as its support, water; and under the water,

darkness: and the knowledge of mankind fails as to what is under the darkness.

Another opinion is, that the earth is upon water; the water, upon the rock; the rock, on the back of the bull; the bull, on a bed of sand; the sand, on the fish; the fish, upon a still, suffocating wind; the wind, on a veil of darkness; the darkness, on a mist; and what is beneath the mist is unknown.

So immense and resplendent is the Bahamut that human eyes cannot bear to look upon it. All the seas of the earth, placed in one of the nostrils of its nose, would be no more than a grain of mustard in the midst of the desert. In Night 496 of the Burton's version of the *Thousand and One Nights*, we read that Isa (Jesus) was allowed to see the Bahamut, and when this gift was bestowed upon him he fell down in a swoon, and did not awake from the swoon that had come upon him for three days. Later, we read in addition that beneath the huge fish there is a sea, and beneath the sea, "a vast abyss of air, [and] under the air fire, and under the fire a mighty serpent, by name Falak," in whose mouth lies the Inferno.

The fiction of the rock standing upon the bull, and the bull upon Bahamut, and Bahamut upon something else could well be an illustration of that cosmological proof of the existence of God which argues that every cause requires a prior cause—so that at last, if one is not to go on to infinity, one comes to the necessity of a First Cause.

## The Baldanders

The Baldanders (whose name, singular in the German, might be translated "suddenly different" or "suddenly other") was suggested to the Nuremberg shoemaker Hans Sachs by that passage in *The Odyssey* in which Menelaus is attempting to subdue the Egyptian god Proteus, who transforms himself into a lion, a serpent, a panther, an immense wild boar, a tree, and finally, water. Hans Sachs died in 1576; some ninety years later, the Baldanders reappeared in the sixth book of Grimmelshausen's fantasy-picaresque novel *Simplicius Simplicissimus*. In a forest, the hero comes upon a stone statue that he takes for the idol from some old Germanic temple. He touches the statue and the statue tells him that it is Baldanders, and that it can take the shape of a man, an oak tree, a sow, a sausage, a meadow full of clover, dung, a flower, a flowering branch, a mulberry tree, a silk tapestry, and many other things and beings, and then, once more, a man. It attempts to teach Simplicissimus the art "of speaking with things which by their nature are mute, such as chairs and benches, pots and kettles"; it also turns itself into a secretary and writes these words from St. John's Revelations: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending," which are the key to the coded document in which the instructions for that art are written. Baldanders adds that its coat of arms (like the Turk's, though with more justice) is the inconstant moon.

Baldanders is a *successive monster*, a monster in time; the title page of the first edition of Grimmelshausen's novel bears an engraving that portrays a being with the head of a satyr, the torso of a man, the outspread wings of a bird, and the tail of a

fish; with one goat's foot and one vulture's claw it stands atop a mound of masks, which might be the individuals of the species. On its belt there hangs a sword; its hands hold an open book, with the figures of a crown, a ship, a chalice, a tower, a baby, a pair of dice, a fool's-cap with bells, and a cannon.

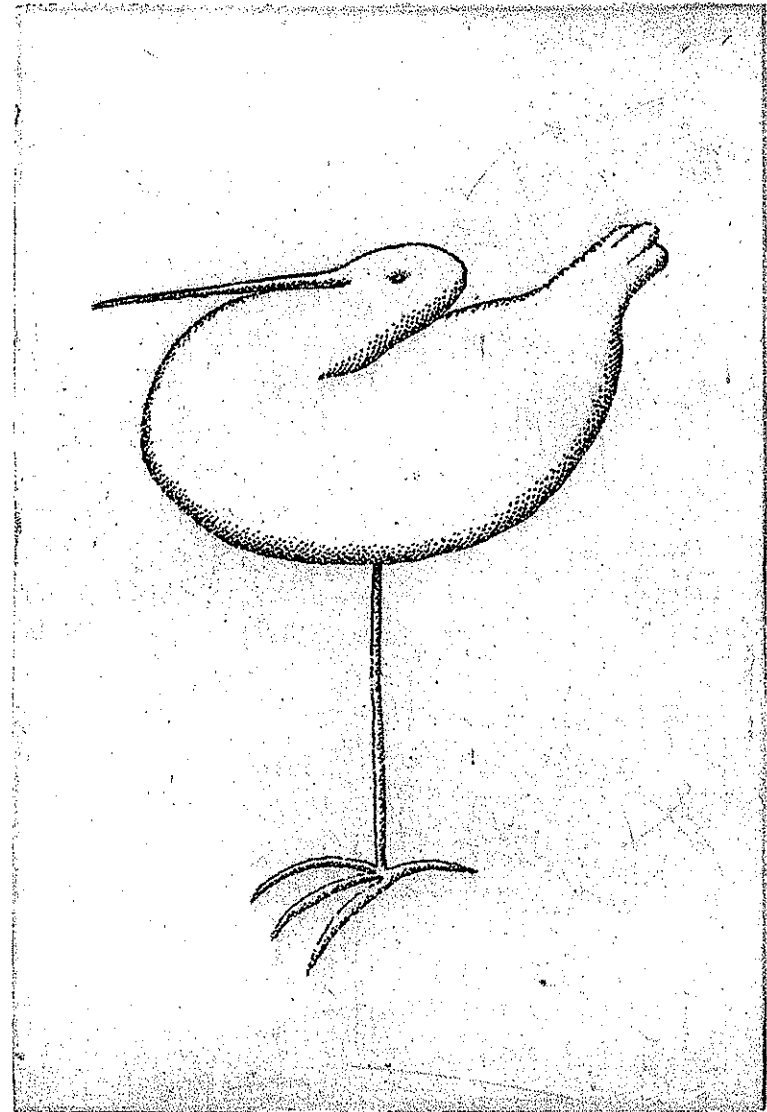
## Banshees

No one seems ever to have seen one; they are less a shape than a wailing that lends horror to the nights of Ireland and (according to Sir Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*) the mountain regions of Scotland. Heard outside one's window, they herald the death of some member of the family. It is the peculiar privilege of certain lineages of pure Celtic blood—with no trace of Latin, Saxon, or Norse—to hear them. They are also heard in Wales and Brittany. They belong to the race of elves. Their wailing is known as "keening."

