## Fantasy and Science Fiction: A Writer’s View

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One more essay shouldn’t strain the reader’s stamina, though I hasten to add that I’ve a standing order with my tutelary deities to spare me the fading writer’s trip of trying to sum everything up. It’s just a little talk that I gave when keynoting the Seventh Annual Eaton Conference on Fantasy and Science Fiction at the University of California at Riverside, in 1985, where I was treated well; and I thought it might make a decent endpiece.

I have often wondered whether I am a science fiction writer dreaming I am a fantasy writer, or the other way around. Most of my science fiction contains some element of fantasy, and vice versa. I suppose that this could be annoying to purists of both persuasions, who may feel that I am spoiling an otherwise acceptable science fiction story with the inclusion of the unexplained, or that I am violating the purity of a fantasy by causing its wonders to conform to too rational a set of strictures.

There may be some truth in this, so the least I can do is try to tell you why I operate this way, what this seeming hybrid nature of much of my work means to me and how I see this meaning as applying to the area at large.

My first independent reading as a schoolboy involved mythology—in large quantities. It was not until later that I discovered folk tales, fairy tales, fantastic voyages. And it was not until considerably later—at age eleven—that I read my first science fiction story.

It actually did not occur to me until recently that this course of reading pretty much paralleled the development of the area. First came fantasy, with its roots in early religious systems—mythology—and epical literature. Watered-down versions of these materials survived the rise of Christianity in the form of legends, folklore, fairy tales, and some incorporated the Christian elements as well. Later came the fantastic voyages, the Utopias. Then, finally, with the industrial revolution, scientific justifications were substituted for the supernatural by Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells. I had actually read things in the proper chronological order.

I feel now that this colored my entire approach to the use of the fabulous in literature. The earliest writings of the fantasy sort involved considerable speculation from a small and shaky factual base. A lot of guesswork and supernatural justifications for events came into play. I accepted these things as a child would—uncritically—my only reading criterion being whether I enjoyed a story. About the time I discovered science fiction I was somewhere near the threshold of reflection. I began to appreciate the value of reason. I even began to enjoy reading about science. In a way, I guess, I was a case of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny.

I have never gotten away from a fondness for all of these forms—I suppose because my thinking has been touched by all of them. Emotionally, I find it difficult to draw distinctions between science fiction and fantasy because I feel them to be different areas of a continuum— the same ingredients but different proportions. Intellectually, however, I understand that if the fabulous elements involve the supernatural, or are simply unexplained in terms of an intelligent person’s understanding of how natural laws operate, then that particular story should be considered a fantasy.

If the fabulous should be explained, or indicated to be explainable in terms of the present state of human knowledge or theory—or some extension thereof—I can see how a story of this sort can be considered to be science fiction.

When I write, though, I generally do not think in terms of such facile compartmentalizations. I feel that fiction should mirror life and that its modus is that classical act of mimesis, the imitation of an action. I concede that it is a distorting mirror we use in science fiction and fantasy; nevertheless, it should represent in some fashion everything which is placed before it. The peculiar virtue of a distorting mirror is its ability to lay special emphasis upon those features of consensus reality which the writer wishes to accent—a thing which in many ways places what we do close to satire, in the classical sense—making the science fiction and fantasy worlds special ways of talking about the present world. Another is the particularly wide range of characters this practice permits me to explore.

Not only do I not like to think of my stories in terms of separate science fiction and fantasy categories, but I feel that for me it would actually be harmful in terms of the creative act to drive such a wedge into my view of the continuum. According to John Pfeiffer, author of The Human Brain, “There is an entire universe packed inside your skull, a compact model of your surroundings based on all the experiences you have accumulated during the course of a lifetime.” Of necessity such a model is limited by the range of one’s perceptions and the nature of one’s experiences.

Thus, the world about which I write, the world to which I hold up my distorting mirror, is not the real world in any ultimate sense. It is only my limited, personal image of the real world. Therefore, though I have tried hard to make my version of reality as complete a model as possible, there are gaps, dark areas which exist in testimony to my ignorance of various matters. We all possess these dark areas, somewhere, because we have not world enough nor time to take in everything. These are a part of the human condition—Jung’s shadows, if you like; unfilled addresses in our personal databases, if you prefer.

What has this to do with the fabulous—with fantasy and science fiction? My feelings are that science fiction, with its rational, quasi-documentable approach to existence, springs from the well-lighted, well-regulated areas of our private universes, whereas fantasy, in the tradition of its historical origins, has its roots in the dark areas. Somewhere, I already hear voices raised in objection to my implication that fantasy springs from ignorance and science fiction from enlightenment. In a way it is true, and in a way it is not. To quote Edith Hamilton, “There has probably not been a better educated generation than the one that ushered in the end of Athens.” Yet it was these same highly rational Greeks who passed classical mythology along to us, in its most powerful, sophisticated forms, while providing material for early chapters in world history books.

Fantasy may take its premises from the unknown, but what it does with them immediately thereafter is subject them to the same rational processes used by any storyteller in the working out of a tale. The story itself then unfolds in a perfectly clear-cut fashion.

I am not saying that the dark areas represent things which are ultimately unknowable, but only that these are representations of the unknown within the minds of individual authors—from the nameless horrors of Lovecraft to the mental processes of Larry Niven’s Puppeteers. I doubt that any two authors’ world models coincide exactly. And I feel that the generalization and representation of these clouds of unknowing in literature are a basis for fantasy.

