

# **On Divergence in Fantasy**

(dissertation)

## **Stranger, I**

(a novel)

**Thesis for Master of Arts (Honours) in English Literature**

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# Abstract

This thesis is in two parts, a paper *On Divergence in Fantasy* (dissertation component) and a novel *Stranger, I* (creative component).

*On Divergence in Fantasy* explores the ways in which fantasy criticism continually redefines its boundaries, without arriving at agreement. The paper draws on Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* to suggest that these disputes and dispersions are not so much a *problem* of fantasy criticism as they are *characteristic* of its operation as a discursive formation.

*Stranger, I* is young adult fantasy novel which explores the themes of identity, difference and relationship to the natural world. The youthful hero Avi must leave a version of a classic fantasy world: a medievalist society with rigid divisions based on family and guild allegiances. Avi's quest is to smuggle vital knowledge beyond the control of the oppressive Alliance of Kai. His journey takes him deep into the unknown landscape of the planet Kai, where he discovers the hidden lives of the Strangers and the secrets of his own past.

# Statement

This thesis comprises a dissertation and a novel (creative component).

The dissertation comprises approximately 30% of the submission.

The thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Word count:

Dissertation: 27,000 words approximately (without quotes or references)

Novel: 80,000 words approximately.

# Preface

*Stranger, I* is young adult fantasy novel which has been written with publication as its goal. To a degree, it therefore works within the conventions of the genre and perceived expectations of the marketplace. However it also breaks with convention in some important respects (which will be apparent on reading). Without “giving away” the story, it can be mentioned that the boundary between fantasy and science fiction has not been observed. Such a boundary has not been fixed in the history of either genre where such cross-overs have been common, but by (a) critical insistence on exclusive definitions and (b) a commercially stronger market for young adult fantasy than science fiction.

During the early stages of writing *Stranger, I*, several people advised that a work which appeared to be science fiction would be unpublishable in the current climate where fantasy predominates. In these discussions, many differences emerged between the author’s perception of fantasy (for example, that it could take place within a technological or futuristic society and not merely in a pre-industrial one) and those of others either writing or reading within the science fiction or fantasy areas. The vehement insistence in various conversations that fantasy is or is not this or that other thing prompted reflection on the nature of fantasy and the research leading to *On Divergence in Fantasy*.

It is also worth noting that in accordance with the realities of commercial publishing (stand-alone fantasy works are rarely published), *Stranger, I* is established as the first book of a trilogy. Some narrative elements are therefore present to establish later books, and are deliberately undeveloped in this initial work.

# On Divergence in Fantasy

## Abstract

This paper considers the ways in which fantasy criticism continually redefines its boundaries, without arriving at a point of convergence. It examines the manner in which fantasy criticism places a constantly shifting canon of texts inside or outside these boundaries, and the areas that it attempts to relegate to beyond the boundaries through critical objections to various types of fantasy literature.

The paper explores the possibility that these disputes and dispersions are not so much a *problem* of fantasy criticism as they are *characteristic* of its operation as a discursive formation. Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* provides a valuable tool to theorise this approach. The paper concludes that there is evidence that the endless proliferation of definitions, the lack of agreement as to which works are “central” and which “peripheral”, and the frequent attacks on sub-genres, are intrinsic to fantasy criticism, rather than an error to be overcome.

## Introduction

*Is the fantastic primarily a literature of fragmentation, a subversive literature that reveals our desires in a fun-house mirror, opening an abyss of meaning, questioning the limits of self and society? Or is the fantastic primarily a literature of belatedness, unmoored from reality, innocent, the repository of exploded supernatural beliefs, expressing a yearning for a lost wholeness, promising transcendence?*

*The answer is yes.*

— David Sandner, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*  
(Sandner, 2004a, p 1)

Fantasy is said to have been with us since ancient times (Moorcock, 1985, p 12); to have emerged in the eighteenth century (Sandner, 2004a, p 6); to have been brought forth by the nineteenth century romantics (Jackson, 1981, p 35).

The twentieth century was said to have fantasy as its dominant literary form (Shippey, 2000, p vii); fantasy is irrelevant (a view held by some Marxists as reported by Miéville,

2002, p 47); or fantasy is an eternal human activity and will remanifest in all ages (Tolkien, 1964, pp 31-2; Tymn, Zahorski and Boyer, 1979, p vii ff).

Much fantasy is poor stuff suitable only for children or infantile adults (Wilson, 1956, p 314); fantasy is a high form of art and the most potent (Tolkien, 1964, p 45).

Contemporary mythic works represent a flight from reality (Eagleton, 1983, p 110); or fantasy, at its best, approaches a profound reality (Schlobin, 1982, pp 13-14).

All of these claims have been made, and will no doubt continue to be made.

Fantasy is:

- Controversial. Each new Harry Potter brings another storm. Magic is either satanic, or wonderfully good for children. Harry Potter books should be banned, or are the best thing for children's reading in decades.
- Subject to withering ideological assaults. Most of these are in web zines or in popular review journals. A few appear in critical works.
- Staunchly defended. For every assailant lobbing lead balls at the castle gate, at least a legion of defenders will let fly with their crossbows from the battlements.
- Popular. *The Lord of the Rings* has been in print for fifty years and has sold over fifty million copies (Shippey, 2000, p xxiv). Royalties from Harry Potter are rumoured to have made J K Rowling the richest woman in Britain.
- Organised. Readers and writers of speculative fiction genres (fantasy and science fiction) are exceptional in the degree to which they have their own critical formations quite apart from those of academe. It is doubtful if any fictional area can claim a more critically engaged popular readership (assuming one excludes the Bible and other scriptures from fictions).
- Of cultural significance. This assertion is a corollary of the above observations.

- Of literary significance. This can be deduced from the number of critical books and journals now dedicated to the genre.<sup>1</sup> It has probably helped that some of the most successful fantasy authors were Oxford scholars. Note that “literary significance” is not the same as “literary value”; there is no agreement on its literary value.
- Undefined. This is not for want of trying —almost every critic offers a new definition. Which is why there is, essentially, none. With no agreed definition, there is no shared understanding of what fantasy is.

This paper deals with disputes. Judgments. Ideologies. And critical fantasies.

In Part 1, fantasy is discussed in terms of Foucault’s notion of a discursive formation, and some critical terms are defined.

Part 2 explores the first and most obvious area of divergence within fantasy criticism, that of *definition*. We are all familiar with the spirited wrangle as to whether or not fantasy is distinguishable from science fiction. We have heard some declare fervidly that science fiction is a type of fantasy, some that they are different genres, and others, trying to resolve the question, declare that both are enclosed within “speculative fiction”. Yet these debates are only the most obvious. This paper will explore some of these debates. It will not attempt to offer a solidity to replace what is fluid, but a way of understanding how these differences continue to typify the discursive formation called “fantasy criticism”. Foucault’s catalogue of “notions of history” will then be used to uncover some framing ideas which are so deeply embedded in definitions and critical approaches to fantasy that they are almost invisible. The possibility is raised that these embedded ideas may be responsible, in part, for the divergences which are apparent.

Part 3 explores a second issue of divergence within fantasy criticism, one that we might call *identifying characteristic works*. Vast spaces have opened up between critics who, for example, marginalise Tolkien (Jackson, 1981, p 9) and those who see his works as central (Attebery, 1992, p 14). Can we determine how such separations may have

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<sup>1</sup> Journals with fantasy as a major area of study include *The Lion and the Unicorn* (USA); *Mythlore* (UK); *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* (USA); *Mallorn* (UK); *Foundation* (UK); *Extrapolation* (USA).

opened up between critics within the one discursive formation of fantasy criticism? This problem is, of course, closely related to the problem identified in Part 2. It is possible that the two problems are causally connected, so that one flows from the other, or they may flow from yet a third possibility, one that is hidden behind both. An attempt is made to isolate some intrinsic forces within fantasy criticism that may push critics to identify their theoretical stances closely with their approval for particular works.

Part 4 considers a third area of divergence, that of objections by fantasy critics to various sub-types of fantasy. These include closely reasoned arguments, sweeping judgments, and visceral displeasure. In each case, the objection will be closely examined. Does it hold up, *as against the genre or mode*? What is the use or purpose of the objection? Is it part of an ideological debate, or the result and justification of a system of classification? This section then considers how it may be possible to extend the theorisation of the forces identified in Part 3 to arrive at a discursive framework that explains some of those oddities that fantasy criticism, perhaps uniquely, produces – scathing attacks on sub-genres; intense questioning of the integrity of strategies such as the use of the mediaeval; the claim by ideological critics that many contemporary works are attempting to recreate a consolatory past; and impassioned defences of those same works by others who claim that they are a valid form of dissent. How has this pattern arisen?

Two things should now be emphasised here. First, the theories of discursive formations contained in Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* have been applied as a useful approach for theorising the patterns of fantasy criticism under discussion. Necessarily, this has introduced a certain post-structuralist flavour into the analysis.

Second, the period under study is from 1954, the date of the original publication of the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* which arguably heralded the current upsurge of fantasy fiction and fantasy criticism.

## 1 – Preliminary

### Definitions and terms used in this paper

*Fantasy critic* will include anyone writing an article, review or other publication who discusses fantasy *qua* fantasy (however defined or termed), and who considers several aspects of fantasy with a critical focus. Excluded from this definition of “fantasy critic” are those writing from “outside” critical formations – including many of those issuing advice to parents on whether or not their children should read *Harry Potter* books, for example.

*Fantasy* will be used as a convenient short form of “fantasy literature” throughout. *Phantasy* will be used to differentiate daydreams and individual imaginings from fantasy in the sense of fantasy texts (following Irwin who drew this distinction from Jung: Irwin, 1976, p 6).

The definitions of *fantasy literature* and other related terms are a subject area for this paper (rather than a starting point), and these will be discussed in the main body of the text.

Insofar as the terms *radical* and *conservative* are used in fantasy criticism, they appear to occupy a simple duality. A “radical” ideology is one that seeks a world in which people are liberated from being subjugated; a “conservative” ideology is one which seeks to maintain or restore a status quo of unequal power relations. The terms may well be used elsewhere in more complex and contradictory ways, but this is essentially their use in ideological fantasy criticism and this convention will be followed here.

Various terms have been applied from Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*.<sup>2</sup> A *discursive formation* is a portion of the entire archive of what can and has been said, identified by certain discursive regularities which distinguish it from other formations, and which makes it possible to speak and take up positions within an area of knowledge (Foucault, 1969, pp 31-9, 129). *Rules of formation* are those “conditions of

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<sup>2</sup> His work offers an entire morphological framework, and not all of numerous terms he establishes have been adopted.

existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance)” to which elements of a discursive formation are subjected (Foucault, 1969, p 38). There are four main elements of a discursive formation: *Objects* are not precisely defined by Foucault but appear to include signs, as they include aspects of both signified and signifier (Foucault, 1969, pp 32, 48). Foucault’s primary interest is not in their nature but in the systems of formation that govern their appearance and transformation (Foucault, 1969, pp 32-3). *Enunciative modalities* are those rules which make possible certain forms of description and perception, resulting in (for example) what we might recognise as a style of writing, or a manner of statement (Foucault, 1969, pp 33-4, 50ff). *Concepts* in Foucault appear to accord fairly closely with the usual dictionary meaning, however once again, he is not so much interested in the nature of the concepts themselves, but the systems that give rise to their emergence and dispersion (Foucault, 1969, p 56). *Theoretical strategies* refer to ways of organising objects, enunciative modalities and concepts to arrive at themes and theories (Foucault, 1969, p 64). Again, it is the characteristic rules of formation that govern theoretical strategies that are of interest.

For brevity, the period under discussion (1954 and following) is referred to as *contemporary* throughout.

### **Establishing fantasy criticism as a discursive formation**

Discursive formations are not necessarily congruent with discipline areas (Foucault, 1969, pp 178-9). In establishing whether “fantasy criticism” constitutes a Foucauldian discursive formation, one must establish distinguishable rules of formation for objects, enunciative modalities, concepts and theoretical strategies.

Does fantasy criticism have characteristic spaces in which *objects* emerge and are transformed? Here we might look for evidence of whether fantasy criticism proffers unique terms (as evidence of *spaces* of interplay which can give rise to objects), or, alternatively, whether it uses terms in unique ways (evidence that it has transformed, and/or is the process of continually transforming preexisting objects to its own rules) (Foucault, 1969, p 32). Clearly yes. Some of its characteristic *objects*, for example, are “fantastic”, “wonder”, “marvellous”, “sublime”, “secondary world”, “*Lord of the Rings*”, and these have particular meanings, positions and statuses that are accorded to them by

fantasy criticism as distinct from other areas of criticism. One might also point to *space* in fantasy criticism which has been opened in the direction of the transcendent, and which has made possible the transformation or reemergence of terms such as “marvellous”, “wonder”, “sublime” and “higher reality” – a space which within secular literary criticism is unique.

Can we determine whether fantasy criticism enables characteristic “enunciative modalities”? This appears more difficult to establish. At first glance, most of the characteristics of its enunciative modalities, insofar as they are evidenced in writing styles or manners of speaking, are arguably indistinguishable from the formations of literary criticism and the literary review. However, Foucault raises three questions which govern the emergence of “enunciative modalities”. Who may speak? From what institutional sites may they speak? What subject positions is it possible for them to occupy? As we start to address these questions, we realise that fantasy criticism does in fact offer differentiable enunciative modalities. Firstly, it has its own *institutional sites*, in the form of journals, conferences, readers’ guides and conventions. The last two, readers’ guides and conferences, are formations shared with fans and authors and may offer both general and academic content (and much in between). Although the writing styles and manners of speaking in academic journals on fantasy may appear similar to those in other academic journals, this is not the case for those in readers’ guides or at fantasy conventions. Secondly, *who may speak* is somewhat differently constituted to those who may speak in other areas of literary criticism or review. In addition to the academic and the literary reviewer, there are also the fan, the scholar-fan and the author-critic, all of whom may disseminate reviews and interpretations of works, contribute to zines and web sites, and publish books analysing fantasy. Fantasy criticism offers a broader range of *subject positions*, and shifting subject positions. There are writers who both speak at popular conventions and teach at universities, and academics who contribute both to scholarly events and fan events. The result is a critical formation which is uncharacteristically open along the boundaries of *who may speak* and from *what subject positions* and *at what institutional sites*, which in turn gives rise to its differentiable enunciative modalities (Foucault, 1969, pp 50-5). Consider the non-fiction work heavily illustrated with high fantasy art; the reader’s guide with its lists of recommended works; the middle ground occupied by speakers in the “academic” stream at non-academic conferences (whose presentation style must take

into account a non-academic audience which is nevertheless a critically engaged audience and which includes members who may be better informed than they on details such as intertextual sources and minutiae of mediaeval culture).

Is it the case that fantasy criticism offers unique conditions for the formation of *concepts*, in their succession, coexistence, or procedures of intervention (to use Foucault's terms)? In other words, we are concerned here not with establishing unique concepts, but unique conditions for their emergence and/or transformation. Again, we might answer yes. Later in this paper it will be shown that fantasy criticism has an unusually high degree of theoretical dispersion. Mutually exclusive conceptualisations are commonplace, and frequently oppositional to those concepts which have already emerged, yet continue to *coexist* with and *succeed* one another. These conceptualisations are part of a field of presence which is recognisably a unity of some kind – there are commonalities in the ideas and elements traded, the authorities which are quoted, the works that are discussed. Yet this field of presence is not a typical collection of “statements ... acknowledged to be truthful, involving exact description, well-founded reasoning, or necessary presupposition” but characterised by contradictory claims, inconsistent descriptions, opposing foundations of reason and disputed origins. These characteristics of succession and coexistence of concepts in fantasy criticism are arguably not characteristic of literary criticism more generally (although they may be present to a lesser degree elsewhere, for example in the study of the romantic movement). This distinctiveness in fantasy criticism's succession and coexistence of concepts is arguably sufficient to prove unique conditions for its formation of concepts, and it is not necessary to explore “procedures of intervention” (although this might be a rewarding area for closer examination at some future time: see Foucault, 1969, pp 56-63).

What of theoretical strategies? Are there distinctive rules of formation that enable themes, points of divergence and congruence in the organisation of objects, enunciative modalities and concepts to emerge? One would venture to say that many of these are similar to those found in related discourses of literary criticism and literary review. Psychoanalytic readings, feminist reinscriptions, Marxist critiques, structuralist analyses and other critical approaches that are applied to literary works generally can be – and are – also applied to fantasy works. There are many points of similarity; however,

before we form a conclusion, let us consider the three areas of possible exploration identified within Foucault's schema. Firstly, we need to ask whether can one find any characteristic *points of diffraction* for theoretical strategies within fantasy criticism. Consider the types of strategies already mentioned in the introduction (and which will be discussed and evidenced later in this paper), such as: the launching of scathing attacks on particular sub-genres; the intense questioning of the integrity of textual strategies such as the use of the mediaeval; the relegation into the past (typically the "consolatory past") of a great flood of contemporary works; impassioned defences of many of those same works based on revisioning dissent; the heated debate around whether to allow or disallow discussion of the transcendent; the oppositional positioning of fantasy and realism. One would have to say that to some degree these types of strategies are characteristic of fantasy criticism, and, when taken together, uniquely so. Secondly, Foucault suggests examining *the economy of the discursive constellation*, whereby discourses "may also be in a relation of analogy, opposition, or complementarity with certain other discourses" or marked off from them by areas of "mutual delimitation". In this latter point we have, quite simply, an opportunity to at last recognise the commonly understood difference between fantasy criticism and criticism generally – the delimitation of fantasy texts as its area of study. Thirdly, Foucault identifies the formative effects of *authority* on theoretical strategies, as further divided into: functions the discourse must fulfil in fields of non-discursive practice (for example, pedagogy); how discourse is appropriated by particular groups; and positions of desire. As to the first two points, the role of fantasy criticism (in its least academic form) in supporting reading pleasure in fan culture, and the unique formation of groups of interest which are inclusive of readers, authors and critics, are clear points of differentiation. As to the third point, desire, this will be discussed later in this paper and at greater length than this section allows, using the term "attractive force" as preferable to "desire" as a force is imputed to observable movements rather than internal, unobservable states. We have already sufficient established enough points of differentiation to conclude that there are unique rules of formation for theoretical strategies. The more difficult question of how these rules of formation may "derive ... from the same set of relations" (Foucault, 1969, pp 64-70) will be also be deferred to later in this paper.

To summarise, fantasy criticism shares many objects, enunciative modalities, concepts and theoretical strategies with related discourses such as literary criticism generally. Yet it also has its own unique rules of formation and these are arguably sufficient to establish it as a Foucauldian *discursive formation*.

## 2 –The Thousand and One Definitional Nights

We can readily observe that there is no widely accepted definition of fantasy literature. Even among those who are in general agreement on the kind of thing that fantasy is, such as “the literature of the impossible”, there is no agreement on its detail or bounds. Lack of agreement, even outright contradiction, appears to be characteristic of fantasy criticism. In this part, therefore, the lack of agreement will first be established and some areas of contradiction noted. A brief consideration of issues of “genre” and “mode” will preface the discussion. It will be followed by a survey of some leading definitions of fantasy, and their areas of difference will be identified. Foucault’s analysis of notions of history will then form the basis of an exploration of how some disparate threads which are identifiable in the history of ideas have manifested within definitions of fantasy. The inheritance by fantasy criticism of these manifold notions, and its emergence as a discipline at a time when the tectonic plates of theories of history (and of criticism) were arguably moving against each other, will form one strand of argument to support the main thesis of this paper: that divergence is a rule of formation of fantasy criticism as a discursive formation, and is not merely a transient or coincidental state.

### Genre and mode

One preliminary divergence needs to be examined, not the least because it underlies the work of some of the theorists to be surveyed. This is the bifurcation in fantasy theory between *genre* and *mode*. Without going too far down the path of genre theory, which would be an overly lengthy digression, it is worth noting from the outset that some critics take a generic approach and others a modal one. Yet others may move comfortably between fantasy as a genre and a mode. Todorov, for example, puts forward a case for genre. He argues that genres help us recognise the relationship of texts to other works:

When we examine works of literature from the perspective of genre, we engage in a very particular enterprise: we discover a principle operative in a number of texts, rather than what is specific about each of them ...