## The Bird That Makes the Rain

In addition to the Dragon, Chinese farmers might call upon the bird known as the Shang Yang to bring them rain. It had but a single leg; in ancient times children would hop on one leg, wrinkle their foreheads, and shout, "It will soon rain, for Shang Yang is frolicking in the yard!" It was said that the bird drank water from the rivers and dropped it upon the land.

In ancient times, a wise man domesticated this fowl, and he would walk about with it upon his sleeve. Historians say that one day the Shang Yang, flapping its wings and hopping on its one leg, passed before the throne of Prince Ch'i, who, alarmed, sent one of his ministers to the court of Lu, to consult with Confucius about this event. Confucius predicted that the Shang Yang would cause floods in the principality and in the lands nearby, and he advised that dikes and canals be built. The prince followed Confucius' advice, and thereby avoided great disasters.





## The Demons of Judaism

Lying between the world of flesh and the world of the spirit, Judaic superstition has it, there is an orb inhabited by angels and demons. Its population exceeds all arithmetical possibility. Through the centuries, Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia have helped shape this fantastic world. Perhaps under the influence of Christianity (Trachtenberg suggests), Demonology, or the science of demons, came to be less important than Angelology, or the science of angels.

We might, however, mention the name Keteḥ Meriri, the Lord of Midday and Hot Summers. A group of children on their way to school met up with him; all but two of them died. During the thirteenth century Judaic Demonology was infiltrated by Latin, French, and German interlopers, who began to commingle with those listed in the Talmud.

## Swedenborg's Demons

The Demons of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) are not a species apart; they belong to the species of mankind. They are individuals who, after death, choose Hell. They are not happy in that region of marshes, deserts, jungles, fire-ravaged villages, brothels, and dark lairs, but they would be unhappier still in Heaven. Sometimes a ray of celestial light penetrates to where they are; the Demons experience it as a fiery burning and a foul stench. They consider themselves beautiful, but many of them have faces like beasts, or mere pieces of flesh, or have no faces at all. They live in mutual hatred and armed violence; if they come together, they do so in order to destroy one another or someone else. God forbids men and angels to draw a map of Hell, but we know that its general shape is that of a Demon. The most sordid and horrible hells are in the west.

## The Lamed Wufniks

**O**n the earth there are, and have always been, thirty-six just men whose mission is to justify the world to God. These are the Lamed Wufniks. These men do not know each other, and they are very poor. If a man comes to realize that he is a Lamed Wufnik, he immediately dies and another man, perhaps in some other corner of the earth, takes his place. These men are, without suspecting it, the secret pillars of the universe. If not for them, God would annihilate the human race. They are our saviors, though they do not know it.

This mystical belief of the Jewish people has been explained by Max Brod.

Its distant roots may be found in Genesis 18, where God says that He will not destroy the city of Sodom if ten just men can be found within it.

The Arabs have an analogous figure, the Qutb, or "saint."

## The Lamia

**A**ccording to the Latin and Greek classics, the Lamia lived in Africa. From the waist up, their bodies took the form of a beautiful woman; below, that of a serpent. Some reports have called them sorceresses; others, malign monsters. They lacked the faculty of speech, but their whistling was melodious. They would lure travelers to themselves in the desert, and then devour them. Their remote origins were divine; they sprang from one of Zeus's many amours. In that part of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) that treats of the passion of love, Robert Burton tells the story of a Lamia that assumed human form and seduced a young philosopher, "taking him home to her house in the suburbs of Corinth":

She being fair and lovely would live and die with him, that was fair and lovely to behold. The young man tarried with her a while to his great content, and at last married her, to whose wedding came Apollonius, who by some probable conjectures found her out to be a Serpent, a Lamia. When she saw herself descried, she wept, and desired Apollonius to be silent, but he would not be moved, and thereupon plate, house, and all that was in it, vanished in an instant.

Shortly before his death, John Keats (1795–1821) was inspired by Burton's tale to write his poem "Lamia."

## Nymphs

Paracelsus would have it that they live only in water, but the ancients divided the Nymphs into Water Nymphs and Land Nymphs. Some of these latter beings were Wood Nymphs, the presiding deities of woods and groves: the Hamadryads lived, invisible, inside trees, and died when the trees died. Other types of Nymphs were believed to be immortal, or to live for thousands of years. Those who lived in the sea were called Oceanids or Nereids; those who lived in rivers, Naiads. Their exact number is not known, but Hesiod ventured the figure three thousand. They were grave and lovely maidens; seeing them might bring on madness or, if they were naked, death; a line from Propertius avows that fact.

The ancients brought the Nymphs offerings of honey, oil, and milk. They were minor deities; no temples were built to them.

## Odradek\* by Kafka

Some say the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis. Others again believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate, especially as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the word.

No one, of course, would occupy himself with such studies if there were not a creature called Odradek. At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. But it is not only a spool, for a small wooden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to that at a right angle. By means of this latter rod on one side and one of the points of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs.

