5

The Great Schism

If indeed Utopia is a "socio-economic subset of Science Fiction",[1] the new and unexpected terminological conflict pits it against what is today generically identified as "fantasy", which has indeed a far older historical lineage than Science Fiction itself (conventionally assigned an inaugural date of 1895 – Wells' *Time Machine* – if not 1818 – Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*). Whether legitimately or not, the scientific pretensions of SF lend the Utopian genre an epistemological gravity that any kinship with generic fantasy is bound to undermine and seriously to unravel: associations with Plato or Marx are more dignified credentials for the Utopian text than fantastic trips to the moon in Lucian or Cyrano. It would seem, therefore, that we need to pause for a brief detour through this new generic debate, first addressing the structural differences to be established between SF and fantasy, before touching on the relevance of the latter for Utopianism and Utopian construction.

In recent years, to be sure, the competition between SF and fantasy – which has evolved largely to the benefit of the latter, especially among younger readers of innumerable multi-volume series – has seemed to take on overtones of that bitter opposition between high and mass culture crucial to the self-definition of high modernism but far less significant in its postmodern avatar. Not only do the sales of fantasy lists far outweigh those of a diminished "serious" SF, but the latter now has a specialized following that can scarcely be compared to the readership developed by Tolkien (posthumously) or Harry Potter (very actual indeed). The increasing number of films drawn from the work of Philip K. Dick have not particularly encouraged a reevaluation of this major American literary figure (particularly since even the greatest of these adaptations, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* [1982], offers an elegant futuristic melancholy very much at odds with its literary source, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* [1966]). But even a mass public would not seem to warrant extended comparisons between the current fantasy best-sellers and the Utopian craze inspired by Bellamy's *Looking Backward*; as for

[1] See Introduction, note 8.

Morris, along with Le Guin one of the few practitioners of both Utopia and fantasy alike, his Utopian achievement is not particularly enhanced by a commitment to medieval fantasy or romance which tends to refocus *News from Nowhere* as idyll or pastoral.

Fantasy has indeed, as a genre, stronger affinities with medieval content than with such Renaissance forms; and this will indeed be one of the topics to be explored in what follows, particularly in the light of the medieval currents that continue to inform More's *Utopia*. But I will also want to address two other structural characteristics of fantasy which contrast sharply with SF and can also serve as *differentiae specificae* for this genre, namely the organization of fantasy around the ethical binary of good and evil, and the fundamental role it assigns to magic.

We will return to magic in a moment. As for ethics, however, it would not seem particularly necessary, after Nietzsche, to argue its regressiveness; but perhaps Nietzsche's point is only reinforced by the perpetual necessity of doing so.[2] He himself sought to strike at the heart of Christianity by demonstrating the aggressivity inherent in the latter's imperative of charity: not only does doing good to others secure their gratitude and thus my power over them, but in Nietzsche's larger historical vision neighborly love disarms the strong and inaugurates the new religion of the weak. More recently, Sartre analyzed the function of the ethical binary itself as a way of securing the centrality of the self and its ideologies and literally marginalizing the other, who becomes the locus of evil; Foucault elaborated this view into an investigation of the policing operations inherent in the opposition of good and evil, and the institutionalization of the norm over the abnormal and the exception. But perhaps the remarks of Freud quoted in the preceding chapter are enough to underscore the essentially infantile spirit of an opposition between heroes and villains which reconfirms the narcissistic perspective of the self on other people and other realities.

Medieval material, as well as a Christian (or even Anglican) nostalgia particularly pronounced in Tolkien and his fellow-travelers as well as in the Harry Potter series, must first be radically distinguished from the historicisms at work in the SF tradition, which turn on a formal framework determined by concepts of the mode of production rather than those of religion: a work like Keith Roberts' remarkable *Pavane* (1968), in which the triumph of the Spanish Armada secures England for an essentially medieval Catholic domination well up into chronologically modern times, cannot be said to express any nostalgia for this alternate history any more than the cognate *Hard to Be a God* (1964)

2 Terry Eagleton objects to this positions (see *After Theory* [New York, 2003] pp. 142–145), but rather than engaging in debates about "human nature", I would prefer to point to the disastrous results of ethical politics, such as those of the Second International (or even the American New Left in the 1960s). See also, on ethics, the positions of Fourier (Part Two, Essay 1, below).

of the Strugatsky Brothers (and indeed most such "alternate histories", from the steam punk of books like Gibson and Sterling's *The Difference Engine* [1990] to Aldiss' *Helliconia* trilogy [1982], Brunner's *Crucible of Time* [1983], or Kim Stanley Robinson's *Years of Rice and Salt* [2002], still owe allegiance to Enlightenment values).[3]