... failing to recognize the existence of genres is equivalent to claiming that a literary work does not bear any relationship to already existing works. Genres are

precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature (Todorov, 1970, pp 3, 8).

Genres, he points out, cannot be fixed, as individual works may alter our understanding of a genre (Todorov, 1970, p 6). Todorov also makes a distinction between historical genres and theoretical genres. Theoretical genres can be either elementary (defined according to one characteristic) or complex (based on several characteristics); historical genres in criticism are a sub-group of complex theoretical genres (Todorov, 1970, pp 14-15). This last point may go some way towards explaining why few theorists define fantasy literature according to a single characteristic, but it does not provide a theoretical basis for the exclusions and contradictions which are identified below. Todorov's particular interest is in "la littérature fantastique" that is usually translated as "the fantastic", and which will be described later in this paper.

Todorov's use of "the fantastic" is not universal. Many critics use "the fantastic" to designate a mode, and "fantasy" to delineate a genre (and some use these terms interchangeably). The fantastic as a *mode* may be used to describe certain elements or styles of representation within a work which may not itself be a fantasy. Often these elements or styles of representation are presented as a converse of realism or the mimetic. Rabkin (1976) provides a typical example of this distinction:

When the anti-expected happens, we are in the presence of the fantastic.

The occurrence of the anti-expected can be fantastic even if it takes place in a work that is not itself a fantasy (Rabkin, 1976, p 10).

Jameson offers an interesting fusion of "genre" and "mode". He defines "genre" as a contract between a writer and the readers "based on the presupposition that all speech needs to be marked with certain indications and signals as to how it is properly to be used" (Jameson, 1975, p 135). After discussing two tendencies within genre theory, the first in which the object of inquiry is semantic (for example, a mode of "comic vision") and the second in which it is syntactic (for example, a formula for the construction of a comedy), he proposes a synthesis whereby genre is defined as:

... that literary phenomenon which may be articulated *either* in terms of a fixed form *or* in terms of a mode, and which *must* be susceptible of expression in *either* of these critical codes optionally (Jameson, 1975, p 137).

This fusion suits his critical purpose. In distinguishing (but not separating) “mode” from “form” he offers a basis for the discussion of the historical process of secularisation and renewal of romance as a mode (Jameson, 1975, p 142). Within the other thread, the “form” of genre, he offers a basis for structural readings of romance. For Jameson as a Marxist critic, structuralism allows him to rebut what he derisively terms “categories of bourgeois individualism” such as the hero (Jameson, 1975, p 148).

Jackson suggests that fantasy is a mode, “from which a number of related genres emerge” (Jackson, 1981, p 7). Hume attempts to rebut the distinction, arguing that “An inclusive definition cannot confine itself to treating fantasy as a genre (Todorov) or even as a mode (Jackson)” (Hume, 1984, p 24). Given that Hume’s aim is to discuss fantasy as an *impulse* within literature at large alongside that of mimesis, rather than *fantasy literature* as a particular body of work, this appears reasonable, although we might note that her use of “impulse” is arguably a disguised type of “mode”. One would however have to agree with Hume that elements of fantasy could potentially be interwoven in almost any type of work, which is the basis of the modal approach. However, Hume’s objection that definitions are often too narrowly framed, and result in too narrow a corpus is problematic (Hume, 1984, p 8); if there is an identifiable group of works, one can presumably legitimately study these works, and to do so one would need a workable definition; one has, in practical terms, declared a genre, for the very reasons that Todorov put forward. Of interest is Hume’s observation: “And note, too, the relative unimportance or eccentricity or peripherality of so many of the texts these definitions confine themselves to” (Hume, 1984, p 19). Here Hume is pointing towards the divergence in agreement as to characteristic works which will be discussed later in this paper.

The purpose in summarising this debate is not to determine whether either genre or mode is a more or less valid approach. A separation into a genre may serve one critical purpose, and hinder another; fantasy authors, too, may embrace or reject a particular label. The task of this paper is not to resolve anomalies, but to observe them. One

would have to say that this particular anomaly is an example of divergence within fantasy criticism.

### Definitional elements

Many articulated definitions of fantasy have multiple elements. These elements are rarely combined in the same way; to treat each combination separately would however result in little more than a lengthy list of critics and their preferred formulae. The main elements, such as “the impossible”, “wonder” and so forth will therefore be discussed separately.

Fantasy as the *literature of the impossible* is probably the most common formulation. The “impossible” is that which, according to the known rules of the known world, cannot occur.<sup>3</sup> Variations of this definition (which can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*: see Aristotle, c 350 BC at XXV) have been current throughout the period under study, and continue to dominate much critical literature. It was popular among a number of critics in the 1970s, and still holds sway. It has been adopted as a definitional component by: C S Lewis, 1982, p 90ff (mythopoetic impossible); Irwin, 1976 (the impossible as intellectual play); Fredericks, 1978 (the “reality-orientated” impossible); Tymn, Zahorski and Boyer, 1979, p 3 (“nonrational phenomena”); Schlobin, 1979, p xxvi; Sandner, 2004a, p 7 (the “belated” impossible); Grant and Tiner, 1997, p 338 (“impossible” or “otherworld”); it also forms part of Manlove’s definition (1975 and 1982) (discussed below) and numerous others. It is most frequently adopted in combination with other definitional elements. However, it is subject to a serious degree of internal contradiction. One example will suffice. It is plainly open to a critic adopting the “literature of the impossible” definition to consider science fiction to be a type of “literature of the impossible”. Fantasy could thus be very broadly conceived, with science fiction a sub-genre within it (as it is in Moorcock, 1985, pp 7, 32). For various reasons, however, many critics prefer instead to distinguish fantasy from science fiction. The basis on which it is done is characteristically something like this: science fiction comprises works which might

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<sup>3</sup> It follows that what could be defined as “fantasy” changes with our “knowledge”, and therefore varies from culture to culture, across time and according to the individual beliefs of the reader.

appear to be concerned with the impossible but they can be distinguished on the ground that they present a scientific basis for phenomena, so that they could conceivably be possible at another time or place, for example with access to more advanced technology (see Tymn, Zahorski and Boyer, 1979, pp 4-5; Irwin, 1976, pp 96-7; Swinfen, 1984, p 5). There is also a third possibility. This holds that science fiction is “the literature of the impossible” and that fantasy is a sub-genre within it. This is the approach taken by Lewis in “On Science Fiction” (Lewis, 1982). This position, that fantasy is a sub-genre of science fiction, is a complete reversal of the first, where science fiction was the sub-genre of fantasy. This is an internal, definitional, contradiction.

Fantasy as *any departure from consensus reality* is the definition adopted by Hume (Hume, 1984, p 21). This definition is so broad as to potentially include all works of fiction. Hume acknowledges this difficulty, and addresses it thus:

It may seem that I am trying to claim all literature as fantasy, or at least all but the realistic novel and occasional earlier picaresque and satiric tales. Not so. I am saying that most literature includes fantastic elements, even as it includes mimesis (Hume, 1984, p 22).

Hume’s definition is notable in that rather than trying to define works as fantasy, she defines fantasy as something available to works. In other words, she positions fantasy as a mode (although Hume attempts to reject “mode”, preferring “impulse”), rather than a genre, and she is therefore in opposition to many of the genre-based definitions discussed in this section. To consider fantasy purely as a mode conversely raises problems for other critics who take a genre-based approach. Irwin, for example, comments that “Paradoxically enough, the fantastic [that is, the mode] can be used to make an antifantasy” (Irwin, 1976, p 9). Recent examples proving this point can be seen in the anti-fantasy novels of Robin Klein *Halfway Across the Galaxy and Turn Left* (1985) and *Seeing Things* (1993).

The above theories of fantasy situate fantasy’s point of departure at a divergence from a shared reality. This reality is implicitly external to the text. Rabkin, on the other hand, defines fantasy as works concerned with breaking the “ground rules” of the works’ narratives, that is, the point of departure for fantasy is from rules established within a narrative itself:

The fantastic is a quality of astonishment that we feel when the ground rules of a narrative world are suddenly made to turn about 180° ... In more or less degree, a whole range of narratives uses the fantastic. And at the far end of this range, we find Fantasy, the genre whose center and concern, whose primary enterprise, is to present and consider the fantastic (Rabkin, 1976, p 41).

His theory goes some way to describing how the effects of wonder, astonishment and so forth, commonly associated with fantasy, are produced. However, his definition necessarily excludes works which, within the textual “fantasy world”, accept the marvellous as “normal”. Most fairy tales are thus excluded:

We do not find here [in the “Briar Rose” or “Sleeping Beauty” tale] the signals of the fantastic. This is not Wonderland but the less energetic and less frantic World of Enchantment. In this world ... the prophecy of the pricked finger is as believed ... Within the World of Enchantment, everything happens according to rule (Rabkin, 1976, p 35).

This is atypical, for, as we shall see below, there are several critical approaches which would foreground precisely the world of enchantment and faërie that Rabkin would exclude. His definition, for example, would exclude contemporary works usually considered to be fantasy, such as Gail Carson Levine’s *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* (1991) where the existence and qualities of many of the foregrounded elements (dragons, sorcerers that can fly, ogres) etc are part of the “ground rules” of the narrative and the suspense relies on other elements (which would be merely “non-expected” or “dis-expected” within Rabkin’s formulation). Later in the same work, however, he appears to broaden his definition of the fantastic (as a mode) to include that which is anti-expected from the perspective of the “extra-textual” or “conscious” world as well as against a narrative world and is therefore able to reincorporate fairy tales within the fantastic, although not within fantasy (Rabkin, 1976, pp 57, 73).<sup>4</sup> Like Hume, Rabkin sees the potential for many works to include fantastic elements, but, unlike Hume, his model incorporates a fantasy genre. However, this genre is incompatible with that of other critics.

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<sup>4</sup> His definition of fantasy as based on a reversal of textual ground rules is reaffirmed.

Irwin's main thesis is that fantasy is "*a kind of mental play*", wherein "writer and reader knowingly enter upon a conspiracy of intellectual subversiveness, that is, upon a game" (Irwin, 1976, p 9). As an early theorist, Irwin articulated an influential "the literature of the impossible" definition which, although not the first statement of this idea, was frequently cited. His additional criteria for "mental play" forms part of his effort to assert that the form is controlled by reason, not emotion. Violations of the impossible that are not "play" but are concerned with transcendent themes ("... Faust-like efforts to abrogate finitude or to penetrate ultimate mysteries") are excluded, for example ghost stories, as are works intended to incite the reader's wonder but not engage his or her intellect, such as fairy stories (described as "antifantasy") (Irwin, 1976, pp 9, 89). Again, these are precisely the areas foregrounded by a number of other critics, including Manlove and Tolkien. Irwin also excludes the "romance" form, on the basis that it "is not an intellectual game, and that it fosters a credence different from that which fantasy requires" (Irwin, 1976, p 67). This is yet another example of discord, for numerous critics, as we shall see below, argue precisely that fantasy is part of the romance tradition. Further, in one of the most remarkable exclusions so far discussed in this paper, Irwin's focus on the control of reason leads him to placing impossibility based on "the heroic" character beyond the bounds of the genre:

... fantasy cannot contain beings that are intrinsically heroic and those whose essence is either psychic, spiritual, or passional ... The heroic, the psychic, the spiritual, and the passional — separately or in combination — may be approached by reason, anatomized, explained, understood, illuminated, but they cannot be so apprehended in their fullness (Irwin, 1976, p 74).

This is a highly contentious assertion. The heroic is foregrounded by many other critics, again notably those that situate fantasy within romance. Fantasy, as thus described, is highly specific, and would exclude many contemporary works, particularly young adult works which encourage identification with an heroic character. Spiritual beings also "have no proper place in a fantasy", including Lucifer, presumably

excluding recent works such as Webb's *Waywalkers* (2003) which features an heroic Lucifer and other pantheistic figures as its central "impossibility".<sup>5</sup>

Fantasy has historical associations with *romance* and this term sometimes appears in criticism as an overarching category which includes fantasy, or is sometimes even equated to fantasy (for an example of the latter, see Spencer, 1985, p 101). This usage places fantasy consciously within a particular historical tradition. Rather than a defined genre in itself, fantasy is thus on a continuum – in Foucauldian terms, the latest "series" in the discursive formation "romance". The romance and the fantasy novel share preoccupations with the moral development and self-realisation of the hero, the quest, struggles between good and evil forces and one-to-one heroic combat. The romance and the fantasy novel are both related to the *epic* tradition, with common motifs including the journey, a noble-minded hero, encounters with fabulous monsters and legendary powers. Northrop Frye's influential *Anatomy of Criticism* in the 1950s cemented the fantasy/romance association within a theoretical framework. His particular conceptual approach made romance a cornerstone of literature, one of four dominant literary modes:

The romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream ... The perennially childlike quality of romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space ...

The essential element of plot in romance is adventure ... The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest ...

... the nearer the romance is to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero and the more the enemy will take on demonic mythical qualities. The central form of romance is dialectical ... (Frye, 1957, pp 186-7).

However, opinions as to the origins and nature of "the romance" differ considerably. As to origins, Moorcock, for example, finds fantasy is "in direct line from the fabulous

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5 It should be made clear that Irwin is not excluding works which merely *contain* the above elements, even where this content is substantial; his desire is to exclude those for which *the impossible element* is founded on non-intellectual treatment of the central contradiction. A great many works that others would place within fantasy genres therefore fall outside his definition, however he will admit particular works if they meet his requirement of a central intellectual violation of convention (Irwin, 1976, p 183).

epics of Gilgamesh, Ulysses, Finn Mac Coul, Siegfried, Arthur, Charlemagne and, again primarily through Morris, the Icelandic sagas” (Moorcock, 1987, pp 14-15). He describes an outpouring of romance works in the sixteenth century, citing *Palmerin de Inglaterra* (c 1547) as a typical example and also describing it as epic fantasy. Sandner places the birth of the romance in the eighteenth century. The realistic novel diverged from the romance, with the new realistic novel and the romance/fantasy necessarily defining themselves each against the other. This trend continued, and as a result modern fantasy literature continues to be defined as against realism (Sandner, 2004a, p 7). Bloom (a probable influence on Sandner) likewise asserts that the romance form originated in the eighteenth century, describing fantasy as “belated romance” that replaced the heroic genre (Bloom, 2004, pp 237, 241).

As to its nature, Frye distinguishes myth from romance (both of which he includes within a broader category of “mythopoetic fiction”) on the basis of the divinity of the hero in myth and the role of myth in theology (Frye, 1957, p 188). Fredric Jameson, a Marxist critic, adopts part of Frye’s analysis and terminology, including the enclosure of fantasy within romance (Jameson, 1975, p 137). However, he quickly draws attention to some crucial differences between his analysis and Frye’s. Pointing to romance’s “conceptual opposition between good and evil, under which all the other types of attributes and images (light and darkness, high and low, etc) [as described by Frye] are clearly subsumed” (Jameson, 1975, p 140), he immediately calls into question the nature of evil and how it might be used to constitute Otherness. In other words, while sharing a description of romance’s boundaries and its known themes and motifs as common territory with Frye (albeit with a different emphasis), he moves into an ideological analysis at very point that Frye moves into an archetypal/psychological one. This is an example of how different critical schools may use similar point of departure (similar definitional boundaries) but rapidly reach quite incongruent destinations (due to divergence of critical approach). It is not however the type of divergence that concerns this paper, which is focused rather on the lack of agreement as to the nature of fantasy, namely as to the definition, centre and periphery of fantasy, rather than on the diversity of themes which fantasy may offer for exegesis. As discussed above, those critics who hold that romances fall completely outside fantasy are an example of the type of divergence that is being explored.

Jackson disputes the identification of fantasy with “romance” and defines fantasy in part as “*a literature of desire*, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss” (emphasis added). The constraints of society and culture lead to a sense of lack, for which fantasy attempts to compensate. Fantasy can manifest desire, or attempt to dispel it. More frequently, it performs both functions within the same narrative as the reader’s desire is dispelled by vicarious experience. She compares fantasy works to other brief interludes of disorder where desire is uncovered and then re-covered (Jackson, 1981, pp 3-4). Jackson rejects any critical attempt to locate this desire within a transcendent space, for example as a desire for a secondary world that is more complete or unified than our own, preferring to consider art in its social, political, economic and sexual contexts (Jackson, 1981, pp 2-3). However, fantasy “deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material” that she also feels obliged to consider it from a psychoanalytical perspective. To reconcile the socio-political and the psychoanalytical approaches, she forms a (somewhat tenuous) theoretical bridge between the two by asserting that the unconscious is where social norms and expectations are replicated, as well as resisted (Jackson, 1981, p 6). She also accepts the traditional “literature of the impossible” description of fantastic narratives (Jackson, 1981, p 21). Other critics who include desire as an element include Tolkien (see below) and Apter who takes a psychoanalytical approach to fantasy which is inclusive of desire (Apter, 1982, p 6). “Desire” is thus adopted within very diverse critical approaches: the postmodern, the transcendental and the psychoanalytic. It could be used to dismiss fantasy as escapist wish-fulfillment (a common enough argument), or to radicalise fantasy, as Jackson does, by pointing to how it critiques aspects of society. Apter acknowledges both possibilities (Apter, 1982, p 6). Although it may be coupled together with other definitional elements, it is a very different formulation from those based on the impulse to “wonder”, “mental play” or “romance” for example.

Fantasy is “*a fiction evoking wonder*” for a number of critics (who perhaps were influenced by earlier definitions of romance). Notable among them is Manlove (1975 and 1982), who combines this definitional element with the familiar “impossible”:

... a fantasy is: *A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms* (Manlove, 1982, pp 16-17). [original emphasis]

Other critics whose definitions of fantasy embrace “wonder” include: C S Lewis, 1982, p 91 (fantasy is required to have some effect, of which wonder is one of those possible); Swinfen, 1984, p 5; and Lynn, 1989, p xix (wonder envisaged as a likely destination of the impossible and magic). The requirement for “wonder” clearly depends on successfully achieving an effect on a reader. Some corollaries immediately occur: 1) If a fiction fails to evoke wonder, then it can’t be a fantasy, even if it has many of the motifs we associate with fantasy. 2) Conversely, works from many cultures and periods with diverse conventions are able to be united by their shared effect. Manlove is therefore able to trace the antecedents of fantasy back through to ancient works, myths and fairy tales (Manlove, 1982, p 26). 3) A fiction may evoke wonder in some readers and not in others. Like the “impossible”, what is wondrous may depend on cultural and individual responses. 4) Critical discussion will therefore require mechanisms to infer the response of wonder. Manlove attempts to circumvent these contingencies by linking wonder causatively to the impossible:

Wonder is, of course, generated by fantasy purely from the presence of the supernatural or impossible and from the element of mystery and lack of explanation that goes with it (Manlove, 1982, p 22).

If wonder flows directly from the unexplained impossible, presumably its effect or intended effect on readers can be assumed rather than needing to be tested or inferred. However, this causative link to the impossible raises the question of whether the presence of wonder is really a necessary definitional requirement. Several critics, for example, deploy wonder as a signal of a successful fantasy, rather than a definitional element (Senior, 1995, pp 115, 118-19, 121; Gates, Steffel and Molson, 2003, p 14). Be that as it may, the use of “wonder” within definitions of fantasy has been surprisingly pervasive. Yet it is incompatible with a number of other approaches, including those of the ideological critics of the fantastic, for example Jackson, and Irwin’s “mental play”, discussed above.