One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; at least there is no sign of it; nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind; the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished. In any case, closer scrutiny is impossible, since Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of.

\*Originally titled "*Die Sorge des Hausvaters*" ("The Cares of a Family Man").

He lurks by turns in the garret, the stairway, the lobbies, the entrance hall. Often for months on end he is not to be seen; then he has presumably moved into other houses; but he always comes faithfully back to our house again. Many a time when you go out of the door and he happens just to be leaning directly beneath you against the banisters you feel inclined to speak to him. Of course, you put no difficult questions to him, you treat him—he is so diminutive that you cannot help it—rather like a child. “Well, what’s your name?” you ask him. “Odradek,” he says. “And where do you live?” “No fixed abode,” he says and laughs; but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation. Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance.

I ask myself, to no purpose, what is likely to happen to him? Can he possibly die? Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek. Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children, and my children’s children? He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.

—Franz Kafka

## One-Eyed Beings

In Spanish, the English word “monocle” is rendered “*monóculo*.” Before this word was used as the name of an eyeglass, it was applied to those men or creatures that had but a single eye. Thus, in a sonnet composed in the early seventeenth century, Góngora spoke of what we might translate as the “monocle’d suitor of Galatea.” He was referring, of course, to Polyphemus, and in his *Fábula* he dedicated to that monster lines that exaggerate, but do not compare to, those (praised by Quintilian) in the third book of *The Æneid*—which in turn exaggerate but fall short of those lines in *The Odyssey*, Book IX. This literary decline corresponds to a decline in poetic faith: Virgil attempts to impress the reader with his Polyphemus though he hardly believes in him, while Góngora believes only in the Word—verbal artifice, verbal creatures.

The race of Cyclops was not the only one-eyed race; Pliny (VII, 2) mentions also the Arimaspi:

[Not] far from the spot from which the north wind arises, the Arimaspi are said to exist, a nation remarkable for having but one eye, and that placed in the middle of the forehead. This race is said to carry on a perpetual warfare with the Griffins, a kind of monster, with wings, as they are commonly represented, for the gold which they dig out of the mines, and which these wild beasts retain and keep watch over with a singular degree of cupidity, while the Arimaspi are equally desirous to get possession of it.

Five hundred years earlier, the first encyclopedist, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, wrote the following (III, 116):

Then again towards the North of Europe, there is evidently a quantity of gold by far larger than in any other land: as to how it is got, here again I am not able to say for certain, but it is said to be carried off from the griffins by Arimaspians, a one-eyed race of men. But I do not believe this tale either, that nature produces one-eyed men which in all other respects are like other men.

## The Ouroboros

Today the ocean is a sea or system of seas; for the Greeks, Oceanus was a circular river that girdled the earth. All waters flowed from it, and it had neither outlet nor source. It was also a god or a Titan, perhaps the oldest of all, for Sleep, in Book XIV of *The Iliad*, calls Oceanus he "from whom all gods arose." In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Oceanus is the father of "the swirling rivers," which number three thousand, and foremost of which are Neilos (the Nile) and Alpheios. Oceanus was customarily portrayed as an old man with a full, flowing beard; after many centuries humanity discovered a better symbol.

Heraclitus had said that in the circle, the beginning and end are a single point. A third-century Greek amulet, to be found today in the British Museum, gives us an image that can better illustrate that infinitude: the serpent that bites its own tail or, as a Spanish poet put it, "that begins at the tip of its tail." Ouroboros ("he who devours his tail") is this monster's technical name, later employed in myriad texts by the alchemists.

This creature's most famous appearance is in Norse cosmogony. In the Younger, or Prose, Edda, Loki is said to have engendered a Wolf and a Serpent. An oracle warned the gods that these creatures would be the earth's doom. The Wolf, Fenrir, was bound by a "fetter called Gleipnir, made from six things: the noise a cat makes when it moves, the beard of woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird." The Serpent, Jörmungandr, the "Mithgarth-Serpent," "was flung into the deep sea which surrounds the whole world, and it grew so large that it now lies in the middle of the ocean round the earth, biting its own tail."

In Jotunheim, or "Giant-Land," Utgarda-Loki once challenged the god Thor to lift a cat; Thor, using all his strength, could barely lift one of the cat's paws off the ground; this cat was Jörmungandr, and Thor was tricked by magic.

When the Twilight of the Gods shall come, the serpent shall devour the earth and the wolf shall devour the sun.

## The Panther

In medieval bestiaries, the word "Panther" refers to an animal quite different from the "carnivorous mammal" of contemporary zoology. Aristotle had said that the odor of this beast attracts other animals; Ælian, the Latin author known as the "honey-tongued" for his mastery of Greek, declared that this odor was "grateful to man," as well. (These statements have led to the conjecture that there was some confusion between the Panther and the civet cat.) According to Pliny, there are reports that "the Panther has, on the shoulder, a spot which bears the form of the moon; and that, like it, it regularly increases to full, and then diminishes to a crescent." To these marvelous circumstances there came to be added the fact that in the Septuagint, the word "Panther" is used once in a way that might refer to Christ (Hosea 5:14).

In the Anglo-Saxon bestiary known as the Exeter Book, the Panther is a solitary, kind animal with a melodious voice and a fragrant breath. It makes its home in the mountains, in a secret place. Its only enemy is the Dragon, with which it is constantly embattled. A twelfth-century Latin bestiary adds details to this description: It sleeps for three nights, and when it awakens, singing, multitudes of men and animals are drawn by the music and the fragrance of its breath, and they make their way from the fields, castles, and cities to its cave. The Dragon is the Old Enemy, the Devil; the awakening is the Resurrection of the Lord; the multitudes are the community of the faithful; and the Panther is Jesus Christ.

