

# Fantasy, Imagination and History:

A Historiographical Study of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*  
and Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of the historical imagination in fantastic literature through the close examination of two exemplary works of modern fantasy and science fiction: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*. Building on an understanding of history which recognises the philosophical and fictional dimensions of the historical imagination, it develops close readings of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Book of the New Sun* as works of 'feigned history'. While the existing body of fantasy criticism privileges an understanding of secondary world creation (cosmogogenesis) as mythopoeisis, this thesis argues for a reading of fantastic cosmogogenesis in terms of the historical imagination and its expression. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, it is argued, expresses the historical consciousness associated with Romantic anti-modernity through the themes and forms of cultural history, while Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* reflects a more ambivalent approach to meaning, representation and historical understanding which may be traced to intellectual developments in the latter half of the twentieth century. Close studies of historical representation in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Book of the New Sun* reveal that, despite differences in approaches to language, meaning and historical representation, they share a common historiographical thread which is identified as cultural history in the Romantic historiographic tradition. As exemplary texts of twentieth-century imagination, they embody important features of historical consciousness in our time.

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# Introduction

## Imagined Histories

*The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself  
Affection or Love becomes a State, when divided from Imagination*

*The Memory is a State always; & the Reason is a State*

*Created to be Annihilated and a new Ratio created.*

- William Blake, 'Milton'.

For poet and philosopher William Blake, the imagination was not a state of being but a religion; it was not affection, or reason, or memory, or history – all of which are mutable and temporal – but supernatural and eternal. For R.G. Collingwood, historian and historiographer, the imagination belonged not to the realms of the supernatural and divine, but was the creative force which allows human beings to apprehend and communicate history.<sup>1</sup> For both the poet and the historian, imagination, like humanity, was strung between the worldly and the divine, the temporal and the eternal, the particular and the universal. It is these stresses that manifest the irresolvable duality at the heart of this thesis and are embodied in the philosophies and works of literature that are its subject.

Historical knowledge and writing at any time are not without their troublesome tensions, and the last few decades have been no exception. Longstanding disagreements between narrativist and empiricist philosophies of history surface in disputes over disciplinary boundaries and practice. There are, however, other dimensions to history which open the horizons of possibility in a field whose vision is at times obscured by the politics of past and present. Experience, imagination and expression are aspects of Clio that are easily overlooked in struggles over power, knowledge and meaning. These qualities are neglected not because they are insignificant to history and historical practice, but because they are elemental human qualities shared with the other muses that walk the halls of the humanities. Any discussion of imagination and expression in

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<sup>1</sup> See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 1946 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), esp. 245-249.

history necessarily enters the vast space where the muses and musings of language, literature and philosophy cross paths.

For historians, encounters with the past are often tinged with mourning. History is an aspect of human existence bound up with time, mortality and the irreducible alterity of the past; it is experienced as loss and expressed as lament. The past as it was is irrecoverable, and the gap of space and time that connects yet separates past from present is unbridgeable to experience. The imagination, however, promises the possibility of feeling, knowing and understanding the past.

This study takes imagination as its starting point. Imagination is one of the qualities that history shares with literature, and this shared territory constitutes a nexus of tension and uncertainty as well as creative possibility. The creative nexus is encumbered by understandings of history and literature which return, under the weight of tradition, to context and text, thereby limiting the possibility for understanding history in terms of linguistic, fictional and narrative forms. In tracing the intellectual developments that have shaped the field of history and, in particular, cultural history, it is possible to outline an approach to the study of literature which recognises the historical in the fictional not simply as particular knowledge, content or context, but as the expression, in fictional form, of the 'historical' as it is imagined. This understanding of history in terms of imagination and its expression allows for further exploration of the problems and possibilities of representing the 'historical' in literature.

The historical novel is the literary form in which history as imagination is most readily recognised and assessed. Like the novel itself, the historical novel is tied to the traditions of literary Realism. Their shared interest in the realities of human experience mean that history and literature find a common, if uncomfortable, meeting ground in the historical novel. The challenge that forms the primary impulse for this thesis is that of finding the forms of the historical imagination on considerably more perilous ground, in the realms of fantasy. Fantasy literature – also called fantastic literature, the literature of the imagination and the literature of the unreal – offers some of the greatest challenges and, at the same time, greatest possible rewards for the apprehension and expression of the historical imagination in literature.

The body of this work is comprised of an extended exploration of the ideas, language, symbols and structures of the historical imagination involved in the creation of the secondary worlds of fantastic literature through close textual studies of two such worlds: J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth and Gene Wolfe's Urth, developed in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Book of the New Sun* respectively. Both secondary worlds stand in ambivalent relation to the primary or real world: our own earth. One has been described as earth of the distant past and the other as earth of the far future. Neither world, however, finds its history in the history of our earth. Middle-earth and Urth are deeply historical worlds and their historicity is ultimately a product of Tolkien and Wolfe's shared ability to 'feign history';<sup>2</sup> that is, to give a fictional world history in its dual sense: the sense of a past and of human experience and the expression of being in time.

Section One of this thesis, consisting of three chapters, outlines the critical nexus of fantasy, literature and history which forms the constellation of ideas empowering exploration of the historical imagination in fantasy literature.

Chapter One considers the problematic yet productive nature of the relationship between history and literature. Developments in the humanities in recent decades appear to have melted into air the solid categories separating the fields, forms and concerns of history, literature, and related disciplines. These developments may seem novel, but are actually re-expressions of long-standing problems and concerns about the nature of history and literature revolving around several core themes: experience, knowledge, imagination and expression. Existing studies of the historical imagination and its elaboration in the historical novel lay the conceptual foundations for further exploration of the historical imagination in fantasy literature.

Chapter Two considers the position of fantasy within the broader field of literary studies. The relationship between fantasy and literature is, like the relationship between history and literature, characterised by confusion, complexity and occasional conflict. The existing body of fantasy criticism has engaged actively with broader intellectual developments within the field of literary studies and thereby established fantasy as a

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of 'feigned history' is drawn from the 'Foreword' of the 1966 edition to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Tolkien expresses dislike of allegory and preference for "history, real or feigned". 'Foreword,' in *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of 'The Lord of the Rings'* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 9.

vital, if relatively neglected, field of literary and cultural studies. Nonetheless, there remains a significant aspect of fantasy that has been largely overlooked by scholars of the fantastic: its historical imagination.

Chapter Three addresses the lack of critical attention to historiography in the field of fantasy studies. Not only are time, myth and history key concerns of fantastic literature, the history of modern fantasy itself reveals a deep affinity for historical consciousness that locates it in the Romantic tradition and, in particular, connects it to Romantic historicism. The historical imagination is an essential component of fantastic cosmogenesis: the creation of the secondary worlds of fantasy literature. Fantasy shares with Romantic historicism the desire to imagine, express and immerse readers in other worlds. While Romantic historicists sought imaginative access to the life-worlds of the past, fantasy authors seek to imagine and render secondary worlds. Both face similar problems of representation; that is, problems of expressing, in language, imagined otherness. There is thus productive overlap in the linguistic and rhetorical strategies of Romantic historiography and fantasy writing.

Section Two constitutes an extended exploration of ‘feigned history’ in J.R.R. Tolkien’s multi-volume work of high fantasy *The Lord of the Rings*. This text is not only the seminal work of modern fantasy, it is also a work of history that expresses an underlying historical philosophy at the same time as it demonstrates sensitivity to historiographic problems and concerns.

Chapter Four locates J.R.R. Tolkien, as a philologist and fantasist, within the traditions of Romantic anti-modernity and Romantic historicism. Recognising the significance of language and time to Tolkien’s worldview as the historiographic concerns of Romantic anti-modernity allows for a reading of *The Lord of the Rings* that builds upon and simultaneously reconciles the more divergent critical readings of one of the most significant literary works of the twentieth century. Tolkien’s Romantic historicism has specific implications for the apprehension and expression of the historical imagination in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Rather than reading the cosmogenesis of Middle-earth in terms of mythical imagination and mythopoeisis as is so often done, Chapter Five argues for an approach to Middle-



earth that recognises the Romantic historicist assumptions that informed Tolkien's 'Sub-creative Art'.<sup>3</sup> Tolkien's approach to myth is explored as a distinctly modern attitude that clearly distinguishes between mythical and historical consciousness. A closer study of the mythical places of Middle-earth reveals an approach that establishes Middle-earth as a historical rather than mythical world.

Chapter Six extends the reading of history in *The Lord of the Rings* developed in the previous chapter through an in-depth study of the forms of feigned history in the text. It focuses on the continuity of the past and historical consciousness in various cultural domains, in particular, language, landscape, and relics. Explorations of the stuff of cultures that manifest the places and peoples of Middle-earth reveals that Tolkien's approach to history shares much with ethno-history and aligns with philological and Romantic historicist traditions. Not only do the cultural histories of Middle-earth expose the assumptions underlying Tolkien's approach to the past and history, the text itself demonstrates critical historiographic awareness that draws attention to the problems of existing in and expressing history.

Section Three concerns Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, a second epic, multi-volume work in the traditions of the modern fantastic that is recognised as one of the foremost literary achievements in the field of modern science fiction. While Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is a work which shaped much genre fantasy to follow, Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* is a generic hybrid, incorporating and playing with the conventions and histories of both science fiction and fantasy.

Chapter Seven introduces the labyrinthine *Book of the New Sun* and its baroque Urth as words and worlds that have confounded scholars of modern fantasy. Wolfe's approach to writing and world creation is not easily located in a distinct philosophical or literary tradition. While the text creates more problems of interpretation than it solves, it nonetheless opens up possibilities for the expression of the historical imagination through the interplay of the thematic, philosophical and historical conventions of both science fiction and fantasy.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'Sub-creative Art' is drawn from J.R.R. Tolkien's 'On Fairy-stories,' in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), 11-70.

Chapter Eight explores the problems and potential of ‘feigned history’ on the scale and complexity required to create a far future world such as Urth. While existing interpretations of Wolfe’s text have emphasised the eternal and transcendent meanings to be found in *The Book of the New Sun*, the richness, intricacy and complexity of life on Urth empower a reading through the lens of cultural history. Exploring the stuff of Urth reveals an approach to the past which locates meaning, history and historical consciousness in cultural forms and practices at the same time as it interrogates the nature of culture itself.

Chapter Nine situates Wolfe’s self consciously meta-fictional and historiographic approach to writing and history in *The Book of the New Sun* in the post-historical milieu. Urth is at once a historical and post-historical world. Post-history returns us to the contemporary problems of thinking and practicing history that are explored in Chapter One. The idea of the post-historical amalgamates many of the challenges represented to historical understanding and practice by the period and philosophies commonly termed postmodern. *The Book of the New Sun* is as much a work of memory as it is of history. Wolfe’s text thus explores, even embraces, the challenges to the historical imagination represented by postmodernity and miraculously finds hope for both memory and history in the culture of amnesia after the end of history.

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Ann Rigney has commented that “writing history is an attempt to present as well as we can something that is ultimately ‘(un)presentable’”.<sup>4</sup> The problem of representability encompasses not simply the impossibility of presenting the past ‘as it actually was’ but also the inadequacies of language, narrative and discourse to give expression to the past as it is imagined. Similarly, one of the core problems of fantasy literature is ineffability. Fantasy attempts to approach through imagination and to communicate in conventional language unreal and unconventional subjects and experiences that have “traditionally stymied expressive attempts in our own world.”<sup>5</sup> A longing for the unfamiliar, the elusive and even the eternal is a sentiment that links fantasy and history. The promise of the imagination as a means of accessing and expressing these sentiments is also shared.

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<sup>4</sup> Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Branham, ‘Fantasy and Ineffability: Fiction at the Limits of Language,’ *Extrapolation* 24:3 (1983): 66.

In recognising the common desires of history and fantasy and exploring their literary forms, it is hoped that we might also find shared understandings and modes of expression. We may find new ways of recognising and communicating the wonders of the imagination and of history.

## Section I

### Encounters with Enchantment

#### Chapter 1 – History Encounters Literature

The journey through which history encounters fantasy literature is analogous to a step through a magic mirror. In finding fantasy, history discovers an alien world that is a reflection of its own and meets a stranger that is also its self. It is possible to understand the journey by dividing it into stages that trace encounters with ever increasing strangeness. As with any journey, its significance lies not in its beginning or end but in the metamorphosis of the self. The first encounter – with literature – has the quality of a meeting not with a stranger, but a rendezvous with a close friend or relative with whom the journey is to be shared. This shared journey transforms both history and literature and challenges their relationship. In observing history's encounter with literature and tracing their shared journey, a greater understanding of history may be achieved, an understanding that assists in the encounter with fantasy that is to follow.

During the closing decades of the twentieth century the discipline of history was drawn into a disordered space of theoretical and methodological turmoil. It experienced a merry-go-round of 'turns': linguistic, rhetorical, theoretical, historical and cultural; it was impaled upon a bewildering array of 'posts': postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-marxism, post-feminism, post-history; and it endured the emergence of a hybrid collection of interdisciplinary mutations: ethnohistory, cultural studies, cyberstudies. The contemporary intellectual climate of the humanities resembles a carnival (fun for some, terrifying for others) and the rides are not yet over. This carnival of theories is, of course, an appropriate response to our contemporary milieu. It dispenses irony, self-doubt and self-criticism in dialectical exchange with faith, hope and imagination; and it also vends new possibilities for both historical and literary studies.

Locating the nexus of history and literary studies within the carnival that is the contemporary intellectual domain is not a simple task. The problems and questions raised by this endeavour touch the very centres of enduring intellectual projects within

the humanities, exposing irreconcilable positions and illuminating elusive categories. Fundamental philosophical concerns – ontological, epistemological, phenomenological – are inevitably implicated in the queries ‘what is history?’ and ‘what is literature?’ All discussions of history, literature and their relationship consistently return to basic philosophical problems: what are the natures of the real and of representation of the real in human thoughts and actions? And what is the role of imagination and experience as mediators between the real and the ideal? Issues of reality and representation, imagination and experience lead directly into epistemological problems of understanding, knowledge and truth and thus to issues of politics, power and practice.

The relationship between history and literature is traditionally understood as an ancient and persistent association between two similar, yet essentially distinct discourses.<sup>6</sup> The genealogical metaphor of the muses, of sisterhood between history and literature, is used regularly to conceptualise their problematic relationship of similarity and difference as well as their identity as part of a larger family group, the humanities.<sup>7</sup> Robert Nye chooses an organic metaphor to characterise the relationship: “history and literature: branches of the same tree”.<sup>8</sup> The familial and organic metaphors are analogous, the latter describing a broader ‘tree’ of humanities in which history and literature form similar, yet discrete branches.

Despite the common metaphor of genealogical or organic connection, history and literature are also persistently located on either side of “the grand dichotomies of Western metaphysics”.<sup>9</sup> These divisions are ubiquitous in the Western philosophical tradition and serve the useful purpose of aiding general conceptualisation and categorisation. Their universalising nature and tendency towards fixity, however, means that thinkers work within them at the same time as struggling against them to express

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<sup>6</sup> For traditional understandings of the relationship between history and literature, see Russel B. Nye, ‘History and Literature: Branches of the Same Tree,’ in Robert Bremner, ed., *Essays on History and Literature* (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 1966), 123-163; Walter Laqueur, ‘Literature and the Historian,’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (1967): 5-14.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Laqueur, ‘Literature and the Historian’.

<sup>8</sup> Nye, ‘History and Literature’.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘History and Anthropology,’ *New Literary History* 21:2 (1990): 322. Here anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose works have had a significant impact on disciplines outside of anthropology, discusses the persistence of these dichotomies in contemporary intellectual debates in the humanities. Geertz argues that this dualistic conceptual paradigm is simply more trouble than it is worth.

the specificity and complexity of their ideas. The following list is abbreviated, but serves to illustrate the main dualities associated with the literature/history binary:

<b>Literature</b>	<b>History</b>
<i>mythos</i>	<i>logos</i>
Art	Science
Subjective	Objective
Fiction	Fact
Myth	History
Text	Context
Imagination	Reason
Dionysus	Apollo

The relationship between history and literature has been historicised, narrated and mythologised in forms that situate the identities of both in terms of some or all of these conceptual dichotomies. Family histories of the relationship commonly describe a ‘Golden Age’ in which the two sisters recognised their similarities. This picture of family harmony, however, descended into opposition and mutual distrust during the course of the nineteenth century. The sisters’ estrangement is associated with the rise of scientific or positivist history in the mid-nineteenth century, epitomised by Leopold von Ranke’s resolution to “tell [the past] as it was” and the concurrent institutionalisation of history and literature as distinct disciplines.<sup>10</sup> This sorry outcome is usually ascribed to history’s misguided aspirations to the objective epistemological status of the natural sciences. Previously identified with the rhetorical, narrative and artistic/creative modes of literature, history turned away from imagination and language toward empirical methods and epistemological theory. In the words of Leopold von Ranke:

I found by comparison that the truth as more interesting and beautiful than the romance. I turned away from [romance] and resolved to avoid all invention and imagination in my work and stick to the facts.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For examples of such ‘family histories’, see Lionel Gossman, ‘History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification,’ in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 3-39; Nye ‘History and Literature’; Hayden White, ‘The Fictions of Factual Representation,’ in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays on Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 122-124.

<sup>11</sup> George Gooch describes this quote as “one of the precious fragments dictated in [Ranke’s] old age. *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 74.

Linda Orr claims that this “epistemological break serves as a distinctive myth in modern historical writing”;<sup>12</sup> that is, it constitutes a moment in the story of history which marks a defining shift in the identity of the discipline.<sup>13</sup> The rise, in the late nineteenth century, of scientific or ‘modern’ history was the point at which history and literature staked their territory on opposing sides of the *logos/mythos* dichotomy and henceforth came to view each other with suspicion and distrust.

This tale, although an exciting family drama, oversimplifies the nature of both history and literature and misleads through omission. While these limited characterisations of the core protagonists aid in conceptualising their interaction, they do little justice to the more complex personalities of the two and thus to the close but troubled nature of their relationship. It is ultimately reductive to describe the modern definitions of history and literature as firmly institutionalised on opposing sides of a clearly established boundary. Closer investigation reveals that these definitions tend to place both forms in the middle-ground rather than at the extremes. Von Ranke’s ‘telling it as it was’ history, which fits pleasingly into the scientific, *logos* side of the binary, is not representative of the dominant, modern understanding of history and historical practice, nor was it the sole manifestation of historical understanding and practice even in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The modern understanding of history, often referred to as empiricist, traditional or ‘normal’ history,<sup>15</sup> while drawing on the distinction between *logos/mythos* and related dichotomies, actually places history in a bridging position that attempts to unify or communicate between these extremes. As Robert Berkhofer argues, the writing and theory of history, under the modern paradigm, attempted to unite the dual perspectives of art and science.<sup>16</sup> The historian as an intersection of opposites, as a mediator, communicator or connector, is a common metaphor. Nineteenth century

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Orr, ‘The Revenge of Literature: A History of History,’ *New Literary History* 18:1 (1986): 2.

<sup>13</sup> François Hartog describes the modern “regime of historicity” as one associated with progress, the future and a singular temporal trajectory: “In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they had organised their discipline as a science of the past, but this science in turn became teleological”. ‘Time, History and the Writing of History: the Order of Time,’ in Rolf Torstendahl and Irmline Veit-Brause eds., *History-Making: The Intellectual and Social Formation of a Discipline: Proceedings of an International Conference, Uppsala, September 1994* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets, historie och antikvitets akademien: Distributed by Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1996), 97.

<sup>14</sup> See, in particular, Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer uses the word ‘normal’. *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1995), *passim*.

<sup>16</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 11.

historian Thomas Macaulay exemplified this view, writing that history must enter the province of literature which

lies on the confines of two distinct territories. It is under the jurisdiction of two hostile powers, and like other districts similarly situated, it is ill defined, ill cultivated and ill regulated. Instead of being equally shared between its two rules, the Reason and the Imagination, it falls alternately under the sole and absolute dominion of each. It is sometimes fiction; it is sometimes theory.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, Elazar Barkan notes historians' awareness of "their need to adjudicate between fiction and reality".<sup>18</sup> Thus situated in the middle-ground, the position of history within the art/science dichotomy is unstable. Linda Orr uses the metaphor of self/other to describe the relationship of history to literature:

It is as if history awakens in the [late] 19<sup>th</sup> century, surprised and even horrified to see how closely it is coupled with fiction. It seeks thereafter to widen a difference within its very self, in order not to be engulfed by that other self – and the effect is to invent the modern definition of history.<sup>19</sup>

History's modern self has never fully differentiated its identity from that of its other (literature), because it awkwardly recognises this other as part of its self. The points of similarity between the two are also points of instability and tension, sites at which their separate identities threaten to dissolve into oneness.

Human experience, imagination, language and narrative form are the main sites of similarity and tension between history and literature. These are also the domains within which past and contemporary debates concerning the relationship between history and literature are centred. A number of writers identify the common subject of history and literature as human experience. According to Russell Nye, "the highest and most intimate relationship between literature and history (is) their concern with the relevance and meaning of experience".<sup>20</sup> For Nye, the imaginative evocation of the quality, or feel, of life is the fundamental similarity between history and literature: "both literature and history are records of internal and external experience. Both attempt to gain from

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'History,' *Edinburgh Review* (1828), in *Critical, Historical and Miscellaneous Essays and Poems* (Great Britain: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1852), 51.

<sup>18</sup> Elazar Barkan, 'History and Cultural Studies,' in R. Cohen and M. Roth, eds., *History and ...: History within the Human Sciences* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 365.

<sup>19</sup> Orr, 'Revenge of Literature,' 3.

<sup>20</sup> Nye, 'History and Literature,' 153.



experience some insight into the quality, mode, tempo and personality of life – not the fact of the past, but the feel of it.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Ivie Edward Cadenhead writes that “history and literature are both concerned with events, with human nature and emotions, with motives, with fears and hopes, and with the relevance of the total to both past time and present readers”.<sup>22</sup>

Nye continues: “history and literature, in perceiving the meanings of experience, are essentially imaginative; and that is the common factor that makes an art of both of them.”<sup>23</sup> Historians frequently recognise the role of the imagination in their practice.<sup>24</sup> It is the imagination that articulates (connects and expresses) human experience and, in history, also provides access to the past, guides in the selection and interpretation of evidence, and gives form to the past as story. Thus the historical imagination is both empathic, it is the ability to comprehend the experience of others, and creative, it gives narrative form and expression to that experience. According to R. G. Collingwood, whose formative ideas in the Anglo-Saxon historical tradition are set out in *The Idea of History*, it is the *a priori*, constructive imagination that allows the historian to re-think the past in his own mind.<sup>25</sup> Louis Mink notes that, following Collingwood, “historians very often testify that they find it useful or necessary to ‘relive’ or ‘recreate’ in imagination the events which they investigate”.<sup>26</sup> It is the imagination which allows the historian access to a past which cannot be known by purely empirical methods.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Collingwood suggests that the imagination gives the historian authority in processes of historical selection and construction.<sup>28</sup> Historians frequently acknowledge

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>22</sup> Ivie Edward Cadenhead Jr., ‘History and Literature: Introduction,’ in Ivie Edward Cadenhead Jr., ed., *Literature and History* (Tulsa: University of Tulsa Press, 1970), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Nye, ‘History and Literature,’ 154.

<sup>24</sup> With the exception of the most stubborn empiricists such as Geoffrey Elton, see *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 1946 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956). In particular consult the section on ‘the historical imagination’, 245-249.

<sup>26</sup> Louis Mink, ‘The Autonomy of Historical Understanding,’ in William H. Dray, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and History* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 187.

<sup>27</sup> Empirical here is defined as direct experience, whereby reality is accessed through the senses. See Roger G. Seamon, ‘Narrative Practice and the Theoretical Distinction between History and Fiction,’ *Genre* 16 (1983): 197-218.

<sup>28</sup> Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 245-249. Similarly, Macaulay suggests that the imagination is active in both historical research and writing: “a perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. Yet he must control it sufficiently as to content himself with the materials which he finds”. ‘History,’ 51. On the role of the imagination in history, see

the role played by the imagination in the processes of selection and interpretation; the facts, after all, do not speak for themselves.<sup>29</sup>

It is also the creative imagination, expressed through the use of language, which gives form and meaning to history. As Murray Krieger argues, “after all, it is the imagination – as a form-giving power – which must give history’s raw data their intelligible contours.”<sup>30</sup> Language is the primary instrument used for the communication of meaning in both history and literature. According to Nye, “the historian and the literary artist use language to express what they explain and conjecture, and they use it symbolically, to express more than words alone mean.”<sup>31</sup> Using the resources of the empathic and creative imagination and language, historians transform facts into meaningful stories about the past, giving their histories the linguistic and narrative qualities that they share with literature.

The problem, for historians, is that history thus described begins to appear indistinguishable from literature and might even be considered as simply another form of literary activity. Whilst many historians recognise that history and literature frequently use common imaginative, linguistic and narrative devices, that which ultimately distinguishes the stories of history from those of literature is the relationship of historical representation to the real. It is the real that is persistently returned to, even by writers who emphasise the essential similarities between history and literature, as the guarantor of difference between historical and literary texts. Warner Berthoff’s differentiation between history and fiction exemplifies this understanding. He argues that

Both, as modes of narrative, are composed. But in [history] the order of narrative is meant to reveal a pre-existent order of actuality; in [fiction], though the narrative may imitate some form of history, it is known from the first to be a particular writer’s invention.<sup>32</sup>

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also E.H. Carr, *What is History?* 1961 (London: Penguin, 1990), 21-22; Mark Weinstein, ‘The Creative Imagination in Fiction and History,’ *Genre* 9:3 (1976): 265.

<sup>29</sup> Carr, *What is History?* 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> Murray Krieger, ‘Fiction, History, and Empirical Reality,’ *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974): 345.

<sup>31</sup> Nye, ‘History and Literature,’ 139.

<sup>32</sup> Warner Berthoff, ‘Fiction, History, Myth: Notes towards the Discrimination of Narrative Forms,’ in Morton W. Bloomfield, ed., *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 272.

A philosophy of representational realism is fundamental to modern understandings of historical practice. In short, history, defined as the study and representation of the past, posits its object, the past, as real. Historians construct representations that refer to and correspond with an actual past. Berkhofer summarises this understanding: “In this view actuality is the foundation of historical knowledge, factuality is the goal of historical practice.”<sup>33</sup> Modern definitions of history are based on a differentiation between ‘history’ as ‘the past’ and ‘history’ as ‘discourse about the past’, where the former exists independently of the latter.<sup>34</sup> The past exists, it cannot be changed; historians may construct histories, but they do not construct the past. As Nye states, “The historian cannot move beyond his definition of history as past action; he is confined always by the past, and always by actuality.”<sup>35</sup> The existence and accessibility of the past as object/referent is the ultimate guarantor of the distinction between history and literature.

The particular representational problem of history is that its object – the past – can no longer be directly experienced. Evidence – material traces of the past in the present – is required to ensure that the historian’s access to the past is not purely imagined or invented. For E.H. Carr, the reciprocal relationship between present and past, between the historian and his facts, is fundamental to history.<sup>36</sup> This reciprocity is dependent on the existence of not only the past, but also facts and evidence as independent objects. Historians are accountable to the evidence, which serves as a limit on the imagination and as a source of verification. It is responsibility to data and evidence “which marks the point at which historical structure differs from poetic structure”.<sup>37</sup> Numerous historiographers reiterate this understanding. According to Nye, “while we require from both the historian and the literary artists this creative act of imagination, we demand of the historian additional tests of validity of his view of what things mean.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Mandelbaum argues that

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<sup>33</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 47. Note that for the Past to be ‘real’ it must also be singular: there can be only one Past.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Nye, ‘History and Literature,’ 145-146.

<sup>36</sup> Carr, *What is History?* 27-30.

<sup>37</sup> Krieger, ‘Fiction, History and Empirical Reality,’ 354.

<sup>38</sup> Nye, ‘History and Literature,’ 156.

it is surely the historian's task to discover facts and relations which are not already known to him and which are not invented by him. We expect historians to engage in research, to weigh alternative possibilities, and to marshal evidence in favour of one rather than another of these possibilities. As a consequence, in judging ... historiographical work we use standards other than standards of interest and intelligibility ... the primary basis on which we evaluate stories.<sup>39</sup>

These comments suggest that it is not purely the past itself, but demands, expectations and standards which are upheld by and act upon the historian. Ultimately, the contemporary agency of the past in a historian's work is mediated by others who share access to the past via evidence. History is a collective profession, a discipline. As Marwick asserts, "historians certainly do not operate as solitary geniuses; history progresses cumulatively."<sup>40</sup> Histories are commensurable: they can be compared and evaluated according to criteria that distinguish between different interpretations on the grounds of factuality and accuracy. Other historians act as sources of limitation, validation and evaluation for any individual historian, ensuring that imagination, interpretation and language do not lead him to misrepresent the reality of the past.

The writing of history is also considered to be a cumulative process. In Marwick's words, "historians add to, modify and correct what has been discovered by other historians."<sup>41</sup> While histories may take narrative form, the historian "is not engaged in an activity which is best represented by the model of telling a story" because, "typically, the person who tells a story will be inventing what he tells us ... he is not in any case engaged in an inquiry which aims to establish what in fact did occur."<sup>42</sup> If historical knowledge takes the form of a story, then it is, as Berkhofer suggests, a collectively and cumulatively produced Great Story that provides knowledge of an actual past.<sup>43</sup> Berthoff restates this fundamental distinction:

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<sup>39</sup> Maurice Mandelbaum, 'A Note on History as Narrative,' *History and Theory* 6 (1967): 414.

<sup>40</sup> Arthur Marwick, 'Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including 'Postmodernism') and the Historical,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995): 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Mandelbaum, 'A Note on History as Narrative,' 414.

<sup>43</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 64. Berkhofer uses 'Great Story' to explain the assumption underlying 'normal' historical practice that there exists a single Past, or Great Past, and thus a single grand narrative, meta-narrative or Great Story which corresponds to that Past. All histories assume and are embedded in the larger context of both the Great Past and Great Story. The Great Story is "a unified story framework that lies at the heart of normal history." (43)

*Fiction* is the body of synthetic and, in detail, idiosyncratic narrative of imagined events composed by identifiable authors. *History* is the body of synthetic and, in detail, self duplicating narratives describing events presumed to have actually occurred, and recovered by inquiry and assembled according to some cohering fiction (in the non narrative sense) of intelligibility.<sup>44</sup>

The distinctiveness of the historian's identity is thus couched in terms of collective duty and responsibility: to practice history is to conform to a series of normative values.<sup>45</sup> Here literature and history are divided by a binary separation which distinguishes between a collective project (history) and individual products (literary texts), two domains which Berkhofer describes as closed and incommensurable. This distinction, unfortunately, places literature in an untenable position at the same time as limiting historians' ability to discuss literary authors and works in historical terms. In short, literature defined as incommensurable stories written according to individual whim is not particularly amenable to historical analysis which posits the connectedness of human existence across space and time. The differentiation between history and literature as distinct cultural activities – one collective, the other individual – is thus problematic.

The problem for historians, then, remains: to define history in such a way as to establish boundaries which distinguish it from literature, a process which necessarily involves some understanding of history's literary other. The attitude adopted by historians towards literature is ambiguous, ranging from dismissive, to defensive, to inclusive. Ann Rigney identifies a common, uncritical stance: we know what literature is, it is just a matter of differentiating history from it.<sup>46</sup> The philosophy of history tends to place the discipline's other, literature, clearly on the *mythos* side of the grand *mythos/logos* binary. Issues of representation, realism, meaning, and knowledge in literature are rarely raised in historiographic discourse: literature is primarily imaginary, is based on fiction rather than reality and is not a form of knowledge.

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<sup>44</sup> Berthoff, 'Fiction, History, Myth,' 275 (Berthoff's italics).

<sup>45</sup> These group expectations make History, by definition, a culture, where culture is defined as human attitudes, values, conventions and norms of behaviour. *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, 2006, s.v. "culture".

<sup>46</sup> Ann Rigney, 'Semantic Slides: History and the Concept of Fiction,' in Rolf Torstendahl and Irmline Veit-Brause, eds., *History-Making: The Intellectual and Social Formation of a Discipline: Proceedings of an International Conference, Uppsala, September 1994* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets, Historie och Antikvitets Akademien: Distributed by Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1996), 31.

In the contemporary intellectual climate, however, this exclusionary strategy has proven untenable. The sites of similarity between literature and history have increasingly taken on the appearance of battlefields where historians construct ever higher barricades to defend the identity and distinctiveness of their besieged discipline. History continues to distinguish itself from literature by appeals to the existence of the past as real, to evidence as a source of limitation and verification, and to the discipline as a collective enterprise. The status of history in relation to literature, however, remains far from secure, as indicated by historians' anxious attempts to assert their difference and reconcile the empirical and creative aspects of their practice.

Indeed, some historiographers now argue that contemporary theories have undermined traditional certainties, collapsing the conceptual frameworks that have defined and differentiated history from literature.<sup>47</sup> These traditional certainties were, of course, never particularly certain; the sites of similarity and tension that have characterised the unstable relationship between history and literature since the nineteenth century – imagination, experience, language, narrative, interpretation, meaning and reality – have long occupied the centre of conceptual debates. Contemporary theories, however, place particular emphasis on questions of language, meaning and interpretation. John Teows notes that “the first result of this self reflexive activity appears to be a displacement of conventional distinctions and disputes into the new terms of meaning and language.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, a general shift has taken place which has “brought that peripheral blurred area between history and fiction close to the centre of contemporary historiographical debates”.<sup>49</sup> In their struggle to defend history, historians find themselves wandering in a dangerous realm of language and meaning where there is no distinction between science and art, fact and fiction, literature and history. Gabrielle Spiegel succinctly describes the situation in which historiographers and literary critics have found themselves: “I found

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<sup>47</sup> In particular, see Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990); Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*. I use ‘contemporary theories’ here to refer to intellectual developments in the European and Anglo-American worlds from the 1960s including structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language and meaning.

<sup>48</sup> John Teows, ‘Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,’ *American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 881.

<sup>49</sup> Carlo Ginsburg, ‘Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,’ *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 87.

– find – myself, therefore, mired in the middle ground, a bog of theoretical self-contradiction from which one emerges muddied, if not downright muddled.”<sup>50</sup>

For many historians, this quagmire has a name: postmodernism. Postmodernism is the term used broadly, and somewhat ambiguously, to describe a range of conceptual and theoretical developments and redevelopments within the humanities in the latter half of the twentieth century. Various labels – the linguistic, rhetorical or interpretive turn, these developments can be traced to continental European theory, in particular structuralism and post-structuralism. Postmodernism may also refer to the material, economic, and political conditions characteristic of late-capitalism or to the cultural and intellectual developments and products associated with these conditions.<sup>51</sup>

Postmodernism, regardless of its actual impact on historians and the writing of history, has maintained an obtrusive presence in historiographical discourse.<sup>52</sup> While history was besieged by the postmodern menace, literature appeared to suffer few ill effects; indeed, some historians consider literary critics to have been the source of history’s tribulations.<sup>53</sup> This is, of course, an overly defensive view, which fails to acknowledge

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<sup>50</sup> Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), xviii.

<sup>51</sup> See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>52</sup> See Elisabeth Deeds Ermath, *Sequel to History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994); Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*; Keith Jenkins, *On “What is History?”: From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996); Ewa Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 1998). Debates on postmodernism and history have been prominent in historical journals such as *History and Theory*, *Past and Present* and *Social History* since the 1980s. In particular see: Frank Ankersmit, ‘Historiography and Postmodernism,’ *History and Theory* 28 (1989): 137-53; Perez Zagorin, ‘Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations,’ *History and Theory* 29 (1990): 263-274; Frank Ankersmit, ‘Reply to Professor Zagorin,’ *History and Theory* 29 (1990): 263-296; Lawrence Stone, ‘History and Postmodernism,’ *Past and Present* 131 (1991): 217-218; Patrick Joyce, ‘History and Postmodernism,’ *Past and Present* 133 (1991): 204-13. Jane Caplan offers a summary guide to ‘postmodern’ theories for historians in ‘Postmodernism, Post-Structuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians,’ *Central European History* 22 (1989): 260-78. Marwick and Joyce represented opposing views on the impact of postmodernism on historical practice in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 2001: Arthur Marwick, ‘All Quiet on the Postmodern Front: The Return to Events in Historical Study,’ *TLS* (Feb. 23, 2001): 13-14; Patrick Joyce, ‘A Quiet Victory: The Growing Role of Postmodernism in History,’ *TLS* (Oct. 26, 2001): 15. While Marwick asserts that “in fact, at this very time, historians are turning back to events, deserting structures and ‘webs of meaning,’” (14) Joyce argues that postmodernism has in fact quietly won the ‘history wars’ and simply “become part of the conceptual furniture involved in doing the job [writing history]”. (15)

<sup>53</sup> See Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987); Elton, *Return to Essentials*; Stone ‘History and Postmodernism’; Arthur

that theories of language and meaning are not crimes committed against history by literary critics, but part of a discursive order which has been articulated and reproduced within history and literature by historians and literary critics alike.<sup>54</sup> Contemporary theories have thus impacted upon both literature and history, affecting their fragile relationship and replacing old certainties with new uncertainties and possibilities in both fields.

‘The linguistic turn’ describes the impact of several, related theoretical developments. For historians, the linguistic turn indicates a shift in focus from epistemological concerns (history as a form of knowledge) to formal literary concerns (history as a form of writing). These developments can be traced to the influence of the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, through Levi Strauss’ exploration of cultural structures as analogous to the structures of language, to the semiotics of Roland Barthes. The resultant post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories – in particular those of Foucault and Derrida – interrogate the composition and workings of signifying systems. In simple terms, post-structuralism, particularly deconstruction, denies the structural coherence of textual forms and seeks to reveal the heterogenities and internal tensions within texts that subvert their ostensible meanings.<sup>55</sup> In its approach to history, literature, philosophy and other discourses, post-structuralism tends to resist totalising and unifying systems of knowledge and power.<sup>56</sup>

Structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language, signification and textuality thus challenge many historians’ understandings of the status of reality and the nature of representation. These issues in the conceptualisation of reality, representation and knowledge are fundamental to the traditional definition and distinction between history and literature. According to both structuralist and post-structuralist theories, language

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Marwick ‘Two Approaches to Historical Study’; Keith Windshuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> Two of the empiricists’ main antagonists - Hayden White and Dominic LaCapra – are more aptly characterised as intellectual historians, see Lloyd S. Kramer, ‘Literature, Criticism and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra,’ in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1989), 98-99.

<sup>55</sup> For discussions of the impact of post-structuralist modes of criticism in historiography, see Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 10; Kramer, ‘Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination,’ 112; Teows, ‘Intellectual History’.

<sup>56</sup> Geoff Bennington and Robert Young, ‘Introduction: Posing the Question,’ in Geoff Bennington Robert and Young, eds., *Post-structuralism and the Question of History* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 9.



constitutes its objects, effectively creating reality. In the words of Roland Barthes, “the world of signs constitutes and calls into existence the world of things. Reality, in sum, is human; it is always that which we make signify, never a mere given.”<sup>57</sup> Language is not referential; the discourses of history and literature do not correspond, or refer to, any external, extra-linguistic reality.<sup>58</sup> The effect of structuralist and post-structuralist theories, therefore, is to replace questions of representational realism and correspondence with questions of form and meaning; as Barthes states, “language is a form, it cannot be either realistic or unrealistic”.<sup>59</sup>

Within structuralist theory, literary, historical, and other cultural texts are primarily understood as systems of linguistic signs; that is, texts are processes of signification which constitute, rather than reflect, a ‘reality’. Barthes describes the process by which historical (and other) texts represent through signification while purporting to refer to an extra-linguistic reality as a referential illusion or “realistic effect”.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, historians’ (and others’) claims to representational realism are deceptive and manipulative, as they conceal the process of signification through which they construct the past. Berkhofer explains that, “Like all other forms of realistic representation, historical realism tries to bridge or conceal the gap between its form and its subject, to give the illusion of reality through its form”.<sup>61</sup>

While most historians would accept that they construct histories, the charge that they create or invent the reality of the past is an entirely different matter. Structuralist linguistics appears to deny “the primary premise of the historical profession”:<sup>62</sup> the distinction between history as the past and history as writing about the past. A situation emerges where the dialectical conversation between “the historian and his facts”,<sup>63</sup> the latter implying the existence and accessibility of an independent past, collapses into

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<sup>57</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 57.

<sup>58</sup> Berkhofer refers to this argument in contemporary theory as ‘dereferentialism’. *Beyond the Great Story*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 136.

<sup>60</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Discourse of History,’ trans. Stephen Bann, *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981): 17. In this translation, the term “realistic effect” is used, rather than the more familiar “reality effect”.

<sup>61</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 58.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> One of E.H. Carr’s well known answers to the question “what is history?” is “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.” *What is History?* 30.

solipsism. According to these theories, the guarantors of (or at least the possibility of) representational realism – facts and evidence – are nothing more than linguistic constructs which the historian uses to create the illusion of the past. Berkhofer explains, “The problem with historical facts, as with histories themselves, is that they are constructions and interpretations of the past.”<sup>64</sup> Facts are always already encoded within systems of signification and therefore “the historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers”.<sup>65</sup>

The historian’s role as “collector and relater of signifiers” means that “the historian’s constructive and imaginative activity is involved in the very foundations of his work”.<sup>66</sup> According to Barthes, “historical discourse is, in its essence, a form of ideological elaboration, or, to put it more precisely, an *imaginary* elaboration.”<sup>67</sup> It is the historian’s imagination that determines the forms of the past. Krieger explains that “Imagination cannot help but see form in history’s causal sequence because its prior intercourse with fictions has conditioned it to perceive such forms.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, according to some critics, the historian’s imagination, as the product of a particular culture, is limited in the forms that it can perceive. Kramer notes that, “History, the discipline, confines the imagination within certain kinds of method and forms of writing.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Elazar Barkan argues that the high value that historians place on the non-fictional character of their work constrains creativity and limits the possibility of developing new forms of writing for new theoretical, methodological and cultural realities.<sup>70</sup> Thus, when compared to creative literature, historical writing appears limited in both imagination

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<sup>64</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 53. Berkhofer’s statement is akin to Hayden White’s assertion that “the distinction between facts and interpretation does not exist”. ‘Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination,’ in *Tropics of Discourse*, 107. See also Gossman, ‘History and Literature,’ 27.

<sup>65</sup> Barthes, ‘The Discourse of History,’ 16. Considerable confusion surrounds these ideas and mainly concerns the definitions of ‘facts’ and ‘evidence’. ‘Facts’, if taken to mean statements, assertions or utterances about the nature of reality are, indeed, human linguistic constructs and therefore the creation of human beings. This does not, however, imply that they negate the existence of, or do not correspond in any way, to some extra-linguistic reality. ‘Evidence’, if taken to mean material traces of the past in the present, which may also be given symbolic or linguistic properties, does confirm the existence of the past-as-real. If material things exist through time and space, and are not called into being at the will of historians (who are not magics), then the past also exists.

<sup>66</sup> Gossman, ‘History and Literature,’ 32.

<sup>67</sup> Barthes, ‘The Discourse of History,’ 16 (Barthes’ italics). Barthes describes the imaginary as the linguistic expression of psychological or ideological entities: “we can take the imaginary to be the language through which the utterer of a discourse (a purely linguistic entity) ‘fills out’ the place of subject of the utterance (a psychological or ideological entity).” (16)

<sup>68</sup> Krieger, ‘Fiction, History and Empirical Reality,’ 345.

<sup>69</sup> Kramer, ‘Literature, Criticism and Historical Imagination,’ 118.

<sup>70</sup> Barkan, ‘History and Cultural Studies,’ 366.

and form.<sup>71</sup> So not only is the historian's appeal to representational realism challenged, but his constructive and critical imagination, and his very discipline, are also brought into question. The discipline, rather than being a critical and constructive collective engaged in a shared knowledge project, appears to be a restrictive regime reciting a shared delusion.

Probably the most influential and provocative investigation of the historiographical implications of such structuralist theories of language, narrative and culture, has been the work of Hayden White. The most alarming aspect of White's work for other historians has been his apparent conflation of the theory and methods of history with those of literature, placing history on the "same footing as fiction and other modes of expression".<sup>72</sup> According to White, the techniques and strategies used by historians and literary artists are essentially the same.<sup>73</sup> White notes, on the part of historians,

a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are – verbal fictions, the contexts of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.<sup>74</sup>

White is concerned about the way in which, while literary artists recognise the constructed nature of their worlds, historians exist in a state of referential delusion. According to White, "literary artists tend to have a greater linguistic self consciousness not only about their subject matter, but are also more willing to explore the problematic relation between language, consciousness and reality".<sup>75</sup> Historians have evaded "the implications of the fictive nature of historical narrative".<sup>76</sup> This attitude on the part of some historians is unsurprising, given that they understand "the implications" to be the

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<sup>71</sup> Kramer, 'Literature, Criticism and Historical Imagination,' 117-118. Ann Rigney makes the opposite assertion in *Imperfect Histories*. Rigney suggests that the demands of the discipline and, more specifically, the quest to represent a real so complex that it exceeds our ability to do so adequately, renders histories more engaging than literary fiction. "It is only by discounting the defamiliarizing and sublime charms of discourses based on real events that one can assume, in the struggle between representation and invention for the production of pleasure, that the advantage lies with the latter." *Imperfect Histories*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Ellen Somekawa and Elizabeth A. Smith, 'Theorizing the Writing of History or "I can't think why it should be so dull for a great deal of it must be invention",' *Journal of Social History* 22:1 (1988): 150.

<sup>73</sup> White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation,' 121.

<sup>74</sup> Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact,' in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 42.

<sup>75</sup> White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation,' 127.

<sup>76</sup> White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact,' 42.

dissolution of history into literature and thus into the irresponsible hands of literary critics. In White's analysis, neither the past, the facts, nor lucidity of interpretation determine the possible meanings attached to historical narratives; meaning is determined by the forms of the narratives themselves. Narratives are shaped according to rhetorical tropes; the historian chooses to emplot a historical sequence according to one of several "pre-generic plot structures".<sup>77</sup> History is both a fiction-making and meaning-making activity. White explains that "the encodation of events in terms of such plot structures is one of the ways that a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts."<sup>78</sup> Historians highlight some facts and exclude others in order to create a particular kind of story, with a particular meaning;<sup>79</sup> history "is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation".<sup>80</sup>

Despite the apparent finality of White's statements, he does not go so far as to deny the existence of the past-as-real. The contention that the historian constructs histories and creates historical meaning is not the same as the contention that the historian creates the past. Facts and evidence may be expressed as linguistic constructs, but facts and evidence are not the same thing as 'the past'. In fact, White's description of the historical process is closer to Carr's traditional 'dialectic' model than it appears. Historians have long recognised that they create representations of the past and reflected upon history writing as an imaginative creative process. White himself states that the stories of history are "as much invented as found" and acknowledges that it is impossible to tell where "the actual ends and the creative begins".<sup>81</sup> These statements

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<sup>77</sup> The term "pre-generic plot structures" is derived from the work of literary theorist Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971). White writes that "A historical interpretation, like a poetic fiction, can be said to appeal to its readers as a plausible representation of the world by virtue of its implicit appeal to those 'pre-generic plot-structures' or archetypal story-forms that define the modalities of a given culture's literary endowment." 'Interpretation in History,' *New Literary History* 4:2 (1973): 291.

<sup>78</sup> White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact,' 49.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. According to this understanding, the process of selection of facts is guided primarily by their appropriateness to a given plot structure intended to communicate a particular meaning.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. Here White uses 'fiction' in the sense of an organising and meaning-giving conceptual and linguistic form. Fiction defined as falsehood is not consistent with White's analysis; there is no distinction between 'facts' and 'fictions' where both are defined as linguistic constructs. See White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation,' 126. Note here that White conflates 'fiction-making' with 'literary,' thereby limiting the possibility of any non-literary understanding of fictions as signifying systems. One possible result of this conflation is to render not only all writing, but all conceptual systems, amenable only to 'literary' analysis.

<sup>81</sup> Roger G. Seamon, 'Narrative Practice and the Distinction between History and Fiction,' *Genre* 16 (1983): 203.

suggest that White is reluctant to deny completely the existence of the past-as-object or to suggest that it has no role in historical work. The past is as much found as invented.

The primary effect, then, of White's analysis has been to challenge the distinction between historical and literary practice by emphasising the apprehension, organisation and expression of meaning in both. White seeks to demonstrate the connections and similarities between the writing of novels and the writing of history, revealing how historians use the same literary, rhetorical, stylistic devices as novelists. For White, the narrative forms of historical and literary writing are equivalent; if "viewed simply as verbal artefacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another".<sup>82</sup> The point can be restated in semiological terms: there is no way of distinguishing between historical and literary structures of signification, all texts are on equal footing.<sup>83</sup> Under these theoretical conditions, the distinction between literature as text and history as context collapses. Derrida's words have been seized upon and repeated: all meaning is inter-textual and there is nothing outside of the text.<sup>84</sup>

The apparent threat to the identity of history and the collapsing distinction between history and literature represented by White's work and structuralist and post-structuralist theories has elicited a mixed reaction from historians. Some historians have manifested a particularly negative response: Geoffrey Elton insists on a 'return to essentials' to heal a discipline suffering the effects of "the cancerous radiation that comes from the forehead of Derrida and Foucault"<sup>85</sup> and their fellow theory-mongers; Gertrude Himmelfarb describes the fragmentation and deconstruction of history;<sup>86</sup> and Keith Windschuttle bemoans the murder of a discipline at the hands of literary critics and social theorists.<sup>87</sup> The possibility of the production of histories based on material evidence invented by the historian is quite alarming to many historians.<sup>88</sup> When the

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<sup>82</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 122.

<sup>83</sup> See Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 17; Seamon, 'Narrative Practice.'

<sup>84</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978), 158. While there is some debate surrounding the meaning and significance of Derrida's statement, it is generally taken to mean that texts do not refer to any extra-textual reality but only to other texts.

<sup>85</sup> Elton, *Return to Essentials*, 41.

<sup>86</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'Some Reflections on the New History,' *The American Historical Review* 94:3 (1989): 661-670.

<sup>87</sup> Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*.

<sup>88</sup> Simon Schama explores these possibilities in his work *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (London: Granta, 1991). In the Afterword Schama admits that not only the historical narrative, but some

independence of the past from its representation and the authority of the discipline are both eliminated, the historian is potentially able to construct histories based purely on his own interests and imaginative capabilities. Himmelfarb warns that

Historians now freely use such words as “invent”, “imagine”, “create” (not “re-create”), and construct (not “reconstruct”) to describe the process of historical interpretation, and then proceed to support some novel interpretations by a series of “possibilities”, “might have beens” and “could have beens”.<sup>89</sup>

According to Himmelfarb, not only have the theoretical foundations of the discipline been undermined, but contemporary theories also threaten to corrupt the values of historians themselves. What future has the group identity of history, based as it is on self-control, duty and responsibility towards the past, if those within the group are seduced by the irresponsible and self-indulgent culture of postmodernism?

A criticism often levelled at post-structuralist theories is that of linguistic reductionism that confines “all of life to language, all scholarship to sound and fury, ultimately signifying nothing.”<sup>90</sup> Critics argue that an understanding of society and culture provided by a purely linguistic theoretical paradigm is both simplistic and problematic in terms of critical praxis.<sup>91</sup> A purely linguistic conceptual paradigm leaves limited criteria by which to evaluate texts. If all representations are reality-fictions and all reality-fictions are equal, not only can they not be assessed in terms of truth and falsehood, they can also not be judged against each other or according to any ‘objective’ standard.<sup>92</sup> The result is a tendency towards aestheticism – where texts are evaluated

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of the evidence in the text is a product of invention rather than of scholarship. Despite Schama’s claim that his narratives are “works of imagination, not scholarship” (320) they are quite clearly a combination of both. Schama’s work is a hybrid of literary and historical writing, scholarship and invention, fact and imagination which tests the uncertain boundaries that separate history from literature. For an analysis of Schama’s work as historical writing see Cushing Strout, ‘Border Crossings: History, Fiction, and *Dead Certainties*,’ *History and Theory* 31:2 (1992): 153-162.

<sup>89</sup> Himmelfarb, ‘Some Reflections on the New History,’ 667.

<sup>90</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 9.

<sup>91</sup> In particular, see Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

<sup>92</sup> “The lion of the imagination lies down with the lamb of fact very easily under this heralded ‘postmodern’ condition: every day the lion is fed a fresh lamb. The fictional becomes so universal in this widespread contemporary mood that it can no longer be contrasted with anything nonfictional, but of course in that case the fictional loses its own meaning, lacking any comparative method of discriminating it.” Strout, ‘Border Crossings,’ 154.

only according to formal criteria – that threatens to destroy “the conceptual foundations of political commitment in the contemporary world”.<sup>93</sup> The door to political and social analysis is closed and criticism limited to “what are essentially and simply alternative interpretations.”<sup>94</sup> The critical paralysis that results from a purely linguistic understanding of history, literature, culture and society is evident in the difficulty in translating postmodernist insights into “concrete action on one hand and historical narratives on the other.”<sup>95</sup> A further criticism often levelled at post-structuralist and postmodern theories is that they tend to contradict themselves in application and practice, thereby undermining their theoretical foundations and revealing the aporias such foundations produce.<sup>96</sup>

These practical and intellectual problems and processes have given rise to ongoing conceptual struggles and negotiations within the discipline of history. The attempt, by some historians, to occupy territory beyond the reach of literary theorists has led to a division between narrativist and empiricist philosophies of history, or ‘history as writing’ versus ‘history as knowing’.<sup>97</sup> In actuality, the distinction between the two is not as sharp as it appears. Both represent attempts to establish a distinctly historical approach to the challenges raised by contemporary theories. Empiricists and others argue against reducing history to the literary dimensions of historical writing. Instead, they emphasise the role of research and investigation in historical practice and describe history as a process of ‘knowing’ characterised by ongoing dialogue and debate among a community of historians.<sup>98</sup> This defence appeals less to the reality of the past than to the lasting yet dynamic culture of the historical profession as guarantor of accountability and of knowledge, albeit provisional knowledge.

In their attempts to respond to contemporary theories and develop new categories and conceptual tools for historical practice, historians have found themselves caught up in

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<sup>93</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 15. See also Gossman, *Between History and Literature*; Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Somewaka and Smith, ‘Theorising the Writing of History,’ 150.

<sup>94</sup> Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 22.

<sup>95</sup> Barkan, ‘History and Cultural Studies,’ 367.

<sup>96</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 19.

<sup>97</sup> See Frank Ankersmitt, ‘The Dilemma of Contemporary Anglo-Saxon Philosophy of History,’ *History and Theory* 25:4 (1986): 1-27.

<sup>98</sup> Marwick articulates a similar argument in ‘Two Approaches to Historical Study’. Gossman also reaches this conclusion in *Between History and Literature*.

another 'turn'. Broadly termed 'the cultural turn', this development unites literary studies and history, as well as other disciplines, under the banner of cultural criticism. The new cultural criticism perceives traditional disciplines as sites of essentialist, foundationalist knowledge, and chooses to embrace the challenges of contemporary theories. The result is activity that is difficult to pin down as it plays around traditional disciplinary boundaries, stirring up further doubts and debates, whilst simultaneously adopting an eclectic range of theoretical and methodological tools.

Whilst genealogies of the new cultural criticism incorporating the new cultural history and cultural studies manifest a plethora of theoretical and methodological influences, they maintain a consistent interest in the meaning and interpretation of cultural forms.<sup>99</sup> Among the theories that have been incorporated into the new cultural criticism, it is worth noting the influence of social history, Marxist criticism, Derrida, Foucault, and cultural anthropology. Whilst both cultural history and cultural studies today tend to avoid the concept of society, their origins in social history are unquestionable. British cultural studies traces its roots to the combined influence of the literary criticism of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart and the social history of E. P. Thompson.<sup>100</sup> From social history, cultural studies adopts an interest in the everyday and popular culture as opposed to the historical and literary traditions of political history and canonical texts.<sup>101</sup> The new cultural criticism is characterised by a process of "dehierarchisation"<sup>102</sup> that eliminates traditional distinctions between high and low, or elite and popular, cultures. From Foucault, the new cultural criticism appropriates an understanding of power as microcosmic and ubiquitous in its operation. With Foucault, questions of power come to be inseparable from the discussion of truth and knowledge. Contemporary cultural criticism has also adopted Foucault's notions of discourse and

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<sup>99</sup> On the nature and development of the 'new cultural history' in the postmodern context, see Mark Poster, 'Introduction,' in *Cultural History and Postmodernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3-13.

<sup>100</sup> See John Storey, 'Cultural Studies: An Introduction,' in John Storey, ed., *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 1-13; Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,' in Lawrence Grossberg, et. al., eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 277-285; Elazar Barkan, 'History and Cultural Studies,' Cohen and Roth, eds., *History and ...*, 349-369; Poster, 'Introduction,' in *Cultural History and Postmodernity*, 4-5.

<sup>101</sup> Ann Rigney explains that many of these 'new' interests and modes of scholarship and writing are not, in fact, the product of the postmodern adventure, but the inheritance of nineteenth century Romantic Historicism "which opened up the domain of history to include potentially all aspects of experience". *Imperfect Histories*, 1. See also Poster, 'Introduction,' in *Cultural History and Postmodernity*, 7-8.

<sup>102</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 6.



subjectivity. From anthropology, and in particular the work of Clifford Geertz, contemporary cultural criticism appropriates the method of ‘thick description’: an approach to culture that recognises both the material and ideal manifested in complex webs of signification.<sup>103</sup>

In short, disciplines and ideas have been systematically and unsystematically raided for their potential contributions to cultural criticism, and history is no exception. Such has been the appeal to history that commentators have discovered another ‘turn’: the historical turn. Criticism informed by the theories and methods of history is perceived as an alternative and corrective to the worst excesses of the linguistic turn.<sup>104</sup> The appeal to the historical is evident in the rise of a number of movements that combine history with other forms: New Historicism, historical anthropology and ethno-history. The (re)turn to history constitutes the revival of the ‘historical’ and a renewed awareness of the historical dimension of texts, culture, society. Many critics have found that ideas about history have become central to their analyses of modern and postmodern texts.<sup>105</sup> Questions arise, however, as to what is being sought from history and what is understood by ‘history’ and the ‘historical’ after postmodernism.

Some perceive the turn to history as problematic, partly because it involves “historical methodology ... flourishing outside history departments.”<sup>106</sup> That is, it involves practicing history without the safeguard of the discipline that ensures an ongoing process of revision and debate. The problem that arises “when text based history is removed from its narrative and cognitive frame in historical practice and used within another field”<sup>107</sup> is that it may lose its disciplinary dynamic; it is stabilised and made a building block for a different structure of explanation. This is, of course, a potential danger with any theoretical or methodological paradigm which is removed from the

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<sup>103</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hutchinson, 1975).

<sup>104</sup> See Gossman, *Between History and Literature*; Michael Roth, ‘Introduction,’ in Cohen and Roth, eds., *History and*, 1-22; Terrance J. McDonald, ‘Introduction,’ in Terrance J. McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 1-16.

<sup>105</sup> See Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*; Ermath, *Sequel to History*, esp. 16; Francesca Benedict, ‘From Story to History: History in North American Literature in the 1980s,’ in Theo D’haen and Hans Bertens, eds., *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 1995), 115-132.

<sup>106</sup> Barkan, ‘History and Cultural Studies,’ 364.

<sup>107</sup> Carolyn Steedman, ‘Culture, Cultural Studies and the Historians,’ in Grossberg et. al., eds., *Cultural Studies*, 614.

culture of its production into another culture and reduced to a foundational assumption. The (re)turn to history, in the (con)texts of the linguistic and cultural turns is, however, a turn towards ambiguous and unstable notions of history and the historical. The boundaries circumscribing the realms of literature, history and other humanities are no longer certain. The traditional understanding of history as context or background to literary or other texts and cultural forms, the real to which textual representations refer, is no longer taken for granted. Yet the notion of representation swimming freely through an ocean of ungrounded signification is also problematic. Theorising the literary and the historical after the linguistic and cultural turns is thus an unfinished process which necessitates self-reflexive and dynamic conceptualisations of history.

The primary contribution of narrative theories, such as those of Hayden White, to contemporary intellectual debates was to reveal the similar stylistic devices and generic tropes used by both historians and literary artists. Narrative theory demonstrated the fictional within the historical and, for some, identified or reduced the historical to the fictional. As part of the historic turn, or the revival of the historical, critics have sought to challenge a purely literary understanding of history by revealing the historical within the fictional. Roger Seamon suggests that this “interpretive transformation of fiction into history is the reverse of the effort made by Hayden White to discover the fictional in the historical.”<sup>108</sup>

Answers to the question as to what constitutes the historical within the fictional, however, can easily lead back to the re-entrenchment of literature and history on their traditional terrains. While tropology fails to adequately address the human origins and development of fictional forms and ‘pre-generic plot structures’, the search for the historical and cultural roots of fictions also risks a retreat to the traditional orthodoxy where history is context and literature is fiction and text.<sup>109</sup> Ann Rigney, whose approach to the blurring of boundaries between literature and history takes the in-between space as one of insight and opportunity, suggests an alternative means of perceiving the historical within the fictional. Rigney comments that the “blurred area”

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<sup>108</sup> Seamon, ‘Narrative Practice,’ 205.

<sup>109</sup> On the failure of White’s analysis to address the cultural processes shaping the creation and development of fictional forms and categories see Susan Gearheart, *The Open Boundary of History and Fiction: A Critical Approach to the French Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 64.

between history and literature has remained “less a source of insight than of anxiety” and argues for an approach that recognises “that contested boundaries are inevitable in cultural practice”.<sup>110</sup> Rigney’s own investigation of the historical forms and categories within historical and literary writing is based on the assertion that certain fictions have a distinct “aesthetic effect directly linked to the representational function of historical writing”.<sup>111</sup> In short, fictions are historical not simply because they are forms intricately tied to complex cultural processes located in space and time and having a foundational reality, but also because they are attempts to represent that reality. Simply stated, Rigney defines histories as “projects” which seek to represent the past as it is imagined.<sup>112</sup> Rigney also acknowledges that historical writing will always be imperfect, because there will be gaps between the past as real, the past as we imagine it and the past as it appears in the representations we create and consume.

It is possible to extend Rigney’s definition of histories as projects to represent the real past as it is imagined, to histories as expressions of the ‘historical imagination’. The historical imagination is not limited to ways we imagine the past, but concerns aspects of our consciousness of the past and of relationships between past, present and future. It is more aptly understood as our imagination of ‘history’ in the sense of diachronic and synchronic human existence in space and time. Attempts to express and communicate the historical imagination are not limited to formal scholarship or writing about the past (that is, texts that are recognised as historical writing) but may be found in most cultural forms.<sup>113</sup>

In historiography, the term ‘historical imagination’ usually refers to Collingwood’s understanding of the historian’s use of his imagination in the processes of selection, interpretation and expression involved in writing history. Essentially, the imagination is the faculty which allows the historian to re-create the past in his own mind and to express it in writing in such a way as to communicate his vision to others.<sup>114</sup> In literary discourse, the term ‘historical imagination’ is often used in the analysis of historical

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<sup>110</sup> Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, 6.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>112</sup> See *ibid.*, esp. 3-4.

<sup>113</sup> As Ann Rigney writes, from a definition of historical representation as a ‘project’ to represent the past as it is imagined, it follows “that a text may be recognized as a historical representation without its automatically being accepted as a fully satisfactory history.” *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>114</sup> Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 245-249.

novels. Indeed, the historical imagination in literature is most readily identifiable in historical fiction. An exploration of historical fiction reveals a genre at the nexus of literature and history that is well positioned to highlight not only the dangers, but also the possibilities inherent in the theoretical developments of the last decades. The use of historical imagination as an analytical model for discussing historical novels opens the door to analysis of the historical imagination in other texts.

Historical fiction is a hybrid form that, according to traditional, modern paradigms of the two, exists at the intersection of history and literature. As Dean Rehberger explains, “Borrowing its form from the aesthetic conventions of the novel and its content from the pages of history books, historical fiction appears as both history and literature.”<sup>115</sup> Given its status as a boundary dweller, historical fiction has always been the subject of anxious discursive negotiation and debate. Changing definitions of the literary and the historical have also impacted on the status of this literary form that represents the meeting of the historical and the fictional.

What constitutes historical fiction depends largely on what is considered to constitute history or the historical. The common element in historical fiction and conventional history is representation of the past. Even this principle of ‘pastness’, however, depends on what is understood to be involved in any representation of the past. Traditionally, historical fiction is defined by its ‘historical’ content, that is, the inclusion of an ‘identifiable’ historical time and place, historical events and/or ‘real-historical’ figures within the narrative.<sup>116</sup> There is an unspoken assumption that the plot of a historical novel “must include a number of ‘historical events’, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change etc), mingled with and effecting the personal fortunes of the [fictional] characters”.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, “when the novel’s characters live in the same world with historical persons we have a historical novel.”<sup>118</sup> The “specific link to history”<sup>119</sup> that characterises the historical novel is the inclusion of certain aspects

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<sup>115</sup> Dean Rehberger, ‘Vulgar Fiction, Impure History: The Neglect of Historical Fiction,’ *Journal of American Culture* 18:4 (1995): 59.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>117</sup> Avron Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1971), 4.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

from a recognised historical record: the Great Story.<sup>120</sup> The definition of historical fiction thus depends on a traditional and relatively limited definition of history and the historical.

Historical fiction, being both a hybrid and popular genre has, in general, been held in contempt by professional historians and literary scholars.<sup>121</sup> Rehberger comments that “Neither the discipline of History nor English accepts this impure and mixed form as a legitimate expression of its discipline’s demands.”<sup>122</sup> Historical fiction may be judged by historians in terms of its accuracy, that is, submitted to the challenge of professional historical accountability to evidence and other interpretations and found lacking. For literary critics the historical element of historical fiction limits the creative imagination of the author. R. Gordon Kelly writes that “historical fiction invites the historian’s scorn for playing fast and loose with the facts, even while literary critics denigrate it for its slavish subservience to the documentary record – ‘mere’ fact”.<sup>123</sup> Academic distaste for historical fiction is also related to the perceived vulgarity of the genre. Historical fiction, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has been an extremely popular and successful literary form:<sup>124</sup> “If the historians have not produced best sellers, the appetite of a public, much larger in numbers than in the last century, for historical literature has grown by leaps and bounds.”<sup>125</sup> The popularity of historical fiction contrasts with the relative unpopularity, from the point of view of the reading public, of professional histories produced by ‘ivory tower’ historians suffering from their characteristic obsession with footnotes and facts.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, *passim*.

<sup>121</sup> See Amy J. Elias, ‘Defining Spatial History in Postmodernist Historical Novels,’ in D’haen and Bertens, eds., *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres*, 105-112; Harry Henderson, *Versions of the Past: Historical Imagination in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Rehberger, ‘Vulgar Fiction, Impure History’.

<sup>122</sup> Rehberger, ‘Vulgar Fiction, Impure History,’ 59

<sup>123</sup> R. Gordon Kelly, ‘Historical Fiction,’ in M. Thomas Ingre, ed., *Handbook of American Popular Literature* (New York: Greenwood, 1988), 191, quoted in Rehberger, ‘Vulgar Fiction, Impure History,’ 62.

<sup>124</sup> On the popularity of the historical novel in comparison to academic histories see Laqueur, ‘Literature and the Historian’; Horst Steinmetz, ‘History in Fiction – History as Fiction: On the Relations between Literature and History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,’ in D’haen and Bertens., eds., *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres*, 81-103; Rehberger, ‘Vulgar Fiction, Impure History’ .

<sup>125</sup> Laqueur, ‘Literature and the Historian,’ 7.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*.

The appeal of historical fiction suggests certain popular attitudes towards history. Some critics relate this appeal to the literary or aesthetic qualities of historical fiction in contrast to the ‘dry’ quality of scholarly history that is limited by its commitments to objectivity and factuality.<sup>127</sup> In this view, historical novelists, drawing on all the resources of imagination and representation available to the literary artist, are able to create a past that is rich, vivid, and more alive than the “dry bones” of the dead past offered up by academic historians.<sup>128</sup> Their discipline requires that historians recognise their own position in the present and remain self-reflexive in their activity. Historians thus remain outsiders, always distanced from the past by the awareness of hindsight. The critical component of the historian’s practice demands distance. The novelist, bearing no such responsibilities to the discipline of History, can imagine and express an (albeit illusory) insider’s view of the living past.<sup>129</sup>

According to this understanding, the discipline of History makes historical writing less ‘true to life’. In Butterfield’s words, “history cannot come so near to human hearts and human passions as a good novel can; its very fidelity to the facts makes it ... farther away from the heart of things ... To make a bygone age live again, history must not merely be eked out by fiction; ... it must be turned into a novel.”<sup>130</sup> Similarly, Walter Laqueur suggests that the popularity of historical fiction, in contrast to that of professional history, is “at least in part often due to a deliberate neglect of style and an absence of imagination on the part of the academic historians themselves”.<sup>131</sup> According to Laqueur,

style and imagination are the great preservatives in history, and the world at large ... will sooner forgive lack of scientific solidarity than lack of literary charm. Competence, scientific solidarity should be a prerequisite for writing history, not a synonym for boredom.<sup>132</sup>

Why are style and imagination the great preservatives of history? It is the imagination that offers the promise of access to the past and the possibility that it might live again. The appeal of historical fiction is the appeal of the past itself, or of the possibility of

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<sup>127</sup> See *ibid.*, 7-8; Ernest Baker, *A Guide to Historical Fiction* (1914) (New York: B. Franklin 1969).

<sup>128</sup> “dry bones” is Baker’s term. *Guide to Historical Fiction*, viii.