For Todorov and a group of other critics, fictions of wonder and “the marvellous” are specifically excluded from “the fantastic”, which is defined as a specific genre where *one hesitates between a rational and a supernatural explanation*. On either side of this genre are two others: the marvellous, those works where one is led to accept non-rational rules as true; and the uncanny, those where the seemingly supernatural turns out to

have a rational explanation. A number of French and other critics offer similar constructions, albeit with some differences. Malrieu, for example, rejects Todorov's "hesitation", and instead proposes a confrontation between an individual and an exterior phenomenon (Malrieu, 1992, p 49). If we follow Jackson, who adopts much of Todorov's model but favours a traditional distinction between the fantastic "mode" and fantasy "genres", and who positions the fantastic mode between the marvellous and mimetic modes rather than between the marvellous and uncanny, it appears that much popular fantasy falls within "the marvellous", and therefore outside the heart of fantasy and the fantastic (Jackson, 1981, pp 7, 32, 35). Olsen, who also adopts aspects of the model in his 1987 work on postmodern fantasy, follows Jackson in establishing fantasy as an area of instability between two modes of discourse (the marvellous and the mimetic) which is deconstructive in effect (Olsen, 1987, pp 288-9). In summary, the "fantastic", as variously defined by this group of critics, is a genre or mode characterised by indeterminacy of meaning. This group typically offers a very narrow configuration of "fantasy" or "the fantastic". A large part of those works which others would place within fantasy are relegated by this group to "the marvellous". Their preoccupation with deconstructive themes is atypical. Their definition has almost no common ground with those discussed above, nor with a range of other definitions based on a magical worldview or the creation of secondary worlds.

For quite a number of critics, *the creation of a secondary world* – also known as an "otherworld" — is an essential requirement of fantasy and part of its definition. Fantasy in Tolkien's analysis (1964), for example, is principally concerned with secondary realms, and the fairy story in particular with the realm of Faërie characterised by magic:

Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie (Tolkien, 1964, p 40).

Many works usually identified as fantasy have this characteristic; well-known examples include C S Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Le Guin's *Earthsea* series and Andre Norton's *Witch World* books, to name just a few. Secondary worlds are also a component of Mobley's definition, that of Swinfen who equates secondary worlds with the result of the "sub-creation" described by Tolkien and that of Grant and Tiner who

have a bifurcating definition requiring either the “impossible” or an “impossible otherworld”) (Mobley, 1974, p 117; Swinfen, 1984, pp 4-5; Grant and Tiner, 1997, p 338). On the face of it, a definition based on secondary worlds might appear to exclude works that are set in the everyday world, and this is one possible approach. Other critics circumvent this difficulty by a strategy of dividing fantasy into “high” and “low” forms. For example, Tymn, Zahorski and Boyer define “high fantasy” as a work entirely situated within another realm and “low fantasy” as a work where elements from another realm intrude into the everyday world (Tymn, Zahorski and Boyer, 1979, p 5). *The Lord of the Rings* would be a typical example of “high fantasy” and Wynne Jones’ *Wilkins’ Tooth* of “low fantasy”. However formulated, the “secondary world” definition is contested. It is rejected by Jackson, who emphatically states that “Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world ...” (Jackson, 1981, p 8). For others, rather than being the thing itself, secondary world fiction is a sub-genre of fantasy (see Lewis, 1982, p 93, for example). The magical secondary world of faërie is specifically excluded from fantasy by Rabkin, Jackson and others (see above).

One of the simplest of definitions of fantasy states that it is *a fiction with a magical worldview*. Mobley (1974), who was very influenced by Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories”, offers “magical worldview” as the main feature of her definition. It is clear from her discussion that foregrounding magic enables her to draw a clear line between science fiction (which is not magical) and fantasy (which is not scientific):

The fantasy fiction which this paper examines is essentially a nonrational form (although a reasonable form in that it has an internal logic of its own) which arises from a world view essentially magical in its orientation. As a fiction, it requires the reader’s entering an Other world and following a hero whose adventures take place in a reality far removed from the mundane reality of the reader’s waking experience. This world is informed by Magic, and the reader must be willing to accept Magic as the central force without demanding or expecting mundane explanations (Mobley, 1974, p 117).

Tolkien (1964) employed magic as one of his definitional elements of fairy-stories (within which he includes fantasy), although later in his essay he preferred the word “enchantment” to magic (Tolkien, 1964, pp 15, 49-50). Like Mobley, magic allowed Tolkien to distinguish fairy-stories from science fiction. To this exclusion he added that of any satire on or explaining away of the magic itself. Magic is also a main

element of Ruth Nadelman Lynn's definition of fantasy as a form in which "magic causes impossible, and often wondrous, events to occur" (Lynn, 1989, p xix). It is clear that "the impossible" and "magic" are definitionally related. "Magic" is a way of naming and theorising an animating force behind the "impossible". However, it can be distinguished from the impossible by its individualised nature, as in "magic" the impossible can only be wielded personally. Swinfen (1984), following Tolkien, also distinguishes between magic and enchantment, on the ground that magic is motivated by a desire for power and control, and belongs to the "primary" (everyday) world (Swinfen, 1984, p 6; Tolkien, 1964, pp 49-50). It therefore has no relation to fantasy, whereas enchantment is related to secondary worlds, and inspires wonder. A definition based on magic or enchantment clearly has some incompatibilities with Irwin, Rabkin and Jackson, discussed above (who in turn do not form a group but represent very divergent models). It also gives rise to an additional dispute, around the type of animating power that a work requires to be considered fantasy. For some of this group of critics, this must not be based on personal desire of the hero or wielder of magic for personal control over their world; the idea that magic is a projection of the ego is implicitly rejected.

The converse argument, that fantasy depicts *archetypes or aspects of the inner world*, projected figuratively or metaphorically over externalised landscapes and figures, is very prevalent. Moorcock (1987) is one of a number of advocates of this view:

In a romance the 'real' world of the social novel is reversed; the protagonists are placed in landscapes directly reflecting the inner landscapes of their minds. A hero might range the terrain of his own psyche, encountering, as other characters, various aspects of himself ...

Epic fantasy can offer a world of metaphor in which to explore the rich, hidden territories within us ... (Moorcock, 1987, pp 16-17).

Others who link fantasy to the figurative projections of the psyche include Apter (the figurative made literal) and Nikolajeva (the fantasy world as a mindscape) (Apter, 1982, p 3; Nikolajeva, 2003, p 152).<sup>6</sup> Without question, this formulation when used as

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<sup>6</sup> Compare with Campbell's similar assertion vis-à-vis myth (Campbell, 1948, p 4).

a critical approach is able to account for a number of features of some forms of fantasy in a coherent way. It explains the presence of impossible – for the inner world is not bounded by the everyday, to the contrary it seeks to confound the everyday. It explains why magic is nearly always present, through the desire of the ego to manipulate and rise above the laws of the physical universe. If we adopt a Jungian approach where this inner world is inhabited by archetypal figures, it explains recurring motifs such as the guide, the princess, the deluded king. The unique “special powers” of the hero and the hero’s ability to “save the world” point to the self as the central point of the fictive universe – and the only place where this can usually occur is in an individual’s own consciousness. The limits on powers, the agents that aid and hinder, the relations of friendship and antagonism, the encounters, training and preparation, show the self exploring its relation to others and attempting to arrive at a position where it will be fully approved, and where this position of approval will be totally unassailable. The fantasy self earns the respect and affection it craves through practice and right action, and, in simpler fantasy forms, through right of birth and/or possession of a fantastic power (consider Harry Potter, for example). Campbell has attempted to theorise such heroic journeys (whether myth, fantasy or otherwise) as emanations from the unconscious, and claims that they are all alike – part of a universal “monomyth” (Campbell, 1948, pp 3-4). The “inner world” approach is however incompatible with a number of other critical approaches, notably those engaged with ideologies such as Marxism or feminism. Hourihan, for example, takes issue with the heroic monomyth, linking it to traditional and robust myths of white superiority, masculinity and dominance. She does not analyse heroic tales as if they spring innocently from the unconscious, but rather asserts that they are replicated by Western male culture (Hourihan, 1997, pp 1-8).

What we might call *transcendent* definitions of fantasy also occur throughout our period. Like some of the formulations discussed above, the transcendent is based on a contravention of the everyday and/or consensus reality; but in this case, the direction taken is typically towards what is higher, deeper, more mysterious or truer. Interestingly, this impulse can be seen in the mystical/spiritual sequences which are present in a large number of fantasy works, and it is also a belief of many fantasy

writers.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most famous critical example is found in Tolkien's essay *Tree and Leaf*, where he offers both the pagan transcendent of faërie and the Christian transcendent of *evangelium* (Tolkien, 1964, pp 14, 62). The transcendent also occurs in Swinfen (the numinous transcendent) and in Gates, Steffel and Molson who offer a definition of fantasy based on myth, a quest for "deeper realities and eternal truth", and a desire to "explore life's mysteries" including good and evil (Swinfen, 1984, p 9; Gates, Steffel and Molson, 2003, pp 1-2). The latter argue that all fiction contains two impulses: "the impulse to imitate daily life and the impulse to transcend it". These two impulses correspond to the traditional distinction between the novel (imitative) and the romance (transcendent). The romance is preoccupied with "making apparent the hidden dreams of [the known] world" and it "gives repetitive form to the particular desires of a community, and especially to those desires which cannot find controlled expression within a society" (Beer, 1970, pp 10-12). These desires may tend towards a mystical or higher reality, or to everyday reality as transformed into its ideal form (utopian fiction, for example). The transcendent is however specifically excluded or rejected by a number of critics, whether for its incompatibility with another definition (see for example Irwin, 1976, pp 3-4, 89) or on ideological grounds (where the transcendent is frequently identified with conservative writers and critics) (see Jackson, 1981, p 2).

The above is a brief description of many of the dominant strands within definitions of fantasy.<sup>8</sup> We have seen that these are frequently interwoven, as the same critic may employ several of these strands, combining them in a unique way. This is a form of divergence in itself. However, most notable are the frequent instances of incompatibility or contradiction.

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7 See Patti Perret's collection of fantasy writers' portraits and self-portraits (Perret, 1996). In this collection, the transcendent impulse is present in a number of the writers' self-portraits, some very explicitly: see for example Evangeline Walton, p 84.

8 There are also, of course, many other variants to which space does not allow consideration.

### Attempts at synthesis

From time to time, a resolution of this divergence through an all-encompassing synthesis is attempted. Attebery (1980) suggested limiting the definition of fantasy to “[t]he single condition, that a story treat an impossible as if it were true”. From there, he suggested, rather than apply further limitations to the definition of fantasy, various subdivisions could be made to suit the critic’s interest (Attebery, 1980, pp 2-3). This seems an inclusive approach and it offers an interesting fusion of “the literature of the impossible” definition with a verisimilitude found in many fantasy works. However, it has not been widely adopted.

Hume (1984) made another such an attempt, canvassing some of the available definitions of fantasy, charting them against an ideal model to discover their shortcomings and finally arriving at a new synthesis. Her model took into account contextual interactions, including interactions between the author and the author’s world, and the reader and the reader’s world. The more contextual links that are present, the more complete its approach. Interactions within the work itself are markedly less prominent in this model.

Before considering Hume’s model, an important distinction must be made. A *definition* sets bounds or limits so that all share a common understanding of things discussed; it is unavoidably prescriptive, as it serves to group together some things and distinguish others. A *critical approach*, on the other hand, determines the grounds and scope of an enquiry, and it may be wide-ranging or highly specific. As a simple example, “swords and sorcery” fantasy could be defined as a sub-genre of fantasy which foregrounds battles and contests involving magic and sword-fights. This definition could conceivably be adopted both by a critic who takes a feminist approach and writes of the positioning of women in such novels, and by a psychoanalytic critic who chooses to examine Oedipal aspects. We must conclude that *the definition of a genre does not necessarily frame the critical approach*.

To return to Hume, the model that she presented was for her ideal critical approach; however she used it to test definitions. For this reason alone we should set the proffered test aside as far as it bears on definitions. Of course, it is perfectly possible to embed elements of a critical approach in a definition and some of the critics Hume cites have done so, which is doubtless one reason for the confusion. A second source of confusion

is that in many cases in fantasy criticism the definition is followed by numerous qualifications, particular critical emphases and theories as to usage. The moment at which the definition ends and the analysis begins is frequently far from clear. A third confusion, which is related to the second, can occur when a definition emerges during discussion which is a refinement of that used at the starting point. One further point: when discussing the validity of critical approach, one has two choices: one may compare it to an ideal model, as Hume does, or meet it on its own terms. If the choice is to compare it to an ideal model, one might set aside a structuralist approach as inadequate, for example, because it fails to examine the author's social and historical context. Hume does something of this kind with Todorov (Hume, 1984, pp 14, 18).<sup>9</sup> But two can play this game; the structuralist can do likewise, setting aside as inadequate any analysis that fails to consider the abstract formal construction of a narrative (see for example Todorov's critique of Frye: Todorov, 1970, pp 17-18). How an approach measures up to an ideal model clearly depends on the ideal that it proposed; and in the likely continued absence of a Unified Field Theory for literature, one must conclude that: any such model merely formulates another critical approach; no one model or approach can tell us everything we might be interested in knowing; in no case is there an obligation to cover all possible avenues of enquiry; and any claim to have covered all avenues or answered all questions is almost certain to be false.

As to definitions, we can conclude: "by definition", they include some things and exclude others; they set bounds on what is to be discussed, and, as it is not possible to form an argument without bounds, they are a necessary part of the assumptions on which any argument is founded. Further, they can change during the course of an argument. And in case the above seems too obvious, consider the following passage from Hume:

This collection of definitions of fantasy irresistibly reminds one of the blind men describing an elephant. Each observation is accurate for that part of the whole to which it applies, but none can stand as a description for the entire beast.

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<sup>9</sup> Jackson also describes a lack of consideration of the social and political as a failure of Todorov (Jackson, 1981, p 6).

My evaluation of these definitions corresponds roughly to their inclusiveness. Those that embrace more of the contextual system are more readily usable ... But ultimately, all of these are *exclusive* ... I am not denying that exclusive definitions can be useful ... But the insights remain fragmented. They do not lend themselves to integration with the broader concerns of literary theory. Nor do most of them have much to offer as answers to such major questions as “Why use fantasy?” “What do audiences get from it?” “What good is it to authors?” “Why was fantasy displaced from the mainstream by the realistic novel in the nineteenth century?” (Hume, 1984, pp 19-20).

The demand to “describe the entire beast”, include everything fantastic and to answer all major questions is admirable, but 1) it isn’t the only approach or necessarily the most desirable (being exclusive on occasions might allow a finer focus); 2) there is no requirement for a *definition* to answer questions such as “Why use fantasy?”; any “answers” would more commonly be sought as part of a critical approach; 3) a demand for total inclusivity is impossible to satisfy. One can see the third issue proven in Hume’s own work: immediately after formulating her own definition, she is forced to qualify it by explaining why she would include some works but exclude others (Hume, 1984, p 22). This is not to say that her exclusions aren’t perfectly reasonable (they are): the point is that exclusions are an inevitable part of the process of definition itself. We must conclude that Hume’s synthesis is merely another competing classification and regrettably, it doesn’t dispose of other definitions or bring the competing and contradictory elements together. As further evidence, we might point out that the pattern of divergence of definition in post-1954 fantasy texts has continued unabated, and can be seen for example in the subsequent definitions such as those proposed by Attebery and Sandner discussed above. The synthesis attempted by Hume has failed to “take”.

### **The crisis of definition**

To recap, the number of definitional elements is long (and the above examination was not exhaustive, merely representative). The dilemma for critics has typically been how to choose from among these competing definitions, and combine them and/or add to them in order to arrive at a new synthesis. So far, perhaps, we have an inconvenient tangle, but, arguably, no real difficulty. After all, any critical approach may legitimately

deploy its boundaries in diverse ways that critics find useful for their projects. A divergence of definitional boundaries does not in itself “put into crisis” the discursive formation that is fantasy criticism. However, there are two additional observations that we must make.

1. In fixing their positions, most critics seek *much more than a temporary boundary* for the purposes of a particular discussion, aspiring instead to historical truth. They often attempt to solve the riddle raised by the question “what is fantasy”, in a permanent, conclusive way. Yet no-one has done so to the satisfaction of those who follow. In evidence of this last point, occurrences where others later agree are extremely rare. *X’s definition of fantasy literature is definitive and will be followed here* is the elusive gold under the end of the rainbow. Instead, each critic remakes and recombines.

2. Attempts to be decisive together with an observable polysemy have *created a distinctive divergence*, producing the contradictions and exclusions discussed above. Irwin and Rabkin totally exclude fairy tales, but to Tolkien (as a critic) fairy tales are central. Gates, Steffel and Molson propose a definition built on the transcendent, but the transcendent is identified by Jackson and others as an error to be expunged. Frye and others favour the romance and the heroic, but to Irwin these are totally out of bounds unless they coexist with “intellectual play”. If it had been the case that such biases were merely temporary lenses, with which to examine a small part of the warp and weft of fantasy literature for a particular study, then such contradictions would be of little concern. But when the manifest project of most critics is to crystallise their definition of fantasy literature into a definitive historical statement, the many instances of *total exclusion* by some critics of what to others are *defining elements* are not merely baffling, they speak of a level of topographical divergence that on the face of it is extraordinary. The theories resemble not so much a shared territory with contested or uncertain boundaries and divisions, as they do feudal states. Each is struggling to instate an elusive centre, the high kingdom of fantasy, at their own castle. Yet there is brisk commerce between them – ideas and elements are traded, authorities are quoted and works are discussed. They are clearly part of the same discursive formation. Why, then, are contradiction and dispersion so characteristic?

### The genre as an act of history

Earlier, we concluded that any criteria might be validly used to declare a genre that proved useful to the critic and mapped to a set of works. In this view, genres are helpful lenses for comparison of works. However, this guise of genres – as the innocent illuminators of textual patterns – is only one aspect of their actual use. If it were the only aspect, one might expect genres to be typically declared provisionally and temporarily, for the purposes of a particular discussion and with a demurrer that other illuminations are inevitable. However on the contrary many critics seek not *a* definition for their study but *the* definition, the one that will definitively and enduringly describe and capture its quarry.

Such assertions aspire to history. In fact, we can see that *any* act of declaring a genre<sup>10</sup> is unavoidably caught up to some degree in the creation of history; this is implicit in Todorov's discussion (although he does not explore the implications of invoking history). Even if a genre is presented in its most innocent aspect – that of a temporary device – it still contains an assertion that there is a pattern of similarities and differences, caught within time, which can be examined; even this much is a claim on history. And in its more typical manifestation – a definition of genre which aspires to be definitive – a critic is making a strong claim to historical truth. This is the case whether the timespan is enduring (as in Moorcock) or merely the briefest of intervals (for example, the rapid naming of emerging sub-forms).

With this realisation, if we can consider some of the impulses within critical historicity, we may shed some useful light on the definitional problem of fantasy. Foucault provides a useful catalog of “notions” and traditions in creation of histories within his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where he identifies a number of ideas which he argues have been or are becoming prevalent in history and/or in the history of ideas, whether in traditional or contemporary forms. Some of these will be discussed here, and brought to bear on definitions of fantasy. However first, it should be made clear that these “notions”, traditions or trends do not form a cohesive whole. Foucault distinguishes two main areas, that of history and that of the history of ideas, and he

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10 Other than a purely theoretical (conjectural) genre.

also describes a shift between traditional and more recent approaches to both these areas. Some of the “notions” are therefore oppositional to others. Some, such as “discontinuity”, were ideas that Foucault proposed with approval, others, such as “origin” were ideas he opposed. But the relevance of this part of his work was not his privileging of discontinuity and rupture over teleological rationalism but his identification of the influence of these competing ideas of history.