To mitigate the astonishment this allegory may produce, let us recall that the Panther was not a fierce and fearsome beast for

the Saxons, but rather an exotic sound, backed by a none-too-concrete image. It might be added, to compound the curiosity, that Eliot's poem "Gerontion" speaks of "Christ the tiger."

Leonardo da Vinci included "the Panther in Africa" among the beasts in his *Bestiary*. Here is his description:

This has the shape of a lioness, but it is taller in the leg and slimmer and longer and quite white, marked with black spots after the manner of rosettes; all the animals are fascinated by these as they gaze at them and they would remain standing there always if it were not for the terror of its face; being conscious of this therefore it hides its face, and the animals that are round about it take courage and draw near so as to be able the better to enjoy so much beauty: it then suddenly seizes on the nearest and instantly devours it.

## The Pelican

The Pelican of ordinary zoology is an aquatic fowl approximately six feet tall with a long, broad beak from whose lower jaw there hangs a reddish membrane forming a sort of sack or basket for holding fish; the Pelican of fable is smaller, and its beak is short and sharp. Faithful to its name, the plumage of the first is white; the feathers of the second are yellow, or sometimes green. Even more striking than its appearance are its habits.

With her beak and claws, the mother bird pets her nurslings with such devotion that she kills them. Three days later, the father bird arrives; driven to desperation by finding the chicks all dead, he pecks at his own breast until he bleeds. The blood that flows from the wound brings the nurslings back to life. That is the way the bestiaries tell it, though St. Jerome, in a commentary on Psalm 102 ("I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert"), attributes the chicks' death to the Serpent. The Pelican's tearing at its own breast and feeding its children with its own blood is the usual version of the fable.

Blood that brings life to the dead suggests, of course, the Eucharist and the Cross, and so a famous line in the *Paradiso* (XXV, 113) calls Christ "our Pelican." Benvenuto da Imola's Latin commentary makes this reference clear: "The word 'Pelican' is used because the Side was opened that we might be saved, like the Pelican that gives Life to its dead children with the Blood of its breast. The Pelican is an Egyptian bird."

The image of the Pelican is widespread in ecclesiastical heraldry, and still engraved upon chalices. Leonardo da Vinci's bestiary defines the Pelican in the following way:

This bears a great love to its young; and if it finds them slain in the nest by a serpent it pierces itself to the heart in their presence, and by bathing them with a shower of blood it restores them to life.

## The Perytion

Apparently the Erithrean oracle predicted that Rome would be destroyed by the Perytions. When the sayings of that oracle disappeared (accidentally burned) in the year 642 of our era, the person responsible for restoring them failed to include that particular prediction, and therefore today there is no indication of it to be found there.

Given the obscurity of its origins, then, there was need of a source that might throw more light on the creature's habits and appearance. Thus it was that after countless difficulties the authors have learned that in the sixteenth century a rabbi in Fez (almost certainly Aaron-ben-Chaim) published a small pamphlet dedicated to fantastic animals, wherein the author mentions having read the work of a certain Arab author in which there is mentioned a treatise on the Perytions that was lost when Omar burned the library at Alexandria. Although the rabbi did not give the name of this Arab author, he did have the happy idea of transcribing a few paragraphs from his text, thereby leaving us a valuable description of the Perytion. Lacking further corroboration, we think it wise simply to reproduce those paragraphs verbatim:

The Perytion inhabits the island of Atlantis, and is a creature half stag, half bird. It possesses the head and feet of the stag, and as for the body, it is that of a perfect bird, with all its feathers and plumage.

The most astonishing feature of this beast is that when it is struck by the rays of the sun, the shadow it throws



upon the ground is not that of its own figure, but rather that of a human being; from this circumstance, some have concluded that the Perytions are the souls of men who died far from the protection of the gods. . . .

[T]hey have been come upon as they were feeding upon dry earth; . . . they fly in flocks and have been seen at high altitudes near the Pillars of Hercules.

They are fearsome enemies of mankind. It appears that if they can manage to kill a man, their shadow becomes once again that of their own body, and they attain the favor of the gods . . .

Those who crossed the seas with Scipio to conquer Carthage very nearly failed in their enterprise, for during the crossing a compact band of Perytions appeared, killing many of the sailors. . . . Although our weapons are powerless against the Perytion, the animal can kill but a single man.

They wallow in the blood of their victim and then fly off into the heavens.

In Ravenna, where they were seen not a few years ago, it is said that their feathers are sky-blue, a fact which I find most surprising, for *I have read* that the plumage is of a very dark green.

Although the foregoing paragraphs are quite specific, it is a pity that no further trustworthy information concerning the Perytion has come down to our own day. Nor has the rabbi's pamphlet from which we have taken this description managed to survive. The document could be found, until the last world war, in the library of the University of Munich. Painful to tell, the document has now disappeared, whether by consequence of the



bombardment of that city or by the work of the Nazis it is impossible to say.

It is to be hoped that if this last surmise is the real cause of its disappearance, the document will in time be found again, and added to the treasures of one of the world's great libraries.