I wish to take things one step further, however. I can hardly deny the effectiveness of a good story which is purely fantasy nor of another which is purely science fiction, in terms of the distinctions as I see them. As I said earlier, I tend not to think of such distinctions at all while I am working. When I am writing a story of some length, my personal sense of aesthetics usually causes me to strive for closure, to go for the full picture, to give at least a nod to everything I regard in that version of reality. As a consequence, my stories reflect the dark areas as well as the light ones; they contain a few ambiguous or unexplained matters along with a majority of things which follow the rules. In other words, I tend to mix my fantasy and my science fiction. Looked at one way, what I write is, I suppose, science fantasy—a bastard genre, according to some thinking on the matter. I am not sure what that makes me.

I followed this pattern in my first book— This Immortal —by leaving certain things unexplained and open to multiple interpretations. I did it again in my second book— The Dream Master —only there the dark areas were in the human psyche itself rather than in events. It was present in the Peian religion and its effects on my narrator, Francis Sandow, in the otherwise science fiction novel Isle of the Dead. In Lord of Light, I wrote a book where events could be taken either as science fiction or as fantasy with but a slight shifting of accent. And so on, up through my recent novel, Eye of Cat, where the final quarter of the book may be taken either as fantasy or as hallucination, according to one’s taste in such matters. I write that way because I must, because a small part of me that wishes to remain honest while telling the calculated lies of fiction feels obliged to indicate in this manner that I do not know everything, and that my ignorance, too, must somehow be manifested in the universes which I create.

I was wondering recently where this placed me within the general context of American incarnations of the fabulous. I began reviewing their history with this in mind, and I was struck by a serendipitous insight into our relationship to the grand scheme of things.

We did it backwards.

American fantastic literature began the pulp magazines of the late 1920s. From that time on through the 1930s it was heavily indebted to other sorts of adventure tales. We can regard this as a kind of £/r-science fiction, whence rose the impetus which has carried all of the rest.

What happened, then, in the 1940s? This was the time of the “hard” science fiction story, the time of the sort of story referred to by Kingsley Amis as having the “idea as hero.” Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein in particular exemplify this period when the idea, derived from science, dominated the narrative. At initial regard, it should not seem strange that our science fiction entered its first recognizable period with what was the latest phase in the historical development of fantastic literature—that technologically oriented form of the fabulous narrative which had to await the appropriate development of the sciences. But what happened next?

In the 1950s, with the collapse of many of the science fiction magazines and the migration of science fiction to the paperback and hardcover book markets, along with the freedom from magazine restrictions thus obtained, came a shifting of concerns to the sociological and political areas. The idea was still hero, but the ideas were no longer derived exclusively from the physical sciences. I think of Edward Bellamy and of Fred Pohl. I think of Thomas More and of Mack Reynolds. I think of Nietzsche and of some of Freud’s character studies (which I can only classify as fantasies) and I think of Philip Jose Farmer. Looking back even further to the pastoral genre I also think of Ray Bradbury and of Clifford Simak.

Moving—ahead, I suppose—to the experimental work of the 1960s, I recall the Carmina Burana, the troubadours, the minnesingers, the lyrical literature of self of an even earlier period.

And the 1970s? We saw a resurgence of fantasy—fat-volumed trilogies detailing marvelous exploits of gods, warriors, and wizards—a thing which is with us still, and which in recent years, as with Tolkien, has taken on the overtones of ersatz scripture.

American fabulous literature appears to have recapi-talated phytogeny in reverse. We worked at it steadily and have finally made it back to the mythic beginning—which is where I came in. I have a strange sense of deja vu, of my lost past recaptured, on reading much of the current material in the area.

Such are the joys, you might say, of being able to select my own examples. True. I can point to numerous exceptions to every generalization I’ve made. Yet I feel there is something to what I have said or I would not have sketched this tendency in even this wavery impressionistic outline.

So where do we go from here? I see three possibilities and a whimsical vision: We can drop back into the Ur-and write adventure stories with just the fabulous trappings—which is the direction Hollywood seems to have taken. Or we can turn around now and work our way forward again, catching up with H. G. Wells sometime around the turn of the century. Or we can fall back upon our experience and strive for a synthesis—a form of science fiction which combines good storytelling with the technological sensitivity of the forties, the sociological concerns of the fifties, and the attention to better writing and improved characterization which came out of the sixties.

Those, I say, are three possibilities. A less likely avenue might be to do the latter and also to incorporate the experience of the ancient 1970s, when fantasy reached what may have been its greatest peak in this century. That is, to use all of the above with a dash of darkness here and there, to add to the flavor without overpowering the principal ingredients, to manipulate our fancies through a range of rationality and bafflement—in that our imagination needs both to fuel it, and a fullness of expression requires the acknowledgment of chaos and darkness opposed by the sum of our knowledge and the more successful traditions of thought to which we are heir.

I feel that it is this opposition which generates the tensions and conflicts of the human mind and heart implicit in all particularly good writing, secondary to the narrative line itself but essential if that nebulous quality known as tone is to sound with veracity in the search for mimetic verisimilitude. This quality, I feel, is present in the best writing in any genre—or in no genre at all, for labels are only a matter of convenience, and subject to revision by manufacturers or college catalog editors. One must, of course, feel strongly about such matters when attempting to recast the field in one’s own image, for one would hate to dim the vision of those hard, gemlike authorial virtues of narcissism and arrogance.

Will science fiction and fantasy go this way? Partly, it depends on who is writing it—and to the extent that I see many talented newcomers in the area, I am heartened. The most gifted writers seem to be the ones who care the least what you call one of these things we are talking about, other than a story. Their main concern is how effectively a tale has been told. The area itself, like life, will go through the usual cycles of fads, periodic overemphasis of a certain sort of theme or character—as well as fat books, thin books, and trilogies. The best stories will be remembered years later. What they may be like, I can’t really say. I’m not in the prediction business.