### **“Memory”**

Memory, Foucault argues, was one of the primary functions of traditional history. To this idea, Foucault opposes a concept of history as “one way in which society recognises and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked” (Foucault, 1969, p 7). The applicability of the *ideal* of memory can be seen in frequent use of documented “myths and legends” to found memories of a culture. For fantasy, such memories can draw on myths and legends from any time or place, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the *Mahabharata*. What is claimed in defining fantasy to encompass these works is much more than tradition, with its requirement for a traceable line of inheritance. Some works are present *in place of memory*, independent of tradition. These works are cited as examples of early fantasy under definitions which reach back into an ancient past (see for example Moorcock, 1987, pp 14-15; Mathews, 2002, p 5). Yet those making these claims rarely trouble to establish a line of textual inheritance to support their inclusion. The impulse to *develop* memory, to look back on the past from the present, is a probable reason for their presence. This implies that memory need not be inherited through a tradition, but can be rediscovered at the time it is needed, supporting Foucault’s argument, rather than one of continual preservation that the word “memory” usually implies. Further, the impulse to memory can lead to a particular definitional result – a vision of timelessness. In the case of fantasy, the genre is cast as a form that exists in our culture at all times (and often, in all cultures). Mathews, for example, claims that: “In these ancient texts we find models and foundations of what seems to be an aboriginal human impulse towards fantasy” (Mathews, 2002, p 10).

**“Monument”**

“... in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments” (Foucault, 1969, p 7). The impulse to *monumentise*, to discern what is intrinsic and to discover organising totalities, leads to an attempt to uncover a different kind of generic principle. The impulse here is one of a quest for underlying patterns, the deeper structures. The impulse to monumentalise is seen, for example, in structuralist criticism, in the division of all literature into the mimetic and fantastic and in definitions of fantasy based on universal archetypes. A notable example of monumentalising within the study of myth is found in the work of Joseph Campbell who described a monomyth for the human psyche which traced the hero’s journey through a mythological separation, initiation and return that he claimed transcended culture. He called on narratives from all parts of the world to support his assertion of various universal themes (Campbell, 1948, p 30ff). Interestingly, a heroic, masculine, Western monomyth present within “hero stories”, including fantasy, is also asserted by Hourihan (1997), paradoxically for the purposes of opposing its truth value:

In Western culture there is a story which has been told over and over again, in innumerable versions, from the earliest times. It is a story about superiority, dominance and success. It tells how white European men are the natural masters of the world because they are strong, brave, skilful, rational and dedicated. It tells how they overcome the dangers of nature, how other ‘inferior’ races have been subdued by them, and how they spread civilization and order wherever they go. It tells how women are designed to serve them, and how those women who refuse to do so are threats to the natural order and must be controlled. It tells how their persistence means that they always eventually win the glittering prizes, the golden treasures, and how the gods – or the government – approve of their enterprises. It is our favourite story and it has been told so many times that we have come to believe that what it says about the world is true (Hourihan, 1997, p 1).

The difficulty with any monomyth is that it must ignore the existence of the numerous narratives that fail to fit its formula. Contemporary fantasy includes a significant body of work that is oppositional to most of the dualisms that Hourihan asserts are contained in these works: that humans are superior to animals, free men to slaves, men to women, reason to passion, soul to body, white to black (Hourihan, 1997, p 2). The work of Andre Norton, Ursula Le Guin and Tamora Pierce for example, form part of a

tradition that invests women with heroic roles, inverts racial stereotypes, opposes dominance and accords animals consciousness and respect. The impulse to monumentalise is inevitably reductive.

### **“Continuity”**

Foucault argues that traditional history sought to give continuity to discontinuous events (Foucault, 1969, p 3). The impulse to create continuity can be seen in critical frameworks which seek to connect, via chains of causation, particular discontinuous events such as re-emergences of fantasy forms in different periods, or the publication and success of disparate works. The impulse to connect discontinuous events into causative chains can more readily be seen in critical approaches than in definitions. Attebery’s critical work is an example. In 1980 he framed the development of American fantasy as successive attempts to develop a uniquely American secondary world, finally succeeding in Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (Attebery, 1980, pp vii, 84). However it also sometimes manifests in definition: Sandner’s formulation of fantasy as “the modern literature of nostalgia and the impossible” links modern fantasy causatively with earlier periods, and Attebery plays with defining fantasy as “the set of texts that in some way or other resemble *The Lord of the Rings*” (Attebery, 1992, p 14).

### **“Discontinuity”**

Foucault asserts that, unlike traditional history, the contemporary history of ideas favours discontinuity – a collection of disparate series, which may overlap or intersect, but need no longer form an unbroken chain of reason (Foucault, 1969, pp 4-5). The notion of discontinuity, with its transformations, interruptions and multiple networks, is admirably facilitated by the most influential definition of fantasy in our period, that of “the literature of the impossible”. The impossible is defined against cultural norms, and lends itself to disconnection. In discussing the sub-genres of the impossible, the gothic may intersect the ghost story without the need for an encompassing theory of progression or influence that accounts for both. Catalogues of types have surfaced, like mediaeval bestiaries, that are loosely grouped by theme with little regard to historical or ideational commonalities. It appears that series of sub-genres of the literature of the

impossible can be freely catalogued and resonances between them noted without any need for an encompassing schema.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the “reader’s guide” works, the least academic of the critical works, are more likely to favour discontinuity. Such systems of classification attempt to oppose order through discontinuous series.

**“Convergence and culmination” (Foucault, 1969, p 8)**

Todorov’s and Jackson’s definitions of “the fantastic” have been criticised for their uni-purpose or reductive approach (see for example Attebery, 1980, pp 3, 22). Arguably, this result has arisen at least in part from their positioning the fantastic at a point of convergence between the marvellous and the uncanny (Todorov) or the marvellous and the mimetic (Jackson). The fantastic is limited to a small area of unstable equilibrium that is sustained only while a certain ambiguity is unresolved, with the smallest shift or hint of resolution of this ambiguity resulting in the narrative falling towards the marvellous on one side or the uncanny or mimetic on the other. Yet its primacy is asserted in a textbook example of culmination when Todorov claims it as the most literary of all forms, and the “quintessence of literature” (cited in Jackson, 1981, p 37). For Jackson, the fantastic, as a transgressive fiction which uncovers desire, is the ideal to which the fantasy works are or should be pointing, and which is claimed as the centre (Jackson, 1981, p 9).

**“The progress of consciousness, or the teleology of reason, or the evolution of human thought” (Foucault, 1969, p 8)**

Foucault argues that the *telos* of reason has been a constant theme of the modern period since the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1969, pp 12-13). One can see this manifested in some psychoanalytic analyses, for example in those that identify fantasy with infantile thinking, considering it to be proper to early stages of development but a sign of immaturity when it is discovered in adults, who are thereby considered to have failed to reach the ideal state of development. Such ideas were given authority by Freudian notions of a desirable and/or inevitable progress from the pleasure principle to the reality principle. A related idea is the belief that fantasy, in the form of myth, properly

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11 Callois, for example, is criticised by Todorov for exhibiting this tendency (Todorov, 1970, p 101).

belongs to primitive societies and its presence in the Western industrial world is an anomalous vestige primitivism, a reversal of what is (perhaps erroneously) seen as the enlightenment ideal of a shift from myth and superstition to reason as epitomised by science (Stambovsky, 1996, p 7). Freud's essay on "The Uncanny", one of the source texts for psychoanalytic criticism of fantasy, contains versions of both ideas. For example, he locates the original source of "the double" within a childish and primitive narcissism (Freud, 1919, p 86). An uncanny effect is attached to "magical practices" and is also associated with an "infantile element ... which also holds sway in the minds of neurotics ... a feature closely allied to the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts" (Freud, 1919, p 93).

### **"Tradition" and "Origin"**

Foucault claims that placing phenomena within a tradition "allows a reduction of the difference proper to every beginning; in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for origin" (Foucault, 1969, p 21). One can perhaps see evidence of this tendency in some of the ways that fantasy may be positioned within the romance tradition. On occasions this does indeed seem to attempt a reduction of difference between eras, or at least lack of consideration of difference. Paul Spencer, for example claims that "Romance, or course, is more or less synonymous with fantasy, in a broad sense ..." (Spencer, 1985, p 101). The quest for origin within this tradition can also, it is true, lead some critics endlessly back in time, whether by invoking ancient myths or by pointing to the earliest recorded writings such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and beyond (see, for example, Mathews, 2002, p 4ff; Moorcock, 1987, pp 14-15).

### **"Irruption"**

"Irruption" is Foucault's oppositional notion to "origin". It describes the emergence of phenomena against localised and transient conditions:

"We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from view, in the dust of books" (Foucault, 1969, p 25).

Irruption arguably enables cultural studies and ideological critics to consider how works may emerge within a localised social context, rather than in their relation to other works or matters universal. Considering a work as an “irruption” would imply resisting any totalising definition. Blake, for example, a cultural studies critic, can discuss the phenomenal success of Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels within the context of contemporary British and international society and politics, and he is free of Pennington’s distress over whether or not they are “great, or even good, literature” or comply with existing rules of fantasy literature (Blake, 2002, p 4; Pennington, 2002, p 79).

### ***The historical dimension***

A number of Foucault’s “notions” were applied above to fantasy criticism. It can be seen that not all of these ideas are mutually compatible, and indeed within Foucault’s work, they are associated with divergent approaches to history and the history of ideas. “Irruption” is opposed to “origin”, “discontinuity” to “continuity”, for example. We might have taken this analysis further, and examined “series” as opposed to “tradition”, or “rupture” as opposed to “convergence”, for example, but it is hardly necessary to traverse the entire catalogue. What has been established is that relationships can be suggested between fantasy criticism and ideas which underlie various approaches to history and the history of ideas. Foucault argues that within the field of *history*, we are seeing a transition from a traditional approach (based on establishing causal continuities between disparate events) towards an approach based on *series* and systems of relations. Conversely, within the *history of ideas* (which arguably includes literary criticism) there is a transition from the culminations of periods towards rupture and discontinuity (Foucault, 1969, pp 3-4). All of the notions described above fit into one quadrant or other of the resulting possibilities.

For our purposes, it hardly matters which. What is notable is that this period of transition of both history and the history of ideas is largely the period in which most fantasy criticism emerged as a discipline. The great outpouring of fantasy criticism began in the 1970s, building on a scattering of critical essays from previous decades; Foucault’s work was originally published in 1969 and it is describing shifts that we can

recognise were occurring within the twentieth century, particularly the second half of the century.<sup>12</sup>

It may therefore be argued that the emergence of fantasy literary criticism coincided with a period of transition of competing historicities, and the directions that are lie open within fantasy criticism to a degree reflect those that lay open more generally. In Foucauldian terms, the *theoretical strategies* of literary criticism, history and the history of ideas – as higher levels of discursive formation which may proffer strategies to fantasy criticism – are characterised in the contemporary period by numerous points of diffraction. These diffracting strategies are transmitted to fantasy criticism, which in transforming these strategies has been more affected than some other disciplines because of its moment of emergence. The diffraction therefore impacted profoundly on its emerging *concepts*, including its definitions. We can conclude that this comprises at least one set of forces which would tend to establish divergence within the rules of formation of fantasy criticism. This set of forces would not be unique to fantasy criticism but might be expected to manifest in other formations emerging in the same period.

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12 There were of course a number of observations from Coleridge and others which could be said to have laid down some of the founding ideas of fantasy criticism, but at the time of their first publication they belonged to literary criticism more generally.

### 3 – Characteristic works – inclusions and exclusions

We have considered the definitional problem at some length. Critics face a similar – and related – problem in choosing “characteristic works” from among the many and varied texts and sub-genres laid out before them. Let us examine, from a sample of the above critics, some practical examples of what is chosen for inclusion (what is in the centre), and what is excluded (left on or beyond the boundary) – and how these inclusions and exclusions operate.

Jackson, who is what might be loosely described as a postmodernist critic, places in central position authors of “the fantastic” who unsettle expectations, transgress norms, resist closure, represent “the other” and find “emptiness inside an apparently full reality”, such as Poe, Kafka, Calvino and Pynchon. Conversely, she sidelines Kingsley, Lewis, Tolkien, Le Guin and Adams, principally on the grounds that “they belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature ... [they] move away from the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely ‘fantastic’”. She argues that literary fantasies are expressive of unconscious desires. Most will attempt to re-cover that desire, but some attempt to “remain ‘open’, dissatisfied, endlessly desiring”. It is the latter works that she sees as the most uncompromising and places in central position. She arrived at this as her organising pattern in the course of “reading and comparing a wide variety of fiction, from Gothic novels, through Dickens and Victorian fantasists, to Dostoevsky, Kafka, Peake and Pynchon ...” (Jackson, 1981, pp 5, 6, 9, 158).

Manlove’s inclusions and exclusions are based on his definition of fantasy as essentially as a fiction of wonder and the impossible. Science fiction is excluded by Manlove, as “throwing a rope of the conceivable” that displaces wonder. *Alice in Wonderland* is also excluded, as it is reducible to a dream. Wonder is “a central feature”, and he describes it in frequently emotive terms. “Fantasy in its purest form” is typified by Tolkien and the Inklings. “At the core of the genre is a delight in being” (Manlove, 1982, pp 16-17, 22, 41).

Harold Bloom’s central text is Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). He describes how he has read Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* “literally hundreds of times, indeed obsessively. I have read several copies of it to shreds”. Here he is not describing a

dispassionate selection of an exemplar work to illustrate a theory; quite the opposite. His fascination is highly personal, and his acknowledgement of this is forthright:

I know of no other book that has caused me such an anxiety of influence ...  
Repeated readings have confirmed my initial sense that no other fictional work  
inflicts such spiritual violence upon its audience (Bloom, 2004, p 246).

When later he concludes that Lindsay's book is placed "at the very center of modern fantasy" and the works of the Inklings "despite all their popularity are quite peripheral", his universalising claim must in fact be read as a highly personal statement (Bloom, 2004, p 250).

W R Irwin demurs that he has no wish to make "one work represent all of fantasy", before choosing Kafka's *Metamorphosis* for close examination. His attraction to it is at first stated to be based on "intellectual decorum":

Read in German or English, the work reveals the total realization in the concreteness, clarity, order, economy, and straightforwardness of tone that earlier I stated as the stylistic norm of fantasy. The diction is in no way exotic or recondite ... The style is an instrument of the developed concept and the persuasive strategy; the observation of intellectual decorum is complete. All this a reader may easily see for himself (Irwin, 1976, p 86).

The reference to "economy and straightforwardness" as the "stylistical norm" for fantasy is curiously at odds with much fantasy literature, including for example that of Tolkien whom Irwin does include within his definition. In the pages that follow, Irwin explores "What Fantasy Is Not", and makes a number of exclusions. Notably, these include those which might be considered the reverse of intellectual decorum – works that merely "generate a thrill of wonder at the marvellous" as these stories secure a reader's engagement through "his emotions, not his mind". It is from this platform that he excludes most fairy stories, ghost stories, pornography and gothic romance. He is able to redeem the work of Macdonald, Lewis and Tolkien who are said to "transform" their material into "narrative demonstrations". The irrational must not "remain unmodified" or the work is not considered fantasy (Irwin, 1976, pp 89-100).

Irwin's discussion along the axis of intellectual decorum–emotion is, however, only one aspect of inclusion and exclusion, albeit the one which he sees as the definitional

source. There is another axis that he reveals, this time much more personal, and it concerns phantasy. At the desirable end of the axis is metamorphosis (the first theme he chooses for in-depth discussion). Here he finds what he assumes to be a universal source of fantasy's appeal in the dream of transformation:

Fundamental change is a method almost inexhaustible in possibilities for fantasy and advantageous because of its immediate appeal to the fancy. Few people have omitted, in their daydreams or otherwise, to entertain themselves with narratives based on a projection of their own altered form, personality, capability or disposition. One of the penalties of identity is that it is identity; by having a personality, however capacious, one is debarred from having any other personality. And the release from this is the arbitrary abandonment of the known self for a factitious and usually more interesting or powerful self ... / Somewhat similarly, the fancying of transformation or fundamental change in familiar persons outside the self is a gratifying source of entertainment, though not of daydreams. All this is common knowledge – and common practice (Irwin, 1976, pp 107-8).

At the other end of the phantasy axis is pornography, which Irwin places furthest from fantasy. “The great welter of such writing, available more or less surreptitiously, represents the unmodified use of such gross and violent stimulants as Wordsworth never thought of” (Irwin, 1976, pp 90-1).

Tolkien, for whom fantasy is “the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds” closely related to fairy stories, applauds serious use of magic, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its use as “a vehicle of mystery”, as in George MacDonald's *The Golden Key* (Tolkien, 1964, pp 15, 28, 40). He believes that when fantasy is successful, it produces secondary belief in the world that it creates, and, at its most successful, primary belief, a sense of having directly experienced the secondary world (Bloom, 2000, pp 49-50). The primal secondary world is the unattainable yet deeply desired other-world of Faërie:

Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood ... But the world that contained even the imagination of Fáfñir was richer and more beautiful ... (Tolkien, 1964, p 40).

Further, all fully realised fairy stories (presumably including fantasy works) must offer “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” or “sudden joyous ‘turn’”, related to Christian *evangelium*, which he names a “eucatastrophe”:

In its fairy-tale — or otherworld — setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it ... is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief (Tolkien, 1964, p 62).

Those works that Tolkien excludes are mere traveller’s tales of marvels, works that employ the machinery of dreaming to explain marvels, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, and beast stories where “the animal form is only a mask upon a human face” (Tolkien, 1964, pp 16-19). Those that he actively dislikes and disparages are those that would extend the modern industrial world, namely types of science fiction which appear to yearn for life in a future completely alienated from nature (Tolkien, 1964, pp 57-9).

Moorcock, who is the least comfortable with any form of bounded definition of fantasy and would prefer to avoid applying one, is also the most inclusive (Moorcock, 1987, p 13). He does roughly define fantasy as part of the romance and epic traditions. Included therefore are fantasy works in a long line of succession that includes classic epics, chivalric romances, Icelandic sagas and more recent works such as *The Lord of the Rings* (Moorcock, 1987, p 15). His praise is reserved for authors whose prose styles, storytelling abilities and characterisation show originality and polish; unsurprising, perhaps, in one better known as a fiction writer than as a critic. He also acknowledges that he values works that convey personal meaning:

I admire intelligent, disciplined, imaginative entertainment which provides me with some perspective on my own life. This essay, therefore, cannot for me be the celebration of a form. It can only praise individuals (Moorcock, 1987, p 15).

Moorcock does make a few exclusions. He exclude myths, legends and folk tales on the bases of their lack of “definite authorship” and their claim to be accounts of actual events (Moorcock, 1987, p 21). For the latter reason, he excludes from fantasy *La Chanson de Roland* and Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*. A few other areas are set aside as being beyond his scope (*Arabian Nights* and oriental stories, for example) (Moorcock, 1987, p 21). Past this, even the works that he clearly has little time for are included. His

strategy for such works is to condemn rather than exclude. Tolkien's works are "epic Pooh" and popular sixteenth century works are "decadent" romances (Moorcock, 1987, pp 34, 125). Tolkien and the sixteenth century *Palmerin of England*, however, are still discussed as fantasy works.

To continue the topographic metaphor used earlier, in these critics and in many others, we can identify both *meerstone texts* and *lodestone texts*. *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Lord of the Rings* are some typical "meerstone" texts: these works operate effectively as surveyors' markers. Critics use them to elucidate their chosen boundaries. Other texts operate as "lodestones": ideal works, around which analysis orbits and a definition is built and tested. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is such a text for Irwin (Irwin, 1976, p 81). Frequently, what is a lodestone for one critic is a meerstone for another: fairy stories are central to Tolkien, but peripheral to Irwin; *Alice in Wonderland* is central to Rabkin, but peripheral to Manlove. This pattern is repeated far beyond the critics sampled here; for example Jackson includes the works of Kafka and Pynchon as "lodestones" whereas Grant and Tiner specifically exclude the works of these authors from fantasy, as indeed they exclude postmodern works generally (Grant and Tiner, 1997, p 338).