## The Phoenix

In monumental statuary, in pyramids of stone, and as mummies, the Egyptians sought eternal life; it seems only natural, then, that it should be Egypt where the myth of an immortal, periodic bird was born—though the later elaboration of the myth is the work of the Greeks and Romans. Erman writes that in the mythology of Heliopolis, the Phoenix (*benu*) is the lord of jubilees, long cycles of time; in a famous passage, Herodotus (II, 73) tells, with repeated incredulity, an early form of the legend:

Another bird also is sacred; it is called the Phoenix. I myself have never seen it, but only pictures of it; for the bird comes but seldom into Egypt, once in five hundred years, as the people of Heliopolis say. It is said that the Phoenix comes when his father dies. If the picture truly shows his size and appearance, his plumage is partly golden but mostly red. He is most like an eagle in shape and bigness. The Egyptians tell a tale of this bird's devices which I do not believe. He comes, they say, from Arabia bringing his father the Sun's temple enclosed in myrrh, and there buries him. His manner of bringing is this: first he moulds an egg of myrrh as heavy as he can carry, and when he has proved its weight by lifting it he then hollows out the egg and puts his father in it, covering over with more myrrh the hollow in which the body lies; so the egg being with his father in it of the same weight as before, the Phoenix, after enclosing him, carries him to

the temple of the Sun in Egypt. Such is the tale of what is done by this bird.

Some five hundred years later, Tacitus and Pliny took up this marvelous story once again; Tacitus quite properly observed that antiquity is obscure, but that tradition had established the Phoenix's life span at 1,461 years (*Annals*, VI, 28). Pliny, too, researched the chronology of the Phoenix; he tells us (X, 2) that according to Manilius it lives for the space of one Platonic year, the great year or *annum magnum*. This is the time required by the sun, the moon, and the five planets to return to their original positions; Tacitus, in his *Dialogues*, claims that this "great revolution" takes 12,994 ordinary years to complete. The ancients believed that when this astronomical cycle was accomplished, universal history would be repeated down to the last detail, since the influence of the planets would be repeated: the Phoenix would, in that case, be a mirror or image of the universe. An even more precise analogy may be found in the philosophy of the Stoics, who taught that the universe dies in fire and is reborn from fire and that just as the process had no beginning, so it shall have no end.

Time has simplified the mechanism by which the Phoenix is born. Herodotus mentions an egg; Pliny, a "little worm" or maggot; but by the end of the sixth century a poem by Claudianus celebrates an immortal bird that rises again from its ashes—its own heir and a witness to the ages.

Few myths have been so widespread as that of the Phoenix. To the names of those authors already mentioned we might add Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, XV), Dante (*Inferno*, XXIV), Shakespeare (*Henry VIII*, V.4), Pellicer (*The Phoenix and Its Natural History*), Quevedo (*Parnaso español*, VI), Milton (*Samson*

*Agonistes*). We might also mention the Latin poem "*De Ave Phoenix*," attributed to Lactantius, and a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon imitation of that poem. Tertullian, St. Ambrose, and Cirilus of Jerusalem have cited the Phoenix as proof of the resurrection of the flesh. Pliny mocks those physicians who prescribe remedies extracted from the nest and ashes of the Phoenix.

## The Chinese Phoenix

The religious texts of the Chinese are often somewhat disappointing, for they lack the note of pathos which we have grown to expect from our own Bible. Then suddenly, in the midst of a rational passage, we come upon a moment of moving intimacy. This, for example, comes from the seventh book of Confucius's *Analects*:

The Master said, "How I have gone downhill! It has been such a long time since I dreamt of the Duke of Chou."

And this, from the ninth book:

The Master said, "The Phoenix does not appear nor does the River offer up its Chart. I am done for."

We are told by the commentators that the "Chart" (or sometimes "Sign") referred to in this passage is an inscription written on the back of a magic tortoise. As for the Phoenix (*Feng*), it is a bird whose plumage is of shimmering colors similar to the pheasant's or the peacock's. In prehistoric times, it would visit the gardens and palaces of virtuous emperors, the visible proof of celestial favor. The male, which had three legs, lived in the sun.

In the first century of the Christian era, the bold atheist Wang Ch'ung denied that the Phoenix was of a distinct species. He said that just as a serpent could change into a fish, and a rat change into a tortoise, and just as the stag, in times of general prosperity, was transformed into a unicorn, so the goose took the form of the Phoenix. He attributed this mutation to the "propri-

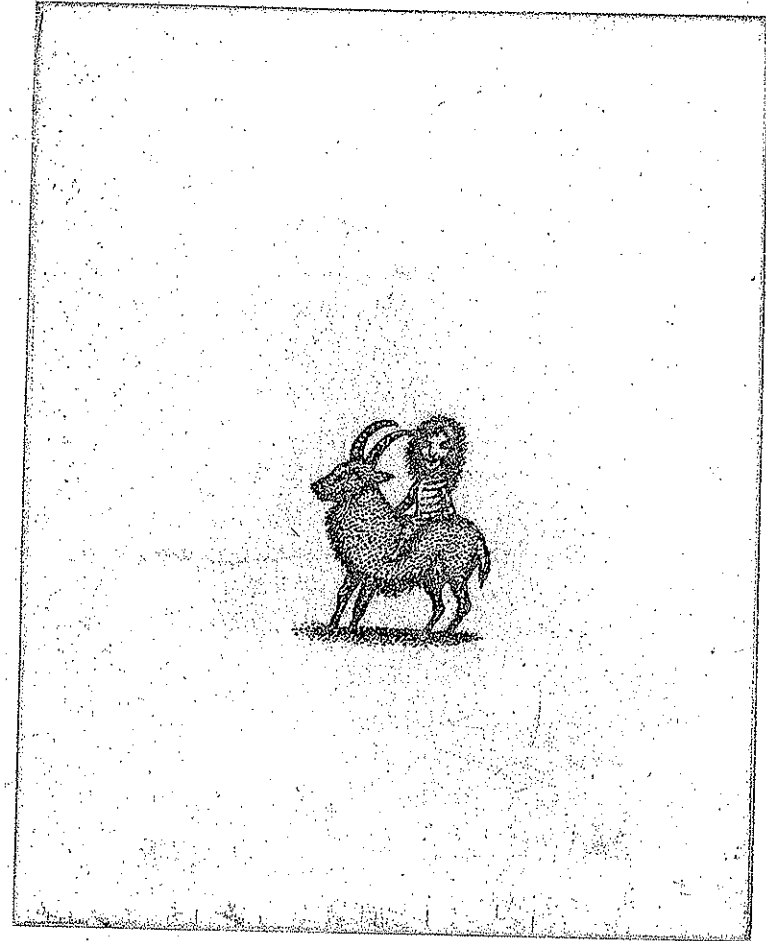
tious liquid" which, 2,356 years before the Christian era, had made the garden of Yao, one of the exemplary emperors, grow vermilion grass. As one can see, Wang Ch'ung's information was faulty—or rather, excessive.