Nonetheless what I would characterize as a mode-of-production aesthetic shares with the historicism of fantasy a well-nigh visceral sense of the chemical deficiencies of our own present, for which both offer imaginary compensations, albeit of very different types. The various SF historicisms – galactic Roman empires, Orientalist fantasmagorias, samurai worlds, medieval-corporate Foundations – stand on an equal footing with images of this or that fantastic future; and, whatever their more fantastic details, such as the spice worms of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), reinforce components of an essentially historical situation, rather than serving as vehicles for the fantasies of power. Herbert's remarkable ecological construction, indeed, offers a revealing textual contrast to related fantasy worlds of the "sword-and-sorcery" type. Even the tell-tale figure of the redeemer–savior, common to much other 1960s SF such as Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961),[4] stands as a symptom of that historical era and as the expression of a sense of impending well-nigh Utopian change, rather than as a figure from the stock formulaic cast of fantasy characters, where, as with Georges Dumézil's Indo-European separation of functions, the warrior-hero tends to be radically dissociated from the magician-priest (whom we will examine in a moment). Meanwhile postmodern SF, and in particular Bruce Sterling's cyberpunk, shows a seemingly insatiable appetite for historicist visions of other modes of production, a phenomenon no doubt related to that postmodern genre I have elsewhere

3 The work of the Strugatsky Brothers, the major writers of the recent Soviet SF tradition, will be examined in Chapter 6, below: *Hard to Be a God* teaches the historical lesson on non-intervention from a Marxist perspective, in which the altruistic attempt to intervene in the evolution of the modes of production and to humanize a feudal system of great brutality catapults the latter beyond capitalism into fascism. William Gibson (1948–) and Bruce Sterling (1954–) are generally acknowledged to be the founders of so-called cyberpunk: see Part Two, Essay 11 below. Brian Aldiss (1925–) is one of the most considerable figures in the British SF tradition (his first novel, *Starship* [1958] is discussed in Part Two, Essay 2, below); The Helliconia trilogy stages an immensely ambitious history of another planet and the evolution of its civilization across a more than two-thousand-year-long Great Year. He is also the author of an important history of SF (*The Billion Year Spree*, New York, 1973: rewritten in 1986 as *The Trillion Year Spree*). The British novelist John Brunner (1934–1995) left a large and mixed body of SF work, including a tetralogy of four massive and influential dystopian novels: *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), *The Jagged Edge* (1969), *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975). On Robinson's novel, see Chapter 1, note 11, above.

4 When asked who was the greatest French poet, André Gide famously replied, "Victor Hugo, alas"; an answer to the question about the greatest American SF writer would have to identify Robert A. Heinlein (1907–1988) in much the same way. But see H. Bruce Franklin's excellent *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction* (New York, 1980); and see also on Heinlein Part Two, Essays 2 and 7, below.

called nostalgia film.[5] But this SF avidly searches out the entrepreneurial features of past and future, and, whether neo-conservative or not, is certainly not technically reactionary in the spirit of fantasy.

The latter indeed breathes a purer and more conventional medieval atmosphere, and dreams this non-historical vision along certain sharply articulated lines, from religion to village life, from superstition and legends all the way to the great struggles between the nobility and the peasantry. It is more appropriate to identify these strata as castes rather than as classes (in the modern industrial-capitalist sense), inasmuch as they are characterized by a sense of physical and mental difference analogous to (but not identical with) the modern racialisms. Indeed, one of the signal features that differentiate caste from modern notions of race and class lies in the distinctive culture attributed to each of these structural populations of feudalism. That the hegemonic caste should generate its own aesthetic is scarcely surprising, although the death-oriented haughtiness of the medieval aristocracy, with its samurai cult of honor and masculinity, is obviously very different from the spirit of a later bourgeois dominant culture. But it is in the culture of the peasantry that we find the most original features of medieval life, particularly when compared with the exhaustion and alienated lives of modern factory workers, to whom socialism (and later on, mass culture) must first bring culture from the outside. Peasant culture, however, constitutes a fundamental negation and repudiation of its aristocratic masters, with its Brechtian slyness and "cowardice", its mutism and attachment to the Taoist rhythms of nature, its secret homage to the primordial trickster figure.[6] The opposition between these two caste aesthetics indeed cuts right across religion itself, where the wealth of the church and its princes and sumptuous rituals, its tortured god and its obsession with sin and judgment, stand in sharp contrast to the survival of the older nature cults among the peasantry, along with the joyous poverty of the Franciscan order, and the plebeian revelry of the festivals and the great pilgrimages. Each of these cultures then projects its own unique forms and genres, and the *chanson de geste* expresses the ethos of the feudal barons as dramatically as the fairy tale expresses the hopes and beliefs of the peasants. Medieval culture-material then offers a mixture of these aesthetic voices and practices: the omnipresence of the binary opposition between good and evil and the sense of radical otherness already informing the first crusades and the hatred of Islam coexisting with the plebeian Christianity of the villages and their egalitarianism.