<sup>129</sup> See Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, 227.

<sup>130</sup> Butterfield, *Historical Novel* (1924), 23 cited in Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, 226.

<sup>131</sup> Laqueur, ‘Literature and the Historian,’ 8.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

reliving or experiencing that which has been otherwise irretrievably lost. For the popular audience, the historical novel offers imaginative access to the past:

To make the past present, to bring the distant near, ... to invest with the reality of human flesh and blood, to call up our ancestors before us with all their peculiarities of manners, and garb, and show us over their houses, to seat us at their tables, to rummage their old fashioned wardrobes, as Macaulay put it, "these parts of the duty which properly belongs to the historian, has been appropriated by the historical novelist".<sup>133</sup>

The popularity of historical fiction reminds us that historians "have no monopoly in their own field of study":<sup>134</sup> the representation and constitution of understanding about the past. Historian David Lowenthal even suggests that "more people apprehend the past through historical novels, from Walter Scott to Jean Plaidy, than through any formal history."<sup>135</sup> Popularly, historical novels might even be considered "a more trustworthy guide to the past"<sup>136</sup> because they are understood to be more 'true to life' than professional histories. Here 'truth' is understood in terms somewhat alien to the historian's ideal of representation that corresponds to the past-as-real; something is 'true to life' if it corresponds to the truth of being human.<sup>137</sup> In short, historians probably have a less significant role in both the formation and expression of the historical imagination than they would like to think.

Unfortunately, the very factors which make historical fiction such an important measure of the historical imagination also render it a difficult subject of academic enquiry. Historical fiction presents problems for literary critics and historians because its definition is directly connected to the status of the literary, the historical and the

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<sup>133</sup> Macaulay, 'Hallam,' (1828), *Critical and Historical Essays*, 1:115, cited in Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 225.

<sup>134</sup> Laqueur, 'Literature and the Historian,' 5.

<sup>135</sup> Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, 224. According to Rehburger, "The historical novel has held a privileged place among popular audiences in that it is perceived to combine the providing of pleasure with the imparting of useful knowledge." Rehburger, 'Vulgar Fiction, Impure History,' 60. Ann Rigney also points out that "This interest in the boundaries between fiction and history is a response, on one hand, to the proliferation of mediated images of the past in contemporary culture, where the public at large are arguably as dependent on filmmakers and novelists for their views of history as they are on professional historians." *Imaginary Histories*, 4-5.

<sup>136</sup> Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, 224

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 225-227.

popular.<sup>138</sup> Rehberger notes that even students of popular fiction, who rise to the challenge of vulgar and hybrid forms, have largely avoided historical fiction.<sup>139</sup> The problem with historical fiction is that the category ‘historical’ is, particularly within the contemporary intellectual climate, highly ambiguous. History, after the impact of social history, structuralism, post-structuralism and cultural history is neither confined to, nor dominated by, Great Men or Great Events. Traditional definitions of historical fiction as a genre depend on a limited understanding of history: the ‘historical’ within the fictional refers specifically to parts of the Great Story. History, having moved beyond the Great Story, and defined more broadly as the experience, imagination and representation of past and present time, is something so extensive that “in a sense no delineated space of a genre can appear to exclude or contain the historical novel”.<sup>140</sup>

A promising starting point for the investigation of the historical imagination in literary fiction may be found in Harry Henderson’s *Versions of the Past*. Henderson explores the historical imagination in American fiction according to an understanding of the ‘historical’ in historical fiction not as content or context but as an imaginative system or frame: “systematic configurations of attitudes or conventions regarding the representation of historical reality.”<sup>141</sup> Henderson is interested in the way in which authors, in historical novels, create fictional worlds, providing the illusion of a whole society: “because he tries to give the illusion of a ‘whole’ society the author of an historical novel presents a total image of the culture”.<sup>142</sup> Henderson considers the ways in which writers represent human experience and culture and, in particular, how they deal with the problems of objectivity, subjectivity, society and temporality. “Instead of placing the literary work in measurable relation to ‘outside’ reality, Henderson identifies the historical imagination by focusing on what the writer conceived history to be, on how he orders events and what assumptions guide his ordering.”<sup>143</sup> Henderson maintains a diachronic understanding of history and sees the historical imagination as that which

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<sup>138</sup> As Rehberger argues, the scholarly neglect of historical fiction “stems primarily from institutional pressures and biases ... that are complexly woven into the historical fabric of how we define history, literature and the popular.” ‘Vulgar Fiction, Impure History,’ 59.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>141</sup> Henderson, *Versions of the Past*, 15.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>143</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, ‘Foreword’ in *ibid.*, ix.



allows the novelist to grapple with the question of change and processes of social transformation.<sup>144</sup> He argues that

It is possible to detect consistent structures informing the images of the historical past here [in the historical novels] examined, structures that are quite unlike philosophies and ideologies reared upon one or two unshakeable assumptions. Instead these structures appear as interlocking constellations of assumptions about history and society, which lack hierarchical order among them but which are mutually reinforcing.<sup>145</sup>

Henderson identifies two major frames of reference that order ideas regarding the nature of history, subjectivity and society. The ‘progressive view’ holds that society moves steadily toward the fulfilment of ideals such as freedom and justice, that these ideals can be furthered by heroic action and that history consists of measurable change on an absolute scale.<sup>146</sup> The ‘holist view’ denies that such ideals exist in any absolute sense;<sup>147</sup> it holds a relativistic view of “time bound man” and “instead of the unity of all times and places, the holist frame emphasises clear cultural boundaries among cultures separated by space *or* time”.<sup>148</sup> Henderson suggests that writers and other members of their culture “tend to perceive the historical situations which provide themes for their fictions from within these two frames (space or time), or to combine elements of each”.<sup>149</sup>

Henderson’s model of the historical imagination can be developed into a more complex understanding of the role of imaginative formations in both literary and historical writing. Henderson conceptualises imaginative structures in two basic forms – ‘progressive’ and ‘holist’ – but often comes to the conclusion that both structures are represented in narrative histories in complex interaction “responding to the currents and tensions of the age”.<sup>150</sup> In application, however, Henderson’s two structures allow little room for addressing questions of cultural change and simplify the dynamic and often internally contradictory nature of imaginative formations.

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>147</sup> Trachtenberg ‘Foreword,’ in *ibid.*, x.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 14 (Henderson’s italics).

<sup>149</sup> Trachtenberg ‘Foreword,’ in *ibid.*, x.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 15.

Critics have recognised that the forms of history in historical fiction correspond to the imagination of history in a broader cultural sense. As Weinstein observes, “changes in the philosophy of history over the last 150 years are reflected in the tradition of the historical novel.”<sup>151</sup> For example, Walter Scott’s novels maintain a confident understanding of the past as something real and accessible. Scott

dramatises the value of accumulated experience and the need to observe closely and reflect carefully on that experience. The basic assumption is that, although truth is deceptive and the road to it difficult, there is an objective reality – about people and history – that can finally be discovered by the qualified observer.<sup>152</sup>

The presence of the omniscient narrator in Scott’s novels legitimises the reality of the past and its connection to the present. Weinstein explains that “the authorial voice, the omniscient narrator, shows us the ‘multiple corners of time’ which are the cruces of history. He sees not only that the past has made the present but also that only the present can understand the meanings of the past”.<sup>153</sup> Steinmetz compares Scott’s attitude to that of Leopold von Ranke: both were assured of the possibility of ‘telling it as it was’.<sup>154</sup> The von Rankean certainty that epitomises Scott’s understanding of history contrasts with the approach to history evident in the work of other novelists. In general, the novel represents the dominant modern understanding of history as a dialectical process of mediation and interaction between the detective-historian and the past itself. As Weinstein explains, “History in the novel has become a continuous interaction between the protagonist and his facts, an unending dialogue between past and present”.<sup>155</sup>

More recently, critics have recognised a new, postmodern form of the historical novel that is connected with postmodern culture and criticism and characterised by a “problematizing return to history”.<sup>156</sup> Linda Hutcheon argues that the postmodern historical novel – which she terms ‘historiographic metafiction’ – represents, as the term

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<sup>151</sup> Weinstein, ‘The Creative Imagination in Fiction and History,’ 268. See also Steinmetz, ‘History in Fiction,’ 82.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>154</sup> Steinmetz, ‘History in Fiction,’ 82.

<sup>155</sup> Weinstein, ‘Creative Imagination,’ 268. Weinstein quotes Carr who writes “My first answer therefore to the question ‘What is History?’ is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.” *What is History?* 30.

<sup>156</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 88. See also Elias, ‘Defining Spatial History’; Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987).

suggests, a critical, self-conscious and reflexive awareness of the functions of both the historical and the fictional in literature and the interdependence of creative and critical modes.<sup>157</sup> Hutcheon believes that historiographic metafiction is a form which foregrounds and explores the problems of the historical and the fictional, the real and the unreal. Similarly, for Amy Elias, the postmodernist historical novel redefines history as an open work or “field of *possibilities*”, as opposed to a known and closed historical record.<sup>158</sup> Elias places meaning and interpretation at the core of the postmodern understanding of history: “the postmodern historical novel presents history as an open work in order to defamiliarise and revitalise the processes of historical representation, and cultural assumptions about what constitutes history.”<sup>159</sup> Elias seeks to identify the techniques used by postmodern novelists to counter traditional understandings of history as narrative, linear and progressive. Postmodern historical novels use spatialisation to “counter historical linearity with other, more disjunctive, spatial metaphors”.<sup>160</sup> The aim of the postmodern historical novel is to defamiliarise and thereby encourage reconsideration and critical awareness of assumptions about what constitutes the fictional, the real and the historical.<sup>161</sup>

Literary forms are thus historical forms, in the sense that they reveal not only the workings of the historical imagination, but also the ways in which the imagination of history may be represented. Historical novels and other literary works employ strategies to negotiate what Elias describes as “the literary problem of how to (represent) time and space”.<sup>162</sup> This problem of representation is, however, not purely a literary problem. Ann Rigney identifies the problem of representability – that is, the quest to represent the past and history as imagined – at the heart of historical writing.<sup>163</sup> The problem of how to express the historical imagination is central to literature, history and life.

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<sup>157</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 88.

<sup>158</sup> Elias, ‘Defining Spatial History,’ 108 (Elias’ italics).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>163</sup> Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, 2-3.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Encounters Fantasy

As a result of a journey shared, the turbulent relationship between history and literature took on new forms at the close of the twentieth century. Literature and history appeared to gravitate towards one another and to become almost indistinguishable in the in-between spaces of the contemporary. There is danger in such places, but magic also; everything is transformed: the dead live, the past is now, and history grows wings. It is in this perilous realm – the territory of the unreal, the supernatural, the impossible and the wondrous – that history encounters fantasy. Fantasy is the facet of literature that appears to be most remote from history. If history does indeed encounter its other in literature, then the otherness of fantasy is almost overwhelming. Closely aligned with fairy-tale and myth, fantasy revels in the impossible, the uncanny and the magical, while history clings to the real. Fantasy, for all its fascination, has remained largely unacknowledged by both historiography and literary criticism, despite being located within the discourses of modernity that have defined history, literature and their relationship for centuries. In the contemporary intellectual milieu, fantasy criticism, literary criticism and historiography exist alongside each other and struggle with many of the same intellectual challenges, yet remain curiously blind to one another's existence. In following the intersecting paths that connect fantasy criticism to literary theory and historiography, it is possible to discern new conceptual possibilities for the study of both fantasy literature and history.

Like the definitions of 'history' and 'literature', that of 'fantasy' is also contested territory. Fantasy is frequently described as the 'literature of the unreal',<sup>1</sup> but this is a deceptive designation which conceals fantasy's fundamental concern with the nature of reality and of reality's representation. Within the historical discourse that defines it, fantasy is the eternal other of literary Realism. At the beginning of twenty-first century, fantasy manifests in various forms which exist in multiple possible relations to contemporary literary and cultural theories. It encompasses the high-fantasy tradition

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Jackson describes fantasy as the "literature of 'unreality'". *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London; New York: Methuen, 1981), 4. See also Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973); Christine Brook-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

exemplified by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, numerous popular generic forms ranging from ‘sword and sorcery’ to dark fantasy, and the fantastic-uncanny. Different perspectives define fantasy as a fundamental human impulse, a literary tradition, literature with particular structural, formal or rhetorical properties, and literature which constructs alternative worlds which exist in different possible relations to the real. Considerable overlap exists between these theories of the fantastic, revealing key themes to which fantasy and fantasy criticism constantly return: the nature of reality and representation, language, the psychological and the sacred.

The main streams of fantasy criticism, as outlined below, locate fantasy in relation to literature and literary theory. While the relationship between fantasy and literature has been explored in detail, little critical consideration has been given to the potential impact of this relationship upon understandings of history. Through an exploration of the ideas and possibilities raised by the encounter between fantasy and literature, it is possible to glimpse the implications of this encounter for history and historical writing.

Fantasy has enchanted and challenged authors, readers and thinkers for centuries. Although a number of works exploring fantasy and the fantastic in literature have been published since the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> there remains a lack of critical tools, awareness and acceptance of fantasy or the fantastic among scholars. In her book *Fantasy and Mimesis*, which is amongst the broadest, most inclusive studies of fantasy in literature, Kathryn Hume attempts to address what she sees as a “critical void” in literary

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<sup>2</sup> The most influential critical investigations of the nature and value of fantasy or the fantastic published since 1970 include Todorov, *The Fantastic*; Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Jackson, *Fantasy*; Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); T.E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Christine Brook-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Colin Manlove, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1983); Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Methuen, 1984); Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990); Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London; New York: Arnold, 1996); Richard Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of the Imagination* (New York; London: Routledge, 2002). Other contributions to fantasy criticism include edited collections of papers and journals devoted to scholarly articles on fantasy and science fiction literature such as *Extrapolation*, 1979-; *Science Fiction Studies*, 1973- and *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 1988-. Critical commentary on the nature of fantasy and imagination is, of course, not confined to this period. For a collection of earlier writings on fantasy in literature including material from Plato, Addison, Radcliffe, Ruskin, Chesterton, Freud and Lovecraft, see David Sandner, ed., *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* (Westport, Conn.; London: Praeger, 2004).

scholarship with respect to fantasy.<sup>3</sup> She claims that Western scholarly traditions have left contemporary theory bereft of an adequate critical vocabulary for inquiries into fantasy.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, writing in 1987, Roger Schlobin remarked that, despite some progress in the field, the body of fantasy criticism remained “woefully small” in relation to the scope of fantasy in art and literature.<sup>5</sup> This sense of critical neglect is offset by a more positive conviction that the depth and complexity, richness and variety of fantasy offer great opportunities for a range of critical inquiries. Fantasy is a field which possesses enormous potential for inter-disciplinary and co-operative approaches. Roger Schlobin argues that such “interdisciplinary, open minded, free wheeling approaches” are actually required for the study of a field that cuts across art and literature “like a bar of light”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the existing body of fantasy criticism tends to evoke a field that is “as large as literature and art itself”,<sup>7</sup> encompassing the oceanic scope of human consciousness (and unconsciousness), experience and expression.<sup>8</sup> It is thus no surprise that, as Gary Wolfe observes, fantasy criticism draws from a complex of philosophical traditions and disciplines – including psychoanalysis, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, feminism and history – and must weave its own path through the vocabularies and critical preoccupations of each.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their belief in the significance of their chosen field, fantasy critics often feel the need to defend their interest in a subject that is frequently associated with escapism, pulp fiction and fandom.<sup>10</sup> Those whose interest lies in recovering fantasy as a respectable form of literature, a subversive mode, or an essential element of literary practice are frustrated by “inaccurate and exclusive associations with pulp or popular literature”<sup>11</sup> or bemoan the “tide of pulp” that serious fantasy has become: formulaic,

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<sup>3</sup> Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, xiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Schlobin, ‘From the Old on to the New: New Directions in Fantasy Criticism and Theory,’ *Extrapolation* 28:1(1987): 7.

<sup>6</sup> E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1949), 74, cited in Schlobin, ‘From the Old on to the New,’ 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Mathews, *Fantasy*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Wolfe, ‘Strange Invaders,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 32:1 (1986): 135.

<sup>10</sup> In particular, see Ann Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945* (London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Schlobin, ‘From the Old on to the New,’ 8. See also Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, 1.

repetitive, standardised, “*dead*”.<sup>12</sup> For those who have an interest in the meaning and significance of fantasy as a form of popular culture, there remains a daunting gap between academic criticism and the pleasures of the popular. The critical attention accorded to fantasy literature since the 1970s has, however, certainly been supported by “the new academic and intellectual respectability of popular culture”<sup>13</sup> and the associated development of critical theories for the analysis of popular cultural forms under the interdisciplinary umbrella of cultural studies.

Despite its attachment to a field identified with subversion, boundary transgressions and the “liberation of imagination”,<sup>14</sup> fantasy criticism is mired in obstructive discourses of definition and classification which tend to be more restrictive than liberating. There exist many and varied attempts to establish the essential or defining characteristics of ‘fantasy’, to identify typical or outstanding texts, and to distinguish different forms of fantasy. It is thus difficult for any discussion of fantasy to avoid a quagmire of classification, a problem that is compounded by the ambiguity of both popular and critical uses of the word. These range from broad and all-inclusive to narrow and exclusive definitions: from fantasy as an aspect of human consciousness – an impulse vital to all human expression – through fantasy as a distinct textual moment, to fantasy as a select body of texts. In addition, the word ‘fantastic’ is used both as an adjective derived from, or corresponding to fantasy and in the more restricted sense of the ‘fantastic-uncanny’.<sup>15</sup>

The broadest and most inclusive understandings of fantasy define it as an elemental human impulse that is not confined to, nor defined by, literary practice, but that informs literature, art and other human beliefs and activities.<sup>16</sup> Roger Schlobin argues for a

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<sup>12</sup> Gary Kern, ‘The Search for Fantasy: From Primitive Man to Pornography,’ in George Slusser, Eric Rabkin and Robert Scholes, eds., *Bridges to Fantasy* (Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 193 (Kern’s italics).

<sup>13</sup> George Landlow, ‘And the World Became Strange: Realms of Literary Fantasy,’ in Roger Schlobin, ed., *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press; Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), 105.

<sup>14</sup> Mathews, *Fantasy*.

<sup>15</sup> The term ‘fantastic-uncanny’ is derived from Tzvetan Todorov’s influential categorisation of realistic and fantastic literature in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. For a clarifying discussion of the ambiguities surrounding the use of the terms ‘fantasy’ and ‘fantastic’ see Dieter Petzold, ‘Fantasy Fiction and Related Genres,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 32:1 (1986): 11.

<sup>16</sup> Neil Cornwell describes this approach among theorists in the section ‘Fantasy: Basically an Impulse?’ in *Literary Fantastic*, 31-33.

definition of fantasy as something elemental and fundamental to human consciousness and to the production of art and literature, writing that,

The important issue here is, of course, that fantasy lies at the very heart of human existence, and its artistic manifestations call to human qualities much more elemental than science and reason, genre and theme.<sup>17</sup>

Similar understandings of fantasy as a fundamental human impulse have been expressed by Eric Rabkin, Kathryn Hume and, more recently, Richard Mathews.<sup>18</sup> Defined in this way, fantasy is the animating force behind numerous literary forms that are also recognised as distinct, but related, genres, including children's literature, literary fairy-tales, science fiction, utopian and dystopian literature, and gothic literature. In *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Kathryn Hume argues for an inclusive definition of fantasy to support the development of a critical vocabulary that can be applied to study of fantasy as it is manifested in much of Western literature:

I have tried not to isolate fantasy from the rest of literature. It is truer to literary practice that fantasy is not a separate or indeed separable strain but rather an impulse as significant as the mimetic impulse and to recognise that both are involved in the creation of most literature.<sup>19</sup>

In Hume's analysis, "fantasy informs the spirit of all but a small part of Western literature. We are curiously blind to its presence because our traditional approaches to literature are based on mimetic assumptions".<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Tolkien scholar and philologist Tom Shippey invokes fantasy as a "metaphoric mode" that characterises much modern literature when he states that the fantastic is "the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century".<sup>21</sup>

If fantasy plays a vital role in apprehension and expression, then there are elements of fantasy not only in most types of literature, but also in most types of history. Curiously,

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<sup>17</sup> Schlobin, 'From the Old on to the New,' 5.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Rabkin concludes that fantasy "is a basic mode of human knowing" (190) which informs both narrative and non-narrative forms: "the fantastic represents a basic mode of human knowing, something much broader than the disciplines of criticism, literary history, and art history alone." *Fantastic in Literature*, 205. Similarly, in his exploration of the pre-modern roots of fantasy, Richard Mathews discusses fantasy as a "powerful, vivid mode of human consciousness" (1) and "what seems to be an aboriginal human impulse towards fantasy." *Fantasy*, 10. Hume provides a working definition of fantasy as "any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor". *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 21 (Hume's italics).

<sup>19</sup> Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, xii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), vii-viii.



fantasy critics who recognise fantasy as an ‘impulse’ give only passing consideration to the manifestations of this impulse outside of ‘literature’.<sup>22</sup> Understood as an impulse, however, fantasy must be evident in most human cultural forms, including philosophy, music, art and history. The problem with such a broad definition of fantasy is that while it recognises fantasy as a critical, imaginative and speculative mode of thought and expression, it opens up a field that is too broad in scope for the purposes of most projects in literary and cultural studies. Indeed, in their explorations of fantasy, critics will often recognise both a broader, inclusive definition of fantasy and a narrower subgroup of texts which they choose to explore. Investigations of fantasy thus tend to be focused on specific literary expressions of a broader impulse-to-fantasy. Such explorations of fantasy-as-literature do, however, suggest means of understanding the operations of fantasy in other cultural forms, including history.

Despite the potential for misinterpretation and disagreement over the precise nature and meaning of the words ‘fantasy’ and ‘fantastic’, most theorists of fantasy agree that the defining element of fantasy is the unreal or impossible. In its literary form, fantasy is thus often defined simply as the ‘literature of the unreal’ or ‘literature of the impossible’. Theorists also agree that the unreal or impossible in fantasy constitutes a deliberate and conscious departure from the ‘real’; for example, Kathryn Hume defines fantasy as “a deliberate departure from what is usually accepted as real or normal”.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Gary Wolfe writes that fantasy is “deliberate and purposeful in the ways in which it diverges from cognitive reality.”<sup>24</sup> Any understanding of the ‘literature of the unreal’ is based upon conceptions of both ‘the real’ and ‘literature of the real’. Contemporary fantasy criticism adopts an understanding of ‘the real’ which reflects the philosophical climate of the 1970s, in particular, the influence of structuralist theories of language, textuality and processes of representation. Among fantasy critics, the ‘real’ to which fantasy is ‘unreal’ is predominantly understood as a ‘fictional construct’.<sup>25</sup> The origins and nature of reality-as-fiction are pertinent to fantasy criticism insofar as these ideas shape the way in which fantasy is positioned in the politics of the real. Because

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Hume defines fantasy as an impulse “native to literature”. *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, xii. See also Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Gary Wolfe, ‘The Encounter with Fantasy,’ in Schlobin, ed., *Aesthetics of Fantasy*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Cornwell, *Literary Fantastic*, 218. Note here that ‘fictional construct’ refers to a conceptual and linguistic construct (see ch. 1, fn. 74). See also Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 7; Apter, *Fantasy Literature*, 18.

most fantasy criticism is concerned with emphasising the critical potential of the literature of the unreal, it tends to work from a conception of reality as a fictional construct that is based on cultural consensus, normative expectation and popular acceptance of hegemonic discourses.<sup>26</sup>

Leaving ontological debates aside, recognised as the literature of the unreal, fantasy is more directly defined in relation to its other: 'the literature of the real', Realism or Mimesis.<sup>27</sup> Both Fantasy and Realism are approaches to reality and representation based upon different philosophical pre-suppositions.<sup>28</sup> Fantasy deals with the 'unreal' against the constructed 'real' that is shaped according to the normative textual expectations of Realism.<sup>29</sup> Thus Fantasy is usually read as a critique of the inadequacies of Realist discourse and incorporates an alternative approach to reality and its representation.<sup>30</sup> Both Fantasy and Realism are, therefore, 'reality orientated'. Christopher Nash suggests, in *World Postmodern Fiction*, that the critic who compares fantasy texts to Realist texts is not faced with books that are more or less like real life, more or less about reality, or more or less imaginary, but with "books of certain sorts whose assumptions differ concerning *what things and how things ought to be said* about reality".<sup>31</sup> In short, fantasy, far from escaping the real, is implicated in issues of reality and representation, power, knowledge, identity, experience, interpretation and meaning. As Jackson explains, "Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real but it does not escape it; it exists in parasitic or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that 'real' world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite".<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For example, Irwin writes that "'fact' relies little on incontrovertible evidence and much on acceptance of authority, stable or changeable consensus and normative expectation." *Game of the Impossible*, 62. Hume defines reality as the social consensus based on unquestioned assumptions upon which everyday action depends. *Fantasy and Mimesis*, xi-xii.

<sup>27</sup> Critics use different terms to indicate the philosophical and literary tradition of Realism. Kathryn Hume uses the term 'mimesis' in *Fantasy and Mimesis*. David Clayton uses the term 'noematic discourse' in 'On Realistic and Fantastic Discourse,' in Slusser, Rabkin, and Scholes, eds., *Bridges to Fantasy*, 59-77. I am using Realism because mimesis is also defined as 'realism of presentation', that is, descriptive or lifelike writing. For this definition, see Christopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (London; New York: Longman, 1993) 4. I capitalise 'Realism' and 'Fantasy' here to indicate particular discourses about reality.

<sup>28</sup> See Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, xii; Apter, *Fantasy Literature*, 2; Rabkin, *Fantastic in Literature*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction*, 114.

<sup>30</sup> See Wolfe, 'The Encounter with Fantasy,' 3; Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*.

<sup>31</sup> Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction*, 3 (Nash's italics).

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, 20. Similarly, T.E. Apter writes that fantasy "must be understood not as an escape from reality but as an investigation of it." *Fantasy Literature*, 2.

The opposition between Fantasy and Realism is elaborated through a historical narrative that describes Realism or Mimesis as the dominant mode of Western philosophical and literary thought and practice and Fantasy as its eternal other: two creative forces existing in constant opposition to one another. The history of Fantasy narrates the struggle of alternative modes of consciousness and representation against a dominant Realism. According to this discourse, Realism has its roots in the Classical World, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, but rises to ascendancy in the nineteenth century alongside hegemonic scientific rationality, industrial capitalism and the middle classes. In its literary form, Realism finds its fullest expression in the modern novel.<sup>33</sup> Kathryn Hume identifies Fantasy-the-impulse with Medievalia and Romanticism, against Classicism, Christianity and the Enlightenment.<sup>34</sup> Of course, the construction of any tradition has implications for identity and thus the specific forms selected to represent the shaping movements of modern fantasy vary among critics. Despite these differences, however, the defining moment of modern fantasy is most commonly situated in the nineteenth century, associated in particular with Romanticism and exemplified by late English Romantics such as Ruskin, MacDonald and Morris.<sup>35</sup> For example, Richard Mathews constructs a broad history of Fantasy which identifies multiple pre-modern tributaries including ancient religions, medieval epic and romance, folk tale, fairy tale, and Romantic poetry. For Mathews the defining moment for modern Fantasy occurs in the nineteenth century and is embodied, in particular, in the work of George Macdonald and William Morris. In the twentieth century fantasy splits into several distinct sub-genres: high fantasy, adventure or ‘sword and sorcery’ fantasy and dark fantasy.<sup>36</sup> The problem with such histories is that, while they recognise the

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<sup>33</sup> See Ian Watt, ‘Realism and the Novel Form,’ in *The Rise of The Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968 (1957), 9-35.

<sup>34</sup> Hume writes that “thanks to the Greek philosophers, Christianity and the Enlightenment we have no vocabulary for analysing literary departures from reality.” *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Colin Manlove writes that modern fantasy developed from nineteenth century fantasy, which was part of a larger tradition of Romanticism and late-Romanticism. *Impulse of Fantasy*, x. For discussions of the nineteenth century antecedents to modern fantasy, see Toby Siebers, *The Romantic Fantastic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979). Brian Attebery traces a selective tradition of fantasy writing from folk-tale through literary fairytale to the work of English ‘Romantics’ Ruskin, Macdonald and Morris. The result is a grouping of fantasy literature he terms ‘high fantasy’, and within which he is able to identify certain consistencies of narrative form and theme. Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), esp. 1-15. On the legacies of the Romantics in twentieth century fantasy, see Kath Filmer, ‘Fantasy and the Displacement of Religious Discourse,’ in *Scepticism and Hope in Twentieth Century Fantasy Literature* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 1-22.

<sup>36</sup> Mathews, ‘From Antiquity to Infinity: The Development of Modern Fantasy,’ in *Fantasy*, 1-36.

relationship of fantasy to changing social and intellectual milieus, they tend to be highly selective and to oversimplify the complex and contradictory nature of these milieus as well as the intricacies of social and cultural development. These narratives also position fantasy, like History, in a fixed place in “the grand dichotomies of Western metaphysics”,<sup>37</sup> thus hindering attempts to consider the in-between spaces where fantasy and history meet.

Aware of such inadequacies, critics who adopt a structuralist approach to classification and definition identify significant discontinuities between past and present forms of fantasy and argue that tracing a narrative history of modern fantasy is impossible.<sup>38</sup> Definitions of fantasy as a literary tradition with a distinct path of historical development are less common than those based on systems of categorisation that attempt to establish the fundamental formal, structural or rhetorical properties of fantasy texts and to distinguish between different sub-classes of fantasy.<sup>39</sup> The existing body of fantasy criticism is comprised largely of critical approaches based upon structuralist theories and assumptions about the nature of texts and reading. According to structuralist theories texts function analogously to language systems, operating through an identifiable system of rules or code (*langue*) which can produce multiple specific manifestations (*parole*). Larry McCaffery explains that

Although the specificities of applications differ, these critics all agree with the idea that all narratives are expressed by means of a finite narrative code – a process characterised by the insistent and paradoxical interplay of the system and the variety of its specific manifestations.<sup>40</sup>

For theorists of fantasy who base their analyses on structuralist assumptions, defining and categorising fantasy literature is a matter of establishing the ‘language system’ or ‘narrative code’ underlying various literary forms. Critics often use the analogy of a

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<sup>37</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘History and Anthropology,’ *New Literary History* 21:2 (1990): 322.

<sup>38</sup> See Stephen Prickett, ‘Centring the Margins: Postmodernism and Fantasy,’ in Kath Filmer, ed., *Twentieth Century Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society, and Belief in Twentieth-Century Mythopoeic Literature* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan; New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), 84. Irwin asserts that “Fantasy has no history, that is, no continuous developmental movement.” *Game of the Impossible*, 182.

<sup>39</sup> Structuralist theories of fantasy are influenced in particular by the writing of Propp on fairytales, Russian Formalism and the work of Northrop Frye. Critics who define fantasy according to structuralist premises include Tvetzan Todorov, W. R. Irwin, Erik Rabkin, Robert Scholes, Rosemary Jackson and Christine Brook-Rose. Cornwell provides an overview of this group of theories in ‘The Fantastic - Basically a Genre,’ *Literary Fantastic*, 34-42.

<sup>40</sup> Larry McCaffery, ‘Form, Formula and Fantasy; Generative Structures in Contemporary Fiction,’ in Slusser, Rabkin, and Scholes, eds., *Bridges to Fantasy*, 24. See also Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, 17.

‘game’ to describe the way in which texts operate to produce meaning and reader response.<sup>41</sup> A game (text) operates according to certain rules which the players (readers) recognise and can understand, although every game played is different, the fundamental rules of game-play remain constant.<sup>42</sup>

The most influential analysis of fantasy literature based on structuralist theories is Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Todorov’s text has had a lasting impact on the terminology and classification systems used in fantasy criticism. For Todorov, ‘the fantastic’ is a narrative moment of indeterminacy between realistic and supernatural explanations of events which produces a ‘fantastic effect’ of ‘hesitation’ and uncertainty on the part of the reader.<sup>43</sup> According to Todorov, the fantastic lasts only as long as the reader’s uncertainty and indecision remain; he explains, “The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous.”<sup>44</sup> Numerous critics have adopted or developed Todorov’s conception of the fantastic.<sup>45</sup> Eric Rabkin, for example, states that ‘the fantastic’ occurs when the “ground rules” of the narrative, once established, are directly contradicted within the narrative, producing an effect of “astonishment’ on the part of the reader.<sup>46</sup> Todorov conceives of the fantastic not as an autonomous genre, but as a narrative moment “located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny”.<sup>47</sup> According to Todorov’s model, the uncanny and the marvellous offer different explanations for the presence of supernatural or unreal elements in a narrative. In the former, the uncanny, “the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena describes”; in the latter, the marvellous, “new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena”.<sup>48</sup> Todorov includes two additional sub-

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<sup>41</sup> Irwin describes fantasy as “intellectual play” in *Game of the Impossible*, 197; McCaffery argues for a non-referential system that conceives of fantasy as a “generative game” in ‘Form, Formula and Fantasy,’ 21-37.

<sup>42</sup> In *Game of the Impossible*, Irwin uses the analogy of a game to describe the way in which author, text and reader interact in fantasy literature.

<sup>43</sup> See Todorov, ‘Definition of the Fantastic,’ in *Fantastic*, 24-40.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Jackson, *Fantasy*; Irwin, *Game of the Impossible*; Rabkin, *Fantastic in Literature*.

<sup>46</sup> See Rabkin, *Fantastic in Literature*, 8, 28-29, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Todorov, *Fantastic*, 41.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

genres – the ‘fantastic-uncanny’ and the ‘fantastic-marvellous’ – which account for “works which sustain the hesitation of the true fantastic for a long period”.<sup>49</sup>

While Todorov insists that the fantastic is an “evanescent genre”<sup>50</sup> and that texts containing elements of the supernatural or unreal “must ultimately end in the marvellous or uncanny”,<sup>51</sup> other critics also distinguish between fiction with moments of the fantastic and fiction in which the fantastic determines the character or structure of the whole text.<sup>52</sup> This definition departs from Todorov’s definitions of the fantastic and uncanny, being closer to his conception of the marvellous. According to this understanding, the supernatural or unreal component underlies and determines the structure of the whole narrative. W.R. Irwin argues that the basic principles of fantasy, overt and conscious violation of consensus reality and the construction of a believable alternative world, have certain requirements of logic and rhetoric which shape the narrative character of the whole work.<sup>53</sup> Thus, Irwin explains that “no matter what is the central and arbitrary non-reality that generates the fantasy illusion, all elements of the narrative are governed by it.”<sup>54</sup>

A related model of fantasy literature describes fantasy in terms of world creation. This specification of fantasy is variously labelled alternative world, secondary world or otherworld fantasy, ‘objective fantasy’ or ‘neocosmic fiction’.<sup>55</sup> As Nash argues, alternative world fantasy is the most “readily recognisable and currently popular mode” of fantasy.<sup>56</sup> Understanding the fantasy text as a secondary reality is a means of conceptualising the roles of writers and readers and the relationship of the text to its socio-cultural contexts. The alternative worlds of fantasy do not function according to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>52</sup> See *ibid.*, 41; Petzold, ‘Fantasy Fiction and Related Genres,’ 14; Irwin, *Game of the Impossible*, 58.

<sup>53</sup> Irwin argues that the central formal requisite of fantasy is the “persuasive establishment and development of an improbability, an arbitrary construct under the control of logic and rhetoric.” *Game of the Impossible*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>55</sup> The term ‘secondary world’ is derived from the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis and used by numerous critics. Robert Branham uses the term ‘objective fantasy’ in ‘Principles of the Imaginary Milieu: Argument and Idea in Fantasy Fiction,’ *Extrapolation* 21:4 (1980): 328-337; and ‘Fantasy and Ineffability: Fiction at the Limits of Language,’ *Extrapolation* 24:1 (1983): 65-79. Nash uses the term ‘neocosmic’ (new world) fiction in *World Postmodern Fiction*, *passim*.

<sup>56</sup> Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction*, 61.

the norms of consensus reality, yet they maintain an internal coherence of their own, they are “worlds in which some metaphysical order implicitly holds sway”.<sup>57</sup> Thus not all texts which could be labelled fantasies can be understood as alternative world fantasies – only those which construct a believable and coherent secondary world. Further sub-classification of alternative world fantasy can be made which differentiates between such classes as high fantasy, science fiction, ‘sword and sorcery’ and dark fantasy according to the principles underlying the construction of the secondary worlds and the relationship between the secondary worlds and the primary or real world.

A further conceptual paradigm that has developed from structuralist and alternative world theories of fantasy and that characterises most critical discussions of fantasy is the division of fantasy texts according to their approach to reality – that is, the differentiation between the ‘unreal as real’, or marvellous and ‘real as unreal’, or fantastic.<sup>58</sup> Both ‘the unreal as real’ and the ‘real as unreal’ are fictions characterised by the deliberate departure from consensus reality. Yet the former (unreal as real), is typified by realism of presentation or ‘mimesis’; that is, the unreal fictional world is rendered and described as though it were real.<sup>59</sup> The ‘unreal as real’ – also referred to as the ‘marvellous’ – employs traditional, Realist narrative methods in the treatment of unreal subject matter, and thus has certain formal qualities in common with Realist literature.<sup>60</sup> In marvellous literature, unreal characters and events are often described in rich and vibrant detail, as though real. Conversely, the ‘real as unreal’ or ‘fantastic’ is characterised by the explicit problematisation of conceptions of reality and processes of representation. According to Rosemary Jackson the fantastic is “a mode of writing which *enters a dialogue with the ‘real’ and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure*”.<sup>61</sup> In fantastic literature, “ordinary meanings are suspended”, familiar modes of meaning and explanation are inadequate because “everything proliferates with potential meanings and becomes a potential danger”.<sup>62</sup> Unlike the richly described realities of marvellous fantasy, “the represented world of the fantastic

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Critics who recognise this distinction include Christine Brooke-Rose, Rosemary Jackson, W.R. Irwin and Brian Attebery.

<sup>59</sup> See Irwin, *Game of the Impossible*, 75; Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of the ‘unreal as real’ and ‘real as unreal’ in fantasy criticism, see Cornwell, *Literary Fantastic*, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, 36 (Jackson’s italics).

<sup>62</sup> Apter, *Fantasy Literature*, 2-3.

is of a different kind from the imagined universe of the marvellous and it opposes the latter's rich, colourful fullness with relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes".<sup>63</sup> The 'unreal as real' and the 'real as unreal' typically evoke different reader responses. While the marvellous is likely to be wondrous and enchanting, the fantastic may produce hesitation, uncertainty and anxiety.

These two categories of fantasy literature bear different relations to the norms of literary Realism. While marvellous fantasy departs from the Realist novel in terms of content, it maintains presentational Realism;<sup>64</sup> that is, unreal beings, objects and events are rendered and described objectively, as though real.<sup>65</sup> This type of fantasy is, in many ways, bound to Realistic traditions and methods. Irwin explains that "it imitates the validating processes of [Realism]: plausible and coherent presentation ... but it does so in support of a fictive 'reality' that violates conventions as to reality".<sup>66</sup> Conversely, the fantastic violates conventions of Realism in both content and presentation. According to Nash, in fantastic literature, the very possibility of objective description of events or experiences is questioned:

Realism has congenitally said 'yes' to the possibility and desirability of total coherence. Neocosmic [marvellous] fiction says 'Yes but not on Realism's terms' and the fiction we've now to consider [fantastic and antiRealist] says simply 'no'.<sup>67</sup>

While the marvellous is linked to world creation, the 'fantastic' tends to reject the concept of text as world, as this implies universality, coherence and closure.

It is clear from the distinction between the marvellous and the fantastic that, like historiography and literary theory, fantasy criticism has been inexorably caught up in the controversies surrounding postmodern culture and criticism. It is not surprising that fantasy, which is defined in opposition to the Realist traditions of modernity, has been connected to the postmodern. Within the contemporary philosophical climate, the

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<sup>63</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, 42.

<sup>64</sup> On the difference between presentational realism and realism of content, see Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible*, 189; Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Irwin, *Game of the Impossible*, 72.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>67</sup> Nash uses the term 'neocosmic fiction' to describe marvellous fantasy and 'antiRealism' to describe the character of contemporary 'real as unreal'/ fantastic and postmodern literature. *World Postmodern Fiction*, 77.



fantastic – ‘real as unreal’ – has become the more critically acceptable form of fantasy, particularly as it connects to postmodern thought and culture. Some critics recognise the fantastic as a mode that is particularly contemporary. Christopher Nash, for example, organises his survey of postmodern fiction around the concepts of Realism and antiRealism, tracing connections between marvellous fantasy, the fantastic-uncanny and contemporary, postmodern or antiRealist fiction.<sup>68</sup> Neil Cornwell also argues that “the fantastic has ... reached a position in which is increasingly itself becoming ‘the dominant’”.<sup>69</sup> Descriptions of postmodern literature are notably similar to descriptions of fantastic literature. Postmodern literature is characterised by the rejection of traditional narrative forms in favour of fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, dislocation, decentring, heterogeneity and intertextuality.<sup>70</sup> Christopher Nash describes anti-Realist, or postmodern, fiction as radically unreadable, disintegrative literature that seeks to dismantle our customary expectations of narratives and normal ways of reading.<sup>71</sup> According to Rosemary Jackson, fantastic texts are similarly characterised by instability of narrative and structured through patterns of contradiction and ambivalence that resist closure and eschew meaning.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, Lucie Armitt describes the fantastic as “endlessly open and thus non-containable” texts that pose “a dangerous threat to established notions of fixity and conformity”.<sup>73</sup>

The change in philosophical climate from the dominance of structuralism to that of postmodern cultural criticism, post-structuralism and deconstruction has highlighted some of the inadequacies of structuralist modes of analysis. One problem with structuralist definitions of fantasy is that, in application, texts rarely fit neatly into a single formal category. Sometimes the overlap is so great that the categories themselves become meaningless. In the climate of postmodern criticism, in which genre boundaries

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<sup>68</sup> Nash uses the term ‘antiRealist’ rather than postmodern in order to avoid the confusions associated with the terms postmodern culture and criticism. In Nash’s analysis, marvellous fantasy conforms to certain conventions of Realism but is a forerunner to antiRealist/postmodern fiction. See *World Postmodern Fiction*, esp. 47-55.

<sup>69</sup> Cornwell, *Literary Fantastic*, 211. See also Irwin, *Game of the Impossible*, 187.

<sup>70</sup> “Postmodernism is characterised by rapid and apparently unrelated transitions of pace, of time, of tone; it specialises in juxtaposing detailed realism and wild fantasy; in many ways it is less a mode of literary construction in the formal sense than a mode of disconcerting the reader, of challenging or even gratuitously assaulting conventional perspectives and habits of association.” Prickett, ‘Centring the Margins,’ 184.

<sup>71</sup> Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction*, 77-79.

<sup>72</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, 4-42.

<sup>73</sup> Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, 33.

disintegrate, structuralist categorisations of fantasy are increasingly considered “redundant distinctions”.<sup>74</sup> The structuralist conception that the meaning and interpretation of texts can be understood solely in terms of underlying ground rules or language systems has also been questioned. Post-structuralist criticism challenges the stability, integrity and independence of such signifying systems and deconstruction draws attention to the role that gaps, rifts and absences in signifying systems play in processes of representation.

A further inadequacy of both structuralist and post-structuralist modes of analysis becomes apparent when we attempt to understand fantasy as more than a textual form. The structuralist rejection of a defining history or tradition of fantasy, as expressed in Irwin’s bold statement that “fantasy has no history”,<sup>75</sup> raises again the concerns expressed by historians and others regarding purely linguistic or formal understandings of literature and history. Fantasy may have “no continuous developmental movement”;<sup>76</sup> this does not, however, imply that it has no history, nor does it imply that history has nothing to offer fantasy, or fantasy history.

Moreover, fantasy critics have been concerned not only to define and categorise fantasy, but also to establish the value and significance of fantasy texts, as literature and as popular cultural forms, in the contemporary world and in light of developing critical and cultural theories. Fantasy critics feel compelled to justify their interest in the field by affirming the social and cultural value and significance of fantasy. This mobilisation in support of fantasy can be largely attributed to its frequent association with the escapist, irrelevant, vulgar and formulaic. Hume comments that “Most fantasy is dismissed by hostile critics as ‘escapist’ and most escape literature is dismissed as ‘fantasy’”.<sup>77</sup> The most popular forms of fantasy are frequently subject to the most scathing criticism or simply dismissed, even by those with an avowed interest in fantasy literature.

While the value and significance of Realist literature can be assessed according to the standards of referential realism and verisimilitude, such evaluation has always been

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>75</sup> Irwin, *Game of the Impossible*, 182.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>77</sup> Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 9. See also Schlobin, ‘From the Old on to the New,’ 4.

inconsistent with the premises underlying fantasy literature and criticism. Confronting the problem of textual value and significance, fantasy critics face the puzzle of the relationship between imaginative texts and social realities and experiences, a problem which purely structuralist theories of language and textuality are ill-suited to resolve. It is reasonable to ask: “What significance do these literary narratives have and how is this significance transferred from the realm of the formal game to the real world?”<sup>78</sup> The answer, however, will remain elusive while the ‘formal game’ is understood as a realm bearing no relation to the ‘real world’.

Such questions locate fantasy criticism in a similar space to historiography and literary criticism. According to structuralist premises, texts can be categorised in terms of underlying narrative codes that produce meaning. Once again, the questions arise: from whence do these narrative codes, pre-generic plot structures or fictions arise and how does the critic evaluate the viability, value or significance of a particular narrative code or convention? In other words, “if fiction loses its direct representational ability, where does its ‘significance’ and importance to the author and society reside?”<sup>79</sup>

The approach that dominates contemporary criticism suggests that value and significance be accorded to texts that deconstruct traditional narrative codes and disrupt dominant systems of meaning. The narrative codes of least value are those that are most conventional, that is, the formulaic, predictable and popular.<sup>80</sup> The issue of evaluation has particular pertinence to fantasy, a field that paradoxically encompasses texts that are radically unconventional and texts that are highly formulaic.

In defence of popular, genre and marvellous fantasy, both authors and critics make several arguments. Against the accusation of escapism and irrelevance, they insist on the critical relationship between fantasy and reality. Fantasy literature, as an alternative approach or response to reality and representation, can act as a critical lens on the unquestioned assumptions and understandings that characterise consensus reality. According to one discourse of fantasy criticism, while fantasy may be thought of an

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<sup>78</sup> McCafferey, ‘Form, Formula and Fantasy,’ 24-25.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> This attitude is particularly evident amongst fantasy critics such as Brook-Rose, Jackson, Armitt and Nash, who clearly favour the subversive ‘fantastic’ over the more popular and conventional ‘marvellous’.

escape from reality, it is actually an escape from the prison of Realist interpretive structures, or normative, consensus, notions of reality – prisons of the mind.<sup>81</sup> Fantasy author C.S. Lewis suggests that Realism is a prison; to those who are so “ready with the charge of escape” he offers the simple question his friend, Tolkien, had asked him: “What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?” and gives the obvious answer: “gaolers”.<sup>82</sup>

Fantasy literature, however, clearly varies in the degree that its approach to, and representation of, reality presents an alternative or challenge to consensus realities or normative understandings. In more recent criticism, the division of fantasy into marvellous and fantastic literature tends to present the former as non-critical, formulaic consolation while the latter is considered to be a truly subversive, critical mode.<sup>83</sup> The nature of fantastic literature’s subversive action is, however, not well understood. Rosemary Jackson writes that “the topography, themes, and myths of the fantastic all work together to suggest this movement towards a realm of non-signification, towards a zero-point of non-meaning.”<sup>84</sup> Contra Jackson, myths and moments of narrative irony do not tend towards non-signification. Apter’s statement that in fantasy “everything proliferates with potential meanings and becomes a potential danger”<sup>85</sup> is a more accurate account of the signifying action of the fantastic.<sup>86</sup>

Critics including Eric Rabkin, Kathryn Hume, Dieter Petzold and David Clayton all suggest that, within the broader field of fantasy literature, fantasy texts relate to conceptual and social realities in different ways, each with its own distinct critical action. Hume, for example, outlines four possible approaches to reality within fantasy: escapism or the literature of illusion, expressive or the literature of vision, didactic or

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<sup>81</sup> Rabkin, *Fantastic in Literature*, 42.

<sup>82</sup> C.S. Lewis, ‘On Science Fiction,’ in Walter Hooper, ed., *Of This and Other Worlds* (London: Collins, 1982), 89.

<sup>83</sup> Jackson defines the fantastic as essentially subversive, but is concerned that marvellous fantasy texts function “as conservative vehicles for social and institutional repression.” *Fantasy*, 155. Similarly, Nash states that “alternative world fantasy is a deeply conservative mode.” *World Postmodern Fiction*, 56.

<sup>84</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, 42.

<sup>85</sup> Apter, *Fantasy Literature*, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Colin Manlove’s argument that delight in creation and being is central to fantasy. Manlove writes that the core theme of fantasy is “its insistence on and celebration of the separate identities of created things.” *Impulse of Fantasy Literature*, ix.

the literature of revision, and disillusion, in which reality is declared unknowable.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Dieter Petzold differentiates between forms of fantasy according to the relationship their secondary worlds have to the real world: fantastic-uncanny or gothic fantasy is subversive, challenging the readers concept of reality and sense of security; utopian and science fiction literature is alternative, speculating and suggesting different possible realities and adventure; sword and sorcery fantasy is desiderative, creating a pleasing secondary world based on escapism and wish fulfilment; and much secondary world fantasy is applicative, governed by certain rules which apply to both the secondary reality and primary reality.<sup>88</sup>

Even the most escapist of fictions, however – including the pastoral, adventure fantasy, comic novels, detective stories, and thrillers – which do not directly encourage conscious engagement and critique of normative assumptions about reality, can be valued as sources of pleasure, diversion and play. The critical discourse that surrounds ‘play’ suggests that such moments of diversion in literature and life “provide not only entertainment but one means to keeping a clear perspective on our required concerns of thought and feeling”.<sup>89</sup> The worlds and experiences of play may act as alternatives and critical mirrors to the worlds of the consensual, acceptable and normative. And in postmodern terms, play may be valued simply as a source of pleasure that has no particular critical action.

Other critics suggest that the most formulaic or escapist of marvellous fantasy, such as heroic fantasy and ‘sword and sorcery’, can be valuable for reasons other than the subversion of dominant modes of thinking. Indeed, subversion and dissent need not be automatically judged best critical practice. In an article entitled ‘Hammering the Demons: Sword, Sorcery and Contemporary Society’,<sup>90</sup> John Strugnell explores heroic fantasies which centre on a conflict between good and evil. He suggests that such texts are “characteristic of a widespread response to modern life”,<sup>91</sup> a response that upholds the agency and empowerment of individuals in the face of hostile and overwhelming

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<sup>87</sup> Hume, ‘Part II: The Uses of Fantasy,’ in *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 55-146.

<sup>88</sup> Petzold, ‘Fantasy Fiction and Related Genres,’ 16-19.

<sup>89</sup> Irwin, *Game of The Impossible*, 197.

<sup>90</sup> John Strugnell, ‘Hammering the Demons: Sword, Sorcery and Contemporary Society,’ in Filmer, ed., *Twentieth Century Fantasists*, 172-182.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

forces and provides “a meaningful way of talking about life in the twentieth century”.<sup>92</sup> Thus, while conflict between good and evil may be criticised as an over-simplification of complex ethical and political issues, it may also be defended as a valid means of conceptualising and handling such issues.

The mixed relationship between fantasy, formula, escapism and social criticism has been effectively expressed by Robert Crossley in his article ‘Pure and Applied Fantasy: From Faerie to Utopia’.<sup>93</sup> Crossley writes that a persistent tension exists within fantasy literature between private gratification and social obligation;<sup>94</sup> that is, the imagination as a means of escaping to other places, times or worlds – a source of the consolation – exists in constant relation with the imagination as a means of exploring alternatives to, and possibilities for changing, contemporary social realities – a source of criticism. Crossley’s understanding of the social relevance of the fantastic imagination is worthy of elaboration. Fantasy as escapism may provide a source of private gratification which at the same time has a social function. If a hegemonic social order eschews individualism, then sources of private gratification have subversive potential; alternatively if a hegemonic social order depends of the gratification of selfish-individualism, then sources of private gratification may support that order. Fantasy as a source of consolation may either subvert or support a social order depending on the way in which fantasy acts as consolation and whether this reveals or obscures the inadequacies of an existing social order. Fantasy may perpetuate ideas which support and maintain a hegemonic social order, or it may undermine, disrupt or displace such ideas.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, as societies are dynamic constellations, a fantasy which was once subversive may become conventional or hegemonic and vice-versa. Ultimately, the social function of fantasy depends on the relationship between the fantastic imagination, processes of reading and interpretation and the workings of the existing social order. In short, fantasy is neither intrinsically subversive nor purely escapist and conformist;

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>93</sup> Robert Crossley, ‘Pure and Applied Fantasy: From Faerie to Utopia,’ in Schlobin, ed., *Aesthetics of Fantasy*, 176-191.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>95</sup> For example, Karl Mannheim distinguishes between imaginative forms in terms of their social function, which changes as a society changes. According to Mannheim’s model, the ‘ideological’ supports existing dominant social orders and the ‘utopian’ undermines existing social orders. The latter may also produce social change and, in doing so, transform its relationship to the social order. *Ideology and Utopia: an Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & co., 1936).

there is no straightforward way in which to evaluate the politics of fantasy as the imaginative forms of fantasy exist in multiple possible relations to broader social constellations. Moreover, such social constellations are poorly understood with reference to purely textual structures, and call upon the interdisciplinary approach – which includes history – adopted by contemporary cultural criticism.

In order to conceptualise the complex relationships between fantasy texts, writers, readers and their social milieus, most fantasy criticism turns to the alternative world model that describes texts as secondary worlds which can be conceived in relation to a primary reality or world. This model, as previously discussed, is aligned with the marvellous and has a longstanding tradition within fantasy criticism and, while challenged by post-structuralist and deconstructive criticism (which target the coherence of world-systems), remains the most effective model for understanding fantasy in social and cultural context.

According to the ‘alternative world model’, the secondary worlds of literature are the “totality of imaginary characters, actions and setting evoked by literary discourse”<sup>96</sup> and have an ontological status different from that of the real world, although not totally independent or self-referential. The concept of secondary or alternative worlds posits a ‘primary world’ – or more appropriately ‘worlds’ – to which the alternative world relates. Fantasists and critics’ use of the concept of ‘primary world’ is somewhat vague. The ‘primary world’ appears to parallel ‘consensus reality’ in that emphasis is placed on the intellectual or perceptual component of human realities.<sup>97</sup> In short, the ‘primary world’ can be said to consist of the shared imaginative constellations that constitute a ‘philosophical climate’ or ‘imaginative milieu’<sup>98</sup> – structures which are neither static nor universal, but historically and cultural located and subject to change – and are related to specific material and social patterns of existence. The centrality of the primary/secondary world conceptual paradigm to fantasy criticism is evident in the titles

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<sup>96</sup> Petzold, ‘Fantasy Fiction and Related Genres,’ 14.

<sup>97</sup> The use of ‘consensus reality’ and ‘primary world’ in fantasy criticism suggests a phenomenological model of perception. Emphasis is placed on the shared structures or systems of ideas that shape human apprehension and expression. This mode of thinking does not imply that the real is purely imaginative, or that there are no material determinants of being. For further discussion of the phenomenological model of perception see, Robert Collins, ‘Fantasy and Forestructures: The Effect of Philosophical Climate on Perceptions of the Fantastic,’ in Slusser, Rabkin, and Scholes, eds., *Bridges to Fantasy*, 108-120.

<sup>98</sup> See Collins, ‘Fantasy and Forestructures,’ 110; McCaffery, ‘Form, Formula and Fantasy,’ 24-26.

of numerous studies in which the word ‘world’ is conspicuous.<sup>99</sup> Among fantasy critics, the basic model for the conception of texts as ‘secondary worlds’ is derived from the work of fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien, whose essay ‘On Fairy-stories’ has had lasting impact on fantasy criticism.<sup>100</sup> The critical essays of C.S. Lewis have also been influential.<sup>101</sup>

According to the ‘secondary world’ model adopted by both Tolkien and Lewis, the critical effect of fantasy works through estrangement or defamiliarisation, wonder and recovery. Estrangement describes the way in which fantasy literature strips objects from their familiar contextual surroundings and bonds of association through placement in new contexts and relationships.<sup>102</sup> Fantasy defamiliarises not only objects but also ideas; this is particularly the case in science fiction.<sup>103</sup> Robert Branham writes that “the business of fantasy is to transplant the idea intact to an alien socio-cultural milieu, leaving its previous associations behind”<sup>104</sup> and thus to give the idea new meaning.<sup>105</sup> According to Tolkien’s understanding, the immediate effect of estrangement is wonder or enchantment.

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<sup>99</sup> Examples include C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, Walter Hooper ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966); James Gunn, *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975); David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974); Lin Carter, *Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Fantasy* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973); Jane Weedman, *Women Worldwalkers: New Dimensions Of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Lubbock TX: Texas Tech Press, 1985).

<sup>100</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ 1947, reprinted in *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), 11-72.

<sup>101</sup> See the collection of essays by C.S. Lewis, *Of This and Other Worlds*.

<sup>102</sup> For a brief description of estrangement in fantasy, see Branham, ‘Principles of the Imaginary Milieu,’ 332. See also Casey Fredericks, “‘Estrangement’ in Mythology and Science Fiction,” in *The Future of Eternity: Mythologies of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 34-64. Similarly, Brian Attebery states that “Fantasy invokes wonder by making the impossible seem familiar and the familiar seem new and strange.” *Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, 3.

<sup>103</sup> Darko Suvin’s understanding of science fiction as “the literature of cognitive estrangement” has been highly influential in the field of SF studies. Suvin asserts that “SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.” ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,’ *College English* 34:3 (1972): 375.

<sup>104</sup> Branham, ‘Principles of the Imaginary Milieu,’ 333.

<sup>105</sup> “In such worlds we are allowed to see just how far it is possible to break down the connections between various concepts or between certain concepts and types of experiences without completely destroying the chosen concepts.” Lawrence Gagnon, ‘Philosophy and Fantasy,’ in Francelia Butler, ed., *Children’s Literature* (1972), quoted in Branham, ‘Principles of the Imaginary Milieu,’ 334. Kathryn Hume describes the various techniques used by fantasists to provide this quality of enchantment as additive, subtractive or contrastive (including magical devices, mythological or metaphoric dimension to the plot, divine or demonic, numinous worlds). *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 83.



The transformative effects of estrangement and wonder occur when the reader returns his attention to the primary world. What Tolkien referred to as ‘Recovery’ is an effect upon the reader’s way of looking at the primary world: “Recovery is a re-gaining – regaining of a clear view”.<sup>106</sup> The reader looks upon the primary world with a fresh, renewed awareness resulting in a “recovery of freshness in experience and vision by ‘de-automatizing’ our responses to and expression of them”.<sup>107</sup> Defamiliarisation has the effect of “making the familiar seem unfamiliar for a time, so we can come to know it anew and more fully”.<sup>108</sup> Familiar objects are given renewed significance. In Tolkien’s words, “We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness and familiarity – from possessiveness.”<sup>109</sup>

According to this understanding, fantasy literature “which calls attention to the nature of its own reality helps free us from our automatic filtering and makes us freshly aware of our own vision of reality”<sup>110</sup> and the assumptions which underlie our perceptions and experiences of reality. In short, fantasy has an implicit critical function. Fantasy texts usually invite conscious comparison between the alternative and primary worlds and are designed to call attention to differences between them.<sup>111</sup> Comparison makes “us feel the limitations of our own notions of reality, often by presenting one that seems more rich, more intense, more coherent (or incoherent) or somehow more significant.”<sup>112</sup> Hume argues that “If we allow ourselves to enter this kind of augmented world, we are made uncomfortable aware of the thinness and insignificant of our own material reality”.<sup>113</sup> C.S. Lewis, however, argued that the richness of secondary worlds, rather than sending “us back to our daily lives unsettled and discontented ... sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual” and “strengthens our relish for life”.<sup>114</sup> According to Lewis, fantasy stories give us new experiences and thus, instead of simply “commenting on life”, such stories can actually add to it.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ 52. See also Branham, ‘Fantasy and Ineffability,’ 76.

<sup>107</sup> Branham, ‘Fantasy and Ineffability,’ 76.

<sup>108</sup> Fredericks, *Future of Eternity*, 39.

<sup>109</sup> Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ 52.

<sup>110</sup> Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 100.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>114</sup> C.S. Lewis, ‘On Stories,’ in *Of This and Other Worlds*, 38.

<sup>115</sup> Lewis, ‘Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said,’ in *Of This and Other Worlds*, 74.

Not only do estrangement, wonder and recovery affect one's sense of objects and ideas, they also impact on one's sense of self. C.S. Lewis contended that "to construct plausible and moving 'other worlds' you must draw on the only real 'other world' we know, that of the spirit."<sup>116</sup> That the secondary worlds of fantasy embody psychological realities expressed in symbolic form is an understanding developed in much fantasy criticism.<sup>117</sup> The concern of fantasy with the inner worlds of the psyche and the transcendent worlds of the spiritual distinguishes it most clearly as an impulse and literary form. Fantasy seeks to affirm the significance, and ultimately the reality, of ideas. This quality of fantasy is frequently understood as a response to the inadequacies of the dominant Realist tradition with respect to the apprehension and expression of the intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of being.<sup>118</sup> Here fantasy draws on the Romantic tradition and its affirmation of the value of the emotional, irrational, and spiritual. Fantasy has also been described as the literature of ideas, or as philosophical, imaginative or speculative literature.<sup>119</sup> Genre fantasy may be distinguished from its close relative, science fiction, on the basis of the ideas which form the foundations of its alternative worlds: while science fiction is associated with intellectual, cognitive or conceptual formations, fantasy is associated with the emotional, irrational and spiritual aspects of thought.<sup>120</sup>

As a result, a significant proportion of the body of fantasy criticism is based upon psychoanalytic theories and myth theories which place emphasis on inner-realities and

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<sup>116</sup> Lewis, 'On Stories,' 35-36.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Apter, 'Introduction: Fantasy and Psychoanalysis,' in *Fantasy Literature*, 1-11; Gary K. Wolfe, 'Symbolic Fantasy,' *Genre* 8 (1975): 194-209.

<sup>118</sup> The conceptual paradigms for analysis of fantasy texts in terms of individual and collective psychology are derived from a number of highly influential texts and theorists including Robert Graves' analysis of the literary forms of myth in *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, 1947 (London: Faber, 1961); Joseph Campbell's theory of the 'monomyth' developed in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949) and *The Masks of God Volume IV: Creative Mythology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968); Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of fairy-tales as imaginative representations of the processes of individual psychological development in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 1975/76 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1979); and Jungian theory, in particular see Carl Jung, 'The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairy Tales,' in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1953), 207-254.

<sup>119</sup> See Branham, 'Principles of the Imaginary Milieu,' 331.

<sup>120</sup> See, in particular, Gary Wolfe, 'The Encounter with Fantasy,' in Schlobin, ed., *Aesthetics of Fantasy*, 1-15. On the emotional and spiritual significance of fantasy, see Fredericks, *The Future of Eternity*; Hume 'Ch 8 - The Problem of Meaning and the Power of Fantasy,' in *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 168-183; Mathews, *Fantasy Literature*.

the role of the unconscious in apprehension and expression. Like fairy tales and myths, certain aspects of fantasy lend themselves to psychoanalytic approaches. Despite the magical and unreal environments of fantasy, fantasy texts often have a universality of characterisation; that is, the hero of fantasy is often a conventional, ‘everyman’ placed in an unconventional environment.<sup>121</sup> Thus Gary Wolfe describes fantasy as a mode that embraces the empirically and socially impossible, but the psychologically valid.<sup>122</sup> Fantasy narratives frequently take the form of a personal quest that can be understood as both an outer and inner journey, and which traces the spiritual and personal development of the individual. Such enactments of individual psychology and development are connected to theories of collective or social psychology. Here the objects, environments and characters of fantasy may be interpreted as archetypes of the collective unconscious, which, in narrative form, constitute myth. Fantasy is thus often described as ‘mythopoeic literature’ or as a form of ‘contemporary mythology’<sup>123</sup> that gives meaning to the individual and the world through the use of archetypal symbols and mythical narratives which resonate with the individual and collective psyche. Myth criticism and Jungian criticism are approaches to the analysis of fantasy texts that offer explanation for the continuing popularity of fantasy as well as conceptualising the relationship between fantasy and other social and cultural forms.

Fantasy’s focus on the psychological and spiritual is also emphasised by critics attempting to convey the value and significance of fantasy in contemporary social contexts. Understood as engaging with fundamental psychological and spiritual realities, fantasy can be, and often is, justified and valued as essential to the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Harvey Cox’s statement that “the survival of mankind ... has been placed in jeopardy by the repression of festivity and fantasy... without fantasy a society cuts itself off from the visceral fonts of renewal” is oft quoted.<sup>124</sup> This discourse locates the importance of fantasy in its engagement with the unconscious and psychic aspects of being, which are understood as fundamental shaping forces behind human ideas and action. Fantasy’s psychological role may be considered particularly

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<sup>121</sup> See Branham, ‘Principles of the Imaginary Mileau,’ 330.

<sup>122</sup> Wolfe, ‘Encounter with Fantasy,’ in Schlobin, ed., *Aesthetics of Fantasy*, 9.

<sup>123</sup> See Fredericks, *Future of Eternity*; Sheila Finch-Reyner, ‘The Unseen Shore: Thoughts on the Popularity of Fantasy,’ *Journal of Popular Culture* 18:4 (1985): 127-134.

<sup>124</sup> Harvey Cox, *Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (1969), cited in Roger Schlobin, ‘Introduction: Fantasy and its Literature,’ in *The Literature of Fantasy: A Comprehensive, Annotated Bibliography of Modern Fantasy Fiction* (New York, London: 1979), xxvii.

important in the late-modern world as “we are suffering from what Carl Gustav Jung called ‘an unprecedented impoverishment of symbols’, a psychologically critical vacuum is left by the absence of an accepted (and acceptable) mythology”.<sup>125</sup> Fantasy is both a panacea for, and response to, a sense of lack arising from the social conditions of late-modernity. For example, Gary Wolfe observes that “Fantasy, at least of the mythopoeic variety, arises when the dominant cultural attitude of a generation grows so narrow that it fails to account for, or to provide sufficient means for the expression of, any significant aspects of man’s psychological and spiritual makeup.”<sup>126</sup> Fantasy thus articulates psychological realities as a means of engagement with social realities.

Such discourses surrounding the significance of fantasy in the contemporary world can be situated in the broader context of an ongoing struggle between Fantasy and Realism. For example, Roger Schlobin envisages the contemporary world as characterised by the continued dominance of Realism, rationality and science, but also by the existence of a range of alternative fantastic beliefs and practices such as the revival of ancient myths, new age spirituality and pseudo-medievalism. Similarly, Kath Filmer recognises a growing appreciation of fantasy “through the various expressions of the New Age philosophy, of the powerful icon of the Great mother goddess, and of elements of Taoism, Buddhism and fundamentalist, miracle orientated Christianity”<sup>127</sup> and its integration into the late twentieth century lifestyle and culture. David Jasper also suggests that the disturbing relevance of fantasy lies in its closeness to our experience of contemporary culture:

Fantasy literature allows us to break out of inherited traditions of ‘realism’ – which are often simply subtle forms of coercion – and re-establish a vision of society beyond the impossible demands of postmodernity, and the economic and cultural traps of twentieth century ideologies.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Sheila Finch-Reyner, ‘The Unseen Shore: Thoughts on the Popularity of Fantasy,’ *Journal of Popular Culture* 18:4 (1985): 128. Emphasising a similar point, Roger Schlobin quotes Erich Neumann’s assessment of the modern age as “an epoch in which man’s incapacity to deal with psychic [adj. from psyche] nature, with the human soul, has become more appallingly obvious than before.” *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, 25, cited in Schlobin, ‘Introduction,’ *Literature of Fantasy*, xxi.

<sup>126</sup> Wolfe, ‘Symbolic Fantasy,’ 205.

<sup>127</sup> Kath Filmer, ‘Introduction,’ in Filmer, ed., *Twentieth-Century Fantasists*, 2.

<sup>128</sup> David Jasper, ‘Foreword: The Stream of Time Continuous as Life,’ in Filmer, ed., *Twentieth-Century Fantasists*, x.

Such comments are indications of the desire to understand fantasy beyond textual form, as spiritual, intellectual, and material expression actively engaged in broader social and cultural transformations.

For fantasy, as one of the formations of modernity, the postmodern milieu offers new spaces, new challenges and new possibilities. Fantasy and postmodernity are connected but at the same time antithetical. Postmodern literature and criticism fits neatly with the fantastic-uncanny, but is in many ways opposed to alternative world or marvellous fantasy, which remains the most popular, recognised form of fantasy in literature. The secondary world fantasies such as those of the founders of high fantasy, Lewis and Tolkien, are anti-modern and anti-Realist in their rejection of instrumental, scientific-industrial modernity and literary Realism, but are also clearly a product of and part of the contradictions of modernity. Alternative world fantasy has, however, been revived and reshaped in the postmodern world and continues to engage with shifted and shifting primary worlds.

That historical thought and practice itself is also embroiled in the dialogue between Realism and Fantasy, modernity and postmodernity, is a dimension of both fantasy criticism and historiography that is rarely explored. Fantasy criticism is, at present, characterised by an understanding of history that emphasises the dominance of traditional history with close ties to Realism and modernity. While it may be possible to describe fantasy as anti-Realist and even anti-modern, it is difficult to imagine it as anti-historical. Can fantasy be applied as a critical lens on history as it is on reality and representation? Furthermore, can new dimensions of historical thought and practice enrich our understanding of fantasy?