In the underworld there is an imaginary building called the Tower of the Phoenix.

## Pygmies

The ancients believed that this race of dwarflike individuals (twenty-seven inches tall, Pliny tells us), lived within the borders of Hindustan or Ethiopia. Certain authors claim that they built their dwellings out of eggshells; others, such as Aristotle, have written that they lived under the ground, in caves. To harvest their wheat, they were said to arm themselves with axes, as though they were going forth to cut down a forest. They rode lambs and goats of a size befitting them. Each year they would be invaded by flocks of cranes that came from the steppes of Russia.

"Pygmy" was also the name of a deity whose face the Carthaginians carved on the prows of their warships, in order to terrify their enemies.



## Quyata

There is an Islamic myth that speaks of the "Kuyootà" (as Lane transcribes its name): "a huge bull with four thousand eyes, and the same number of ears, noses, mouths, tongues, and feet; between every two of which was a distance of five hundred years' journey." Just as Quyata stands on the back of the fish Bahamut, on its back there stands a rock of ruby, on the rock an angel, and on the angel our own earth.

## Remora

In Latin, "*remora*" is "delay." And that is the true intention of the word that was figuratively applied to the *Echeneis*, because it was said to hold ships stock still in their course. The process was inverted in Spanish: "*rémorea*" is first the marine animal and only metaphorically the obstacle. The Remora is an ash-colored sea creature; on its ventral side, at its head, it has an oval disk whose cartilaginous ridges attach like a large suction cup to other sea animals. Pliny (IX, 41 [25]) tells us of its powers:

There is a very small fish that is in the habit of living among the rocks, and is known as the *Echeneis*. It is believed that when this has attached itself to the keel of a ship its progress is impeded, and that it is from this circumstance that it takes its name. For this reason, also, it has a disgraceful repute, as being employed in love philtres, and for the purpose of retarding judgments and legal proceedings—evil properties, which are only compensated by a single merit that it possesses—it is good for staying fluxes of the womb in pregnant women, and preserves the foetus up to birth: it is never used, however, for food. Aristotle is of opinion that this fish has feet, so strong is the resemblance, by reason of the form and position of the fins. . . . Trebius Niger says that this fish is a foot in length, five fingers in thickness, and that it can retard the course of vessels; besides which, it has another peculiar property—when preserved in salt, and applied, it is able to draw up gold which has fallen into a well, however deep it may happen to be.

It is curious to see how the idea of stopping ships came to be that of slowing lawsuits and aiding pregnancies.

In another place, Pliny tells us that the Remora decided the fate of the Roman Empire:

At the battle of Actium, it is said, a fish of this kind stopped the praetorian ship of Antonius in its course, at the moment he was hastening from his ship to encourage and exhort his men. . . . [And in] our own time, too, one of these fish arrested the ship of the Emperor Caius [Caligula] in its course, when he was returning from As-tura to Antium.

"Winds may blow," Pliny says, "and storms may rage, and yet the Echeneis controls their fury, restrains their mighty force, and bids ships stand still in their career; a result which no cables, no anchors, from their ponderousness quite incapable of being weighed, could ever have produced!"

"It is not always the greatest might that conquers," Diego de Saavedra Fajardo repeats, in his *Empresas políticas*, "when the course of a ship may be halted by the small Remora."

## A Reptile Dreamed by C. S. Lewis

Slowly, shakily, with unnatural and inhuman movements a human form, scarlet in the firelight, crawled out on to the floor of the cave. It was the Un-man, of course: dragging its broken leg and with its lower jaw sagging open like that of a corpse, it raised itself to a standing position. And then, close behind it, something else came up out of the hole. First came what looked like branches of trees, and then seven or eight spots of light, irregularly grouped like a constellation. Then a tubular mass which reflected the red glow as if it were polished. His heart gave a great leap as the branches suddenly resolved themselves into long wiry feelers and the dotted lights became the many eyes of a shell-helmeted head and the mass that followed it was revealed as a large roughly cylindrical body. Horrible things followed—angular, many jointed legs, and presently, when he thought the whole body was in sight, a second body came following it and after that a third. The thing was in three parts, united only by a kind of wasp's waist structure—three parts that did not seem to be truly aligned and made it look as if it had been trodden on—a huge, many legged, quivering deformity, standing just behind the Un-man so that the horrible shadows of both danced in enormous and united menace on the wall of rock behind them.