In modern fantasy, however, these incompatible cultural styles are combined in an unexpected way: thus in Tolkien a village nostalgia is deployed in order to authorize a baleful, more properly aristocratic vision of the epic

5 See, for example, my *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London/Durham, NC, 1991), pp. 287, 369.

6 See my *Brecht and Method* (London, 1998), pp. 136–140.

battle of Good and Evil quite inconsistent with the aesthetic of the peasant fairy tale. Meanwhile the antagonistic religious ideologies of the Middle Ages are here harmoniously combined into a contemporary anti-Enlightenment spiritualism which speaks across the spectrum to those dissatisfied with modernity, from know-nothing American fundamentalisms all the way to the higher-toned Anglican reactionaries. It is also worth mentioning the ahistorical nature of these ethical preoccupations, inasmuch as it would seem to be the absence of any sense of history that most sharply differentiates fantasy from Science Fiction and must also be factored into any systematic comparison with Utopian form. Still, a displacement from politics to ethics and an essentially non-historical perspective on social life are surely not sufficient to distinguish the inner logic of modern fantasy as a genre or mode from any number of other contemporary literary forms (very much including those of high literature or high culture). Nor is the peculiar religious framework itself formally distinctive until we enlarge our conception of religious ideology to include what official religion has always denounced and rejected, namely the practice of magic as such, whose figural meaning we now need to address.

As for medieval religion itself, however, it is important to understand the unique conceptual resources of medieval theology, which lie not so much in any particular piety as in its structure as a remarkably sophisticated form of what Lévi-Strauss called *pensée sauvage*, in its primitive forms a kind of purely perceptual knowledge developed in the absence of abstract or properly philosophical concepts and conceptualities. Medieval theology, like tribal thought, is figural rather than conceptual; but unlike myth it is an extraordinarily elaborated and articulated system of thought, developed after the emergence of classical philosophy as such and in full awareness of the latter's conceptual and linguistic subtleties and of the richness of its problematics. Theology thus constitutes a repository of figuration and figural speculation whose dynamics were not recovered until modern times, with psychoanalysis and *Ideologiekritik*. But it is important not to confuse this remarkable language experiment with religion as such, and better to focus on its fundamental mechanisms, rather than on any alleged subjective content such as faith or belief.

Those mechanisms are summed up by the word *allegory*, which, as enigmatic as it may be, must always offer the central challenge of any attempt to go to the heart of the medieval. But allegory is already implicit in the very conception of *pensée sauvage*, which even in the thinking of Lévi-Strauss' Indians posits the intellectual prestidigitation of individual items promoted to their own generic idea or universal, such that they become classes of themselves. Allegory foregrounds this strange process by way of a unique autoreferentiality or self-designation in which a text's language necessarily acts its content out, and uses itself to articulate the inexpressible. Let Adrian Leverkühn's musical setting from *Paradiso* illustrate this complex process in a succinct and graphic way:

Thus in the piece which especially took me, and Kretschmar too had called very good, where the poet in the light of the planet Venus sees the smaller lights – they are the spirits of the blessed – some more quickly, the others more slowly, "according to the kind of their regard of God" drawing their circles, and compares this to the sparks that one distinguishes in the flame, the *voices* that one distinguishes in the song "when the one twines round the other". I was surprised and enchanted at the reproduction of the sparks in the fire, of the entwining voices.[7]

E come in fiamma favilla si vede,
e come in voce voce si discerne,
quand' una è ferma e altra va e riede,
vid' io in essa luce alter lucerne
muoversi in giro più e men correnti,
al modo, credo, di lor viste interne.
Di fredda nube non disceser venti,
o visibili o no, tanto festini,
che non paressero impediti e lenti
a chi avesse quei lumi divini
veduti a noi venir, lasciando il giro
pria cominciato in li alti Serafini;
e dentro a quei che più innanzi appariro
sonava "*Osanna*" sì, che unque poi
di rïudir non fui sanza disiro.