## Chapter 3 – Fantasy Encounters History

Fantasy empowers the creative and transformative potential of the imagination to act as a magic mirror renewing our visions of ourselves and our worlds. As a vital creative impulse, fantasy underlies art and literature, instilling these forms with enchantment and wonder. Nonetheless, the role of this fundamental impulse in forms of human expression beyond art and literature, such as history, is rarely discussed. Historians may take on many garbs – those of the politician, the philosopher, the artist, the poet and even the sage – but they seldom wear the costume of the wizard and generally eschew the magical arts. Historians and fantasists, surveying the domains of fantasy and history, would appear to reside on opposite sides of a conceptual and creative divide. This picture, however, misrepresents the territories of fantasy and history, and an exploration of the historical imagination in fantasy literature reveals a different landscape altogether.

There exist powerful connections between the impulse of fantasy and our perceptions of history – understood in a dual sense as both the past itself and as representations of the past – that are manifested in fantasy literature. History and fantasy interact in ways that affect our understandings of both the fantastic and the historical. Historical material is used as a source for the settings, characters and themes of much fantasy literature. As speculative literature, fantasy may also ‘play’ with conventional narratives of time and history. In addition, many secondary world fantasies rely on the creation of a believable, coherent world that has its own past and history. In all of these cases, fantasy texts implicitly and explicitly explore the relationship between the past, present and future and thus the nature of historical existence and the meaning of ‘history’. Given the multiple possible manifestations of history in fantasy, the insights of contemporary historiography offer different ways for exploring the meaning, significance and appeal of fantasy texts.

While fantasy critics have identified the affinity of fantasy literature, pastness and history,<sup>1</sup> attempts to elucidate this connection have been hindered by incomplete and limited understandings of history and its role in fantastic cosmogenesis (world-creation). The association between fantasy and history reveals an approach to history among fantasists that is more than rejection of modern, scientific and rational historical discourse or enchantment with an idealised pre-modern past. History or, more accurately, histories, play a formative role in shaping the fictional worlds of fantasy and defining the field as an imaginative space. This process necessarily involves engagement with questions concerning the nature of human existence in space and time, questions which locate fantasy within broader historiographical modes.

Fascination with the past is particularly evident among those authors who represent the nineteenth and twentieth century antecedents of much contemporary fantasy. Enchantment with and invocation of the past is conspicuous within the English tradition of high fantasy that includes among its key authors George Macdonald, William Morris, John Ruskin and, in the twentieth century, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. In tracing this tradition of high-fantasy, Brian Attebery identifies an attitude that appears common to these authors:

More difficult to point out, but equally characteristic are certain feelings that seem to underlie the great fantasies. Among them are respect for the past, love of simple things and simple language, a delight in the hills and forests of the English countryside, an unorthodox but profound religious sense, and a fascination with the impossible.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the past, or of a particular, romanticised ‘past’, is actually central to all of the above qualities: the love of simple things, delight in the English countryside, religiosity, and fascination with the impossible. In short, the attitude or worldview that Attebery identifies is characterised by a particular mode of historical consciousness, one that may be described as Romantic.

The nineteenth century antecedents of modern fantasy belonged to broader tradition of Romanticism in Europe and Britain, and this connection also situates fantasy within an

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 14; K.L. Maunde, ‘History in Fantasy,’ in John Clute and John Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997), 468.

<sup>2</sup> Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition*, 14.

influential historiographical tradition. Those aspects of Romantic thought that are related to the impulse of fantasy include a critical rejection of certain aspects of the Enlightenment and modernity – instrumental rationality, dehumanising and alienating technologies – and an emphasis on the inner-self, the spiritual, the irrational and the unconscious. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in particular, is recognised as an important component of fantasy’s Romantic heritage. The Pre-Raphaelites expressed a Romantic reaction to the Industrial Revolution in Britain, in particular to emergent technologies and processes of production, urbanisation and changed work conditions and social relations that alienated men from their creations and from each other. They “looked to the past, and particularly to an imagined medieval past, for an alternative society”.<sup>3</sup> Artist and writer William Morris saw the arts and crafts of the Middle Ages as an alternative to the sordid vulgarity of production in modern industrial England and attempted to recreate these arts in his own work. The Pre-Raphaelite’s fascination with the medieval world was “comprehensive”, including not only the literature, but the art, architecture, crafts, social structures, and religious practices of the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> This fascination also formed part of a wider “enthusiasm for all things medieval” in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> For the Pre-Raphaelites, the past could be imagined as an organic unity that had been lost in an age of fragmentation and alienation and could thus act as a critical mirror to reflect and transform the present. In short, a particular conception of the past and thus history was central to their worldview.

The connection between fantasy, Romantic protest and the appeal to the past continued into the twentieth century. Those authors often identified as the founders of contemporary fantasy, in particular ‘The Inklings’ – C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams – were also enamoured of the pre-modern past and of folktale, fairytale, legend, and medieval romance. K.L. Maunde, in an article on ‘History in Fantasy’ in the *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*, suggests that pseudo-medievalism is one of the defining characteristics of genre fantasy: “To many writers and readers, a fantasy novel should be set against a quasi-historical (very often quasi-medieval) background, and the boundaries between historical novels and fantasies can be thin.”<sup>6</sup> Of course,

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<sup>3</sup> Colin Manlove, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1983), x.

<sup>4</sup> Beverley Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Arthurian Literature Since 1800* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), 129.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Maunde, ‘History in Fantasy,’ 468.



there exist a range of historical and cultural fields, rich with symbols, from which fantasists can draw emblems and stories that evoke pastness, exotic otherness and the magic of the fantastic. Certain imaginative constellations of the pre-modern past, however, seem to occupy a dominant position in fantasy literature. The principal sources of theme and motif in modern fantasy are indeed drawn from the medieval, including Anglo-Saxon and Welsh history, Celtic mythology and Arthurian legend. European Classical and other world traditions are rich imaginative veins of fantastic gold. Ancient Greek and Roman myths and legends, Nordic mythology and aspects of Middle Eastern and ancient Egyptian history are frequently used sources of symbol and story in fantastic literature.<sup>7</sup> Asiatic cultures are represented to a much lesser extent in popular Western fantasy, although some writers explore elements of ancient and popular Chinese and Indian religious and spiritual beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

Identification with European Romanticism and fascination with the medieval past remain defining elements of contemporary fantasy. Fantasy criticism insists upon a strong connection between fantasy and Romantic ideologies and traditions which often leads to charges of nostalgia. Manlove comments that “A ... nostalgia or escapist urge for greater beauty, wonder, excitement or even for a supposed medieval order itself governs much fantasy, from the German Romantic writers of fairy tale to C.S. Lewis.”<sup>9</sup> Contemporary fantasy literature, particularly in its more popular forms – paperbacks etched with gold and silver, inscribed with swords and dragons, filled with knights and castles and magic – can also be seen as part of a broader “neo-medieval wave” in literature and popular culture: the “avalanche” of “pseudo medieval pulp” that Umberto Eco encounters during his travels in hyperreality.<sup>10</sup>

It is, however, inadequate to describe Romantic historical consciousness as simple nostalgia for an idyllic, pre-modern world. The Romantic approach to history was characterised by a far more complex and reflexive engagement with the past, historical

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of these influences as the “tributaries” of modern fantasy, see Richard Mathews, ‘From Antiquity to Infinity: The Development of Modern Fantasy,’ *Fantasy: The Liberation of the Imagination* (New York; London: Routledge, 2002), 1-36. See also Diana Tixier Herald, ‘Chapter 4 – Saga, Myth, and Legend,’ in *Fluent in Fantasy: A Guide to Reading Interests* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1999), 49-64.

<sup>8</sup> For examples, see Herald, ‘Asia’ and ‘Africa and the Middle East,’ in *Fluent in Fantasy*, 60-63.

<sup>9</sup> Manlove, *Impulse of Fantasy*, x.

<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘Dreaming of the Middle Ages,’ in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (London: Pan Books in association with Secker & Warburg, 1987), 61-72.

consciousness and the writing of history. The period following the Enlightenment, the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, represents an extremely rich time in the theorising and writing of history. In *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, historiographer Stephen Bann explores the “desire for history” as a thread, indeed the most significant thread, traversing the entire Romantic movement.<sup>11</sup> Narratives which reduce accounts of this period to the emergence of Rankean scientific history and, with the full alienating force of modernity, divide history from literature, myth and fantasy, preclude any understanding of the fundamental relationship between the historical and the fantastic. It is during this period that Ann Rigney locates the beginnings of the debates which remain at the centre of controversies surrounding history in the age of the postmodern.<sup>12</sup> Rigney uses the term ‘Romantic historicism’ to describe the extension of history into realms beyond the political and economic in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the beginnings of the project to write an alternate history close to the experience of ordinary people, extending history beyond politics into the domain of culture.<sup>13</sup> During this period, the extension of history into new domains – such as intellectual and cultural history – “[generated] ways of thinking history that [complicated] both its structure (its linking to sequence and development) and its existence as an essentially empirical discipline”<sup>14</sup> and led to the emergence of new varieties of history and dynamic historical debate and experimentation.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Stephen Bann describes a “remarkable enhancement in the consciousness of history” during the Romantic period. He writes that the “desire for history” was expressed in “innumerable ways”<sup>16</sup> such that history became “a flood that overrode all disciplinary barriers and, finally, when the barriers were no longer easy to perceive, became a substratum to almost every type of cultural activity.”<sup>17</sup> The extension of history into new domains and the “proliferation of historical awareness”<sup>18</sup> developed at this time fostered

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. See also Tilottama Rajan, ‘Introduction: Imagining History,’ *PMLA* 118:3 (2003): 427-435; Mark Salber Phillips, ‘Relocating Inwardness: Historical Distance in the Transition from Enlightenment to Romantic Historiography,’ *PMLA* 118:3 (2003): 436-449.

<sup>14</sup> Rajan, ‘Introduction,’ 433.

<sup>15</sup> Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, 4.

a highly self-reflective approach to historical thought and practice.<sup>19</sup> Engagement with ideas in intellectual history, in particular, challenged historical consciousness and discourse to extend beyond empirical modes of understanding and representation. Rigney notes that historians were, and remain, confronted primarily with a problem of representability, that is, the search for modes of discourse and representation that communicate meaningfully the imaginings that they have of the past.<sup>20</sup> It is the Romantic historicist tradition – which understands history as a quest for meaning in a vast realm of human existence reaching through time and space, suspended between mind and matter, the immanent and the transcendent – that imbues fantasy.

While critics have identified the link between modern fantasy and history, they have struggled to conceptualise the nature and the complexity of this connection. As with historical fiction, the ‘historical’ within fantasy is predominantly defined as an existing, and relatively fixed, historical record comprised of recognisable persons, places and events.<sup>21</sup> What distinguishes historical fantasy from historical fiction is the additional presence of elements of the fantastic – unreal, supernatural or impossible – in the former. Because they invoke the ‘real-historical’, historical fantasies are usually set in the past of the primary world, rather than in an alternative otherworld.<sup>22</sup> Such texts, however, may represent a fantastic otherworld that is linked, crosses boundaries or merges with the ‘real-historical’ primary world.

While historical fiction is a peculiar hybrid form that exists at the intersection of the historical and the fictional, historical fantasy is an even more unlikely amalgam. A text that is both ‘real-historical’ and ‘fantastic’ is a constellation of apparently antithetical cosmic forces: on the one hand History – factual, empirical, scientific, modern, and dependent on Realist form and modes of expression – and on the other hand Fantasy – inventive, imaginative, unreal, and ambiguously related to literary Realism. Thus fantasy, when it draws its themes, settings, characters, symbols and inspiration from

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<sup>19</sup> See Rajan, ‘Introduction,’ 432-433.

<sup>20</sup> Rigney contends that “Historical representation is dependent in practice on the representability of events and not on their reality as such.” *Imperfect Histories*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> The ‘real historical record’ corresponds to Berkhofer’s description of the dominant form of modern history defined as the ‘Great Story’. See ch. 1, fn. 38.

<sup>22</sup> The ‘alternative world model’ posits the secondary worlds of literature as the “totality of imaginary characters, actions and setting evoked by literary discourse.” Dieter Petzold, ‘Fantasy Fiction and Related Genres,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 32:1 (1986): 14. ‘Primary world’ refers to everyday consensus reality against which the ‘unreal’ fantasy world is defined.

History is quite aptly described as creating an amorphous field of possibilities and impossibilities – an enchanting “territory between fantasy and history” where the unreal and the real coexist and collide.<sup>23</sup> This nebulous space is further clouded by the fact that the ‘real-historical’ past from which much fantasy literature draws its inspiration is often pre-modern, medieval or ancient material which already blur the modern boundaries between fiction, myth and history. The territory between fantasy and history is, however, a space of great importance to both because its very existence defies the binary that restricts history to History and fantasy to the unreal. It is a space which rests on the possibility of existence, experience and consciousness that is at once historical, mythical, fictional and fantastic. Our ability to explore this space, however, is circumscribed by the very definition and categorisation of historical fiction and historical fantasy – definitions which tend to limit history to a single grand narrative.<sup>24</sup>

Arthurian literature is probably the most visible field of literature in which history, fantasy and myth intersect; it is also a field that has been the subject of extensive critical explorations confronting questions of fiction and history. In their survey of British and American Arthurian literature since 1800, Beverley Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer trace Arthurian legend in literature from the Middle Ages to its “virtual rediscovery”<sup>25</sup> in the nineteenth century and its continuing popularity in the twentieth century. Their text explores the way in which writers of different times have used the “themes and motifs from Arthurian legend to give new and symbolic expression to their own experience”, each age finding in Arthurian legend a “means of expressing something of its own attitudes, ideas and anxieties”.<sup>26</sup> In answer to the question of why Arthurian legend, in particular, has been so appealing to writers as a source of motif and story, they suggest that it is the quality of myth in Arthurian stories which explains their lasting appeal.<sup>27</sup> In short, it is the mythic quality of Arthurian literature that allows it to give meaningful symbolic expression to diverse socio-historical experiences.

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<sup>23</sup> Sophie Masson, ‘Between Fantasy and History,’ *Phantastes: The Online Journal of Fantasy Criticism* (Fall 1999) (online source). <http://www.phantastes.com>.

<sup>24</sup> See Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 38-41.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor and Brewer, *Return of King Arthur*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Taylor and Brewer's exploration of Arthurian legend in literature clearly echoes discussions of fantasy literature, including discussion of its pre-modern sources, renewed popularity in the nineteenth century, and significance as a form of contemporary mythology. The presence of Arthurian legend in literature is not confined to fantasy, but encompasses a range of literary genres;<sup>28</sup> nonetheless, Arthurian literature and fantasy maintain a strong connection. Arthurian fantasy makes up a significant body of literature within the broader field of fantasy literature that cuts across genres of fantasy such as science fiction, historical fantasy and children's fantasy. The qualities of Arthurian legend identified by Taylor and Brewer as the source of its lasting appeal are also qualities conventionally associated with fantasy literature in general: the mythopoeic, the use of symbolic imagery and the focus on inner, psychological experiences and impulses.<sup>29</sup>

Modern Arthurian literature, including Arthurian fantasy, can also be understood as a form of historical fiction or historical fantasy. The definition of historical fiction depends largely on what is considered, by authors and readers, to constitute history. Arthur is generally perceived as a historical or "quasi-historical"<sup>30</sup> figure: he is thought to have existed in the past. Arthur, however, is also recognised as a legendary and mythical figure. Arthurian literature thus incorporates characters, places and stories that are at once coded historical and mythical and defy any clear distinction between legend, myth and history.

Arthurian legend is not the only source of historical characters, motifs, and themes upon which contemporary fantasy authors draw. Australian author Sophie Masson, for example, based her own 'Lay Lines Trilogy' on the work of Marie de France. Masson explains,

She [Marie de France] left behind a vast body of work: a collection of 'lays' or long narrative poems designed to be sung, with Celtic or supernatural

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<sup>28</sup> See Raymond Thompson, 'Arthurian Legend in Science Fiction and Fantasy,' 223-239; Maureen Fries 'Trends in the Modern Arthurian Novel,' 207-222, in Valerie Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day, eds., *King Arthur Through the Ages*, vol. 2 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> Taylor and Brewer, *Return of King Arthur*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Mike Ashley, 'Arthur,' in Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 57.

themes, full of magic, murder and mystery; a collection of hard hitting fables.<sup>31</sup>

Masson identifies the ancestry of fantasy in medieval romance and describes her own fantasy writing as an exploration of the spaces “between fantasy and history” – “the territory of enchantment itself”.<sup>32</sup> Our awareness of the appealing and enchanting quality that myth and fantasy bring to this place is well developed. Our understanding of the nature and function of the historical within this territory, however, is limited by an understanding of history which precludes the interpretive and representative possibilities offered by cultural history in the traditions of Romantic historical thought and practice.

Critics have attempted to describe and explain the role and significance of the historical in fantasy with mixed success. The appeal to pastness is among the central characteristics that Brian Attebery uses to describe fantasy literature in his paper ‘What are the Politics of Fantasy, if any?’<sup>33</sup> He outlines three commonly used strategies in fantasy: the deliberate violation of consensus reality, the placing of fantasy stories in temporal settings other than the present day, and the borrowing of motifs and story tales from folk traditions, usually from European tales and legends.<sup>34</sup> These three strategies are clearly connected: for a present day reader, settings, stories and motifs drawn from the distant past can appear unfamiliar and even unreal and thus constitute a violation of consensus reality. According to Attebery, the significance of the characters, setting, themes or motifs of fantasy drawn from the distant past is that they stand in relation to the writer and the reader as anachronisms;<sup>35</sup> that is, they have a quality of temporal otherness when compared to the readers’ own location in time. Attebery argues that the use of anachronism is a vital aspect of the otherness of fantasy. In short, the distant, and in particular the medieval, past is ‘other’ to the consensus reality of the modern, Western world, against which fantasy is defined:

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<sup>31</sup> Masson, ‘Between Fantasy and History,’ (online source).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Attebery, ‘What are the Politics of Fantasy, if any?’ in Robert A. Latham and Robert A. Collins, eds., *Modes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Twelfth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 1-13.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2.

When Tolkien or McKillop incorporate Anglo Saxon riddling lore into their fantasy texts, they incorporate that sense of otherness as well, the sense that things have not always been as they are now, that our reality extends only as far as the social compact that upholds it.<sup>36</sup>

In a similar sense, non-Western cultures have a quality of temporal otherness comparable to that of the imagined medieval past. Certain aspects of Chinese culture, for example, which may exist as part of contemporary popular Chinese cultural beliefs and practices are, to the Eurocentric imagination, cultures of the past or timeless cultures rooted in myth.<sup>37</sup> Thus Attebery writes,

What I have been calling the impossible might just as well ... be called non-Western reality. In that case, we could define fantasy not as a clash between the real and the unreal but as a meeting ground between empirical and traditional world views, or at least the discourses those world views have generated<sup>38</sup>

In his paper Attebery explores the political significance of the appeal to pastness in contemporary fantasy literature: the politics of anachronism. He argues that the use of anachronism in fantasy is not nostalgia, reaction nor conservatism, suggesting instead that “When fantasy writers define their imaginative spaces by drawing on medieval folklore and feudal institutions” they are attempting to imagine society outside the limits of the modern world-view (and coca-colonization).<sup>39</sup> Attebery recognises the use of anachronism and the appeal to otherness in fantasy as essentially subversive, critical acts. Thus, even while aspects of the past, such as the feudal social order, may be considered in a less than positive light in terms of modern moral and political discourses, “what was once restrictive may be liberating in a new context”.<sup>40</sup> That is, aspects of the past assume different and potentially subversive meanings in the context of the present. Moreover, the contrast or disjunction produced by creative anachronism may actually “transform the present”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>37</sup> The most influential analysis of the hegemonic Western discourse of ‘Orientalism’ which positions non-Western societies as ‘other’ is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

<sup>38</sup> Attebery, ‘Politics of Fantasy,’ 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 6

While they do not suggest that the use of past motifs is intrinsically subversive or critical, Taylor and Brewer argue the Arthurian symbols and themes in literature have, at different times, been used as a means of exploring meaning in the contemporary world:

The enthusiasm for all things past medieval which rapidly developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century may have been largely nostalgic and antiquarian, but, by implicit comparison of imagined past and present reality, it also made possible the re-evaluation and more precise definition of the contemporary.<sup>42</sup>

Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers explain Victorian medievalism in similar terms: “The re-imagination of medieval themes helped shape resistance and social responses to modernization, industrialization, and the development of modern gender and racial identities”<sup>43</sup> by imagining alternate social realities. The argument, stated simply, is that the evocation of pastness in culture can, either by explicit or implicit comparison with the present, impact on the way in which the present and history are understood and negotiated.

Attebery, Taylor and Brewer’s arguments clearly parallel those which emphasise the function of estrangement in fantastic literature and defend fantasy as a literary form that incorporates alternative modes of representing reality that may have a transformative effect on readers’ views of, and behaviour in, the world. What is different here is the role that consciousness or apprehension of the past, present and future has in this process – it is absolutely central. Attebery’s analysis reveals that the defining elements of marvellous fantasy – estrangement, enchantment, and consolation – are understood primarily as functions of historical consciousness. If otherness and estrangement are defining features of fantasy, they are also at the heart of history. The recognition of the alterity and distance of the past is foundational to modern historical consciousness.<sup>44</sup> It is the historian’s distance from the past that makes a historical consciousness possible.

Fantasy’s fascination with the relationship between past and present goes beyond an appeal to the exotic otherness of the distant past, to the exploration of the ontology of time and space, the experience of being in time, and the nature of historical becoming

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<sup>42</sup> Taylor and Brewer, *Return of King Arthur*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, ‘Introduction: Tolkien’s Modern Medievalism,’ in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, eds., *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

<sup>44</sup> See Phillips, ‘Relocating Inwardness,’ 437-439.



itself. That is, fantasy, like history, seeks a greater understanding of the nature of historical 'being'. Speculating about time and history is one of fantasy's prime pastimes.<sup>45</sup> In particular, it is science fiction, the sub-genre of fantastic literature characterised by speculation and extrapolation, which most visibly experiments with concepts of time and history. Speculation about the future of the primary world and manipulation of concepts of space and time are common, even defining, themes in science fiction.<sup>46</sup>

The most familiar form of fantasy game-playing with time and history is the sub-genre of science fiction labelled alternative or speculative history. Jon-K. Adams describes three different types of speculative history and classifies them according to the position of the narrator in time. Adams argues that "manipulations of the past, present and future, although not always distinct, form three types of speculative history": alternative history, parallel history, and future history.<sup>47</sup> All three forms bear some relation to the real-historical as a starting point for speculation and extrapolation. Even science fiction that is set in the distant future can be defined as a form of speculative history; such literature speculates about the contemporary by imagining it as past and the future by imagining it as present and thus engages with the nature of past-present relations and the concept of history itself. Adams argues that the outstanding examples of speculative history are self-reflexive, exploring what it is to speculate about the nature of history, and could be considered "pre-postmodern examples of historiographic metafiction."<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, Robert Canary explores "the relevance of certain concepts from historiography and the philosophy of history to the definition, analysis and history of science fiction".<sup>49</sup> Canary argues that "Debates over whether a given work is science fiction, mainstream fiction, or fantasy can then be seen as debates over the nature of

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<sup>45</sup> See John Clute, 'Time Fantasies,' David Langford, 'Time in Faerie,' Brian Stableford, 'Timeslips,' and John Clute, 'Time Travel,' in Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 948-949.

<sup>46</sup> Jon-K. Adams, 'Science Fiction in Pursuit of History,' in Bernd Engler and Kurt Müller, eds., *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1994), 147. For further discussion of the theme of time in science fiction see Mark Rose, 'Time,' in *Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 96-138; Casey Fredericks, 'The Big Time,' in *The Future of Eternity: Mythologies of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 65-90.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Canary, 'Science Fiction as Fictive History,' *Extrapolation* 16:1 (1974): 81.

historical reality and the rules by which it operates.”<sup>50</sup> The assumption implicit in Canary’s statement – that history operates by rules – highlights the understanding of history which underpins much speculative science fiction: that is, history is primarily a process or pattern, the rules or structure of which are debateable but discernable. Canary argues that speculative “science fiction’s implicit claim to operate by the same rules as historical reality means that it is inevitably speculating about the nature of those rules”<sup>51</sup> and thus it is able to reflect upon, test or explore its own assumptions about history. Canary traces the impact of changing conceptions of history on speculative science fiction, in a similar way to which changing conceptions of history have been traced in the novel, making a connection between popular philosophies of history and the philosophies of history represented in science fiction literature. He identifies a shift from linear to cyclical conceptions of history, followed by a more recent shift to a postmodern form of speculative science fiction in which there is greater discontinuity between past, present and future and larger patterns of historical meaning become problematic. Canary concludes that

Changes in the field [of science fiction] since the 1950s can be seen as a response to altered views of historical reality and to the effects on traditional concepts of plot, scene, and character. These changes correspond to a shift toward a historicist or narrativist philosophy of history.<sup>52</sup>

Canary recognises both a linear philosophy of history, based on concepts of causation and progress and a cyclical philosophy of history, based on universal patterns of meaning. These grand narratives of history as the progress or cyclical rise and fall of civilisations are challenged by the “narrativist philosophy of history” which questions the very possibility of finding any pattern or meaning in history. It would be more accurate to say that narrative philosophy recognises the role of story in history, but considers meaning to be something created and given to, rather than found or implicit in, historical processes. Canary’s historiographical analysis is simplified, yet it is based on the premise that philosophies of history and corresponding representational strategies inform both historical and fictional texts and can be discerned through textual analysis.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 91.

Speculating about the nature of time and history is not confined to science fiction as a genre. The theme of temporal manipulation is apparent across many genres within the broader field of fantasy literature. *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* lists a sub-genre, ‘time-fantasies’, to describe those fantasies in which temporal manipulation forms a central theme.<sup>53</sup> Time fantasies involve time-travel, time-slips or other similar adventures in time. Temporal manipulation allows for the juxtaposition of different temporal spaces, objects, or beings and thus for the explicit contrast of different milieus. Because temporal manipulation is fantastic, that is, unreal or impossible, fantasy literature enables the exploration of ideas about temporality and history in ways which other literary genres do not. The mysteries of time and temporal paradoxes have seemingly endless allure to both readers and critics of science fiction and fantasy literature. The secondary worlds of fantasy often operate according to different concepts of temporality. Gary Wolfe observes, of the other worlds of symbolic fantasy, that “in many cases there is a strong implication that time in the other world is determined by human action rather than by an arbitrary system of measurement.”<sup>54</sup> Temporality may thus act as a means through which to explore and express human emotional or psychological realities. Similarly, David Jasper acknowledges the centrality of temporal play to fantasy literature:

All good fantasy and science fiction flourishes on the intermingling of different elements and, perhaps, above all, conjuring with time. Part of its fascination lies in the drawing together of different temporal scales and sequences which are not ordinarily linked.<sup>55</sup>

What does the ability of fantasy to “conjure with time” mean for the historical imagination and its expression? In an article entitled ‘Dreaming History’ Elmar Schenkel recognises a connection or similarity between fantasy in its more self-reflexive forms and contemporary historiography.<sup>56</sup> Schenkel argues that both fantasy

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<sup>53</sup> Clute, ‘Time Fantasies,’ in Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 948.

<sup>54</sup> Gary K. Wolfe, ‘Symbolic Fantasy,’ *Genre* 8 (1975): 202.

<sup>55</sup> David Jasper, ‘Foreword: The Stream of Time Continuous as Life,’ in Kath Filmer, ed., *Twentieth-Century Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society, and Belief in Twentieth-Century Mythopoeic Literature*, (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan; New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), ix.

<sup>56</sup> Elmar Schenkel, ‘Dreaming History: Fantasy and Historiography in Ursula Leguin’s *Lathe of Heaven*,’ in Engler and Müller, eds., *Historiographic Metafiction*, 242.

and historiography draw attention to processes of representation<sup>57</sup> and the complex interaction of the imagination and material reality in these processes:

Both modern historiography and fantasy, especially metafiction-based fantasy, stress the relational character of all ‘facts’. Facts imply a subject-object relationship in which there is an indissoluble bond between the perceiver and the perceived. Any reproduction of reality has an element of fantasy in it due to this relationship.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, Sophie Masson argues that fantasy occupies an in-between space, a space of negotiation between Myth and History.<sup>59</sup> It is precisely this position which Rigney describes modern historiography as occupying from the late eighteenth century, suspended between the empirical and the ideal, faced with the problem of representing the unrepresentable.<sup>60</sup> In short, fantasy and historiography can be understood as overlapping practices, facing the same problems and linked by shared concerns with the imagination and representation of the past.

One example of the correspondence between fantasy and historiography is historical practice understood as mythistory.<sup>61</sup> The term mythistory is analogous to metafictional fantasy in its awareness of the use of meaning-giving forms – fictions or myths – in the process of representation and, like fantasy, is highly conscious of the role of language in apprehension and expression.<sup>62</sup> What fantasy brings to the meeting of history, fiction, and myth is heightened consciousness of the irrational, emotional and supernatural elements of the imagination. One could even argue, as Schenkel does, that fantasy is an essential aspect of the historical imagination which depends not only on referential realism, but on the creation of unreal, that is, essentially imagined, connections:

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Note that Rosemary Jackson also argues that fantasy is primarily concerned with “processes of representation”. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London; New York: Methuen, 1981), 14.

<sup>58</sup> Schenkel, ‘Dreaming History,’ 242.

<sup>59</sup> Masson, ‘Between Fantasy and History’ (online source).

<sup>60</sup> See Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, esp. 1-11.

<sup>61</sup> See William McNeil, ‘Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,’ in *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3-22.

<sup>62</sup> “Historians are principally concerned with the semeiological [sic.] level of human interaction, and since words are what mainly sustain such behaviour, it is fitting and proper that historians should also rely upon words ... to find meaning in the past.” McNeil, ‘The Rise of the West as a Long Term Process,’ in *Mythistory*, 47.

an unquestioning faith in the factual or literal truth inevitably destroys the historical imagination. Imagination and myth are anti-factual because they create connections and constitute the relational character of facts.<sup>63</sup>

Metafictional fantasy, historical fantasy, speculative history, fantasies that consciously appeal to the distant past for both subject matter and meaning, fantasies that explore the territory between the already amorphous realms of myth and history, the nature of historical and temporal experience, and the meaning of history – all are situated at the centre of contemporary historiographical debates about the relationship between history and literature. Fantasy occupies a unique and pivotal position at the nexus of history and literature, it is thus surprising that discussions of fantasy and history tend to be confined to the relatively small circle of literary scholars of the fantastic and to be virtually non-existent among historians.

Following Robert Canary's application of historiographical ideas to the analysis of science fiction, it is possible to apply similar modes of analysis to other genres of fantastic literature. Such an approach is based upon the premise that philosophies of history underlie both historical and literary writing. It is also based on the assumption that the historical imagination, or certain ways of understanding and representing history, constitutes a significant component of any philosophical climate, social imaginary or worldview. While fiction and fantasy are important elements of the historical imagination, the historical imagination is also essential to any fiction or fantasy concerned with apprehending and expressing a sense of pastness and historical existence.

Robert Canary's article on historiography and science fiction is based upon a relatively limited conception of the way in which the secondary worlds of science fiction are constructed and the role which philosophies of history play in this construction.<sup>64</sup> Canary understands the textual worlds of science fiction as speculative constructs based on the premise that the fictional world is contiguous with the real or primary world.<sup>65</sup> He is able to identify the philosophies of history informing science fiction texts based on the assumption that philosophies of history establish laws of continuity and causality

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<sup>63</sup> Schenkel, 'Dreaming History,' 250.

<sup>64</sup> Canary, 'Science Fiction as Fictive History.'

<sup>65</sup> On the idea of the 'primary world' in fantasy criticism, see ch. 2, fn. 87-88.

and that self-conscious speculation based upon these philosophies informs the construction of the worlds of science fiction. The way in which fantasy texts, however, construct imaginary worlds is not confined to extrapolation and speculation from fundamental premises, nor are ideas about history confined to philosophies of continuity and causality.<sup>66</sup>

For a broader analysis of the historical imagination in fantasy literature, it is necessary to develop a more nuanced understanding of cosmogenic (world creation) processes and the forms of history implicit in these processes. Many critics suggest that fantasy worlds are creations that represent an internally consistent and convincing ‘reality’ through the elaboration of basic precepts or fundamental laws which are themselves unreal or impossible. Robert Branham writes that the imaginary worlds of objective fantasy are based on certain “alternative or ‘magical’ precepts”.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Christopher Nash notes that an alternative world “is what it is by virtue of the special system of laws at work within it; it works with us by persuading us that this system is workable ... that it makes its own sense.”<sup>68</sup> These basic laws or magical precepts are often laws of causality. Kenneth Zahorski and Robert Boyer write that the construction of a plausible secondary world depends on the text’s ability to “explain” the unreal, and such explanations usually imply a system of “internal logic” or laws of causality.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Canary’s analysis of the historiography of science fiction is based upon the conception of secondary worlds as the self-conscious elaboration of certain fundamental, often speculative, precepts.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The idea that the fictional worlds of fantasy are created and narrated through the elaboration of certain fundamental, but impossible, unreal or supernatural ‘laws’ is a popular, but limited and limiting understanding of secondary world creation in literature. Eric Rabkin refers to the “interior set of ground rules” established through secondary world creation. *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 4. W.R. Irwin argues that fantasy literature “results only from the persistence of a main and substantial tendency throughout the whole. No matter what is the central, arbitrary non-reality that generates the fantasy illusion, all elements of the narrative are determined by it.” *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 10. For similar accounts of fictional world creation see Robert Branham, ‘Principles of the Imaginary Milieu: Argument and Idea in Fantasy Fiction,’ *Extrapolation* 21:4 (1980): 328; Kenneth Zahorski and Robert Boyer, ‘The Secondary Worlds of High Fantasy,’ in Roger Schlobin, ed., *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press; Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), 56-58.

<sup>67</sup> Branham, ‘Principles of the Imaginary Milieu,’ 328. See also Irwin, *Game of the Impossible*.

<sup>68</sup> Christopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (London; New York: Longman, 1993), 61.

<sup>69</sup> Zahorski and Boyer, ‘The Secondary Worlds of High Fantasy,’ 56-57.

<sup>70</sup> Canary, ‘Science Fiction as Fictive History.’

In a similar vein, Casey Fredericks describes the act of creating a secondary world as “rendering a cosmology”.<sup>71</sup> He writes that “in a sense, all fantasy and science fiction narratives are related to cosmological genesis”.<sup>72</sup> Christopher Nash also defines alternative world fiction as “neocosmic fiction” in order to emphasise the “cosmically totalistic” dimension of the alternative world fiction.<sup>73</sup> The term ‘cosmology’ suggests the metaphysical nature of the fundamental precepts that define the world. Nash identifies several different metaphysical systems that commonly form the basis for secondary worlds: historical, anthropological, natural history, epistemological, ontological and linguistic.<sup>74</sup> This system of analysis, however, fails to recognise the interdependence of the historical, anthropological, natural, epistemological, ontological and linguistic in any social imaginary.

Imaginary worlds are created from pre-existing elements – signs, motifs, images, narratives – and are thus always already embedded in multiple cultural complexes of human meaning and practice. These complexes are at once historical, anthropological, ontological, and linguistic. The symbols and motifs of fantasy are often already encoded as ‘past’, indicating that the historical imagination and fantasy are interconnected from the first. The idea that the creation of secondary worlds consists in extrapolation from fundamental precepts limits our ability to recognise fantasy as an intertextual and culturally eclectic form that often appeals to cultural and temporal otherness for the element of the unreal. Fantasy worlds are not simply imaginative creations elaborated consistently from certain fundamentals; the cosmologies of fantasy are themselves constructed from pre-existing cosmological systems, motifs and cultural signs which are rich with actual and potential meaning.

Like the eccentric and anachronistic characters that wander the pages of many fantasy texts and worlds, fantasy itself constructs meaning from an eclectic range of cultural sources. Fantasy, like all fictions, is a form that is intertextual and interactive with other

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<sup>71</sup> Fredericks, *Future of Eternity*, 65. “Rendering a cosmology” is Joseph Campbell’s phrase; he writes that “the second function of a mythology is to render a cosmology.” *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 611.

<sup>72</sup> Fredericks, *Future of Eternity*, 65.

<sup>73</sup> Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction*, 56.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-77.

cultural forms.<sup>75</sup> Fantasy creations are constructed from elements already found in what Brian Attebery calls “the common imagination”.<sup>76</sup> If fantasy is a product of the common imagination (or, more appropriately, imaginations), then it also reproduces and reinvests meaning in these imaginations. The eclectic nature of fantasy creations, the intertextuality of fantasy, is a large part of its appeal. If the appeal of a world is connected to its richness and depth of actual and potential meaning, then a world that successfully weaves multiple cultural signs and systems into its own creation has immense evocative power. Hume argues that

such mythic additions to reality carry a resonance beyond that possible for mere fantasy creations. The more exposure we have to a fantasy tradition, the more easily it can work upon us. Those nontraditional fantasies which command some of the power of traditional myth usually imitate or echo known patterns... Mythic worlds not rooted in known traditions have trouble communicating their reality to the reader.<sup>77</sup>

It is clear that fantasists draw on cultural archetypes, myths, symbols, motifs and signs in their construction of secondary worlds. Fantasy texts are closely aligned with myth: they frequently use the signs and language of myth and are also often understood as acts of mythopoesis.<sup>78</sup> ‘Mythopoesis’, literally myth-creation, may refer to the creation of a particular type of story – a myth – or to the re-creation, that is, re-writing, of a myth in another form.<sup>79</sup> In the fantasy tradition, ‘mythopoesis’ is associated, in particular, with Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien whose work defines “the Mythopoeic Society’s view of mythopoeia.”<sup>80</sup> The understanding of secondary world creation as

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<sup>75</sup> Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London, New York: Arnold, 1996), 21.

<sup>76</sup> Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Methuen, 1984), 88.

<sup>78</sup> See C.W. Sullivan III, ‘Mythology,’ in Gary Westfahl, ed., *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders*, volume 2 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005), 548-550; Mike Ashley, ‘Myths,’ in Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 675-676; Kath Filmer, ‘Introduction,’ in Filmer, ed., *Twentieth Century Fantasists*, 1-7.

<sup>79</sup> “Mytho-poesis (from the Greek *poiein*, meaning to make, to create) re-creates the ancient stories. And, while mythology presents its stories as if they actually took place, mythopoesis transposes them a symbolic meaning.” Harry Slochower, *Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 15.

<sup>80</sup> Jared Lobdell, *The Scientification Novels of C.S. Lewis: Space and Time in the Ransom Stories*. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland and Company, 2004), 169. The Mythopoeic Society, devoted to the study of fantasy and, in particular, the work of the Inklings, was founded in 1967. See David S. Bratman, ‘Mythopoeic Society,’ in Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 675. For a critical account of the nature of mythopoeia and the link between mythopoeia and fantasy, see Lobdell, ‘C.S. Lewis and the Myth of Mythopoeia,’ in *Scientification Novels*, 161-182.



mythopoesis is more appropriate to fantasy than the ‘extrapolation’ model, but it presents new challenges for a historiographical reading of fantasy literature surrounding the definition of, and problematic relationship between, history and myth.

The role of myth in fantasy literature is complicated by a general lack of clarity and consistency regarding the meaning and significance of the term ‘myth’. Probably the most critically recognised example of the use of archetype and myth in fantasy (and other cultural forms) is the ‘hero-monomyth’ – “the universal mythological formula of the adventure of the hero”<sup>81</sup> – as described by Joseph Campbell. Campbell’s book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, has been highly influential in modern fantasy criticism.<sup>82</sup> Campbell recognises the hero-monomyth as the single most pervasive plot in western consciousness and literature. Interpreted according to psychoanalytic theory, the hero monomyth is a reflection of the pattern of archetypal images which guides the unconscious development of the individual’s psyche.<sup>83</sup> In the third essay of his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye represents his four *mythoi* – romance, tragedy, irony, and comedy – as parts of a single, universal and cyclical monomyth or quest-romance.<sup>84</sup> In *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Kathryn Hume introduces another monomyth, the ‘cosmological monomyth’, which develops the parallel between hero-myth and world-myth already apparent in both Campbell and Frye’s works. Hume describes the “cosmological monomyth” as the plot that describes creation and origins, the world of time and history, and apocalypse and downfall.<sup>85</sup> The cosmological monomyth is to the world what the hero monomyth is to the individual.

A related discourse of fantasy criticism defines Myth as the form of consciousness alternative to Reason.<sup>86</sup> According to this understanding, the use of myths and archetypes in fantasy is a way of accessing an alternative mode of consciousness and a different level of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ that is associated with the pre-modern past, the

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<sup>81</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Sphere Books, 1975), 25.

<sup>82</sup> For discussions of the hero-monomyth in fantasy see Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 177; Sheila Finch-Reyner, ‘The Unseen Shore: Thoughts on the Popularity of Fantasy,’ *Journal of Popular Culture* 18:4 (1985): 131.

<sup>83</sup> Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, paraphrased in Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 177.

<sup>84</sup> Northrop Frye, ‘Third Essay - Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths,’ *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 131-242.

<sup>85</sup> Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 183.

<sup>86</sup> Myth and Reason are capitalised here to indicate approaches to reality.

unconscious and the irrational. The use of myth in fantasy is both critical and creative; the revival of myth through fantasy subverts the dominant discourse of Reason and acts as a source of cultural renewal. Critics, such as Roger Schlobin and Sheila Finch Reynor, who argue positively for fantasy as the revival of myth, tend to see myths and archetypes as dynamic, critical forms as opposed to Reason, Science and History, which they perceive as monolithic, static forms which dominate modern consciousness.<sup>87</sup>

An alternative discourse, however, exhibits a more negative attitude towards the presence of myth in fantasy.<sup>88</sup> According to this argument, Myth relate static systems of meaning based on unquestioned assumptions, the opposite of History which resists closure and is characterised by dynamism and change; myths are, in short, ahistorical.<sup>89</sup> Fantasy appeals to archetypes and myths as tried and tested cultural materials which it reproduces and sells with bright covers. Fantasy literature commodifies the archetypes for consumption by a predictable and uniform mass that suffers from an acute sense of lack in our post-mythical culture. Such fantasy is mass-market genre fiction that conforms to the expectations of a popular audience and consoles rather than challenges them. The use of myth in this context is considered neither critical nor creative; myth provides the formulas for much derided formula fantasy. For example, in his discussion of the role of myth in fantasy and science fiction, Casey Fredericks acknowledges that

a number of contemporary science fiction critics ... dismiss science fiction as nothing more, in fact, that a rehash of old mythological themes, characters and ideas ... a barely concealed displacement of archaic myths into phoney scientific gadgets or even phonier pseudo-scientific epistemologies.<sup>90</sup>

Some commentators use myth in both a positive – myth as creative, critical, dynamic and plural – and negative – myth as sterile, uncritical, static and monolithic – sense in

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<sup>87</sup> See Schlobin 'Preface,' in Schlobin, ed., *Aesthetics of Fantasy*, ix-xvi; Sheila Finch-Reyner, 'The Unseen Shore,' 127-134.

<sup>88</sup> See Christine Brooke-Rose's discussion of Darko Suvin's approach to fantasy and science fiction. Suvin writes that myths "conceive human relations as fixed and supernaturally determined" and myth "absolutizes and even personifies apparently constant motifs from sluggish societies". *A Metamorphosis of Science Fiction* (1979), 7 cited in Brooke-Rose, *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 74. See also Darko Suvin, 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy" or "Fantastic Fiction": An Effusion,' *Extrapolation* 41:3 (2000): 209-247.

<sup>89</sup> Brooke-Rose writes, of myth and the marvellous, that they both "ignore historical time: myth is above it; the marvellous is non-temporal despite a grammatically conventional past". *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 76.

<sup>90</sup> Fredericks, *Future of Eternity*, 5.

relation to fantasy. Sheila Finch-Reyner argues that “fantasy writing today, particularly at the lower levels [that is, formula fantasy], owes much of its structure to elements of myth”, but is closer to fairy-tale wish-fulfilment and escapism. Conversely, “those fantasies that treat complexity and ambivalence in the characters’ search for illumination and transcendence, that recognise the outcome is often tragic and shrouded with ambiguity, are closer to the grounds of true myth”.<sup>91</sup> In Finch-Reyner’s analysis ‘true myth’ is characterised by complexity, ambiguity, multiplicity, and dynamism, while ‘myth’ is often used as a structuring form for essentially simplistic and consolatory fictions.

Clearly myth, like history, may be placed on either side of static/dynamic, uncritical/critical binaries. Nonetheless, when the grand dichotomies are invoked, history is always placed on the opposite side to myth. When myth is dynamic and critical, history is uncritical and static; when history is temporal and ceaselessly changing, myth is timeless and unchanging. This confusing and ineffective system of conceptualising history and myth can be restated in more workable terms. What is essentially at issue when considering myth, history and fantasy is, once again, processes of representation and meaning in human cultures. Fantasy, like history, uses motifs and signs tied into meaning-giving systems often termed ‘fictions’. The term ‘myth’ may also refer to a meaning-giving system, but is usually reserved for the most ubiquitous, universal or archetypal of ‘fictions’. All such ‘fictions’ are always-already encoded with meaning; they are not, however, handed from heaven as monolithic, unchanging, ahistorical objects. As Casey Fredericks suggests,

Myths are historical phenomena par excellence: they are metamorphic, multivalent, plurisignative and elusive ... myth is dynamic in its function, not static.<sup>92</sup>

Conceived as part of the social, fictions are historically and culturally determined agents of historical and cultural change. Both authors and readers are able to appropriate, reproduce and manipulate fictions and reconstitute their meanings. So, while fantasy is often understood as mytho-poesis (myth-making), the process of world-creation may be equally perceived as historico-poesis (history-making), where the world that is created is neither mythical nor historical but both.

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<sup>91</sup> Finch-Reyner, ‘The Unseen Shore,’ 131-132.

<sup>92</sup> Fredericks, *Future of Eternity*, 47-48.

It is possible to consider the role of myth and history in fantasy in conjoined rather than oppositional terms. The evocative power of fantasy, its richness of meaning, is intimately connected to the meaning of history. As with fantasy, the meaning of history is in turn connected to constant cultural reproduction of fictions, myths and other meaning systems. In short, history and fantasy exist in the negotiating space 'in between' the static and unchanging and the fluid and ephemeral. As T.S. Eliot suggested, a sense of history enables the individual to recognise the timeless and the temporal, the static and the dynamic:

the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but its presence ... the historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.<sup>93</sup>

Historiography, understood as the study of historical writing, philosophies of history and the historical imagination, can be applied to all texts. As contemporary criticism reminds us, every history embodies an underlying theory of history, an imaginary ideal of history and ways of representing history; all of these elements may be subject to critical analysis and exploration. The term metahistory, like the term metafiction, indicates a self-reflexive awareness of the assumptions and practices involved in thinking and writing history. To take a historiographical approach is to explore the theories that underlie the history presented and the ways in which it is presented.

From the point of view of contemporary historiography, history is no longer confined to or defined by a Great Story of the actions of Great Men in the Past. In order to explore different theories and ideas about history, history has taken on a more inclusive definition that embraces a range of possible apprehensions and expressions of spatial and temporal existence and this includes both diachronic and synchronic modes. History connects and communicates. History is objects, images and ideas. History is memory, tradition, and heritage. History is lived; it is practices, ritual, and actions. History is culture and society. History is literature and art. History is landscape, geography, and

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<sup>93</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' cited in Taylor and Brewer, *Return of King Arthur*, 237.

place. History is buildings and institutions. History is people, experience, and life. From this inclusive definition, it is difficult to imagine any reality, any world that lacks some sort of history. It is also possible to discern different ways in which the historical imagination informs literature, and fantasy literature in particular, that do not confine the historical to the real, but embrace the possibilities of fiction, myth and magic.

Curiously, the example that Rigney uses to communicate the difficulty of the historian's quest to create a history in line with these imaginings is appropriate to this study of fantasy. Histories, observes Rigney, are often very long books.<sup>94</sup> These very long books, prefaced with the historian's notes on the incomplete and imperfect nature of the work, are an embodiment of the problems of writing a history that seeks to represent a complete life-world. It is not really a "[peculiarity] of histories to be long",<sup>95</sup> for it is not at all peculiar for works of marvellous fantasy to be very long books or series of books. The convincing representation of an entire life-world – be it a world of the past or a fantastic secondary world – can be a task of voluminous proportions. While the criteria for writing successful history differ from those for writing successful fantasy, the problem of representation is common to both. The problem of representation, for historians, changed as the domains of history expanded into the cultural and social realms and came to incorporate both the ideal and material. Historians began to explore new modes of expression to convey their understandings. While the problem of representing whole life-worlds is of similar scale for fantasists and historians, the former have more flexible boundaries; that is, the boundaries which circumscribe representability extend further in fantasy than they do in history, because the former need not negotiate the demands of discipline and correspondence. The magical thing about alternative and fantastic realities, from the historiographic point of view, is the potential they offer for the development and exploration of different aspects of the historical imagination: different ideas about, and expressions of, history and the experience of history. That is, fantasy may push the limits of representability such that our imperfect and unreal histories may be closer to the realities of our imaginings.

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<sup>94</sup> Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, 60.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

## Section II

### Fantasy and the Enchantment of History:

#### J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

#### Chapter 4 – Losses and Longings: Romantic Historical Consciousness in *The Lord of the Rings*

Between 1937 and 1956 a British scholar compiled and published an epic, three-volume work of 'history'.<sup>1</sup> It has since been acclaimed as one of the greatest books of the twentieth century and its author identified as among the century's most influential writers.<sup>2</sup> This history has been read and re-read and has retained its pertinence through the most transformative of times. It fascinates scholars and laymen alike and has not dulled under the harsh light of critical revision and re-assessment. It has been translated into numerous languages and appears to transcend historical, national, ideological and cultural boundaries. In the postmodern cultural milieu, characterised by incredulity in the face of meta-narratives and in particular those in the guise of history, this epic narrative is an unusual and striking feature in the cultural landscape. Today, this 'history' retains a firm hold on the popular imagination; in fact, the force of its enchantment appears greater than ever.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 7. The division of the work into three volumes was the publisher's decision. Tolkien conceived *The Lord of the Rings* as a single work comprised of six books. The three volumes of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* were first published in the UK between 1954 and 1955 and in the USA between 1955 and 1956. Tolkien began working on the books as early as 1937.

<sup>2</sup> The 1997 Waterstone Readers' Poll in Great Britain voted *LOTR* "the greatest book of the century". For accounts of the poll and its aftermath see Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien, Man and Myth: A Literary Life* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 1-10; Tom Shippey, 'Tolkien and the Polls,' in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), xx-xxiv. *LOTR* also frequently tops similar internet polls. A 1999 Amazon.com poll named Tolkien "Author of the Millennium". See Bradley J. Birzler, 'Not a Hippie Cult Figure: The Christian Gifts of J.R.R. Tolkien,' *New Oxford Review* 68:10 (2001): 25. The central and somewhat provocative claim of Tom Shippey's book *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* is, as the title suggests, that Tolkien ought to be considered an, if not the, "author of the century" and correspondingly, that fantasy be considered as the twentieth century's most significant literary mode. Note that Shippey employs a broad definition of fantasy which extends well beyond genre fantasy to incorporate most literary works that include an element of the supernatural or unreal.

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* is rarely recognised as a work of history, let alone as the most popular or important work of history produced in the twentieth century. Tolkien's tale is, however, widely considered to be the most significant work of fantasy ever written. *LOTR*, along with Tolkien's other literary and scholarly works, established him as the most influential modern fantasist. His work defined the tone and theme of much fantasy literature to follow, opening up an imaginative space for the development of the genre itself.<sup>3</sup> While *LOTR* may not be the greatest history written in the twentieth century, it is certainly the most appropriate starting point for an investigation of the intersection of fantasy and history. Not only does Tolkien's epic fantasy mark the foundation of modern high fantasy,<sup>4</sup> it is also a work that is fundamentally and profoundly historical. *LOTR* provides a powerful illustration of the extent to which history is integrated into fantasy world-creation, interwoven with language, time and myth to create secondary worlds of magic and wonder.

A number of recent events have renewed interest in *LOTR*, confirming its status as a fantasy masterwork. The most influential of these has been director Peter Jackson's ambitious and extremely popular translation of *LOTR* into film. Jackson's *LOTR* films have resulted in increased interest in Tolkien's books, with bookstore shelves being restocked for a new generation of readers and an older generation of second time readers. In short, the books written by the "tweediest and most persnickety of Oxford philologists"<sup>5</sup> have become a twenty-first century mass marketing phenomenon. In addition, an unusual fellowship has formed between hobbits and a boy, Harry Potter, and together they have propelled fantasy into the centre of mainstream Western popular culture. The success of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels is not only predicated upon

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<sup>3</sup> See Shippey, 'Tolkien and the Fantasy Genre,' in *J.R.R. Tolkien*, xxiv-xxvi; John Clute, 'J.R.R. Tolkien,' in John Clute and John Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 950-955. Jared Lobdell argues that *LOTR* wove together pre-existing literary forms to create a new genre which he terms "Tolkienian fantasy" but uses interchangeably with genre or popular fantasy: "what began as an adventure story in the Edwardian mode became eventually the onlie [sic.] begetter of a new literature, a new *genre*, we and the bookstores now call fantasy." *The Rise of Tolkienian Fantasy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), xv (Lobdell's italics).

<sup>4</sup> 'High fantasy' is the sub-genre of fantasy literature distinguished by its complete secondary or alternative worlds. John Clute defines 'High Fantasy' as "Fantasies set in OTHERWORLDS, specifically SECONDARY WORLDS, and which deal with matters affecting the destiny of these worlds." 'High Fantasy,' in Clute and Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 466 (Clute's capitalisations).

<sup>5</sup> Judith Shulevitz, 'Hobbits in Hollywood,' *New York Times Book Review*, April 22, 2001 (online source). <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/22/bookend/bookend.html>. Judith Shulevitz is likely accurate in asserting that Tolkien would not have approved of the status of his texts (or himself) as either cult material or mainstream icons.

the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, but also upon a strong tradition of British fantasy and children's literature. Both *LOTR* and Harry Potter, however, have proven to be global phenomena which, while rooted in a British tradition, appeal to the fears, hopes and dreams of people of diverse ages and walks of life. This renewed interest in Tolkien within the popular sphere has also prompted considerable journalistic and academic commentary on the author, his books and fantasy in general. Tolkien's status as a 'literary genius' and the value, meaning and significance of *LOTR* continue to be debated,<sup>6</sup> but the popularity of *LOTR* and its manifestation in multiple cultural and political spheres indicates a presence in the popular imagination that is difficult to ignore.

J.R.R. Tolkien and his writings have been the subject of extensive critical discourse and debate since his first scholarly works were published in 1922.<sup>7</sup> The field of Tolkien criticism is vast and remains a site of both controversy and celebration. Issues in Tolkien criticism are analogous to those in fantasy criticism in general and thus intersect with foundational discourses which cross the fields of fantasy, literature and history, particularly those concerning the nature of reality and problems of representation. The controversies surrounding Tolkien are predominantly inspired by the enduring popularity of his work coupled with the critical disdain that often accompanies mention of his name. It is this duality, his ability to "provoke the twin reaction of popular appeal and critical rage",<sup>8</sup> that provides the impetus behind much Tolkien scholarship.

Tolkien's work, as with most genre or high fantasy, has been the target of considerable criticism. *LOTR* is often dismissed as nostalgic, simplistic, conformist and escapist. The

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Judith Shulevitz argues against Tom Shippey's contention that Tolkien should be listed among the greats of twentieth century literature. Shulevitz contends that influence and popularity are not signs of greatness and that *LOTR* is ultimately popular because it is predictable. 'Hobbits in Hollywood,' (online source). Shulevitz does, however, misrepresent Shippey's argument. It is Shippey's contention that Tolkien's greatness lies not in his popularity, but in his literary achievement in the broader context of twentieth century literature and history.

<sup>7</sup> For an extensive bibliography of Tolkien criticism see Judith Johnson, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Six Decades of Criticism* (Westport CT, London: Greenwood Press, 1986). For bibliographies incorporating material written since the 1980s see Michael Drout and Hilary Wynne, 'Tom Shippey's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* and a Look Back at Tolkien Criticism since 1982,' *Envoi* 9:2 (2000): 101-34; Richard C. West, 'A Tolkien Checklist: Selected Criticism 1981-2004,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 50:4 (2004): 1015-1028.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 4. See also Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien, Man and Myth* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 2; Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997).



“literati”, as Joseph Pearce labels those who support and guard the sacred canon of literary texts, consistently condemn it.<sup>9</sup> Among scholars of the fantastic, Tolkien is the primary exemplar of the ‘marvellous’ that, weighed down by the machinery of literary Realism, sinks in estimation below the sophisticated and subversive ‘fantastic-uncanny’.<sup>10</sup> At the opposite pole of fantasy criticism, fantasist Michael Moorcock labels *LOTR* “Epic Pooh”: the “infantile” and “pernicious confirmation of the values of a morally bankrupt middle-class”.<sup>11</sup> Similar accusations have been levelled at Tolkien since *The Hobbit* was published in 1936: his writing has been variously described as juvenile, paternalistic, chauvinistic, reactionary, anti-intellectual, racist, sexist, fascist and irrelevant.<sup>12</sup>

Despite, or even because of, the persistence of negative critical reactions, Tolkien and his work also remain the subjects of enthusiastic scholarly interest and the focus of literary and academic organisations, journals and conferences. Scholarly discourse continues to revolve around Tolkien’s values and identity, the fundamental meaning of *LOTR*, its social and cultural significance, and the most appropriate modes of its interpretation. The enduring popularity of *LOTR* is also a mystery that has enticed critics and prompted conflicting explanations. *LOTR* has been read as fairy-tale, myth, children’s literature, pastoral fantasy, Romance, epic, adventure story in the Edwardian mode and as Quest or Hero-narrative.<sup>13</sup> It is not, however, often read as a work of

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<sup>9</sup> Pearce, *Tolkien*, 1-2. Tom Shippey also uses this term. *J.R.R. Tolkien*, xxi. The original source is an article by Susan Jeffreys, *Sunday Times*, 26 January, 1997. Jeffrey’s uses the term non-pejoratively to refer to like-minded critics of Tolkien.

<sup>10</sup> See Christine Brooke Rose, ‘The Evil Ring, Realism and the Marvellous,’ in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 233-255; Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion* (London, New York: Methuen, 1981), esp. 156.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy* (Reading: Cox and Wyman, 1987), 185.

<sup>12</sup> For summaries of these negative critical reactions to *LOTR* see Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle Earth*, 15-16 and ‘Tolkien and His Critics: A Critique,’ in Thomas Honegger, ed., *Root and Branch: Approaches towards Understanding Tolkien* (Zurich; Berne: Walking Tree Publishers, 2005), 75-117; Rosebury, *Tolkien*, 196-200; Shaun F. Hughs, ‘Introduction: Postmodern Tolkien,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 50:4 (2004): 808-811. The collection edited by Robert Giddings contains critical commentary. *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land* (London; Totowa, NJ: Vision, 1984). In particular, see Giddings ‘Introduction,’ 7-24; Fred Inglis, ‘Gentility and Powerlessness: Tolkien and the New Class,’ 25-41; Nick Otty on “nostalgia”, “paternalism”, “racism”, “hierarchy”, and the “celebration of war” in *LOTR: The Structuralist Guide to Middle-earth*, 154-178; and Kenneth McLeish on the dangerous nature of Tolkien’s conservative “Edwardianly cosy view of human affairs” and simplistic morality in the post-war world. ‘The Rippingest Yarn of All,’ 133.

<sup>13</sup> On the basis of Tolkien’s explanation of Fairy-stories in ‘On Fairy-stories,’ in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), 11-70, numerous critics use Tolkien’s own understandings to interpret *LOTR*. In

imaginary history or interpreted as historical writing, despite Tolkien's introduction of the work as "a history of the Great War of the Ring".<sup>14</sup> Tolkien's work has been approached from numerous theoretical perspectives – formalism, tropology, philology, literary history, psychoanalysis, myth-theory, queer theory and feminist criticism – and is subject to shifting modes of interpretation and critical pre-occupation. Analysis has extended beyond Tolkien and his writings to the 'Tolkien phenomenon' itself, including sociological and psychoanalytical investigations of popular cultural and political appropriations of *LOTR*.<sup>15</sup> Tolkien's own political persuasions and the political implications of *LOTR* have been inconsistently described as socialist, reactionary, conservative, anarchist, totalitarian and fascist.<sup>16</sup> The world of Middle-earth has been

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particular see R.J. Reilly, 'Tolkien and the Fairy Story,' *Thought* 38 (1963): 89-105; J.S. Ryan, 'Folktale, Fairy Tale and the Creation of a Story,' in Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil David Isaacs, eds., *Understanding 'The Lord of the Rings': The Best of Tolkien Criticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 106-121. See Derek Brewer on *LOTR* as Romance: 'The Lord of the Rings as Romance,' in Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell, eds., *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 249-264. On the Germanic and Christian epic traditions in *LOTR*, see Jane Chance, 'The Germanic King: Tolkien's Medieval Parodies' and 'The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's Epic,' in *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 75-96; 97-127. Critics frequently emphasise the mythic elements in *LOTR* and understand Tolkien's literary creations in terms of mythopoesis: in particular see Jane Chance's edited collection, *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004). Hal Colebatch emphasises the heroic elements in *LOTR* in *Return of the Heroes: 'The Lord of the Rings', 'Star Wars', Harry Potter, and Social Conflict* (Christchurch, New Zealand: Cybereditions, 2003). *LOTR* is often identified by detractors as children's literature; for example, see McLeish, 'The Rippingest Yarn of All'. Others identify the influence of children's literature on Tolkien's work; for example, see Lobdell, *Rise of Tolkienian Fantasy*, 8-10. W. H. Auden emphasised the elements of the Quest narrative in *LOTR*: "Mr Tolkien has succeeded more than any previous writer in this genre in using the traditional properties of the Quest, the heroic journey, the numinous object, the conflict between Good and Evil, while at the same time satisfying our sense of historical and social reality." 'At the end of the Quest, Victory,' *New York Times Book Review*, 22 January 1956, 5; 'The Quest Hero,' *Texas Quarterly* 4 (1961): 81-93. Jared Lobdell argues that Tolkien set out to create an "adventure story in the Edwardian mode" but ended up combining multiple literary streams to create an entirely new genre: "Tolkienian fantasy". *Rise of Tolkienian Fantasy*.

<sup>14</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Foreword,' *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of 'The Lord of the Rings'* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 7.

<sup>15</sup> See Rosebury, 'Chapter 6: The Cultural Phenomenon,' in *Tolkien*, 193-220. Rosebury is critical of most appropriations of *LOTR*, which he considers to be a far cry from the intellectual and literary achievement of the original. For explorations of popular cultural and political appropriations of Tolkien's work see, in particular, Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, The Bomb and The Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Nigel Walmsley, 'Tolkien and the '60s,' in Giddings, ed., *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land*, 73-86.

<sup>16</sup> On the chauvinistic and totalitarian elements of *LOTR* see Jackson, *Fantasy*, 155. Brian Rosebury positions Tolkien within a socialist tradition along with Marx, John Ruskin and William Morris in his attitudes to work and human creativity but perceives his politics to be broadly conservative. *Tolkien*, 161. On the fascist and racist implications of *LOTR* see Inglis, 'Gentility and Powerlessness' and, more recently, Anderson Rearich III, 'Why is the Only Good Orc a Dead Orc? The Dark Face of Racism Examined in Tolkien's World,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 50:4 (2004): 861-874; and Niels Werber 'Geo – and Biopolitics of Middle-earth: A German Reading of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*,' *New Literary History* 36:2 (2005): 227-336. Werber notes "a frightening coherence" between the "deep structure, narrative rhetoric, and topology in Tolkien's work" and the politics of the Third Reich. (229) Werber is less concerned with Tolkien's politics than with the contemporary popularity of the Tolkien phenomenon in Germany which he believes provides evidence for the ongoing presence and strength of pre-1945

perceived as fundamentally Christian, Nordic, Germanic, Christian in pre-Christian times, natural and eclectic.<sup>17</sup> There have been many attempts to “unmask the man” and “unravel the myth”,<sup>18</sup> but unravelling this particular myth appears to be a task beyond the skill of men and best left to elves.

The following discussion of selected themes and ideas which emerge from the field of Tolkien criticism is not intended to be a comprehensive account of the author, the text, or the phenomenon, but rather to position an alternative approach to reading *LOTR* and understanding its significance. Criticism of Tolkien and *LOTR* has hitherto not emphasised historiography as a starting point or conceptual framework. For those with a serious scholarly interest in Tolkien’s work, analysis of *LOTR* is largely devoted to the sources of the text – the experiential and literary material from which Tolkien built Middle-earth – Tolkien’s technique of “Sub-creation”,<sup>19</sup> interpretations of the form and appeal of his work as modern myth, and elucidation of the underlying philosophy informing his scholarly and literary work. Nonetheless, each of the core concerns which are identified below – the sources, mode of representation, and worldview apparent in *LOTR* – has significance in terms of historical meaning and consciousness. Thus, an

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political discourses thought to have died with the Third Reich. Patrick Curry attempts to defend Tolkien from accusations of nostalgia, racism and fascism, emphasising the (post)modern ecological consciousness evident in *LOTR* in *Defending Middle Earth*, 46-54; ‘Tolkien and His Critics,’ 75-139; and “‘Less Noise, More Green’: Tolkien’s Ideology for England,” in Patricia Reynolds and Glen GoodKnight, eds., *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference 1992* (Milton Keynes, UK: The Mythopoeic Press, 1995), 126-138. Curry summarises Tolkien’s politics as anarchist and conservative. ‘Tolkien and His Critics: A Critique,’ 100.

<sup>17</sup> Some commentators identify *LOTR* as a Christian work underpinned by a basically Christian mythology: Colin Manlove identifies *LOTR* as ‘Christian Fantasy’. *Christian Fantasy from 1200 to the Present* (London: Macmillan 1992); Kevin Aldrich writes that “Tolkien was Roman Catholic and the mythology behind *The Lord of the Rings* is consonant with the book of Genesis and Roman Catholic moral theology.” ‘The Sense of Time in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,’ *Mythlore: a Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, General Fantasy & Mythic Studies* 15:1 (1988): 5. On *LOTR* as a work which belongs to the pagan world of Germanic sagas, see Patricia Meyer-Spacks, ‘Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*,’ in Neil David Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo, eds., *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien’s ‘The Lord of the Rings’* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1968), 81-108. Jared Lobdell attempts to overcome the apparent conflict between Christian and pagan themes in *LOTR*; he argues that the text applies Christian theology to pre-Christian times. ‘The Timeless Moment in *The Lord of the Rings*: Christian Doctrine in a Pre-Christian Age,’ in *World of the Rings*, 49-70. On “natural theology” in *LOTR*, see Catherine Masden, “‘Light from an Invisible Lamp’: Natural Religion in *Lord of the Rings*,’ in Chance, ed., *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth*, 35-48. Verlyn Flieger’s description of *LOTR* as an eclectic work is perhaps the most accurate of these general categorisations; she writes “eclecticism is typical of Tolkien’s sweeping approach to history and to the cultures of his Middle-earth.” ‘A Postmodern Medievalist?’ in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, eds., *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Pearce, *Man and Myth*, xi.

<sup>19</sup> See J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), 11-70.

overview of these themes leads directly into a discussion of the possibilities of a historiographic approach to *LOTR*.

The sources of *LOTR*, drawn from Tolkien's life and experiences, are extensive and provide "a remarkable nexus of actual literary, linguistic and cultural association"<sup>20</sup> for critical investigation. Moreover, *LOTR* itself forms but a part of Tolkien's larger vision and additional writings, most of which were incomplete and unpublished at the time of his death. It is worth noting, however, that the average contemporary reader is likely to have read only the most popular of Tolkien's works and to be aware of but a twig on the tree of the author's sources. Knowledge of the text's sources is clearly not a necessary prerequisite for enchantment; the Tolkien phenomenon cannot readily be reduced to the man or his sources. *LOTR* is a text that has survived well beyond the social-historical environment of its creation and taken on forms and meanings which its author did not intend and would not likely have approved: meanings that may be inconsistent with the text, its intentions or its underlying philosophy.<sup>21</sup> These forms should not be discounted simply because they are at odds with a particular vision of the 'original' or 'authentic' Tolkien; they remain part of the cultural phenomenon itself. Indeed, those who argue for the continued relevance of Tolkien's work must come to terms with the highly contradictory and often conflictual nature of the cultural field as a site of struggle for meaning, identification and self-determination.<sup>22</sup>

Despite these reservations about approaching the text in terms of its author or the context of its creation, it is clear that Tolkien's experiences, attitudes and techniques informed his sub-creation, Middle-earth, to such an extent that it is difficult to discuss

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<sup>20</sup> J.S. Ryan, 'Cultural Name Association: A Tolkien Example from Gilgamesh,' *Mallorn* 22 (1985): 22, cited in Verlyn Flieger, *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997), 77. The most informative explorations of Tolkien's sources are to be found in the writings of fellow scholar Tom Shippey, in particular, *The Road to Middle Earth* (1984); and *J.R.R. Tolkien* (2001).