We can see from the reiteration of key texts that they are in part drawn from some form of "canon". Yet fantasy criticism differs significantly from some other critical formations in that its "canon" is highly unstable. The works within the canon are in constant movement, from meerstones in one theory to lodestones in another, from the periphery to the centre. To position a work on the periphery is not necessarily to afford it obscurity, at best it is to exclude it for a short interval of time – for it may operate as a lodestone or centre in another critic's approach.

Bloom's confession of his intense orbit around Lindsay's work gives us a clue as to the origin of this power. We can hypothesise from Bloom's account that this may arise in part from the unique interactions of fantasy works with the critic as an *attracted subject*. The ideal work(s) form the "attractor" text(s); it is that relation between critic and text(s) which makes possible – or perhaps, necessary – the laying of unique bounds around the texts. When we start to look for evidence of an originating personal attraction within the works made central by critics to support this assertion, we must bear in mind that the larger discursive formation of academic discourse, from which fantasy criticism has emerged, works against its disclosure and in favour of its

concealment. Yet despite this, it is arguably apparent to some degree in the accounts of many of the critics discussed above. It can be seen in Irwin's description of his phantasy of transformation, Manlove's account of delight in being, Tolkien's thirst for dragons, perhaps even in Jackson's description of how she sat down with an armful of what she felt were the typical texts (her own "attractor texts") and tried to find their commonalities. As to the latter "armful of texts" approach, Attebery has observed that this particular phenomena is a strong contributor to dispersion of definition in fantasy criticism:

Nearly every critical text in the field has proposed its own definitions for fantasy and the fantastic ... Virtually all the definitions offered are descriptions after the fact; that is, the critic assembles a body of texts that seem somehow to fit the term and then describes the common feature or features. Literary theorists find this procedure messy, since neither the grouping nor the description is arrived at dialectically. Yet in practice, this method of defining is true to the process of categorization within the human mind (Attebery, 1992, p 12).

The missing part of the puzzle, that is, the reason why an armload of books should provide an impetus —Attebery's "somehow" in the above passage — can be theorised as a force acting between "attractor" texts and critics.<sup>13</sup>

Paradoxically, this force is not at all apparent in Moorcock, who as an author-scholar unhesitatingly discloses his personal preferences in a wide-ranging survey, and yet whose theoretical allegiances are anchored in the romance tradition rather than constructed afresh. For many other critics, however, it is open to us to hypothesise that the proffered definitions and critical approaches are (at least to some degree) constructed around an originating critic-text relationship. In the rest of this section, the validity of this hypothesis will be temporarily assumed, so that we might freely explore what such a relationship might imply or allow us to discover.

1. For a critic-attractor text relationship to enter the discourse of fantasy criticism, it must first be transformed. There is a convention (or requirement) that *origin and*

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<sup>13</sup> If it were a standard process, one would expect to see the same approach typify many other areas of criticism.

*destination be reversed.* The attractor texts may initially be privately examined with a conscious sense of fascination, a quest to uncover the source of their originating power. Subsequently, in bringing these texts within fantasy criticism, the rules (the theoretical strategies of academic criticism) demand that the theoretical be privileged over the personal. The power of the attractor text must be concealed or transformed, and this is achieved by a displacement whereby instead of an origin, the works become an ideal destination. In most examples of fantasy criticism, a definition and critical approach are presented in the early part of the work, as a kind of formal preliminary before the author can begin the real business of discussing the works she or he feels like discussing. The attractor texts are subsequently rediscovered against these preliminary arguments and found to be ideal works. If fantasy criticism were considered from the perspective of genre, the above would be easily identifiable as its characteristic formula. Bloom's essay is unusual in that it shows the entire process at work, revealing both an originating attraction and a declaration of universality against which Lindsay's work is an ideal example.

2. Earlier in this paper, a puzzling tendency of fantasy critics to seek much more than a temporary boundary for their highly particular endeavours was described. Instead, they appeared to accord their idiosyncratic versions the status of historical truth. We could more simply describe this as an impulse to *universalise*. This is the second way in which a relationship with attractor texts is typically transformed as it enters fantasy criticism, and, taken together with manifold nature of attractor texts and critics, it is another force which contributes to the curiously incompatible and mutually exclusive realms of definition described earlier in this paper. Can we find something within the rules of formation of either the discursive formation of fantasy criticism itself, or of higher level discursive formations (such as literary criticism more generally), that might establish this "universalising" as a characteristic theoretical strategy? First, we might observe that it is clear that the impulse to universalise is implicit in a number of the "notions" of history and the history of ideas described by Foucault, particularly those associated with "traditional" approaches to history. The impulses to monument, to convergence, to teleological rationalism, to memory, to origin and continuity — all of these describe attempts to create unity. We can therefore establish that "universalising" is certainly present at a higher discursive level than that of fantasy criticism.

In summary, the pre-existing tendency within Western thought to universalise goes some way to explaining why this is a common strategy. However, wouldn't we expect that a postmodern critic such as Jackson would favour what Foucault describes as the notions of discontinuity, rupture, diverging series? Let's pursue this question, as a test case. Initially, Jackson does resist a universalising impulse:

There is no abstract entity called 'fantasy': there is only a range of different works which have similar structural characteristics and which seem to be generated by similar unconscious desires. Through their particular manifestations of desire, they can be associated together (Jackson, 1981, pp 7-8).

At first she situates her critical endeavour proximately, with a specific, non-generalised statement that she has "given the most space" to texts which attempt to remain "open', dissatisfied, endlessly desiring" rather than those which re-cover desire. And yet, within the space of a page, she begins to refer to her preferred direction as the "centre" in discussing how Kingsley and Tolkien "move away from the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely 'fantastic'" (Jackson, 1981, p 9). As her work progresses, true fantasy is increasingly identified only with works of authors such as Kafka, Borges and Carroll which interrogate the real but provide no firm ground of meaning, and that open up gaps instead of certainties:

Fantasy becomes a literature of separation, of discourse without an object, foreshadowing that explicit focus upon problems of literature's signifying activity found in modern anti-realist texts (Jackson, 1981, p 40).

More typically, many works are found to explore this disturbing region, and then withdraw, including Stoker's *Dracula*, Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Peake's *Gormenghast* (Jackson, 1981, p 42). Yet other works, particularly those which create secondary worlds (which she usually describes as falling within "the marvellous"), don't interrogate the real: Morris' *The Wood Beyond the World*, Lewis's *Narnia*, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the works of Le Guin (Jackson, 1981, pp 42-3).<sup>14</sup> Insofar as she presents her historical account of the emergence of a form, describes its characteristic

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<sup>14</sup> Sometimes Jackson does use the term "fantasy" in the popular sense; this shifting use of terminology is difficult to avoid.

concerns, and shows us the ways in which particular works interrogate “the real” and realism, we can be fascinated to see an interesting sub-genre articulated and given shape before us. Insofar as she establishes a centre, creates inclusions and exclusions, privileges one sub-genre over another, and sets an ideal direction for works to follow, we can see precisely the same impulse to universalise found in many other critics.

Let us return to the question of whether the tendency to universalise is contained within the rules of formation of fantasy criticism itself, or merely transferred to fantasy criticism from other discursive formations. Is there anything, for example, in the relation between the critic and the attractor texts which might make universalising more prevalent? Fantasy itself has been described as a projection of an inner world over an outer world; are we seeing something of the same kind at work in fantasy criticism? Could the attractor text(s), when combined with the psyche of the reader/critic, create a sense of a powerful force that appears to be universal — whether it be Tolkien’s attraction for Faërie or Jackson’s for gaps and interstices — when it is actually localised? The question must remain open as a possibility. Its exploration would require a form of empirical research that is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Another question we might consider is *at what level* a critic-attractor text relationship is characteristic of fantasy criticism. Is it at a formative level? Let us return to the rules of formation of fantasy criticism, and see if we can find any reasons why a critic-attractor text relationship might be present at the formative level. Two groups of objects exist within fantasy criticism to a greater degree than literary criticism. The first group are its characteristic signs. Earlier in this discussion, objects such as “wonder”, “the marvellous”, “sublime”, “higher reality”, “enchantment” and “faërie” were identified, and it was noted that fantasy criticism was unusually open in the direction of the transcendent (an associated concept). One could also have equally well noted “archetype”, “myth”, “quest”, “epic” and an openness in the direction of the Jungian psychology or a Campbellian universal monomyth, or “magic”, “special power”, “predestined” and an openness in the direction of magical thinking. Another group of objects comprises the fantasy texts themselves. Within Foucault’s schema, texts would have to be described as objects (they are certainly not concepts, enunciative modalities or theoretical strategies). The objects of fantasy criticism therefore typically include a selection of the lodestones texts identified earlier such as Morris’ *The Wood Beyond the*

*World*, Adams' *Watership Down*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and J R R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Most of these have not been objects of the mainstream of literary criticism to any significant degree, with a few exceptions such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Yet how was it possible for these new combinations of objects (signs and texts) to emerge from literary criticism? What force propelled their emergence? Insofar as these works have included "popular works" that were not usually studied, how did they come to be studied? Some form of force would have to have been required initially to move beyond the boundaries of traditional literary criticism into fantasy (and perhaps still is required). The attractor text(s)-critic relationship is one possible source of this impetus, and if this were the case, it would locate that relationship at the formative level of fantasy criticism. That is, the emergence of these objects may be related to the text-critic relationship; the signs ("wonder", "higher reality" et cetera) may indirectly or directly describe aspects of the attraction and the texts of the new canon may include "attractor texts".

4. The existence of meerstone texts (boundary texts/excluded texts), arguably could arise as the inevitable result of distance or incompatibility from the attractor text(s). However Attebery's observation that genres might be usefully approached as "fuzzy sets", defined by their centre rather than their boundaries, by implication disputes whether boundaries do flow inevitably from a choice of centre (Attebery, 1992, p 12). Indeed, some critics have left the boundaries open so that their versions of fantasy can gradually merge with other forms. However, as shown earlier, sharply delineated boundaries – territories on the map in Attebery's metaphor – are common. The existence of *competing* centres may provide an explanation of this tendency. The observation that meerstone texts are frequently those that are lodestones to other theorists would tend to support a hypothesis that boundaries form as a result of competing centres. One can readily observe similar boundary-forming in countless human institutions. There is also a further possibility, that there exists a counter-force or anti-attractor force which, together with the competing centres, might also lend shape to the characteristic idiosyncratic boundaries and curious exclusions (see Part 4).

5. It has been argued above that the proliferation of definitions and choices made by fantasy critics is related to the profusion of their individual attractor text(s), and that the attractor text(s)-critic relationship is inseparable from the discursive formation

itself. But how do the fantasy texts come to exert their power? Is their attraction born from shared perceptions of inadequacies that are apparent in consensus reality? Does their power come from ideology, and the strong association between fantasy texts and ideal worlds? Could it be something to do with a match between the subconscious of the critic and particular archetypes? There are countless possibilities. Particularly tempting might be to hypothesise that fantasy as a mirror of representation must be particularly susceptible to desire; this has long been argued by those who apply Jungian, Lacanian and other psychoanalytical approaches to their reading of fantasy texts. However, the correctness or otherwise of this or any other speculation has no impact on the existence and operation of the critical attraction which has been observed and described. Insofar as the underlying mechanism of attraction is a question of the origin, and this origin is between an individual and works, its nature must lie outside our power to explore.

6. Ultimately, we might observe that the impulse to universalise is always *transcendent*, even if it appears anti-transcendent; for what is Irwin's logico-rational play but a world of faerie, glittering with illusive promises? And what is Jackson's search for completely un-re-covered desire but a quest for an impossibly higher reality?

In this section, the primacy of a critic-attractor text was first assumed, and some corollaries of this assumption were then explored. Yet how reasonable was the original assumption? On what evidence was it based, and was this evidence substantial enough to support a conclusion? The evidence as it emerged above comprised: an observation that the "canon" of fantasy criticism was curiously structured, with the same works made central by some critics but placed on the boundary or explicitly excluded by others; an admission by Bloom that he had long been under the influence of an attractor text, and some traces of evidence in the work of other critics that similar attractor text forces may have been operating; the tendency of postmodern fantasy critics to create a "centre" even though this contradicts their ideology; the oft-reported relationship of fantasy to phantasy and individual desire; and an observation that some force must have been at work to enable critics to cross an established boundary between "literary" and "popular" works. Is this sufficient to establish a case for a founding critic-attractor text relationship? Perhaps not. Unfortunately, little further evidence is available within the critical texts themselves; any additional evidence would have to be

gathered using sociological techniques such as interviews, which lie beyond the scope of this research.

The idea of a critic-attractor text relationship as an originating force is however supported by some evidence, and further, the model derived from this assumption does describe certain patterns of fantasy criticism for which no other explanation is readily apparent, so it may at least be given the status of a viable hypothesis. If accurate, it would establish another set of forces which would tend to establish divergence within the rules of formation of fantasy criticism. This set of forces may or may not be unique to fantasy criticism, depending upon whether or not there is a distinctive relationship between fantasy and this attraction.

## 4 – Critical objections to fantasy

*Thus, there are five sources from which critical objections are drawn. Things are censured either as impossible, or irrational, or morally hurtful, or contradictory, or contrary to artistic correctness.*

— Aristotle, *Poetics*<sup>15</sup>

A third area of dispersal in fantasy criticism is in the choice of which areas of fantasy to attack or disparage. These attacks or disparagements will be referred to here as “critical objections”. It is interesting to consider that many critical objections to fantasy are made from within fantasy criticism itself. There are of course a number of exceptions. Notable are: Hourihan’s attack on the heroic genres (Hourihan, 1997, pp 1-3); the occasional sideswipe from those who prefer the realist mode and see little of value in the fantastic; and the storm over the last few years centred around the use of magic in Harry Potter and other works by Christian critics.<sup>16</sup> The charge of escapism, too, is largely made from outside fantasy criticism, and is one that many fantasy critics consistently attempt to refute or redeem (see for example Rabkin, 1976, p 43ff; Swinfen, 1984, p 234). These objections are undeniably significant, but it is also true that many of those critics who have the most to say publicly about what is problematic about particular types of works or sub-genres of fantasy are fantasy critics.<sup>17</sup> It is these latter objections that are first evidenced and then analysed below, as a further example of divergence within fantasy criticism. It will be seen that most critical objections attempt to displace works or sub-genres that have been put in central position by other critics. The objections in some cases will be examined in detail to establish their arbitrary nature. The same question will then be addressed as in earlier sections: is this divergence mere variation, or is it intrinsic to the formation of fantasy criticism?

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15 Aristotle, c 350 BC XXV.20.

16 Even the Christian objection was to some extent situated within a tradition of fantasy works typified by C S Lewis and contrasted with those of J K Rowling.

17 It is significant that fantasy critics who make rebuttals to general charges against all of fantasy (such as escapism) are able to cite very few sources for the perceived attacks.

### Harold Bloom and the Goblet of Literary Value

A particularly enduring form of argument used against fantasy is its lack of literary value. This debate is often focused around those works held up as the leading examples of fantasy, but applies more broadly. For example, if *The Lord of the Rings* is held out by some as an example of how fantasy can also be fine literature, and then attacked by others as poor quality writing, the argument has broader application than to *The Lord of the Rings* as an individual work. The “no literary value” argument does not need to be raised against also-ran texts. When this argument is raised by non-fantasy critics, it has the clear purpose of keeping fantasy away from the hallowed halls of “literature”. How, then, are we to interpret the use of similar arguments by fantasy critics?

The mixed reception among fantasy critics of *The Lord of the Rings* provides an interesting case in point. Tom Shippey, for example, played with describing Tolkien as “the author of the [twentieth] century” (original emphasis) before he sensibly dropped the “the” (Shippey, 2000, p xvii), and even in 1956, Tolkien’s work had a “resounding reception at the hands of a number of critics” (Wilson, 1956, p 312). In this light, and remembering that in 1983 Bloom had said that the works of the Inklings “despite all their popularity are quite peripheral” (Bloom, 2004, p 250), let us consider some remarks concerning *The Lord of the Rings* by Harold Bloom in the volume he edited on *The Lord of the Rings*. Bloom’s introduction to this volume is dedicated to airing his “aesthetic doubts” about the work. He questions “whether a visionary descent into hell can be rendered persuasively in language that is acutely self-conscious” and observes that “*The Lord of the Rings* seems to me inflated, over-written, tendentious, and moralistic in the extreme.” Tolkien’s style is “stiff, false-archaic, over-wrought”. With echoes of Edmund Wilson, he expresses his puzzlement as to “how a skilled and mature reader can absorb about fifteen hundred pages of this quaint stuff” (Bloom, 2000, pp 1-2).

Bloom’s volume includes an essay by Burton Raffel, entitled “*The Lord of the Rings* as Literature”. Raffel argues that the work is “a magnificent performance, full of charm, excitement, and affection”, but it is not “literature”. Raffel’s approach is to initially praise, then to compare with “literary” authors such as Evelyn Waugh or D H Lawrence, against whom Tolkien is found lacking:

It would destroy *The Lord of the Rings* if Tolkien wrote as D H Lawrence did, and vice versa. But Lawrence was writing literature, his style suited his aim. Tolkien is writing in a separate genre (Raffel, 2000, p 20).

Raffel doesn't attempt to define literature as a whole, but it is fairly clear that works that might be considered literature must, in the four areas he identifies – style, characterisation, incident and morality – resemble other works already considered to be literature. “Writing in a separate genre” with a different stylistic register, conventions of characterisation and so forth appears to be fatal. (Raffel does acknowledge that his analysis is “rather narrow” and that a broader definition of literature would have a different result (Raffel, 2000, pp 17-35).)

Let's now consider the difference between Raffel and Bloom. Raffel is not a fantasy critic, and Bloom is. Raffel's style of analysis would fairly clearly lock all genre fiction out of “literature”. Correspondingly, does Bloom's analysis lock Tolkien and by analogy other “high fantasy” works out of “literature”? The kind of stylistic excess that typifies the heroic/epic form adopted by many of these works is one that in *The Lord of the Rings* he finds “inflated, over-written, tendentious”. The shift in register as *The Lord of the Rings* seeks to establish a secondary world different to our own is held by Bloom to be “stiff, false-archaic, over-wrought”, its preoccupation with good and evil to be “moralistic in the extreme”. However, the qualities Bloom describes and raises aesthetic difficulties with don't “belong” to Tolkien. They could be found in William Morris, Ursula Le Guin, Andre Norton and numerous others and are typical of “high fantasy”. In other words, Bloom is describing the typical characteristics of a sub-genre, in negative terms. Further, *The Lord of the Rings* and similar works are precisely those held up as exemplars by other critics (discussed above), in another example of divergence within fantasy criticism.

### **Something Consolatory This Way Comes**

The consolatory/compensatory objection takes two forms. In the first, a discontented or potentially discontented group is offered or seeks fantasy as consolation for its lot; fantasy helps express and thus diffuse dissatisfaction. The group may be conceived of by the critic as actually oppressed (for example, the traditional working class) or merely as displaced from its traditional position of privilege (for example, the English rural

middle classes). The second form of the argument is that which considers the compensatory function of fantasy in the psyche of an individual, and is a product of psychoanalytic theory and theories of “omnipotence of thought”. The first form of the argument is the concern of this section.

The possibility that certain works are designed to console a class or classes of people and diffuse any impulse to overturn the status quo cannot be denied, and it is not hard to think of examples. However, if an argument situates entire sub-genres in this category in a negative way, and these sub-genres happen to be those most associated with popular culture, one might wish to examine the grounds of such arguments very carefully indeed.

First, it is worth remembering the influence of Tolkien’s famed “consolation of the happy ending”, or “eucatastrophe”, contained in his 1938 essay “On Fairy-Stories” and published in book form in 1964. His good catastrophe provides “a sudden joyous ‘turn’”, the possibility of deliverance, and *evangelium*. A Christian Tolkien clearly supplants a pagan Tolkien and an environmentalist Tolkien from this point in the essay, which occurs towards the end, to its finale (Tolkien, 1964, p 62). For many, Christian consolation is negatively associated with oppression and acceptance of the status quo. By equating happy endings in secondary world fiction with Christian consolation, Tolkien has laid open a path for some critics, including those who are not convinced of the value or motivation of a rebellion against “the Robot Age”, to disparage these works by using “consolation” as a pejorative.