Paradiso, VIII

And as we see a spark within a flame, and as a voice within a voice is distinguished when one holds the note and another comes and goes, I saw within that light other lamps moving in a circle more and less swift according to the measure, I believe, of their internal sight. From a cold cloud winds, whether visible or not, never descended so swiftly that they would not seem impeded and slow to one who had seen those divine lights come to us, leaving the circling first begun among the high Seraphim; and within those that appeared most in front *Hosanna* sounded in such wise that never since have I been without the desire to hear it again.[8]

Here already a kind of Utopian body is projected as the senses swap places, lights doing double duty for sounds and then vice versa: this is the very element of allegory, whose *pensée sauvage*, divested of abstractions, must use

7 Thomas Mann, *Dr Faustus* (New York, 1948 [1947]), p. 162.
8 Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* (Princeton, 1975: Singleton translation), Canto VIII, verses 16–30, pp. 82–85.

each singular perception to express the other, then appropriating the other in order to return on itself to shore up its own existence as representation. So it is that Adrian's music needs not add some third dimension to Dante's allegorical scheme but merely insert itself in the ceaseless exchange from tenor to vehicle.

And although I have minimized the theological content of this form, it can certainly be argued that it is the supreme non-representability of the godhead that furnishes the mystical text with its fundamental vocation and motivates allegory as an extreme structure of language itself.

It is precisely this allegorical dimension which is lacking in modern fantasy, whose medieval Imaginary seems to be primarily organized around the omnipresence of magic, itself enlisted in the pursuit of power by the great magicians in their reenactment of that cosmic struggle between Good and Evil which, as we have seen, expresses the aristocratic ideologies of the medieval aesthetic. Magic is indeed the more problematic component of generic "sword and sorcery", since the armed struggle as such is easily understood as a regression to the pre-technological era and an attempt to recreate the immediacy of a face-to-face conflict between individuals.

Magic on the other hand reawakens all the unsolved generic problems inherent in distinguishing fantasy from SF, and in particular in determining why any number of fantastic SF technologies, such as teleportation or time travel, superhuman computers, telepathy, or alien life forms, should be regarded any differently from magicians or dragons. Darko Suvin's influential conception of SF as "cognitive estrangement",[9] which emphasizes the commitment of the SF text to scientific reason, would seem to continue a long tradition of critical emphasis on verisimilitude from Aristotle on (who famously explained that history only describes what did happen, while "poetry" – in the larger sense – describes happenings probable or believable).[10] The role of cognition in SF thus initially deploys the certainties and speculations of a rational and secular scientific age: Suvin's innovative use of this concept presupposes that knowledge today – Marx's General Intellect[11] – includes the social, and that therefore the reception of SF ultimately includes the Utopian.

It is perhaps in the borderline phenomena that the distinction meets its crucial test: Jules Verne seems to face backwards and to sum up that whole tradition of fantastic machinery that passes through Cyrano on its way back to Lucian. Meanwhile in fantasy itself the dragon can be seen as the equivalent of the spaceship or of teleportation in SF. Yet as a living being the dragon is also able

9 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven, 1979), Chapter 1. We should not invoke Suvin's authority here without noting his negative judgments on fantasy as such: see "Considering the Sense of 'Fantasy' or 'Fantastic Fiction'", *Extrapolation* 44.3 (2000), pp. 209–247.

10 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451.

11 See Chapter 2, note 19 of this volume above.

to incarnate sheer otherness, so that its symbolic capacities well exceed those of inanimate machinery. Indeed, in Delany and Anne McCaffrey the ecstasy of dragons in flight rehearses intensities at the very limit of the human; in Le Guin the dragon's preternatural wisdom and knowledge, and its symbiotic relationship with humans, equally make it into a vehicle for transcending ordinary human possibilities.[12] In Science Fiction, however, the relationship to the spaceship as artificial intelligence (as most famously in *2001*) or to other kinds of bio-technology, such as the intelligent house,[13] is a relatively lateral development which only becomes central to the genre with the thematics of robots (Asimov), androids (Philip K. Dick), and later cyborgs (Donna Haraway). But these are machines that have already become Others, and have been promoted into something like a new and distinct, alternate, species to the human.