<sup>21</sup> For a critical discussion of appropriations and re-productions of Tolkien's work, see Rosebury 'Ch 6: The Cultural Phenomenon,' in *Tolkien*, 193-220. Rosebury appreciates the literary and aesthetic value of *LOTR* and has little time for vulgar appropriations which simply "relabel", "assimilate" or "imitate" the original. Patrick Curry has a more positive view of appropriations of Tolkien's work, seeing critical and radical potential in the ways in which aspects of the mythology of Middle-earth have been re-articulated by popular social movements, including ecological, anti-war, anti-nuclear and 'new-age' movements: Curry, *Defending Middle-earth* (1997); cf. Flieger, *Question of Time*, 12-16.

<sup>22</sup> The idea of "culture" as a site of struggle is drawn from the theoretical writings of the school of British Cultural Studies. See John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class,' in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 9-74.

this fantasy world without considering the author's life, sources, techniques, and worldview. Paradoxically, it is Tolkien's philosophy and techniques which have produced a story that exists as something much more than the sum-total of its sources and a creation which will long outlive its creator and the context of its creation. Tolkien's own attitude towards identifying and attempting to trace the sources of stories or the way in which ideas are appropriated and re-articulated over time was that the completion of such a task was probably impossible and, in any case, did not touch on what he believed to be more significant: the enchanting and affective nature of stories themselves.<sup>23</sup> He expressed a preference for appreciating the soup that has brewed over time in 'The Cauldron of Story' rather than in sieving it in order to examine its ingredients (sources), the bones from which it was originally made.<sup>24</sup> Here, Tolkien's metaphor is reminiscent of discussions of history and literature which indicate a preference for the living story as opposed to the dead bones of the past, favouring the dreams of the historical imagination over the discussion of dry facts. An approach to history which locates its identity or appeal in facts and sources alone, excluding the various forms of historical narrative and their affective qualities, is ill suited to Tolkien's work.

In his preface to the 1966 edition of *LOTR*, Tolkien resisted any clear statement of the motives or meaning of the tale in *LOTR*, insisting that it had "no topical or allegorical meaning".<sup>25</sup> He denied any connection between the "real war" (WWII) and the 'War of the Ring' or any relation between events in the Shire and the wartime experience in Britain, stating that 'The Scouring the Shire' was simply "an essential part of the story without any allegorical significance or contemporary political reference".<sup>26</sup> Tolkien went on to declare that he "cordially disliked allegory in all its manifestations" and much preferred history "true or feigned".<sup>27</sup> Despite his proclaimed dislike for allegory, Tolkien acknowledged that the seeds and roots of his creation, his tree, lay in reality.<sup>28</sup> The soup in the 'Cauldron of Story' would, after all, be bland without ingredients. There are clear resonances in *LOTR* of Tolkien's identity, experiences and the social and

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<sup>23</sup> Tolkien, 'On Fairy-stories,' 48-49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Tolkien, 'Foreword,' 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Tolkien, 'On Fairy-stories,' 61-62.

cultural milieu in which he was writing. This author delved so deeply into the sources of his creation that it is difficult to believe he would deny their manifest significance in his work. Of course, fiction can never be completely independent of ‘reality’ and Tolkien’s statements do not constitute denials of the existence of connections between fantasy worlds and the primary world. Such a denial is dangerous for most fantasists because justifications of fantasy are frequently made in terms of its relevance to the ‘real’ world of human consciousness, experience and action. Tolkien’s creation contains echoes of his life and experiences: his experiences of war, his occupation and pre-occupations, and his spiritual beliefs. Attempts, however, to bind his creation to any or all of these factors are unconvincing because they are at odds with the dynamic and meaningful existence of that creation in relation to readers and their life worlds.

The reason that Tolkien expressed a dislike for purely allegorical interpretation is that it is often reductive and deterministic: it can amount to throwing away the soup in order to gnaw upon the bones.<sup>29</sup> Tolkien’s sense of meaning derived from his occupation as a philologist, an element of his identity that informed both his scholarly work and literary creations, which together, according to most critics, form “two parts of an indivisible whole”.<sup>30</sup> He understood that the meanings of words change over time, yet contain echoes of past meanings and are not dislocated from experience or existence in history. Words and language were the building blocks of his worldview and world. He created *LOTR* in such a way that the text could not be easily bound to one particular interpretation, perspective, political ideology or socio-historical moment. Such a binding spell would constitute an assault on the independence of his creation and result, ultimately, in disenchantment.

Moreover, it is this independence and the fullness of Tolkien’s creation, understood in his own terms as a complete “Secondary World” having an “inner consistency of reality” that inspires “Secondary Belief”, which is most often cited as the key to its appeal.<sup>31</sup> The fullness and depth of Middle-earth as a Secondary World can be largely

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, ix. Regarding Tolkien’s scholarly occupation as the root of his sub-creation and literary techniques, see Shippey’s *Road to Middle-earth* and *J.R.R. Tolkien*.

<sup>31</sup> These are Tolkien’s terms. ‘On Fairy-stories,’ 44, 48. Rosebury argues that the key to *LOTR*’s aesthetic power is the “quality of meticulously depicted expansiveness” of Middle-earth. *Tolkien*, 13. See also Clute, ‘Tolkien,’ 951-52; Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 84; Brewer, ‘The Lord of the Rings as Romance,’ 255.

attributed to Tolkien's sources and techniques. It is not simply the text's independence, however, that is the key to its appeal, but the way in which this vision exists as a dynamic and complex aspect of a range of real-world experiences and thus may be meaningfully integrated into a variety of human imaginings, expressions and actions.

Tolkien composed *LOTR* in the middle of the twentieth century and, while it may be a fantasy set in a distant past,<sup>32</sup> *LOTR* constitutes a complex, if somewhat ambivalent, response to our times. Several commentators explain the popularity of Tolkien's fantasy in relation to the twentieth century experience of modernity.<sup>33</sup> In short, Tolkien is thought to have "tapped into the longings and misgivings of modern man".<sup>34</sup> For Tom Shippey, Tolkien is an author of the century because *LOTR* utilises fantasy to respond to distinctly modern, twentieth century, experiences.<sup>35</sup> The nature, however, of twentieth century modernity is not self evident and exists in a range of contradictory experiences and ideas. Beyond this, much of Tolkien's modernity lay in the discovery and invention of the pre-modern world: the apprehension and expression of the pre-modern was a defining feature of his modernity.

The most effective way to conceive this duality and to explain ambivalences and contradictions within *LOTR* and the critical field that surrounds Tolkien is to conceptualise the multi-dimensional worldview evident in his work.<sup>36</sup> *LOTR* may be situated within a broad tradition of Romantic anti-modernity, a tradition that remains alive and active today. The nature of Romanticism and its relationship to the modern is highly ambiguous; it is, however, possible to understand the phenomenon in terms which allow a reading of *LOTR* and the culture that surrounds it that recognises, rather than dismisses or avoids, the contradictory, ambivalent and ultimately rich nature of the text itself and of the readings, interpretations and appropriations of that text. Beyond

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<sup>32</sup> According to Tolkien's understanding, Middle-earth is our own earth, specifically North-Western Europe, which he identifies as his "home". J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, Humphrey Carpenter, ed. (London; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 376.

<sup>33</sup> See, in particular, Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*; Chance, *Tolkien's Modern Medievalism*; Curry, *Defending Middle-earth*; Curry, 'Tolkien and his Critics'.

<sup>34</sup> Birzir, 'Not a Hippie Cult Figure,' 25.

<sup>35</sup> Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, xxvi.

<sup>36</sup> This approach has not eluded critics; for example, Veryl Flieger imagines this worldview when she conceives of Tolkien's work in the context of a "generative climate of thought" (27) or "Spirit of the Age" (29) exemplified by writers with shared thematic, conceptual and theoretical concerns. *Question of Time*, 29-59. Similarly, Shippey identifies Tolkien among "a group of 'traumatized authors,' all of them extremely influential ... all of them tending to write fantasy or fable." *J.R.R. Tolkien*, xxx.

this, an approach that recognises the Romantic worldview manifest in the text relates directly to Romantic historiographic thought as it is expressed in modern fantasy.

In an article entitled ‘Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism’, Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy provide a concise yet nuanced overview of Romanticism.<sup>37</sup> Recognising not only the contemporary interest in Romanticism within academic discourse, but also its appearance in popular cultural forms and social movements,<sup>38</sup> they argue against reductive definitions which limit it to a literary mode, historical moment or political form and dismissive approaches which discount it altogether. Sayre and Löwy understand Romanticism as a rich, diverse and highly contradictory phenomenon which has multiple dimensions encompassing not only literary, but also philosophical, political and cultural forms. They also recognise its manifestation throughout the modern period: from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on Marxist theory, which sits somewhat uncomfortably with Romanticism, yet which also insists on antecedent relation to specific social and economic conditions and experiences, they develop an understanding of Romanticism as a worldview which they term ‘Romantic anti-capitalism’ and at the heart of which lies a critique of the conditions of life in capitalist, bourgeois society. In summary, they propose that Romanticism is a historically located worldview, or collective mental structure, which may be manifested in various cultural forms and which is, “in essence, a reaction to the conditions of life in capitalism”.<sup>40</sup> Thus, according to their definition, the Romantic worldview is product and part of capitalist modernity and will “retain its vitality” so long as capitalism itself persists.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, ‘Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism,’ *New German Critique* 32 (1984), 42-92.

<sup>38</sup> “Moreover, there is also a very essential Romantic component in certain large-scale social movements like ecology, pacifism, and anti-nuclear coalitions ... The Romantic longing for a harmonious relationship between man and nature is one of the main driving forces of such movements, and one of the main tenets of the counter-culture.” *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> “One cannot avoid facing the hypothesis that, *far from a purely 19th-century phenomenon, Romanticism is an essential component of modern culture*, and its importance is in fact growing as we approach the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” *Ibid.*, 42-43 (Sayre and Löwy’s italics).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. The phrase ‘conditions of life’ indicates that Romantic anti-capitalism is a response not to capitalism itself as ideology or mode of production and exchange, but to particular life experiences which arise from this mode. As a *Weltanschauung* (worldview) conceived in Marxist terms, Romanticism is not a universal tendency inherent in human beings, but a collective mental structure that is historically located and founded in specific life experiences. *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.



Romantic anti-capitalism encompasses a “whole range of forms of thought in which criticism of bourgeois society is inspired by reference to a pre-capitalist past”<sup>42</sup> and has contradictory socio-political implications. While Marxist criticism in the twentieth century has emphasised the tendency of Romantic anti-capitalism to lead to reaction and conservatism and, in its more extreme form, fascism, Sayre and Löwy argue that it is also possible for it to lead in the opposite direction, towards the Left and revolution. The critical potential of Romantic anti-capitalism lies not in its politics, but in its use of alternate realities to reflect upon existing reality.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Sayre and Löwy consider examples of both Realist and fantastic literature within the Romantic tradition:

Many Romantic and neo-Romantic productions are deliberately non-realistic: fantastic, fairy-like, magical, oniric, and more recently, surrealist. Yet this does not reduce their relevance or importance, both as critiques of capitalism and as dreams of another world, quintessentially opposed to bourgeois society.<sup>44</sup>

Sayre and Löwy use the concept of “critical unrealism” to designate fantastic literature which involves the creation of a secondary world “radically opposed to the grey, prosaic and inhuman reality of industrial capitalist society”.<sup>45</sup>

Tolkien and other fantasists have frequently been identified as belonging to such a tradition of Romantic anti-modernity.<sup>46</sup> Tolkien may also be situated within a specifically British tradition of Romantic protest that is concerned with humanism, ecology, spirituality, and community and is deeply hostile to scientific, industrial modernity.<sup>47</sup> Sayre and Löwy comment on this tradition in their work and in particular emphasise the life of William Morris which illustrates “the possibility of mobilising this

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>43</sup> “Their critical lucidity is not at all contradicted by their “reactionary,” past orientated, legitimist or Tory ideology. It is vain (and useless) to dress them up with non-existent “democratic” and “progressive” virtues. It is *because* they turn their gaze towards the past that they are able to criticise the present with such acumen and realism.” Ibid., 49 (Sayre and Löwy’s italics). The critical action of Romantic anti-capitalism, as understood by Sayre and Löwy, parallels the critical action of fantasy as explained by Robert Crossley in ‘Pure and Applied Fantasy: From Faërie to Utopia,’ in Schlobin, ed., *Aesthetics of Fantasy*, 176-191.

<sup>44</sup> Sayre and Löwy, ‘Romantic Anti-Capitalism,’ 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> For example see Curry, *Defending Middle-earth*, 25-26; Flieger, *A Question of Time*, 17; Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb*, 1-8; John R. Holmes, ‘Tolkien, *Dustschawung*, and the Gnostic Tense: Is Timelessness Medieval or Victorian?’ in Chance and Siewers, eds., *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages*, 43-44.

<sup>47</sup> See Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 1-6.

tradition for socialism”,<sup>48</sup> linking cultural values which emphasise human artistic and creative energies to the organised movement of the working class. It is, however, Tolkien’s place in this tradition that also leads to the labels escapist, nostalgic, racist, nationalist, and even fascist.<sup>49</sup> While critics attempt to defend the writer and his work against these accusations and point to the critical and subversive potential of Romantic anti-modernity,<sup>50</sup> they overlook the contradictory nature of a worldview which has conservative, revolutionary and even conservative-revolutionary expressions. In short, Sayre and Löwy’s understanding of Romantic anti-capitalism enables a reading of Tolkien’s work that recognises the ambivalences within the text itself as well as the contradictions within both popular and academic readings of that text.<sup>51</sup>

Sayre and Löwy’s description of the key features of the Romantic anti-capitalist worldview is particularly pertinent to a historiographic reading of *LOTR*, because they identify temporal, or more accurately historical, consciousness as being at the centre of this worldview. The first feature, and the one on which all others depend, is a critical attitude towards the here and now: “its seemingly most spiritual or intellectual aspects are closely bound up with temporality. Romanticism issues from a revolt against a concrete historical present.”<sup>52</sup> The specifics of the historical present may vary but, from Sayre and Löwy’s Marxist perspective, the modern period has one essential feature: capitalism.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, Romantic anti-capitalism reacts specifically against what are perceived and experienced as capitalism’s negative effects on individuals and societies such as reification, alienation, and social fragmentation. The Romantic consciousness

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<sup>48</sup> Sayre and Löwy, ‘Romantic Anti-Capitalism,’ 50. On the connections between Tolkien and Morris see Chester S. Scoville, ‘Pastoralia and Perfectibility in William Morris and J.R.R. Tolkien,’ in Chance and Siewers, eds., *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages*, 93-104.

<sup>49</sup> On the similarities between *LOTR* and German geopolitical ideology see, in particular, Inglis, ‘Gentility and Powerlessness’; Werber, ‘Geo- and Biopolitics of Middle-earth’.

<sup>50</sup> See Curry, *Defending Middle-earth*, 26.

<sup>51</sup> In the field of Tolkien criticism, the term ‘anti-capitalism’ may actually be preferable to the more commonly used ‘anti-modernity’. As critics have pointed out, anti-modernity is a thoroughly modern sentiment. The critical focus on Tolkien’s rejection of modernity and appeal to pre-modern symbols and forms tends to obscure the modern origins and nature of Tolkien’s worldview. In particular, it obscures the histories behind myth. On the modern subject matter beneath the “surface quality of its medievalism” in *LOTR*, see Giddings, ‘Introduction,’ 12. On the modern nature of Tolkien’s anti-modernity see Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 159; Flieger, *A Question of Time*, esp. 29-59.

<sup>52</sup> Sayre and Löwy, ‘Romantic Anti-Capitalism,’ 54.

<sup>53</sup> Because the social, economic and ideological changes associated with early capitalism can be traced to the fifteenth century, examples of Romanticism or pre-Romanticism can be identified in the early-modern period. In addition, because ‘postmodern’ society and culture may be understood as a product of ‘late-capitalism’, Romanticism remains active in the postmodern era.

expresses a general sense of loss, disillusion or disenchantment: a revulsion against “the disenchantment of the world”.<sup>54</sup> There exists a feeling that “in the modern world something precious has been *lost* on the level both of the individual and of humanity as a whole.”<sup>55</sup> Thus an important aspect of Romanticism is nostalgia or longing for what has been lost as well as a desire to re-enchant the world through imagination.<sup>56</sup> Because something that has been lost has been possessed previously and can therefore be found, Romantic longing is directed towards the past. The past that is the object of nostalgia is always idealised and may be entirely mythical, but much is invested in the authenticity of a past that is found rather than invented. In addition, Sayre and Löwy identify an active principle in the Romantic imagination which often takes the form of a “*quest for what has been lost*”.<sup>57</sup> Beyond this, because capitalism is understood primarily in terms of division, separation or fragmentation, what is longed for is often imagined in terms of unity, harmony or wholeness. In summary:

Experience of loss in the capitalist present, nostalgia for what has been lost, localized in a pre-capitalist past, and a quest for what has been lost in present or future: such are the principle components of the worldview we are exploring here.<sup>58</sup>

Sayre and Löwy’s explanation of the key themes of Romanticism bears strong resemblance to related discourses in fantasy criticism. There are clear parallels between Tolkien and C.S. Lewis’ understandings of the function of Fairy-stories, a model which is adopted by many fantasy critics, and Sayre and Löwy’s conception of the critical mode of Romantic anti-capitalism. That is, both fantasy and Romanticism are understood as projects to romanticise or re-enchant a disenchanted world through imagination. Sayre and Löwy’s understandings also have much in common with Brian Attebery’s explanation of the critical function of temporal estrangement in fantasy literature.<sup>59</sup> The past becomes the object of Romantic imaginings because it is different

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<sup>54</sup> Max Weber, quoted in Sayre and Löwy, ‘Romantic Anti-Capitalism,’ 55.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. (Sayre and Löwy’s italics).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 57 (Sayre and Löwy’s italics).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Attebery, ‘What are the Politics of Fantasy, if any?’ in Robert A. Latham and Robert A. Collins, eds., *Modes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Twelfth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 2-3.

or distanced from the present;<sup>60</sup> this sense of difference has a critical function when it is represented as an alternative to the present. Patrick Curry uses the term “radical nostalgia” to explain the critical potential of Tolkien’s nostalgia in the modern context and envisages *LOTR* in terms congruent with the Romantic worldview. Verlyn Flieger characterises Tolkien as a “reluctant modernist”<sup>61</sup> and uses the term “regressive innovation” to encompass the same paradox of temporal consciousness that turns a critical eye to the present and finds that it needs to look backwards in order to look forwards.<sup>62</sup> Finally, Tolkien himself pre-figures Attebery’s concept of temporal estrangement in ‘On Fairy-stories’ when he writes that he is concerned with time, specifically “the effect produced *now* by these old things in the stories as they are.”<sup>63</sup>

Just as capitalism is associated with division and loss, the emergence of modern history and modern historiography – including Romantic historiography – is predicated upon the separation of past from present and thus the loss of the past. Michel de Certeau argues that the sense of loss or absence at the core of modern historical consciousness is manifested in the historical imagination in the form of discourses surrounding death.<sup>64</sup> It is no coincidence that Tolkien himself interpreted *LOTR* as a tale ‘about’ death:

But I might say that if the tale is ‘about’ anything (other than itself), it is not as seems widely supposed about ‘power’. Power-seeking is only the motive that sets events going, and is relatively unimportant. It is mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality; and the escapes: serial longevity, and hoarding memory.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, Jared Lobdell recognises the essential role that modern historical consciousness plays in the formation of the Romantic worldview when he traces Tolkien’s literary history, and the history of Tolkienian fantasy, through the ‘Invention

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<sup>60</sup> “The determining characteristic of the past is its *difference from the present*.” Sayre and Löwy, ‘Romantic Anti-Capitalism,’ 56 (Sayre and Löwy’s italics).

<sup>61</sup> Flieger, *Question of Time*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. It is for this reason that Flieger finds it practical to explain Tolkien’s vision of time as “a complex field of experience, encompassing past, present and future.” *Ibid.*, 5. John A. Calabrese employs a similar understanding of temporality when he writes that “Ages overlap. ... The past is never clearly separated from the present.” ‘Continuity with the Past: Mythic Time in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,’ in Donald E. Morse, ed., *The Fantastic in World Literature and the Arts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 43.

<sup>63</sup> Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ 32 (Tolkien’s italics).

<sup>64</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), esp. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 284

of Tradition'.<sup>66</sup> The particular mode of historical consciousness that Lobdell recognises as emerging in the eighteenth century is one based upon both continuity or connection and separation or distance: "What happened in the eighteenth century ... was that the Discovery or Invention of the past, in particular the British Past, brought back an idea of continuity without eliminating the idea of difference."<sup>67</sup> To see the difference or alterity of the past is not only to sense its absence from the present, but also to have an alternative way of looking at things and criterion for acting in the present.

In expanding their conception of Romantic anti-capitalism, Sayre and Löwy identify several potential 'types' which they define in terms of their relation to capitalism.<sup>68</sup> It is possible to situate Tolkien himself within the 'Conservative' or 'Resigned' types, while certain appropriations of *LOTR* illustrate the liberal, fascist, utopian-humanist and even Marxist types. Although this typology is a useful way to conceptualise the diametrically opposed socio-political projects that seem to emerge from *LOTR*, it is somewhat restrictive and moves away from the thematic issues within the worldview which are expressed in the text.

Several elements characteristic of the Romantic anti-capitalist worldview may be found in Tolkien's *LOTR*. Firstly, the text contains a veiled critique of conditions of life associated with modernity, including both material and spiritual conditions. Alternative modes of existence are envisaged: hope and faith are invoked in opposition to disenchantment, and community and ecology are invoked in opposition to alienation and fragmentation. The text's appeal to the past is part of a project to imagine an alternative way of life. This vision has been explained as an "ideal England" in the context of Tolkien's admitted desire to create an Anglo-Saxon "mythology for England".<sup>69</sup> Beyond this, *LOTR* is, above all, a meditation on loss. It is imbued with a

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<sup>66</sup> Lobdell, *Tolkienian Fantasy*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Sayre and Löwy's typology of Romantic anti-capitalism includes *Restitutionist* Romanticism, *Conservative* Romanticism, *Fascist* Romanticism, "*Resigned*" Romanticism, *Liberal* Romanticism, *Revolutionary and/or Utopian* Romanticism which includes the sub-categories *Jacobin-democratic* Romanticism, *Populist* Romanticism, *Utopian-humanist* Romanticism, *Libertarian* or *Anarchist* Romanticism and *Marxist* Romanticism. 'Romantic Anti-Capitalism,' 60-87 (Sayre and Löwy's italics).

<sup>69</sup> Jane Chance explains that "the phrase ['Mythology for England'] was Carpenter's, mentioned first in his *Biography* and derived from Tolkien's letter 131 to Milton Waldman of Collins in 1951". Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977), quoted in Jane Chance, 'Introduction: "A Mythology for England"?' in Chance, ed., *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth*, 1, fn. 2.

powerful and poignant sense of pain and grief, coupled with an equally emotive appeal to the past and the imagination as sources of recovery and re-enchantment. All of these components are thematic aspects of the Romantic worldview and may be identified as important themes in Tolkien's work.

Tolkien's Arda is a "thinning" world.<sup>70</sup> The long history of Middle-earth embodies a pattern of progressive loss. There are numerous examples within the text of the withering of once beautiful landscapes, ruin of once great civilisations, forgetting of once treasured memories, disappearance of once great heroes and rulers, and the estrangement of once friendly allies. This discourse of disenchantment and loss reflects that of the early Romantics, such as Novalis, who saw the Enlightenment in terms of the rule of science over religion and the loss of magic and spirituality from the world:

The result of the modern manner of thinking one called philosophy ... the hatred of religion extended very naturally and consistently to all objects of enthusiasm, disparaging fantasy and feeling, morality and the love of art, the future and the past. This new philosophy places man of necessity at the top of the series of natural beings, and made the infinite creative music of the cosmos into the uniform chattering of a gigantic mill.<sup>71</sup>

For Novalis, the harsh light of reason bleaches all that it touches, dispelling magic and mystery from the world, while the creative music of the natural universe is replaced by the impoverished and inhuman language of machines.

Tolkien criticism tends to dwell on the ways in which *LOTR* embodies a critique of twentieth century modernity;<sup>72</sup> it is, after all, this critical position that explains much of the text's ongoing appeal. Tolkien's critique of the twentieth century is expressed most directly through the political machinations of Wormtongue and Saruman and the industrial war machines and slave armies that emerge from Isengard and Mordor. Tolkien's distaste for industrial modernity, particularly as it is manifested in war, can be

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<sup>70</sup> Clute, 'J.R.R. Tolkien,' 952-954. On the importance of thinning and recovery in high fantasy see John Clute, 'Thinning,' in Clute and Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 942-943. "The passing away of a higher and more intense reality provides a constant *leitmotif* in the immensely detailed mythology created by J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) comes at the end of aeons of slow loss." (942)

<sup>71</sup> Novalis, *Christianity or Europe* (1799) in Frederick C. Beiser, ed., *The Political Writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 69-70.

<sup>72</sup> See, in particular, Curry, *Defending Middle-earth*; Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*.

traced to his own experiences of war.<sup>73</sup> In ‘On Fairy-stories’ he writes of the appeal of archaism as both an escape from, and condemnation of, the ugly and evil aspects of the modern world:

And if we leave aside for a moment ‘fantasy’, I do not think that the reader or the maker of fairy stories need even be ashamed of the ‘escape’ of archaism: of preferring not dragons but horses, castles, sailing ships, bows and arrows; not only elves, but knights and kings and priests. For it is after all possible for a rational man, after reflection ... to arrive at the condemnation, implicit at least in the mere silence of ‘escapist’ literature, of progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say ‘inexorable’ products’.<sup>74</sup>

Here Tolkien questions modern notions of rationality and progress and implies that the natural order of things has been corrupted when progressive equates to destructive.

Finally, Tolkien’s work may be interpreted as an active project to counter the destructive force of progressive modernity. Even though *LOTR* is predominantly a narrative of loss, Tolkien’s comments suggest that the creative process itself – the “escape” of imagination, writing and reading – may be a source of recovery and healing. Thus Curry concludes that the social, natural and spiritual aspects of Middle-earth taken together “comprise the whole implicit project of his literary mythology, and a remedy for pathological modernity in a nutshell: namely the re-sacralization (or re-enchantment) of experienced and living nature, including human nature and the local cultural idiom.”<sup>75</sup>

Curry’s faith in recovery and re-sacralisation through literature brings into focus the importance of spiritual themes within the Romantic worldview. Religion may act as a source of imagined unity which exists in opposition to, and as remedy for, disenchantment, alienation and social fragmentation. Tolkien’s world (Arda) clearly has such a spiritual dimension. There is, however, some debate over whether *LOTR* is a Christian work expressing a specifically Christian morality.<sup>76</sup> Tolkien was a devout

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<sup>73</sup> Nick Otty’s statement that *LOTR* contains an unambivalent celebration of war is an inaccurate and simplistic account of the text. ‘The Structuralist’s Guide to Middle-earth,’ 175. For extended analyses of war in *LOTR* in the context of Tolkien’s own wartime experiences, see John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2003); Janet Brennan Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004).

<sup>74</sup> Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ 56.

<sup>75</sup> Curry, *Defending Middle-earth*, 29.

<sup>76</sup> For example, see Colin Manlove, *Christian Fantasy from 1200 to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 1992); Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the*

Catholic and Christianity itself is not at necessary odds with the Romantic worldview. Modernity may be conceived in terms of the increasing secularisation of human societies, laying down the claims of reason against the authority of the Church, and thus the removal of mystery and faith from the world.

It is possible to read *LOTR* through the lens of Christianity: the Story of Christ may be perceived in Frodo's tale, Galadriel may be reminiscent of the Virgin Mary,<sup>77</sup> Catholic symbols may be seen throughout the text<sup>78</sup> and Christian morality may be found in Tolkien's vision of good and evil; in short, *LOTR* may be read as a fundamentally and profoundly Christian work.<sup>79</sup> Such readings have become increasingly popular in the twenty-first century.<sup>80</sup> This renewed concern regarding Tolkien's Christian credentials reflects less upon *LOTR* than it does on a world in which religion has re-emerged as a central site of cultural and political conflict. The phenomenon is a reminder of the evocative and emotive power of the symbols and narratives within *LOTR* – particularly

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*Victorian Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Aldrich, 'The Sense of Time'. Conversely, Patricia Meyer-Sparks argues that *LOTR* is "by no means a Christian work" and draws attention to the pagan elements of the tale. 'Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*,' 81-108. John Hunter comments, "It is obvious that Tolkien's novel reflects the narrative forms of Christian redemption, but this could also be said about texts as diverse as pagan fairy tales and television soap operas. Such narratives neither originate with nor confine themselves to Christianity." John C. Hunter 'The Evidence of Things not Seen: Critical Mythology and *The Lord of the Rings*,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 26:2 (2006): 134.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Pearce, 'Tolkien and the Catholic Literary Revival,' in Joseph Pearce, ed., *Tolkien - A Celebration: Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 103; Charles A. Coloumbe, 'The Lord of the Rings – A Catholic View,' in Pearce, ed., *Tolkien - A Celebration*, 58.

<sup>78</sup> Coloumbe, 'The Lord of the Rings – A Catholic View,' 53-66.

<sup>79</sup> For example, Joseph Pearce argues that "For Tolkien, his faith was of paramount importance and absolutely essential to his sub-creation." 'Tolkien and the Catholic Literary Revival,' 103. Charles Coloumbe states that *LOTR* "is this age's great Catholic epic." 'The Lord of the Rings – A Catholic View,' 65. Sally Bartlett writes that "every age of Middle-earth mirrors the Christian tale through the four components of creation, degeneration, sacrifice and renewal." 'Invasion from Eternity: Time and Myth in Middle-earth,' *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, General Fantasy & Mythic Studies*, 10:3:37 (1984): 22. See also Kevin Aldrich 'The Sense of Time'; Jared Lobdell, 'The Timeless Moment,' in Jared Lobdell, *The World of the Rings: Language, Religion, and Adventure in Tolkien* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 49-70.

<sup>80</sup> Such texts extend from the field of Tolkien criticism into the field of theology and popular religion. See, for example, Mark Eddy Smith, *Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues: Exploring the Spiritual Themes of 'The Lord of the Rings'* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002); Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Sarah Arthur, *Walking With Frodo: A Devotional Journey Through 'The Lord of the Rings'* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003); Richard L. Purtill, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2003); Bradley Birzer, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003); Matthew T. Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in 'The Lord of the Rings'* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003); Fleming Rutledge, *The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkien's Divine Design in 'The Lord of the Rings'* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004); Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware, *Finding God in 'The Lord of the Rings'* (Carol Stream, IL: Saltriver, 2006).



those relating to identity and war – and re-affirms the highly flexible nature of meaning to be found in the text. This assertion does not imply that the Christian mystery is not echoed in a number of ways in *LOTR*. Such appeals, however, to the authority of the author for authenticity of meaning (to claim to know the man and the ‘true’ myth) in the name of any religion should be approached with a degree of scepticism. The themes that may be identified as Christian in *LOTR* – such as good and evil, death and immortality, time and timelessness – are not the exclusive domain of Christian theology. These symbols have been reincarnated and the stories retold more times than can be counted. Tolkien was a scholar familiar with such creations in many of their forms: Christian, Classical, Celtic, Germanic and Nordic; ancient and modern.<sup>81</sup> The fact that *LOTR* contains echoes of all of these mythologies in form and content is evidence of the intimate connection between the imagination of the sacred and the forms of story, rather than its status as a fundamentally Christian or Catholic work.

In rejecting the alienation associated with modernity, the Romantic worldview looks to alternative ways of life and finds them in pre-modern times. Critics have recognised *LOTR* as an attempt to imagine an “ideal England” that can be situated within the English tradition of “national pastoral fantasy”.<sup>82</sup> Pastoral fantasy finds comfort in the ideal of the simple, rural community and scorns the modernity of science, industry and progress. This tradition is clearly present in *LOTR* in the representation of the Shire, which is a rustic, rural community that exists in harmony with the natural world. The Hobbits appear to be an idealised English *volk* – practical, good natured, unassuming, pipe-smoking fellows. The ruin of the Shire in the hands of Saruman and his men embodies the tragic and irreversible loss of traditional ways of life in the face of social change and technological progress. It should be noted, however, as Patrick Curry suggests, that the Shire, while based upon a pre-industrial English countryside, may be interpreted as any ethnic or group longing for an idealised rural past.<sup>83</sup> In addition,

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<sup>81</sup> For specific works on the roots of Middle-earth in Nordic, Anglo-Saxon and Finnish mythologies see articles in ‘Part III: Tolkien and the old Norse,’ ‘Part IV: Tolkien and Old English,’ and ‘Part V: Tolkien and Finnish,’ in Chance, ed., *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth*, 145-304. See also Tom DuBois and Scott Mellor, ‘The Nordic Roots of Tolkien’s Middle-earth,’ *Scandinavian Review* 20:1 (2002): 35-40; Marjorie Burns, ‘Gandalf and Odin,’ in Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter, eds., *Tolkien’s Legendarium: Essays on the History of Middle-earth* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 219-231.

<sup>82</sup> Lobdell, *Tolkienian Fantasy*, xii-xv. See also Curry, ‘Pastoral Fantasy?’ in *Defending Middle-earth*, 44-46; Brennan Croft, ‘The Pastoral Moment,’ in *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 34-40.

<sup>83</sup> Curry, *Defending Middle-earth*, 38.

Middle-earth is not entirely populated by Hobbits, and *LOTR* as a whole cannot be reduced to English pastoral fantasy.

Tolkien's Middle-earth goes beyond the simple and rustic Shire into the realms of the heroic, epic and monstrous. While it is possible to conceive of the Shire as a nostalgic vision of an alternative way of life which acts a critical mirror on industrial modernity, the extension of Tolkien's vision into a broader field renders his text considerably more complex. Tolkien's "radical nostalgia" for the past extended well beyond the English country-side idyll and into far more perilous realms. The context of Tolkien's "mythology for England", in Britain and in the twentieth century, has meant that while it may have been inspired by the grand legendariums of continental Europe in the age of nationalism, it has somewhat altered appearance in the post-war, post-colonial, and post cold-war world. Ultra-nationalism reached its most horrific manifestation in twentieth century fascism. In the lurid light shed by National Socialism, backward-looking utopias of racially pure homelands and myths of chosen peoples and their heroes struggling against subhuman races take on a particularly grim appearance. There can be little doubt of the legitimising function of such mythologies for acts of genocide. The fact that Tolkien's Middle-earth may be described as racist and even fascist to the extent that it draws upon and re-creates blood and soil mythologies highlights the contradictions and internal tensions of the Romantic worldview. Nostalgic pastoral dreaming and violent projects to bring about a new Golden Age are variant expressions of the same worldview.

When Tolkien envisaged himself creating a "mythology for England", he was not thinking of a final solution, but imagining something similar to the nineteenth century linguistic projects of the Brothers' Grimm in Germany or Lönnrot in Finland.<sup>84</sup> Such projects are not only in accord with the Romantic worldview, but may also be seen as active quests of the sort Sayre and Löwy describe. Such quests seek to "recreate the human community" conceived as "participation in the organic whole of a people, *Volk*, and in its collective imagination as expressed through mythology."<sup>85</sup> Tolkien's own approach to literary creation was guided by his scholarly occupation – philology – a

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<sup>84</sup> See DuBois and Mellor, 'The Nordic Roots of Tolkien's Middle-earth,' 35-40; Verlyn Flieger, 'A Mythology for Finland: Tolkien and Lönnrot as Mythmakers,' in Chance, ed., *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth*, 277-284.

<sup>85</sup> Sayre and Löwy, 'Romantic Anti-Capitalism,' 59.

discipline with roots in the very projects that Tolkien sort to emulate. According to Tolkien's fellow philologist Tom Shippey, philology is the study of the historical forms of a language or languages.<sup>86</sup> Philology unites two essential themes in Tolkien's work: language and time. The result is a scholarly and literary practice that is not only located within a tradition of Romantic medievalism but is also a direct expression of the Romantic worldview and historical consciousness.

Language is frequently identified as the basic theme informing Tolkien's life and work. Shippey argues that philology, Tolkien's scholarly occupation and passion, is "the only proper guide to Middle-earth ... of the sort which the author may be supposed to have desired".<sup>87</sup> Regardless of whether philology is the best guide to Middle-earth, Shippey's work is the best guide to Tolkien's philology. Shippey's exploration of the philological roots of *The Hobbit* and *LOTR* reveals not only the extent to which Tolkien's scholarly pursuits provided the source material for his "invention", Middle-earth, but also the way in which Tolkien's technique, the art of "sub-creation", derived from philology. In Shippey's words, "the activity of recreation – creation from philology – lies at the heart of Tolkien's 'invention'".<sup>88</sup> Shippey notes, on Tolkien's part, a refusal to distinguish between the "invented" and the "discovered", citing the philologist's understanding of the roots of the word "invention" in the "Latin *invenire*, 'to find'; its older sense, as Tolkien knew perfectly well, was 'discovery'".<sup>89</sup>

According to Shippey, the work of the philologist involves the reconstruction of lost or vanished languages, and the cultures to which they belonged, from the only remaining traces of their existence – words. The philologist's task of reconstruction is characterised by as the interaction of imagination and reality, or the "invention" of an \*reality.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Shippey, *J.R.R Tolkien*, xii.

<sup>87</sup> Shippey, *Road*, 6.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>90</sup> In philological practice, the asterisk before the word denotes it is a reconstructed form. "In this entire process [of philological reconstruction] the thing which was perhaps eroded most was the philologists' sense of a line between imagination and reality. The whole of their science conditioned them to the acceptance of what one might call '\*-' or 'asterisk-reality'... that which no longer existed but which could, with 100% certainty, be inferred." *Ibid.*, 16-17.

Tolkien also thought – and this takes us back to the roots of his invention – that philology could take you back even beyond the ancient texts it studied. He believed that it was possible sometimes to feel one’s way back from words as they survived in later periods to concepts which had long since vanished, but which had surely existed, or else the word would not exist.<sup>91</sup>

In reconstructing languages, philologists pieced together histories of vanished peoples from linguistic traces, often detecting layers or “historical strata” within language: “language behind language and age behind age.”<sup>92</sup>

The discipline of philology, as Shippey describes it, bears striking resemblance to the discipline of history, as it is commonly and traditionally understood; that is, as the reconstruction or reconstitution of the past from evidence or traces found in the present. History, or discourse about the past, is not the same as history, the past: in Shippey’s terms, the former may be considered an \*reality. Like philology, history is also characterised by the intermingling of “invention” and “discovery”, creation and appropriation, imagination and reality, or an unending dialogue between “the historian” and “his facts”.<sup>93</sup> Shippey’s portrayal of the writer as a philologist-creator is also pertinent to the work of historians, who struggle with the opposing aspects of their practice: knowledge and creation.

Shippey’s philologist-creator has a diachronic understanding of language, is fascinated by the language and culture of the distant and vanished past, sees words as traces that contain echoes of the past, and recognises the presence of the past in the present as well as a basic continuity between past and present. It is clear from Shippey’s description of Tolkien’s occupation that philology and modern historical practice are intimately connected. For philologists, words constitute historical artifacts. According to Shippey, “philologists were more likely than [literary] critics to believe in what one might call ‘the reality of history’”;<sup>94</sup> that is, philology posits the basic reality of the past-as-object and maintains a strong sense of the continued existence and presence of the past in the present. Shippey comments that philologists conceive history in terms of continuity and connection: a “reason for the feeling of intimate involvement with history, though, lies

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<sup>91</sup> Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, xiv.

<sup>92</sup> Shippey, *Road*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> See E.H. Carr, *What is History?* 1961 (London: Penguin, 1990), 30.

<sup>94</sup> Shippey, *Road*, 22.

in the philologist's awareness of the shaping of present by past", an awareness of "continuing history and continuing linguistic change".<sup>95</sup>

The philological conception of history is worthy of elaboration. As a discipline, philology has ties to Romantic medievalism and literary historicism. These ties mean that it is possible to discuss philology in relation to that Romantic worldview and the mode of historical consciousness that underpins much fantasy literature. In his article 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists and the Presence of the Past', Joep Leerssen discusses early nineteenth century philological practice as a form of "literary historicism".<sup>96</sup> Leerssen's understanding of literary historicism is akin to Ann Rigney's use of "romantic historicism":

I use the term "romantic historicism" to designate broadly the historical culture of [the closing decades of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth] and the convergence of influences by which it was characterized: a radicalized awareness of the alterity of the past and the historicity of experience picked up on the Enlightenment interest in culture and eighteenth century antiquarianism and fed into emergent nationalism with its "identity politics" and interest in folk culture.<sup>97</sup>

Both writers identify the same key figures in this tradition, including the historical novelist Walter Scott, and the "Romantic historians"<sup>98</sup> Thomas Babington Macauley, Augustin Thierry and Jules Michelet. Leerssen is concerned with historical consciousness in literature, and he argues for an approach to the Romantic medievalism of the early nineteenth century that recognises literary works as part of "early nineteenth century historical consciousness and historical sensibility" which involved "historicist recuperation of the past well beyond the realm of literature".<sup>99</sup> He writes that "a pervasive common condition, which I term literary historicism, affected the field of literature, as well as antiquarian and philological scholarship."<sup>100</sup> John Hunter identifies Tolkien's work as a twentieth century expression of the very tradition Rigney and Leerssen discuss; he argues that

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>96</sup> Joep Leerssen, 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists and the Presence of the Past,' *Modern Language Quarterly* 65:2 (2004): 221-43.

<sup>97</sup> Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>98</sup> Leerssen, 'Literary Historicism,' 224.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 234.

far from being unique or aberrant, Tolkien's historicism, has a very canonical pedigree ... that comes from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century projects to harness mythology to the emerging national ideologies of the northern European nations.<sup>101</sup>

Certain qualities of literary historicism as Leerssen describes it are pertinent to philology and to Tolkien's own work within the philological tradition. Firstly, literary historicism does not distinguish sharply between scholarly learning and literature. Leerssen states that

the point needs to be stressed. Nowadays the fields of learning and literature are well and truly divorced ... Following the Romantics' poetics, literature has become more consciously artistic and inspiration driven, while, owing to known and describable historical factors, historical and antiquarian writing has undergone professionalization and academic institutionalization.<sup>102</sup>

In short, literary historicism belongs to that period prior to the estrangement of literature and history when philologist-creators and historical novelists were considered natural artists rather than hybrid anomalies.

On this basis, Leerssen notes that it is important to consider not only Romantic literary poetics, but also Romantic scholarship in order to understand nineteenth century medievalism. Due to changes associated with the decline of *ancien régime* Europe and the emergence of the modern nation-state, much ancient and medieval material became newly available to scholars and "the new accessibility of old manuscripts coincided with the emergence of a new attitude to the past: historicism."<sup>103</sup> Leerssen refers not to the historicism of von Ranke, but to a notion which was transferred from the field of legal studies to philology by Jacob Grimm: "historicism meant the study of human culture as a diachronic growth process: 'to understand *what is* in terms of *how it came to be*'."<sup>104</sup> Thus while von-Rankean historicism emphasises the need to study the past in itself, abstracted from present concerns, Leerssen focuses on a historicism that posits a dynamic relationship of distance and connection between past and present. Historian

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<sup>101</sup> John Hunter, 'The Reanimation of Antiquity and the Resistance to History: Macpherson-Scott-Tolkien,' in Chance and Siewers, eds., *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*, 63.

<sup>102</sup> Leerssen, 'Literary Historicism,' 225.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, paraphrasing Wilhelm Scherer (Leerssen's italics).

David Lowenthal evokes an analogous conception of the paradoxical relationship of past and present as one of both distance and coexistence:

We are in fact aware of the past as a realm both coexistent with and distinct from the present. What joins them is our largely unconscious apprehension of organic life; what sets them apart is our self-consciousness – thinking about our memories, about history, about the age of things around us. Deliberation often distinguishes the here and now ... from bygone things, thoughts, and events. But conflation and segregation are in continual tension, the past has to be felt both part of and separate from the present.<sup>105</sup>

Lowenthal's conception of the organic and unconscious nature of connection and the conscious and rational nature of separation positions him within the tradition of Romantic historicism.

Literary and Romantic historicism describe the historical imagination of a worldview that envisages society as an organic community with roots deep in the past. The significance of the connection between past and present lies in the relevance of the past to present society and community, specifically as a means of asserting the legitimacy, authenticity and value of cultural and social forms based on an assumption of cultural-anthropological continuity over time. Significantly, Leerssen finds literary historicism expressed most obviously in scholarship focused upon the “discovery” of “National epics” and the “philological-historical invention of national literatures”<sup>106</sup> that affected all of Europe in the early nineteenth century. Leerssen instances Jacob Grimm's appeal to fellow scholars to “project ourselves [into] the wholly vanished conditions”<sup>107</sup> of the past as a succinct definition of literary historicism. The object of the philologist's study – the myth, epic or legend – is considered “uncompromisingly archaic, accessible only through the reader's [or scholar's] imaginative reaching into the past”.<sup>108</sup> The capacity of

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<sup>105</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 186.

<sup>106</sup> Leerssen, ‘Literary Historicism,’ 237. Note that Leerssen, like Shippey and Tolkien, uses discovery and invention interchangeably. The connection between contemporary debates in historiography and the concerns of Romantic historicism that Rigney discusses in *Imperfect Histories* is further evidenced by the fact that, in his final analysis, Hayden White is also unwilling to differentiate discovery and invention in historical practice, stating that verbal fictions are “as much invented as found.” ‘The Fictions of Factual Representation,’ in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays on Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 121.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 237. Similarly, Shippey describes the way in which philology was thought to “breathe life into the dry bones of old poems, filling history with the reverberations of forgotten battles and empires.” *Road*, 15.

<sup>108</sup> Leerssen, ‘Literary Historicism,’ 236, fn. 26.

the historical imagination to traverse “distance and a great abyss of time”<sup>109</sup> is fundamental.

Another scholar who draws attention to Tolkien’s concern with temporal consciousness in relation to nineteenth century medievalism is John R. Holmes.<sup>110</sup> Holmes’ discussion highlights the importance of imagination and emotion to Romantic conceptions of historical existence as well as to the role of literary form in expressing these qualities. Holmes identifies a mode of temporal consciousness which he refers to as “*dustchaeawung*, the ‘contemplation of dust’”<sup>111</sup> not only in Tolkien’s fiction and Germanic traditions, but also in classical and Victorian thought:

I would like to explore a notion of time that Victorians (and latter-day Victorianists) seem to think that they invented, and that classicists attribute to classical thought and yet that Tolkien finds not only central to Northern (that is, Germanic) thought but also to his own fiction as well. The treatment of time takes the form of a lament to an irretrievable past, which the Greeks and Romans called “*elegeic*”, but which will be considered here under an Old English name for it, *dustchaeawung*, the ‘contemplation of dust’.<sup>112</sup>

Like Rigney’s Romantic historicism and Leerssen’s literary historicism, Holmes’ *dustchaeawung* is an imaginative, intellectual and expressive mode that is found in multiple socio-historical contexts. Holmes’ identification of the *dustchaeawung* motif – the lament for past civilisations – in classical, Anglo-Saxon and other pre-modern traditions also draws attention to the fact that the distinction between pre-modern historical consciousness defined as unity and modern historical consciousness defined as separation is itself a construct of moderns seeking therapy for the traumas of their own time. The important features of *dustchaeawung*, as Holmes describes it, include a sense of sadness at irrecoverable loss, wonder at the “vastness of time” and “the desire to recreate imaginatively the daily life of those who left that dust”.<sup>113</sup> All three critics emphasise the sympathetic, emotional and appreciative aspects of Romantic historical consciousness as well as Romantic writers’ desire for modes of historical representation undivided from other imaginative and expressive forms.

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<sup>109</sup> Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ 32.

<sup>110</sup> John R. Holmes, ‘Tolkien, *Dustschaeawung*, and the Gnostic Tense: Is Timelessness Medieval or Victorian?’ in Chance and Siewers, eds., *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages*, 43-58.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



Each of these aspects of the Romantic worldview – religious sentiment, pastoral fantasy, national mythologies and Romantic historicism – have been re-articulated throughout the modern era and Tolkien’s *LOTR* may be considered one such articulation. Beyond this, *LOTR* itself has been read, interpreted, and appropriated in the critical spirit of the Romantic worldview in both popular and scholarly realms. Significantly, all such expressions are historical in two senses: firstly, they are responses to experiences arising from specific historical circumstances; secondly, their articulation depends on a form of historical consciousness that differentiates past from present, yet posits a fundamental connection between the two and insists on the role of the imagination in traversing distance and communicating connections.

As Sayre and Lowry suggest, Romantic anti-capitalism is a phenomenon that is not only present, but resurgent in the postmodern era. Romanticism and Romantic medievalism have been integrated into the postmodern cultural milieu and this process accounts, in part, for the ongoing popularity of *LOTR* in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Patrick Curry, explaining the place of *LOTR* in the postmodern era, interprets the postmodern as a Romantic project to re-enchant and re-mythologise the world.<sup>114</sup> The unfortunate result, however, of such musings on Tolkien’s postmodernity has been to displace history and historical consciousness from the field of Tolkien criticism. Emphasis is placed on the universal and ahistorical qualities of *LOTR*, qualities associated with myth rather than history. Commenting on Brian Rosebury’s idea that Tolkien celebrates values with no specific historical valence, Jane Chance suggests that “such an argument opens the door to consideration of Tolkien’s peculiar postmodernism. His ahistoricity can support politics of both conservatism and subversion”.<sup>115</sup>

While *LOTR* does resonate with certain aspects of the postmodern milieu and can, indeed, support a range of social and political projects, this is not because of its ahistoricity or lack of historical valence. As demonstrated, politics of both subversion and conservatism are associated with the ambivalent and complex historical worldview expressed in *LOTR* and present in the environments of its creation and reception. The

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<sup>114</sup> See Curry, *Defending Middle-earth*, 23-26.

<sup>115</sup> Chance and Siewers, ‘Introduction,’ 2.

unfortunate contention that *LOTR* lacks historicity stems from a limited and limiting understanding of history and its relationship with literature and fantasy. The cultural traditions represented in *LOTR* are not, as Chance and Siewers suggest, “mounted above the historical fray”,<sup>116</sup> rather, they are dependent on a feigned historical fray. History is not simply the real-world context which acts as a background to literary representation and reading. Middle-earth may be considered an independent secondary world, but this does not mean it is a world without history. The historical imagination is an essential component of fictional world creation, and is especially active in fantasy. Beyond this, the Romantic worldview which underpins Tolkien’s work and much fantasy is a historical worldview, tied to specific historical experiences, that also depends on the historical imagination for its critical function. Tolkien loved myth, but he chose to feign history because in the pre-modern, modern and postmodern worlds it is our historical consciousness that allows us to feel and express both the pain of loss and the longing for eternity.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 5 – A Dialogue with the Uncompromisingly Archaic:

### History and Myth in *The Lord of the Rings*

The frequent portrayal of Tolkien's work as universal, ahistorical, timeless, and mythic serves to highlight one important fact: *The Lord of the Rings* is predominantly recognised and interpreted in terms of myth.<sup>1</sup> As John C. Hunter notes, "The mythic nimbus around *The Lord of the Rings* has been strongly insisted upon by its author, many critics, and thousands of ordinary readers".<sup>2</sup> For Tolkien, language, culture and time were simply inseparable concepts. It is for this reason – the integration of language, culture and time – that myth and history, which are forms of living, understanding and expressing being in time, are implicated so strongly in his work. In elucidating this thematic constellation, myth-theory has greatly enriched the field of Tolkien criticism; it has, however, blanketed this field in such a way as to largely obscure history and historical consciousness from vision. The purpose of this chapter is to recognise the splintered light of history through the vivid glow of myth that surrounds Tolkien's work and thus open up paths along which to explore the historical imagination and its expression in *LOTR*.

Despite the dominance of myth-theory in the field of Tolkien criticism, considerable confusion surrounds the discussion of myth in relation to Tolkien's work; this confusion is mainly due to a lack of clear and consistent definition and application of the terms

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Curry states that Tolkien's tales have "probably achieved as close to universality as is given to art." *Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997), 38. Tom Shippey devotes a chapter of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* to "The Mythic Dimension" of Tolkien's work that reaches towards the "universal" and "timeless". *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 161-225. Verlyn Flieger, who insists on the foundational and indispensable place of *The Silmarillion* in Tolkien's vision of Middle-earth, interprets his creation primarily in terms of mythical time. *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997). John A. Calabrese concludes that "In summary, it is clear that a sense of mythic time exists in the very structure of the epic. The search for basic mythic functions reveals continuity with the deep and sacred past in various aspects of characterization, use of language and construction of plot. Frodo's task of bearing the Ring is a timeless or continual struggle." 'Continuity with the Past: Mythic Time in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*,' in Donald E. Morse, ed., *The Fantastic in World Literature and the Arts* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987), 43. See also Sally Bartlett, 'Invasion from Eternity: Time and Myth in Middle-earth,' *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, General Fantasy & Mythic Studies* 10:3:37 (1984): 18-22.

<sup>2</sup> John C. Hunter, 'The Evidence of Things not Seen: Critical Mythology and *The Lord of the Rings*,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 26:2 (2006): 129.

myth, mythic and mythology.<sup>3</sup> Given the influence of Tolkien's scholarship and fiction in the field of fantasy literature, excessive emphasis on myth also obscures the role of history in the fantastic imagination and the construction of fictional worlds more broadly. Although Tolkien himself stated that "history often resembles myth",<sup>4</sup> resemblance is not equivalence.

While *LOTR* draws on and may even be considered part of the mythology of Middle-earth, it is not, in itself, a mythical narrative.<sup>5</sup> It is written in the form of history rather than myth and appeals to historical consciousness more that it evokes myth consciousness. By comparison, *The Silmarillion* is written in a form that closely resembles traditional mythical narratives and resonates with the sacred, religious and mythical imaginations. Juxtaposed, the narratives of the two books contrast starkly in language, form and content. The opening passage of *The Silmarillion* employs biblical language and takes the form of a creation myth:

There was Eru, The One, who in Arda is called Iluvatar; and he made the first Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. And he spoke to them,

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<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, Jane Chance notes that a firm definition of 'mythology' would assist in determining Tolkien's purposes. She also notes various approaches to 'mythology' amongst scholars. A "firm definition" is, however, yet to be established in the field of Tolkien criticism concerned with "Tolkien's mythology": 'Introduction: A Mythology for England,' in Jane Chance, ed., *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 1. In a more critical vein, John Hunter, concerned with the "rampant and obvious misuse" (131) of the term, seeks to expose the contradictory application of 'mythic' to *LOTR*. He writes, "The task of this essay will thus be to see how habitual contradictions in the discourse of the mythic are both expressed and opened up for critique in response to *The Lord of the Rings*" (131). See 'The Evidence of Things not Seen,' 129-147. John A. Calabrese emphasises not only the mythic nature of the narrative, but also of the societies represented within *LOTR*. He writes that "Mythic societies hand down traditional memories from one generation to another." 'Continuity with the Past,' 35. Such a broad statement, which may be equally true of 'historical societies', is an example of the diffuse and ambiguous (mis)application of 'mythic' to *LOTR*. This statement is followed by the even more obscure statement that "The races of Tolkien's world are in a pre-mythic state since they acquire old tales or songs and customs traditionally or remember them directly." *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-stories,' in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), 31.

<sup>5</sup> John A. Calabrese's argument that, according to schemata developed by G.S. Kirk, *The Lord of the Rings* "resembles the rare narrative type of myth" is unconvincing. 'Continuity with the Past,' 33. *LOTR* is not a "simple, neatly arranged tale", nor is it an "elaborate relic of the past". *Ibid.*, 33. As Veryl Fliieger contends, the text is too eclectic in its style and content to be easily coded as wholly "medieval" or "past". Fliieger, 'A Post-Modern Medievalist,' in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, eds., *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 19. "Traditional memories", lineages and "ethnic fiction" (*ibid.*, 33) are important themes in *LOTR*; these are, however, more aptly analysed as historical rather than mythic forms.

propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad.<sup>6</sup>

The language of introductory passages to Book One of *The Lord of the Rings*, on the other hand, is closer to that of the modern novel, and even more reminiscent of children's literature:

When Mr Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton.<sup>7</sup>

This lighthearted and slightly nonsensical introduction contrasts again with the formal account of the triumphant return of the king to Minas Tirith in Book Six of *LOTR*:

So now there was a wide space before the walls of Minas Tirith, and it was hemmed in upon all sides by the knights and the soldiers of Gondor and of Rohan, and by the people of the City and of all parts of the land. A hush fell upon all as out from the host stepped the Dúnedain in silver and grey; and before them came walking slow the Lord Aragorn. He was clad in black mail girt with silver, and he wore a long mantle of pure white clasped at the throat with a great jewel of green that shone from afar; but his head was bare save for a star on his forehead bound by a slender fillet of silver. With him were Éomer of Rohan, and the Prince Imrahil and Gandalf robed all in white, and four small figures that many men marvelled to see.<sup>8</sup>

These passages are much closer to the language of *The Silmarillion*. There are, however, passages in the sixth book that contrast starkly with the narration of regal events in Gondor. Frodo and Sam's dialogue is conversational and informal, while the vulgar and abusive language of the Orcs stands in direct contrast to the polite and politic exchanges of the Captains of the West. In line with such observations, Verlyn Flieger notes the presence of two distinct narrative styles in the text: an epic, or high, medieval style and

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<sup>6</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, Christopher Tolkien, ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 15. The creation myth of *The Silmarillion* differs from most archaic cosmogenic myths in its lack of a feminine element. The emphasis on the single God, thought, and language places *The Silmarillion* in the tradition of monotheistic, Judeo-Christian myth. Joseph Campbell describes the typical form of primitive and folk creation myths as follows: "The first effect of the cosmogenic emanations is the framing of the world stage of space; the second is the production of life within the frame: life polarised for self-reproduction under the dual form of male and female. It is possible to represent the entire process in sexual terms, as a pregnancy and birth." *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Sphere Books, 1975), 234. *The Silmarillion* also has much in common with the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. The primary cosmogenic force in the Finnish myth is, however, the feminine *Ilmatar*.

<sup>7</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of 'The Lord of the Rings'* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 29 (hereafter cited in text as *Fellowship*).

<sup>8</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King: Being the Third part of 'The Lord of the Rings'* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 219 (hereafter cited in text as *Return*).

a “normal” or common style.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Tom Shippey notes the importance of contrasts in the construction of Middle-earth, including contrasting narrative styles in the depiction of different races, cultures and events.<sup>10</sup> The presence of such contrasts in narrative style throughout *LOTR* makes it exceedingly difficult to characterise the work as unified or mythic in either form or content.<sup>11</sup> Richard Jeffery’s description of *LOTR* as the work of a passionate but hesitant perfectionist, “not pure or consistent, but very mixed ... extremely uneven in value, increasingly so as it continues”<sup>12</sup> is more apt than accounts of the book as the masterwork of an accomplished mythmaker.

Most importantly, and herein lies the puzzle, *The Silmarillion* simply does not have the popularity, appeal, recognition or influence of *LOTR* (with the exception, of course, of that area of Tolkien criticism devoted to close study of the mythology of Middle-earth). For theorists who wish to explore mythology in Tolkien’s work, *The Silmarillion* is naturally the preferred text. If it is this mythology, however, that is the key to the appeal of *LOTR* then why, by comparison, is *The Silmarillion* not the more popular work? The answer is simple: myth consciousness and mythical narratives simply do not resonate with the experiences and expectations of twentieth century readers in the way that historical narratives do.

To emphasise that *LOTR* does not take the form of a mythical narrative is not to suggest that Tolkien’s own understanding of myth and the mythology of Middle-earth do not inform *LOTR*, or that myth-theory has nothing to offer in terms of understanding Tolkien’s work. It is, however, to argue, as Hunter does, that “writing a novel that is informed by myth and writing something that works as a myth are very different activities”.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of this shift in focus from myth to history is to open the door to reading *LOTR* as a historical narrative which works not as myth, but through the language and consciousness of history and to develop an understanding of the function of the historical imagination in Tolkien’s work and, more generally, in the construction of the secondary worlds of high fantasy.

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<sup>9</sup> Flieger, ‘A Post-modern Medievalist,’ 21.

<sup>10</sup> Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Shippey’s conclusion that the mythic dimension of *LOTR* lies in the mediation and reconciliation of contrasts is an atypical use of the term ‘myth’. Ibid., xxxii.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Jeffery, ‘Root and Tree: The Growth of Tolkien’s Writings,’ in Joseph Pearce, ed., *Tolkien - A Celebration: Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 150.

<sup>13</sup> Hunter, ‘The Evidence of Things Not Seen,’ 134.

Tolkien's own conception of myth is an ambiguous assembly of ideas related to his personal passion for pre-Christian myth, his identity as a philologist and his religious beliefs.<sup>14</sup> In 'On Fairy-stories' Tolkien identifies God as Creator and men as Sub-creators formed in the image of God.<sup>15</sup> God embodies light and Truth, and therefore the myths and stories created by men contain "splintered light" or fragments of divine Truth.<sup>16</sup> 'On Fairy-stories' is primarily concerned with the value of fairy tales, myths and other stories, and Tolkien concludes that value lies in truth and the ultimate Truth lies in the *evangelium*.<sup>17</sup> 'History' enters his discussion because it is the term commonly used to denote factuality or truth. Tolkien recognises that, in common parlance, myths are considered 'inventions', even lies, rather than 'facts' or truths. Thus, in accordance with his religious beliefs and philological passions, Tolkien argues for the truth, and thus value, of all stories as sub-creations containing the "splintered light" of divine Truth. As the differentiation of myth from history commonly serves to devalue and deny the truth of myth, Tolkien emphasises the union of myth and history in the Christian Story which confirms the divine and 'factual' truth of both: "The Christian joy, the *Gloria* ... this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men – and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused."<sup>18</sup> Tolkien's conception of myth, thus described, is relatively limited in critical application to *LOTR*.<sup>19</sup> The fusion of myth and history is not a simple proposition, even in Tolkien's own terms, and it is thus not unreasonable to question whether Tolkien achieved, or even desired to achieve, such a union in *LOTR*.

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<sup>14</sup> J.S. Ryan argues that Tolkien equates philology, mythology, history and religion in 'On Fairy-stories'. 'Tolkien's concept of Philology as Mythology,' *Seven: An Anglo-American Literary Review* 7 (1986): 92.

<sup>15</sup> Bartlett, 'Invasion from Eternity,' 18. See also J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-stories,' 50.

<sup>16</sup> "We have come from God so the myths we create, woven by us, reflect a splintered fragment of the true light." Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien, Man and Myth* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 58. On Tolkien's philosophy of myth as "splintered light", see also Bartlett, 'Invasion from Eternity,' 18.

<sup>17</sup> Tolkien, 'On Fairy-stories,' 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 63. Bartlett explains this idea: "Myth became fact through history in the life of Christ". 'Invasion from Eternity,' 18.

<sup>19</sup> There is little overt allusion to the Christian myth in *LOTR*. Those critics who discuss Middle-earth in terms of his Christian philosophy of myth tend to draw from *The Silmarillion* and the extended *History of Middle-earth* for supporting evidence. See, for example, Bartlett, 'Invasion from Eternity'; Kevin Aldrich, 'The Sense of Time in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*,' *Mythlore: a Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, General Fantasy & Mythic Studies* 15:1:55 (1988): 5-9.

In order to explore the historical imagination within *LOTR* it is necessary first to delineate the nature of myth and myth consciousness such that it may be distinguished from historical writing and consciousness.<sup>20</sup> This distinction allows for a critical analysis of Tolkien's work that extends beyond the field of myth-theory into the realm of historiography; it also exposes some of the limitations of myth-theory in application to *LOTR*. While myth has multiple meanings in different scholarly traditions, there is considerable overlap in definitions of myth; for example, anthropological definitions are rarely at odds with formalist or structuralist models. It is possible to provide a general summary of the characteristics of myth as it is commonly understood: myths are usually, but not necessarily, narratives or stories; a mythology is a collection of myths; more specifically, myths are stories about supernatural or superhuman beings or forces; myths are stories with explanatory power; that is, they constitute metaphysical systems which explain and order the universe for human comprehension and action. According to anthropological theory, myths serve important functions in human societies, are often considered sacred and are associated with religious beliefs and practices. Correspondingly, myths have a truth status or authority that is separate from the rational, empirical or demonstrable.<sup>21</sup> Drawing on critical and philosophical use of the term, Peter Heehs defines myth as "a set of propositions, often stated in narrative form, that is accepted uncritically by a culture or speech-community and that serves to found or affirm its self-conception," highlighting the independent authority or truth status of myth as well as its metaphysical function within cultures.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between myth and history is more obscure. The reason for this obscurity lies mainly in the fact that both are ways in which humans understand and express the experience of being in time. The relationship between myth and history is implicated in the narratives of modernity that have thus far proven central to considerations of the historical imagination in fantasy literature. Myth consciousness

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<sup>20</sup> On the need to establish a more critical definition of myth in application to *LOTR*, see John Hunter 'The Evidence of Things not Seen,' 130-131. As Hunter explains, the term 'mythic' is generally diffuse: "This term is applied to everything from the religious narratives of archaic societies to the ideological justifications for contemporary social arrangements to deliberate lies". Ibid., 130. Hunter contends that such usage has "allowed the 'mythic' to become (in some cases) an intellectual smokescreen behind which more intractable issues can be concealed." Ibid., 131.

<sup>21</sup> The English word 'myth' derives from the Greek *mythos*. Peter Heehs explains that *mythos* (word as authoritative pronouncement) is differentiated from *logos* (word as demonstrable truth). The authority of myth is given and unquestionable, while the authority of reason must be demonstrated and is subject to revision. 'Myth, History and Theory,' *History and Theory* 33:1 (1994): 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3.



and historical consciousness are distinguished quite clearly by discourses which locate history as the product of modernity, alongside such developments as capitalism and the modern nation state. History and historical consciousness are predicated upon the rupture that occurs between past and present in the modern moment. History embodies a “particular temporalising logic” and “thus modernity embodies a specific temporality: linear, one dimensional, irreversible and unrepeatable”.<sup>23</sup> According to this model, myth consciousness is a feature of pre-modern, archaic or ‘primitive’ societies and is expressed as unity and atemporality, sameness and repetition. At the core of the distinction between history and myth is temporal distance and closeness imagined in spatial terms, where history is linear and progressive and myth is circular and repetitive. Attempts to attain myth consciousness may be considered a characteristic of historical consciousness which experiences and seeks to overcome the alienation associated with modernity. Thus the longing for, rather than the attainment of, myth consciousness, is itself an important quality of historical consciousness and modernity.

While literature often imitates the form of myth and appeals to the universal and atemporal qualities associated with myth, literature is fundamentally at odds with myth consciousness thus conceived. Even prior to such considerations as the development of the modern novel, written and printed language constitute processes of individuation, separation and alienation.<sup>24</sup> It is simply not possible to write or to read ‘pure’ myth. It is for this reason that oral or theatrical story telling are often considered more authentic forms for folk tales, fairy tales, legends and myths. This understanding did not escape Tolkien, who expressed myths and legends within the text of *LOTR* predominantly in the form of song or rhyme rather than prose. The use of archaic forms in this way is itself a characteristic of the Romantic historicist approach to the past in the context of modernity. The reproduction or imitation of a particular poetic form may be understood as an attempt to bridge the gap between past and present experience and consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, ‘History, Imagination and the Politics of Belonging: Between the Death and Fear of History,’ in Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie, eds., *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall* (London; New York: Verso, 2000), 150.

<sup>24</sup> On the cultural and sociological changes associated with the development from oral to written and printed cultures see, in particular, Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London; New York: Methuen, 1982); Marshal McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

<sup>25</sup> See Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 125.

Despite the contradiction implicit in the expression of mythic consciousness in modern writing, the understanding of myth as an alternative to modern consciousness is often invoked in the field of fantasy criticism.<sup>26</sup> Myth represents an alternative ideal of being and consciousness, specifically temporal consciousness, which is associated with pre-modern or primitive societies and can thus act as a critical mirror to the present. Science fiction theorist Robert Scholes presents such an understanding of the literary treatment of mythical and historical time. According to Scholes

Mythic fictions are produced in cultures that lack a concept of historical time. Myths deal with unchanging conditions ... when myths deal with the time between the beginning and the end they treat this time as cyclical not as linear. This view of the cosmos persists in primitive cultures until certain technical developments ... force them to acknowledge that history exists and they are in it.<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, historical consciousness recognises temporal experience as a continuous, irreversible and unrepeatable process. Scholes identifies two other non-historical conceptions of time – Legendary time and Fairy-tale time – which may also act as sources of alternative temporal consciousness in literature.<sup>28</sup> The association between fantasy literature and the cultural forms which embody alternative modes of temporal consciousness is well established; fantasy has its roots in myth, fairy-tale, folk-tale, ballad, and fable. This understanding, however, confines these forms to the past. According to the model which differentiates between pre-modern or archaic myth and history, the temporal consciousness of a modern form – fantasy – can be nothing other than modern historical consciousness. The alternative temporalities of fantasy function through a hermeneutic that is predicated on the difference of mythic or pre-modern temporality and consciousness from historical or modern time temporality and consciousness. Thus the presence of myth in fantasy is mediated through a historical

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<sup>26</sup> See ch.2, fn.112-113.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Fiction of the Future* (Notre Dame; London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Legendary time represents “a stage in the growth of historical awareness” and “incorporates some notions of past, present and future, but as distinct conditions – as beginning, middle and end, rather than as a continuous process of change.” Ibid. “Fairy tale time offers us neither beginning, middle nor end of our own historical process, but another time altogether.” Ibid., 14. Similarly, Lucie Armitt writes that Fairy-tales are “temporally defined in negative terms in that they deal with ‘never-never’ places, a complex understanding of time that defines it primarily in spatial terms.” *Theorising the Fantastic* (London; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 26.

consciousness dependent on distance and difference, rather than myth consciousness of identity and sameness.