—C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*

## Sylphs

For each of the four roots or elements into which the Greeks divided matter there was a corresponding spirit. In the work of Paracelsus, the sixteenth-century Swiss alchemist and physician, we find four elementary spirits: the Gnomes of earth, the Nymphs of water, the Salamanders of fire, and the Sylphs or Sylphides of air. These words are of Greek origin. Littré has sought the etymology of "sylph" in the Celtic tongues, but it is most unlikely that Paracelsus would have known, or even suspected the existence of, those languages.

Today, no one believes in Sylphs, but the phrase "a sylphlike figure" is still applied to slender women, as a somewhat clichéd compliment. The Sylphs occupy a place between that of material beings and that of immaterial beings. Romantic poetry and the ballet find them useful.

## Talos

Living creatures made of stone or metal constitute an alarming species within fantastic zoology. We might recall the fire-breathing bronze bulls that Jason, with the aid of Medea's magic, yoked to the plow; Condillac's statue of sentient marble endowed with a human psyche; and, in the *Thousand Nights and a Night*, the man of gleaming metal, wearing a leaden plate upon his breast inscribed with mystic signs and talismans, who rescued and then abandoned the third Kalandar when the Kalandar toppled the brass horseman that stood atop the Lodestone Mountain. Other such creatures are the "girls of mild silver, or of furious gold" that a goddess in the mythology of William Blake snared in nets of silk for a man; the metallic birds that were the nursemaids of Ares; and Talos, who guarded the isle of Crete.\* Some declare Talos to be the work of Vulcan or of Dædalus; Apollonius of Rhodes, in the *Argonautica*, says that he was the last survivor of the Race of Brass.

Three times each day Talos circled Crete, hurling boulders at those who attempted to disembark. Heated red hot, he embraced men and killed them. His only vulnerable spot was his heel; instructed by the sorceress Medea, Castor and Pollux—the Dioscuri—slew him.

\*To this catalog we might add a draft animal: the swift wild boar Guillinbursti, whose name means "he of the golden sows," and which was also called Slidrugtanni, "he of the dangerous tusks." "This living creature of ironwork," writes the mythologist Paul Herrmann, "emerged from the forge of the skillful dwarves, who threw into the fire a pigskin and withdrew a golden boar, able to run on land, in water, and through the air. However dark the night may be, there is always sufficient light in that place where the golden boar is found." Guillinbursti pulls the chariot of Freyr, the Norse god of generation and fertility.



## The T'ao-T'ieh

The existence of this creature is unknown to poets and mythology alike, but all of us, at one time or another, have come upon it, in the corner of a capital or the center of a frieze, and have felt a slight shudder of revulsion. Orthrus, the dog that guarded the cattle of the three-bodied Geryon (and that Hercules quickly dispatched), had two heads and one body; the T'ao T'ieh inverts this image, and is even more horrible, for its huge head is attached to one body on the right and another on the left. It generally has six legs, since its forelegs serve both bodies. Its head may be that of a dragon, a tiger, or a person; historians of art call it the "ogre-mask." It is a monster of form, inspired by the devil of symmetry in the imagination of sculptors, potters, and ceramicists. Fourteen hundred years before the Christian era, during the Shang dynasty, it already figured on ritual bronzes.

"T'ao-T'ieh" means "glutton." The Chinese paint it on porcelain in order to "warn against self-indulgence."

## Thermal Beings

The visionary theosophist Rudolf Steiner experienced a revelation through which he learned that this planet, before it became the Earth that we know, passed through three stages, or incarnations: the first was that of Saturn, then that of the Sun, and then that of the Moon. The human being is, at the present time, composed of four members: the physical body, the life body (or ethereal body), the astral body, and the ego; at the beginning of the Saturn stage of evolution it was a physical body alone. But this body was neither visible nor tangible, since at that time there were neither solids nor liquids nor gases on the earth; there was a state "only of 'heat.'"—Thermal Forms. Various colors defined the regular and irregular forms that inhabited cosmic space; each man, each being, was an organism whose "matter" was changing temperatures. According to Steiner, the human beings of the Saturn era were a deaf and dumb and impalpable complex of articulated colds and heats. His *Geheimwissenschaft im Umriß* ("Outline of the Occult Sciences") tells us that "for the researcher, heat is only a substance still finer than gas." Before the Sun stage of evolution, archangels, or spirits of fire, animated the bodies of these "human beings," who began to shine and glow.

Did Rudolf Steiner dream these things? Did he dream them because they had actually occurred, far back in the depths of time? One thing we do know—they are much more awe-inspiring than the demiurges and serpents and bulls of other cosmogonies.

## The Unicorn

The first and last versions of the Unicorn are virtually identical. Four centuries before the Christian era, the Greek author Ctesias, physician to Artaxerxes Mnemon, reported that in the kingdoms of Hindustan there were extremely swift wild asses, with white skin, a purple head, blue eyes, and a sharp horn on the forehead; the base of this horn, Ctesias tells us, was white, its tip was red, and in the middle it was thoroughly black. Pliny (VIII, 31) gives yet more detail:

The Orsæan Indians hunt down . . . a very fierce animal called the Monoceros, which has the head of the stag, the feet of the elephant, and the tail of the boar, while the rest of the body is like that of the horse; it makes a deep lowing noise, and has a single black horn, which projects from the middle of its forehead, two cubits in length. This animal, it is said, cannot be taken alive.

In 1892 the Orientalist Schrader posited that the Unicorn might have been suggested to the Greeks by certain Persian bas reliefs portraying bulls in profile, so that only one horn was shown.