Nonetheless fantasy remains generically wedded to nature and to the organism; and in that effacing of boundaries at work in current ideas of the posthuman, the tug of war between organism and machine increasingly inclines to the preponderance of the latter, in genetic engineering and in the promotion of biology over physics as the prototypical science. The reincorporation of organic material in the imagery of the cyborg or of intelligent computers, however, tends to transform the organic into a machine far more than it organicizes machinery. Thus, postmodern or cybernetic technology becomes if anything even more "unnatural" than the older heavy-industrial kind. This is the historical context in which fantasy and its ethical dynamics and magical powers can today be seen as a compensation for that continuing technological bias of Science Fiction which, although no longer mechanical in the spirit of its "golden age", nonetheless testifies to the omnipresence of a built environment, and indeed to the virtual abolition of a nature so oddly paired in modern fantasy with religion.

Nature thus seems to function here primarily as the sign of an imaginary regression to the past and to older pre-rational forms of thought. But we probably do not want to be caught in that "dialectic of Enlightenment" which Hegel already denounced as a vicious circle in *Phenomenology of Spirit*,[14] in which

12 Samuel R. Delany (1942–), one of the foremost practitioners (alongside his SF novels) of a very sophisticated fantasy indeed in his *Neveryon* series, and a considerable theorist of SF from a linguistic or "structuralist" point of view, is a central figure in what I will call a new "aesthetic" or perceptual stage of SF (see Chapter 7, below). Anne McCaffrey (1926–) is best known for her very successful dragon or Pern series, which is generally considered to be fantasy rather than SF. And on dragons more generally, see Susan Willis, "Le Guin's Dragons: Gender and Utopian Transformation", (lecture at the Summer Institute of Theory, University of Southern Maine, August 2002).

13 See China Miéville, "The Conspiracy of Architecture," in *Historical Materialism*, No. 2, Summer 1998; and also see the interesting special issue of the same journal on "radical fantasy" (Volume X, Issue 4 [2004]), in which an early draft of the present chapter appeared.

14 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford, 1977 [1807]), Chapter VI, subsection B-II, "Enlightenment".

Enlightenment rationality and religious irrationalism confront each other as mutually exclusive thought-modes one of which is historically called upon to disappear. The denunciation of religion (or medieval fantasy) as sheer mystification and obfuscation to be eliminated has as its dialectical consequence the limits of Enlightenment radicalism and its shallow affinities with rationalism and liberalism. Hegel, whose sympathies with the French Revolution were already profound and considerable, was also capable of proposing a historically original post-Enlightenment "solution" to the problem of religion and so-called irrationalism. The mistake of the Revolution, he argues, was to have insisted on the elimination of its cultural antithesis; and the result of this insistence was the Terror. Hegel's dialectic on the other hand suggests (it is a whole political program) that we need to go all the way through religion and come out the other side: absorbing all its positive features – it is after all in this period culture and desire, the very content of the premodern superstructure as such – in order to combine them with an Enlightenment impulse no longer menaced by reduction to instrumental reason and the narrower forms of bourgeois positivism. We might well want to look at the traditional (and irreconcilable) antithesis between SF and fantasy from the perspective of Hegel's lesson here.

But it is in fact in Feuerbach that we find an even more practical solution for our generic problems. For Feuerbach in many ways taught us how to set the Hegelian position in motion, how to make it over into a practical program for analysis and politics alike. Feuerbach, indeed, completes the Enlightenment view of religion as superstition (and an ideological bulwark of tyranny) by asking the complementary question about the source of religion's attraction and power. The conventional wisdom (famously replicated by Marx) which posits it as a "haven in a heartless world" still carries with it the implication of sheer deception and manipulation.

Feuerbach on the other hand had the ingenious idea of grasping religion as a projection: it is, he argued, a distorted vision of human productive powers, which has been exteriorized and reified into a force in its own right.[15] Divine power, of which the various theologies are so many abstractions and elaborations, is in fact unalienated human creativity which has then been re-alienated into an image or a figural form. In it labor and productivity, including human intelligence and imagination, the "general intellect" of humanity, have been hypostatized and subsequently appropriated and exploited like any other human product. We do not read Marx's great footnote – the *Theses on Feuerbach* – fully and correctly unless we appreciate the nature of this revolutionary

15 "In the religious systole man propels his own nature from himself, he throws himself outward; in the religious diastole he receives the rejected nature into his heart again" (Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* [Amherst, NY, 1989 (1841)], p. 31). This philosophically original doctrine of projection can then be seen as a precursor of Bloch's hermeneutic as well: "The deity is an idea the truth and reality of which is only happiness" (*The Essence of Religion* [Amherst, NY, 2004 (1851)].

analysis, which has immense implications for all cultural and superstructural analysis and not only that of religion.