This conceptual confinement of alternative temporalities, specifically myth consciousness and myth form, to pre-modern existence presents a problem: it implies that myth does not and cannot exist in modern forms in the modern world. Such an implication is inconsistent with the vast majority of contemporary literary and cultural theory which assumes that myth not only exists, but is an important form in the modern world. It is useful, then, to distinguish between archaic myth, which is the temporal consciousness associated with ‘primitive’, pre-literate societies, the myths of pre-modern literate societies, and various forms of modern myth.<sup>29</sup>

Mircea Eliade’s descriptions of the relationship between myth and history in *Cosmos and History* develop a similar, but somewhat more flexible conception of myth that may be applied to readings of fantasy.<sup>30</sup> Eliade was concerned with ‘primitive’ societies and archaic myth; however, his discussions reveal the extent to which ideas developed with reference to archaic myth have filtered into discussions of modern myth, particularly as it relates to fantasy literature. Eliade defines myths as the ontological systems or cosmologies of archaic societies. Myths provide human beings not only with sources of meaning but also, ultimately, with the sense of access to absolute reality or truth. Human beings partake in myth when an object or act imitates, repeats or participates in an archetype. The ritual of a wedding, for example, allows human individuals to reproduce and participate in “heirogamy, more especially the union of heaven and earth”.<sup>31</sup> Through such acts, participants cease to exist as individuals and become archetypes; they leave historical time and are projected into the mythical epoch. Thus myth is a form of human behaviour or action that abolishes not only individuality, but also history. Myth is characterised by “the abolition of time through the imitation of

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Day provides a useful model which distinguishes between four types of myth: ‘archaic myth’ refers to the myths of non-literate tribal societies, and ‘intermediate myth’ is founded on archaic myth but shaped by writers in literate societies and includes such examples as Classical and medieval mythologies. ‘Derivative myth’ refers to modern cultural and literary creations which use the themes and symbols of archaic and intermediate myth, but deprive them of their sacred qualities, and ‘ideological myth’ refers to mythical notions and concepts which constitute the metaphysical systems that govern the life of modern man. *The Many Meanings of Myth* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 3-9.

<sup>30</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949), trans. Willard R. Trask, (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures.”<sup>32</sup> For Eliade, “archaic man” may exist in both sacred or mythical time and profane or historical time. Human beings enter mythical time when engaged in actions that imitate the archetypes: “any repetition of an archetypal gesture suspends durations, abolishes profane time and participates in mythical time.”<sup>33</sup>

Implicit in Eliade’s discussion is an understanding of history and historical experience as linear, unrepeatable and particular.<sup>34</sup> He comments on the relationship between history and myth, specifically on the tendency of human beings to transform historical experiences into mythical ones. Eliade writes that “the man of archaic cultures tolerates ‘history’ with difficulty and attempts at times to abolish it”.<sup>35</sup> Historical experiences that do not accord with a mythical cosmology threaten its unity and authority. History is subject to a process of mythicisation when specific, unique and located events or individuals are understood and granted significance in terms of a cosmic model. Eliade’s explanation of the mythicisation process typical of collective memorisation is clearly applicable to modern as well as archaic cultures.

Veryl Flieger applies Eliade’s ideas to *LOTR* in her work *A Question of Time*. Flieger discusses the myth of the Eternal Return as a cyclical vision of time that is not only present in Tolkien’s work, but which locates him within a broader, and distinctly modern, philosophical milieu preoccupied with temporal existence and inhabited by such thinkers as Giambattista Vico and Friederich Nietzsche.<sup>36</sup> Flieger also links the myth of the Eternal Return with the Old Norse cosmology and language to which Tolkien was “inclined”: “the idea of time as not just a linear progression, but as a cycle, a “turning” or “return”.<sup>37</sup> Such conceptions of cyclical or mythic temporality are indeed present in *LOTR* in the form of alternative temporal spaces such as Tom Bombadil’s forest, Lothlórien and even Mordor. There are also many examples in the text of repetition or returns in the form of characters whose experiences echo those of their forebears and events which appear to mirror those of the distant past. On closer

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>34</sup> Eliade considers both mythical and historical consciousness to exist in archaic cultures.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>36</sup> Flieger, *A Question of Time*, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

examination, however, the significance of the mythic spaces and eternal returns in *LOTR* lies not in the embrace of mythical time but in resistance to mythic identification through historical difference.

It is possible to apply Eliade's understandings to *LOTR* from an alternate angle, one which emphasises the tension between history and myth implicit in *LOTR*. If considered in light of events in Moria, the myth of Eternal Return is a highly undesirable cycle in which to be trapped. The conflict in Moria is the most striking example of the direct confrontation of myth and history in *LOTR*. It is difficult to imagine Tolkien's approach to history as nostalgic idealism for a mythic past when Balin's quest into the mines – a clear attempt by the Dwarves to reclaim a mythic Golden Age – awakens not past glories but a hellish monster. The Fellowship becomes trapped in the Chamber of Records, and it seems inevitable that they will share the horrible fate of Balin's quest. Only Gandalf's presence and his loss in battle with “an evil of the Ancient World” (*Fellowship*, 337) liberate the company from the myth of Eternal Return. The continuance of the narrative and the ongoing history of Middle-earth itself require that the Fellowship be freed from the repetitive force of myth. The protagonists are under siege in the Chamber of Records – that is, a historical space – and the Balrog – a mythical being – emerges from the depths of the ancient past – a mythical place. The Fellowship is literally and figuratively encircled and trapped by a myth from which it must escape.

From the mines of Moria the Fellowship proceed to another mythical space, one that is far more fair but equally perilous. Lothlórien is a mythical space within a historical world. It has the ancient, timeless quality of myth and evokes an alternative experience of being and consciousness:

Though he walked and breathed and about him living leaves and flowers were stirred by the same cool wind that fanned his face, Frodo felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness. (*Fellowship*, 333)

Again, the Fellowship must leave Lothlórien in order to continue their journey. There may be respite from history within this mythic space, but there is no escape from the urgency of their quest, and “the sun that lay on Lothlórien [has] no power to enlighten the shadow” (*Fellowship*, 333) of the land beyond the river.

Eliade's anthropological theories appear to be readily applicable to *LOTR* because of the text's focus on culture and ritual. In general, however, such theories are specific to archaic cultures and non-literary cultural forms. The possibility of literary myth complicates, in particular, the clear distinction between history and myth apparent in Eliade's work and brings into focus the problem of representation of temporal consciousness in written forms of narrative, poetry and prose.

Probably the most influential approach to myth in literature is the formalist model developed by Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism*.<sup>38</sup> Myth is the first of the five fictional modes which Frye identifies: myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic.<sup>39</sup> Frye traces European literary history through the sequence of modes, from the myths of the pre-medieval period – including Classical, Teutonic and Judeo-Christian myths – to medieval romance, to the high mimetic mode of the Renaissance, the low mimetic mode of middle class literature, and the dominant ironic mode of the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> Frye's history of modes itself has a circular pattern; he anticipates a return from modern irony to the original form, myth.<sup>41</sup> In particular, he identifies popular "science fiction as a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency towards myth."<sup>42</sup> Frye uses myth, however, in "the common sense"<sup>43</sup> meaning narratives about gods. Frye's theory of modes classifies fictions according to the hero's power of action:

if superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a *myth* in the common sense of a story about a god.

if superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being ... Here we have moved from myth, properly so called, into legend, folk tale, *marchen*, and their literary affiliates and derivatives.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>40</sup> See Frye, 'First Essay: Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes,' in *ibid.*, 33-67.

<sup>41</sup> Frye's own model is thus both mythic and ironic.

<sup>42</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 33 (Frye's italics).

Like Eliade, Frye locates myth historically in the pre-modern period, but does not confine its existence to this epoch. According to Frye's model, *LOTR* and most fantasy literature is romance rather than myth; *The Silmarillion*, which includes narratives concerning the divine, is in both Frye's schema and Tolkien's own understanding a collection of myths and legends.<sup>45</sup>

Frye's analysis suggests several qualities of myth which are relevant to discussions of *LOTR* as historical narrative and which also relate directly to structuralist definitions of myth. Frye describes myth as the most "abstract and conventionalised of modes".<sup>46</sup> Myth is not concerned with representative realism, naturalism or "likeness to life".<sup>47</sup> The reason for this is that myth does not refer to any reality outside its own:

The world of mythical imagery is usually represented by the conception of heaven or Paradise in religion, and it is apocalyptic, in the sense of that word already explained, a world of total metaphor in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it was all inside a single infinite body.<sup>48</sup>

Myth does not need to be like reality because it constitutes a complete reality in itself. Myths represent through metaphorical identification, whereas the other modes work through simile or analogy: "what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association".<sup>49</sup> Thus in myth the sun and the god are one and the same, whereas in romance the hero may have qualities which liken him to the sun-god. Frye's discussion of myth in terms of metaphor is similar to Eliade's conception of myth as identification with the archetypes. The contrast between sameness and difference is crucial to the distinction not only of myth from romance, but also of myth from history. Frye writes that in between myth and naturalism lies the whole area of romance which has the tendency "to displace myth in the human direction yet, in contrast to 'realism', to conventionalise content in an

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<sup>45</sup> Tolkien, 'Foreword,' *Fellowship*, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 134.

<sup>47</sup> Frye explains that "as the modes of fiction move from the mythical to the low mimetic and ironic, they approach a point of extreme 'realism' or representative likeness to life. It follows that the mythical mode, the stories about gods, in which characters have the greatest possible power of action, is the most abstract and conventionalised of all literary modes." *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 136. Frye defines "apocalyptic" earlier in this essay: "By an apocalypse I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate." *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

idealised direction.”<sup>50</sup> The tendency towards sameness – “to conventionalise content” – is the tendency towards myth. The opposing tendency, towards difference and towards humanity, may be considered the tendency towards history.

The application of Frye’s ideas to *LOTR* reveals a core ambiguity in the text which points to tension between history and myth. *LOTR* is neither a myth in “the common sense”<sup>51</sup> – it is not a story about gods – nor does it tend towards the abstract and conventionalised mode of mythical representation. The features of naturalism and literary realism are frequently identified as defining features of marvellous fantasy.<sup>52</sup> It is these qualities – associated with the modern novel – that place marvellous fiction and *LOTR* in ambivalent relation to other examples of modern literature and myth.<sup>53</sup> The problem arises in the potential conflict between the unified, timeless and self-referential nature of the mythic and the variety and detail associated with mimetic or ‘lifelike’ representation: as John Hunter suggests, such details tend to be “corrosive to mythic timelessness”.<sup>54</sup> Lothlórien, which is a mythic space that exists within the world of Middle-earth, does have qualities of mythic timelessness. These qualities are, however, associated with an alternative mode of consciousness and perception that defies language and ‘lifelike’ representation. In Lothlórien Frodo struggles to conceive and express what he senses:

A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured forever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful.  
(*Fellowship*, 332)

Lothlórien is a space in which individuals find themselves unable to differentiate between experience and memory, dreaming and waking, ancient and new. Sam comments that he feels as if he “were inside a song”. (*Fellowship*, 332) The difference

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>52</sup> See ch.2, fn.46. Christopher Nash defines ‘neocosmic’ or ‘marvellous’ fiction as realism of form but not of content. *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (London; New York: Longman, 1993), 4.

<sup>53</sup> See Brian Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 7.

<sup>54</sup> “Tolkien’s historical-fictional detail is thus completely corrosive to mythic timelessness.” Hunter, ‘Evidence of Things not Seen,’ 137.



between feeling as though one is “inside a song” and reflecting upon what it might be like to be inside a story<sup>55</sup> is the difference between being in myth and being in history.

The Hobbits’ meeting with Tom Bombadil provides another example of an encounter with mythic being and temporality. Bombadil is described as “First” and “Last”, “oldest and fatherless”. (*Fellowship*, 254-255) He resides in a bounded space that has a quality of temporal otherness similar to that of Lothlórien and he expresses himself in song rather than prose. Bombadil’s songs, like the environment of Lothlórien, eradicate difference and distances of time and space. Bombadil is clearly a creature of myth. He is also the only being in *LOTR* who appears to be immune to the power of the Ring and is thus placed in a unique relation to the history of Middle-earth. Bombadil’s ancientness actually distances him from the history of Middle-earth; Elrond, a living repository of memory, does not recall him: “But I had forgotten Bombadil, if indeed this is still the same that walked the woods and hills long ago, and even then was older than the old.” (*Fellowship*, 254) The Council concludes that Bombadil can offer little assistance with the problem of the Ring as, “if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind.” (*Fellowship*, 254) As Gandalf suggests, Bombadil is uncompromisingly archaic and with him dialogue to bridge the distance between the historical and the mythic is virtually impossible.

The Hobbits’ encounter with Bombadil is followed by another more perilous encounter with eternity in the form of a Barrow-wight. On reflection, a pattern becomes evident in the protagonists’ encounters with mythic spaces and beings in *LOTR*. The close proximity (in narrative and story) of contrasting mythic spaces reveals two distinct forms of myth: death and immortality. The realms of the Barrow-wight, Ring wraiths, the Balrog and Mordor are spaces of death inhabited by evil creatures, and the havens of the Elves and Bombadil are places of eternity inhabited by immortal beings. Tolkien thus confronts his primary thematic concerns – death and immortality – through the mythic spaces in *LOTR*. The challenging nature of these themes is indicated by the disturbing proximity of eternity-as-nothing (death) to eternity-as-everything (immortality) as well as the tension between the mythical nature of these spaces and the

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<sup>55</sup> On the Stairs of Cirith Ungol, Frodo and Sam reflect on their own experiences in comparison to stories and tales of adventure. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers: Being the Second part of ‘The Lord of the Rings’* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 284-285 (hereafter cited in text as *Towers*).

historical – that is, unique and developing – nature of the individual characters, their experiences and the journey itself.

The intractable nature of the problem of myth and history is supported by its continued presence in the contemporary philosophical climate. As previously noted, the impact of structuralism on concepts and methods in the fields of literary studies, cultural studies and history is significant. One of the primary developments of structuralist theories of myth has been to augment the critical potential of myth-theory in application to modern cultural forms. Structuralist theories of myth are based upon the linguistic theories developed by Levi Strauss in the field of anthropology. If language is understood in terms of *langue* and *parole*, then myth is a particular type of *langue* or linguistic code. According to Roland Barthes, myth is a type of speech, specifically a “*second order semiological system*”.<sup>56</sup> That is, a myth is a signifying system which is made up of signifiers that already exist as signs in other, primary, signifying systems.<sup>57</sup> Barthes describes myth as a parasitical type of language. When a sign becomes a signifier in a mythical system, its original meaning is distanced and impoverished: “when it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains.”<sup>58</sup> The meaning contained in a sign is not lost when it becomes a signifier in a myth, rather myth has a way of appropriating this meaning, draining it of its richness, evocative power, value and history to nourish its own life: “The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alteration.”<sup>59</sup> Although the lasting impact of Barthes’ writings has been the identification of history with myth, here his definition of myth depends upon an understanding of history as something that is lost – “history evaporates”<sup>60</sup> – in the signifying process of myth.

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<sup>56</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 114 (Barthes’ italics).

<sup>57</sup> “In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it *is a second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.” Ibid., 114.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 118.

When applied to Tolkien's writing, Barthes' conception of myth as parasitic language gives Middle-earth the appearance not of an authentic independent world,<sup>61</sup> but of a clever and deceptive illusion wrought through masterful mythopoesis. Applying Barthes' theory of myth to Middle-earth, Margaret Hiley argues that the interpretation of Tolkien's work as universal and ahistorical in its applicability to human circumstances is evidence of the author's success in constructing a mythology in Barthes' sense.<sup>62</sup> Hiley explores the way in which Tolkien uses the language and form of myth to give his text, and himself as author, authority and the quality of timelessness: "a validity surpassing the mere concerns of the author and the era."<sup>63</sup> In addition to this, Hiley recognises myth as the desire for unity and wholeness: "it tries to include all of the world inside its artefact".<sup>64</sup> The achievement of unity is predicated on exclusion of, or expansion to incorporate, alternative realities (including the primary reality). Although Hiley does not adopt the critical tone of Barthes, who considers myth insidious and dangerous, she does argue that Tolkien uses the language and form of myth to conceal the constructed and exclusive nature of his fictional world:

His use of these fragments [Old English and other sources] is another example of what Barthes calls stolen language: incorporating primary material into his secondary world, disguising it and robbing it of its original identity ... Eliot's *Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos* flaunt their stolen language, whereas Tolkien's is hardly to be detected without the deductive skills of a fellow philologist such as Tom Shippey. The function of this is clear: it is once again an example of myth's hiding its constructed nature in order to claim greater authority. Because the distinction between primary sources and newly created material is blurred, the new material claims the authenticity of the primary sources.<sup>65</sup>

In her structuralist critique of the mythology of Middle-earth, Hiley also considers Tolkien's approach to history. In accordance with most critics who approach myth and history in Middle-earth, she concludes that the two converge or overlap to the point of

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<sup>61</sup> Shippey, *Road*, 148.

<sup>62</sup> It is likely that such interpretations are dependent as much upon the tendency of readers to resist history, universalise and mythologise as upon, and sometimes in spite of, Tolkien's representative strategies.

<sup>63</sup> Margaret Hiley, 'Stolen Language, Cosmic Models: Myth and Mythology in Tolkien,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 50:4 (2004): 842.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 852.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 851.

being indistinguishable.<sup>66</sup> What her reading of history and myth in *LOTR* suggests is, however, that history in Middle-earth tends towards myth or, as Barthes would argue, is consumed by myth. It is unsurprising that Hiley reaches this conclusion, because while traditional myth-theory perceives history and myth as binary opposites, structuralism has the unfortunate effect of rendering historical and mythical narratives virtually indistinguishable. According to structuralist assessments of historical discourse, events, facts and evidence are all signs, already pre-encoded within linguistic systems, and the historian's activity of selecting and ordering these signs into a historical narrative constitutes a process of second order signification:

In historical writing the signs of language become signifiers in a secondary system elaborated by the historian. Historical discourse thus has the character of a language constructed out of material that is itself already language.<sup>67</sup>

When history is defined as a narrative form that uses pre-encoded signs and rhetorical devices to create a meaningful version of the past, it comes under Barthes' definitions of myth.<sup>68</sup> Structuralist theories of myth leave little room for an understanding of historical form distinct from mythical form. Such a distinction is necessary, however, if we are to allow for any recognition of the possibility "that historical representation has its own aesthetics, and thus that it may have an aesthetical value alongside other sorts of value."<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the aesthetics of historical representation stem, as Ann Rigney suggests, from the problems of representability specific to history which are present in *LOTR* in the encounter between the mythic and historical.

In order to preserve historical narrative from complete consumption by myth it is thus necessary to adopt an understanding which distinguishes between different types of narratives or fictions. It is possible to qualify broad structuralist definitions of myth with models drawn from anthropology and literary theory. In general, these theories support rather than contradict one another. In anthropological, literary and even structuralist

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<sup>66</sup> "In Tolkien's Secondary World, there is thus an overlapping of myth and history – there can be no strict distinction between the two." Ibid., 846. See also Calabrese, 'Continuity with the Past'; Bartlett, 'Invasion from Eternity'.

<sup>67</sup> Lionel Gossman, 'History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification,' in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 29.

<sup>68</sup> Heehs, 'Myth, History and Theory,' 18.

<sup>69</sup> Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, 8.

definitions, myths are somehow removed from the individual and merely human. Mythical narratives involve supernatural and superhuman powers. Mythical narratives do not refer to individual human beings: myths involve Gods, demigods, archetypes, or types. If a tale is written in the first person or refers to named human individuals, then it is not a myth. Thus, Arthurian legend is, as the term suggests, a collection of legends rather than myths that takes the form of romance rather than mythical narrative. Mythical narratives invoke ontological systems which constitute absolute realities or truths. In doing so, they conceal or distract from their dependence upon or reference to any reality external to themselves. If a narrative deliberately draws attention to or prompts reader awareness of its own construction, then it is unlikely to function successfully as myth.

Historical narratives share certain qualities with mythical narratives. The attempt to keep myth and history entirely separate may be, as Peter Heehs suggests, impossible because the two interpenetrate.<sup>70</sup> The tendency, for example, of historical narratives to use the same symbolic language as myths, participate in mythical cosmologies, assume absolute truths and depend on unquestioned assumptions is the reason that William McNeil states that most histories are more accurately referred to as mythhistories.<sup>71</sup> The term acknowledges a tendency towards myth in historical writing, but it also suggests an equally powerful opposing tendency towards history defined as the particular and changeable. Thus myth and history are most effectively conceived in dialectical relation to one another and mythhistories – or histories as they are more commonly called – recognise and embody the productive tension between the two.

This productive tension is present throughout *LOTR*. Hiley states that “History in Middle-earth is an ongoing story in which all subjective experience somehow relates to a greater whole, and the whole is rooted in mythical time.”<sup>72</sup> The very fact of individual “subjective experience” existing in relation to a “greater whole” implies a process of mythicisation constituted by the interaction of history and myth. There is sufficient self-consciousness and reflection on the part of both author and characters in relation to this

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<sup>70</sup> Heehs, ‘Myth, History and Theory,’ 1.

<sup>71</sup> William McNeil, ‘Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,’ in *Mythistory and Other Essay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3-22.

<sup>72</sup> Hiley, ‘Stolen Language,’ 847.

process – the encounter between history and myth – to suggest that the convergence of the two is not a simple, unquestioned union, but a metamorphosis which alters the very nature of consciousness and being in time.

The Hobbits' tale is one of expanding historical consciousness.<sup>73</sup> They gain increasing awareness of past events (history-as-the-past) which allows them to locate their own experiences in relation to tradition, memory, song and story (history-as-discourse). Not only do the Hobbits participate in events which are located within a broader historical narrative, they also participate in the 'writing' of that history. It is Merry, Pippin and Frodo who complete Bilbo's Diary, recording the events that they have witnessed, along with the tales of the past that they have learned, in the *Red Book of Westmarch*.<sup>74</sup> Tolkien's desire to represent the Hobbits as actors in, and writers of, history is evident in the Prologue to *LOTR* which indicates that the Hobbits' writings form the main documentary source for *LOTR* as history: "this account of the end of the Third Age is drawn mainly from the Red Book of Westmarch... that most important source for the history of the War of the Ring."<sup>75</sup> Bilbo and Sam, in particular, demonstrate the ability to compose rhyme and story in styles that imitate those of the past. For example, Aragorn's rhyme "*All that is gold does not glitter, not all who wander are lost*" (*Fellowship*, 168), is not, as it might appear, an ancient relic, but Bilbo's own composition. Hiley's suggestion that Tolkien does not seek to draw attention to his own appropriations of mythic content and form in order to usurp mythic authority is challenged by the numerous examples of compositions in *LOTR* that do not belong to the past, but instead emulate past styles.<sup>76</sup>

Beyond this, the Hobbits are self-reflexive historians. Their love of stories leads them to reflect on the nature of stories. As has been pointed out, the Hobbits demonstrate several moments of meta-narrative awareness;<sup>77</sup> that is, their meditations and discussions

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<sup>73</sup> John A. Calabrese states that "Although Tolkien sets the narrative within a historical framework, the characters are not as historically conscious as the author would like the reader to be." 'Continuity with the Past,' 24. This point is arguable given that revealing the mysteries of the past is an appealing component of the narrative that is undermined by prior knowledge.

<sup>74</sup> Tolkien, 'Prologue,' *Fellowship*, 24-25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Hiley, 'Stolen Language,' 851.

<sup>77</sup> For example, see Janet Brennan Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004), 45-46. Verlyn Flieger discusses the passage in which Frodo and Sam "wander into distinctly postmodern territory by idly (at first) kicking around the self-reflexive idea that they are in a Story." 'A

suggest that they are conscious of their place in a story or in possible stories. Because *LOTR* is a historical narrative, these meta-narrative moments constitute significant points of historiographic reflection.

The Hobbits' discussions and reflections on stories focus on several themes. Firstly, they are concerned with the problem of endings; their stories always seem incomplete or unfinished: one story merges into another which is somehow the same, but also different. Secondly, the Hobbits muse about how they will be represented in stories and the effects of different modes of representation. Finally, they focus on the difficulty of distinguishing between stories; that is, they recognise the similarity of their own stories to other stories with which they are familiar. All of these problems directly invoke the uneasy relationship between myth and history. Myths have beginnings and endings, as do historical narratives; history, however, depends on a conception of temporality where neither origin nor end is fully discernible. Histories represent the lives of individuals, myths do not. Histories distinguish between the stories of different individuals, myths do not.

The Hobbit's reflections are fraught with uncertainty and ambivalence and encourage one to question rather than accept the simple identification of history with myth. In her analysis of Frodo and Sam's meta-narrative reflections, Flieger concludes that "Sam finally comes to the realization that he and Frodo are part of the same ongoing story, that they are, in fact, in the *Silmarillion*."<sup>78</sup> But Frodo and Sam are not in the *Silmarillion*, and they are not even in *The Lord of the Rings* (which has yet to be written); they are simply Hobbits on the approach to Mount Doom. Tolkien raises a paradox: Frodo and Sam might be heroes of legend or even Hobbits in history at the same time as they are themselves in Mordor. Foremost, this suggests that the historically specific lives and individual experiences of the two Hobbits – Frodo and Sam – might become, or even already be, something else: the adventures of heroic figures on a quest which will determine the fate of the world. Sam tests the implications of this convergence when he attempts to deceive the Orcs into believing their own fears,

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Post-modern Medievalist,' 24. Here Flieger identifies an important aspect of the postmodern as "intentional questioning of the strategies of representation" (ibid., 23) through meta-narrative reflection and comment. While these qualities have certainly been claimed by the postmodern self, the implication that neither modern nor pre-modern persons demonstrated such self consciousness is not only doubtful, but constitutes hubris in the extreme.

<sup>78</sup> Flieger, 'A Post-modern Medievalist,' 24.

that he is a figure out of legend, a “great Elf-warrior” with his “elf-sword” come to slaughter them all. (*Return*, 156) The narrative pays attention to the disjunction between the story and the reality of Sam and Frodo’s situation: Sam is not a “great Elf-warrior”, but a small and frightened Hobbit who only appears as such through an illusion over which he has no control. The possibility that the illusion which deceives the Orcs and leads them to turn on each other might be the form which Frodo and Sam’s tale takes at some future time is disturbing as it veils the trauma of their experience beneath a powerful yet deceptive veneer of heroic fiction.

Such meta-textual moments are not rare, but consistently woven into the structure of *LOTR*. The result is not only a self-conscious narrative, but a history imbued with historiographic awareness. The mythic nimbus that all too often surrounds *LOTR* not only obscures the historiographic nature of the text, it also obscures Tolkien’s struggle with the problems that confront all writers, and historians in particular. In desiring and projecting unity onto Tolkien’s vision, readers succumb to the lure of the Ring. Tolkien confronts problems of representing temporal existence which he does not overcome, but consciously communicates throughout *LOTR*. While myth constitutes one form of apprehension and expression through which Tolkien approaches and expresses these problems, it is not the only form he employs. *The Lord of the Rings* is more aptly read as ‘feigned history’ which, in the traditions of Romantic historiography, imagines and strives for unity, yet remains fully aware of historical being and consciousness.



## Chapter 6 – Echoes of Enchantment: 'Feigned History' in *The Lord of the Rings*

“This tale grew in the telling, until it became a history of the Great War of the Ring and included many glimpses of the yet more ancient history that preceded it.”<sup>1</sup> The opening words to the foreword of the 1974 Unwin Books edition of *The Lord of the Rings* clearly indicate Tolkien’s vision of *The Lord of the Rings* as a work of history situated within the context of a larger history and enriched by a collection of “mythology and legend of the Elder days.”<sup>2</sup> While much scholarship has been devoted to understanding the creation and appeal of Middle-earth as a Secondary World, little of this has been guided by an interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* as feigned history.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Tolkien’s work, the question “how does an author feign history?” is integral to understanding the nature and appeal of Middle-earth as a Secondary World. An investigation of the intricacies of imagined history in *LOTR* offers insight not only into the historical consciousness expressed in Tolkien’s work, but also into the role of historical imagination in the creation of the fictional worlds of fantasy literature.

Tolkien’s own approach to “Sub-creation”, as elucidated in ‘On Fairy-stories’,<sup>4</sup> has directed scholars’ explorations of his work as fantasy, literature and mythopoesis. It has, however, offered little guidance for those approaching his work from a historiographic angle. In ‘On Fairy-stories’ Tolkien uses “history” to refer to the real-historical record of the real-past that is the business of historians, not philologists such as himself.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of ‘The Lord of the Rings’* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 7. The “yet more ancient” history is contained in the twelve volume *History of Middle Earth* and the collection of mythology and legend of the Elder Days in *The Silmarillion*.

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien, ‘Foreword,’ 7.

<sup>3</sup> With the notable exception of John Hunter, who recognises that “*The Lord of the Rings* is a text that presents itself, from beginning to end, as a history” and describes the text as “a potent recent example of the modern West’s techniques for reanimating its past.” ‘The Reanimation of Antiquity and the Resistance to History: Macpherson-Scott-Tolkien,’ in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, eds., *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 61, 63. Kevin Aldrich acknowledges that *LOTR* is “feigned history”, but understands history in broad theological terms as all that lies between Christian genesis and revelation. He writes: “Tolkien’s Story of Middle-earth is feigned history: ‘The Fall of Man is in the past and off stage; the Redemption of Man in the far future’ (*Let*, 387)”. ‘The Sense of Time in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,’ *Mythlore: a Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, General Fantasy & Mythic Studies* 15:1 :55 (1988): 6.

<sup>4</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964). On “Fantasy” as “Sub-creative Art”, see 43-50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

History is, in short, the dead and dry stuff that goes into the Cauldron to be transformed into Story. Tolkien comments later, however, that “History often resembles ‘Myth’ because they are both ultimately of the same stuff”.<sup>6</sup> This statement, while it appears to conflate history with myth, points to the problem of history and myth that appears in his scholarly and literary works: the two are distinct, yet bear close resemblance and share the same basic substance. This problem is akin to that of the thorny kinship of literature and history: points of conjunction are the focal points for uncertainty, anxiety and creative possibility. A further guide to Tolkien’s conception of history lies in his admitted dislike for allegory and preference for “history, real or feigned.”<sup>7</sup> This statement implies a conception of history that extends beyond history as the (real) past and history as discourse about the (real) past: if history can be feigned, then neither its form nor substance must correspond to the past-as-real. Tolkien’s refusal to distinguish between the Old World and Middle-earth, fiction and history, the invented and the found enabled him to explore an extended field of historical expression. The problem of correspondence, which demands that histories be accurate representations of the past as it actually was, is largely removed from the equation.<sup>8</sup> New problems of historical representation are brought to the fore. These comments, while revealing, offer little detail about the nature of feigned history in terms of historical consciousness, written expression and his approach to historical representation; such detail appears only in the meticulous rendering of an imaginary history for a Secondary World.

The following discussion is an exploration of the forms of feigned or imagined history in *LOTR*. History is imagined in *LOTR* on several levels: Tolkien creates a deeply historical world – a world with its own history and historicity – the inhabitants of which exhibit different forms of historical existence, awareness and expression. Above all, *LOTR*, imbued with historiographic sensitivities of Romanticism and philology, touches vital questions concerning the experience and representation of historical existence. The problem at the heart of *LOTR* is not, after all, the problem of power, but the problem of being and belonging in time.<sup>9</sup> Through the comparison of different, sometimes

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, ‘Foreword,’ 9.

<sup>8</sup> On the problems of correspondence and coherence in historical writing, see Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>9</sup> See ch.4, fn. 66.

conflicting, modes of historical consciousness, Tolkien traces this problem to the farthest reaches: struggling on the edge of the abyss and weeping on the shores of eternity.

The appeal and evocative power of Middle-earth as a Secondary World – its enchantment – is not some mysterious quality absorbed from mythic sources or contained in mythic form, nor is it a purely a product of the fantastic or unreal elements in Tolkien’s work. The enchantment of Middle-earth is the enchantment of history and evoking this enchantment requires a rare form of art. “Fantasy”, as Tolkien defines it, is the Sub-creative Art which forms Secondary Worlds that inspire not only Secondary Belief but also wonder and Enchantment.<sup>10</sup> Fantasy may be utilised to represent history in ways that extend beyond the limits of traditional historical narrative, literary realism and historical fiction. While conventional history wrestles with the bonds of language, Tolkien’s fantasy finds history in language and with it the words to express the wonders of the historical imagination. Through an exploration of the different levels of history in *LOTR*, this chapter seeks to reveal the forms of historical consciousness, symbolism, association, language and narrative that emerge from the collaboration of the fantastic and historical imaginations. Firstly, it is possible to describe Middle-earth as a historical world which evokes a specifically historical, rather than mythical, sense of place. Secondly, the various inhabitants of Middle-earth are characterised by different modes of historical consciousness and have different means of expressing the nature and significance of their belonging in history. Finally, and in line with “Tolkien’s desire to supplement history as we know it with a fictional history as we would wish it”,<sup>11</sup> *LOTR* may be conceived as a project to extend the limits of representability to produce a vision of history that encompasses the mundane and miraculous, the material and spiritual, the immanent and transcendent in its vast embrace.

Tolkien’s success in communicating Middle-earth as an independent Secondary World in *LOTR* depended upon his ability to convey not the unity or completeness of myth, but the temporal depth and expansiveness of history.<sup>12</sup> John Clute notes that “[T]he surface

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<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ 44-45 (Tolkien’s capitals).

<sup>11</sup> Hunter, ‘The Reanimation of Antiquity,’ 62-63.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Shippey conceives Tolkien’s “notion of literary ‘depth’” in terms of history: “by which a work – like Lord Macaulay’s famous *Lays of Ancient Rome* – gains added charm by having a sense behind it of an older history now lost, as well as of a later and less truthful history now more familiar.” *J.R.R. Tolkien:*

story of *LOTR* – like *The Hobbit* before it – is mediated through a network of allusion to earlier times”.<sup>13</sup> That Clute uses the term “surface” here is telling. Tolkien’s desire to create a Secondary World commanding Secondary Belief required him to develop more than a superficial or surface reality drawing on a primary reality for its meaning. It is allusions to earlier times within *LOTR* that suggest the existence of a past which gives meaning to the events and characters depicted in the narrative. Such references provide a sense of continuity and connection between past, present, and possible futures and a sense of the historicity of existence, as well as indicating the presence of different forms of historical consciousness. The history and historicity of Middle-earth itself is manifested in *LOTR* in numerous ways including landscape, names and language, relics, documents, memory, songs, legends and individuals.

The landscape presented in *LOTR* does not constitute a background to the narrative; it is a living, dynamic, varied and deeply historical organism which shapes and communicates meaning in the text. As critics have noted, considerable portions of *LOTR* are devoted to landscape description containing elaborate topographic detail.<sup>14</sup> These descriptions contrast significantly with mythic and symbolic landscape presented in *The Silmarillion*, but they create the impression of a terrain that is more than life-like: it has a life and historical existence of its own. Tom Shippey writes that the importance of the detailed description of the localised landscape contained in the first several hundred pages of *LOTR* is to “suggest very strongly a world which is more than imagined, whose supernatural qualities are close to entirely natural ones, one which has moreover been ‘worn down’, like ours, by time and by the processes of land and languages and people.”<sup>15</sup> Here Shippey implies that such detailed description gives the impression of a landscape that appears real precisely because it appears historical,

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*Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), xxxii. Similarly, Marjorie Burns writes, “Behind every setting and every character in J.R.R. Tolkien’s writings lies a history of literary, mythological and linguistic complexity.” ‘Gandalf and Odin,’ in Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter, eds., *Tolkien’s Legendarium: Essays on the History of Middle-Earth* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 220.

<sup>13</sup> John Clute, ‘J.R.R. Tolkien,’ in John Clute and John Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997), 952.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Rosebury argues that it is the “quality of meticulously depicted expansiveness” which gives *LOTR* its aesthetic power and appeal. *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 13. See also Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 83 and Thomas Honneger’s analysis of place in ‘From Bag End to Lórien: the Creation of a Literary World,’ in Peter Buchs and Thomas Honneger, eds., *News from the Shire and Beyond: Studies on Tolkien* (Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2004), 48-67.

<sup>15</sup> Shippey, *Road*, 83.

where history is imagined as a process of erosion over time. Further, it is Tolkien's ability to convey the historicity of the landscape that enables the text to be interpreted as feigned history rather than allegory. While the landscape of the Dead Marshes, for example, may be reminiscent of the battlefields of Europe during the First World War, the dead faces in the water are those of Elves, Orcs and Men slain at the Battle of Dagorlad during the time of the Last Alliance of Elves and Men.<sup>16</sup> While the barrows on the Southern Downs are reminiscent of those in the English countryside,<sup>17</sup> they are, as Sam and Frodo discover, the burial mounds of kings and queens of the lost kingdom of Arnor.<sup>18</sup>

On a primary level, the landscape contains the physical remains of Middle-earth's past, providing those who exist within the landscape with a sense of historicity. The past of a place may be present in both tangible and intangible forms. Traces of the past – burial mounds, ancient monuments and ruins – mark the landscape and serve as focal points for historical reflection within the narrative. As the company approaches the golden hall of King Théoden, they pass sixteen burial mounds and Gandalf declaims "Behold! We are come to the great barrows where the sires of Théoden sleep."<sup>19</sup> The mounds themselves are a physical manifestation of time, where temporality is represented spatially as accumulation. The location of the past underground serves to distinguish and distance past from present while at the same time suggesting the presence and accessibility of the buried past. As they pass the barrows, the company reflects on the history of the area, the discussion focusing on the differing temporal consciousness of Elves and Men, and Aragorn falls into reflective song:

"Five hundred times have the red leaves fallen in Mirkwood in my home since then," said Legolas, "and but a while does that seem to us."

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<sup>16</sup> The Battle of Dagorlad at the gates of Mordor forms part of Elrond's account, from memory, of the history of the Ring. *Fellowship*, 233-234.

<sup>17</sup> Shippey traces these locations to the English landscape: "Barrow-wight too springs from landscape, for barely fifteen miles from Oxford begins the greatest concentration of barrows in the country, where the green Berkshire downs rise from the plain." *Road*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> See Elrond's account of the decline of the descendents of Númenor. *Fellowship*, 234-35. Note that these accounts of past events are contained within the text of *LOTR*; the reader is not required to consult *The Silmarillion* or *The History of Middle-earth* in order to obtain information about the relevant aspects of Middle-earth's past.

<sup>19</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers: Being the Second part of 'The Lord of the Rings'* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 97 (hereafter cited in text as *Towers*).

“But to the Riders of the Mark it seems so long ago,” said Aragorn, “that the raising of this house is but a memory of a song, and the years before are lost in the mist of time. Now they call this land their home, their own, and their speech is sundered from their northern kin.” Then he began to chant softly in a slow tongue unknown to the Elf and Dwarf; yet they listened for there was strong music in it. (*Towers*, 99)

Not only do Elves and Men have contrasting experiences of temporality, but they also measure time differently: while Legolas uses the seasons to record the passing of time – a cyclical model with an emphasis on repetition – Aragorn suggests that the memory of Men is insufficient to encompass such an extended period of years and that the past has been “lost in the mist of time” – a linear model with an emphasis on vision. Aragorn not only describes memory as a process of loss, but also dwells upon the division of an original family of Men into different nations. The fact that the Elf and Dwarf are not able to understand the language in which Aragorn sings heightens the sense that the passing of time is, at least for Men, a process of fading, separation and loss.

Like graves, ruins constitute potent and moving points of reference for the historical imagination.<sup>20</sup> As human creations that have endured and at the same time succumbed to the ravages of time; ruins exist at the intersection of the human, the historical, and the natural. Ruins may be integrated into visions of history in order to communicate a diverse range of meanings: a sense of endurance and continuity, the loss of something once whole, irrelevance and obsolescence, or decline and decay. Like modern historical practice, the reification of ruins is a modern phenomenon characterised by the clear delineation of past from present.<sup>21</sup> In *LOTR* ruins are predominantly signs of decline and decay which serve as points of reflection upon the grandeur of the past, its loss and its pertinence to present concerns.<sup>22</sup> The ruins of the tower of Amon Sûl, which the Hobbits call Weathertop, serve as a site not only for Frodo’s life-threatening encounter with the

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<sup>20</sup> See Andreas Schönle’s overview of the significance of ruins in Western historiography in ‘Ruins and History: Observations on Russian Approaches to Destruction and Decay,’ *Slavic Review* 65:4 (2006): 650-54.

<sup>21</sup> “Modernity fabricates ruins in order to dramatise its distance from the past.” By “fabricate” Schönle means that “mute material” or piles of rubble are transformed into “ruins” which communicate historical meaning. *Ibid.*, 652.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin’s interpretations of ruins within a broader vision of history as a pattern of decline. Schönle writes that “for Walter Benjamin, another founding father of ruinology, ruins were the quintessence of history, conceived as a continuous unraveling from a transcendent state of wholeness.” *Ibid.*, 651.

Dark Riders, but also for an extended reflection upon the past which prompts song and story of great Men and Elves of old.<sup>23</sup>

The traces of the past that mark the landscape of Middle-earth serve as focal points for historical reflection, yet Tolkien goes beyond this, granting the landscape itself historical consciousness. The landscape of Middle-earth has the capacity to remember and to communicate that memory. In the land of Hollin, Gandalf comments that

“there is a wholesome air about Hollin. Much evil must befall a country before it wholly forgets the Elves, if once they dwelt there.”

“That is true,” said Legolas. “But the Elves of this land were of a race strange to us silvan folk, and the trees and the grass do not now remember them. Only I hear the stones lament them: *deep they delved us, fair they wrought us, high they builded us; but they are gone*. They are gone. They sought the Havens long ago.” (*Fellowship*, 271)

Not only is the living landscape able to remember, but different natural materials express different modes of temporal consciousness: as Legolas states, grass and trees have shorter memories than stones. Thus the varying modes of historical consciousness among the inhabitants of Middle-earth are reflected in a landscape, the historical awareness of which is equally nuanced. In a similar incident, the Hobbits pass through a land where they catch “glimpses of ancient walls of stone, and ruins of towers” (*Fellowship*, 197) as they approach Rivendell. Frodo is reminded of Bilbo’s tales:

“Who lives in this land? He asked. “And who built these towers? Is this troll-country?”

“No!” said Strider. “Trolls do not build. No one lives in this land. Men once dwelt here ages ago; but none remain now. They became an evil people, as legends tell, for they fell under the shadow of Angmar. ... But that is now so long ago that the hills have forgotten them, though a shadow still lies on the land.”

“Where did you learn such tales, if all the land is empty and forgetful?” asked Peregrin. “The birds and beasts do not tell tales of that sort.”

“The heirs of Elendil do not forget all things past,” said Strider. (*Fellowship*, 197)

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<sup>23</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of ‘The Lord of the Rings’* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 182-184 (hereafter cited in text as *Fellowship*).

While the ruins remain, the landscape has forgotten. Aragorn's memory and knowledge of legend, capacities directly linked to his ancestry, extend beyond all the other forms of historical knowing contained in the passage: the tales of Bilbo, the ability of birds and beasts to communicate to Hobbits, and the memory of the landscape.

The above examples provide preliminary evidence of the function of fantasy in extending the limits of historical representation. The inclusion of impossible, unreal and supernatural elements in *LOTR* allows Tolkien to grant the living landscape the human quality of memory, giving representability to the historical imagination.

Reflecting upon Glyn Daniel's writing on the historicity of the English landscape, David Lowenthal comments that "any observer of the living landscape, at least in England, constantly comes 'up against the dead and the dying – prehistoric earthworks, Roman villas, Norman *mottes*, dead and decaying towns, deserted villages, nineteenth century disused railways'."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Michel de Certeau observes that in Western historiography the past is distant, dead and Other; while the ghosts of the past might haunt the present, they are subdued and silent, for the powers of speech belong to those of the present.<sup>25</sup> In fantasy the ghosts of the past who haunt the present may speak and act of their own volition, uncontained by the boundaries between past and present, living and dead. The consequences are challenging for the historical imagination, which struggles to contain its own contradictions: a past that is at once living and dead, present and distant. These challenges reach heightened expression in *LOTR* with the frequent manifestation of the past in form of ghosts or spirits of the long dead.

The Hobbits' first treacherous encounter with the ghosts of the past occurs when they almost become spirits themselves at the hands of a Barrow-wight in the Southern Downs. (*Fellowship*, 138-144) The wights that inhabit the Downs are agents of the

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<sup>24</sup> Glyn Daniel, *Idea of Prehistory*, 140, cited in David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 238.

<sup>25</sup> "Alphonse Dupront has said 'The sole historical quest for "meaning" remains, indeed, a quest for the Other,' but, however contradictory it may be, this project aims at 'understanding' and, through 'meaning,' at hiding the alterity of this foreigner; or, in what amounts to the same thing, it aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them scriptural tombs." Michel de Certeau, quoting Alphonse Dupront *Language et Histoire* (1970), in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 2. For de Certeau the problem of the otherness of the past is not only primary, but insurmountable: attempts to understand amount to strategies aimed at containing, silencing or coercing the Other.



Ringwraiths, haunting the tombs of the Men of Arnor who were buried in mounds with their treasures.<sup>26</sup> The ability of the physical landscape to communicate the past is powerfully enhanced by the presence of spirits of the dead. In another perilous encounter, Frodo and Sam see “dead faces” in the water of the Dead Marshes. (*Towers*, 205-207) Like the wights, these ghosts enchant the living into a trancelike state, attempting to lure them to the grave.

The nature of the protagonists’ encounters with the dead reveal much of the desires and fears associated with the otherness of the past. Ghosts give the past not only a voice, but immediacy, agency and the ability to transgress the boundaries that separate past from present. The agency of the dead – like the power of the Ring – is predominantly the power of suggestion: the past has the ability to transform perceptions of reality through illusion and it speaks in the language of desire. The ability of ghosts to affect memory is suggested when Merry awakes outside the barrow:

Then he stopped, and a shadow came over his face, and he closed his eyes. “Of course, I remember!”, he said. “The men of Carn Dūm came on us in the night, and we were worsted. Ah! The spear in my heart.” (*Fellowship*, 143)

In both cases the buried past is perilous as it threatens to lure the Hobbits from the present, from current concerns and, ultimately, from life. Importantly, the supernatural connection which spirits form between past and present does not overcome their alterity. While the ghosts of the dead may resemble persons of old, they have a quality of otherness – “all foul, all rotting, all dead” (*Towers*, 206) – that provides the distance necessary for separation and, ultimately, independent consciousness and action. Yet while Frodo is conscious of his situation in the Barrow on the Southern Downs, it is only with the help of Tom Bombadil that the Hobbits are able to escape. By calling Bombadil’s name, Frodo uses the power of song to overcome the Barrow-wight’s incantation.

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<sup>26</sup> The people of Arnor and the Barrows are mentioned in Bombadil’s song: “Gold was piled on the biers of dead kings and queens; and mounds covered them, and the stone doors were shut; and the grass grew over all.” (*Fellowship*, 132) Elrond also describes the Barrows in his recollections: “For the folk of Arnor dwindled, and their foes devoured them, and their lordship passed, leaving only green mounds on grassy hills.” (*Fellowship*, 235)

There are numerous incidents in *LOTR* where words and, in particular, names have the capacity to affect the world if spoken out loud. As Shippey points out, *LOTR* “is loaded down with names, personal names and place names, the latter often transferred to a map”.<sup>27</sup> Shippey emphasises the philological principle that the name refers to the thing,<sup>28</sup> highlighting the assumption of referential realism underlying philological practice. In Middle-earth many places or objects are given names, that is, they are named during the course of the narrative, or have multiple names with different connotations and different names in different languages.<sup>29</sup> The presence of multiple names suggests a phenomenological and historical conception of reality where meaning is a dynamic product of the relationship between subject and object and is neither entirely subjective (relative), nor entirely objective. There is some tension, however, in the text between two models of naming: one which suggests that the absolute truth or nature of a thing exists in itself and is expressed in its name and another which suggests that things and names are dynamic and changeable. In his discussion of myth in *LOTR*, John A. Calabrese emphasises the former model, suggesting that “once something acquires a name, its nature remains fixed.”<sup>30</sup> Treebeard the Ent confirms this understanding when he shows concern that the Hobbits might reveal their “true names” and thus render themselves vulnerable. A note from Gandalf also informs Frodo that Strider’s “true name is Aragorn.” (*Fellowship*, 168) Treebeard’s explanation of his own true name, however, reveals that it is a dynamic and changing (or growing) thing. (*Fellowship*, 59) According to this understanding, the truth and power of a thing exists not, as might be suggested, in a single authentic meaning attached to its origins or “fixed” nature, but in its historical becoming.

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<sup>27</sup> Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 57.

<sup>28</sup> For the philologist “language is isomorphic with reality.” Shippey, *Road*, 77.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Elendil’s sword, the Sword that was Broken, is re-named Andúril. (*Fellowship*, 264) Tom Bombadil gives new names to the Hobbits’ ponies. (*Fellowship*, 144-45) Bombadil himself is known by many names including Iarwain Ben-adar, Forn, Orald and “other names besides”. (*Fellowship*, 254) Gandalf’s names include The Grey Pilgrim, Mithrandir, Tharkūn, Olórin, and Incánus. (*Towers*, 246) Gandalf undergoes a transformation such that his name changes and he returns from death no longer Gandalf the Grey but Gandalf the White. (*Towers*, 146) Aragorn is also known by many names. (*Fellowship*, 223-24)

<sup>30</sup> John A. Calabrese, ‘Continuity with the Past: Mythic Time in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,’ in Donald E. Morse, ed., *The Fantastic in World Literature and the Arts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 43.

Names are particularly useful devices in fantasy as they “weight a narrative with the suggestion of reality”.<sup>31</sup> Beyond this, names which differ according to perspective and change over time suggest that this is a dynamic and historical, rather than absolute and determined reality. Names communicate more than the origins or authentic nature of places or things, acting instead as historical records of their existence in space and time.<sup>32</sup> Within the text of *LOTR*, the most striking example of the historicity of language lies within the language of the Ents. The Ents’ names for things take the form of a story of their existence over time. Treebeard explains to the Hobbits that

“my name is growing all the time, and I’ve lived a very long, long time; so *my* name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of things they belong to in my language, in the Old Entish as you might say. It is a lovely language, but it takes a very long time to say anything in it.” (*Towers*, 59)

Thus to the Ents, the Hobbits appear a hasty folk:

“I can see and hear (*and* smell *and* feel) a great deal from this, from this, from this *a-lalla-lalla-rumba-kamanda-lind-or-burúmē*. Excuse me: that is part of my name for it; I do not know what the word is in the outside languages: you know, the thing we are on ... *Hill*. Yes, that was it. But it is a hasty word for a thing that has stood here ever since this part of the world was shaped.” (*Towers*, 59-60)

While the tongue of the Ents suggests the possibility of a language that encompasses and communicates the diachronic existence of things, it has some substantial drawbacks. The fantastical language of the Ents allows Tolkien to highlight one of the perpetual problems of historical writing and consciousness: the necessity of generalisation and simplification of complex and extended historical experiences for the sake of communication and action. As demonstrated by the Ents, extended historical reflection is not conducive to action and leaves one particularly vulnerable to the actions of others more concerned with the future than the past.

Tolkien’s text includes numerous songs which serve a similar purpose to names in conveying information about the past and confirming the historical nature of reality. Songs often take the form of tales about the past which are pertinent to present

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<sup>31</sup> Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Shippey writes that the philologist is “prone to consider not only what a word was doing in its own immediate contexts, but also its roots, its analogues in other languages, its descendents in modern languages and all the processes that might be hinted at by its history.” *Road*, 22.

individuals and events. Like names, songs may have a transformative effect on subjective perception and reality. In addition, *LOTR* includes references to other types of oral history such as legends, stories, ‘old wives’ tales’ and sayings which also provide information about the past. Most are parochial, peculiar to a particular race or culture and its historical knowledge and of varying accuracy. Attention is drawn to oral traditions as a form of history because they not only allude to the past of Middle-earth, but provide unexpected sources of information and knowledge pertinent to current concerns which connect past and present and draw attention to the historicity of existence.

Approaching Weathertop, having listened to Strider’s account of the ruin of Amon Sûl, Merry asks, “Who was Gil Galad?” and receives his answer from Sam in the form of a half-remembered song.

*Gil-galad was an Elven-king;  
Of him the harpers sadly sing:  
the last whose realm was fair and free  
between the Mountains and the Sea. (Fellowship, 183)*

Importantly, the pattern of wearing, decline and gradual loss that is evident in the ruins of the tower which Aragorn likens to a king with a broken crown is also apparent in the tale of Gil-Galad, as well as in the form of the song itself: Sam only knows part of the song, which he recites not in its original form, but in translation. (*Fellowship*, 183) This example demonstrates the way in which multiple forms of historical expression are interconnected and mutually re-enforcing: the physical form of the ruin is described as a tower in Aragorn’s oral account and connected to the symbols of kingship as well as to historical figures – Elendil and Gil-Galad – the latter appearing in the song. The idea that language and oral histories, in this case a song, may be subject to the same pattern of decline, over time and in translation, as the material creations of Men is emphasised when it is repeated shortly later by Aragorn who recites a tale to the Hobbits but states that it “is hard to render in the Common Speech, and this is but a rough echo of it”. (*Fellowship*, 190)

Like names and songs, relics have particular significance in Tolkien’s work. The most important relic and driving force of the narrative in *LOTR* is Sauron’s Ring. While the Ring appears to be a symbol of power, it is actually the key to understanding the

problem of history at the core of *LOTR*. The different ways in which individual characters and races relate to The Ring reflects their differing modes of historical consciousness and relationships to the history of Middle-earth. It is primarily through the Ring that Tolkien explores the problems of historical agency and choice. The Ring is usually interpreted as a symbol of power, encapsulating the simple, but thoroughly modern conception that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.<sup>33</sup> This interpretation is appropriate to a reading of *LOTR* which assumes that the text is primarily about power. Reading the text as history, however, presents alternative possibilities. The Ring is fundamentally ahistorical. Its nature is absolute, complete and unalterable, inscribed on it and determined by its maker. The evil of the Ring lies not in the desire for absolute power but in the longing for the absolute itself, a desire that is beyond possessing and about being, but which threatens to eradicate time, history and, ultimately, life.

There are several other significant relics in *LOTR* and they, like the Ring, have inner-power that relates to their origins and owners. Relics of power are often named. In fantasy, relics are frequently magical or enchanted items. As historical objects, relics have particular appeal. Historian David Lowenthal explains that relics have the quality of immediacy that memory lacks: “their existential concreteness explains their evocative appeal”.<sup>34</sup> In addition, relics constitute tangible confirmation of the coexistence of the past with the present.<sup>35</sup> Historians generally recognise, however, that relics offer limited access to the past; they are, like facts, dead and mute.<sup>36</sup> The student of history is reminded that the facts do not speak for themselves;<sup>37</sup> the agency of the past is a fragile thing that ultimately depends upon the behaviour of historians and the norms of historical practice. In fantasy this is not necessarily the case. Relics, like the landscape and the dead, may be alive with inner-power, meaning and potential agency which exists in relation to the agency of individuals. Fantasy thus draws on and adds to the evocative appeal – as well as the danger – of relics as historical objects. The vial of

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<sup>33</sup> See, in particular, Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 116-117.

<sup>34</sup> Lowenthal, *Past*, 245.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>36</sup> “Unlike history and memory ... the tangible past cannot stand on its own. Relics are mute; they require interpretation to voice their reliquary role.” *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>37</sup> “It used to be said that the facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order of context.” E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (1961) (London: Penguin, 1990), 21-22.

Galadriel is an example of one such relic, its magical light aids Frodo and Sam in the darkest of places.

While the power of relics may be traced to their nature or origins, unlike the Ring, other relics in *LOTR* may be utilised by, or even belong to, individuals in the present. The best example of such a relic in *LOTR* is the Sword of Elendil which Aragorn renames Andúril. (*Fellowship*, 264) In Lowenthal's words, the sword is at "once past and present": its historical (past) and contemporary roles intersect.<sup>38</sup> The sword is powerful but, unlike the One Ring, it is not static: its diachronic existence is suggested by processes of change. It has multiple names, has been broken and is remade. Its significance arises from the relationship between the subject (Aragorn) and the object (the Sword) in time, rather than being absolutely determined and determining like the Ring.

There are several historical documents in *LOTR*, although they do not appear as frequently as memories, stories, songs, names and relics. The time period during which *LOTR* is set – at the close of the Third Age – is dominated by non-documentary historical sources. The most common form of historical expression in *LOTR* – the song – is, however, represented as a fading form. The text contains the strong suggestion that the coming age – the Age of Men – will be the age of libraries, documents, and written histories. Tolkien notes that at the end of the Third Age:

the part played by the Hobbits in the great events that led to the inclusion of the Shire in the re-united kingdom awakened among them a more widespread interest in their own history and many of their traditions, up till that time still mainly oral, were collected and written down.<sup>39</sup>

Those documents which are present in *LOTR* reveal much of the relationship between historical awareness and the forms through which history is communicated. In Moria, the Company of the Ring discovers a written record of Balin's expedition in the Chamber of Records which Gandalf names the "Book of Mazarbul". What is significant here is that Tolkien chose to use the form of a written record – a documentary source – as the primary source through which the Fellowship accesses information about the fate

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<sup>38</sup> Lowenthal, *Past*, 248.

<sup>39</sup> Tolkien, 'Prologue,' *Fellowship*, 24-25.

of Balin's quest. While crumbling ruins and ghostly presences evoke a feeling of historical otherness, the record, read out loud and thus communicated as an oral source, has immediacy and familiarity. The written language of the document is echoed in the words of Legolas, Gimli and Gandalf as their own small company is about to be overwhelmed by the dark hordes.

"It is grim reading," [Gandalf] said. "I fear their end was cruel. Listen. *We cannot get out. We cannot get out. They have taken the bridge and the second hall ...*The last lines run *the pool is up to the wall at Westgate. The watcher in the water took Óin. We cannot get out. The end comes, and then drums, drums in the deep.* I wonder what that means. The last thing written is in a trailing scrawl of elf letters; *they are coming.* There is nothing more." (*Fellowship*, 306)

"They are coming!" cried Legolas.

"We cannot get out," said Gimli.

"Trapped!" cried Gandalf. "Why did I delay? Here we are caught, just as they were before." (*Fellowship*, 307)

This repetition communicates the power of the connection between past and present that binds the two groups to a shared fate: trapped! Importantly, the fate of the Fellowship differs from the fate of the Dwarves, despite the overwhelming force of their shared experiences. The power required to sever this connection and overcome the inevitability of myth is, however, immense, and the loss appears great. It is only Gandalf's presence that ensures the survival of the remaining members of the Fellowship, and the wizard is lost in battle with a mythical demon – "an evil of the Ancient world" (*Fellowship*, 337) – and falls from history, and from the narrative, into the realm of ancient myth and death.

Gandalf is also able to identify the One Ring only by consulting the documents and scrolls that are kept by the warden of Minas Tirith:

"yet there lie in his hoards many records that few now can read, even of the lore-masters, for their scripts and tongues have become dark to later men ... there lies in Minis Tirith still, unread, I guess, by any save Saruman and myself since the kings failed, a scroll that Isildur made himself. For Isildur did not march away straight from the war in Mordor, as some have told the tale." (*Fellowship*, 242)

Here, Gandalf's knowledge of ancient languages and ability to recognise the heroes of legend as the documenters of history gives him privileged access to the past.

Like Aragorn, Gandalf is among the Wise and Great whose knowledge of history extends well beyond the range of simple folk.<sup>40</sup> In Middle-earth, age and genealogy are the most significant factors shaping an individual's knowledge of the past. The association of age with knowledge, and sometimes memory, of the ancient past highlights the historical quality of race in *LOTR*.<sup>41</sup> Races are differentiated according to age: the Ents and Elves are the oldest races compared to which Men and Hobbits are relatively young. The Dúnedain, or Race of Kings, are descendents of an ancient race of Men who place great importance upon their genealogy and capacity to remember. Other significant individuals in the text, including Frodo, acquire both their knowledge of the past and their role in the present-history from their genealogy.

The connection between race and history in Middle-earth implicates Tolkien's historiographic concerns in the Romantic worldview and philology. The central place of culture and ethnicity within the Romantic worldview means that a further source of interpretive insight – which integrates ethnicity, myth and history – emerges from the field of ethnography. The term ethno-history is generally used by ethnographers to refer to the study of ethnic groups that utilises the techniques of both ethnography and history.<sup>42</sup> Anthony Smith, a prominent theorist of ethnicity and nationalism, has given the term a different meaning which indicates a particular type of history. In short, an ethno-history is the history which an ethnic group creates for itself.<sup>43</sup> Ethno-histories are tales of homelands and Golden Ages, victories and defeats, the rise and fall of civilizations, heroes and quests, kings and ancestors, chosen people and barbarians. *LOTR* itself may be read as a work of ethno-history if conceived as part of a myth-making project – Tolkien's "mythology for England" – but the text also contains

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<sup>40</sup> Aragorn suggests that the role of the Rangers lies in protecting simple folk from this knowledge: "Strider' I am to one fat man who lives within a day's march of foes that would freeze his heart, or lay his little town to ruin, if he were not guarded ceaselessly. Yet we would not have it otherwise. If simple folk are free from care and fear, simple they will be, and we must be secret to keep them so. That has been the task of my kindred, while the years have lengthened and the grass has grown." (*Fellowship*, 239)

<sup>41</sup> Niels Werber notes that "In Tolkien's novels, purity of race is always a sure sign of superiority of knowledge, wisdom and strength." 'Geo- and Biopolitics of Middle-earth: A German Reading of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*,' *New Literary History* 36:2 (2005): 241.

<sup>42</sup> "Historians and anthropologists now have no difficulty agreeing that ethnohistory is essentially *the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and causes of changes in a culture defined by ethnological concepts and categories.*" James Axtell, 'Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint,' *Ethnohistory* 26:1 (1979): 2 (Axtell's italics).

<sup>43</sup> "By ethno-history is meant the ethnic members' memories and understandings of their communal past or pasts". Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16.



multiple ethno-histories. While they utilise mythic themes, symbols and forms, ethno-histories are modern and historical rather than mythic. Smith's approach to nationalism, ethnicity and the analysis of ethno-histories – which he has termed ethno-symbolism<sup>44</sup> – is valuable in this instance because it offers a means of comprehending the specific forms of language and symbolism used to express the connections between history and ethnicity that appear in *LOTR*. The focus of the ethno-symbolist's analysis is the elements of myth, memory, symbol and tradition used to constitute and re-constitute modern national identities.<sup>45</sup> The primary analytical category is not, however, the nation, but *ethnies* or ethnic communities which are defined by their shared cultures including such things as “ethnic origin myths, beliefs in ethnic election, the development of ethno-scapes, and the territorialisation of memory.”<sup>46</sup> Smith's focus is thus on cultural rather than political expressions of collective identity.

In *LOTR* ethnic identity is expressed in its more extreme form as racial identity. Middle-earth is home to various fantasy races including Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, Orcs, Trolls, and Ents. While the different groups of Men – including the Men of Bree, Rohan and Gondor – may be defined as ethnic or national groups, the Men of Westeros are clearly identified as a race: the Race of Kings. As a category, race is traditionally distinguished from ethnicity by its biological determinism.<sup>47</sup> In Smith's analysis:

A sense of common ancestry confers sentiments of prestige and dignity through an ethnic fraternity, one based upon alleged kinship ties; and herein lie the seeds of that transformation, through a biological or genetic interpretation, by which the ‘ethnic community’ becomes a ‘race’.<sup>48</sup>

The peoples of Middle-earth have the biological attributes of races as well as the cultural attributes of *ethnies*.

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<sup>44</sup> Ethno-symbolism is a theory of nationalism which places emphasis on the pre-modern precursors of the modern nation-state in the form of ethnic groups or communities: “For ethno-symbolists, what gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular living past has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsia.” *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> “A scientifically discredited term previously used to describe biologically distinct groups of persons who were alleged to have characteristics of an unalterable nature.” *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, 2006, s.v. “race”.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 65.

The most important components of ethnicity are cultural attributes and the defining aspect of shared culture is shared memory.<sup>49</sup> Smith identifies several common features of *ethnies* including an identifying name or emblem, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories and traditions, one or more elements of common culture, a link with an historic territory or homeland, and a measure of solidarity.<sup>50</sup> Within *LOTR* the group to which Aragorn belongs – variously labelled the Rangers, Dúnedain, Men of Westesse, Númenóreans or Race of Kings – demonstrates these features. Particular emphasis is placed on Aragorn’s genealogy and on the bloodline of the Kings of Númenor. Aragorn’s place in this bloodline is more than a “symbolic kinship link” or “myth of ancestry”;<sup>51</sup> it is represented as actual and historical rather than purely symbolic. Extensive knowledge of the past and the biological equivalent of this – an extended lifespan – are features which grant the group not only a significant place in the history of Middle-earth, but also heightened historical consciousness. Aragorn’s most important historical memory concerns the last war with Mordor, Isildur’s bane and the breaking of the sword of Elendil. Although the Dúnedain are scattered and wandering at the time of the telling, they are clearly associated with certain territories: ‘the West’ or Númenor – long since sunk below the Sea – is their place of origin, and they have claims to Kingship over much of Middle-earth.

The Dúnedain not only demonstrate the features that Smith considers the definitive components of *ethnies*, they also highlight the extent to which these features vary across different ethnic groups and in different socio-historical circumstances. The primacy that the Dúnedain place on bloodline and hierarchy is consonant with a distinctive historical and socio-political context. This *ethnie* belongs to a feudal socio-political order rather than a modern democratic or populist one. The ethnic rights of the Dúnedain are the claims of an aristocracy to authority rather than a community to territory. In contrast, while genealogy is an important component of the group identity of Hobbits that is reflected in the social hierarchy within the Shire, it does not grant them royal authority because they exist as subjects under the guardianship of kings. The primary component

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<sup>49</sup> See *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>51</sup> These are Smith’s terms in *ibid.*, 63. Myths of descent base claims to status, power and privilege on “a presumed biological link with a hero, a founder, or even a deity.” *Ibid.*, 58.

of the Hobbits' ethnicity is their tie with a specific historical territory or homeland: the Shire.

The second most significant aspect of racial identification in Middle-earth, after language, is place.<sup>52</sup> Using Smith's terms, Middle-earth may be described as a series of ethno-scapes, where the landscape is a direct expression of ethnicity:

What is at stake is the idea of historical and poetic landscape, one imbued with the culture and history of a group, and vice versa, a group part of whose character is felt by themselves and outsiders to derive from the particular landscape they inhabit.<sup>53</sup>

In Middle-earth, beings of particular races clearly belong in certain places: specific geographical locations, natural environments, and distinct sorts of dwellings. Sam notes of the Elves of Lothlórien: "Now these folk aren't wandering or homeless, and seem a bit near the likes of us: they seem to belong here, more even than Hobbits do in the Shire." (*Fellowship*, 342) Individuals feel uncomfortable out-of-place. Numerous aspects of racial identity – physical appearance, society, culture – are connected to, and given expression through landscape and space. As Thomas Honegger writes, "the description of the habitat of a people is an important instrument to characterise its inhabitants and supplements or even replaces a straightforward characterisation."<sup>54</sup> Elves are repeatedly associated with forests and trees, the stars and sky, Dwarves with mountains and underground caverns. The psychological and physical attributes of characters correspond directly to their places of identity; for example, Dwarves are short and stocky of stature and fond of rocks and the underground, whilst Elves are tall, lithe of stature, and fond of trees. Hobbits are reclusive, unobtrusive, and fond of the holes in which they dwell.

The qualities already identified in the landscape of Middle-earth – historicity and agency – are typical features of ethno-scapes. Ethno-scapes connect the historicity of

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<sup>52</sup> Tolkien undoubtedly considered language to be the defining element of ethnic identity. See 'Appendix F: The Languages and Peoples of the Third Age,' in *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of 'The Lord of the Rings'* (London: Unwin Books, 1974), 375-382 (hereafter cited in text as *Return*). Despite the foundational place of language to Tolkien's conception of Middle-earth and its races, for practical reasons, he was not able to convey great linguistic variation in *LOTR*. In general, the presence of the Common Tongue serves to mask the linguistic component of ethnic identity. See Tom Shippey's analysis of Tolkien's use of different "modes of speech" for different characters and races in *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 70-76.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 150.

<sup>54</sup> Honegger, 'From Bag End to Lórien,' 59.

the landscape directly to the history of ethnic groups; the landscape is considered sacred as it has born witness to the life of the cultural community and forms the “last resting place of ‘our ancestors’.”<sup>55</sup> Smith has described ethno-scapes as landscapes which act as witnesses to, documents of, and actors in history:

The land as a historically unique and poetic landscape, as a decisive influence over historical events and as a witness to ethnic survival and commemoration over the *longue durée*: these are all components of the general process of ‘territorialisation of memory’.<sup>56</sup>

The graves, monuments, ruins, towers and battle-fields of Middle-earth are all integrated into the ethno-scapes of Elves, Dwarves and Men as “sites of memory”.<sup>57</sup> French historian Pierre Nora writes that such sites are “bound intimately with life and death, time and eternity”.<sup>58</sup> On the purpose and meaning of sites of memory, he states that

the most fundamental purpose of the *lieux de mémoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish the state of things, to immortalise death, to materialise the immaterial ... all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs.<sup>59</sup>

Nora’s comments suggest that Tolkien’s concern with death and immortality is not purely a personal, spiritual matter,<sup>60</sup> but one which is also integral to the concerns and expressions of collective historical consciousness.