Two such arguments exist in the works of Jackson (1981) and Olsen (1987). Both critics, through their desire to give central position to postmodern versions of the fantastic, follow Todorov and various French critics in locating a large part of what usually included within fantasy into a neighbouring mode, “the marvellous”. Jackson (1981) emphasises the cultural context of textual production and foregrounds the compensatory function as a characteristic of fantasy, which expresses that which is lacking but desired:

... fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss (Jackson, 1981, p 3).

However, in giving expression to this desire, Jackson argues there are two possible paths. Fantasy can express desire or it can expel it; and frequently, the latter is accomplished by use of the former:

In many cases fantastic literature fulfils both functions at once, for desire can be ‘expelled’ through having been ‘told of’ and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader (Jackson, 1981, p 4).

Compensation is thus an intrinsic function of fantasy; consolation, however, is not. Consolation is a function of “the marvellous” (Jackson, 1981, p 154). According to Jackson, “modern ‘faery’” or secondary world literature is “quasi-religious”, its utopianism fails to engage with human culture, and it presents an orthodox liberal human view:

These miraculous unities [of MacDonald, Kingsley, Le Guin, Lewis, T H White, Tolkien and Donaldson] are myths of psychic order which help to contain critiques of disorder. Their utopianism does not directly engage with divisions or contradictions of subjects *inside* human culture: their harmony is established on a mystical cosmic level ...

... romances (of integration) by Le Guin, Lewis, White, etc, leave problems of social order untouched ...

From Walter de la Mare, Beatrix Potter, A A Milne, to Richard Adams and J R R Tolkien, a tradition of liberal humanism spreads outwards, covering with its moral, social, and linguistic orthodoxies a world of bears, foxes, wolves, rabbits, ducks, hens and hobbits ...

The current popularity of J R R Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* indicates the strength of a romance tradition supporting a ruling ideology (Jackson, 1981, pp 154-5).

One might point to a contradiction between some of these statements and Jackson’s earlier assertion that works are always subject to “historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinants” (Jackson, 1981, p 3). Further, the ruling ideology alleged to be contained within this tradition is barely evidenced for many of the twentieth century authors. Le Guin’s attempt to unite difference in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is compared unfavourably with works that leave dualities unresolved such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; there is an implicit denial here of any possibility of a radical

utopianism. Tolkien's dislike of "the materialism of a Robot Age" is described as "a naïve equation of industry with evil", so that his radical concerns about the products of factories in 1938 being "machine-guns and bombs" and the displacement of the natural world by development are ignored (Jackson, 1981, p 155).

For Olsen, postmodernism is characterised by a rejection of any transcendental signified or overarching meaning, and modes of writing that depict this rejection are favoured. Those works which do present a "coherent ideology" belong to the marvellous instead of the fantastic:

The marvelous is a mode of discourse employed by most fairy tales, romances, utopias, satires, supernatural tales, surrealist texts, and science fictions, a mode in which narrative events are backed by a coherent ideology ... The marvelous mode believes that human life is subject to immutable, universal truths (Olsen, 1987, p 18).

"The marvellous" (so defined) is thus at odds with postmodern thought. As further evidence of its lack of contemporary relevance, the preferred location of marvellous works – back-in-time or remote-in-distance – is cited. However, one might observe that despite a theory which attempts to estrange their presence, "marvellous" fantasies such as *The Lord of the Rings* continue to achieve significant popular and critical success. Perhaps this is why the "compensatory/consolatory" theories are forced to turn dirty: such works may be present, but they are nevertheless anti-present, and the way that they are anti-present is that they are linked to outmoded ideologies:

... the marvelous narrative is compensatory, looking back to a lost beautiful and often aristocratic moral and social hierarchy that was communally and teleologically meaningful (Olsen, 1987, p 18).

Olsen does not attempt to explore what such works are compensating for; and this is significant in itself. The consolatory/compensatory argument has, by 1987, acquired such force that the mere identification of works or sub-genres as compensatory/consolatory appears to be sufficient to dismiss them from consideration. Everyone knows, it seems, that such works belong to the Dark, rather than the Light.

These arguments deny any possibility that the fantasy works in question might engage meaningfully with contemporary issues or offer any credible alternatives (whether

political or individual, metaphoric or literal). The function of these arguments is essentially one of disposal. Further, in attacking works of “the marvellous” these theorists are also attacking the very works that other critics place at the very centre of fantasy. This is more than the definitional disagreement noted earlier; it is an ideological assault. What is sought is much more than displacement outside a boundary; it is erasure, and a more extreme example of divergence within fantasy criticism than one confined to mere definitions.

### **Sir Michael and the Green Blight**

Michael Moorcock (1987) expresses a loathing for Tolkien, Lewis and Richard Adams, but has read much mediaeval romance and admires Susan Cooper. His argument that Tolkien’s, Lewis’ and Adams’ fantasies offer “consolation” to a “backward-yearning class” is otherwise remarkably similar to many of the arguments against mediaevalism and includes the “consolatory” attack discussed earlier:

*The Lord of the Rings* is a pernicious confirmation of the values of a morally bankrupt middle-class. Their cowardly, Home Counties habits are primarily responsible for the problems England now faces. *The Lord of the Rings* is much more deep-rooted in its infantilism than a good many of the more obviously juvenile books it influenced. It is Winnie-the-Pooh posing as an epic. If the Shire is a suburban garden, Sauron and his henchmen are that old bourgeois bugaboo, the Mob – mindless football supporters throwing their beer-bottles over the fence – the worst aspects of modern urban society represented as the whole by a fearful, backward-yearning class ... (Moorcock, 1987, p 125).

...

Of the children’s writers only Lewis and Adams are guilty, in my opinion, of producing thoroughly corrupted romanticism – sentimentalised pleas for moderation of aspiration which are at the root of this kind of Christianity. In Lewis’s case this consolatory, anxiety-stilling ... attitude extended to his non-fiction ... (Moorcock, 1987, p 137).

In Moorcock’s case, the sub-genre under fire is however not mediaevalist English fiction, it is the English “rural romance”. He concludes the chapter in which the above appears, entitled “Epic Pooh”, with:

I would love to believe that the day of the rural romance is done at last  
(Moorcock, 1987, p 139).

Really? Would he wipe out William Morris' English rural socialist romances? No, although his prose style "has little appeal to the modern reader". Mary Stewart's English rural descriptions are specifically approved, on the basis of their "crisp, well-written sentences" (Moorcock, 1987, p 69).

Is Moorcock perhaps attacking an ideology which he finds offensive by attacking the sub-genre that appears to contain it? On the face of it, the sub-genre of rural arcadianism has no particular affinity with conservative ideals. Rural interludes are found in many works. The rural world presented as an ideal can be found across the political spectrum. In contemporary Australian politics, for example, an idealised rural setting crosses the spectrum from the conservative Four Wheel Drive Recreation Party through to left-wing alternative communities. In literature we can find arcadian interludes in Plato, Shakespeare, Alice Walker and many other writers.

Let's take Adams' *Watership Down* as an example, and explore the values that lie within it in an attempt to discover the source of Moorcock's ire. Essentially, this work explores dystopias and utopias in a rural landscape. Adams' dystopias are three, one pointing towards the high art and soft living while feeding off a murderous benefactor (avant-garde modernism and arts grants, perhaps), one pointing towards tyrannical bureaucracy (possibly socialism), and one to slavery (the rabbits in the cages on the farm). His final utopia points towards tradition, the good prince (Hazel-rah and the legendary El-ahrairah), tribal loyalties, but also towards individual liberty and choices, and the rise of a new class from a handful of outcast survivors ("Fiver's blood"). In his utopia, traditional roles and leaders are fused with contemporary notions of choice and equality. In his dystopias, traditional tyranny fuses with bureaucracy, and a modernist, death-wish-filled art. The end result is clearly a humanist vision that is suspicious of some aspects of the current age, while it embraces others. Swinfen in discussing Adams' utopia and dystopias claims that one of the societies Adams demolishes is a traditional one, in the destruction of the original burrow which was unable to change with the times (Swinfen, 1984, p 219). Be that as it may, it is hardly "epic Pooh" or the comfort of the nursery, containing as it does passages such as those describing Blackavar's torture.

What, then, is at issue? The problem with this kind of humanism of course is that it appears to cling to an ideal of a bygone era, that of the emergence of a good prince and privilege, in which rulers are given power but wield it fairly to advantage the entire society and who love their people more than themselves. When we say this is an “ideal” of a bygone era, this is not to deny its force and real influence as a model in past eras. The good prince and enlightened administration were a utopian endeavour, an ideal world that existed in the aspirations of those who found themselves in a non-ideal monarchical society. If their utopian hopes were continually disappointed in an everyday world which included tyranny, corruption, greed and self- or class-serving aristocrats, there were nevertheless ideals against which their everyday world could be measured and found wanting, and towards which people could work, hope or aspire. One could argue that this is still very much the case today in Britain where Princess Diana has embodied the ideal for the current age, particularly after her death when she has become an idealised figure.

Yet when one observes that the entire fantasy genre is awash with princes and kings willing to sacrifice themselves for their people and captains of the guard who are doughty and just, one is brought up against the question of why this ideal, which one might think properly belongs to a vanished monarchistic world, still has such attractive power in an age of social democracy. Further, it is in our own age that the legend of Arthur has re-erupted in new cycles of stories, for example those by Mary Stewart and Kevin Crossley-Holland. One possible answer is that the current age has no equivalent ideal of its own. The period where it was possible to believe that communism could bring about a social utopia has long past, and the various contemporary ideals of the policy-maker, the politician or the economist have not captured the popular imagination in an idealistic way, at least not in Australia or Britain. It is the reversionary instinct, one might suspect, rather than the rural landscape, that raises Moorcock’s hackles in the works of Tolkien, Lewis and Adams. The rural landscape, at least in Tolkien and Adams, is a place from which to attack industrialisation and the modern world, and advocate a partial return to a tradition which seems out of place in today’s world and hence draws the wrath of critics. This wrath is hardly diminished by the popularity and success of these works, which however suggest that inexplicably, an atavistic longing for an ideal world (as opposed to the actual lived experience) of a past era is nevertheless very prevalent in contemporary society.

Far from being mere consolation for a discomfited elite, it appears these works have a broad appeal. Why this should be so may be puzzling, but attempting to erase these works by wishing them gone is not particularly helpful. Further, like the anti-consolatory argument, the anti-rural argument attacks works that other critics place at the very centre of fantasy, in another example of divergence within fantasy criticism.

### The Farthest Shore Rejected

In Part 1 of this paper it was observed that a characteristic feature of fantasy criticism, taken as an entire discursive formation, was that it was *open in the direction of the transcendent*, as evidenced by a group of objects including “marvellous”, “wonder”, “sublime” and “higher reality”. In Part 2, some definitions by leading critics were found to have a transcendent component. It was also noted that the transcendent was advocated by many fantasy authors. To some degree, this could be seen as a defensive manoeuvre, a way of refuting suggestions that fantasy is “untrue” or an inferior form of writing to realism which is “true”. However, and probably more significantly, transcendent interludes or themes are common in fantasy works themselves, and are characteristic of particular fantasy sub-genres, which lends support to their authors’ assertions that fantasy does *try* to depict a “higher reality”. In many of these works, a hero may be endorsed by pantheistic, divine and/or ancient forces, establishing his or her right to represent the good, and adumbrating a higher level of significance for the battle between good and evil of which any local struggle is only a small part. Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising* series, C S Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* are examples of works where this is a major theme. In the works of other authors, there is often a significant interlude that serves a similar purpose. Andre Norton’s heroes usually encounter an “old power” or other force that lies beyond the known world. Tamora Pierce’s heroines are wont to encounter pantheistic or spiritual entities that endorse their special roles. Consider also Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy and Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* works, with their incursions into the land of the dead.

Given the pervasiveness of this element within the works, it is interesting to observe that many critics have been unable to bring themselves to admit the transcendent element into discussion. Firstly, there are those like Irwin who would elide the transcendent. He excludes from fantasy those works which represent “... Faust-like efforts to abrogate finitude or to penetrate ultimate mysteries” including ghost stories

(Irwin, 1976, pp 3-4, 89).<sup>18</sup> Yet this is understandable, is it not? How can transcendental elements be discussed in any meaningful way within a secular logical-rational argument and a rigorous critical framework? And what of the situation of post-modern or post-structuralist critics, who would consider that any meta-signifier is necessarily absent? Is it even possible, we might ask, to discuss the transcendental within a post-structuralist formulation? Let's make the attempt —

A narrative possibility exists within the fantasy literature which we will, until we understand it better, describe as the “mystical unknown”. To evoke this possibility, a narrative simultaneously *withholds* and *bestows*. This is a double movement; but in both cases, the gesture purports to start or finish beyond the narrative plane.

The gesture of withholding reverses verisimilitude: whereas sensory completeness suggests the tangible, the denial of sensory completeness, and the offering of a part rather than a whole, suggests the intangible. The hand that rises from the lake in Arthurian accounts such as Tennyson's *Morte D'Arthur*, “clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful”, places the Lady of the Lake within this “higher unknown” and is a typical example; only a part of the Lady is seen (or seeable). Such withheld elements in the narrative invariably have two functions. They *emote* (awe, wonder, et cetera) for a power which (seemingly) lies beyond the text, and by which gesture the text lends itself the mystical power it purports to evoke; they also act as *agents*.

In their role as an agent, they perform the gesture of bestowal. Time and time again when the “mystical unknown” appears in the fantasy novel, an artifact is transferred (for example, the sword in the Arthurian cycles), a warning is given or a wound is healed. But where, we might ask, do these agents come from? From which nation, power or character in the narrative? Their sudden appearances are frequently disassociated from the narrative structure and seem inexplicable; the narratives only rarely offer an easy allegorical or religious interpretation (famously, Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*). In this way they seem to point to us from beyond the text; but we know this to be impossible. One must conclude therefore that they are *agents of the narrative*. They come from the unseen power that fuels the fantasy world, which is the genre itself. The gift that is bestowed is precisely that of certainty. The narrative confirms itself.

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18 In Irwin's case, a work will be readmitted if is associated with a more intellectual purpose – he includes religious and moral purposes here and is thus able to recover Lewis, Tolkien et al.

Now the above of course is rather (but not entirely) tongue-in-cheek, but it does show that there are ways of discussing the transcendent when it appears in literature from perspectives which do not in themselves endorse concepts of higher truth.

Secondly, there is a second group of critics who enter into discussion of the transcendent, in order to dismiss it or marginalise it as representing particular values. Jackson, for example, objects strongly to the transcendent (in the sense of “higher reality”), casting off the works of Tolkien and others who explore this area in their fictional works, on the grounds of its nostalgic conservatism:

Literature of the fantastic has been claimed as ‘transcending’ reality, ‘escaping’ the human condition and constructing superior alternate, ‘secondary worlds’ ... this notion of fantasy literature as fulfilling a desire for a ‘better’, more complete, unified reality has come to dominate readings of the fantastic, defining it as an art form providing vicarious gratification. This book aims to locate such a transcendentalist approach as part of a nostalgic, humanistic vision, of the same kind as those romance fictions produced by Lewis, T H White and other modern fabulists, all of whom look back to a lost moral and social hierarchy, which their fantasies attempt to recapture and revivify (Jackson, 1981, p 2).

For Tolkien, the only way is backwards: the chauvinistic, totalitarian effects of his vision are conveniently removed from present material conditions, by providing an “escape” from them ...

Beyond the ‘high fantasy’ of Kingsley, MacDonald, Morris, Tolkien, Lewis, etc., there is a recognizable ‘death wish’, which has been identified as one recurrent feature of fantasy literature ... these more conservative fantasies simply go along with a desire to cease ‘to be’, a longing to transcend or escape the human (Jackson, 1981, p 156).

Largely, Jackson’s argument consists of the “consolatory” objection, discussed previously, and an objection to the ideologically conservative use of the past. To this she adds a strong charge of a “death wish”, the very most powerful form of the escapist argument. Why, though, is the transcendent so powerfully objectionable, so innately associated with conservatism? She objects, for example, to beast stories (a form of transcending the human), including those of Adams, and excepting Orwell’s satire. It is true that these can be conservative. However, they can also be radical, as in Orwell.

Adams' *Watership Down* is probably neither, but what of Adams' *Plague Dogs* with its powerful animal rights message?

Olsen also associates the transcendent with compensatory and aristocratic class values belonging to the past:

The marvelous mode believes that human life is subject to immutable, universal truths ... the *here* of the text is the gateway to the *there* ... the marvelous narrative is compensatory, looking back to a lost beautiful and often aristocratic moral and social hierarchy that was communally and teleologically meaningful (Olsen, 1987, p 18).

These responses are interesting given that there appears to be little evidence to suggest that the use of the transcendent is innately conservative. Postmodern critics may have little affinity with it, given their rejection of the transcendental signified, but its appearance is frequent in both "conservative" works and radical works including feminist fantasies. And arguably, there is an association between fantasy and the transcendent which is contained within the structure of fantasy itself, and which makes efforts to excise it as a form of ideological error misguided. To establish this relationship, let us posit that there exists a narrative form or forms which are associated with "another reality". Without speculating as to their truth or uses, or judging their value, we will merely ask, to what direction will these forms incline? Logically, in reaching beyond the knowable, one formal possibility available for these works is to depict a realm where the bounds of everyday reality are broken – in other words, to create a realm that lies outside the everyday world, otherwise known as a secondary world or fantasy world. The fantasy novel's association with "higher reality" is, in this interpretation, therefore not (necessarily) formulaic. It may be intrinsic to a project for which a possible waystation will inevitably be that of the fantasy world. Now, let's travel in the other direction, and remove any *initial* impulse to "another reality". A fantasy realm, a secondary world, has been created, and it offers an enticing possibility. It has broken one bound; why not see what lies further beyond, why not break another? The creation of a secondary realm can in itself thus be seen as a transformational force from which the transcendental elements in fantasy might flow.

Neither of these possibilities requires a conservative ethos. It is likely that a common association between Christian themes and the transcendent may have led critics to

make this assumption.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Crossley's analysis questions the fixed nature of a division between the "everyday" world and the fictional other realm. Based to a large degree on his observations of the responses to fantasy of college students, he raises the possibility that our world may *change* as we interact with the transcendent (Crossley, 1975, p 288). This might give credibility to the fantasy world as a possible site of radical political resistance, a status claimed for it by some (see for example Curry, 1997, p 26).

As with the consolatory and anti-rural arguments, some of those putting forward the anti-transcendent argument do so from a perspective of ideological discomfort. They attack the transcendent as innately conservative — an interesting response when it is so prevalent in so many fantasy works including those by feminist and radical authors. This condemnatory approach contributes to a dispersion in fantasy criticism whereby some critics seek to elide the transcendent entirely and others accord it a central role (as discussed earlier).

### Rejecters of the Small

When Edmund Wilson (1956) claimed that "certain people – especially, perhaps, in Britain – have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash", he was offering a snide explanation of the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* among his (adult) contemporaries. When he asked that "if we must read about imaginary kingdoms, give me James Branch Cabell's *Poictesme*. He at least writes for grown-up people ..." he was making a plea for an aesthetic that he finds lacking in Tolkien (Wilson, 1956, p 314). The ground of this objection, that parts of the fantasy genre are "juvenile", has persisted (see for example Moorcock, 1987, p 125).