In our present context, indeed, it has immediate consequences for our reception of that fundamental motif of fantasy which is magic as such. If SF is the exploration of all the constraints thrown up by history itself – the web of counterfinalities and anti-dialectics which human production has itself produced – then fantasy is the other side of the coin and a celebration of human creative power and freedom which becomes idealistic only by virtue of the omission of precisely those material and historical constraints. Magic, then, may be read, not as some facile plot device (which it no doubt becomes in the great bulk of mediocre fantasy production), but rather as a figure for the enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualization of everything latent and virtual in the stunted human organism of the present. Let Le Guin's extraordinary evocation of one specialized magical talent stand for this motif as a whole:

> The first sign of Otter's gift, when he was two or three years old, was his ability to go straight to anything lost, a dropped nail, a mislaid tool, as soon as he understood the word for it. And as a boy one of his dearest pleasures had been to go alone out into the countryside and wander along the lanes or over the hills, feeling through the soles of his bare feet and throughout his body the veins of water underground, the lodes of knots of ore, the lay and the interfolding of the kinds of rock and earth. It was as if he walked in a great building, seeing its passages and rooms, the descents to airy caverns, the glimmer of branched silver in the walls; and as he went on, it was as if his body became the body of earth, and he knew its arteries and organs and muscles as his own. This power had been a delight to him as a boy. He had never sought any use for it. It had been his secret.[16]

In such a passage the very nature of magic itself becomes a whole literary program of representation; and this is why the most consequent fantasy never simply deploys magic in the service of other narrative ends, but proposes a meditation on magic as such – on its capacities and its existential properties, on a kind of figural mapping of the active and productive subjectivity in its non-alienated state. By the same token, the approach to this power and its representation will generally not take the form of its plenitude or mature achievement (the aged wizards who compel awe and fear), but rather that of the *Bildungsroman*, in which (like the hero of *The Wizard of Earthsea*) the novice gradually comes to witness and guide the awakening of this peculiar talent.

But we may now, recalling Le Guin, go even further than this: for her fantasy novels put us on track of both our two still outstanding problems: the question

16 Ursula Le Guin, *Tales from Earthsea* (New York, 2001), pp. 13–14.

of history and the role of the ethical binary of good and evil. The Earthsea series in fact begins with the awakening of evil (in Ged's first misguided consultation of the spells, and developing through to its confrontation with the shadow, or evil, self at the end of that first volume) and ends with the attempt to resolve what has become a world-wide historical crisis, in the gradual disappearance of magical powers everywhere in Earthsea. Le Guin thus begins in ethics and ends up in history; and in a materialist history at that. For in its purely thematic form, the vision of an immense historical degradation and the end of the old world, the old society and the old ways, is everywhere apparent in fantasy (and in myth itself). Tolkien affords us the prototypical expression of this reactionary nostalgia for Christianity and the medieval world, and Le Guin starts out, like so many others, as his disciple. But her village paradigm, a nostalgic celebration of the societies of an older Native American mode of production, switches train tracks from the Church of England to the politics of imperialism.

Meanwhile, even her deployment of the paradigm of the struggle between Good and Evil becomes socialized and historicized by way of feminism. The patriarchal, in *Always Coming Home* (1985), is identified with the imperialistic (and see the great war novel *The Word for World Is Forest* [1972], unjustly neglected since the end of the Vietnam War). By the same process, the representational evolution of *The Wizard of Earthsea* pentalogy, from the evil "shadow" of the first volume to the truly chilling appearance of Jasper in *Tehanu* (1990) – a character in whom *ressentiment* and misogyny, class superiority and the dehumanizing will to vengeance, are memorably compounded – affords a vivid picture of submission to the other's magic as a paralyzing force, and truly resituates us in the concrete social world of alienation and class struggle, of subalternity and oppression. Le Guin thereby triumphantly demonstrates that fantasy can also have critical and even demystificatory power.

But we must also take into account the way in which history and historical change inscribe themselves in even the most ahistorical forms. Postmodernity, which names wholesale modifications in the life world, can also be expected to mark that merely imaginary reality which is the shape and function of magic in fantasy texts: perhaps, indeed, it is this deeper rhythm of history which Le Guin's own work, ostensibly registering the secularization and the literal *Entzauberung* of an older world by modernity, in fact detects and expresses.

But the more immediate shifts are to be identified in the paradigm shift in modern science itself from physics to the life sciences: a shift calculated to make problems for conventional SF representation and narrative. Indeed, it seems likely that today the complexities of biology and the genetic, indeed bio-power itself, offer a content and a raw material far more recalcitrant to plot formation than even Einsteinian cosmology and the undecideability of atomic sub-particles. Greg Bear's influential *Blood Music* (1983) can serve as a

useful chronological marker for this watershed, while I am probably not alone in finding the latest hard SF based on informational processes (even by so estimable a writer as Greg Egan) relatively unreadable.