Smith notes that an ethno-scape may also grant the landscape “a more active, positive role; no longer merely a natural setting, it is felt to influence events and contribute to the experiences and memories that moulded the community.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Neils Werber argues that the geo- and biopolitics within Tolkien’s novel constitute a coherent

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<sup>55</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 151.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Pierre Nora defines and identifies *loci memoriae* – the “realms” or “sites of memory” – of the French in his *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, published in English as *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 volumes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Nora writes, “these *lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age.” ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,’ *Representations* 26 (1989): 12.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 151.

<sup>58</sup> Nora, ‘Between Memory and History,’ 19.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Kevin Aldrich discusses this theme in terms of Tolkien’s Catholicism. See ‘The Sense of Time,’ 6.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 151.

ideology, one in which “lands, rivers, and seas become political in such a deep and intense way that nature itself takes part in political and military action – a mountain acts hostile or a river attacks the fiend.”<sup>62</sup> Tolkien’s use of fantasy enables him to represent the landscape as conscious and active. The ideas which are given expression are not, however, purely fanciful or escapist, but form common features of the historical imagination and, as Werber suggests, constitute core concepts of ethno-nationalist ideologies.

*LOTR* contains not only a plurality of ethno-histories and ethno-scapes, but each of these suggests a different mode of historical experience, expression and consciousness. Individuals exhibit more interest in and knowledge of the history of their own races than in that of others. Different races also have distinct knowledge and awareness of history and experiences of spatial and temporal existence. Accordingly, the various races of Middle-earth relate differently to the present-history of the War of the Ring and to the larger mythistory of Middle-earth.

Even though they are among the most ancient, alluring and fascinating of the peoples of Middle-earth, the Elves play a comparatively indirect role in the history narrated in *LOTR*. In general, the Elves occupy a position removed from current events and have an attitude of aloofness. When the Hobbits encounter High Elves on their way to Rivendell, their leader Gildor explains that his group are Exiles, “tarrying here a while, ere we return over the Great Sea”; (*Fellowship*, 84) he continues:

“The Elves have their own labours and their own sorrows, and they are little concerned with the ways of Hobbits, or of any other creatures upon earth. Our paths cross theirs seldom, by chance or purpose.” (*Fellowship*, 88)

This distance is represented spatially in the ethno-scapes of the Elves – domains such as Rivendell and Lothlórian – which, while they evoke a sense of antiquity, understanding and secret power, are places of withdrawal, removed from the main plane of events in the present-history of the War of the Ring. While Rivendell provides a safe space where the peoples of Middle-earth can debate their strategy and Bilbo can reflect and write song, story and history, Bilbo clearly recognises that this place situates him safely outside the current ‘adventure’. Lothlórian is a mythic space even farther removed from

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<sup>62</sup> Werber, ‘Geo- and Biopolitics of Middle-earth,’ 230.

the normal temporal movement of history and historical experience. It is, in Nora's words, a realm of memory which strives towards the immortal, blocks the work of forgetting and materialises the immaterial.<sup>63</sup> Here the experience of temporality takes on a unique, dreamlike quality and history is displaced by mythic timelessness which merges past, present and future into one. Frodo is able to sense the ancient past with impossible clarity, but the mythic experience of temporality offers him little guidance for the task at hand: he gains only a frightening, chaotic, and disordered vision of time and space in Galadriel's mirror.<sup>64</sup>

The Elves have their own, rich history that is expressed in their language, tales, and songs. The traditions and lore of the Elves are concerned mainly with the distant past, the Elder Days "before the fading time": (*Fellowship*, 188)

Only Elves preserve any records of the vanished time, and their traditions are concerned almost entirely with their own history, in which men appear seldom and Hobbits are not mentioned at all.<sup>65</sup>

Thus the ethno-history of the Elves features a golden age as well as a myth of decline.<sup>66</sup> The songs of the Elves are invariably tales of the once shining and glorious past, now distant, faded and lost. By the end of the Third Age, much of the Elven population departed Middle-earth, journeying from the Grey Havens to Elvenhome over the Sea. The Elven language and many tales and songs of the Elder Days have been forgotten or are only partially remembered by a scattered and dwindling company of Elves and Men. On the path to Lothlórian, their guide, Haldir, explains to the Fellowship:

"Some there are among us who sing that the Shadow will draw back, and peace shall come again. Yet I do not believe that the world will ever again be as it was of old, or the light of the Sun as it was aforetime. For the Elves, I fear, it will prove at best a truce, in which they may pass to the Sea unhindered and leave Middle-earth for ever." (*Fellowship*, 330-331)

Through the characters of the Elves, Tolkien explores the idea of memory and history experienced through the lens of immortality. The immortality of the Elves distances and estranges them from mortals. At the same time that it grants them the ability to

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<sup>63</sup> Nora, 'Between Memory and History,' 19.

<sup>64</sup> See John C. Hunter 'The Evidence of Things not Seen: Critical Mythology and *The Lord of the Rings*,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 29:2 (2006): 132.

<sup>65</sup> Tolkien, 'Prologue,' 14.

<sup>66</sup> See Smith, 'A Myth of Decline, or How We Fell into a State of Decay,' in *Myths and Memories*, 67.

remember the ancient past, which is only partially known or completely forgotten by others, it also distances them from the present and hinders their ability to act and communicate with others in relation to the present-history. The Elves, whose wisdom and antiquity appears to render them extremely powerful, have limited power over the Ring and can slow, but not stop, processes of fading and decay. They are not, like Bombadil, immune to the lure of Ring, nor are they immune to history. The reader is reminded that their safe havens on Middle-earth – places of ancient light in a darkening world – will either fall to the Shadow or simply fade away, “slowly to forget and to be forgotten”. (*Fellowship*, 346)

The dark doppelgangers of the Elves, the Orcs, are in direct contrast, a race without ethnicity or history. The foundational features of ethnicity – an identifying name and language – are, for the Orcs, not even their own. The word “Orc” is a name that other races have for this “foul people”.<sup>67</sup>

It is said that they had no language of their own but took what they could of other tongues and perverted it to their own liking; yet they made only brutal jargons, scarcely sufficient even for their own needs, unless it were for curses and abuse.<sup>68</sup>

The language of the Orcs is not only harsh and unpleasant to hear, but grants them limited ability to communicate cultural understanding, let alone the depths and complexities of history. While the ethno-scapes of the Elves and others are rich with shared memory, the Orcs appear to be without an ethno-scape of their own: like Trolls, they do not create, but occupy the ethno-scapes of others, corrupting and fouling them.<sup>69</sup> While the ethno-scapes of Men are marked by the graves of heroes, ancestors and forefathers which become sites of memory, the mangled and bloody corpses of Orcs are strewn about the desolate landscape of Mordor. Similarly, after the Battle of Helm’s Deep, the bodies of the Orcs are “piled in great heaps, away from the mounds of Men”,

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<sup>67</sup> Tolkien, ‘Appendix F,’ *Return*, 380.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> For example, in Mordor, the tower of Cirith Ungol, occupied by Orcs when Sam and Frodo venture there, was originally a tower of Gondor: “As he gazed at it suddenly Sam understood that this stronghold had been built not to keep enemies out of Mordor, but to keep them in. It was indeed one of the works of Gondor long ago ... but as with Narchost and Carchost, the Towers of the Teeth, so here too vigilance had failed.” (*Return*, 154) Thomas Honegger writes that the Orcs’ lack of a “ ‘place of origin,’ of a ‘home,’ points to a moral deficiency.” ‘From Bag End to Lórien,’ 79.

and described as “heaps of carrion ... too great for burial or for burning.” (*Towers*, 131)

Evil does not provide fertile soil for living history:

And after all was done men returned and made a fire there and burned the carcase of the beast; but for Snowmane they dug a grave and set up a stone upon which was carved in the tongues of Gondor and the Mark:

*Faithful servant yet master's bane  
Lightfoot's foal, swift Snowmane.*

Green and long grew the grass on Snowmane's Howe, but ever black and bare was the mound where the beast was burned. (*Return*, 106)

The history of the Dwarves does not hold the position of significance that the Elves occupy in Tolkien's vision. Through the Dwarves, however, Tolkien conveys alternate forms of historical expression as well as a different response to the loss of the past. While the culture and history of the Elves is predominantly linguistic and expressed through tales, ballads and songs, the identity and history of the Dwarves is largely encoded in their material creations: their buildings and crafts. At Rivendell, Gwaihir tells Frodo of the works of the Dwarves in the Lonely Mountain:

Gwaihir began to talk of the work of his people, telling Frodo about their great labours in Dale and under the Mountain. “We have done well,” he said. “But in metal work we cannot rival our fathers, many of whose secrets are lost. We make good armour and keen swords, but we cannot again make mail or blade to match those what were made before the dragon came. Only in mining and building have we surpassed the old days. You should see the waterways of Dale, Frodo, and the mountains, and the pools! You should see the stone-paved roads of many colours! And the halls and cavernous streets under the earth with arches carved like trees and the terraces and Towers upon the Mountain's side.” (*Fellowship*, 221)

As the Company of the Ring approaches the Misty Mountains, Gimli announces,

“I need no map ... There is the land where our fathers worked of old, and we have wrought the image of those mountains into many works of metal of stone, and into many songs and tales. They stand tall in our dreams.” (*Fellowship*, 270)

Like that of the Elves, the culture of the Dwarves has faded over time. Unlike the Elves, the Dwarves express a desire to reclaim and rebuild past grandeur, a desire which ultimately leads to tragedy. As Smith notes, myths of decline are frequently accompanied by programs for renewal:



The tree never grows straight, the river always meanders, even turns back in erratic loops. But, if seized with ethnic consciousness, men can unbend the tree and set the river back on course. Then, of course, the golden age will be renewed and the heroes will return.<sup>70</sup>

Gloin speaks precisely of such an ability of the Dwarves to shape their environment, surpassing the skills of their forefathers. Similarly, Balin's expedition to the Mines of Moria is a quest to reclaim Durin's kingdom, a symbol of both the grandeur of the past and of its loss.<sup>71</sup>

Like that of the Elves and Dwarves, the history of Men is dominated by a discourse of dispersal, decay and fall to ruin. The once majestic kingdoms of Men mark the landscape of Middle-earth in the form of barrows and ruins, the crumbling remains of towering monuments and great cities. The allied races are now embittered and estranged, and the Race of Kings scattered and forgotten, as Elrond laments:

“Never again shall there be any such league of Elves and Men; for Men multiply and the Firstborn decrease, and the two kindreds are estranged. And ever since that day the race of Númenor has decayed, and the span of their years has lessened.” (*Fellowship*, 234)

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<sup>70</sup> Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 67.

<sup>71</sup> As expressed in the song 'In Durin's Day':

*The world was fair, the mountains tall  
In Elder days before the fall  
Of mighty kings in Nargothrond  
And Gondolin, who now beyond  
The Western Seas have passed away:  
The world was fair in Durin's Day  
...  
The world is grey, the mountains old,  
The forge's fire is ashen-cold;  
No harp is wrung, no hammer falls:  
The darkness dwells in Durin's halls;  
The shadow lies upon his tomb  
In Moria, in Khazad-dûm.  
But still the sunken stars appear  
In dark and windless Mirrormere;  
There lies his crown in water deep,  
Till Durin wakes again from sleep.  
(*Fellowship*, 300-301)*

“But in the wearing of the swift years of Middle-earth the line of Meneldil son of Anárion failed, and the Tree withered, and the blood of the Númenóreans became mingled with that of lesser men.”(*Fellowship*, 235)

The history of Men is encoded in their buildings, monuments, fortresses and cities, all of which are susceptible to ‘wearing’ and the ravages of time. The most important measure, however, of the history of Men is genetic. The discourse of degeneration that marks the history of all the races in Middle-earth appears in the history of Men through the “mingling” of bloodlines. Both passages above link racial decay to reproduction and the corruption of pure bloodlines. Of all the ethno-histories represented in Middle-earth, those of Men are the most heavily coded with biological and racial discourse. Tolkien’s emphasis on the mortality of men, in contrast with the immortal Elves, shifts his focus on historical consciousness from living memory to other forms of memory, in this case, the idea that memory may be passed down through generations through ties of blood.

Verlyn Flieger considers Tolkien’s “expressed belief in the persistence of familial, racial, historical memory”<sup>72</sup> in her discussion of his unfinished time-travel story *The Lost Road* and a letter from Tolkien to his son, Christopher:

The clear idea in both the story and the letter is that “things of racial and linguistic significance” are not linked by cultural association only but are combined deep in the blood and the ancestry so that mind and body remember.<sup>73</sup>

This idea extends the synchronic conception of community as an organic unity to a diachronic conception where the experiences and memories of the community are encoded not only into their creations and sites of memory, but into their very blood, which lives immortal so long as the race continues to produce offspring.

The Wizards – Gandalf, Saruman and Radagast – who appear in *LOTR* are difficult to classify according to racial or ethnic categories, due to their semi-divine status as Maiar. They do, however, bring into focus the Ring as a representation of the problems of historical agency. Gandalf plays a central role in the present events, admitting after the defeat of Sauron that “the Third Age was my Age. I was the Enemy of Sauron; and my

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<sup>72</sup> Flieger, *A Question of Time*, 74.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., quoting J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Humphrey Carpenter, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981),108.

work is now finished.” (*Return*, 249) Gandalf acts as a guide throughout the narrative, providing the most direct information about the nature of the Ring and of unfolding events in relation to the larger history of Middle-earth. Gandalf’s attitudes and actions are in direct contrast to those of the wizard Saruman. Together the two wizards represent opposing ways of engaging with history.<sup>74</sup> At Rivendell, Gandalf tells of his imprisonment at the hands of Saruman who has attempted to convince him to use the power of the Ring for his own purposes. Saruman’s appeal to instrumental reason is in direct contrast to Gandalf’s appeal to courage and hope and his faith in the stalwart endurance of the Hobbits in the face of an unknown and unknowable future. Of all the races, Saruman’s logic has the most appeal to Men who are vulnerable to the lure of a power with the potential to determine the course of history.

In the halls of history of the Wise and Great it is easy to overlook the experience of Hobbits. As historical beings, Hobbits are a peculiar race. In the Prologue, Tolkien describes the Hobbits’ transition from legendary-time to historical-time as a product of territorial expansion and incorporation into a feudal order under the then King of the Northern Kingdom. The Hobbits’ transition into historical-time is marked by the establishment of their own calendar of *Shire Reckoning*.<sup>75</sup> Tolkien does not imply that the Hobbits exist in a pre-historical mode, but in a historical state marked by feudal territorial, political and social arrangements. The Hobbits have their own, parochial history that is unknown or ignored by others, and it is for this reason that they intermittently pass “out of the history of Men and Elves”<sup>76</sup> and appear, instead, as beings out of myth or legend. Here Tolkien suggests that legends are incomplete histories, the specifics of which are unknown or have been forgotten.<sup>77</sup> The culture of Hobbits is concerned with the domestic and familiar, their own lived experience and the everyday. While war features prominently in the history of Men and Elves, it has a different place in the history of Hobbits, and is marked by a distinct process of remembering. Objects which are not part of their everyday lived experience become *mathoms*:

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<sup>74</sup> See James Robinson, ‘The Wizard and History: Saruman’s Vision of a New Order,’ *Orcrist: Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin J. R. R. Tolkien Society* 1 (1966-67): 13-17.

<sup>75</sup> Tolkien, ‘Prologue,’ 16.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> As John Hunter suggests, “The ‘legends’ that the characters know are usually half forgotten histories, needing only to be properly understood to reveal the determining power of the past on present events.” ‘The Reanimation of Antiquity,’ 61.

So, though there was still some store of weapons in the Shire, these were used mostly as trophies, hanging above hearths or on walls, or gathered into the museum at Michel Delving. The Mathom-house it was called; for anything that Hobbits had no immediate use for, but were unwilling to throw away, was called a *mathom*.<sup>78</sup>

For the Hobbits, hoarding acts as a form of latent memory. Experiences that have passed beyond living memory – such as hardship and war – may be handled because the internal and external resources necessary to cope with such events are retained.

These resources serve the Hobbits well in the epic and violent history that unfolds in *LOTR*. As Tolkien writes, the book itself is “largely concerned with Hobbits”<sup>79</sup> who, “in the days of Bilbo and Frodo his heir ... suddenly become, by no wish of their own, both important and renowned, and troubled the counsels of the Wise and the Great”.<sup>80</sup> At Rivendell, Elrond announces that:

“This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the Great.”

“But it is a heavy burden. So heavy that none could lay it on another. I do not lay it on you. But if you take it freely, I will say that your choice is right; and though all the mighty elf friends of old ... were assembled together, your seat should be among them.” (*Fellowship*, 259)

Emphasis is placed on Frodo’s free choice to take up the burden of the past. The Hobbits are linked directly with the Ring.<sup>81</sup> It is the Hobbits’ unobtrusive, yet stoic nature that renders them the most suitable candidates to take up the burden of the absolute: their lack of ambition paradoxically grants them the greatest historical agency. The Dwarves seek to regain a lost Golden Age, Men to claim their inheritance, Wizards to control history and the Elves to depart history altogether; the Hobbits appear to be caught up in history as-it-happens, faced with impossible choices, without motive or foresight.

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<sup>78</sup> Tolkien, ‘Prologue,’ 17.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>81</sup> Bilbo is described as the Ring-finder, and Frodo, his heir, as the Ring-bearer. (*Fellowship*, 217)

While *LOTR* embodies the Romantic “desire for history”<sup>82</sup> in the context of modernity, it also expresses an ambivalent attitude towards the past. The past of Middle-earth is both perilous and fair; it exists in the present as oppressive burden and magical inspiration. Age is associated with wearing and decay and with wisdom and enrichment. Many of the relics, spirits and landscapes of the past that remain are worn or rotten remnants of that which was once rich and beautiful. Such remains inspire feelings of fear and dread. This corrupt and threatening past exists in contrast to the beautiful and enchanting past, embodied in the immortal Elves, their stories and songs and in parts of the landscape. Remnants of the past always inspire mixed feelings: fear, awe, and wonder.

*LOTR* may be read as a work of ‘feigned history’ on several levels. It is, simply stated, a historical account of war – the “Great War of the Ring”. (*Fellowship*, 7) As a secondary world, however, Middle-earth manifests history that extends in breadth and depth well beyond the War of the Ring. Tolkien’s “Sub-creative Art”, the art of rendering an imaginary world, is an art of historical writing that draws on the traditions of Romanticism. The sources of Tolkien’s “Sub-creation” are to be found in myth, memory and history: all forms of apprehending and expressing the past. *LOTR* depicts a diverse range of ways in which the past can be accessed – through landscape, documents, legends, memory and relics – and expressed – in story, song, material creations, and rituals. Such forms are the stuff of culture and are integrated into Tolkien’s vision of Middle-earth through a practice of cultural history. Tolkien’s cultural history is based in the traditions of Romantic historicism and tied, in particular, to his personal and scholarly passions in the fields of medievalism and philology.

The understanding of history that characterises the Romantic worldview is modern; yet, while it recognises rupture between past and present, it perceives culture and, in particular, imagination and language, as the threads defining history as continuity and connectedness. The Romantic vision of history recognises and strives towards unity, yet is characterised by heightened awareness of diversity and difference. The presence of multiple ethno-histories and diverse forms of historical consciousness and expression gives rise to a tension between a universal mythistory of Middle-earth and the particular

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<sup>82</sup> Stephen Bann, ‘Romanticism and the Desire for History,’ in *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 3-10.

nature of historical consciousness and experience. None of the creatures of Middle-earth is conscious of world-history in all its intricate detail and vast scope. Those who demonstrate the greatest breadth and depth of historical awareness – such as the Elves, Ents and Bombadil – are also assigned a contemplative mode of existence, one which dissociates them from the present-history and potentially places them, or others, in peril. Gandalf frequently reminds his charges of the necessity of haste and the risks of delay, for, as Legolas states, “time does not tarry, ever”. (*Fellowship*, 368) The multiple, perspectivist histories of the individuals and races of Middle-earth together form components of a larger, single narrative or Great Story which exists, but is beyond the reach of full historical consciousness and representation. Groups and individuals are able to access splintered fragments of this Story, but attempts to grasp the complete field of time are not only doomed to failure, but extremely dangerous.

*LOTR* does contain a spiritual discourse of transcendence, an escape from the “long defeat”<sup>83</sup> of history. Leaving Middle-earth for Elvenhome, the Elves and their companions move beyond the boundaries of history and representability into the realm of the eternal and mythical. It is clear, however, that such transcendence is also tragic, a source of pain and “regret that can never be fully assuaged”, (*Fellowship*, 346) for it comes at the highest possible price: to transcend history is to lose the world and all of its music.

*O! Wanderers in the shadowed land despair not! For though dark they stand all woods there be must end at last and see the open sun go past: the setting sun, the rising sun, the day's end, or the day begun. For east or west all wood must fail...*

*Fail* – even as he said the word his voice faded into silence. (*Fellowship*, 115)

Thus, not only is *LOTR* built upon Romantic understandings about the nature of culture and history, it also communicates Romantic sentiments of longing and loss. It is a

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<sup>83</sup> Tolkien wrote to Amy Ronald that “I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything other than a ‘long defeat’”. *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, Humphrey Carpenter, ed. (London; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 255. In this letter, he quotes Galadriel who explains that “together through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.” (*Fellowship*, 400) John R. Holmes argues that Tolkien suggests Christian tradition, rather than eliminating the tragedy of history, changes the meaning and value of the pagan hero’s “overthrow in time” with the promise of eternity outside history: “Tolkien, *Dustschawung*, and the Gnostic Tense: Is Timelessness Medieval or Victorian?” in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, eds., *Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 49.

poignant work that conveys conflicting emotions that are familiar to historians: the sadness evoked by the recognition that the past is ultimately and irrevocably lost and the allure and enchantment of touching traces, fragments of a greater whole that is just beyond reach.

## Section III

### Fantasy and the Ends of History:

#### Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*

#### Chapter 7 – Wonders of Urth and Sky:

#### Science Fiction Fantasies and Histories

American author Gene Wolfe is among the most highly acclaimed and deeply respected writers in the field of fantastic literature. Writing thirty years after J.R.R. Tolkien produced his seminal work of high fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*, Wolfe created an epic multi-volume work of science fantasy that can be taken as representative of the highest achievements of fantastic literature at the close of the twentieth century and the dawn of the next. Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* draws on the dual traditions of science fiction and fantasy, taking a hybrid form that embodies the dynamic and transformative nature of the fantastic. *The Book of the New Sun* is not only an erudite exploration of being and consciousness, man and his symbols, through the medium of the fantastic; it also dwells upon the nature of history and historical consciousness in a world where humankind wanders in the ruins of the palaces of memory at the end of time. Wolfe carries the imagination to the limits of creation to render a world which reveals historical consciousness as the path least visible, but most travelled in the search for the meaning of human existence in time.

Among scholars and fans alike (although the two are not easily distinguished), it is agreed that Gene Wolfe's work shines among the most intelligent, challenging and original examples of contemporary fantastic literature.<sup>1</sup> Wolfe has received his share of

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<sup>1</sup> Responses to Gene Wolfe and his writing range from sheer rapture, to respectful admiration, cautious awe and bewildered puzzlement. Michael Swanwick writes, in a tone of self-conscious adoration, "His virtues as a writer are so great and so many that a recitation of them tends to make him blend into the sky ... Wolfe is so extremely smart that he stands out even in a field that routinely attracts savants, autodidacts, brilliant loners and wild talents; he writes novels and short fiction with complete mastery, he's endlessly inventive and endlessly surprising ... his writing covers an astonishing range of subjects and styles ... his prose is as good as prose gets." 'The Wolf in the Labyrinth,' *Fantasy and Science Fiction* 112:4 (2007): 82. Not all responses to Wolfe are this adulatory; for example, John Farrell



both popular and critical acclaim, including numerous awards in the fields of fantasy and science fiction.<sup>2</sup> The praise of esteemed science fiction commentator John Clute is indicative of the general tone of response to Wolfe:

Gene Wolfe may not be the finest writer the science fiction world has yet produced – though I myself do think he almost certainly is – but it is surely the case that he is the science fiction writer least easy to understand at a single reading.<sup>3</sup>

As Clute suggests, much of the respect for Wolfe's work is a response to the depth, breadth and complexity of his literary creations and the challenge of interpretation that they present to his readers.<sup>4</sup> His books are not formula fantasies, but fictions rich with shifting ambiguities, intricate puzzles and hidden significances which duly acknowledge the complexities of humanity and its desire for meaning. Wolfe's oeuvre includes a wide variety of forms, ranging from the short story to the multi-volume work. He has a versatile writing style which indicates heightened awareness of the role of language and dialogue in the construction of stories and selves. Nick Gevers identifies "three distinct threads" running through Wolfe's work "embodied respectively in the vast neo-classical novels, the contemporary fantasies, and the puzzles in miniature."<sup>5</sup> Wolfe's "vast neo-classical novels" are multi-volume works of epic scale and include his *New Sun*, *Long Sun* and *Short Sun* series, as well as his *Soldier* or *Latro* series and more recently published *Wizard Knight* books.<sup>6</sup> "Contemporary fantasies" describe Wolfe's stand-

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acknowledges that Wolfe is a superb writer, but questions his ability to communicate on the level of story: "His writing is too religious, too difficult and too strange." 'The Distant Suns of Gene Wolfe,' *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 172 (2007): 27.

<sup>2</sup> Gene Wolfe has received multiple awards for his novels, novellas and short stories including Nebula, Locus and World Fantasy Awards. He received the World Fantasy Award for lifetime achievement in 1996 and was recognised as a living inductee into the SF Hall of Fame in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> John Clute, *Strokes: Essays and Reviews, 1966-1986* (Seattle, Wash.: Serconia Press, 1988), 158. Similarly Peter Wright contends that "Gene Wolfe is one of the most important American writers to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century". 'Introduction,' in Peter Wright, ed., *Shadows of the New Sun: Wolfe on Writing/Writers on Wolfe* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Joan Gordon writes: "Wolfe's fictions are characterised by complexity and ambiguity and by their meticulously crafted and luminously metaphorical prose style". Joan Gordon, 'Wolfe, Gene,' in Jay P. Pederson, ed., *St James Guide to Science Fiction Writers* (Detroit, Mich.: St James Press, 1995), 1029. Peter Wright aptly describes Wolfe's writing as "deceptive in its themes and plotting, misleading in its allusiveness and intertextuality and labyrinthine in its structuring yet it is variegated, vigorous, challenging and entertaining." Wright, 'Introduction,' 1.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Gevers, 'A Magus of Many Suns: An Interview with Gene Wolfe,' (January 2002) (online source). <http://www.sfsite.com/03b/gw124.htm>

<sup>6</sup> The four volume *Book of the New Sun*, comprises *The Shadow of the Torturer* (1980), *The Claw of the Conciliator* (1981), *The Sword of the Lictor* (1982), *The Citadel of the Autarch* and a sequel *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987). The four volume *Book of the Long Sun: Nightside of the Long Sun* (1993), *Lake of the Long Sun* (1994), *Caldé of the Long Sun* (1994) and *Exodus from the Long Sun* (1996); and the three

alone fantasy novels set in the contemporary world.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Wolfe is a prolific writer and publisher of short stories for which “puzzles in miniature” is an apt description.

Wolfe is best known for his multi-volume works. Among these *The Book of the New Sun* has received the most critical attention and is arguably his “greatest literary accomplishment so far”.<sup>8</sup> *The Book of the New Sun* is comprised of four volumes: *The Shadow of the Torturer*, *The Claw of the Conciliator*, *The Sword of the Lictor*, and *The Citadel of the Autarch*.<sup>9</sup> *The Book* is presented in the form of an autobiographical history or chronology written by Severian the lame, Autarch of Urth, describing the “long journey by which [he has] backed into the throne”.<sup>10</sup> The planet on which *The Book* is set – Urth – appears to be our own Earth, eons hence.<sup>11</sup> The Commonwealth, of which Severian ultimately becomes ruler,<sup>12</sup> is at war with the forces of Ascia, located in the North, who are slaves to an alien race that threatens human existence on Urth. More urgent threats, however, lie in the dying sun, the encroaching ice and ultimate planetary extinction, for *The Book* is set in the twilight of life on Urth.

*The Book of the New Sun* stands in uncertain relation to the forms, categories, conventions and traditions of both science fiction and fantasy; it deftly evades decisive placement into any particular class of fantastic literature. *The Book* has been variously – and at times inaccurately or misleadingly – labelled as “science fantasy”,<sup>13</sup> “dystopian

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volume *Book of the Short Sun: On Blue's Waters* (1999), *In Green's Jungles* (2000) and *Return to the Whorl* (2001). The Soldier or Latro Series consists of *Soldier of the Mist* (1986) and *Soldier of Arete* (1989), and finally, *Soldier of Sidon* (2007); The Wizard Knight books consist of two volumes, *The Knight* (2004) and *The Wizard* (2004).

<sup>7</sup> His best known contemporary fantasies are *Peace* (1975); *There Are Doors* (Tor Books, 1988); and *Free Live Free* (Ziesing, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, ‘Wolfe, Gene,’ 1029.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfe completed a fifth volume, *The Urth of the New Sun*, when prompted by his publisher. I am excluding this volume from my study because it marks a significant shift in narrative style and adopts a more consistent underlying mythology.

<sup>10</sup> Gene Wolfe, *The Shadow of the Torturer: Volume One of 'The Book of the New Sun'* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 9 (hereafter cited in text as *Shadow*).

<sup>11</sup> Wolfe has, in one interview, directly denied that ‘Urth’ and ‘Lune’ are Earth and its Moon. This is probably because of his dislike of direct allegorical readings. Nick Gevers, Michael Andre-Druissi and James Jordon, ‘Some Moments with the Magus: An Interview with Gene Wolfe,’ *Infinity Plus*, December 2003 (online source). <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intgw>. On a cosmic scale, the time setting of *The Book* is also ambiguous, given that the death of Urth’s star – the Sun – is evidently an unnatural event and not in accordance with the lifecycle of stars.

<sup>12</sup> The term “Autarch” translates as “self-ruler”. Gene Wolfe, *The Citadel of the Autarch: Volume Four of the 'Book of the New Sun'* (New York: Timescape, 1983), 189 (hereafter cited in text as *Citadel*).

<sup>13</sup> Darko Suvin identifies *The Book of the New Sun* as a work of science fantasy, but goes on to reject the subgenre ‘science fantasy’ as a useless category. ‘Considering the Sense of “Fantasy” or “Fantastic

fiction”,<sup>14</sup> “science fiction with an ‘aura of fantasy’”,<sup>15</sup> and “heroic epic”.<sup>16</sup> This genre ambiguity is an intentional and significant part of *The Book*’s construction. Joan Gordon writes, aptly, that Wolfe takes a “baroque and indirect approach to the genre [fantasy]”.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, John Clute notes that Wolfe is inclined to irony and parody and tends to play with genre and the generic.<sup>18</sup> Wolfe describes himself as a “fabulist”, rather than writer of genre literature.<sup>19</sup> He sidesteps around genre boundaries and has little patience for strict definition or categorisation, as is evident in his responses to related questions in interviews. In one interview, when asked “what is Magic Realism?”, Wolfe, who had evidently grown tired of such generic discussion, answered “fantasy by people who speak Spanish”. Later in the interview Wolfe commented, of his writing, that “I’m not trying to write genres, I’m trying to write a book”.<sup>20</sup>

Attempts to describe *The Book* by relating it to other texts or traditions have resulted in diverse patterns of association. Within the field of fantastic literature, it has been likened to Jack Vance’s far future *Dying Earth* series<sup>21</sup> and Mervyn Peake’s gothic *Ghormenghast* trilogy.<sup>22</sup> For others it recalls literature from different traditions, including Dicken’s *Great Expectations* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*,<sup>23</sup> the work of

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Fiction”: An Effusion,’ *Extrapolation* 41:3 (2000): 229; Michael Andre-Druissi recognises ‘Dying Sun’ novels, including the work of Jack Vance, Gene Wolfe and Damien Broderick, as science fantasies: ‘Languages of the Dying Sun,’ in Damien Broderick, ed., *Earth is but a Star: Excursions through Science Fiction to the Far Future* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 2001), 217. See also Rod French, ‘Gene Wolfe and the Tale of Wonder: The End of an Apprenticeship,’ *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature* 5:2 (1983): 43.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Popcrunch’ includes *The Book of the New Sun* in a list of top dystopian fiction. <http://www.popcrunch.com/the-16-best-dystopian-books-of-all-time/>

<sup>15</sup> Joan Gordon, *Gene Wolfe* (Mercer Island, Wash.: Starmont House, 1986), 88.

<sup>16</sup> The reverse cover for *Sword & Citadel: The Second Half of ‘The Book of the New Sun’* (Orb Books, 1994) quotes the *Washington Post Book World*: “the most extraordinary hero in the history of heroic epic.”

<sup>17</sup> Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Clute, *Strokes*, 148. Similarly, Michael Andre-Druissi notes Wolfe’s “knack for taking a genre staple and turning it on its head.” ‘Gene Wolfe: The Man and His Work,’ *Fantasy and Science Fiction* 112 (2007): 87.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Brown, ‘Gene Wolfe: Moral Fabulist,’ *Locus* 26:6 (1991): 4.

<sup>20</sup> Brendan Baber, ‘Gene Wolfe Interview,’ *Lupine Nuncio* (1994) (online source). <http://mysite.verizon.net/~vze2tmhh/wolfe.html>

<sup>21</sup> See Michael Andre-Druissi, ‘Posthistory 101,’ *Extrapolation* 37:2 (1996): 127, on the tradition of far future science fiction, including the work of H.G. Wells, Olaf Stapledon, Jack Vance and Clark Ashton Smith, behind Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun*; see also Gevers, ‘A Magus of Many Suns’ (online source).

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Raven, ‘Review: *Severian of the Guild*,’ *SF Site* (2008) (online source). <http://www.sfsite.com/06a/sg273.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Michael Andre-Druissi, ‘Gene Wolfe at the Lake of Birds,’ *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction* 66 (1996): 5. Andre-Druissi describes *The Book* as a combination of *Great Expectations*, *I, Claudius*, and

William Blake<sup>24</sup> and the short stories of J.L. Borges.<sup>25</sup> Notably, and due not only to its thematic and symbolic content, but also to the fact that the author's Catholicism is widely known, *The Book* has been likened to *The Bible* itself, and even described as an "attempt to represent the Word of God."<sup>26</sup>

Despite Wolfe's playful and parodic tendencies, as well as the complexity and depth of his literary creations, it is nonetheless possible to describe *The Book* in terms of generic categories, their interaction and their subversion. Tracing of the lines of influence and literary association that form the many-coloured material out of which this richly textured world is woven constitutes an initial tentative step towards an understanding of the function of historical consciousness and its expression in the eschatology and genesis of Urth. While it may be an "uncouth term",<sup>27</sup> science fantasy is a useful preliminary designation. There is critical potential in the identification of the dual traditions of science fiction and fantasy in *The Book*: both forms are particularly concerned with temporal, and thus historical, existence. The histories and philosophies of science fiction and fantasy diverge, however, in ways which render the hybrid forms of science fantasy particularly creative and challenging in terms of historical consciousness and its representations.

Science fiction and fantasy constitute yet another troubled literary fraternity. Both are forms of fantastic or speculative fiction, and implied in this is a shared attitude to reality and its representation rooted in specific historical experiences. Both science fiction and fantasy coalesced as genres in the nineteenth century, in the context of industrial modernity and in relation to the already established dominant mode of literary

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*The Dying Earth*. John Clute compares Severian's journey to Dante's in *The Divine Comedy*. *Strokes*, 150.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Witcover, 'Gene Wolfe's Strange Travels,' *New York Review of Science Fiction* 138 (2000): 4.

<sup>25</sup> Andre-Druissi, 'Gene Wolfe at the Lake of Birds,' 5.

<sup>26</sup> John Clute writes that Gene Wolfe has created a novel "which makes sense in the end only if it is read as an attempt to represent the Word of God". *Strokes*, 150. Like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Book of the New Sun* has been interpreted in terms of its author's religious beliefs. One interviewer comments that Wolfe is 'famous' for his Catholicism. Elisabeth Counihan, 'A Picture of Gene Wolfe,' *Interzone* 119 (1997): 20. Readings of Wolfe's writing through the lens of Catholicism include Witcover, 'Gene Wolfe's Strange Travels,' 1, 4-6; Kathryn Locey, 'Three Dreams, Seven Nights, and Gene Wolfe's Catholicism,' *New York Review of Science Fiction* 95 (1996): 1,8-12; Stephen Palmer, 'Severian as Christ Figure,' *Vector* 162 (1991) (online source). <http://mysite.verizon.net/~vze2tmhh/sevchrist.html>

<sup>27</sup> Suvin, 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy",' 229.

Realism.<sup>28</sup> It is their shared rejection of literary Realism that locates them together within the broader family of fantastic or speculative literature.<sup>29</sup> The inevitable family disagreements between science fiction and its “antigenre”,<sup>30</sup> fantasy, began almost immediately.

Despite, or because of, the qualities science fiction shares with fantasy, most discussions of science fiction are careful to distinguish it from its close relative.<sup>31</sup> Distinctions between the two are ultimately directed towards explanation and evaluation of the function of literature within human societies. For example, Mark Rose acknowledges the shared origins and anti-Realism of science fiction and fantasy, but distinguishes science fiction as an “extrapolative form” based upon the extension of reality according to current understandings of scientific plausibility or logical possibility.<sup>32</sup> He surmises that, because science fiction insists on “the contingency of the present order of things ... one might call fantasy a conservative form, whereas in principle science fiction might be called subversive”.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Michael McClintock concludes that “although fantasy is, in principle, the wider and more flexible – as it is the elder – genre, in contemporary practice science fiction is the more sophisticated, distinctly the more mature form.”<sup>34</sup> Seminal science fiction theorist Darko Suvin

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<sup>28</sup> See Mark Rose, *Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 18-19. On the broader social and cultural conditions of this emergence, see Roger Luckhurst, ‘Conditions of Emergence,’ in *Science Fiction* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2005), 13-29. In general, contemporary science fiction criticism adopts a cultural-historical understanding of genre as patterns, conventions and resemblances that are developed and recognised (by writers, publishers and readers) within broader cultural and historical formations. See, for examples, Paul Kincaid, ‘On the Origins of a Genre,’ *Extrapolation* 44:3-4 (2003): 409-419; Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 5-6; Michael W. McClintock, ‘High Tech and High Sorcery: Some Discriminations between Science Fiction and Fantasy,’ in George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin, eds., *Intersections: Fantasy and Science Fiction* (Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), esp. 30-33.

<sup>29</sup> Darko Suvin writes that science fiction “shares with myth, fantasy, fairy tale and pastoral an opposition to naturalistic or empiricist literary genres”. ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,’ *College English* 34:3 (1972): 372. Similarly, Mark Rose notes that “both science fiction and fantasy of the sort associated with William Morris, Charles Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien are modern genres, dependent upon the prior existence of the realist novel ... as the dominant narrative form.” *Alien Encounters*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Scholes writes that “the genre that we have learned to call science fiction has been entangled with its other, its antigenre, fantasy, from the beginning”. ‘Boiling Roses: Thoughts on Science Fantasy,’ in Slusser and Rabkin, eds., *Intersections*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Darko Suvin, ‘Considering the Sense of “Fantasy”,’ 209-247; Mark Rose, *Alien Encounters*, esp. 3-4, 18-23. According to Mark Rose, this issue of genre distinction is “precisely the issue upon which most definitions of the genre focus as well as the point at which they founder.” *Ibid.*, 3. Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Corgi, 1973), esp. 8-10.

<sup>32</sup> Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> McClintock, ‘High Tech and High Sorcery,’ 35.

identifies fantasy as a literary genre or group of genres “whose audience and characteristics are in a close though confusing (multiple, unclear, love-hate, complimentary, contradictory) relation with SF.”<sup>35</sup> He recognises and attempts to delineate the borders that distinguish science fiction from fantasy because he is concerned about the commercial burgeoning of genre fantasy accompanied by the qualitative and quantitative stagnation of science fiction since the 1960s.<sup>36</sup> Although he does not discount fantasy altogether, Suvin restates his earlier position that most fantasy is “socio-pathological” and, unlike science fiction, “poorly equipped” to critique modern “materialist civilization” because it is anti-cognitive, ahistorical and ideological.<sup>37</sup>

Definitions of science fiction focus on several core features which can be summarised in the following terms: science and/or technology, scientific method, reason or cognition, factuality, extrapolation and possibilities, progress and the future. The very term science fiction implies that this form has, on some level, something to do with science. Science is rarely identified as the most important element of science fiction; it is, however, often invoked as an ethos, approach, method or language.<sup>38</sup> Because science itself is a changeable and contested field – subject to shifting paradigms, problems, and pre-occupations – the meaning of the ‘science’ in ‘science fiction’ is highly unstable. Science does, however, suggest a method of thinking about and relating to the world rooted in factuality and rationality and working through the application of reason, hypothesis and extrapolation. Darko Suvin’s description of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement is one of the most influential in science fiction

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<sup>35</sup> Suvin, ‘Considering the Sense of “Fantasy”,’ 210.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-211.

<sup>37</sup> For Suvin, the value of science fiction lies within its very form (cognitive estrangement) and the critical action that this form implies. Fantasy lacks the critical potential of science fiction because it is anti-cognitive, or introduces the impossible and supernatural, and works as “*compensation substituting for*”, rather than exploration preparing for, opposition to a capitalist, patriarchal order. See ‘Considering the Sense of “Fantasy”,’ 236 (Suvin’s italics).

<sup>38</sup> For example, Brian Aldiss’ preliminary definition of science fiction asks that the text provide a “*definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science)*”. *Billion Year Spree*, 8 (Aldiss’ italics). Mark Rose writes that science fiction invokes the “scientific ethos to assert the possibility of the fictional worlds it describes”. *Alien Encounters*, 20. Carl D. Malmgren writes that “the conventions of the genre dictate that the author ... adhere to the laws of nature and the “laws” inherent in the scientific method. ... This adherence to the dictates of scientific necessity distinguishes science fiction from fantasy in general.” ‘Philip Dick’s *Man in the High Castle* and the Nature of Science-Fictional Worlds,’ in George E. Slusser, George R. Guffey and Mark Rose, eds., *Bridges to Science Fiction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 128.

criticism.<sup>39</sup> While Suvin explains cognition as creative and critical thinking, relevant to human experience,<sup>40</sup> the general effect of his use of the term is to suggest a mode of thought associated with scientific reason, factuality and possibility. Suvin writes, that “SF takes off from a fictional (literary) hypothesis and develops it with extrapolating and totalizing (scientific) rigor. The effect of such factual reporting of fictions is one of confronting a set of normative fictions”.<sup>41</sup> Most definitions of science fiction express similar understandings which link science with fact, logic and rationality.<sup>42</sup>

Some discussions of science fiction employ the terms ‘technology’ or ‘machines’ in place of, or in direct relation to, ‘science’.<sup>43</sup> These terms enable critics to discuss science fiction in terms of the concrete material developments and experiences associated with modernity. They are, however, inseparable from concepts such as ‘science’, ‘rationality’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘progress’. For example, in his cultural history of science fiction, Roger Luckhurst identifies “Mechanism (to use the older term for technology)”<sup>44</sup> as the primary concern of science fiction, but writes that the term describes a “hugely influential discourse ... felt to pervade not only ‘the external and physical ... but the internal and spiritual also’.”<sup>45</sup> Luckhurst also discusses science fiction as texts that “imagine futures or parallel worlds premised on the perpetual change associated with modernity, often by extending or extrapolating aspects of Mechanism from the contemporary world”,<sup>46</sup> employing the familiar definition of science fiction as

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<sup>39</sup> Suvin defines science fiction (SF) as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment”. ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,’ 375.

<sup>40</sup> Suvin writes that cognition “implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than towards a static mirroring of the author’s environment”, a critical methodology, “often satirical, combining a belief in the potentialities of reason with methodological doubt in the most significant cases”. ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,’ 377. In a later article he attempts to clarify: “My main watershed criterion for the use of reason would be: does it “include people” (Kracauer, 57), do singular people have each a name and a face in that Truth?” ‘Considering the Sense of “Fantasy”,’ 239, quoting Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977).

<sup>41</sup> Suvin, ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,’ 374.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Scholes and Rabkin on “scientific method” in their exploration of the sciences of science fiction in *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 113-162. On the scientific ethos and extrapolation in science fiction, see also Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 20-22.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Rose, ‘Machine,’ in *Alien Encounters*, 139-175.

<sup>44</sup> Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4 quoting Thomas Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times,’ (1829).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

extrapolation based on current experiences and understandings of science and/or technology.

Because science finds computers to be more advanced technologies than pens, because logic identifies progress as something that has forward rather than backward momentum, and because reason sees greater possibilities and more open horizons in the future than in the past, science fiction tales are usually set in the future. In summary, fantasy is distinguished, at least superficially, from science fiction by its inclusion of magic and wizards rather than science and scientists;<sup>47</sup> its tendency to accept impossibilities rather than explore possibilities; its focus on the supernatural in relation to the natural; its concern with spirituality and emotion rather than knowledge and reason; and its gaze turned towards the past rather than the future. As Brian Attebery succinctly states: “If science fiction’s gaze is outward and ahead, fantasy’s is inward and into the past”.<sup>48</sup>

In terms of history, science fiction and fantasy are distinguished by more than the general direction of their gazes: standing back to back, one faces the future and the other faces the past. Because literary forms are historical phenomena – in their diachronic existence and as part of historically located socio-cultural complexes – science fiction, like fantasy, is a form with a history or histories. There are a greater number of histories of science fiction than of fantasy literature. The histories of science fiction differ from the histories of fantasy in trope and tone. In general, histories of science fiction are more structured than those of fantasy, having a (debated) point of origin, epochs with start and end dates, and even fathers (again debated), a Golden Age and a New Wave.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Michael McClintock argues that the difference between magic and technology as instruments of control is the key to distinguishing between fantasy and science fiction: “In fantasies magic works; in science fiction, technology does. (And in both sorts of worlds what matters most is control)... The root distinction is the relationship, mediated by magic or technology, of characters to the worlds they inhabit.” ‘High Tech and High Sorcery,’ 33. While science fiction writers such as H.G. Wells and Arthur C. Clark have questioned man’s ability to distinguish advanced technology from magic, McClintock argues that technology operates independently of individuals, while magic does not; anyone might be a scientist or operate technology, only certain individuals are capable of magic. He thus echoes Suvin’s argument that fantasy represents worlds which operate according to personal desires, while in science fiction worlds human action is limited by the reality principle.

<sup>48</sup> Attebery, ‘Science Fantasy and Myth,’ in Slusser and Rabkin, eds., *Intersections*, 182. Similarly, McClintock writes, “the quintessential magic weapon is the sword; the off the shelf technological weapon will be some sort of gun. The age of magic is almost always past, technological time is almost always future.” ‘High Tech and High Sorcery,’ 33. See also Scholes, ‘Boiling Roses,’ 18.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree*; Rose, *Alien Encounters*; Scholes and Rabkin, *Science Fiction*; Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*; and Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (Basingstoke,



Histories of fantasy pay greater attention to the pre-modern precursors of modern fantasy and have a vague sense of origins.<sup>50</sup> Science fiction histories acknowledge its popular and mass cultural forms – particularly in the pulp magazines of the mid-twentieth century – while histories of fantasy focus on great moments of literary accomplishment and generally eschew popular, mass produced, formula fantasy.<sup>51</sup> These different histories point towards different modes of approaching, understanding and communicating history itself and, quite possibly, to divergent forms of historical consciousness.

For Darko Suvin, the distinction between fantasy and science fiction is, on a fundamental level, a result of their different approaches to history. Suvin points to the difference between the imagined histories of fantasy (such as that of Tolkien's Middle-earth) and the "Alternative Histories of SF".<sup>52</sup> He argues that "Fantasy's alternative locus presents an alternative concept of 'history', or better flow of human affairs"<sup>53</sup> which denies real-world laws of history, replacing them with personal power relationships focused on the principle narrative agents:

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Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006). The origins of science fiction are debated, but the field of science fiction criticism has traditionally been concerned with establishing a firm sense of the genre's genesis. See Kinkaid, 'On the Origins of a Genre'. Brian Aldiss names Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the original science fiction text, writing that "The central contention of my book, supported by evidence, is that science fiction was born in the heart and crucible of the English Romantic movement in exile in Switzerland, when the wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelly wrote *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*." *Billion Year Spree*, 3. H.G. Wells and Jules Verne are frequently identified as important figures, if not fathers of science fiction, worthy of their own chapters in its history: see Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree*; Adam Roberts, 'Jules Verne and H.G. Wells,' in *The History of Science Fiction*, 129-155. Roger Luckhurst describes H.G. Wells as the embodiment of the conditions of emergence of science fiction. 'Britain: The Scientific Romance and the Evolutionary Paradigm,' *Science Fiction*, 30-49. Gary Westfahl argues for the recognition of Hugo Gernsback as the father on modern science fiction in *The Mechanics of Wonder: The Creation of the Idea of Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998). 'The Golden Age' of science fiction refers to the 1940s-1950s: see Adam Roberts, 'Golden Age Science Fiction 1940-1960,' *The History of Science Fiction*, 195-229. Some critics think that science fiction entered a state of decline from the 1970s: see Suvin, 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy",' 210; Rabkin and Scholes, *Science Fiction*; Luckhurst, 'The 1970s,' *Science Fiction*, 141-166. Curiously, given these factors – myths of origin, founding fathers, a Golden Age, and myths of decline – the history of the genre has the markings of an ethno-history. See ch. 6, fn. 43.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Richard Mathews, 'From Antiquity to Infinity: The Development of Modern Fantasy,' in *Fantasy: The Liberation of the Imagination* (New York; London: Routledge, 2002), 1-36.

<sup>51</sup> Even Brian Aldiss, who devotes chapters to Mary Shelley, Edgar Allen Poe, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice-Burroughs and C.S. Lewis, discusses the period of John W. Cambell's editorship of 'Astounding' magazine and the popularity of science fiction magazines in the 1950s. See 'The Future on a Chipped Plate: The World of John W. Cambell's "Astounding"' and 'After the Impossible Happened: The Fifties and Onwards and Upwards,' in *Billion Year Spree*, 244-77, 278-325. For further discussion of magazines and popular science fiction culture in the development of science fiction, see Scholes and Rabkin, *Science Fiction*; Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*; Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*.

<sup>52</sup> Suvin, 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy",' 222.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

Fantasy creates a world where one or more all-important individuals *intimately interact with a spacetime* not only radically different from the author's historical moment of social life, but also, and primarily, *denying history as socio-economic lawfulness*.<sup>54</sup>

For Suvin, history is not the past or even representations of the past, but laws of causality which govern change in human societies. While the worlds of science fiction “develop historical – technological, overtly political or other – tendencies within the reader's environment”, Heroic Fantasy constructs “expurgated Otherworlds” which function according to “a modified type of history organised around an individual (or with Tolkien a collective) hero within a correlatively simplified landscape”.<sup>55</sup> The modified versions of history typical of fantasy create “*historically unanchored worlds*”<sup>56</sup> where historical realities are displaced by ideological models that enable human beings to interact with or participate in history motivated by fear and according to desire.

The problem with fantasy's approach to history is, according to Suvin, its failure to acknowledge the real-existing historical forces which shape human experience. Creative anachronism, the feature of fantasy that writers such as Brian Attebery and even Tolkien<sup>57</sup> perceive as the key to fantasy's critical potential, is anti-cognitive. In fantasy “the quite high technology of a steel blade or ocean-going vessel is admissible”, but “we never meet a smith or shipwright ... the field of production is under total proletarian taboo”.<sup>58</sup> In Suvin's assessment, any representation of a society that fails to depict the horrors of wage slavery, child labour and genocide that lie beneath certain technologies and political forms is deficient. Fantasy's simplistic representation of empirical evils as supernatural forces renders it socio-pathological. Suvin's Marxism is uncompromising. A failure to understand the processes which connect economic modes and their ideological, political and experiential correlates is a failure to understand history itself;

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 223 (Suvin's italics).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 222 (Suvin's italics).

<sup>57</sup> See Brian Attebery, ‘What are the Politics of Fantasy, if any?’ in Robert A. Latham and Robert A. Collins, eds., *Modes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Twelfth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 1-13; Beverley Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Arthurian Literature Since 1800* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), 1; J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-stories,’ *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Books, 1964), esp. 32.

<sup>58</sup> Suvin, ‘Considering the Sense of “Fantasy”,’ 227. This statement is, of course, an excessively general and inaccurate representation of fantasy.

this failure renders fantasy “useless”<sup>59</sup> as a means of understanding or critiquing modern, capitalist civilisation. Suvin concludes that the Otherworlds of fantasy are “ahistorical”,<sup>60</sup> not in their lack of imaginary histories, but in their lack of historical realism and historiographic awareness. In short, Suvin condemns the vast majority of fantasy as ideological and ahistorical.<sup>61</sup>

Suvin’s scientific materialist philosophy of history ultimately limits his ability to recognise the range of the historical imagination within the fantastic. For example, the model of Christian temporality that Suvin identifies as the philosophy of history underlying Tolkien’s Middle-earth<sup>62</sup> is contradicted by the text of *The Lord of the Rings* itself. Tolkien’s narrative does not conform to a consistent model of Christian temporality and even draws attention to the problems and imperfections of apprehending and expressing historical existence according to mythic models. Fantasy’s tendency to emphasise the psychological, spiritual and emotional is not well served by an approach which limits historiography to laws of causality. Suvin is accurate in his assertion that science fiction texts construct worlds based upon understandings of history and its workings. His suggestion, however, that science fiction writers share his own scientific materialist understanding of history as socio-economic lawfulness is misguided. The human experience of temporality forms a common theme in both science fiction and fantasy, and the alternative worlds of both science fiction and fantasy fiction create imaginary histories underpinned by philosophies of history. The creation of such imaginary histories relies upon a degree of historiographic awareness. Thus both fantasy and science fiction tend to be historiographic as well as historical forms.

The question remains as to whether fantasy and science fiction do indeed draw upon and express different modes of historical consciousness or different philosophical traditions.

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<sup>59</sup> Suvin, ‘Some Dilemmas on the Uses and Values of Fantasy’ in ‘Considering the Sense of “Fantasy”,’ 232-243. Suvin is concerned with the usefulness of literature in the anti-capitalist struggle; it is not enough to be revolted by the world, the point is to change it.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>61</sup> Ironically, Roger Luckhurst criticises Darko Suvin’s approach to science fiction as ideological and ahistorical. *Science Fiction*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Suvin argues that Tolkien’s philosophy of history leads to narrative time structured in “strict analogy to Christian temporality” (225) based on an ideology which is predominantly “conservative Providential collectivism: the history of the whole human species has a preordained sense with a happy ending, what Tolkien called a ‘eucatastrophe’.” ‘Considering the Sense of “Fantasy”,’ 223.

According to Mark Rose, the theme of time is one of the core concerns of science fiction.<sup>63</sup> The same has, of course, been said for fantasy.<sup>64</sup> A distinct approach to history emerges from discussions of temporality in science fiction.<sup>65</sup> In so far as science fiction is defined as extrapolation based on fact and according to rational principles, the time travel narratives of science fiction proceed from factual experiences or events according to logical principles or scientific models of temporality. The philosophies of history evident in science fiction thus described include the discourses which define history as facts about the actual past and/or those which perceive history as patterns, structures or causal relations over time. In short, history enters the equations of science fiction as knowledge about the past and the operations of time.<sup>66</sup> This model supports Suvin's basic contention that the alternative worlds of fantasy are different from those of science fiction in their relationship to knowledge about historical reality and "the rules by which it operates".<sup>67</sup> Science fiction's extrapolative form means that the alternative worlds of science fiction are represented as "logical extensions of"<sup>68</sup> existing perceptions of historical reality and its possibilities, while the alternative worlds of fantasy may represent unrealities and impossibilities in place of (substituting for) existing conceptions of historical reality.<sup>69</sup>

As with fantasy, the understandings of history associated with science fiction belong to the milieu which is its crucible. As Luckhurst writes, "the intellectual challenge and cultural authority accrued to scientific knowledge" in the nineteenth century "resulted in profound changes to the late Victorian apprehension of the world".<sup>70</sup> Most significantly, this included changes in the way Victorians viewed time and history.<sup>71</sup> The popularisation of ideas from the scientific field of natural history – including those of

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<sup>63</sup> Rose, 'Time,' in *Alien Encounters*, 96-138.

<sup>64</sup> See ch. 3, fn. 40.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Jon-K. Adams, 'Science Fiction in Pursuit of History,' in Bernd Engler and Kurt Müller, eds., *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern American and Canadian Literature* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1994), 147-161; Robert Canary, 'Science Fiction as Fictive History,' *Extrapolation* 16:1 (1974): 81-95.

<sup>66</sup> This epistemological focus means that understandings of history may incorporate ideas about what is not known, what is knowable and what is unknowable.

<sup>67</sup> Canary, 'Science Fiction as Fictive History,' 81.

<sup>68</sup> Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 22.

<sup>69</sup> Rose writes "the changed worlds of fantasy are presented as literary substitutions for reality ... The changed worlds of science fiction are presented as logical extensions of reality." *Ibid.*, 21-22. See also Suvin, 'The Sense of "Fantasy",' esp. 222-223.

<sup>70</sup> Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 98.

Charles Darwin - reshaped historical consciousness into new moulds of evolution and devolution, progress and regress, generation and degeneration.<sup>72</sup> These forms remain prominent in the literary imagination of science fiction and are also evident in *The Book of the New Sun*.

As Robert Canary suggests, however, science fiction, like other forms of cultural expression, has reflected and reflected upon changing conceptions of history, including shifts from linear to cyclical models of temporality and from historicist to narrativist philosophies of history.<sup>73</sup> Science fiction has been identified as a close relative to, if not a form of, historiographic metafiction.<sup>74</sup> Canary nonetheless restates the idea that science fiction appropriates history as a form of knowledge, writing that “changes in the field [of science fiction] since the 1950s can be seen as a response to altered views of historical reality.”<sup>75</sup> Canary thus maintains the idea that science fiction differs from fantasy in the way its alternative worlds relate to existing conceptions of historical reality.

The difference between the historical consciousness of science fiction and that of fantasy appears to be the difference between history as a form of knowledge (epistemological) and history as a form of experience (phenomenological). The idea that knowledge is the core of science fiction, while imagination lies at the heart of fantasy, is identified by Robert Scholes in his exploration of the hybrid genre, science fantasy.<sup>76</sup> Scholes traces the roots of the words ‘science’ and ‘fantasy’: while fantasy is associated with mental images and imagination, ‘science’ is derived from the Latin *sciens*, knowing and, Scholes speculates, connected through the Greek to the Latin word “*scinder: to cut, rend, split; to divide, separate.*”<sup>77</sup> Scholes’ account of the divergent

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<sup>72</sup> See *ibid.*; Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 22-23.

<sup>73</sup> Canary, ‘Science Fiction as Fictive History,’ 91. See also Mark Rose’s discussion of history and fiction in Philip K. Dick’s *Man in the High Castle* in *Alien Encounters*, 119-120.

<sup>74</sup> See Adams, ‘Science Fiction in Pursuit of History,’ 147-161.

<sup>75</sup> Canary, ‘Science Fiction as Fictive History,’ 91.

<sup>76</sup> Scholes, ‘Boiling Roses,’ 3-18. Stephen W. Potts also emphasises the association between the science fiction and knowledge: “Like science itself, science fiction has traditionally also had a low tolerance for that which remains unknown ... most science fiction true to its roots in scientific empiricism, presents the triumph of human reason over the irrational, the alien, the mysterious and the initially mind boggling.” ‘Dialogues Concerning Human Understanding: Empirical Values from Locke to Lem,’ in Slusser, Guffey and Rose, eds., *Bridges to Science Fiction*, 41.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 (Scholes’ italics).

traditions of science fiction and fantasy differs slightly from others; Scholes envisages the two not as rivals, but as friends forced apart by another force:

Given the positivist matrix that dominated thought in nineteenth century England and America, continuing well into the twentieth century, works of fiction that sought to present alternative worlds were forced to align themselves to the binary polarities offered by positivism: science or magic, extrapolation or escapism, this world transformed or a secondary world created: positivism itself, or religion, the antagonist of science ... this positioning essentially pitted the religion of science against the traditional religion of faith and revelation. The one looked forward towards the extension of human powers and happiness through progress. The other mourned for a lost universe permeated by ethical principle.<sup>78</sup>

Beyond this, the division between science fiction and fantasy, if understood according to the “grand dichotomies of Western Metaphysics”,<sup>79</sup> may also express the tension between knowledge and imagination, correspondence and coherence, connection and separation characteristic of historical consciousness and practice since the nineteenth century.

Paths through these puzzles that characterise the relationships between literature and history, fantasy and science fiction are to be found in Gene Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun*, for in this text lie labyrinths wrought of science, magic and memory, science fiction, fantasy and history. Robert Scholes identifies *The Book* as an exemplary work of science fantasy and perceives great potential for movement beyond positivist dichotomies in the hybrid form of science fantasy: “I should like to conclude that a work like Gene Wolfe’s *The Book of the New Sun* seems at me to have at least partly gone beyond the old religious and scientific oppositions”.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, Brian Attebery suggests that the hybrid form, science fantasy, has the potential to overcome the artificial division between emotion and reason that characterises modern consciousness: “what science fantasy might be able to accomplish is the reintegration of these two perspectives”.<sup>81</sup> Not only is Urth built of the stuff of science fiction and fantasy, but Wolfe is a figure who embodies in his person the divergent traditions with which the two genres are associated: he is scientist/engineer/artist/Catholic in one. Finally, one of the most potent symbols in *The Book*, Severian’s sword *Terminus Est*, is the archetypal

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>79</sup> See ch. 1, fn. 4. Clifford Geertz, ‘History and Anthropology,’ *New Literary History* 21:2 (1990): 322.

<sup>80</sup> Scholes, ‘Boiling Roses’.

<sup>81</sup> Attebery, ‘Science Fantasy and Myth,’ 182.

weapon of fantasy, yet it is named and engraved with the motif of science: “*This Is the Line of Division.*” (*Shadow*, 101)

Simply placed in the fields of genre, *The Book*, which is set in the distant future on a planet under the fading light of a dying sun, belongs to the ‘dying earth’ genre of ‘far future’ fiction.<sup>82</sup> *The Book of the New Sun* is frequently listed alongside Clark Ashton Smith’s *Zothique* sequence and Vance’s *Dying Earth* series as an example of far future fiction.<sup>83</sup> Wolfe acknowledges a direct debt to Vance and also to his predecessor Clark Ashton Smith. On *The Book*, Wolfe comments, “A lot of that was my deciding to rewrite *The Dying Earth* from my own standpoint”<sup>84</sup> and “I never concealed a debt to Jack Vance and a debt to Clark Ashton Smith as far as that goes. I think Vance is very much in the debt to Clark Ashton Smith”.<sup>85</sup> This categorisation acknowledges not only *The Book*’s setting, in Earth’s far distant future under the light of a dying sun, but also its primary thematic concerns: cosmological, teleological and eschatological. Thus situated, *The Book of the New Sun* exists as one of the monuments in the pantheon of literature that looks ahead to the end of time. As a work of far future fiction, it occupies a place where the traditions of science fiction and fantasy merge and offers a unique perspective not only on humanity and cosmology, but also on the nature of history and historical consciousness.

While far future fiction is usually identified as a sub-genre of science fiction, most works in this field are inaccurately categorised as either science fiction or fantasy, and more aptly characterised by the hybrid form, science fantasy.<sup>86</sup> The far future tale finds

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<sup>82</sup> See Brian Stableford, ‘Dying Earth,’ and John Clute, ‘Far Future,’ in Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 305, 342. For extended discussions of ‘far future fiction’ and the ‘dying Earth tale’, see Damien Broderick’s edited collection, *Earth is but a Star: Excursions through Science Fiction to the Far Future* (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2001).

<sup>83</sup> Russell Blackford, ‘Far Future,’ in Gary Westfahl, ed., *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders*, vol. 1. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005), 280-282; John Clute, ‘Far Future,’ Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 342 and ‘On the Cusp of Far,’ in Broderick, ed., *Earth is but a Star*, 151-163; James Jordan, ‘Interview with Gene Wolfe’ (1996) (online source). <http://mysite.verizon.net/~vze2tmhh/wolfejbj.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Gene Wolfe quoted in Jordan, ‘Interview with Gene Wolfe’ (online source).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* (punctuation as per original transcription).

<sup>86</sup> John Clute writes that the far future is “a period more often found in sf and SCIENCE FANTASY than in fantasy proper.” ‘Far Future,’ in Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 342 (Clute’s capitals). Brian Stableford comments, on far future science fiction, that “this is the imaginative realm which, even in SF, has remained most firmly under the domination of mythical images and ideas.” ‘Far future,’ Peter Nicholls, ed., *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (St Albans, Herts., UK: Granada Publishing, 1979), 216. In a later article, Stableford acknowledges that far future fiction is frequently a generic hybrid. Brian

its impulse in imagination and speculation surrounding Earth and humanity in the context of the life of the universe: its beginnings and its ultimate end. The ‘science’ at its core is that which lies closest to metaphysics and religion.<sup>87</sup> In the introduction to his edited collection of scholarship on far future fiction Damien Broderick writes:

These tales were not written as scientific prophecy ... They speak to us here and now, as all myth and poetry speaks: in metaphor and metonymy, as figurations of today’s dreads and aspirations ... If we cast ourselves headlong into the mortal ends of time, it is in the hope, surely, that we find something secret, mysterious and revelatory there.<sup>88</sup>

This branch of science deals with the greatest timescales and the largest objects. If it is concerned with life and death, then it is with the life of the planets and the death of stars. Alone, the purely scientific imagination (if such a thing might be said to exist) and its language is simply inadequate to conceptualise and find terms to express the relationship of mortal humanity to the life of the universe. Authors of far future fiction are drawn to, and draw upon, broader imaginative resources.

Somewhere in Wolfe’s memory, alongside works by Wells, Vance and Ashton-Smith, and a pile of pulp magazines, are to be found the first American editions of *The Lord of the Rings*, each volume inscribed with quotes of personal significance.<sup>89</sup> In interviews, Wolfe acknowledges the influence of the high fantasy tradition and of authors such as G.K. Chesterton, Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien upon his personal development and writing. In particular, Wolfe refers to influence of these authors in terms of theology and Christianity.<sup>90</sup>

Far future fiction exists in spaces where science fiction overlaps with fantasy, physics with metaphysics, the possible with the impossible, the natural with the supernatural, science with religion, technology with magic, and the past with the future. As a result it

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Stableford, ‘Far futures’ in Broderick, ed., *Earth is but a Star*, 54-55. See also Andre-Druissi, ‘Languages of the Dying Sun,’ in Broderick, ed., *Earth is but a Star*, 217. Andre-Druissi notes that dying sun novels are of a hybrid form – science fantasy.

<sup>87</sup> In one interview Gene Wolfe comments that “Physics is coming nearer and nearer and nearer to mysticism”. Gene Wolfe quoted in Jordan, ‘An Interview with Gene Wolfe’ (online source).

<sup>88</sup> Damien Broderick, ‘Introduction,’ in Broderick, ed., *Earth is but a Star*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> See Gene Wolfe, ‘The Best Introduction to the Mountains,’ 2001 (online source). <http://home.clara.net/andywrobertson/wolfemountains.html>

<sup>90</sup> James Jordan, ‘Interview with Gene Wolf’ (online source). See also Gene Wolfe, ‘The Best Introduction to the Mountains’ (online source).



draws on the traditions, histories and the historical imaginations of both science fiction and fantasy. Wolfe's work is an ideal text through which to explore what happens to the literary-historical consciousness when the uncertain boundaries between knowledge and imagination which usually direct its wanderings begin to disappear altogether. *The Book* also evokes the shifting mood – from despair to rapture – which Damien Broderick argues is characteristic of far future fictions:

Their striking evocation of a tonality most contemporary fiction has abandoned, or lost: the elegiac, the haunted, the dying fall, and yet paradoxically, the odd pleasure that comes from confronting a chilling truth.<sup>91</sup>

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has been identified as a work in the elegiac mode, lost in the "contemplation of dust";<sup>92</sup> Broderick identifies the same tone at the heart of far future fiction.

While *The Book*, its meanings and its significance in the context of contemporary fantastic literature has been the subject of comment, speculation and debate within the field of fantastic literary criticism, this critical attention is, unfortunately, limited in two senses. Firstly, there is far less scholarship on Wolfe than on other, comparable writers of science fiction and fantasy such as Ursula Le Guin, Robert Heinlein or Philip K. Dick. Secondly, Peter Wright – whose publications on Wolfe's Fictions of the New Sun are the most sophisticated examples of current scholarship on Wolfe<sup>93</sup> – makes an appropriate, assessment of the field when he writes:

The enigmatic nature of The Urth Cycle has resulted in a critical response that has been disappointing, with contradictory assertions, unresolved conjectures and inconclusive arguments standing as testimony to the bewildering effects of Wolfe's games-playing.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Broderick, 'Introduction,' in Broderick, ed., *Earth is but a Star*, 6-7.

<sup>92</sup> John R. Holmes, 'Tolkien, *Dustschawung*, and the Gnostic Tense: Is Timelessness Medieval or Victorian?' in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, eds., *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 49.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Wright, 'Grasping the God-Games: Metafictional Keys to the Interpretation of Gene Wolfe's "The Fictions of the New Sun"', *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction* 66 (1996): 39-59; Peter Wright, 'God-Games: Cosmic Conspiracies and Narrative Sleights in Gene Wolfe's "The Fictions of the New Sun"', *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction* 66 (1996), 13-39; *Attending Daedalus: Gene Wolfe, Artifice and the Reader* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003). Wright edited a collection of writing on and by Wolfe entitled *Shadows of the New Sun: Wolfe on Writing/Writers on Wolfe*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

<sup>94</sup> Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 56. See Wright's assessment of existing critical responses to *The Book*, "'The God and His Man": Critical Responses to the Urth Cycle,' in *Attending Daedalus*, 49-66.