Neither Wilson nor Moorcock claim that *all* fantasy is "juvenile trash"; however large areas of fantasy draw their ire. For Wilson, the sticking points are elements such as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, and what he felt were "interminable adventures" that left him bored and untouched. For Moorcock, fantasy can be divided into two types, "the kind that permanently disturbs, and the kind that comforts". Fantasy for children is allowed to be comforting, but "an adult story rarely produces a

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19 For the Christian/supernatural association, see for example Manlove, 1982, p 24.

comforting end”, and if it does, Moorcock sees it as a “corrupt and unproductive form” (Moorcock, 1985, pp 8-9). He also posited an intermediary form, “sword and sorcery” fiction, which bridges child and adult worlds. “Sword and sorcery” is permitted to adolescents but marks arrested development in adults:

... the appeal of Sword and Sorcery is on the whole to younger readers whose emotions are, understandably, not yet fully matured. What good it achieves, if any, is that it forms a useful bridge between a childhood sense of wonder and an adult sense of surrealism. However, that bridge seems to be infrequently crossed. People, to prolong the metaphor, sit down half-way over and stay there for the rest of their lives. This is bad for them (Moorcock, 1985, p 31).

This objection can be separated into two parts. First, it assumes an identification of various kinds of fantasy with children. Second, it asserts that for adults to cross the adult-child bound by reading such works is aberrant and Moorcock proscribes the practice. Freud has commented that adults feel the need to conceal their use of phantasy, whereas children do not (Freud, 1908, p 145). The first part of the argument, the identification of fantasy with children, is also asserted by those who seek to encourage adults to allow children access to fantasy, and by those who would idealise the fantasy-making aspects of childhood (see for example Gates, Steffel and Molson, 2003, pp 135-140). The second part of the argument claims that those adults who read fantasy, or take it seriously, are juvenile or in a state of arrested development. Further, as fantasy works are only suitable for children, any fantasy that appears to address adults is thought to be appealing to either an undesirable immaturity or a nostalgia for the nursery, and is either dismissed or received with misgivings. This leads to (and justifies) the final castigation of authors and readers.

All three stages or versions of this argument are of course contested. Some have questioned the fantasy=juvenile equation. Rather than fantasy being naturally associated with children, they argue that this association has arisen for historical and socio-cultural reasons. Sandner (and many others) point out that in the past, a range of works now associated with children including fairy stories, folk tales and stories where magic and mythic elements are prominent, were previously fictions for adults as well:

In the eighteenth century ... the association of the fantastic with childhood remains secondary to the relationship of the fantastic to the primitive and superstitious cultural past (Sandner, 2004b, p 319).

Some have questioned the very existence of a boundary between adult and child reading. Lewis, for example argues that a division between adult and children's books continues to have "only a very sketchy relation with the habits of any real readers", an assertion that the recent popularity of Harry Potter with adult readers appears to support (Lewis, 1952, p 63). Others admit that a division has been affected but take issue with it in various ways. Lloyd Alexander argues that adult's concerns are also addressed by fantasy, but in a different way to children's (Alexander, 1978, p ix). Tolkien argues that adults have a greater need for fantasy, recover, escape and consolation than do children (Tolkien, 1964, p 44). Finally, there are those that find liberating possibilities in reversing the adult/child division. Rabkin suggests that children are licensed to display "outgroup" behaviour, which can provide a viable alternative for adults wishing to escape adult perspectives (Rabkin, 1976, pp 96-7). Crossley believes that reading or writing fantasy provides a valuable bridge for adults between adult and child consciousness (Crossley, 1975, p 284). Westfahl, discussing science fiction as children's literature, offers the possibility that it offers "neoteny", the retention of juvenile characteristics into adulthood, as a "sign of its strength, not its weakness, as a literary genre" (Westfahl, 1994, p 71).

Like some of the attacks discussed earlier, the "juvenile" argument in its strongest form seeks to condemn and/or erase entire areas of fantasy, notwithstanding the presence of numerous works which cross the adult-child boundaries and the habits of readers. This has created a long-standing debate and ongoing divergence between fantasy critics.

### **Le Morte de Moi**

The objection that some types of work encourage egocentric or narcissistic tendencies has been applied to various types of fantasy by critics, including some fantasy critics, who frequently base their concerns on concepts put forward by Freud. Irwin, for example, seeks to invest fantasy with the intellectual energy of a game and distance it from those "daydream" forms that gratify "His Majesty the Ego":

... daydreams also work according to the principle of economy by releasing or returning the dreamer to an easy satisfaction that avoids the tensions facing him. In the other kind of play, including the play of wit, expenditure of all kinds of energy is willingly sought as part of the game (Irwin, 1976, p 31).

Lewis makes a similar distinction between “egotistic” and “disinterested” fantasy. “Castle-building” can be “morbid castle-building” or “normal castle-building”. Only disinterested castle-building can yield literature (Lewis, 1965). Both Lewis and Irwin depart from Freud’s view that the origins of all art are wish-fulfillment phantasy, while being prepared to place some art (whether realism or fantasy) under this category.

Frequently, egocentric fantasy is identified with childhood, or remnants of the childlike self:

... in romance, as in dreams, queens and kings are our representatives. Their royalty universalises them. They revive our sense of our own omnipotence, which, though constantly assailed by adult experience, survives in the recesses of personality even after adulthood (Beer, 1970, p 3).

Rabkin defends the ego’s retention of “omnipotence of thought” in adulthood based on Freud’s observation that, although there is no place for it in the scientific attitude to life, “[n]evertheless, in our reliance upon the power of the human spirit which copes with the laws of reality, there still lives on a fragment of this primitive belief in the omnipotence of thought” (Freud, 1913, p 147). Fantasy therefore serves a valid purpose in helping us “overcome too much reality” (Rabkin, 1976, p 225). Schlobin forms a similar argument, calling on Bachelard’s “irreality principle” to support “an affective sense of the impossible”. Like many other critics, however, he seeks to distance himself from parts of the genre, distinguishing between those works with only “a single affective attribute” and “successful serious fantasies” (Schlobin, 1982, pp 6-9).

However, it is Bloom who questions Freud’s assertions at the most fundamental level. Bloom takes issue with the claim that normal development progresses from the “pleasure-principle” (phantasy) to the “reality-principle”, arguing that this theory has a moral rather than a scientific basis:

... for any theory of fantasy which is not content with mere formalism or structuralism, Freud hypothesized that as infants we begin by living in fantasy.

But when fantasy ceases to bring actual satisfaction, then infantile hallucinations end, and the reality-principle begins to enter ... Yet the pleasure/pain principle retains its sway over fantasy, a word which for Freud refers to the unconscious and its primary process workings ... Freud himself tells us that the drive for ego-preservation provides the dynamic for the onward march of reality-testing, but that the sexual drives are educated by reality only partially and belatedly, thus making for an apparently thoroughgoing dualism between the ego and the unconscious. But Freud, though the greatest and most adroit of modern explainers, cannot explain why as infants we don't all just choose to stay hallucinated. Nor can he explain ever precisely what reality-testing is, which leads me to surmise that finally it is Freud's own displaced version of a kind of Platonising transcendentalism, a moral vision masking itself as evidentiary science ... I am very disturbed that Freud's reality-principle may be only an idealized and idealizing good in itself, one more thing-in-itself that Nietzsche's dialectic can destroy with great ease. Do we possess the Freudian reality-principle as we possess art, only in order not to perish from the nihilizing truth? (Bloom, 2004, p 238ff)

Instead Bloom proposes that fantasy, particularly in its internalised quest form, assimilates impulses from both Narcissus and Prometheus to resolve intrinsic issues that the self faces in its encounters with nature:

Indeed, that curious assimilation, ensuing in a narcissistic Prometheus or Promethean narcissist, is the direct cause of what I have been calling the *clinamen* or opening swerve, or ironic reaction-formation, of a theory of literary fantasy. The aggressivity of Promethean quest, turned quite destructively inwards against the self, results from a narcissistic scar, a scar inflicted by nature upon the questing antithetical will. One consequence of this scar is the aesthetic bafflement of literary fantasy, its ironic or allegorical conflict between a stance of absolute freedom and a hovering fear of total psychic over-determination ... To state this another way, the Shelleyan quester, the Don, Alice, Maskull, Frankenstein, any true hero or heroine of literary fantasy discovers at last that the only fire they can steal is already and originally their own fire.

I offer this as a theoretical defense of fantasy and science fiction alike ...

Neither narcissist nor Promethean can transcend human limitations, and the story of Narcissus is as much the tragedy of human sexuality as Prometheus is of human aspirations (Bloom, 2004, pp 245-6).

As with previous critical objections, attacks on egocentric and narcissistic fantasy establish a ground of moral or literary correctness from which much fantasy falls short. However, as was discussed earlier, other critics focus on this very tendency of fantasy to project the ego outwards over a world or landscape and see it as a central or defining feature. The different perspectives on this aspect of fantasy are another example of divergence in fantasy criticism.

### **Ideological Critics in King Arthur's Court**

In this section, “quasi-mediaeval” will refer to a text or textual element which *prima facie* represents the mediaeval period, but which may not aspire to or achieve historical accuracy; “mediaevalist” will refer to texts which incorporate mediaeval elements into the textual world which may be set in any period or location, including other planets and alternative universes. The latter group includes the former.

The origin of the current cycle of mediaevalist locales is sometimes credited to William Morris, whose *The Wood Beyond the World* and other novels combined heroic fantasy with mediaevalist settings (see for example Thompson, 1982, p 215).

The use of “mediaevalist” implies varied degrees of incorporation of the mediaeval, and that the mediaeval may be mixed with other elements in the textual stew. Brave knights, precocious pages and unhappy princesses may still have heroic adventures in ancient forests; but also in spaceships (Lucas’ *Star Wars*). Quests and swords may feature in castles, but also in twentieth century Britain (Coopers’ *The Dark is Rising*). Feudal lords may still gather their forces and ride out against monsters that terrorise villages, but these fearsome monsters may include machines (Pierce’s *Protector of the Small*).

The prevalence of mediaevalist fantasies in contemporary fantasy fiction, particularly within heroic fantasy forms and quest narratives, has given rise to particular critical debates. Many of these include an inquiry into the relationship between mediaevalist fantasies and modernity. (We will leave aside those commentators who find the use of mediaeval costume, high fantasy language, ritual and noble sentiments merely ludicrous.)

Questions commonly raised include: whether mediaevalism can offer a considered perspective on contemporary culture, or is merely an attempt to escape modernity; gender roles in the mediaevalist heroic narrative; concerns arising from the depiction of social relations within pre-modern worlds — in particular, whether such texts are trying to imaginatively reinstate a feudal or other class-identified order; and similar debates about the role of mediaevalist texts in establishing or transmitting myths of Englishness, for example questions arising as to whether these myths are inevitably tied to a conservative version of national identity or whether this identity can be contested or resynthesised.

The first objection, that of escapism, has been deliberately omitted from this paper as it is commonly levelled at all or most fantasy from outside of fantasy criticism. The role of gender within the heroic also applies to other forms of fantasy as well as the mediaevalist. The remaining debates – the social implications of the use of the past (particularly the feudal system), and the use of the mediaeval period to found and transmit myths of Englishness will be discussed below.

***The Chronicles of Nostalgia – The use of the past seen as evidence of a yearning for a past conservative order***

The use of models drawn from the past as a setting for fantasy has been seen by many as problematic. There are two common concerns around the representation of the past. In the first, the past represents the old, repressive order, from which we have achieved some degree of freedom (albeit we are still confined, in a kind of doublethink that allows every contemporary generation to believe itself to be relatively free), but for which some texts still exhibit a yearning; in the second, the past is unachievable, a golden age formulation, said to be escapist, unrealistic and so forth. Fantasy, in drawing much of its iconography from what on the face of it appears to be romanticised mediaevalism, falls foul on both counts, although it is the first that we are examining here.

Jackson (1981) provides a textbook example of this common concern when she states that there is a romance tradition which supports a ruling ideology and manifests a desire for a feudal order. The works of Tolkien are targeted as a prime example of this impulse:

The current popularity of J R R Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* indicates the strength of a romance tradition supporting a ruling ideology. Tolkien is nostalgic for a pre-Industrial, indeed a pre-Norman Conquest, feudal order. He makes a naïve equation of industry with evil, referring with disgust to the 'materialism of a Robot Age' and looking backwards to a medieval paradise ... (Jackson, 1981, p 155).

Tolkien's conservative position on class and his radical position on industrialisation are conflated in this passage. It is worth pointing out that far from being naïve, in an era of environmental struggle *The Lord of the Rings* has been one of the works associated with the green movement. The complexities of Tolkien's work cannot be so easily reduced to a simple conservative formula.

Patrick Curry's defence of *The Lord of the Rings* endorses a concept of "radical nostalgia" to explain why the past is used to critique the present (Curry, 1997, p 26). However, the issue of class is not fully addressed by this argument. Critics are understandably troubled at the replication in fantasy of a world where aristocratic privilege and class are structurally affirmed. The knights and nobles and villeins and landlords and thieves and all the trappings of quasi-mediaeval fantasy seem to orbit around a central figure of the king or queen. The hero, who is possibly of noble birth and possibly not, wins their position in this world in what may seem as be a change of fortune rather than a challenge to the hierarchical order. In discussing mediaeval romance and the contribution of Chretien in introducing the Arthurian cycle, Beer points out that the courtly code was originally a radical movement:

The courtly code was in its way revolutionary. It subverted the values of feudal society by emphasis on love without bargains, its fantasy of female dominance, its individualism and its paradoxical legalism which piquantly appropriated the language of authority while undermining authoritarian assumptions ... Unlike many later romance writers he [Chretien] is not reviving the *past* wonders of jousts and tournaments, of a world where the passionate niceties of love were practised. He is rather offering an imaginative idealization of the world about him ... (Beer, 1970, p 23).

However she argues that "[c]onservatism was always an impulse in romance" and that in later periods, these same (previously incendiary) ideals were revived to reassert the power of empire and honour (Beer, 1970, p 23). Some mediaevalist fantasy texts

clearly do affirm a traditional class order. *The Sword in the Stone* by T H White (1939) comments on its feudal setting in very conservative terms, and defends feudal values:

Everybody was happy. The Saxons were slaves to their Norman masters if you chose to look at it in one way – but, if you chose to look at it in another, they were the same farm labourers who get along on too few shillings a week today. Only neither the villein nor the farm labourer starved, when the master was a man like Sir Ector. It has never been an economic proposition for an owner of cattle to starve his cows, so why should an owner of slaves starve them? The truth is that even nowadays the farm labourer accepts so little money because he does not have to throw his soul in with the bargain – as he would have to do in the town – and the same freedom of spirit has obtained in the country since the earliest times. The villeins were labourers. They lived in the same one-roomed hut with their families, few chickens, litter of pigs, or with a cow possibly called Crumbocke – most dreadful and insanitary! But they liked it. They were healthy, free of an air with no factory smoke in it [sic], and, which was most of all to them, their heart's interest was bound up with their skill in labour. They knew that Sir Ector was proud of them ... He walked and worked among his villagers, thought of their welfare, and could tell the good workman from the bad ...

In other parts of *Gramarye*, of course, there did exist wicked and despotic masters – feudal gangsters whom it was to be King Arthur's destiny to chasten – but the evil was in the bad people who abused it, not in the feudal system (White, 1939, pp 136-7).

Despite some levelling (“He walked and worked among his villagers ...”) which tends to defuse the effects of an imbalance of power not just in this passage but throughout the work, one would have to say that a charge of conservatism is largely substantiated. Although the Arthurian cycle as a whole describes a shift to the rule of law, and in its original form was a radical message, it can be seen that it is possible for it to be applied as a conservative myth of idealised class order.

Yet this conservative past is not necessarily implicit in the myth of Arthur. The selection of an unknown rustic for the kingship, the association with pagan powers, the establishment of more egalitarian institutions than those that went before, the powerful role accorded to Guinevere, can equally well allow it to be applied as a myth against traditional privilege. In *Arthur*, a recent Arthurian cycle by Kevin Crossley-Holland,

the protagonist questions traditional class values. The resurgence of Arthur myth is more revealing of its malleability to the values of successive ages than of its rigid attachment to a particular social order, and it is reimagined by each age to reflect the values of that age. Even T H White's series, despite the conservatism described above, attaches the new figure of Tom, a village boy who is knighted on the battlefield that destroys Camelot and given the task to spread the legend and ideals that it represented. These ideals are expressed in egalitarian terms. This addition, which appropriates Camelot as an allegorical symbol rather than an actual social order, appears in the Hollywood version and becomes part of the twentieth century's reworking of the tale. Insofar as Arthur continually reappears, as a kind of Messiah for Britain, he represents a desire to sweep away the Britain that is and replace it with an ideal; an ideal that is constantly changing.

If the present falls away from an ideal, and this ideal must be situated somewhere, then one of the possible sites lies in an idealised past. This should not be seen as actual past, and the yearning is typically not for the injustices of previous years but for particular values that oppose those seen as unsatisfactory in the present. These ideals and values may be conservative or radical; the past is available to be appropriated by either.

### ***The Once and Future Pom – Mediaevalism as a Trojan horse which carries hidden values***

Michael Drout has argued that the Anglo-Saxon mediaeval source materials in Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* cycle act a kind of Trojan horse for conservative ideas such as Anglo-centrism, submission to authority, the moral superiority of the educated and hierarchical social relations as part of natural law, and that these ideas are transmitted in ways that lie beyond the author's control. The source material:

... fundamentally shapes the text beyond the control of the author and beyond the conscious apprehension of the child reader ... traditional and historical material (of certain traditions and histories) carry with them coded meanings at a level that is not immediately apparent but that nevertheless operates to exercise ideological control of the text (Drout, 1997, p 231).

There is undoubtedly a preoccupation in British fantasy writing with mythologising England and Englishness, and the mediaeval has provided a rich vein of symbols for

authors to mine. But are the values being transmitted through these source materials inevitably conservative? Some myths of Britain, for example that of Robin Hood, are associated with the transmission of radical rather than conservative values. The Arthurian myth has arguably been associated with both. For each, one should rather ask what functions the mythologising serves, and how it positions individuals within a social context. Until these questions have been addressed, there is insufficient reason for claiming that a myth bears a hidden conservative load regardless of its attempted use. A preoccupation with national identity does not in itself establish the case. Consider William Morris, for example. For Morris in the utopian fantasy *News from Nowhere*, the mediaeval past provided a model which could be reclaimed and reworked into an idealised social structure where Marxist principles were fused with a project of restoring an England where people lived in harmony with nature in a classless society based on artisanship.

Aside from a few attempts such as Morris', it is true that one can observe that the British class system is almost invariably replicated to some degree in British novels including those British fantasy texts which dominate the popular fantasy canon such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Dark is Rising*, and one could speculate that this replication may be beyond the control of the authors, and possibly invisible to them. However, the class system is also present and replicated in almost all British fiction including contemporary realism and thrillers. Mediaeval source materials are not essential to sustain this system, and may even be used to question it. Myths of Britain in popular fiction show both tendencies. Some replicate class values and traditional hierarchies and some seek to question the very values that Michael Drout asserted are inevitably transmitted (consider Kevin Crossley-Holland's *The Seeing Stone*).

Returning to Susan Cooper's work, the ideology in her *The Dark is Rising* cycle is arguably more on the ideals of her times than on a hidden payload from the mediaeval era. Will's family, for example, defends a Pakistani family from a racist character identified with the forces of evil. It is true that Cooper is still caught within paradigms of colonialism. The Pakistani family need to be "saved"; the Pakistani boy is a victim, needing the heroic defence of Will's brother. However it is clear in this work that racial tolerance is identified with "the good", and that this fantasy work is attempting to incorporate non-whiteness and racial difference. It has not advanced as far in its

understanding of this difference as more recently published works, and so has not completely shed its colonialism, but nor had the society in which it was published. J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* as a more recent series has integrated a multi-racial egalitarianism to a much fuller degree, with non-stereotypical characters whose positive and negative traits are not racially defined. This progression however arguably merely reflects that of the society from which these texts have emerged.

Anthony Blake offers another perspective. In *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter* he describes how old and new are intertwined in J K Rowling's works:

Harry Potter isn't just part of Hewison's museum culture; he is a retrolutionary, a symbolic figure of the past-in-future England which is in desperate need of such symbols (Blake, 2002, pp 15-16).