The seemingly irrecuperable ascendancy of fantasy has in that case no little to do with the literary advantages offered by its new content in ecology and a now far more extensive exploration of the possibilities inherent in the human body; while so-called cyberpunk, for all its energies and qualities, can historically be interpreted as SF's doomed attempt at a counteroffensive, and a final effort to reconquer a readership alienated by the difficulties of contemporary science, increasingly hostile ideologically to the radicalism of more social SF (now generationally distanced by the youth culture), and frustrated by the diminishing production of new yet formulaic easy reading in the SF area.

Yet it would not be altogether correct to stage the opposition between SF and fantasy as a replay and variant of the more familiar modern antagonism between high and low or mass culture – or at least it is a position one can take only after registering the postmodern attenuation of these boundary lines, the *rapprochement* between high and low culture in the last decades, and the blurring of distinctive generic characteristics which characterizes postmodernity here as elsewhere. Not only are some of the best recent works and writers difficult to classify, but the disputes about what cannot be admitted into the SF canon have come to seem increasingly unproductive, even though the genre itself depends on them and is constituted by generic recognition (or its accompanying opposite number, generic undecidability). The work of Gene Wolfe (1931–), richly developing in the spaces between fantasy and SF, can perhaps serve as a central exhibit in these debates: for myself, I acknowledge its quality but feel a deep reluctance to abandon these generic distinctions. Perhaps the qualitative judgments that are so easy to make in SF are unavailable in so amorphous a world of discourse as fantasy.

This does not mean that distinctive contemporary fantasy texts cannot emit signals and vibrations which are comparable to those of the best SF and yet as different from it generically as they are from more traditional fantasy as such. The rising flood designed to submerge the Eastern seaboard in Michael Swanwick's remarkable *Stations of the Tide* (1991) is as "historical" an event as the waning of magic in Le Guin; but its deeper historical originality lies in the transposition of this entire simulated "Eastern seaboard" to an alien planet in the first place. As in Le Guin, Swanwick's novel constitutes a reflection on magic as such, on its powers and its nature; yet it opens a unique place for itself in a narrative play on the two distinct senses of this word, only one of which exists in the generic discourse of fantasy. That "literary" meaning, to be sure, designates the powers possessed by "real" magicians (where real designates the conventions of the genre). But in the real world (using the other sense of reality) a real magician is one who exercises a profession and performs specialty acts in venues ranging from children's birthday parties to circuses and

television spectacles. Swanwick's magician Gregorian – who had the makings of a villain as sinister and chilling as Le Guin's Jasper – effortlessly modulates between the two roles, as in the following performance:

> "The rainbird is a typical shapeshifter. When the living change comes over the Tidewater, when Ocean rises to drown half the continent, it adapts by transforming into a more appropriate configuration." Suddenly he plunged both hands deep into the bowl of water. The bird struggled wildly and disappeared ...
>
> When the water cleared, a multicolored fish was swimming in great agitation in the water ...[17]

Yet this seeming demonstration of the peculiar ontology of this planet with its dimorphic life forms turns out to have been sheer illusionism of the proverbial rabbit-and-hat variety, as Swanwick's next chapter reveals. The magical powers of Gregorian thereby become as ambiguous as those of Bergman's *The Magician* (1958) and no less troubling. But what in Bergman is a metaphysical hesitation about the supernatural itself (in something of a textbook illustration for Todorov's rather pedestrian theory of the fantastic) here becomes a narrative shell game and a postmodern play with generic frameworks that fade in and out of each other.[18] This movement produces an intricate alternation between Coleridge's familiar suspension of disbelief and some less familiar suspension of belief, in which the prosaic reality of the faker and illusionist fades in and out of the fantasy conventions and somehow covers them as well, in a virtuosity itself quite different from the way in which Dick motivates and secures his visions by drugs and/or schizophrenics.