While there is no clear consensus, and few clear arguments, concerning the ultimate meaning and significance of *The Book*, existing scholarship revolves around several key themes and tends to draw from the critical sphere of fantasy studies rather than that of science fiction scholarship. Critical work on Wolfe currently takes three main forms: readings of *The Book* which interpret it as a work of Christian fantasy, focusing on Wolfe's use of Catholic symbolism and the Christian worldview evident in the text;<sup>95</sup> readings which discuss *The Book* in terms of a more general theory of myth and literary mythopoesis;<sup>96</sup> and mostly descriptive accounts of aspects of *The Book* which attempt to solve some of Wolfe's puzzles in miniature rather than interpret the work as a whole.<sup>97</sup> Despite that fact that memory is arguably the most important theme in *The Book* itself, none of the existing critical work on Wolfe constitutes an investigation into the implications of his writing in terms of history and historical consciousness.

The influence of the fantasy tradition and the density of Christian referents within *The Book* have led several critics to interpret it as work of Christian Fantasy.<sup>98</sup> The presence of Christian, and specifically Catholic, referents in *The Book* is particularly striking to those familiar with the symbolic imagination of Catholicism.<sup>99</sup> It is not necessary to provide a comprehensive account of the Christian symbolism in the text; some examples

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<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*; John Clute, 'Wolfe, Gene (Rodman)' in Clute and Grant, eds., *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 1028-1029; Paul Witcover, 'Gene Wolfe's Strange Travels'; Stephen Palmer, 'Severian as Christ Figure'; John Farrell, 'The Distant Suns of Gene Wolfe'.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, the writings of Michael Andre Druissi, in particular, 'A Closer Look at the Brown Book: Gene Wolfe's Five-Faceted Myth,' *New York Review of Science Fiction* 54 (1993): 14-19; Donald Palumbo, 'The Monomyth in Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*,' *Extrapolation* 46: 2 (2005), 189-234; Peter Malekin, 'Remembering the Future: Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*,' in Donald E. Morse, ed., *The Fantastic in World Literature and the Arts* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 49.

<sup>97</sup> In particular the work of Robert Borski, published as separate articles and collected in *Solar Labyrinth: Exploring Gene Wolfe's 'Book of the New Sun'* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2004); *The Long and the Short of It: More Essays on the Fiction of Gene Wolfe* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2006).

<sup>98</sup> Joan Gordon places *The Book* within a tradition of Christian high fantasy: "Wolfe transforms the quest story into a densely imaged work of Christian Symbolism in the tradition of C.S. Lewis." 'Wolfe, Gene,' 1029. Gordon also concludes that the meaning of the tetralogy is "essentially Christian". *Gene Wolfe*, 86. John Clute writes that "it [The Book] may nevertheless be treated as a tale depicting that which the secular world cannot offer (i.e., as a CHRISTIAN FANTASY) if the protagonist Severian's true identity is deemed to be that of CHRIST reborn". 'Wolfe, Gene (Rodman),' 1028. James Jordan boldly suggests that Wolfe's New Sun, Short Sun and Long Sun series "look like an extended "spin" on the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Church afterwards," to which Wolfe responds "No, the Biblical parallel had never occurred to me." Nick Gevers, Michael Andre-Druissi and James Jordan, 'Some Moments with the Magus: An Interview with Gene Wolfe,' *Infinity Plus* (December 2003) (online source). <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intgw>.

<sup>99</sup> For example see Locey, "'Three Dreams, Seven Nights" and Gene Wolfe's Catholicism,' 9. Locey's reading of Wolfe is similar to Charles A. Coulombe's reading of Catholic symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings* in 'The Lord of the Rings – A Catholic View,' in Joseph Pearce, ed., *Tolkien - A Celebration: Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 53-66.

will suffice to illustrate the extent to which *The Book* alludes to Christian signs and stories. There are numerous resurrections within Severian's narrative: Severian himself rises from certain death on several occasions; his companion Dorcas is resurrected from a watery grave in the Lake of Birds; and his lover Thecla lives again in Severian's consciousness after he consumes a potent drug and her dead flesh. The first and final chapters of *The Book* are entitled 'Resurrection and Death' and 'Resurrection'. Versions or inversions of Catholic rituals, including the ritual of the Eucharist, appear frequently in *The Book*.<sup>100</sup> Severian himself turns water into wine<sup>101</sup> and carries with him the Claw of the Conciliator, a religious relic which appears to have strange and unpredictable powers of healing. As his journey progresses, Severian increasingly appears to resemble a saviour or Christ figure: the Conciliator/Christ returned to Urth/earth to bring about the New Sun.<sup>102</sup>

*The Book* may be read as an eschatological narrative drawing on the Bible and Torah. It appears to be an account of the Last Days of Urth/earth including the second coming of Christ, the destruction of the old and beginning of a New Age marked by the arrival of the New Sun/Son in the sequel, *The Urth of the New Sun*. Dr Talos' play 'Eschatology and Genesis' is a quasi-biblical account of first and last things that takes a form similar to a medieval passion play. The huge alien beings Erebus and Abaia who live in the sea and will one day "devour the continents" (*Shadow*, 104) are reminiscent of the eschatological predictions of the prophets of the Torah: "One of the prophets in the Book of Isaiah predicts 'In that day the lord with his hand and great and strong word will punish Leviathan, the fleeting serpent ... and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.'"<sup>103</sup> The Green Man that Severian encounters who claims to be from the future and needs only the sun to live may also be read as fulfilment of Jewish eschatological prophecy.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> On divine and diabolical (inverted) versions of this ritual – the consumption of 'the body of Christ' – in *The Book*, see James Jordan 'Gene Wolfe Interview' (online source).

<sup>101</sup> Gene Wolfe, *The Claw of the Conciliator: Volume Two of 'The Book of the New Sun'* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 10 (hereafter cited in text as *Claw*).

<sup>102</sup> See Stephen Palmer, 'Severian as Christ Figure'; Clute, *Strokes*, 151; Gordon, 'Wolfe, Gene,' 1029; and Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 96. Wolfe himself has denied that Severian is a 'Christ Figure'. Jordan, 'Gene Wolfe Interview' (online source).

<sup>103</sup> Dermot A. Lane, 'Eschatology,' in Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 330.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

*The Book* incorporates not only Judeo-Christian myth and symbol, but also other archetypal signs and narratives. Wolfe may have been fascinated by and able to express his ideas through the symbolic language of Catholicism, but his interviews and *The Book* itself reveal a vast array of appropriations from world myth and literature. Many of the elements of the text which are associated with Christian symbolism can also be read in terms of other religious and mythological systems. Michael Andre-Druissi's encyclopaedic dictionaries of the Urth Cycle, *Lexicon Urthus*,<sup>105</sup> stand as testimony to the quantity and diversity of referents to world myth and symbol in *The Book*. The theme of life, death and rebirth, evident in the numerous resurrections in *The Book*, is not the exclusive domain of Christian mythology. The Green Man is a symbol of fertility and rebirth in many cultures. Solar mythology is among the most ubiquitous forms of myth, to be found in ancient Egyptian, Indian, Incan, and Sumerian cultures, to list but a few.<sup>106</sup> In the nineteenth century, anthropological interest in the solar myths of ancient and non-European peoples found broader cultural expression in Romantic literature and art.<sup>107</sup> The fact that Wolfe chooses the dying sun as both literal and symbolic focus of his text combined with his professed interest in the transition from Pagan to Christian worlds<sup>108</sup> indicates that his work, rather than belonging to a tradition of Christian narrative, seeks to explore, and even interrogate, the histories, forms, interactions and workings of Judeo-Christian and other mythological systems.

It is for these reasons that many approaches to *The Book* are guided by myth theory. The most popular theorists of myth among fantasy critics are those who identify the structural and formal qualities of myths, including Propp on folk tales, Graves on myth and Joseph Campbell on the myth of the hero.<sup>109</sup> Several critics recognise that

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<sup>105</sup> Michael Andre-Druissi, *Lexicon Urthus: A Dictionary for the Urth Cycle* (San Francisco: Sirius Fiction, 1994); *Additions, Errata, &cetera: Volume 1* (San Francisco: Sirius Fiction, 1995); *Additions, Errata, &cetera: Volume 2* (San Francisco: Sirius Fiction, 1996).

<sup>106</sup> For a brief overview see David Sick, 'Mit(h)ra(s) and the Myths of the Sun,' *Numen: International Review of the History of Religions* 51:4 (2004): 432-467.

<sup>107</sup> See J.B. Bullen 'Introduction,' in J.B. Bullen, ed., *The Sun is God: Painting, Literature, and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1-11.

<sup>108</sup> Nick Gevers, 'Introduction,' in Gevers, Andre-Druissi, and Jordan, 'Some Moments with the Magus' (online source).

<sup>109</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber, 1961); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

Severian's tale reproduces a form that is familiar in fantasy, the heroic monomyth.<sup>110</sup> Michael Andre-Druissi observes that Severian's narrative follows the fivefold pattern of the hero's life as described by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*: birth, initiation, reign, repose, death.<sup>111</sup> This is, however, a misapprehension. *The Book* does not document Severian's birth, and it ends before his period of reign, repose and (presumably) death. Even if we accept symbolic birth in place of actual birth, the fivefold pattern remains incomplete.

Unfortunately, approaches to *The Book* that focus on its symbolic and mythic dimensions tend towards the uncritical. Peter Malekin emphasises the eternal within *The Book*, arguing that the *leitmotif* of light, ultimately represented by the New Sun, encourages a particular mode of response to the symbols in the text: "Implied is the subordination of reason and the acceptance of symbols [in] a sense of the world older than our own and probably truer".<sup>112</sup> Malekin argues that Wolfe's attitude to myth belongs to a philosophy that connects the eternal (true) to the realm of the unconscious which "guides the destiny of consciousness through the language of symbols".<sup>113</sup> Joan Gordon reaches a similar conclusion, suggesting that *The Book* guides its readers towards a Christian approach to experiencing and understanding eternal truths, "relying on faith rather than proof, on the unseen rather than the seen".<sup>114</sup>

In general, attempts to understand *The Book* as a mythical narrative may be undermined by the complexities of the text itself, as well as by the self-conscious and critical approach to myth evident in Wolfe's work. Wolfe's use of the familiar forms of myth and archetype is complicated by other stylistic elements within *The Book* which suggest a far more reflexive approach to symbols, stories and myth. Its autobiographical form emphasises the subjective perception of reality. Underlying this form is the phenomenological premise, fundamental to fantasy, that reality is filtered through the subjective consciousness. Wolfe uses several devices to suggest the limits of subjective perception and bring story teller and story into question. In addition to the symbolism of

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<sup>110</sup> See, in particular, Palumbo, 'The Monomyth in Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*'. Wright writes that *The Book* adheres closely to Campbell's structural formulation of the heroic cycle but argues that "Wolfe is using the quest myth to delude the reader." 'God Games,' 33.

<sup>111</sup> Andre-Druissi, 'Gene Wolfe at the Lake of Birds,' 6.

<sup>112</sup> Malekin, 'Remembering the Future,' 49.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>114</sup> Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 98.

masking and the theatre, he frequently uses the technique of the “limited viewpoint or unreliable narrator”.<sup>115</sup> Whilst Severian claims to boast a perfect memory, he does not possess perfect insight or understanding. Severian’s lack of discernment is revealed in the text on several occasions, when his initial impression of a person or a situation proves to be mistaken.<sup>116</sup> In a world of costume, theatre, masks and acting, Severian is often tricked, misled or manipulated by others.

Taking these and other narrative devices into account, Peter Wright argues that *The Book* advocates a far more sceptical point of view concerning the role of religion, myth, stories and symbolism in human societies. Wright contends that a close reading of *The Book* reveals a subtext: what others interpret as cosmology is actually a “cosmological conspiracy” or “god-game” orchestrated by aliens.<sup>117</sup> Severian and the human beings of Urth, having a “psychological need for lenitive myths”,<sup>118</sup> are manipulated through the use of myth and symbol to bring about the New Sun. This cosmological natural selection is masterminded and consciously controlled by an alien race (the Heirogrammates) for its own genetic gain. Wright also suggests that not only does Severian act out the role chosen for him by the Heirogrammates, but Wolfe “extends the Heirogrammates’ fictional god-game into an interpretive game”.<sup>119</sup> He cleverly uses familiar forms and motifs to encourage a particular reading of Severian’s story, whilst at the same time providing clues within the text to the actual story of deception and manipulation. Thus while many of the familiar, mythic elements in the text direct the reader towards “the subordination of reason and the acceptance of symbols”,<sup>120</sup> other elements warn the reader to beware of the potentially deceptive nature of myth: it

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<sup>115</sup> Gordon writes “His central technique is the limited viewpoint, used to illustrate and develop all his stylistic and thematic elements. Most typically, Wolfe employs a first person narrator who cannot escape the limitations of his subjective vision.” ‘Wolfe, Gene,’ 1029. Wolfe himself comments that “The reliable narrator is a literary convention in which we say we are going to pretend that everything that the author tells us about the story is the story. Which is, to me, somewhat artificial.” Quoted in Brown, ‘Gene Wolfe: Moral Fabulist,’ 4, 66.

<sup>116</sup> For example, Severian mistakes a woman in costume, at a costume event, for a Pelerine (priestess). Gene Wolfe, *The Sword of the Lictor: Volume Three of ‘The Book of the New Sun’* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 32 (hereafter cited in text as *Sword*). Severian’s initial impression of Dr Talos, Baldanders and their relationship is also mistaken; while Severian initially believes that Baldanders serves the Doctor, later he finds that the Doctor is a humunculus, or machine, created by the giant. (*Claw*, 210, 228)

<sup>117</sup> See Wright, ‘God Games,’ esp. 14-15.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>120</sup> Malekin, ‘Remembering the Future,’ 49.

distorts and deforms, providing only a semiological illusion of the factual, natural and referential.<sup>121</sup>

Wright argues that another fundamental myth about the nature of being and time underlies Wolfe's narrative: not the Christian myth, but the Darwinian myth.

Behind the dramatic action ... is a narrative of survival, not transcendence or spiritual growth, but a representation of the Darwinian principle which dictates that only those most able to cope with their environment will survive.<sup>122</sup>

Like Gordon's reading, Wright's analysis boils down to a choice between the two forms that are blended in Wolfe and his fiction – the Catholic or the engineer, Jesus or Darwin, the magician or the scientist, the spiritual or the scientific, fantasy or science fiction - and where Gordon chooses the former categories, Wright chooses the latter. These are not, however, separable elements within the author, text or historical imagination. What Wright fails to acknowledge is that 'natural selection' and 'evolution' may also function as "lenitive myths" and "the reader should not be deceived into accepting Wolfe's allusions as evidence of the themes and concerns of the text".<sup>123</sup> Wright assumes the Darwinian principle to be the scientific truth obscured by a veil of religious myth. Wolfe's approach to meaning, however, does not suggest that the removal of a mask will reveal the final truth, it may equally reveal another mask.

Severian directly confronts the question of 'religion or science?' when he encounters Master Ash, the Last Man in the Last House, a time-traveller who has been sent to observe one of the multiple possible future histories of Urth. Severian observes:

"I have always found that men of religion tell comforting things that are not true, while men of science recount hideous truths. The Chatelaine Mannea said you were a holy man, but you appear to be a man of science, and you said your people had sent you to our dead Urth to study the ice." (*Citadel*, 131)

Master Ash explains:

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<sup>121</sup> See Roland Barthes' explanation of myth as a mode of signification. 'Myth Today,' in *Mythologies* (London: Paladin Grafton, 1973), 117-174.

<sup>122</sup> Wright, 'God-games,' 15.

<sup>123</sup> Wright, *Attending Daedelus*, 59.

“The distinction you mention no longer holds. Religion and science have always been matters of faith in something. It is the same something. You are yourself what you call a man of science, so I talk of science to you. If Mannea were here with her priestesses, I would talk differently.” (*Citadel*, 131)

The “faith in something” to which Master Ash refers is the faith or trust in the possibility of shared understanding required to communicate with another (human) being.<sup>124</sup> The approach to meaning here is simple: there is no final meaning, there is only shared meaning.

*The Book* constitutes a study of man, his myths and his symbols, and may be understood as an exploration of the nature and function of the human desire to give meaning to the world of experience: “man as a symbolising, conceptualising, meaning-seeking animal.”<sup>125</sup> *The Book* does not suggest that Wolfe exploits this desire as human weakness to be manipulated; instead he treats it as something essentially human to be celebrated, and in his fiction he practices what he celebrates. Wolfe not only places this impulse at the core of his character and world creation, but also recognises and reflects upon its role in reading and the interpretative process. This reflexive approach to meaning is evident within *The Book* in its focus on the way in which things are given significance or become signs for the characters within the text and the way in which characters respond to the signs they have created. *The Book* is an extended exploration of the cultural processes through which human beings grant objects and experiences significance and the way in which culture, in turn, shapes humanity.

The apparent presence of a hidden, yet ultimate and universal truth, is so alluring it remains the key focus of the vast majority of commentary on Wolfe’s fiction. Severian even reflects on the problem of unlocking the mysteries of the universe in *The Book*, and these reflections reveal something of Wolfe’s own approach. Severian and his companion Dorcas discuss the idea that the universe has a secret key. Severian asks Dorcas “are you familiar with the idea that the universe has a secret key. A sentence, or a phrase, some say even a single word?” (*Shadow*, 232) The suggestion that the key to

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<sup>124</sup> Drawing on a range of sociological theories, Barbara A. Misztal, explains the ways in which trust based upon mutual or shared understanding may be thought to shape “all aspects of human life”, (12) underpinning social interaction and communication. See *Trust in Modern Societies: The Search for the Bases of Social Order* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1996), esp. 12-13.

<sup>125</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973 (Hammersmith; London: Harper Collins, 1993), 140.



the universe is to be found in language provides a hint of Wolfe's own approach to cosmic meaning. Severian continues:

The brown book is a collection of myths about the past, and it has a section listing all the keys of the universe – all the things people have said were the The Secret after they had talked to mystagogues on far worlds, or studied the *popul voh* of the magicians, or fasted in the trunks of holy trees. (*Shadow*, 232)

There is not a single key to the universe: there are many; there is not one door; there are doors. Severian himself discusses several general theories of the universe. Among critics of *The Book*, the idea that “everything has three meanings” (*Shadow*, 233) is probably the most frequently cited. Like *The Brown Book*, however, *The Book* contains a collection of such Secrets. Severian considers a fractal structuring of existence: which draws analogies between smaller and larger patterns. (*Sword*, 185) Later, he develops a broad theory of existence based on historical continuity which he calls Primitivity and believes is generally applicable to human action. (*Citadel*, 220) On the beach which Severian believes is also the Sand Garden, he has a spiritual epiphany and states that “everything had approached and even touched the Pancreator, because everything had dropped from his hand. Everything was a relic. All the world was a relic”. (*Citadel*, 257) Finally, in chapter XXXIV ‘The Key to the Universe’, Severian recounts the “secret history of Time, which is the greatest of all secrets”, (*Citadel*, 254-255) yet which he also describes as “too great a thing for any living man to know.” (*Citadel*, 255)

While Severian presents several possible systems of interpretation, he offers little guidance for choosing between them. As has been suggested by Wolfe himself and widely recognised by commentators, Severian is an unreliable narrator.<sup>126</sup> Throughout *The Book*, he undermines his own statements and his trustworthiness as a source of truth and objectivity. Severian's perfect memory is a chimera; he finds it difficult to distinguish between memory and dream or truth and lies, and he doubts his own sanity:

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<sup>126</sup> Of the unreliable narrator, Wolfe comments: “Real people really are unreliable narrators all the time, even if they try to be reliable narrators.” Quoted in Lawrence Person, ‘Suns New, Long and Short: An Interview with Gene Wolfe,’ *Nova Express* 5:1 (1998) (online source).

<http://home.roadrunner.com/~lperson1/wolfe.html>. See also Gordon ‘Wolfe, Gene,’ 1029; Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 82; Brown, ‘Gene Wolfe - Moral Fabulist,’ 4; Gregory Feeley, ‘The Evidence of Things Not Shown: Family Romance in *The Book of the New Sun*,’ *New York Review of Science Fiction* 32 (April 1991): 12.

It was in this instant of confusion that I realised for the first time that I am in some degree insane ... I had lied often ... Now I could no longer be sure my own mind was not lying to me; all my falsehoods were recoiling on me, and I who recalled everything could not be certain those memories were more than my own dreams. (*Shadow*, 24-25)

Limited by his subjectivity and humanity, Severian proves an inconsistent and ambiguous source of answers to the plethora of puzzles posed within *The Book*.

The text thus contains many examples of cryptic advice on meaning and interpretation. In *The Brown Book*, Severian discovers a passage which states that “everything has three meanings”:

“the first is its practical meaning, that the book calls ‘the thing the plowman sees’ ... The second is the reflection of the world about it. Every object is in contact with all others, and thus we can learn of the others by observing the first ... the third is the transubstantial meaning. Since all objects have their ultimate origin in the Pancreator, and all were set in motion by him, so all must express his will – which is the higher reality. The book is saying that everything is a sign.” (*Shadow*, 233)

This statement suggests an epistemology that recognises a layered, yet ordered system of meaning which finds its ultimate truth and higher reality in the existence of the ‘Pancreator’, God. Critics have taken this as a direct statement of Wolfe’s own approach to meaning,<sup>127</sup> yet Dorcas’ response to this philosophy of meaning is significant:

“it seems to me that the third meaning is very clear. But the second is harder to find and the first, which should be easiest, is impossible.” (*Shadow*, 272)

Dorcas’ recognition that the practical may be obscured by the mythic prompts us to return from the universal to the particular in our search for meaning. While *The Book* approaches the universal and transcendental, Urth cannot be reduced to these. It is the maintenance of productive tension between the particular and the universal that constitutes the key to conceiving Urth as a creation of the historical imagination. Urth reminds us that historicity exists in the movement between the practical and the transubstantial, where we find the meaning that neither Dorcas nor Severian grasps: the relational. In recognising this, we may see history’s omnitemporal horizons whichever direction we gaze.

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<sup>127</sup> See Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 92; Malekin, ‘Remembering the Future,’ 53-54; Witcover, ‘Gene Wolfe’s Strange Travels,’ 4.

## Chapter 8 – “All the world was a relic”:

### Fabrics of Cultural History in *The Book of the New Sun*

Tolkien’s sub-creation began with words and language, and while Wolfe shares Tolkien’s love of words, his own creation began with masking and costume. Tolkien’s Middle-earth had its beginnings in the context of philological scholarship, while Wolfe’s work was inspired with in the context of science fiction fandom. Both forms and contexts – language and philology, costumes and fandom – are the stuff of culture, but these points of genesis locate the authors and their works in two distinct fields of cultural historiography. While Tolkien belongs to the intellectual sphere of the old cultural history, Wolfe’s work reflects the assumptions and pre-occupations of the new.

Having in mind the costumes common at science fiction and fantasy fan conventions, Wolfe created his protagonist, Severian’s, costume before he created the character.<sup>1</sup> He imagined the costume before the character, and the character before the world, Urth. During the writing process, the character developed beyond the costume. In fact, in the course of *The Book of the New Sun* the costume is reduced to just that – clothing that is an inadequate vessel for the man – and, by the end of the tetralogy, Severian’s costume is tattered and transformed: his fuligin<sup>2</sup> cloak is torn and faded and his sword is broken and resembles instead a cross. The significance of Wolfe’s choice of costume as starting point is carried through his text such that it extends not only to the characters – most of whom wear masks or costumes at some stage during the course of the narrative – but to his whole world. Urth is a domain so richly adorned, so lavishly costumed, that it resembles a baroque theatre. Wolfe’s far-future Urth is costumed almost entirely from the familiar fabric of world literature, history, legend and myth. It is Wolfe’s use of words, names and signs that are already threaded into stories, histories and other materials of signification to weave his world that gives *The Book* its imaginative depth

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Kathie Huddleston, Wolfe explains the process through which he came to create the New Sun tetralogy. He imagined first a costume of the sort that would be suited to the type of fan conventions he was attending at the time. This costume became the garb of the torturer, Severian. Kathie Huddleston, ‘Science Fiction Weekly Interview: Gene Wolfe,’ *Science Fiction Weekly* 253 (online source). <http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue253/interview.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Severian explains that fuligin is a hue that absorbs light and is darker than black. Gene Wolfe, *The Shadow of the Torturer: Volume One of ‘The Book of the New Sun’* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 27 (hereafter cited in text as *Shadow*).

and enduring appeal. When appreciating Urth as a historical-fictional world, then, it is the cultural material of sign and text, and the patterns of the weaving, that draw the eye.

Wolfe's approach to world creation is akin to the ethnographic approach to the interpretation of cultures that is termed "thick description". In his explication of "thick description", anthropologist Clifford Geertz depicts the cultural worlds or "webs of significance" which face the ethnographer as "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed and knotted into one another which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit".<sup>3</sup> The last three descriptors are fitting for Wolfe's Urth. Culture constituted as densely layered and entwined structures of human meaning and significance which resist reification or reduction to singular structures – formal, psychological, behavioural, biological or other – is the substance of Urth as world and at the core of Wolfe's work of world creation.

The following reading of 'feigned history' in Wolfe's text places emphasis on the cultural history dimensions of Urth rather than on the mythical forms and signs evident in Severian's tale. Such a reading does not, however, negate the significance of myth, mythologies and myth-making to *The Book*. The semiotic definition of culture<sup>4</sup> which underpins cultural history demonstrates the same concern with human patterns of signification – symbols and meaning – that characterises myth-theory and its application to fiction. Cultural history's concern with the problems of representation and representability also allows for an exploration of the author's self-conscious approach to human symbols and fiction making in *The Book*.

Secondary World creation is a challenging task for the historical imagination, and a far future world poses a potentially greater challenge. The time-span of Urth's existence encompasses aeons; the planet's history is on the scale of the lives of stars – a cosmic scale. It is difficult to conceive of cosmic histories in anthropological terms, since the lives of human beings last less than centuries and their civilisations less than millennia. The historical fictions most applicable to the imagination's attempt to embody such a world-in-time appear to be cosmic mythology, big history and natural history. Aspects

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<sup>3</sup> On the semiotic definition of culture see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London: Fontana, 1993), 10.

<sup>4</sup> See Geertz, 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture,' in *ibid.*, 5-30.

of each of these forms may be found in Wolfe's Urth, yet none adequately encompasses the richness of the historical imagination in *The Book*, for none adequately engages with the centrality of culture.

In science fiction, histories that seek to embrace the far future are inclined towards myth and, in particular, myths that are thought to transcend history and enter a realm of cosmic understanding that encompasses world-creation (genesis) and destruction (eschatology).<sup>5</sup> In his study of science fiction as modern myth, Casey Fredericks suggests that the imagination of science fiction may simply be beyond the scope of history and at odds with the particular and human aspects of the historical imagination:

In modern SF, consequently, *cosmology transcends history*, and this transcendence is to be taken as an act of intellection, an apocalyptic transformation of consciousness ... In *The Big Time*, myth, dream, the supernatural, and the afterlife are all indistinguishable and undifferentiated from one another and constitute a mode of transcending the real facts of human history with cosmic-scale consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Wolfe's Urth, however, is not a world of cosmic consciousness and mythic trans-historical existence; it is a planet located in "big history",<sup>7</sup> rather than in some trans-historical, mythic time.

'Big history' is the term used to describe the "scientific paradigms of the history of the universe, the solar system, the earth and life",<sup>8</sup> or biological, geological and astrophysical history. Big history, which describes the origins and long term developmental processes of the universe, stars, planets, geological formations and living species, had its pre-cursors in mythic cosmology and adopted modern, rational-scientific theory and method during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>9</sup> Fred Spier identifies the first "science based big history that also included human history"<sup>10</sup> as H.G. Wells' *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind*.<sup>11</sup> Spier's assertion

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<sup>5</sup> See Casey Fredericks, 'The Big Time,' in *The Future of Eternity: Mythologies of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 65-90.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>7</sup> See David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Fred Spier, 'The Ghost of Big History is Roaming the Earth,' *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 253.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 253-254.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>11</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920).

confirms the affinity between science fiction and big history, as does his later reference to well known science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov, as a twentieth century scientist-historian of big history.<sup>12</sup> Big history aligns neatly with science fiction in terms of its appeal to scientific method and authority, its concern with questions of origins and possible futures, and its awkward proximity to the realms of religion and metaphysics.

Applied to planet earth, big history is traditionally the domain of the natural sciences – including geology and biology – and is concerned with such subjects as the movement of continents, climate change and the development of plant and animal species. These natural histories have been distinguished from ‘normal’ history<sup>13</sup> not on the grounds of scale, but on the basis of their concern with non-human objects – including other objects of nature such as animals and plants – rather than with the past of human beings and their activities.<sup>14</sup> In recent decades, however, the broad field of environmental history, which experienced a re-vitalisation in the 1960s in the milieu of *Annales* school total-history and environmental movements, has incorporated both the human and the natural by focusing on the convergence of environmental dynamics and social processes and practices.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary examples of big history place themselves in the tradition of the *Annales* school, histories of civilisations and natural histories and offer accounts of human history in relation to planetary and cosmic history.<sup>16</sup> David Christian’s *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, for example, places pre-historic, pre-modern and modern human history in the context of histories of the universe, galaxies, the planet

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<sup>12</sup> Spier, ‘The Ghost of Big History,’ 254.

<sup>13</sup> See ch. 1, fn. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Note that theorists of modern, ‘normal’ history such as R.G. Collingwood and Geoffrey Elton define history as the study of the specifically human past. Elton writes “the subject matter of history is human beings – their experiences, actions, thought and suffering – but human beings in the past.” *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 63. See also R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 9.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of contemporary field of environmental history see J.R. McNeill, ‘Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,’ *History and Theory* 42:4 (2003): 5-43; Andrew Isenberg, ‘Historicizing Natural Environments: The Deep Roots of Environmental History,’ in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza, eds., *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002): 372-389. Note that the *Annales* school, and the work of Ferdinand Braudel in particular, including the ideas of long *durée*, total history and convergence, has also been termed ‘big history’ and is often aligned with environmental history. See, for example, Allan Megill, ‘Coherence and Incoherence in Historical Studies: From the *Annales* School to the New Cultural History,’ *New Literary History* 35:2 (2004): 207-231.

<sup>16</sup> For example, David Christian prefaces his introduction to *Maps of Time* with a quote from Braudel’s *On History* on “universal history”. *Maps of Time*, 1. Fred Spier cites Ferdinand Braudel, Oswald Spengler, J.M. Roberts and William McNeil as important forerunners in the field of “the history of humanity”. *The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang until Today* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 1.

earth, and the evolution of species.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Fred Spier's *The Structure of Big History* seeks to advance a "single, uncomplicated, conceptual scheme for all of history, of which human history is only a tiny part".<sup>18</sup> The history of humanity is, nonetheless, the focus of his work and is understood in terms of "ecological regime changes" or significant developments in the way in which human beings interact with the natural environment.<sup>19</sup>

Big history is a peculiar presence on the contemporary historiographic landscape. It boldly presents grand narratives, universals, unity and coherence to a divided discipline only recently convinced of the undesirability of grand narratives, the danger of universals and the fictional qualities of coherence. Beyond this, the application of paradigms drawn from the traditionally scientific field of natural history, such as evolutionary theory, to social and cultural history is a contentious process.<sup>20</sup> Any big history to be found in Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, thus manifests an intellectual milieu in which the paradigms of scientific history, world history, social history and cultural history are in tense negotiations.

As it is a far-future world, Urth exhibits many elements of big history. The importance of the discourse of big history to the historical imagination of the distant past and far future is evidenced in the prominence of themes from big history in interpretations and readings of *The Book*. For example, in 'Post-history 101',<sup>21</sup> Michael Andre- Druissi identifies four Ages of earth/Urth akin to those of Hindu cosmology. This mythic

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<sup>17</sup> Christian, *Maps of Time*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Spier, *Structure of Big History*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Drawing on the work of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu and Johan Goudsblom, Spier posits three "regimes" structuring human behaviour: individual, social and ecological. These concern the way human beings solve problems generated by their personal habitus (individual), social life (social), and natural and inorganic environments (ecological). (5-6) Spier concludes that ecological regime changes, or developments in the way human beings manage their environment (rather than such things as communications technologies or technologies of war), are the major structuring principles of human history. *Ibid.*, 40-44.

<sup>20</sup> Evolutionary theory has experienced resurgence within the social sciences in recent years. Controversy surrounding this development in the field of historical studies is evidenced by debates in the theme issue of *History and Theory* 38:4 (1999) on evolutionary theory and history. See, in particular, David Gary Shaw, 'The Return of Science,' 1-9; Martin Stuart-Fox, 'Evolutionary Theory of History,' 33-51; Joseph Fracchia, 'Does Culture Evolve?' 52-79. Further debate between Runciman, who contends that culture does, indeed, evolve in the manner suggested by neo-Darwinian theory, and Joseph Fracchia, who is critical of this approach, is to be found in *History and Theory* 44:1 (2005). W.G. Runciman, 'Culture does Evolve,' 1-13; Joseph Fracchia and R.C. Lewontin, 'The Price of a Metaphor,' 1-14; W.G. Runciman, 'Rejoinder to Fracchia and Lewontin,' 30-41.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Andre-Druissi, 'Posthistory 101,' *Extrapolation* 37:2 (1996): 127-138.

lifecycle is aligned with the scientific discourse of big history, as both Wolfe and Andre-Druissi identify ages in terms of minerals: “an *age* is the interval between the exhaustion of some mineral or other resource in its naturally occurring form (for example sulphur) and the next.”<sup>22</sup> Speculation concerning the location of the Commonwealth enters the domain of big history, as readers ponder the possible formations of continents and climates of an earth million years hence in light of knowledge about the geographical features of the earth in the pre-historic past.<sup>23</sup> Some of the strange and exotic creatures that inhabit Urth are also familiar signifiers of big history; Wolfe uses the names given to megafauna and other pre-historic creatures to describe Severian’s surroundings.<sup>24</sup>

Another marker of big history is a focus on origins.<sup>25</sup> David Christian describes his big history as a “coherent and accessible account of origins, a modern creation myth”.<sup>26</sup> The first four chapters of *Maps of Time* are dedicated to the origins of the universe, the galaxy, the planet and the human species.<sup>27</sup> A similar focus is suggested by the themes of eschatology and genesis in Wolfe’s book.<sup>28</sup> His use of the theological, rather than scientific terms is, however, one of the more obvious markers of Wolfe’s concern with complexities of human culture and belief, rather than with speculation over the origins and future development of the planet and its life according the paradigms of big history. While it contains elements of big history, *The Book of the New Sun* is not primarily concerned with the themes and problems of big history: it is not written in the style of big histories which reassure their readers with clear explanations of general principles and logical accounts of their consistent and universal application; it does not consider the course of human history over the long duration; and it does not present an easily

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<sup>22</sup> Gene Wolfe, ‘Appendixes: Money, Measures and Time,’ in *The Claw of the Conciliator: Volume Two of ‘The Book of the New Sun’* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 253 (hereafter cited in text as *Claw*) (Wolfe’s italics); Andre-Druissi, ‘Posthistory 101,’ 128. This distinction between ages based on man’s use of natural resources is similar to Spier’s idea of ‘ecological regime changes’. *Structure of Big History*, 40-44.

<sup>23</sup> See Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 77, 87; Gregory Feeley, ‘The Evidence of Things Not Shown: Family Romance in *The Book of the New Sun*,’ *New York Review of Science Fiction* 31 (April 1991): 8.

<sup>24</sup> Severian mentions several such creatures including barylambdas, arctothers, and smilodons. *Shadow*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Spier, ‘The Ghost of Big History,’ 255.

<sup>26</sup> Christian, *Maps of Time*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-106.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Eschatology and Genesis’ is the title of Dr Talos’ play. The play itself is “a dramatisation (as he claimed) of certain parts of the lost *Book of the New Sun*”. (*Claw*, 179)



intelligible and universal paradigm for the development of humanity in the context of cosmic history.

Despite the clear association of big history with the imagination of the far future, the historical imagination in *The Book* is not dominated by the forms of big history. As a historical world, Urth is reductively characterised in terms of mythic, cosmic trans-history and only secondarily located in time through big history. As suggested by Wolfe's starting point – costume – it is contemporary cultural history, with its anthropological foundations, ontological privileging of culture and meaning, and emphasis on the complex nature of representation, which most appropriately conceives Urth as a historical world. Big history and its scientist-historians are, of course, a fascinating subject of interest to cultural historians, but it is more accurate to say that Wolfe is inclined towards the latter, rather than the former, group.

In world-creation, Wolfe also adopts the approach to nature and its historical qualities characteristic of the new cultural history: he does not distinguish between natural and human existence in history. As Gordon points out, on Urth natural history is indistinguishable from cultural history.<sup>29</sup> Severian journeys through a landscape that, whilst naturalistic and at times even wild in appearance, is an accumulation of human artifice. The very dirt itself is comprised of the accretions of culture, “bone and brick and artefact and icon, layer upon layer of human meaning”.<sup>30</sup> Severian comments:

I have heard those who dig for their livelihood say there is no land anywhere in which they can trench without turning up the shards of the past. No matter where the spade turns the soil, it uncovers broken pavements and corroding metal; and the scholars write that the kind of sand that artists call polychrome (because flecks of every colour are mixed with its whiteness) is actually not sand at all, but the glass of the past, now pounded to powder by aeons of tumbling in the clamorous sea. (*Shadow*, 123)

In the interpretation of Urth as historical world through the lens of cultural history, the intellectual process of “thick description” suggests that the reader begin with the plethora of material details – place and object – and trace the conceptual patterns which make these things the meaningful stuff of existence and, at the same time, the stuff of

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<sup>29</sup> Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 80-81.

<sup>30</sup> John Clute, *Strokes: Essays and Reviews, 1966-1986* (Seattle, Wash.: Serconia Press, 1988), 150.

human history. In *The Book*, culture exists as artefacts and objects that litter the surface of ancient Urth and that are integrated into human patterns of existence through ritual and practice and as signs or symbols woven into stories. The world is created and made meaningful through the interaction of the material object and the forms of human belief and practice: place and artefact, language, ritual and story. Wolfe focuses on the cultural processes through which the world is made meaningful and the way in which these processes shape the characters who participate in them. Wolfe's approach to meaning is thus akin to that of the new cultural history.<sup>31</sup> Implicit in all of cultural processes are not only ontological and phenomenological assumptions, but also ideas about the nature of history. Beyond this, the introduction of the meta-fictional and meta-historical elements of costume, theatre and intra-textuality suggests that the historical imagination of Urth is not only rich with the stuff of cultural histories but also with historiographic reflection and insight.

Space, landscape, star-scape and other topoi occupy a central place in science fiction and fantasy world creation; space is always place:

Science fiction, in making cognitive estrangement storyable, insists that the world be treated as a character ... some authors have successfully elevated place to the level of character.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond this, the maxims that "time and space are integral to one another"<sup>33</sup> and "landscape is time materialised"<sup>34</sup> apply to literary works as they do to anthropological and historical texts. Because of the way in which spatial metaphors are used to communicate temporal concepts and thus historical consciousness, the representation of space in *The Book* is a key indicator of the workings of time and conceptions of history on Urth. Wolfe, as a writer, is known for his baroque style and labyrinthine narratives<sup>35</sup> and his approach to the representation of space may be understood in similar terms. Accordingly, the forms of temporality in *The Book* are multiple and complex. Different

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<sup>31</sup> Lynn Hunt emphasises the new cultural history's approach to meaning and culture through language, texts and narrative in 'Literature, Criticism and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra,' in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 1989), 97-122.

<sup>32</sup> Farah Mendlesohn, 'Introduction: Reading Science Fiction,' in Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy Munn, 'The Cultural Anthropology of Time,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 94.

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Bender, 'Time and Landscape,' *Current Anthropology* 43 (2002): S103.

<sup>35</sup> *The Book* is filled with literal and figurative labyrinths. For discussions of Wolfe's use of labyrinths in *The Book* see Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 78-80. John Clute describes Urth as a "labyrinth of a library of a world". *Strokes*, 150.

forms of spatial order communicate different forms of temporality including linear and progressive, cyclical and mythic, and illogical and uncertain. Different understandings and experiences of place and landscape express different forms of historical consciousness.<sup>36</sup> Severian's narrative not only serves to remind the reader of the subjective dimension of landscape and time,<sup>37</sup> but also of the phenomenological interdependence of the two.

Linear, incremental time is familiar in spatial imagery of growth or accumulation.<sup>38</sup> In simple terms, that which is further away, below or buried is, literally and metaphorically, past. Wolfe draws attention to this association when Severian ponders the relationship between "underground places" and pastness: "What is it, I wonder, that has given so great a power to preserve the past to underground places."<sup>39</sup> As a corollary of the relationship between depth and temporality, processes of accumulation may communicate patterns such as ruin and decline or progress and enrichment with each new layer of a human development. Urth's history is revealed to Severian as linear time when he descends a cliff:

In Saltus ... the miners rape the soil of metals, building stones, and even artefacts laid down by civilizations forgotten for chiliads before the Wall of Nessus even rose. This they do by narrow shafts bored into the hillsides until they stroke some rich layer of ruins ... What was done with so much labour there might have been accomplished on the cliff I descended with none. The past stood at my shoulder, naked and defenceless as all dead things, as though it were time itself that had been laid open by the fall of the mountain. Fossil bones protruded from the surface in places ... The forest had set its own dead there also, stumps and limbs that time had turned to stone ... Deeper than this lay the buildings and mechanisms of humanity.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> There is an extensive literature on the relationship between landscape, temporality, memory and historical consciousness drawing on anthropological and historical understandings. For brief, general discussions from the field of anthropology, see Munn, 'The Cultural Anthropology of Time,' 93-103; Bender, 'Time and Landscape.' Within the discipline of history, Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995) is probably the most extensive account of landscape, memory, history and historical understanding in the Western tradition.

<sup>37</sup> The idea that "Landscapes and time can never be "out there"; they are always subjective" is a statement of the foundational phenomenological principles of the new cultural studies and is akin to assertions such as 'space is always place' and world is always worldview. Bender, 'Time and Landscape,' S103.

<sup>38</sup> "Varied ethnographic accounts since the 1970s give substantial evidence of the widespread view of long term time as an incremental process, often conveyed in organic images of "continuous and progressive growth, or in ancestral, creative place-to-place travel involving increasing extension from an origin place." Munn, 'The Cultural Anthropology of Time,' 102.

<sup>39</sup> Gene Wolfe, *The Citadel of the Autarch: Volume Four of 'The Book of the New Sun'* (New York: Timescape, 1983), 322 (hereafter cited in text as *Citadel*).

<sup>40</sup> Gene Wolfe, *The Sword of the Lictor: Volume Three of 'The Book of the New Sun'* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 87-88 (hereafter cited in text as *Sword*).

The cliff face reveals a cumulative, linear temporal order in which objects located further down belong to the more distant past. Severian's description of his descent, however, works to undermine familiar temporal patterns, as it suggests neither evolutionary progress nor decline, but utilises an inversion to reveal Urth's antiquity, where the "buildings and mechanisms of humanity" are to be found deeper than fossilised bones and trees.

Severian's early experiences are also of spaces which communicate a logical sense of temporal order. At first, Urth is an incomplete world that is neither vast nor sublime, but shadowy and parochial; Severian's knowledge of his wider surroundings is limited. The closed and incomplete nature of Severian's experience and his world at this time is symbolised by the walled spaces of the necropolis, Citadel and city: the action in the first volume takes place entirely within the space of the walled city of Nessus. Beyond the wall, the landscape of Urth unfolds as Severian journeys from the bounded and limited world of his youth to the hidden, yet powerful world of the Autarch. The spatial ordering of the necropolis, Citadel, and city suggests concentric circles of experience, the widening of the individual worldview and movement from the particular to the universal. Yet an overarching cyclical order is reinforced with Severian's return to the Citadel and the places of his youth as Autarch at the close of the tetralogy.

There is thus tension between the evolution of the individual, Severian, from torturer to Autarch,<sup>41</sup> and the cyclicity implicit in the spatial and narrative construction of his journey. In temporal terms, this corresponds to tension between history as non-repeatable action and myth as repetitive and cyclical movement. The Citadel is not only both beginning and end of a narrative cycle, it is also a place proximate to mythic rather than historical being and consciousness. The necropolis is probably the most mythic space in *The Book*; it suggests natural, seasonal or cyclical time and is described in terms of death and rebirth. Severian states that

The necropolis has never seemed a city of death to me; I know its purple roses (which people think so hideous) shelter hundreds of smaller animals and birds ... When I think of my own death, or of the death of someone who has been kind to me, or even of the death of the sun, the image that comes to

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<sup>41</sup> Joan Gordon discusses Severian's evolution as a character, in particular his individual, moral development, in *Gene Wolfe*, 80-82.

mind is that of the nenuphar, with its glossy, pale leaves and azure flower.  
(*Shadow*, 14)

It is also here that Severian appears in his more archetypal form, associated with the symbols in the mausoleum: the rose, the boat and the fountain. It becomes clear, at the end of his journey, that the mausoleum and funeral bronze are, in fact, his own, or at least those of an earlier version of 'Severian'. In learning of the 'secret history of Time', Severian comes to realise that his life mirrors, yet differs from, that of earlier figures, versions of himself who failed in the final attempt to bring about the New Sun and thus ensure the continued existence of life on Urth:

Two things are clear to me. The first is that I am not the first Severian ... The second thing is this. He was not returned to his own time but became instead a walker of the corridors [of Time]. ... I know too in whose mausoleum I tarried as a child, that little building of stone with its rose, its fountain and its flying ship all graven. I have disturbed my own tomb and now I go to lie in it. (*Citadel*, 321)

Severian's identity as an actor in an elaborate cosmic drama 'orchestrated' by the Hierogrammates and their servants is an extension of the theme of human existence between the mythic, eternal and universal and the historical, changing and individual.

The necropolis not only houses the tombs of past Severians, it is also the site of a symbolic re-birth in the form of a 'resurrection'. In the first chapter of *The Book*, Severian is witness to the exhumation of a mysterious woman by the followers of the rebel Vodalus. The exhumation is the first of many episodes of persons being raised from the dead or from a place of death – below water or below ground – in *The Book*. While the resurrection may be read as symbolic re-birth, Wolfe clearly places re-birth in opposition to the idea of birth, new life or creation. The necropolis does not unify death and life, it unifies death and life created from death. Reproduction, life created from life, is notably absent. This distinction is critical because reproduction and resurrection are not equivalent processes. The significance of infertility is highlighted in the figure of the Autarch, who is androgynous but infertile, and in the Atrium of Time. In the cold and empty Atrium of Time Severian encounters Valeria who states "I am all the sisters we breed ... and all the sons." (*Shadow*, 33) The duality of the necropolis is thus a mythic but non-dialectic and non-productive duality. Its opposite is history and it is in Severian as an individual whose life differs from any former 'selves' that the possibility of lived and living history resides.

Aligned with the idea of the dying sun is the suggestion that human existence on Urth is in an entropic state characterised by such barbaric and cruel social forms as torture. Jonas comments on history as a sorry record of the barbarity of Urth's past and notes the endurance of such forms into Severian's time:

“I used to read, aboard ship. Once I read a history. I don't suppose you know anything about it. So many chiliads have elapsed here.... So different from this, but so much like it, too. Queer little customs and usages ... some that weren't so little. Strange institutions ... Hereditary rulers and hereditary subordinates, and all sorts of strange officials. ... It became ingrained. It all endured too long. The people didn't know.” (*Claw*, 118)

Cyclical temporality and patterns of recurrence serve to heighten the sense of a world trapped in an enduring state of barbarism. As the Autarch explains: “Until the New Sun comes ... we have but a choice of evils ... We hold humankind stationary ... in barbarism.” (*Citadel*, 239) There is, however, productive conflict embodied in Severian's return to the Citadel as Autarch between the continuation of the cyclical and barbaric pattern of existence and a historical process, driven by the individual, which departs from this pattern. Severian's transformation from a torturer dutiful to the rituals and patterns of the guild to an Autarch who enacts reforms to bring an end to the practice of torture is a process which runs counter to the entropic forces of barbarism and unquestioned precedent.<sup>42</sup> These acts pre-figure events in *The Urth of the New Sun* in which Severian, unlike the previous Autarch, does not fail the Hierogrammates' test and lose his fertility. Severian is thus able to break the cycle of barbarism and infertility, effectively liberating Urth from entropy with the creation of the New Sun.

*The Book* contains additional reflections on the nature of time, myth and history which are markers of historiographic metafiction<sup>43</sup> and which present challenges to conventional understandings of temporal order and historical existence. Overall, Urth is a world in which time and space, rather than being clearly linear or cyclical, are “anarchical, disconnected and misaligned rather than linear, evolutionary or intentional”.<sup>44</sup> During his journey, Severian repeatedly encounters spaces that are

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<sup>42</sup> As Autarch, Severian decides to bring an end to the Guild of Torturers: “it is intolerable that good men should spend a lifetime dispensing pain ... we have decided it should not be done at all.” (*Citadel*, 275)

<sup>43</sup> See ch. 1, fn. 148.

<sup>44</sup> This apt description of spatial and temporal order in *The Book* is drawn from Pauline Marie Rosenau's account of the skeptical postmodernists' views of time. *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 68. Cf. Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 76-77.

deceptive or uncanny. The boundaries that separate spaces and, by inference, times, are fluid, permeable and irrational.

There are spatial and temporal puzzles throughout the tetralogy, and Severian encounters his first in the hidden spaces of the Citadel. The Library is a dark and cave-like space associated with death, blindness and the past:

Again I seemed to hear bronze, and quite suddenly I felt that he and I were dead, and that the darkness surrounding us was grave soil pressing in about our eyes ... The livid woman I had seen dragged from her grave rose before me so vividly that I seemed to see her face in the almost luminous whiteness of the figure who spoke. (*Shadow*, 40)

Here Severian finds Ultan, the Chief Librarian, who explains that the Citadel is not distant or divided from the city of Nessus or from that mysterious place of rumour and legend, the House Absolute, residence of the Autarch:

“The closest, for we are they. This library is the city library, and the library of the House Absolute for that matter. And many others.”

“Do you mean that the rabble of the city is permitted to enter the Citadel and use your library?”

“No,” said Ultan. “I mean the library itself extends beyond the walls of the Citadel. Nor, I think, is it the only institution here that does so. It is thus that the contents of our fortress are so much larger than their container.” (*Shadow*, 43)

The walls which delineate space so clearly to define Severian’s experience, and also his identity (“for we are they”), are conspicuously absent in the library, where the rows of books appear to have no end:

“Do you apprehend any termination to this aisle?” “No, sieur,” I said, and in fact I did not. As far as the candlelight flew there was only row upon row of books stretching from the floor to the high ceiling. (*Shadow*, 43)

Among the most striking examples of uncanny temporal and spatial organisation in *The Book*, which is also significant in terms of the historical imagination, is The Botanic Gardens in the City of Nessus. From outside the Gardens appear to be a large domed glass building, but from inside each garden occupies limitless space. Severian later realises that on entering a garden the visitor is transported to a distant time and place. (*Citadel*, 257) The Gardens are thus a controlled form of time travel through which visitors may step into past or future space-times.

The Botanic Gardens are a museum of natural history, containing multiple, thematically organised gardens or “bioscapes”. (*Shadow*, 147) As a museum space, the Gardens represent the systematic organisation of nature and the past for purposes associated with public, collective memory and knowledge. The Gardens are, like a museum, indicative of collective, and probably normative, approaches to time and history.<sup>45</sup> More specifically, the Gardens appear to be of the type that Stephen Bann refers to as “synecdoche”.<sup>46</sup> Tracing the shift from Classical to Romantic historical paradigms in the construction of Museum spaces, Bann notes a transition from mechanistically organised spaces to spaces that attempt to convey the past as organic totality.<sup>47</sup> The latter uses objects from the past to construct an integrated historical totality, such as a reconstructed room which creates the illusion of being immersed in the past. The Gardens are, however, actually of the more modern sort that Bann labels “ironic”: the ironic museum oscillates between metonymic (rooms organised according to century, monarch etc.) and synecdoche (rooms as reconstructions), each form undermining the logic of the other.<sup>48</sup>

The effect of the ironic construction of the Botanic Gardens is enhanced by the suggestion that the individual Gardens are not reconstructions presenting the illusion of historical totality, but the actual historical past made accessible through the technology of time travel. Wolfe’s use of irony here works to interrogate the ideal of the past and history as organic totality. Beyond this, Wolfe raises questions about the effect of the Garden’s ironic construction on the historical consciousness of individuals and the collective. Little historical understanding is imparted to visitors of the Gardens. The Gardens have an enchanting effect on the consciousness of the visitor, whose sense of connection to the temporal and spatial location from which he originated is gradually eroded. Visitors appear to be easily lost, even trapped, in this uncanny labyrinth, and

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<sup>45</sup> Francois Hartog, drawing on Foucault, would refer to them as a sign of a particular “regime of historicity”: the way in which historicity (or the human condition of being in time) is dealt understood and communicated by a society or collective. Francois Hartog, ‘Time and Heritage,’ *Museum International* 57:3 (2005): 7-18.

<sup>46</sup> See Stephen Bann, ‘Poetics of the Museum: Lenoir and Du Sommerard,’ in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 65-84.

<sup>47</sup> Bann ‘Poetics of the Museum,’ 74-75. Note that Bann also draws on Foucault and Hayden White to analyse the workings of museum spaces in creating historical effects, thus locating his work within contemporary historiographical debates surrounding the representation of the past.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.



Severian finds himself struggling to leave the strangely appealing Garden of Sand where he notices a bush covered with black, claw-like thorns. (*Shadow*, 148) The Sand Garden is the very beach on which he finds himself, and the shrub of claws, in the final volume of *The Book*. (*Citadel*, 256) Sand is itself a landscape that communicates unbounded time.<sup>49</sup> The Garden of Sand is a symbol of the infinite and eternal. It is compelling, appealing and powerful, yet not compatible with conscious thought and independent individual human existence in historical space and time.

Despite their ordered form, the Gardens fail to successfully contain and separate distinct spaces and times. The Gardens' curator enthusiastically encourages Severian to visit the Garden of Antiquities:

“You should! If this is your first visit, I would advise you to begin with the Garden of Antiquities. Hundreds and hundreds of extinct plants, including some which have not been seen for tens of millions of years.”

Agia said, “That purple creeper you're so proud of – I met it growing wild on the hillside of Cobblers Common.”

The curator shook his head sadly. “We lost spores, I'm afraid. We know about it ... A roof pane broke, and they blew away.” (*Shadow*, 148)

The extinct, rare, and antique quality of the creeper is lost as it finds its way into the “Common” present. The curator, who is aware of this, still presents the illusion of the Garden of Antiquities. Here Wolfe points to the ways in which a society may develop and maintain ways of relating to the past as dead things which are contained in distinct periods of time. Outside of the Gardens, the reality of the wild, unbounded past-that-is-present draws attention to the Garden as a vehicle for the containment and ordering of historical consciousness.

Just as place is always space and time – and thus always meaningful in terms of the historical imagination – objects in fantasy are always historical artefacts. As in most fantasy, relics play a significant role in *The Book*. These do not, however, have the more straightforward significance of artefacts in genre fantasy. Severian carries with him two items which could be the standard issue relics for any fantasy hero: a great sword and a magical gem. Such objects in *The Book* are of the types normally found in popular fantasy but their nature is mutable and their meaning indeterminate. Throughout *The Book*, Wolfe's persistently draws attention to the ways in which objects are given

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<sup>49</sup> Bender, ‘Time and Landscape,’ S103.

significance or become signs for the characters within the text and to the ways in which characters interpret and respond to these signs.

The most important artefact in *The Book* is the Claw of the Conciliator, a gem which comes into Severian's possession and which shapes his journey as he attempts to return it to its rightful place with an order of priestesses, the Pelerines, for whom it has religious significance. According to the Pelerines' belief, the Claw is the "most valuable relic in existence", (*Shadow* 143) having belonged to the Conciliator, a saviour figure, and thus having powers including the ability to heal the infirm and return the dead to life. On several occasions, Severian appears to use the Claw to bring the dead to life, and he gradually comes to believe in the Claw's power. Regardless of Severian's belief, the nature of the Claw's power remains uncertain; it may have no power at all, its power may be over time,<sup>50</sup> or its power may lie not in the object but in its bearer.<sup>51</sup>

The greatest revelation about the nature of the Claw comes in the fourth volume of *The Book* when the gem is shattered and revealed to be encasing a black, claw-like thorn. There is irony in the revelation that the gem, somewhat misleadingly referred to as "the Claw", appears to be, quite literally, a claw: it is exactly what its name suggests. This appearance is, however, also misleading; Severian finally discovers that the claw is a claw-like thorn found in nature. Severian returns the sacred relic to the Pelerines, but later, wandering on a beach, he finds it again:

A thorn caught my forearm and broke from its branch ... I plucked it out – then fell to my knees.

It was the Claw

The Claw perfect, shining black, just as I had placed it under the alter stone of the Pelerines. All that bush and all the other bushes growing with it were covered with white blossoms and these perfect Claws. The one in my palm flamed with transplendent light as I looked at it ... It was only when I had thus put it away that I recalled seeing just such a bush in the Botanic Gardens at the beginning of my journey. (*Citadel*, 257)

Severian realises that the power and sacred significance that he thought resided within the Claw resides in all things:

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<sup>50</sup> Dorcas suggests that the Claw manipulates time in a similar manner to the way Father Inire's mirrors manipulate distance. (*Citadel*, 20)

<sup>51</sup> Severian ponders whether the Claw's power has its origins externally or within him. (*Citadel*, 282-283)

The thorn was a sacred Claw because all thorns were sacred Claws; the sand in my shoes was sacred sand because it came from a beach of sacred sand ... Everything had approached and even touched the Pancreator, because everything had dropped from his hand. Everything was a relic. All the world was a relic. (*Citadel*, 257)

This passage appears to support the model of interpretation adopted by Gordon, Malekin and Witcover<sup>52</sup> that finds the “transubstantial” (*Shadow*, 233) or higher meaning of *The Book* in a religious philosophy which identifies the divine in all of creation: the world and human beings are the creation of God (or the Pancreator), thus all beings and all things are sacred. Wolfe’s multi-layered, ironic approach to meaning, however, suggests that there is an alternative reading of the Claw: all beings and things are given transubstantial or eternal meaning and significance by human beings. The divine is a quality granted to things by humanity, rather than an innate quality of things granted by God. Further, while human beings are creators of signs, they are in turn shaped by their own creations:

We believe that we invent symbols, the truth is that they invent us; we are their creations, shaped by their hard defining edges. (*Shadow*, 8)

The phrase “hard defining edges” suggests that Severian is referring directly to the Claw. Thus human beings shape and are shaped by their own creations: beautiful, multi-faceted, crystalline structures which encase the most ubiquitous and ordinary of things.

Wolfe offers further critical reflection on the way in which human beings might shape and in turn be shaped by their own symbols. Severian himself comments, of the Claw after its gem encasement is shattered,

Whenever I looked at it, it seemed to erase thought. Not as wine and certain drugs do, by rendering the mind unfit for it, but by replacing it with a higher state for which I know no name. Again and again I felt myself enter this state, rising always higher until I feared I should never return to the mode of consciousness I call normality; and again and again I tore myself from it. (*Sword*, 254)

Like *The Garden of Sand*, the Claw is a symbol of the infinite, eternal and divine. In *The Book*, Wolfe does not directly challenge the existence or reality of such things; he does, however, offer a critical approach to the human response to transcendental meaning. Like the secret history of Time, the (un)consciousness of the Claw denies human expression. Severian finds the state of mind that erases thought is followed by

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<sup>52</sup> See Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 92; Malekin, ‘Remembering the Future,’ 53-54; Witcover, ‘Gene Wolfe’s Strange Travels,’ 4.

unquestioning, slavish obedience to an unknown higher power. The reader is reminded of the frightening and dehumanising potential of such submission later in the figures of the Ascian soldiers. It is thus no coincidence that Wolfe uses the metaphor of a battle to describe Severian's engagement with the Claw:

At least, after a series of these bold advances and fearful retreats, I came to understand that I should never reach any real knowledge of the tiny thing I held, and with that thought (and it was a thought) came a third state, one of happy obedience to I knew not what, an obedience without reflection because there was no longer anything to reflect upon, and without the least tincture of rebellion. (*Sword*, 254)

Wolfe's suggestion that, through defamiliarisation, the reader should approach story and symbol, however compelling, with a critical eye is supported in the following passage. Severian interrupts his narration to address the reader: "here I pause, having carried you, reader, from fortress to fortress". (*Sword*, 254) The reader is subtly reminded, again, of the potential of symbol, stories and words to enamour, encircle and entrap.

Like Tolkien and other fantasy authors, Wolfe's writing demonstrates his fascination with the most fundamental cultural meaning-making systems: language and naming. Tolkien's reply to a letter from Wolfe regarding the etymology of words and names in *Lord of the Rings* evidences not only Wolfe's own fascination with words, but Tolkien's dual awareness of the actual and fictional historicity of language.

7th November 1966

Dear Mr Wolfe,

Thank you very much for your letter. The etymology of words and names in my story has two sides: (1) their etymology within the story; and (2) the sources from which I, as an author, derive them. I expect you mean the latter ...

Yours Sincerely

J.R.R. Tolkien<sup>53</sup>

Wolfe feigns linguistic history almost as artfully as the philologist and, like Tolkien, he frames his text with authorial comments on language and translation.

Neologisms are associated more frequently with science fiction than with fantasy, with the notable exception of the Elven tongue in Tolkien's works. The word itself –

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<sup>53</sup> See Gene Wolfe, 'The Best Introduction to the Mountains' (online source). <http://home.clara.net/andywrobertson/wolfemountains.html>

“neologism” – has futuristic connotations, but is potentially misleading because even the most alienating of ‘new’ languages are constructed from existing linguistic history.<sup>54</sup> The translation of existing linguistic history into feigned linguistic history is, however, not a straightforward process. Forms of language are highly indicative of both social order and historical consciousness.<sup>55</sup> The language in *The Book* draws on existing linguistic history, describes elements of the cultural-social and political milieu, acts as a meta-fictional device and contains within it the shapes of different forms of historical consciousness. All of the names used in *The Book* may be traced to some source outside of Wolfe’s fictional Urth and are largely drawn from world myth, legend, literature and history. Wolfe states that none of the names are “invented”<sup>56</sup> and, in typically cryptic fashion, advises readers that “everything is just what it says it is”.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the definitions and etymology of the words and names that Wolfe uses can be found in dictionaries or encyclopaedias.<sup>58</sup> In his editorial comment on the “translation” of *The Book*, however, Wolfe notes that many of the words in the text are intended to be suggestive, rather than definitive.<sup>59</sup> Things may indeed be what they say they are, but their meaning is a different matter. While Wolfe shares Tolkien’s love of language, he does not share the traditional philological approach to meaning and history, instead displaying a far more ambivalent and ironic posture.

Fascination with ritual practices and the patterns of belief attached to them is another familiar feature of both science fiction and fantasy. Science fiction often draws on

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<sup>54</sup> See Gary Westfahl, ‘The Words that Could Happen: Science Fiction Neologisms and the Creation of Future Worlds,’ *Extrapolation* 34:4 (1993): 290-304.

<sup>55</sup> For example, languages are the defining and distinguishing elements of the races of Middle-earth and Tolkien’s linguistic system is closely tied to ethno-racial histories. Burgess’ ‘nasdat’ in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) divides futuristic British society into scientific establishment, pseudo-totalitarian state and youth sub-cultures and suggests a pastiche approach to language and the past. The language of the Golubchiks (ordinary Russians) in Tatyana Tolstaya’s post-communist dystopia *The Slynx* (2000) suggests broad cultural amnesia, a superficial, literal approach to meaning, and a culture dominated by greed and doomed to historical repetition and stagnation.

<sup>56</sup> Gene Wolfe, *Castle of Days* (New York: Tor Books, 1992), 252.

<sup>57</sup> Although he admits that some were ‘typos’ – typing errors. James Jordan, ‘Interview with Gene Wolfe’ (1996) (online source). <http://mysite.verizon.net/~vze2tmhh/wolfe/bj.html>.

<sup>58</sup> The lexicon of Michael Andrei-Druissi, who has traced most if not all of the “unfamiliar” words to their sources in world myth and literature, stands as testament to the breadth of Wolfe’s cosmogenic vocabulary: Michael Andre-Druissi, *Lexicon Urthus: A Dictionary for the Urth Cycle* (San Francisco: Sirius Fiction, 1994); *Additions, Errata, &cetera: Volume 1* (San Francisco: Sirius Fiction, 1995); *Additions, Errata, &cetera: Volume 2* (San Francisco: Sirius Fiction, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> Gene Wolfe, ‘Appendix: A Note on Translation,’ in *Shadow*, 261.

anthropology and has a tradition of focusing on the exotic and on ritual.<sup>60</sup> The detail of Wolfe's descriptions of ritualised processes suggests a heightened awareness of the role of ritual in culture. Ritual constitutes culture on the level of human behaviour and practice and meaning on the level of action and interaction. There are numerous rites and practices associated with the Guild of Torturers to which Severian belongs. Initially, Severian places much significance on the practices and mysteries of the Guild. The rituals and Holy Feast days associated with the various Guilds are the keys to Severian's understanding of their identities. Severian's own expulsion from the Guild of Torturers and his gradual rejection of the ritualised practices of torture mark his increasing self-consciousness of the identity-giving function of ritual. Wolfe draws particular attention to the disjunction between ritualised practice and actuality in Severian's description of his ascension to the Autarchy. Engulfed by the forms and voices of ritual, Severian remarks: "at that moment, surrounded by the most meaningful and magnificent symbolism, I could not but think how different the actuality had been." (*Citadel*, 229) Despite the interventions and machinations of multiple, powerful forces – human and alien – the moments surrounding Severian's becoming Autarch are violent, chaotic and conditional. Once established as Autarch, Severian appears to have little patience for the artifice and ritual surrounding the position. In a moment of metafictional musing on his own story, Severian considers his return to the Citadel as Autarch as a comic conclusion to an otherwise epic tale:

I have striven to set down the unembellished truth here, without the least worry that you, my reader, would find some parts improbable, even insipid; and if the mountain war was the scene of high deeds (belonging more to others than to me), and my imprisonment by Vodalus and the Ascians a time of horror, and my passage on the *Samru* an interval of tragedy, then we are come to the interval of comedy. (*Citadel*, 270)

Such reflections on the unfolding narrative are common in *The Book*. In addition to Severian's own story, the book contains several other books and narratives, or "embedded stories",<sup>61</sup> that draw attention to the nature, forms and workings of narrative. Severian carries with him a book, *The Brown Book*, which he originally obtains for Thecla from the Library in the Citadel. *The Brown Book* is titled *The Book of Wonders of Urth and Sky* being a collection of "familiar legends of ancient times". (*Shadow*, 48)

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<sup>60</sup> Farah Mendlesohn, 'Religion and Science Fiction,' in James and Mendlesohn, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, 265.

<sup>61</sup> See Gordon's discussion of the function of embedded narratives in *The Book*. *Gene Wolfe*, 79-80.

The irony is, of course, that these stories are not familiar to Severian or to readers of Wolfe's work (who are, according to the temporal location of Urth in relation to earth, more ancient than ancient). It requires some reflection for readers to recognise that these stories are not only familiar, but also tales drawn from a range of world literatures. The subtitle of *The Brown Book* draws attention to familiarity and the working of processes of defamiliarisation. It also suggests that such processes are temporal as well as spatial; in other words, ancient tales will be familiar to ancient persons in ancient times, medieval tales familiar to medieval persons in medieval times and so on.

*The Brown Book* and the legends recounted within it reflect upon Wolfe's use of myth and legend in the creation of Urth. Other narratives within the text include stories derived from Thecla's memory which are incorporated into Severian's own consciousness and four stories recounted by convalescent soldiers of different cultural backgrounds in a wartime infirmary. The soldiers' personal and parochial tales, rooted and richly expressed in the languages and cultures of their divergent backgrounds, are juxtaposed against the epic events in the final volume of *The Book*. When Severian returns from 'The Last House', where he discusses the mysteries of time and the future of Urth with Master Ash, he finds his companions dead and dying. He promises to the dying Foila that he will record the stories and does so, as part of his own history which he intends to entitle *The Book of the New Sun*.