In the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (composed in the early seventh century), we read that a blow from the horn of the Unicorn can kill an elephant; this recalls the analogous victory of the Karkadan (rhinoceros) in the second voyage of Sindbad.\* An-

\*Sindbad tells us that the rhinoceros's horn, "when cleft in twain, is the likeness of a man"; Al-Qazwini says it is the figure of a man on horseback, and others mention birds and fishes.

other of the Unicorn's adversaries was the lion, and one of the nine-line "Spenserians" in the second book of that tangled allegory *The Faërie Queene* has preserved the way a battle between those two noble creatures might be fought: The lion would stand in front of a tree; the Unicorn, head lowered, charges; the lion steps aside, and the Unicorn's horn sticks in the tree trunk. This description dates from the sixteenth century; at the beginning of the eighteenth, the union between England and Scotland would pit the English Leopard (or Lion) against the Scottish Unicorn on the kingdoms' coats of arms.

In the Middle Ages, bestiaries taught that the Unicorn might be captured by a virgin; in the *Physiologus Græcus*, we read the following: "He can be trapped by the following strategem: A virgin girl is led to where he lurks, and there she is sent off by herself into the wood. He soon leaps into her lap when he sees her, and embraces her, and hence he gets caught." A medallion by Pisanello and many famous tapestries illustrate this victory, whose allegorical applications are familiar to us all. The Holy Spirit, Christ, mercury, and evil have been symbolized at one time or another by the Unicorn. Jung's treatise *Psychologie und Alchemie* (Zurich, 1944) records and analyzes these symbols.

A little white horse with the forelegs of an antelope, the beard of a goat, and a long twisted horn on its forehead is today the most common image of this fantastic animal.

Leonardo da Vinci attributes the Unicorn's capture to the beast's "lack of temperance" and "the delight that it has for young maidens"; that aspect of its nature makes it "forget its ferocity and wildness" and lie in the lap of the maiden, and thus it is captured by hunters.

## The Chinese Unicorn

The Chinese Unicorn, or K'i-Lin, is one of the four animals of good omen; the others are the Dragon, the Phoenix, and the Tortoise. The Unicorn is the foremost of the four-legged animals; it has the body of a Kiun (or deer), the tail of an ox, and the hoofs of a horse; the horn that grows from its forehead is fleshy. Its back is of five mingled colors; its underside is brown or yellow. It will not tread upon green grass or do harm to any creature. Its appearance is said to be auspicious, and to augur the birth of a virtuous ruler. It is bad luck to wound it or to find the body of a dead K'i-Lin. Its natural lifespan is a thousand years.

When Confucius' mother was carrying him within her womb, the spirits of the five planets brought her an animal "with the shape of a cow, the scales of a dragon, and a horn in its forehead." That is one version of the annunciation; a variant collected by Legge says that the animal came of its own accord and spat out a jade plaque on which were written the following words:

*Son of the mountain crystal [that is, the essence of water],  
when the dynasty has fallen, thou shalt rule like a king  
without royal insignias.*

Some seventy years later, hunters killed a K'i-Lin whose horn still bore a piece of the ribbon that Confucius' mother had tied there. Confucius went to see it, and he wept, for he sensed what the death of that innocent, mysterious animal meant and also because within that ribbon lay the past.

In the thirteenth century, Marco Polo tells us, Genghis Khan waged a campaign against India, and accompanying him was the celebrated minister Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai. In the Kara Dagh region the expedition met a creature "like a deer, with a head like that of a horse, one horn on its forehead, and green hair on its body." The creature addressed the guards, saying, "It is time for your master to return to his own land." When the Great Khan consulted Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai, the minister replied: "That creature is the Chio-tuan (a variety of the K'i-Lin). It appears as a sign that bloodshed is needless at present. For four years the great army has been warring in Western regions. Heaven, which has a horror of bloodshed, gives warning through the Chio-tuan." The emperor thereupon desisted from his bellicose designs.

Twenty-two centuries before the Christian era, one of the judges of the emperor Shun possessed a "one-horned goat" that "knew the innocent from the guilty. It would butt the guilty with its single horn, but refused to attack those wrongly accused."

In his *Anthologie raisonnée de la littérature chinoise* (1948), Margouliès includes this calm yet mysterious fable, from the pen of a ninth-century author:

It is universally acknowledged that the Unicorn is a supernatural creature of good omen; thus declare the odes, the annals, the biographies of worthy men, and other texts whose authority is beyond question. Even the women of the villages and young children know that the Unicorn is a favorable sign. But this animal does not figure among the domestic animals, nor may one find it in the world; nor does its shape lend itself to classification. It is not like the horse or the bull, the dog or the pig, the wolf or

the deer. In such circumstances, even if one stood in the presence of a Unicorn, it would be hard to be certain that it is one. We know that a certain animal with a mane is a horse and that a certain animal with horns is a bull. We know the appearances of dogs, pigs, wolves, and deer. We do not know the shape of the Unicorn.

## Valkyries

In the primitive Germanic tongues, "valkyrie" means "she who chooses the dead." An Anglo-Saxon spell against muscle pain describes such a creature, without naming her directly, in the following way:

Resonant were they, yea, resonant, when riding on high,  
And resolute, when they rode over the earth,  
Powerful women.

We cannot be certain how the peoples of Germany or Austria conceived them; in Scandinavian mythology they are beautiful, armed virgins. They were generally thought to be three in number.

The Valkyries chose those who had died in combat and carried their souls up to Odin's epic paradise, where the roof was of gold and illumination came from swords, not lamps. Beginning at dawn, the warriors of that paradise would battle until they died, when they would come to life again and sit down at the banquet of the gods, where they would be served the flesh of an immortal boar and inexhaustible horns of mead.

Under the growing influence of Christianity, the reputation of the Valkyries declined; a judge in medieval England ordered a woman accused of being a Valkyrie—a witch, that is—burned.