This truly postmodern inventiveness is then confirmed by another feature of Swanwick's work which seems to have its SF affinities (in Van Vogt as well as in Dick), but which is also historically and generically very different from the openings onto other worlds they so often posit:

> The Bureaucrat was the last to leave. He stepped out into the hall of mirrors: walls and overhead trim echoing clean white infinity down a dwindling line of gilt-framed mirrors before curving to a vanishing point where patterned carpeting and textured ceiling became one. Thousands of people used the hall at any given instant, of course, popping in and out of the mirrors continually, but the Traffic Architecture Council saw no need for them to be made visible. The bureaucrat disagreed. Humans ought not go unmarked, he felt; at the very least the air should shimmer with their passage.
>
> All but weightless, he ran down the hall, scanning the images offered by the mirrors: A room like a black iron birdcage that hummed and sparked with

17 Michael Swanwick (1950–), *The Stations of the Tide* (New York, 1991, p. 17).

18 See Part Two, Essay 2, for an earlier conceptualization of such "generic discontinuities", which have here developed out into a play of simulacra.

> electricity. A forest glade where wild machines crouched over the carcass of a stag, tearing at the entrails. An empty plain dotted with broken statues swathed in white cloth, so that the features were smothered and softened – that was the one he wanted. The traffic director put it in front of him. He stepped through and into the antechamber of Technology Transfer. From there it was only a step into his office.[19]

Still, Dick's "motivations of the device"[20] alerted us to experiential analogies in the "real world" with their drugs and schizophrenic episodes; but here the analogies – walking down a bustling hallway (or an empty one) – seem rather secondary. Van Vogt's door, meanwhile, functioned as portals onto the mysteries of being of other worlds entirely:[21] something like tourism before the Second World War. That otherness is now the historical difference between Van Vogt and Swanwick, whose narrative merely offers a sampling of various landscapes, with one new wrinkle, namely that it is also a sampling of various temporalities. The old one is indeed put on hold after you enter another dimension of space, and you can live through entire conversations in time before picking up your older chronology again where you left off when you passed through that particular doorway.

That would already set Swanwick's narrative a notch above the mimesis of a purely filmic experience which is now the standard analogon or experiential equivalent for so much contemporary writing (and not only that of fantasy). We may well feel ethical qualms about the phenomenological basis of representations drawn not from our most authentic corporeal experiences but merely from their cinematographic expansion, by way of the image, into areas we have never ourselves physically frequented (even though that expansion is itself predicated on the memory of lived equivalences): but something surely changes when the mimesis of filmic experience becomes reflexive and thematized, itself the deeper subject of the text.

In any case, here the text unexpectedly designates itself by way of the representation, not merely of cinema, but of cinema's "special effects", and indeed of effects inconceivable for the cinema of Van Vogt's time. This is therefore neither modernist reflexivity nor the visionary metaphysics and spirituality vulgarly associated with fantasy, but either something entirely different: namely the mimesis of technology, and of a very specific historical moment of technology at that. (We are told, indeed, that the current development of special-effects technology can be dated from George Lucas' establishment of a *Star Wars* laboratory in 1977.) Swanwick's unique narrative is thus postmodern, not only in the way in which it represents the reality of the image, but also by

19 Swanwick, *Stations of the Tide*, p. 126
20 A Russian Formalist term and concept: see Viktor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* (1925).
21 See Part Two, Essay 6.

carrying within itself the very cybernetic technology which is the marker, if not the cause, of postmodernity in the first place. It thereby becomes more realistic, as a social document, than much of what purports to pass for a postmodern social realism; and, over against cyberpunk in SF, documents a claim of contemporary fantasy for its own unique mimetic possibilities.

In any case, the charm of the world of magic makes a more permanent claim of its own, as it persists in medieval romance, of which the Arthurian cycle is the fundamental expression. And like all the genres of modes of production different from our own – myth, tragedy, epic, Chinese lyric – it also offers that unique "Luft aus anderen Planeten", that air from other planets (which Stefan George evoked and which Schoenberg set to music), that signals some momentary release from the force of gravity of this one. So also our own genres – modernism in one way, SF in another – struggle desperately to escape our force field and the force of gravity of our historical moment. But romance – all the way from Chrétien to its most modern echoes in Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) or the *Lancelot* (1974) of Robert Bresson – retains the fascination of a magical transformation of human relations – conflict, violence, desire, sovereignty, bonding, love and vocation – all uniquely reconfigured under the central narrative category of the adventure. Yet the invocation of magic by modern fantasy cannot recapture this fascination, but is condemned by its form to retrace the history of magic's decay and fall, its disappearance from the disenchanted world of prose, the "entzauberte Welt", of capitalism and modern times. It is only at this point, when the world of magic becomes little more than nostalgia, that the Utopian wish can reappear in all its vulnerability and fragility. In Morris and Le Guin both there visibly reappears that mysterious bridge that leads from the historical disintegration of fantasy to the reinvention of the Novum, from a fallen world in which the magical powers of fantasy have become unrepresentable to a new space in which Utopia can itself be fantasized.