Embedded stories such as those of the soldiers act to counter the mythic, trans-historical elements of Severian's own story and to emphasise the contradictory nature of stories and histories: they are located, culturally specific and discrete at the same time as they speak to the common creative spirit of humankind. In the context of the soldiers' tales, Wolfe, through Severian, reflects openly on the particular and human nature of stories. He recognises storytelling as humanity's creation, commenting that "Indeed, it often seems to me that of all the good things in the world, the only ones humanity can claim for itself are stories and music." (*Citadel*, 83) After listening to the tale of the Ascian – a soldier who speaks solely in the ideological aphorisms of the totalitarian enemies of the Commonwealth – Severian concludes that, even while much of our speech and writing consists of "set locutions", the creative and expressive spirit of language might transcend even the most reductive and restrictive of regimes:

“The people of Ascia were reduced to speaking only with their master’s voice; but they had made of it a new tongue, and I had no doubt, after hearing the Ascian, that by it he could express whatever thought he wished.”  
(*Citadel*, 84)

In the course of *The Book* Severian reflects not only on the story-telling of others, but also on his own writing. Severian interrupts his autobiography on several occasions to address his readers and comment on the writing process. He reflects:

I have noticed that in books this sort of stalemate never seems to occur; the authors are so anxious to move their stories forward ... that there are no such misunderstanding, no refusals to negotiate ... In life it is not the same.  
(*Sword*, 20-21)

Here Severian suggests that reading, like life, is an active process of engagement and negotiation. Later, he addresses his reader as an individual from Urth/earth’s past, commenting on the necessity of including and excluding certain events from any narrative:

Allow me to pause here and speak to you as one mind to another, though we are separated, perhaps, by the abyss of aeons. ... I will pass over many things. (*Claw*, 36)

In addition to such reflective commentary on writing and narrative, *The Book* contains a proliferation of theatrical symbols, including masks, costumes, plays, acting and puppetry. Severian himself wears the habit of his guild, a mask and cloak. This clothing is sometimes mistaken for costume by others.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, numerous characters in *The Book* are actors or assume the roles of actors. In the House Azure, a brothel in Nessus, Severian encounters women who resemble and take on the identities of the small circle of exultant women from the House Absolute, including Thecla and her sister, Thea. Severian and Dorcas both perform in the play composed by Doctor Talos entitled ‘Eschatology and Genesis’. The play is described as “a dramatisation of certain parts of the lost Book of the New Sun”. (*Claw*, 179) ‘The Book of the New Sun’ is also the title which Severian chooses to give his own work. There are thus multiple Books of the New Sun: Wolfe’s tetralogy, the book Severian despatches to Ultan’s library, a “lost Book of the New Sun” which, given the possibility of time travel may have been written by Severian, or by an earlier Severian, or not at all, and Dr Talos’ theatrical version.

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<sup>62</sup> In Nessus, Severian is challenged by guards who tell him that “it is a serious crime to wear the costume you affect.” (*Shadow*, 109) Severian wears the habit of his guild to a costume event in Thrax, assuming that most guests will take it to be a costume. *Sword*, 30-31.



Severian is an actor in the context of Dr Talos' play and is also described as an actor by the hierodules, who refer to themselves as a *deus ex machina*,<sup>63</sup> in the moments surrounding Severian's ascension to Autarch:

“No. We are almost what you think us – powers from above the stage. Only not quite deities. You are an actor, I believe.”

“Yet you are an actor too, you have as much right to think of yourself in that way as the other.” (*Citadel*, 246)

Severian is thus identified as an actor within *The Book* which is accordingly identified as a piece of theatre. The existence, however, of multiple versions of *The Book* with different and unknown authors – Dr Talos (or Baldanders?), the Hierodules, past Severians – draws attention to the most important story, not the tale/s in which Severian acts, but the one of which he is author.

Symbols of the theatre have been noted by critics as the keys to understanding the meaning of *The Book*.<sup>64</sup> This is not surprising, given the proximity of the theatrical and the cosmological in Wolfe's work. Robert Borski writes “I also believe that no other plot element is more important to an understanding of the New Sun's narrative and thematic crux than the stripping away of these masks and revealing of what is underneath.”<sup>65</sup> Many characters in the text appear masked: when Severian first encounters Agilus he wears a mask that appears to Severian to be the face of a dead man; the mask foreshadow Agilus' own death. (*Shadow*, 127) The human-alien beings, Hierodules or cacogens, that Severian first encounters in the House Absolute wear human faces which, when removed, reveal horrors with circular mouths lined with pointed teeth. (*Claw*, 202) These are, however, also masks, donned to conceal more divinely inhuman faces. The repeated symbolism of masquerades and acting serves to emphasise that meaning has multiple layers and indicates a thematic concern with perception, deception and the multifaceted nature of truth. Accordingly, theatre does not provide a master key to the interpretation of Urth. It is not a simple matter of removing a mask to uncover a hidden truth, as the foreshadowing revealed by Agilus' death mask suggests. Masking does not indicate deception and the concealment of truth, for a mask

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<sup>63</sup> “As an actor, Severian, you surely know the phrase I hinted at a moment ago. It refers to some supernatural force, personified, and brought onto stage in the last act in order that the play may end well.” (*Citadel*, 246)

<sup>64</sup> See Wright, ‘God Games,’ 14-15; Robert Borski, ‘Masks of the Father: Paternity in Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*,’ *New York Review of Science Fiction* 138 (2000): 1.

<sup>65</sup> Borski, ‘Masks of the Father,’ 1.

may conceal or reveal a truth. Wolfe's narrative works simultaneously for and against a reading of the theatrical as falsity or artifice. Costume and performance, like ritual, are cultural practices which constitute meaning on the level of human action and interaction. It is thus possible to read Wolfe's representations of theatre, masking and costume as explorations of cultural meaning and practice rather than as straightforward epistemological or ontological statements.

The significance of the theatrical structures and forms in *The Book* lies less in the analogies between Severian's narrative and the biblical and theatrical, but in the distance and difference between these forms. While Dr Talos, who is not a human but a mechanical servant to the alien and hideously cruel giant Baldanders, composes a play – 'Eschatology and Genesis' – Severian composes a work of history – *The Book of the New Sun*. Severian spends some time reflecting on problems implicit in writing history:

If I were writing this history to entertain or even to instruct, I would not digress here to discuss Master Malrubius, who must, at the moment that I thrust away the Claw, have been dust for long years. But in history, as in other things, there are necessities and necessities. I know little of literary style; but I have learned as I have progressed, and find this art not so much different from my old one [torturer] as might be thought. (*Shadow*, 240-241)

In addition to commenting on the purpose of writing and the problems of selection, inclusion and exclusion, Severian also considers the demands of style and convention as well as the demands and expectations that readers bring to the process of reading itself:

In just this way the contending parties of tradition pull at the writers of history. Yes, even at Autarchs. One desires ease; the other, richness of experience in the execution ... of the writing. (*Shadow*, 242)

Similarly you ... will require of me no long delays; personages who are permitted to speak only briefly, but do it well; certain dramatic pauses which shall signal to you that something of import is about to occur; excitement; and a sating quantity of blood. (*Shadow*, 241)

These comments suggest that Severian understands history, like writing, as an act of reflection, interaction and interpretive negotiation. This stands in direct contrasts to the forms of theatre and myth which, in *The Book*, are instead dominated by manipulation, obfuscation, deception and even violence. In fact, Severian encounters much violence during staged or theatrical performances including his dual with Agilus on the Sanguinary Fields, the performance of Dr Talos' play which ends in chaos when Baldanders attacks the crowd, the battle at the castle, and the events surrounding Severian's ascension to the Autarchy.

If there is truth and meaning to be found in *The Book*, then it is not of the sort revealed through myth, theatre or drama. Severian refers to *The Book* as a work of history and, read as a work of feigned history, *The Book* adopts the underlying assumptions and approach of the new cultural history. In short, historical writing of this sort emphasises human cultural activities and creations as complex meaning-making processes. Such histories concern themselves less with universal truths than with the imperfect human truth of history found in the restless but free movement between the universal and the particular, the eternal and the temporal.

## Chapter 9 – The Paradoxes of Post-history:

### Memory and Amnesia in the Post-Historical World

Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* is, in summary, an autobiographical history composed by a post-historical being who stands at, or beyond, the end of history. The reader's sense of Urth as a post-historical world is, paradoxically, a product of both Severian's prodigious memory and Urth's deep history. Severian's memory which, he claims, "in the final accounting loses nothing"<sup>1</sup> acts, ironically, as an impediment to his historical awareness. Beyond this, Urth is so deeply historical, so densely layered in the accretions of time, that its inhabitants, living "awash in ancientness",<sup>2</sup> struggle to grasp any historical awareness of themselves and their world. In short, Severian lacks historical consciousness and Urth lacks historicity.

*The Book's* implicit concern with historical consciousness, and its lack, is apparent in Severian's first person narrative which is primarily an account of memories and processes of remembering. Severian's narration foregrounds the problems of historical experience and consciousness through the bifocal lens of memory and amnesia. Indeed, memory and its twin, amnesia, are themes which dominate the tetralogy. Severian's claim to remember everything, made in the opening pages of the text, provides the reader with only superficial access to his, and Urth's, pasts. Severian is an "unreliable narrator"<sup>3</sup> whose accounts not only highlight problems of meaning and interpretation but also of historical consciousness. Moreover, the nature of Urth as a post-historical world and the forms and workings of memory and forgetting presented in *The Book* may be read in terms of contemporary historiography and, more specifically, in relation to concerns and possibilities surrounding the end of history and the paradoxical resurgence of memory in cultures of amnesia.

On post-historical Urth *The Brown Book*, a written record of legends of ancient times, which Severian carries with him, is an unusual treasure. On his first journey into the

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<sup>1</sup> Gene Wolfe, *The Shadow of the Torturer: Volume One of 'The Book of the New Sun'* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 2 (hereafter cited in text as *Shadow*).

<sup>2</sup> John Clute, *Strokes: Essays and Reviews, 1966-1986* (Seattle, Wash: Serconia Press, 1988), 150.

<sup>3</sup> See ch. 7, fn. 116.

Library of the Citadel, Ultan the curator provides Severian with *The Brown Book* to take to Thecla. Ultan discusses one of the most fascinating stories in *The Brown Book*, ‘The Legend of the Historians’:

But *Wonders of Urth and Sky* was a standard work, three or four hundred years ago. It relates most of the familiar legends of ancient times. To me the most interesting is that of the Historians, which tells of a time in which every legend could be traced to half forgotten fact. You see the paradox I assume. Did that legend itself exist at that time? If not, how came it into existence?

For Ultan, the idea that legend could be traced to fact is impossible. How can something be at once both legend and fact? Ultan’s comments suggest that, in terms of historiography, Urth is a post-historical world, in which the existence of and connection between the past as real and history as representations of the past has long since dissipated.

Post-history describes a number of connected ideas relating to the state of history as a discipline and historical consciousness as a broader socio-political and cultural phenomenon in the decades since the 1970s and in the context of global socio-political transformations and theoretical developments in the humanities and social sciences. The term itself – ‘post-history’ – is menacing for historians as it directly challenges the discipline of history – its meaning, its purposes and its status in the contemporary world. My interest here is less in the status of history, the discipline, and more on contemporary, and specifically postmodern, implications for the historical imagination and the representation of (post)-historical consciousness.

The sense of having reached and moved beyond the ‘end of history’ is neither new, nor entirely the province of the postmodern imagination:

At the end of the Second World War Europe was a pile of ruins ... No one dared believe that the devastated continent could still have a future at all. As far as Europe was concerned it seemed as if its history had come to an end with an overwhelming act of self-destruction ... “this is what exists” noted Max Frisch in the spring of 1946, “the grass growing in the houses, the dandelions in the churches and suddenly one can imagine how it might all continue to grow, how a forest might creep over our cities, slowly, inexorably, thriving unaided by human hands, a silence of thistles and moss,

an earth without history, only the twittering of birds, spring summer and autumn, the breathing of years, which there is no one to count any more.”<sup>4</sup>

In Frisch’s image of post-war Europe as an earth without history, it is history as the material and spiritual progress of European civilisation that has come to an end. Frisch describes the end of history in terms of the decline of human culture and the return of nature; time is no longer “counted” and progressive, but returns to a cyclical pattern of seasons.

Simply stated, the imagination of the end of history always reveals an underlying conception of history and temporality which reflects the concerns of its own milieu. In Frisch’s lament, history is equated with civilisation or, more specifically, European civilisation and its material and spiritual progress. This sense of the end of history clearly reflects the immediate experience of post-war Europe in ruins. Similarly, Fukuyama’s account of the end of history in *The End of History and the Last Man*,<sup>5</sup> which describes history as a quasi-Hegelian dialectical progression towards the moral fulfilment of humanity, emerges in the context of the apparent ideological victory of liberal democracy over Soviet style communism at the end of the 1980s.

In the last two decades, understandings and theories of the postmodern have been closely associated with the end of history.<sup>6</sup> Theorists of postmodern culture and consciousness, despite holding divergent opinions on many issues, tend to agree that the postmodern condition is, following Lyotard, characterised by “incredulity towards meta-narratives”.<sup>7</sup> Thus the postmodern is situated after and in relation to the modern and the meta-narratives thought to have dominated modern consciousness. Vattimo explains that the postmodern condition is “no longer experienced within the framework

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<sup>4</sup> Max Frisch, *Sketchbook 1946-1949*, quoted in Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Civil War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 77-78.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: H. Hamilton, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Gianni Vattimo argues that the end of history is a core element of theories of postmodernity: “One of the most important points on which the descriptions of the postmodern agree – no matter how different they are from other points of view – is the consideration of postmodernity in terms of ‘the end of history.’” ‘The End of History,’ in Ingeborg Hoesterey, ed., *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 132. For a concise summary of the “End of History, Post-history or Post-histoire Movement”, see Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 62-65. See also Jane Caplan, ‘Postmodernism, Post-Structuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians,’ *Central European History* 22 (1989): 263.

<sup>7</sup> Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), quoted in Vattimo, ‘The End of History,’ 132.

of any one of the *metarécits* that used to explain and legitimate existence in previous epochs.”<sup>8</sup> History – as discipline and consciousness – is so intimately connected with modernity it is unsurprising that postmodern assessments of the modern have targeted it with particular vehemence.<sup>9</sup> In general, the postmodern era marks a turning away from hegemonic nineteenth-century (‘modern’ or ‘normal’)<sup>10</sup> philosophies of history, and particularly those which identify direction or patterns of meaning in history.<sup>11</sup>

If the *metarécits* that made it possible for us to think of history as a unitary course have been confuted, as Lyotard assumes, history itself has become impossible ... If we do not live in the framework of one or another *metarécit* then we no longer live historically – we have entered into a condition that already A.H. Gehlen had called *post-histoire*.<sup>12</sup>

There has been a shift, therefore, in the perception of the end of history understood as the end of civilisation, to the end of history perceived as the dissolution of the discourses defining civilisation and modernity.

Of course, the meta-narrative which proclaims the end of history as the end of meta-narratives is a paradox that dwells within most discussions of post-history. Theories of the end of history are likely to be meta-narratives tracing the path towards the end of meta-narratives. As Vattimo states: “the dissolution of the *metarécits* is itself a kind of *metarécit*”.<sup>13</sup> This is unremarkable, given the teleological fiction implicit in the idea of an ending.<sup>14</sup> Theorists of postmodernity and post-history, despite their disagreements, tend to concur that the current epoch is characterised by the rejection of modernity’s meta-narratives, an attitude of general suspicion towards fictions masquerading as facts, and thus the terminal point of modern history.<sup>15</sup> Reaching this point, however, depends on the articulation of a historical meta-narrative describing the shapes of modernity and the development of the postmodern condition.<sup>16</sup> The paradoxes on which theories of the

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<sup>8</sup> Vattimo, ‘The End of History,’ 132.

<sup>9</sup> On history, modernity and temporality see ch. 4, fn. 23.

<sup>10</sup> See ch. 1, fn. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Hayden White remains the key figure in the “narrative turn” in historiography. See, in particular, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and collected essays in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Vattimo, ‘The End of History,’ 133-134.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>14</sup> See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> Vattimo, ‘The End of History,’ 132.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

postmodern are based do not render these discussions of contemporary culture and consciousness meaningless. What is disappointing is the lack of reflection on the existence and workings of meta-narratives, particularly historical ones, in a world which may consciously eschew them, but which clearly retains them, and even seeks them out. Importantly, the interpretation of post-history as the end of meta-narrative history does not necessarily entail the end of history, but rather prompts its shift to paradigms with modern and pre-modern precedents, including the new cultural history, which reshapes history and historical consciousness to focus on texts, spaces, pluralities of meaning, and micro-narratives and seeks to retain self-reflexive awareness of its dependence on the present.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond these matters, while disciplinary history and historians have been facing the threat of disappearing in a puff of theory, societies and cultures have been struggling to come to terms with a massive shift in historical consciousness. For influential Marxist theorist of postmodern culture, Fredric Jameson, the characteristic feature of the culture of late capitalism is that the depthlessness of the “new culture of the image or simulacrum” results in “a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality”.<sup>18</sup> The culture of the simulacrum has “a momentous effect on historical time”<sup>19</sup> in that the distinction between past and present that history presupposes is obliterated and “time becomes a series of perpetual presents”.<sup>20</sup> According to Jameson, postmodern culture is dominated by the practice of pastiche – “the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture”<sup>21</sup> – which is “an

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<sup>17</sup> See Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*, 66.

<sup>18</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6. A “simulacrum” is a copy or reproduction of the real. Influential theorist of simulation and simulacra, Jean Baudrillard, posits three historical orders of simulacra where the simulacrum becomes progressively divorced from the real and assumes an autonomous status. In the postmodern context, a simulacrum usually refers to a copy that exists without any original. See Dan Smith, ‘Simulacrum,’ in Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winqvist, eds., *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 367-369; Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Precession of Simulacra,’ in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1-42.

<sup>19</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society,’ in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17.



alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.”<sup>22</sup>

Jameson’s understanding of postmodern consciousness – in which the empty space of an all embracing present displaces past-present-future and time – is reflected in other theories of postmodern historicity. Drawing on Jameson, David Harvey comments on the connection between the “loss of temporality” and depthlessness in postmodern culture.<sup>23</sup> French historian François Hartog reaches a similar conclusion about the postmodern “regime of historicity” which he describes as struggling for secure footing on the groundless space of the omnipresent present.<sup>24</sup> Hartog develops the concept of “regimes of historicity” in order to understand the shift in historical consciousness and expression associated with the epochal change from modernity to postmodernity.<sup>25</sup> Hartog describes a regime of historicity as “an expression of temporal experience”:<sup>26</sup>

regimes do not merely mark off time in a neutral fashion, but rather organise the past as a sequence of structures. It is a scholarly framing of the experience (*Erfahrung*) of time, which, in return, shapes our ways of speaking of and living through our own time. It opens up the possibility of and also circumscribes a space of working and thinking. It contributes a rhythm to the imprint of time, and it represents, as it were, an “order” of time, to which one may subscribe, or, on the contrary, and more often than not, try to evade, seeking to elaborate some alternative.<sup>27</sup>

Here Hartog understands the ‘end of history’ not in Fukuyama’s sense, but as the end of the modern regime of historicity associated with the future, progress and a singular, linear temporal trajectory.<sup>28</sup> The contemporary, post-1989 or postmodern regime of

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<sup>22</sup> Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society,’ 10. “In some way yet to be determined, a genuine historicity is possible only on the condition this illusion of an absolute present can be done away with, and the present opened up again to the drift from the other ends of time. This is, once again, why the work of art is, in this context, a privileged object of study.” Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 187.

<sup>23</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, England; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989), esp. 58-59.

<sup>24</sup> François Hartog, ‘Time, History and the Writing of History: The Order of Time,’ in Rolf Torstendahl and Irmline Veit-Brause, eds., *History-Making: The Intellectual and Social Formation of a Discipline: Proceedings of an International Conference, Uppsala, September 1994* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets, Historie och Antikvitets Akademien: Distributed by Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1996), 110-111.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-100.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> According to the modern regime of historicity, “History is understood as a process and Time itself as moving to an end (progression).” *Ibid.* See also ch. 1, fn. 8.

historicity is one which privileges the present and provides access to the past through places or sites of memory.

These theories of postmodern historicity (or postmodern lack of historicity) evoke many of the images in Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* and, in the light of such comments, Wolfe's Urth can be read as an exploration of the shades and possibilities of historical imagination and expression in a post-historical world. Thinking and writing about post-history is a contradictory and somewhat irrational process, and thus well suited to Wolfe and the inclinations of science-fantasy. In *The Book* Wolfe combines distinguishing markers of the culture of the simulacrum – mirrors, labyrinths, floating signifiers – with elements familiar to cultural history and signs pointing to an eschatological meta-narrative. Significantly, these diverse signifying systems also constitute modes of understanding history and thus represent the different forms of consciousness competing within the historical imagination in the postmodern, post-historical context.

Reading Urth as a post-historical world is, however, challenging because Urth has characteristics of many, yet does not conform neatly to any, of the discrete understandings of post-history. Urth is certainly a post-historical world if history is understood to be an account of human progress: a rational process of development and material and spiritual improvement. But it is not a world in which the spaces of human culture have been reclaimed by nature. Urth is a world abounding in signs which appears to be on the verge of a post-human future, but it is not a world devoid of meta-narratives. Urth is not at the end of history in Fukuyama's sense of having reached a state which represents the full actualisation of human potential. It is clearly not a world devoid of conflicting political and ideological forces: the peoples of the Commonwealth are at war with the Ascians, human beings who have been reduced to automatons under a totalitarian regime allied with alien powers. The Commonwealth itself is divided, the followers of the rebel Vodalus are also aligned with the aliens Erebus and Abaia and seek to overthrow the authority of the Autarch.

François Hartog's understanding of post-history in the context of shifting "regimes of historicity" conceptualises historical consciousness at the end of history in terms applicable to *The Book*. Hartog notes that shifts from the dominance of one regime to another are likely to be gradual and characterised by extended periods of doubt,

questioning and exploration.<sup>29</sup> The post-historical quality of Wolfe's Urth is that of a regime in flux and pre-occupied with questions of knowledge and meaning. Wolfe's approach to these questions through the processes of signification and memory suggests the workings of the troubled consciousness of postmodern historicity.<sup>30</sup> Severian's account of Urth is abounding with signs, symbols, myths and legends. None of these, however, can be clearly traced to any original, authentic or determinate source of meaning. The age of historians who traced stories to facts is long past; the very idea of authenticating legend is, for Ultan the Librarian, laughable. Within *The Book*, The Hall of Meaning and Father Inire's presence chamber in the House Absolute are distinctive representations of the mysterious forms and workings of postmodern signification.

The motif of the "labyrinth of looking glasses"<sup>31</sup> is a familiar symbol of postmodern signification.<sup>32</sup> Richard Kearney notes that

The metaphor of an incessant play between inter-reflecting mirrors is paradigmatic of postmodern culture ... The mirror in the postmodern paradigm reflects neither the outer world of nature nor the inner world of subjectivity; it reflects only itself – a mirror within a mirror within a mirror.<sup>33</sup>

The Hall of Meaning and the presence chamber not only symbolise post-modern signification – where the "image is without origin or end"<sup>34</sup> – but, more precisely, comment on temporal consciousness and the possibilities of human existence in the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., esp. 104-107.

<sup>30</sup> Both representation and memory have been highlighted as key concerns of contemporary cultural theory and discourse. Andreas Huyssen comments that "Human memory may well be an anthropological given, but closely tied as it is to the ways a culture constructs and lives its temporality, the forms memory will take are invariably contingent and subject to change. Memory and representation then, figure as the key concerns of this *fin de siècle*." *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Ideas of Creativity in Western Culture* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Kearney traces the association of different symbols with different ideas about imagination and representation in Western history: the mirror symbolises the mimetic paradigm of the pre-modern, the lamp symbolises the productive paradigm of the modern, and the labyrinth of looking glasses symbolises the parodic paradigm of the postmodern. *Wake of Imagination*, 17. Scott Lash develops a similar, but sociological, understanding of postmodern culture as a "regime of signification" which signifies differently from other cultural orders. Lash describes postmodern signification as figural – that is, it uses images rather than words – and de-differentiated. 'Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a "Regime of Signification",' in *Sociology of Postmodernism* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990), 172-236. Lash also comments on the relationship between postmodern signification and spatial organisation, noting similarities in the "labyrinthine" structure of "Gothic, baroque or Ancient Greek" urban spaces and postmodern spaces. *Sociology of Postmodernism*, 33-34. David Harvey discusses "postmodernism as the mirror of mirrors". *Condition of Postmodernity*, 336-338.

<sup>33</sup> Kearney, *Wake of Imagination*, 5-6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6.

postmodern culture of the simulacrum. Severian initially learns of The Hall of Meaning and the presence chamber from Thecla, who describes her own memory of her friend Domninia's visit to Father Inire's chambers in the House Absolute. Severian self-consciously narrates Thecla's account as a story that is filtered through multiple memories: his own, Thecla's and Domninia's. The process of remembering thus reflects the multifaceted process of signification which Severian is describing. Thecla depicts the Hall of Meaning as an appealing space in which the two girls play:

"I know you know nothing of the House Absolute. You must take my word for it that at one place in the Hall of Meaning there are two mirrors. Each is three or four ells wide and each extends to the ceiling. There's nothing between the two except for a dozen strides of marble floor. In other words, anyone who walks down the Hall of Meaning sees himself infinitely multiplied there. Each mirror reflects the images in its twin." (*Shadow*, 152)

The Hall of Meaning conveys the familiar, pleasurable and narcissistic aspects of postmodern signification. Wolfe uses mainly spatial descriptors to characterise the Hall: width, height and strides. Father Inire's octagonal room is a similarly postmodern space, yet is experienced as hidden and dangerous. Domninia returns from the room in a terrified state and describes it as follows:

"In the centre was what [Domninia] first took to be a room within the room. The walls were octagonal and painted with labyrinths. Over it, just visible from where she stood at the entrance to the presence chamber, burned the brightest lamp she had ever seen. ... Father Inire drew the wall of the octagon closed behind them. It was a mirror in which she could see his face and hand and shining, indefinite robes reflected. Her own form too, and the fish's ... but there seemed to be another girl – her own face peering over her shoulder; then another and another and another, each with a smaller face behind it. And so on *ad infinitum*." (*Shadow*, 154-155)

Such spaces of endless reflection are typical metaphors of postmodern signification where superficiality replaces depth, space controls time and repetition ends progression.<sup>35</sup>

The presence chamber is an exploration of postmodern processes of signification. In the order of simulacra, the Fish is a third order simulacrum: that is, an image which exists without any originating object.<sup>36</sup> Father Inire explains:

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<sup>35</sup> See Kearney, 'Mime without End,' in *ibid.*, 281-297

<sup>36</sup> On the three orders of simulation see Jean Baudrillard, 'Symbolic Exchange and Death,' in Jean Baudrillard and Mark Poster, eds., *Selected Writings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 138-152.

“Eventually [the Fish] will be a real being, if we do not darken the lamp or shift the mirrors. For a reflected image to exist without an object to originate it violates the laws of our universe, and therefore an object will be brought into existence.” (*Shadow*, 155)

The Fish is an image which appears in the interplay of light and mirrors. All other things – faces, hands, robes – reflected in the mirrors are partial and multiplied to the point that the originating object is lost (in space and time, as it were, because the machine is a space and time travel device). The Fish, however, is whole and singular and appears to be a projection of the mirrors themselves.

The Fish in the presence chamber elaborates Wolfe’s musings on the problems of reality and creation in the culture of the simulacrum. Simply stated, the problem is that consciousness and imagination, humanity and history all disappear as self and world dissipate in the simulacra machine. The postmodern marks the end of imagination and creation because every image is essentially empty, having neither source nor purpose. In Baudrillard’s terms, simulation is based not on presence, but on absence; it substitutes signs of the real for the real.<sup>37</sup> The Fish, however, represents the possibility of creation and the promise of the real. It is thus neither present nor absent, but possible. While there exists a Not-Yet-Become,<sup>38</sup> imagination and creation have not reached their end/s. Accordingly, if the Fish represents any single thing, then it is the principle of hope, which aligns with Wolfe’s own understanding of literature:

NG: “What is the most important thing about fiction?”

GW: “The most important thing is that it assures the reader that things need not be as they are now. In other words, the most important thing is hope.”<sup>39</sup>

Importantly, the presence chamber is not constructed solely of a labyrinth of looking glasses; it is also illuminated by a lamp. Father Inire’s comments suggest that the lamp is at least as important as the mirrors. The chamber thus combines all three symbols of the paradigms of signification: the mirror, the lamp and the labyrinth of mirrors.<sup>40</sup> Again, Wolfe uses not simply signs, but systems of signification and meaning drawn

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<sup>37</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)

<sup>39</sup> Neil Gaiman, ‘The Wolfe and Gaiman Show,’ *Locus* (2002): 82.

<sup>40</sup> Kearney, *Wake of Imagination*, 17.

from multiple historical locations. Not only does this recognise the historical understanding implicit in theories which posit a progressive development of signifying systems, it also challenges the notion of a singular, dominant and totalising mode of signification and creation. Openness to different modes of signification allows for the possibility of historicity, that is “the absolute present ... opened up again to the drift from the other ends of time”:<sup>41</sup> past and future.

Father Inire’s mirrors are not the only obvious signs of Wolfe’s concern with postmodern, post-historical culture and consciousness. Francis Fukuyama comments that “in the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museums of human history”.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, on Urth the age of the historian and the artist is no more, these figures have been replaced by caretakers such as the curator of the Library and the caretaker of the artworks in *The Citadel*, Rudesind, who spends his days removing dust from paintings. The Curators themselves comprise a Guild, the purpose of which is preservation of the past. As the curator of the Botanic Gardens states: “There are only a few of us, but our charge is the most important that society boasts – the preservation of all that is gone”. (*Shadow*, 148) Preservation, however, does not equate to historical consciousness; conversely, it appears to require, even depend on, a form of blindness. That which is preserved becomes an object disconnected from the cultural patterns of signification and lived humanity which should imbue it with meaning.

There are few, if any, artists or historians in *The Book*. The symbolism of puppetry and the theatre would suggest, however, that there must be Prosperos: orchestrating individuals with knowledge, power and purpose. Urth is a world in which “who exactly produces and controls the images which condition”<sup>43</sup> human consciousness is obscure. Those who could be considered to occupy the roles of artists or philosophers are exposed as puppets themselves. Dr Talos is the composer of the play ‘Eschatology and Genesis’, but the Doctor himself is a “homunculus”: a machine created by the alien-

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<sup>41</sup> Jameson, *Prison House of Language*, 187. Hartog expresses similar sentiments: “more modestly one should restore some form of communication between present, past and future, without allowing the tyranny of any of them, History written in the name of the past, of the future or of the present.” ‘Time, History and the Writing of History,’ 111.

<sup>42</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?* (Washington, DC: National Affairs, Inc., 1989), 18.

<sup>43</sup> Kearney writes that in the postmodern condition we no longer know who produces and controls the images which condition human consciousness. *Wake of Imagination*, 3.

giant Baldlanders to serve as his doctor.<sup>44</sup> The Autarch, a mysterious and powerful figure, tells Severian “Your error lies in thinking that I am at the bottom of everything. No one is ... Not I, or Erebus, or any other.”<sup>45</sup> Peter Wright is accurate in attributing the highest degree of orchestrating power present in the tetralogy to the Heirodules.<sup>46</sup> The Heirodules, however, despite their superior technology, angel-like appearance and apparent desire to advance humanity, are radically distanced and non-human. Severian observes,

Famulus gestured, and I was never more aware of the truth behind his mask than I was at that moment, for no human arm could have made the motion he did, and it was a meaningless motion, conveying neither agreement nor disagreement, neither irritation nor consolation. (*Sword*, 225)

The Heirodules appear in the final act as *deus ex machina*, but only to reveal that they too are slaves. (*Citadel*, 246-247)

Wolfe’s suggestion here is not, as Wright argues, that humanity is manipulated by myths which obscure an underlying, unbearable but ultimate truth that renders its existence meaningless and is evidence of a fundamental human flaw.<sup>47</sup> *The Book* presents a situation where it is not humanity that creates and interprets its own symbols, but rather non-human agencies which seem to have the most knowledge of, and power over, myth and meaning. The proliferation of floating signifiers, rather than being an impediment to the circulation of meta-narratives and myths, actually promotes, even strengthens, the appeal of meta-narratives. Thus, rather than prompting incredulity towards meta-narratives, the culture of the simulacra has the opposite effect: it acts as a catalyst to the restless quest for meta-narratives. Most importantly, the myths that flourish on Urth are those which are most distant from human intentions and actions – that is, the most alien – and therefore are the least accessible to reflection, critique and assessment. Urth is indeed a world in which the transcendental meaning is more accessible than the immediate practical meaning. Urth is a world lacking historical consciousness because historicity can only exist through the second order of meaning –

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<sup>44</sup> Gene Wolfe, *The Sword of the Lictor: Volume Three of ‘The Book of the New Sun’* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 228 (hereafter cited in text as *Sword*).

<sup>45</sup> Gene Wolfe, *The Citadel of the Autarch: Volume Four of ‘The Book of the New Sun’* (New York: Timescape, 1983), 205 (hereafter cited in text as *Citadel*).

<sup>46</sup> See Peter Wright, ‘God-Games: Cosmic Conspiracies and Narrative Sleights in Gene Wolfe’s “The Fictions of the New Sun”’, *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction* 66 (1996): 13-39.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

relational – in the interplay of the practical and transcendental, particular and universal; and a world without historical consciousness is a world losing its humanity.

Wolfe's personal reflections and his writing communicate his concern with lack of historical consciousness as a contemporary cultural phenomenon. This concern is expressed in his particular fascination with memory and amnesia. In an interview with James Jordan he comments that an inability to remember is a problem in contemporary society. Wolfe laments that "our society has no memory of [the past]. It has no awareness of history".<sup>48</sup> Memory and forgetting are prominent themes in Wolfe's oeuvre and, as the above comment suggests, he is concerned not purely with private memory but with memory as a social phenomenon closely related to, if not coterminous with, history and historical consciousness. Wolfe comments that

"I'm also very interested in memory. [In the 'New Sun' series] Severian had eidetic memory and was haunted and hag-ridden by it ... In some ways, it's a gift; in other ways, a terrible curse, not least because you are so cut off from ordinary people who forget things".<sup>49</sup>

Beyond this, Severian is a figure whose existence connects subjective memory with history, for he is "The Autarch, whose dreams are our realities, whose memories are our history."<sup>50</sup> It is ultimately through historical consciousness expressed in terms of memory and amnesia that *The Book* makes its boldest expression of the possibilities of imagination and history in the post-historical world.

Severian's prodigious memory shapes the entire *Book*; his tale is granted cohesion at the same time as it is disrupted by the forms and operations of memory. He remains highly conscious of the nature and workings of his memory. This focus on memory and remembering indicates Wolfe's concern not only with history as story, but also with history as memory. In terms of the broader operations of historical consciousness, Severian's autobiography represents the decline of history and rise of memory at the same time as it describes the tragedy of amnesia and the necessity of forgetting. Foregrounding memory's role in defining subjective and historical consciousness,

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<sup>48</sup> James Jordan, 'Gene Wolfe Interview,' (1992) (online source).  
<http://mysite.verizon.net/~vze2tmhh/gwjbj3.html>

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Charles Brown, 'Gene Wolfe: Moral Fabulist,' *Locus* (1991), 4.

<sup>50</sup> Gene Wolfe, *The Claw of the Conciliator: Volume Two of 'The Book of the New Sun'* (New York: Timescape, 1981), 175 (hereafter cited in text as *Claw*).



Wolfe incorporates into his text the dialectical processes active in contemporary historiography and the historical imagination.

Memory occupies a central but ambiguous position in current intellectual discourse surrounding history and historical consciousness. Contemporary, postmodern or late-capitalist culture and intellectual discourse is associated with both the rise and the fall of memory.<sup>51</sup> The rise of memory may be accounted for with relative ease. Because the primary object of both history and memory is the past, the re-assessment of the ontological status of the past prompted by contemporary philosophical debates has affected memory studies as it has historiography. Ideas about memory, however, have adapted in response to the more persistent of post-structuralist and postmodern challenges in ways which ideas about history have not. Memory, like history, has its own history tied to developments from the pre-modern, to the modern<sup>52</sup> and postmodern, but it is not identified as a discipline and field of knowledge dependent on the shared identity and professionalism of historians and the existence of the past as an object of study. Ideas about memory are thus more flexible and easily adapted to new intellectual priorities: memory may be subjective or collective, individual or multiple, and it may confidently describe plural, even competing pasts. The problem of the end of history is not, as Patrick Hutton states, “ordinarily presented as a memory problem”.<sup>53</sup> Depending on the flexibility of one’s definitions, memory studies may have displaced History, or

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<sup>51</sup> Patrick Hutton describes the contemporary intellectual climate as one that has, unsurprisingly, produced a new “culture of memory”. ‘Review: Mnemonic Schemes in the New History of Memory,’ *History and Theory* 36:3 (1997): esp. 377-380. See also Patrick Hutton, ‘Recent Scholarship on Memory and History,’ *The History Teacher* 33:4 (2000): 533-548. For a broad discussion of the boom in memory scholarship since the 1980s and its impact on historical discourse, see Kerwin Lee Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,’ *Representations* 69 (2000): 127-150. Simultaneously, there exists a significant body of work concerned with contemporary cultural amnesia, particularly in the American (USA) context. See, for example, Charles Baxter’s edited collection, *The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting* (St Paul, Minn.: Grey Wolf, 1999). Andreas Huyssen attempts to account for the culture of amnesia in societies that are simultaneously obsessed with memory. *Twilight Memories*, esp. ‘Introduction: Time and Cultural Memory at our *Fin de Siècle*,’ 1-12. Huyssen comments that “The turn towards memory and the past comes with a great paradox. Ever more frequently, critics accuse this very contemporary memory culture of amnesia, anaesthesia, or numbing. They hide its inability and unwillingness to remember, and they lament the loss of historical consciousness.” *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16-17.

<sup>52</sup> In his investigation of “modernity’s relationship with memory” (3) Richard Terdiman notes that the nineteenth century was characterised by, first, a powerful perception of “a massive disruption of traditional forms of memory, and, second, that within the atmosphere of such disruption, the functioning of memory itself, the institution of memory and thereby of history, became critical preoccupations”. *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Hutton, ‘Recent Scholarship on Memory and History,’ 541.

historians may have simply adapted, or be in a process of adapting, their work to become less like disciplinary History and more like memory studies.<sup>54</sup>

Broadly speaking, the recent ‘rise of memory’ is a product of the same intellectual, cultural and ideological forces responsible for the crises of traditional historiography. Patrick Hutton links developments in historiography since the 1970s to the emergence of a “culture of memory”.<sup>55</sup> Hutton associates the ascendance of memory studies with the movement of historiography, or theories of history, to the centre of historical writing and practice and comments that “it is not surprising that all such efforts at the reclassifications of the basic structures of historical writing should have led back to memory”.<sup>56</sup> In his overview of contributions to the development of the culture of memory, Hutton identifies two broad phases of memory studies: the first was mainly concerned with collective memory and public, political identities and the latter, “second generation studies”, employ what Hutton identifies as the “classical art of memory”.<sup>57</sup> The classical art of memory is, for Hutton, a mode of historical understanding and expression that is distinct from the dominant, traditional mode of historical writing in its approach to topic and narrative. While narrative emplotment is the basic organising principle of many traditional histories, it is not the core structuring principle of all historical writing. Hutton cites Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* (1995) and Matt Matsuda’s *The Memory of the Modern* (1995) as recent examples of historical works which employ “the classical art of memory as the organisational principle for the

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<sup>54</sup> Klein contends that, despite assertions to the contrary, “where history is concerned, memory increasingly functions as antonym rather than synonym, contrary rather than compliment and replacement rather than supplement.” ‘On the Emergence of Memory,’ 28-129. Similarly, Gabrielle Spiegel notes that memory’s “partial, fragmented, transient, and allusive nature become a kind of trope of memory that proposes itself both as a counter-historiographical force – history” being understood in the traditional sense of “objective” formalized, and institutionalized modes of understanding and interpretation associated with the “modern (nineteenth-century, positivist and cognitive modernism)”. ‘History and Memory: Liturgical Time and Historical Time,’ *History and Theory* 41:2 (2002): 150.

<sup>55</sup> See Hutton, ‘Mnemonic Schemes,’ 377-380; Hutton, ‘Recent Scholarship on Memory and History,’ 533-537. François Hartog’s account of questions and contributions arising as part of the crisis of the modern regime of historicity is comparable to Hutton’s description of the philosophical climate associated with the decline of history and rise of memory. Hartog also identifies ‘memory’ as a prominent discourse in the contemporary regime of historicity. See Hartog, ‘Time, History and the Writing of History,’ 104-112.

<sup>56</sup> Hutton, ‘Mnemonic Schemes,’ 78.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 381. Pierre Nora’s three volume *Les Lieux de Memoire* (1984-1992) is exemplary of the former. Klein also cites Nora’s work as central to the rise of memory scholarship. ‘On the Emergence of Memory,’ 127. Hutton’s theory of the classical art of memory is elaborated in *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993).

composition of their studies”.<sup>58</sup> The basic organising principle of the classical art of memory is “topical emplotment”:

rather than identifying topics within a narrative, as historians used to do, they use their narratives to illustrate their topics. Their histories are organised around places of memory, chosen to stimulate curiosity about the past ... Herein there are many narratives, each self contained and reduced to the scale of mnemonic reference points at which they are situated.<sup>59</sup>

Hutton does not imply that this kind of historical writing lacks the narrative and rhetorical forms typically associated with history; instead it constitutes a reversal of structure whereby topics give rise to multiple narratives rather than emerging from a singular, unified narrative.<sup>60</sup>

In light of Hutton’s comments, it is apparent that Wolfe’s text reflects the culture of memory in both content and style. The difficulties associated with reading and interpreting *The Book* as history are considerably reduced if it is read as a work in the spirit of the classical art of memory. Severian’s subjective narrative and its noticeable reliance on moments and places of memory stands in clear contrast to the idea of history as coherent narrative presented by a distanced, objective narrator as an account of past events. Severian himself comments that

It has been my good fortune – or evil fortune as it may be – that the places with which my life has been largely associated have been, with very few exceptions, of the most permanent character. ... When I think of the ephemera of my life they are likely to be men and women. (*Shadow*, 185)

Hutton notes that it is extremely difficult to summarise works organised according to the classical art of memory,<sup>61</sup> and this is equally true of *The Book*. Severian’s journey is inadequately described or interpreted as a coherent, logical narrative sequence. Instead, the places, persons and events that Severian experiences give rise to multiple, discretely located, yet intricately connected, narratives. Finally, *The Book* is not simply an account

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 382.

<sup>60</sup> Hutton recognises both history and memory as means of organising and communicating knowledge, based on selection, interpretation and presentation. Ibid., 381. Evelyn Ender explores the rhetorical and fictional forms of memory in a similar manner to White’s exploration of the rhetorical forms of history. *Architexts of Memory: Literature, Science and Autobiography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). Similarly, Gabrielle Spiegel argues that the return to memory in contemporary scholarship “forms part of an attempt to recuperate presence in history – a form of backlash against postmodernist/poststructuralist thought, with its insistence on the mediated, indeed constructed, nature of all knowledge, and most especially knowledge of the past.” ‘Memory and History,’ 149.

<sup>61</sup> Hutton, ‘Mnemonic Schemes,’ 386.

from memory, but a self-reflexive exploration of the dual processes of remembering and forgetting which, in the tradition of the modern “architexts of memory”, “through the detailed description of mnemonic processes [reveals] the artifices of the imagination and rhetoric that bring the past to life.”<sup>62</sup> Wolfe, himself, has acknowledged not only a personal interest in memory, but familiarity and fascination with prominent theories and architexts of memory. In one interview he admits: “I am a great Proust fan. I have read *Remembrance of Things Past* I think about two and a half times.”<sup>63</sup> He also acknowledges using the “memory palace concept”<sup>64</sup> in his writing.

Although it appears to function in opposition to the rise of memory, the decline of memory or cultural amnesia is related to the same intellectual and cultural processes which have produced the crises of historicity in postmodern times. In the discourse which describes the culture of amnesia, memory and history are virtually equivalent, broadly understood as both individual and collective access to, and consciousness of, past experience in relation to present and future being. In *History as an Art of Memory* Hutton describes the loss of memory as a product of the culture of the simulacrum:

We might say that in our postmodern culture we no longer have a strong sense of the places of our memory ... it reflects the nature of memory in an electronic age in which elements of tradition are continually broken up and reused in a kaleidoscope of reconfigurations ... Such trends in contemporary culture have contributed to a sense of severed connections with the past and have raised attendant fears about cultural amnesia.<sup>65</sup>

Hutton’s comments on cultural amnesia reflect the familiar association of postmodern culture and temporality with the decline of history. Similarly, Andreas Huyssen reflects that the recent *fin de siècle* has been characterised by a “deepening sense of crisis often articulated in the reproach that our culture is terminally ill with amnesia”.<sup>66</sup> Literary theorist Evelyn Ender’s comment that “when, because of amnesia or dementia, memory disappears, a person’s life dissolves into an immediate, purposeless present”<sup>67</sup> is reminiscent of Jameson’s sense of postmodern temporality experienced as a series of

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<sup>62</sup> Ender, *Architexts of Memory*, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Jordan, ‘Interview with Gene Wolfe’ (online source).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. The “memory palace concept” refers to the work of Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966)

<sup>65</sup> Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, 166.

<sup>66</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ender, *Architexts of Memory*, 3.

perpetual presents.<sup>68</sup> The problem of amnesia in postmodern times consists mainly in the spatial bridging of the painful yet vital temporal rupture between past and present, a rupture which forms the core problem as well as *raison d'être* of both memory and history.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout *The Book* Wolfe maintains an active tension between the processes of remembering and forgetting thought to be characteristic of contemporary historical consciousness; this consciousness finds imagination and self caught between the cultures of memory and amnesia. Severian's perfect memory is not simply a convenient narrative device which allows for the complexity and detail of his account; it functions to comment on the paradox of memory and amnesia, and the possibility of historical consciousness in the post-historical world.

Ideas about modern memory are closely aligned with understandings of subjectivity and the self. From Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1776-78) to Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and beyond, the literature of remembrance has worked to develop the language of interiority and the self. Evelyn Ender comments that "our ability to create a record of past experiences provides the foundations of human individuality".<sup>70</sup> As an autobiographical narrative, Severian's tale shares much with modern discourses of memory and subjectivity. Severian recognises the importance of memory to his sense of self. Reflecting on the transition from boyhood to manhood, he laments the loss that this transition implies: "I could remember each moment of my past, every vagrant thought and sight, every dream. How could I destroy that past?" (*Shadow*, 28-29) Throughout *The Book*, Severian maintains a strong sense of existence defined through experience and memory: "it seems to be that all experience becomes part of my being." (*Shadow*, 88)

The applicability, however, of modern understandings of memory and the self to *The Book* is limited because Severian is far from the archetypal modern individual. As *The Book* develops, it becomes increasingly clear that neither Severian, nor his memory, are limited by the usual boundaries thought to circumscribe the self. While Severian's

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<sup>68</sup> Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society,' 10.

<sup>69</sup> See Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Ender, *Architexts of Memory*, 6.

recollections sometimes appear to function in a familiar manner – involuntary recall prompted by smells or places, for example<sup>71</sup> – Severian’s memory does not, in fact, operate according to the norms and limitations of the human mind. The corollary of Severian’s unusually complete memory is his inability to forget. In addition, through the consumption of Thecla’s flesh and the analeptic alzado and, finally, through his transformation into Autarch, he comes to embody multiple memories and multiple selves.

Severian’s claim to remember everything initially grants him narrative authority beyond that which is usually recognised for subjective narrators. While it raises his subjective authority to the omniscient level of the objective narrator, Severian’s descriptions of his remembering also work to undermine this authority. The flawless nature of Severian’s memory is brought into question firstly by his own explanation of the imperfections of perfect recollection and, secondly, by the effects that the workings of his memory have on his sense of self. Severian admits that he is not, in fact, able to recall everything, suggesting that although his memory is unusual, it is not as perfect and complete as the reader might assume:

Now I come to part of the story where I cannot help but write of something I have largely avoided mentioning before. You that read it cannot help but notice that I have not scrupled to recount in great detail things that transpired years ago, and to give the very words of those who spoke to me, and the very words with which I replied; and you must have thought this only a conventional device I have adopted to make my story flow more smoothly. The truth is that I am one of those that is cursed with what is called perfect recollection. We cannot, as I have sometimes heard foolishly alleged, remember everything. ... But I can remember more than many would credit. (*Claw*, 64-65)

Severian’s introduction to this explanation of perfect recollection is, itself, misleading. He has, in fact, mentioned his flawless memory many times before. The slight forgetting within this explanation of his remembering only serves to heighten the sense that Severian really is, despite suggestions of the archetypal and omniscient, an unreliable narrator.

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<sup>71</sup> On the literary development of the idea and language of recollection, see Ender, *Architexts of Memory*; Suzanne Nalbantian, *Memory in Literature: From Rousseau to Neuroscience*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.)

While Severian's memory may be flawed, it remains prodigious by normal human standards. Rather than experiencing memory as a constructive support to his sense of self, however, Severian describes his memory as something like a burden or disease.<sup>72</sup> The second chapter of *The Book*, entitled 'Severian', begins with the statement: "memory oppresses me". (*Shadow*, 9) In this chapter, Severian's near-drowning in the river Gyoll, where he is entangled in the deadly roots of the nenuphar flowers, mirrors the suffocating and entangling nature of his own memory.

Severian's experience of memory is relentless, tormenting and oppressive.<sup>73</sup> He finds it difficult to distinguish between memory, dream and visionary states, and describes degrees of consciousness and awareness, overlapping between memory and dream. The second volume of *The Book*, *The Claw of the Conciliator*, begins with Severian's description of a dream. Severian realises he is dreaming, but recognises past experiences – things he thought to be dreams – to have been visions. He wakes to find himself in a dream-like memory state; when he finally comes to full waking awareness he finds a biblical miracle has occurred overnight: "our water-ewer held wine". (*Claw*, 10) The coincidence of his full waking with a miraculous discovery only serves to heighten the sense of overlap between the real and the visionary. Severian frequently experiences such disorientating transitions between sleeping and waking, dream, memory and visionary states. In another episode, he wakes from a restless sleep, certain that he is awake, yet in the trance of memory: "I was wide awake again, or I thought I was." (*Claw*, 218) Later he finds himself in one of Thecla's memories but wakes "uncertain of the point at which memory had become dream." (*Claw*, 218) He is even unsure if some experiences have occurred at all; for example, he wonders if "indeed ... my encounter with Typhon and Phaiton was not a vision or a dream." (*Sword*, 187)

In general, Severian's experience of overlap between memory, dream and vision aligns with Wolfe's nuanced but insistent approach to problems of experience and reality. Again, the indeterminate nature of reality is emphasised; dreams, in particular, highlight the effect of desire on perceived realities. The woman who impersonates Thecla in the House Azure – a brothel in the City of Nessus modelled on the House Absolute – asks

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<sup>72</sup> Suggested in phrases such as "the disease of memory gained upon me." (*Claw*, 145)

<sup>73</sup> "My nerves have never, I suppose, been fully sound, tormented as they have always been by a relentless memory." (*Claw*, 52)

Severian if he cannot master reality, shaping it to his own desire, and believe that she is indeed the Chatelaine, even for a moment:

“Weak people believe what is forced on them. Strong people what they wish to believe, forcing that to be real. What is the Autarch but a man who believes himself Autarch and makes others believe by the strength of it?”  
(*Shadow*, 75)

Many of Severian’s dreams have, however, the quality of visions, which suggest the possibility of a higher, transcendent ordering of reality and destiny by forces overriding the individual will and desire. One of his most significant dreams, in which two wooden marionettes battle, is played out later as he fights the giant Baldanders in the castle by the lake

Memory experienced as dream and vision is more typical of ideas about memory developed in the early twentieth century than of the traditional modern “architexts of memory”.<sup>74</sup> While modern ideas of memory are connected primarily to emotion, sensation, association and the narrative creation of the self,<sup>75</sup> memory understood in terms of the unconscious, dreams, automatism and aleatory functions is associated, in particular, with the avante-garde and Surrealist movements of the early twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> For the surrealist poets, memory arising involuntarily from aleatoric states such as walking and sleeping was favoured over memory subject to the rational packaging of the mind: “calmed, harmed, wrought like an iron gate”.<sup>77</sup> Memory was aligned with the imagination, unconscious and dream states characterised by “incongruity, discontinuity and uncertainty”.<sup>78</sup> This understanding of memory gives rise to a different conception of the productive or creative relationship between past, present and future. Rather than the present reaching into the past to rationalise and give structure to its own existence, or the past existing as an end in itself, the past gives rise

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<sup>74</sup> Ender, *Architexts of Memory*. Among the creators of the “architexts of memory”, Evelyn Ender identifies the following writers: Rousseau, Proust, Virginia Woolf and George Eliot. Suzanne Nalbantian identifies similar key figures in the development of the idea of memory in literature from the nineteenth century including Rousseau, Baudelaire, Proust, Woolf, Joyce and Faulkner. *Memory in Literature*.

<sup>75</sup> Nalbantian, *Memory in Literature*.

<sup>76</sup> See Nalbantian, ‘Apollinaire, Breton and the Surrealists: Automatism and Aleatory Memory,’ in *Memory and Literature*, 100-116.

<sup>77</sup> André Breton, *Poisson Soluble II* (2), in *Oeuvres Complète*, vol. 1, 515, quoted in *ibid.*, 111.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.



to “unanticipated couplings”<sup>79</sup> of images, the free-interplay of which evokes imagination, fertility and creation, opening passages to the future.<sup>80</sup>

For Severian, memory and dream states are more often experienced as vivid, disconnected, involuntary, confused, visionary and even delirious than as logical and structured. In addition, the overlap of vision and dream states with Severian’s subjectivity and personal memories serves to heighten the sense of the self existing between the poles of the universal and eternal and the transient and individual. As Merryn explains:

“When we sleep,” Merryn told me, “we move from temporality to eternity.”

“When we wake,” The Cumaean whispered, “we lose the facility to see beyond the present moment.” (*Citadel*, 28)

The presence of the eternal is also evoked by Severian’s inability to forget; he claims “I ... never forget anything ... do not truly understand what others mean when they say *forget*.” (*Shadow*, 88) Severian perceives his inability to forget as part of the burden of his ineradicable memory:

“Whatever I possess I would give to become one of you, who complain every day of memories fading. My own do not. They remain always, and always as vivid as at their first impression, so that once summoned they carry me off, spellbound.” (*Claw*, 14)

It is not simply his ‘perfect recollection’ that makes Severian’s memory unusual. Severian the Lame, author of *The Book of the New Sun*, is not I, but we: the Autarch of Urth who, having consumed the living flesh of the previous Autarch, embodies the consciousness of all of his predecessors. The effect of multiple personalities on memory and the self is suggested in particular through Severian’s descriptions of being “two people” (*Citadel*, 44) after Thecla’s consciousness is merged with his own. After the ritual, Severian considers Thecla to be part of his self, and Dorcas, for example, to be another, independent self. (*Shadow*, 231) Because Thecla’s consciousness is present within his own, Severian experiences her presence mainly in the form of awareness and memory; he explains:

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> “From childhood memories and some others emerge a feeling of freedom and then of going astray that I consider the most fertile that exists.” Ibid., 105.

at times I who remember am not Severian, but Thecla, as though my mind were a picture framed behind glass, and Thecla stands before that glass and is reflected in it. (*Claw*, 89)

Severian sometimes has difficulty distinguishing between his two selves and their memories: I-Severian and I-Thecla. At one such moment of confusion, his friend Jonas reminds him:

“You are not the Chatelaine Thecla,” he said. “You are Severian, a journeyman of the torturers, who was unfortunate enough to love her. See yourself!” He held up the steel hand so that I could see a stranger’s face, narrow, ugly and bewildered.”

I remembered our tower then, the curved walls of smooth dark metal. “I am Severian,” I said.

“That is correct. The Chatelaine Thecla is dead.” (*Claw*, 100)

The reader is similarly disoriented when there is a sudden shift in narrative voice from Severian to Thecla. In the antechamber below the House Absolute, Thecla awakens, confused and frightened in a body that is not her own: “My confusion was so great I nearly fell, borne down by the jumble of my mind. I wrung my hands but the hands I wrung were not my own.” (*Claw*, 141) It is only after he has become Autarch that Severian gains some sense of stability of self despite having a consciousness comprised of multiple personalities:

At that moment I regained a command of my personality that I had not truly possessed since I had drunk alzabo with Vodalus and eaten Thecla’s flesh. It was not that Thecla was gone ... or that my predecessor and the hundred minds that had been enveloped in his had vanished. The old, simple structure of my single personality was no more; but the new complex structure no longer dazzled and bewildered me. It was a maze, but I was the owner and even builder of that maze, with the print of my thumb on every passageway. (*Citadel*, 246)

This sense of stability is associated with figures from his youth – in particular Master Malrubius and the dog Triskele. Throughout *The Book*, however, Severian overwhelmingly describes his experiences of memory and self as disconnected and disorientating, yet fertile with the promise of the future. It is ultimately Severian’s fertility, that is, his ability to have children, that breaks the cycle described in “the secret history of Time” (*Citadel*, 246) bringing the New Sun and an end to the entropic state of barbarism on Urth.

Severian's reflections reveal the ways in which both memory and forgetting are essential to the human self. In her study of texts of memory, Evelyn Ender concludes that

While autobiography is a precondition of our human identity, it implies, as Jean Starobinski points out, a double difference: a difference in time (between now and then) and, connected to it, a difference in identity (between "I now" and "I then"). Rememberers have to overcome these differences in order to create the "recapitulative knowledge" born from the accumulation of experiences. The other impediment is psychological: it springs from a contradictory human need, which demands that we be able to both remember and to forget. Caught between these contrary currents, human memory is necessarily imperfect: it is frail, fragile and often unreliable."<sup>81</sup>

Severian's memory is flawed, but it is not as frail, fragile and unreliable as it ought to be. Severian experiences recollection as difficult and oppressive because his memory works to eliminate the necessary distance and difference between then and now and between past (*I-then*) and present (*I-now*) selves. These problems of perfect memory are related to the dissolution of the self and history in postmodern times; that is, the eradication of distance and difference between times and spaces leads not only to the loss of historicity, but also to the loss of the self.

Severian often finds his consciousness overwhelmed by memories that are "so perfect and vivid as to be more compelling than any opiate": (*Claw*, 226)

My memories have always appeared with the intensity, almost, of hallucinations, as I have said often in this chronicle. That night I felt I might lose myself forever in them, making of my life a loop instead of a line; and for once I did not resist the temptation but reveled [sic.] in it. Everything I have described to you came crowding back to me, and a thousand things more. (*Citadel*, 11)

He understands the danger of such states of mind:

But it [perfect memory] has another danger, one I have encountered many times. When I cast my mind into the past, as I am doing now and as I did when I sought to recall my dream, I remember it so well that I seem to move again in the bygone day, a day old-new and unchanged each time I draw it to the surface of my mind, its eidolons as real as I. ... You see, it is very easy to waste hours and even days in such rememberings, and sometimes I even fall so deeply into them that I am drugged and drunken. (*Claw*, 65)

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<sup>81</sup> Jean Starobinski, quoted in Ender, *Architexts of Memory*, 230.

Severian finds himself in dangerous situations when his mind is in a trance-like memory state. He is captured by Vodulus' men whilst lost in a memory of something which he thinks a dream: "But now the tyranny of memory overwhelmed my will ... I could not escape from their fascination and the memory of the dream." (*Claw*, 66)

More significantly, Wolfe's text reveals the way in which an excess of memory may act as a form of amnesia. Through this revelation, Wolfe works towards reconciling the contemporary culture of amnesia with that very same culture's apparent obsession with memory.<sup>82</sup> Just as the sheer depth of history renders Urth post-historical, an excess of memory acts to disperse subjectivity and consciousness. Severian's memory often inhibits his ability to order his experiences and sense of self. Severian finds it difficult to maintain a "historian's discrimination of the critical distance between past and present states of mind".<sup>83</sup> Thus Severian's perfect memory erases the distance between his past and present selves which is, paradoxically, something upon which the act of remembering depends. The culture of amnesia is consistent with the rise of memory and closely aligned with the dissolution of the self. All three elements point to the dissolution of historical consciousness and loss of historicity in the post-historical world.

In *The Book*, the human tragedy of cultural amnesia and crisis of historical consciousness is represented most poignantly through the figure of Dorcas. Dorcas embodies the unbearable truth of Luis Bunuel's statement that "life without memory is no life at all... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing."<sup>84</sup> When Dorcas is resurrected at the Lake of the Birds she has no knowledge of who she is or how she came to be there. Dorcas' amnesia remains a source of perpetual melancholy. Her sense of self is fragmented and incomplete:

"When I try to recall the time before I helped you [Severian] out of the water, I can only remember being in the water myself. Everything before that is like a vision shattered to pieces, only small bright bits, a thimble I saw laid on velvet once, and the sound of a small dog barking outside a door." (*Shadow*, 232)

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<sup>82</sup> See Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, 54.

<sup>84</sup> Luis Bunuel, *Cabaret Voltaire* (1961), 197, quoted in Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 1.

The crisis of Dorcas' existence comes, however, not as a result of her inability to remember, but through the gradual emergence of recollections attached to everyday objects from her past. Dorcas experiences the same overlap between dream and memory as Severian. She is haunted by strange and confusing dreams: "I know no one could understand who has not had the same dream, but it is terrible. Terrible." (*Claw*, 169) These dreams gradually become memories, attached to the people and objects from her past, including her family and home: "I remember more each morning, after my dreams." (*Claw*, 216) The traumatic re-emergence of her past self occurs in the city of Thrax – the city of windowless rooms – a space which reflects her own sense of hopelessness and entrapment. She falls into a state of silence and despair. (*Sword*, 15) Finally recognising that she has been dead for over forty years, she finds herself unable to continue to exist in the present:

"Shall I tell you what I really believe? I believe that I have been dead – not sleeping, but dead. That all my life took place a long, long time ago when I lived with my husband above a little shop, and took care of our child ... For a long, long time I was dead, a shrunken corpse preserved in the brown water. And there is something in me that is dead still." (*Sword*, 68)

Dorcas embodies both the tragedy and ultimate impossibility of being human without lived historical existence and consciousness.

The conviction that the self cannot exist detached from lived existence in space and time, without historicity, is confirmed by two more of Severian's experiences. When Severian meets the witches outside the stone town, the acolyte explains that the Cumean is not able to bring back the past, she cannot "raise" the stone town, because she was not alive when it existed:

"She cannot. She is very old, but the city was devastated whole ages before she came to be. Only her own time rings her, for that is all her mind comprehends by direct knowledge. To restore the city, we must make use of a mind that existed when it was whole." (*Claw*, 246)

The Cumean resurrects the figure of Apu Panchu who raises the stone town with him. Severian, later, describes this resurrection:

"When the witch brought back the man she had come to revive, I thought at first that she was restoring the whole city. It wasn't until several days afterward that I understood ... I didn't really understand, of course. I still think about it and I still don't. But I know somehow that she was bringing him back, and *he* was bringing the stone town back with him, as a setting for himself." (*Sword*, 48)

Similarly, when Severian takes Master Ash from the Last House, Master Ash, who has been sent from the future to observe Urth's history, explains to him that he may be unable to go with Severian if they do not belong to the same thread in the tapestry of time. That is, Master Ash will cease to exist if the past Urth in which he finds himself – Severian's Urth – is not the past Urth to which he belongs:

“But your world is your world. I can exist there only if the probability of my existence is high.”

“The question is whether I am the future to which you go.” (*Citadel*, 134)

The idea that there exist multiple possible ‘timelines’ describing Urth's evolution is one of several notions about the nature of temporality that are expressed in the book. Different metaphors and images are evoked to describe time: a labyrinth or “maze of tunnels”, (*Citadel*, 135), a “fence of iron palings”, (*Sword*, 167) a river and a sea, (*Citadel*, 132) and a tapestry (*Citadel*, 135). The conception of temporality that dominates the book is complexity, multiplicity and, most importantly, indeterminacy. As Master Ash explains to Severian: “No one can know the future. We are speaking of the past.” (*Citadel*, 131)

A future that is unknown and unknowable allows for the possibility of human agency in history. Wright's exploration of the Darwinian discourse of evolution and survival evident in *The Book* rightly draws attention to Wolfe's concern with the big questions of human being in time. The cynical determinism inherent in this view, however, fails to acknowledge the hope for survival that Wolfe finds in memory and historicity. In *Architexts of Memory*, Evelyn Ender suggests that the art of memory constitutes a key to human survival:

The art of memory, I thus propose, is deeply bound up with our human survival. It is an art that is characteristically human – linguistic, historical, cultural – and it celebrates human consciousness not only in its highest, creative forms but also as part of our responsibility.<sup>85</sup>

Severian's autobiography is a work of the art of memory. Creation, art and memory, however, can find only fragmented footholds in a world of buried libraries and simulacra machines. Thus *The Book* works to reveal the problems as well as the potential of imaginative and literary form to give expression to memory and historical

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<sup>85</sup> Ender, *Architexts of Memory*, 21.

consciousness after the end of history, and it ultimately finds hope, fertility and the future in the historical imagination.

## Conclusion

### Landscapes of Imagination and Memory:

#### Of This and Other Worlds' Histories

Ancient Urth is a post-historical world experienced and expressed as a landscape of memory. Of his work *Landscape and Memory* historian Simon Schama writes, “If this is a book of memories, it is not meant as a lament at the cremation of our hope. Rather it is a journey through spaces and places, eyes open wide, that may help us keep faith with a future on this tough, lovely old planet.”<sup>1</sup> Schama’s book is as much a journey through imagination, emotion and expression – of loss, lament and hope – as it is through the landscapes of human culture and memory. While he explores the mausoleums and museums of myth, symbol and the sacred, Schama remains a historian at heart, and his heart is tied to the human cultural history of our earth. If we connect our fantasies to our histories and our memories, however, we might add other places to the landscapes of lovely, old earth. We might also journey through worlds of imagination and fantasy, worlds such as Middle-earth and Urth.

These two otherworlds and their creators occupy different locations in the history of earth and the history of fantasy literature itself: *The Lord of the Rings* stands as the seminal work of high fantasy in the Western tradition, while *The Book of the New Sun* is a hybrid text, finding precursors in the dual traditions of fantasy and science fiction. Both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Book of the New Sun* are, however, multi-volume works of fantastic literature which, in the traditions common to fantasy and science fiction, create richly imagined secondary worlds. These secondary worlds are places of familiarity and strangeness, wonder and peril, enchanting beauty and disturbing horror. It is not difficult to understand why such creations have been understood as acts of mythopoesis: that is, as expressions of the eternal creative impulses of human consciousness and spirituality in the language of symbol and myth.

Neither Middle-earth nor Urth are, however, worlds of myth. Because of the pre-eminence of myth-criticism in the field of fantasy scholarship, analysis of the secondary

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 19.



worlds of fantasy literature has emphasised mythopoesis in the cosmogenic process. But earth, Middle-earth and Urth are instead deeply and beautifully *historical* worlds. Through a representational process which might be termed ‘feigned history’, both Tolkien and Wolfe engage in the task of creating worlds that have pasts, histories and, most significantly, a sense of historicity. Both authors engage with questions of consciousness and being in history and face, as writers, the problems of representing historical consciousness and existence.

Both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Book of the New Sun* occupy significant places in the history of fantastic literature. They are also linked by a common historiographical thread: cultural history based in the traditions of Romantic historiography. It is ultimately through the representation of cultural forms that embody historical consciousness and lived history that Tolkien and Wolfe render their secondary worlds. In short, Middle-earth and Urth are worlds not simply of myth and symbol, but of all the stuff of human culture in time: landscapes and languages, stories and songs, artefacts and rituals, magic and knowledge. Correspondingly, the representations of the forms and practices of culture in both texts embody certain assumptions about the nature and significance of human culture and its relationship to historical existence, consciousness and its expression.

The forms of ‘feigned history’ on Middle-earth bear the intellectual markers of the old cultural history and Romantic historicism. Tolkien’s philosophical and scholarly connections to Romanticism and medievalism are well documented.<sup>2</sup> These connections situate *The Lord of the Rings* within the currents that have shaped modern historiography since the eighteenth century. Broadly speaking, Tolkien writes in the spirit of the Romantic quest for the fullness of past experience and embodies Romanticism’s challenge to dominant scientific, empiricist models of history as rational knowing. The languages and cultures of Middle-earth reflect the understanding of language and culture that informed philology, Romantic historicism and the old cultural history: as essentialist, holistic and organic components of human communities and everyday lived existence.

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<sup>2</sup> See ch. 4, fn. 46.

If Middle-earth is the earth of our long-forgotten past, then Urth is the earth of our yet-to-be-remembered future. Like Middle-earth, Urth is located in a broader historical cosmos and consciousness. But while Middle-earth is a thinning world, expressing a historical sentiment of longing, loss and lament for time past, Urth is a labyrinthine world mirroring a historical space of deceptive twists and turns: linguistic, narrative, and cultural. Wolfe's self-conscious focus on the processes and problems of signification in *The Book of the New Sun* reflects upon the problematisation of reality and its representation arising from developments in structuralist and poststructuralist theory since the 1960s that have been core concerns of contemporary historiography. Similarly, Wolfe's explorations of memory and amnesia engage with developments in the field of memory studies associated with intellectual and cultural developments in the latter half of the twentieth century. While *The Lord of the Rings* is a work in the spirit of the old cultural history, *The Book of the New Sun* expresses the spirit of the new and reflects the understanding of language and culture that informs contemporary cultural studies: as complex, plural and multi-layered systems of human signs and signifying activities.

The thread which binds the old cultural history to the new and ties fantasy to history, through all the twists, turns and labyrinths of language and meaning, is imagination. On the literature of memory, Evelyn Ender writes that "writers see best what is true for us, namely that remembrance is an act of imagination".<sup>3</sup> While Ender is referring to literary artists, her words also ring true for writers of histories: history, like memory, is an act and art of imagination. The communication of the historical imagination in language is both the perpetual problem and productive promise of historical writing. The same has been said for fantasy: fantasy is the literature of the imagination. To fantasy, history brings the longing for and imagination of the past and being in time. To history, fantasy brings imagination that explores the remote realms of inner and outer space and expression that reaches to the limits of representability, only to return with renewed vision to familiar words and worlds.

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<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Ender, *Architexts of Memory: Literature, Science, and Autobiography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

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