The idea of a retrolutionary allows for modern consciousness and ideals to be joined to symbols of the past. Mediaeval swords join with multiculturalism. Fusing contemporary consciousness with mediaevalist themes and motifs leads to those themes and motifs being reinscribed.

### ***The Mediaeval as Otherworld***

If mediaevalist fantasies aren't *necessarily* motivated by a desire to transmit conservative ideological positions; if they can be contemporary in focus; and if concerns of a hidden "conservative ideological load" are not borne out vis à vis the entire genre (however valid they may be for particular works) then various other questions arise. What, then, is the utility of the mediaeval in fantasy fiction? What *is* represented by it? Why use the mediaeval at all?

It has been established that multiple uses and purposes are possible, and one might further speculate that part of the success of the mediaevalist mythology lies in its very availability to be possessed, or rather repossessed, by successive periods and by competing ideologies within those periods. However, the mediaeval isn't unique in this. Other periods, for example the biblical period, have been reinscribed by texts with significant ideological variations including, for example, works as diverse as Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Contemporary fantasy, however, makes relatively little use of the biblical era, and much use of the mediaeval.

Why a preoccupation with feudal life? Arguably, the purpose is to create an otherworld in which to explore certain themes, not to restore the mediaeval period. As the era immediately preceding the rise of scientific rationalism, it offers a vantage point from which to critique particular aspects of modernity and to offer alternatives. It can accommodate anti-modernist values such as artisanship, relationships with other species, respect for nature, a pantheistic transcendent, reliance on one's own resources, and speaking against convention. Yet at the same time, it can portray a reasonably large-scale society and portray versions of whatever may be considered problematic in modernity: misuse of resources, policies imposed upon unwilling populations, a network of production with resulting inequities, corruption, a justice system favouring the wealthy, war and greed. Its use is both convenient and conventional. The mediaeval offers an Otherworld which is prefabricated, fully furnished and equipped. The romance tradition has cast it into a recognisable heroic mode and it can accommodate courage and heroics, encounters with the fabulous and the monstrous. Its use saves an author the considerable trouble of building a world *ab nihilo*.

An interesting example can be found in Tamora Pierce's young adult fantasy works, where martial arts or magically inclined girls challenge a patriarchal and homosocial feudal order and establish female versions of the centre. Her world is growing; with each new quartet, more female figures are introduced into her magical mediaevalist world. Pierce's aren't isolated works; female protagonists in mediaevalist fantasies are growing in number, and mediaeval Otherworlds are perceptibly changing in our times to accommodate them.

It should be emphasised that a society redrawn in this way is a type of Otherworld, not an actual society as it was or might have been. This argument is given credibility by a particular paradox of mediaevalist fantasy. That is, the richness of the period detail concerning objects, but the often total lack of mediaeval consciousness. A work may provide a minute depiction of the types of swords, how to make a long bow and other fine details, but few such texts offer a view of how the mediaevals thought. Some rituals, such as the investiture of knights, are explored, and not others, such as the preoccupation with religious questions. This is because its use is not actually a recreation of the mediaeval, but an Otherworld for which the mediaeval offers a convenient and conventional sourcebook. Far from representing feudal thought, these

novels present a pastiche of characters and attitudes; and this is self-reflexively and humorously referred to in White's *The Sword in the Stone* when Merlyn exclaims "By this and by that ... why can't they get us the electric light and company's water?"

The mediaeval is a contested ground. The mediaevalist fantasy is not fixed and it is available to be reinscribed and repossessed for myriad purposes. The insistence by some critics that mediaevalist texts are irredeemably conservative has created a polarised debate and another example of divergence in fantasy criticism.

### The anti-attractor

In the introduction to this paper, it was observed that "scathing attacks on sub-genres" were a feature of fantasy criticism, and some of these have been explored above. These objections may sometimes overlap with the definitional and textual exclusions discussed earlier, but are different in kind in that they are primarily characterised not merely by boundary setting but by condemnation and/or attempts at disposal. However, as with the earlier exclusions, some of the areas outlawed by some critics are those most central to others: the role of "consolation" in particular works is celebrated in some critical theories (Tolkien) and abhorred in others; the use of the past affords "radical nostalgia" for Curry but for some critics it is anathematised as supporting a "ruling ideology"; the transcendent is one of the more interesting functions of fantasy for some analysts (Crossley) but condemned by others (Irwin). In most cases, a counter-argument and counter-examples are already extant or can be fairly easily established, suggesting that the objections have little universality. On the contrary, they inevitably invite counter-argument.

Foucault has argued that in describing a discursive formation one does not necessarily seek to find a unity of theme, or highlight particular differences; instead, one might establish that there are *systems of dispersion*, for example of theoretical strategies:

What one finds are rather various strategic possibilities that permit the activation of incompatible themes, or, again, the establishment of the same theme in different groups of statement. Hence the idea of describing these dispersions themselves; of discovering whether, between these elements, which are certainly not organized as a progressively deductive structure ... one cannot discern a regularity: an order in their successive appearance, correlations in their

simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space, a reciprocal functioning, linked and hierarchized transformations. Such an analysis would not try to isolate small islands of coherence in order to describe their internal structure; it would not try to suspect and reveal latent conflicts; it would study forms of division ... instead of drawing up *tables of differences* ... it would describe *systems of dispersion* (Foucault, 1969, p 37). [original emphasis]

Can we establish a system of dispersion that would account for the raising of objections to sub-genres in these diverse ways and the use of opposing theoretical strategies (such as ideological criticism opposed to the transcendent), concepts (“omnipotence of thought” opposed to the inner journey, “tradition supporting a ruling ideology” opposed to “radical nostalgia”) and objects (for example Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* opposed to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*)? Some possibilities will be explored below.

1. A common thread in these objections within fantasy criticism is ideology, whether political or otherwise. Objections emerge out of, and imply adherence to, a belief in an ideal. If this ideal is transgressed then its holder feels justified in attacking, condemning or attempting to dispose of the texts that appear to be contravening its particular codes. For example: if there is an ideal model of human development, part of which assumes certain kinds of phantasy are suitable only for juveniles, then a body of literature that appears to offer these phantasies to adults may be castigated. Or: if there is an ideal model of “literature”, with familiar strategies of structure, characterisation, themes and so on (whether the ideal be founded on modernism, postmodernism, realism or even high fantasy), then works that fail to comply with this model and yet are held out as literary ideals by others may be regarded as false exemplars to be cut down. Or: if there is an ideal “radical” political position, then any popular works which fail to situate the “status quo” and rebellion in the required way may be subject to attempts to dispose of their relevance.

2. Ideals imply a future to which we may aspire and a past and/or present from which we seek to diverge (the non-ideal world). In other words, they create a vision of history. In Part 2, some competing notions of history during the twentieth century were discussed, together with the impact of these on definitions of fantasy criticism. Is there a relation between these notions of history to the ideologies that underlie the critical objections? Perhaps, but this cannot be directly established. Examples were given earlier

that illustrated that a postmodernist critic could adhere to a centre, a feminist critic to a monomyth, a structuralist critic to a culmination, a psychoanalytic critic to a *telos* of reason.

The ideological bases of the underlying notions of history do not appear to bear a direct relationship to ideologies put forward at the discursive level. Does this call into question the conclusion reached at the end of Part 2, that the shifting, varied and contradictory notions of history embedded in definitions have contributed to an observable divergence? Not at all, in fact the reverse is true. If there were a one-to-one relationship between these notions of history and either an ideology or a critical approach, this would limit the number of iterations that might be expected. But if, as we have seen, these notions of history can surface in all manner of ideological contexts, even those that may seem incompatible, the permutations greatly increase.

3. Foucault, in discussing science, argues that ideology arises in “the space of interplay” between science and knowledge, and in “its existence as a discursive practice and of its functioning among other practices”, that is to say, in its rules of formation and how it emerged from among other discursive formations and in its relation to knowledge, rather than in its conscious reflection, its practices or the uses to which it is put by practitioners (Foucault, 1969, p 185). Could the same be said of fantasy criticism? The knowledge upon which fantasy criticism is built comprises various pre-existing deposits including “literature”, romance tradition, fairy story, legend and myth. It has attempted to transform existing concepts of what comprises “good literature”, and its Foucauldian “positivities” have been built from various objects, concepts and theoretical strategies associated with one or more of romance, fairy story, legend and myth – all of which have a strong relation to the past – and of their intersections with popular fiction. Fantasy criticism emerged as a discursive formation in defiance of a tradition that eschewed “popular” fiction and at a time when both notions of history and theoretical approaches to literature were in a state of unrest. Could this combination of a distinctive relation to various bodies of knowledge strongly associated with the past, and the transfer of competing objects, concepts and theoretical strategies from the competing notions of history and literary criticism, some of which are antagonistic to inherited ideas, have uniquely created a formation which would

typically give rise to the divergence of objections and the characteristic condemnation of sub-genres described above?

In support of this possibility, we might observe that the objections and their underlying ideologies frequently do concern the relationship between the past and the present, whether of social systems, politics or individuals. The deepest and most fundamental schism within fantasy criticism occurs along one particular faultline: the proper relationship between the past and the present. Arguably, this faultline has been embedded within fantasy criticism from the outset. It emerges firstly from its paradoxical relationship with traditions of form – which, on the one hand, had to be defied in order for this discursive formation to be justified at all, and, on the other, had to be recovered from within studies of myth, romance and fairy story. Secondly, it emerges as a paradox within theoretical approaches to literature. On the one hand, fantasy criticism came into being as the progress of literary politics was being reconstructed by a groundswell of Marxist/feminist/post-colonialist critics as a movement away from a hierarchical order built on class, patriarchal values and empire. On the other hand, many of the fantasy works represented an ongoing alienation from contemporary industrial capitalism (with roots reaching well beyond the Luddites back to arcadian opposition to the city-state), and this has continued to be a major theme. In broad terms, the politics of the left are based on the transformation of institutions, and of the right are based on the ideal aspirational individual/family and free marketplace. In both cases the movement from the past to the present is commonly viewed as a movement away from error (whether from classism, racism, colonialism on the left, or inefficient pre-capitalist production and markets on the right). In neither case is there much room for a vision of an idealised past associated with nature, myth or *faërie*. These ideas are “free radicals” in the contemporary political spectrum and may appear to attach to an opposing ideology, or to none at all. The continuation of these ideals is an ongoing source of puzzlement to ideologues (much as popular support for the green movement continues to puzzle major political parties), and they may mistakenly attribute these representations to their opponents.

4. Fantasy works or sub-genres do frequently *re-present* the past – they are articulated on the same traditions of romance, fairy story, legend and myth, the study of which provided the initial critical tools used to analyse them. Whether they are actually

*representing* the past is questionable (only a small percentage make any serious attempt at historical accuracy). If they re-present childhood (interpreted as the past of the adult), mediaeval life (interpreted as the past of industrial capitalism), magic and superstition (interpreted as the past of science), the rural landscape or village (interpreted as the past of the modern city), the pantheon (interpreted as the past of monotheism), or intuiting, powerful heroes (interpreted as the past of success through rational choice and endeavour) – they risk giving rise to either an analysis that sees them as the latest iteration of a familiar romance, fairy story, myth or legend, or to a countervailing chorus of objections which are ideologically founded on assumptions that they are seeking a fallen state – a juvenile adult self, a nostalgic conservatism, an unrealistic rural arcadia, a Christian transcendent, an egocentric omnipotence. Both these possible responses tend to elide their role as texts which comment on the present. Of course, to many analysts it is clear that fantasy has more to say about the present than the past, but the more strident objections to works such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Dark is Rising* or *Harry Potter* merely attempt to dispose of their contemporary relevance. This is despite it being extremely obvious that even the most degraded swords and sorcery text which possesses the most conservative ethos possible is as typical of the era that we are in now as of any era that preceded ours. The glorification of individual violence to restore personal power in a hierarchical setting is very much a phantasy of the present, echoed in hundreds of Hollywood films and mass-market thrillers with no fantasy elements at all. In its radical form, the fantasy novel opposes contemporary values with alternatives built on original arcadian ideals of harmony with nature and creative artisanship, frequently situated in a colourful pseudo-mediaeval milieu. There is no difficulty in discerning the tradition upon which such works are built, but there is no end of difficulty in seeing that within this framework lies a restless commentary on the present.

5. Let us assume for a moment that there do exist “attractor” texts of the kind that were surmised in Part 3. One would then be tempted, in a Western dualistic kind of way, to extend this analogy to posit an opposite force. This would be as strong as the desiring force, an “anti-attractor”, a highly contested “other”. Immediately, in the interplay between realism and fantasy and the ways they have historically been defined against

each other (Sandner, 2004a, p 7), it is clearly open to fantasy critics to situate its oppositional “other” within realism, and this has certainly occurred.<sup>20</sup>

However, it is also open for this force – this “anti-attractor” or strongly antagonistic energy (remembering that at the moment, it is merely a theoretical construct) – to be projected onto particular works or sub-genres within fantasy. Is there any evidence, within the critical objections described above, that such a strongly repellent force could be at work, a force that is at an anterior level to a critical approach, and that may be related to the force of the attractor texts in some way? One would look for the evidence of such a strong force in the language that would express anti-attraction, and at least one of the critical works discussed above carries such evidence. Moorcock’s denouncement of “Epic Pooh” could hardly carry a stronger load of anti-attraction – let us call it “loathing” – in which he wishes rural fantasy gone:

*The Lord of the Rings* is a pernicious confirmation of the values of a morally bankrupt middle-class. Their cowardly, Home Counties habits are primarily responsible for the problems England now faces. *The Lord of the Rings* is much more deep-rooted in its infantilism than a good many of the more obviously juvenile books it influenced ...

Of the children’s writers only Lewis and Adams are guilty, in my opinion, of producing thoroughly corrupted romanticism ...

I would love to believe that the day of the rural romance is done at last (Moorcock, 1987, pp 125, 137, 139).

One might also look for evidence of anti-attraction through critical “attempted murder” – a level of disposal that does not work through argument, but seeks to erase. One can see indications of this in the “consolatory” argument, and to some degree in the “juvenile”, “no literary value” and “narcissistic/egocentric” arguments. Instead of considering the gap between the contemporary world and the fantasy sub-genre in question, and what it might signify, the texts and frequently their authors and readers

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<sup>20</sup> See the summary in Jackson, 1981, p 22ff. For an example of this approach applied, see Schlobin, 1982, p xiv.

are relocated into a position of irrelevance (back in time) or dismissed using simple terms of disapprobation (“juvenile”).

6. Is the idea of an “anti-attractor” an alternative idea to that of an original tension between past and present implicit to the rules of formation of fantasy criticism? Not necessarily. As the idea of “attractor” text(s) theorised a force that drew the critic into an area that was (and, arguably, still is to a degree) outside the usual bounds of criticism, the “anti-attractor” may theorise the conflicts that arise when critics with a theoretical stance which makes ideologically assumptions about the relationship between the past and the present find themselves surrounded by objects (including texts) and concepts which seem to be incompatible with these ideas. When many acclaimed texts in particular sub-genres fail to fit an ideological model, those incompatibilities are construed as an attack (or last-ditch offensive) from an opposing ideology. The proximity of these texts to the critic’s own attractor texts creates a conflict that appears to challenge their beliefs, and the critic attempts to de-centre or demolish the right of presence of the incompatible texts or sub-genres. This process could theoretically occur from almost any ideological direction – for example it could give rise to Christian objections to Harry Potter (where the corresponding attractor texts are Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*) as well as to postmodern objections to *The Lord of the Rings* (where the corresponding attractor texts include those by Kafka and Pynchon).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored three areas which delineate fantasy criticism, namely definition, characteristic texts and objections. In all these areas, a high degree of disparity was evident.

Critics' definitions of fantasy differ to an extraordinary degree, and characteristics which are central to one definition may be totally excluded from another. Even where definitions share common elements, each critic has uniquely combined and recreated elements to arrive at a new formula. It is true that attempts to synthesise existing definitions have been made, but none have gained broad acceptance. Instead, the definitions and critical approaches continue to proliferate, each one providing the illusion of the ordered system, the comfort of control, and the disguise of theory which appears to have solidity but is in fact highly transient.

Most critics also put forward a selection of characteristic and excluded fantasy texts. These reveal a curious pattern. Although there is a "canon" of works, these works are placed in very different configurations. What are central or "lodestone" texts for some critics are "meestone" or boundary-marker texts for others.

Likewise, works and sub-genres that, to some critics, are ideal or typical are, to others, errors to be attacked or expunged. The objections raised to particular works and sub-genres show fractures running through fantasy criticism, with a major fault line corresponding to debate around the legitimate use of the past.

In applying Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, it was hoped that it would be possible to theorise some of these divergences. This approach yielded some useful results. In shifting the emphasis from the approaches to analysing fantasy works to the establishment of the critical formations which describe them, a number of possibilities were brought into view.

First, various notions of history and the history of ideas come into play within each and every definition of fantasy. Embedded within each one, sometimes almost invisibly, are ideas, whether traditional or emerging, such as monument, continuity, discontinuity, convergence, culmination (and numerous others). These may even be ideologically at odds with the surface level of the critical argument. These various and often

contradictory notions, inherited by fantasy criticism at a time when such ideas were in a state of flux, may have contributed to divergence being established as a rule of formation of fantasy criticism.

Second, the relationship between the critic and the texts that they choose to examine was posited to be *a priori* to the construction of definitions of fantasy. An attraction between critic and text may lead to the unique weaving of a theory around particular texts, creating another force for divergence. It was further posited that this too may originate in the rules of formation as, in establishing fantasy as an area of criticism, considerable motivation was needed to shift from traditional notions of “good literature” to disparaged “popular” forms.

Third, a sample of objections were examined. These were found, for the most part, to be ideologically driven. Many of the objectors claimed that particular works or sub-genres adopted the wrong attitude to the relationship between past and the present (whether of society or of an individual). The origins of fantasy fiction, its relation to the traditions of romance, myth, fairy story and legend, and its associated anti-industrial ideologies, together with the emergence of fantasy criticism at a time when many dominant critical ideologies (both of the left and the right) viewed the movement from the past to the present as a movement away from error, has led to a disjunction that many critics cannot easily resolve except by attempting to erase or attack works that fail to fit their ideological model. Again, this issue is arguably situated at the formative level of fantasy criticism, which brought together the incompatible versions of the past as they were transferred from the fantasy works (which offer visions of the past as a commentary on or contrast to the contemporary era) and from other areas of literary criticism (that is, those parts of it that construct the past as unreconstituted sexism, racism, classism, or as superstitious, primitive or juvenile, or as Luddite resistance to market capitalism).

If divergence characterises fantasy criticism as a Foucauldian discursive formation, that is, if it is embedded in the rules of formation of fantasy criticism, then all of us who struggle with these questions – How should fantasy be defined? What are its characteristic works? – may cease to regard divergence as a “problem” or error that should be corrected, and instead begin to see this feature as characteristic and anticipated. Instead of dredging through all the definitions that have come before and

attempting to reconcile them – a tedious task which is dutifully undertaken as a preliminary exercise by many authors of fantasy criticism books – one could cheerfully adopt any combination from the many available strands, with explanation but not apology. After all, this adoption of a unique combination from a number of available strands is already the end result in the vast majority of cases.

This paper has argued that the tendency to divergence is indeed embedded within the discursive formation of fantasy criticism. The main evidence presented was contained in the continued proliferation of definitions, the tendency for works to be differently positioned as “lodestone” and “meerstone” texts, and the strident critical objections which directly oppose central tenets of other theorists. These divergences have been present for a period of some five decades. It is predicted that this pattern will continue. Sometimes it does happen that several critical approaches and definitions will coalesce sufficiently to form a Series of similar worlds (“the literature of the impossible”, “a fiction evoking wonder” and “secondary worlds” are extant series), as in the worlds of Wynne Jones’ Chrestomenci, but they can never integrate into a unity. Nor should we expect them to; divergence is not a source of error but intrinsic to fantasy criticism’s unique discursive formation.

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