
The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists

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People would call me up to say, “You must read this wonderful book about a school for wizards, it’s so original, there’s never been anything like it!” The first time this happened, I confess I thought they were telling me to read my own *A Wizard of Earthsea*, which involves a school for wizards, and has been in print since 1969. No such luck. I had to hear all about *Harry Potter*, and it was hard, at first. I felt a lot of ignoble envy. I had to wrestle the green-eyed monster by reminding myself how bad hype is for the writer’s soul.

But I soon felt a growing and less ignoble astonishment. It wasn’t only common readers: reviewers and critics kept talking about Rowling’s book as if it were a unique, unprecedented phenomenon. The true phenomenon was its reception — the huge, genuine popularity it earned, before the sales hype took over. The book was a charmer, in the wizardly sense of the word: it cast the narrative spell. Word-of-mouth led adults to read it who had not read anything remotely like it since they were ten, if then; and finding it new to their experience, they thought it original.

But critics and reviewers of literature are supposed to have some experience of literature. Those who praised *Harry Potter* for its originality were demonstrating blank ignorance of the tradition to which it belongs: the literature of fantasy, specifically fantasy for children. Within that tradition it also belongs to an intensely British sub-tradition, the “school story,” which American readers and reviewers might excusably not recognize as such. But how could so many reviewers and literary critics know so little about a major field of litera-

ture, have so little background, so few standards of comparison, that they believed a book that was not only typical of a tradition, but quite conventional and in many respects derivative, to be a unique achievement?

The modernists are largely to blame. Edmund Wilson and his generation left a tradition of criticism that is, in its way, quite a little monster. In this school for anti-wizards, no fiction is to be taken seriously except various forms of realism, which are labeled “serious.” The rest of narrative fiction is labeled “genre” and is dismissed unread.

Following this rule, the universities have taught generations of students to shun all “genres,” including fantasy (unless it was written before 1900, wasn’t written in English, and/ or can be labeled magical realism). Students of literature are also taught to flee most children’s books, or books that appeal to both children and adults, as if they were ripe buboes. Academic professionalism is at stake — possibly tenure. To touch genre is to be defiled. Reviewers in the popular journals, most of whom come out of the universities, obey the rule. If the reality of what people read forces a periodical to review mysteries or science fiction, they do it in separate columns, coyly titled, at the back of the journal — in *purdah*.

To declare one genre, realism, to be above genre, and all the rest of fiction not literature because it isn’t realism, is rather as if judges at the State Fair should give blue ribbons only to pigs, declaring horses, cattle, and poultry not animals because they’re not pigs. Foolishness breeds ignorance, and

ignorance loves to be told it doesn't have to learn something. But nobody can rightly judge a novel without some knowledge of the standards, expectations, devices, tropes, and history of its genre (or genres, for increasingly they mix and interbreed). The knowledge and craft a writer brings to writing fantasy, the expectations and skills a reader brings to reading it, differ significantly from those they bring to realistic fiction. Or to science fiction, or the thriller, or the mystery, or the western, or the romance, or the picture book, or the chapter-book for kids, or the novel for young adults.

There are of course broad standards of competence in narrative; it would be interesting to identify those that span all genres, to help us see what it is that Jane Austen and Patrick O'Brian have in common (arguably a great deal). But distinction is essential to criticism, and the critic should know when a standard is inappropriate to a genre.

It might be an entertaining and mind-broadening exercise in fiction courses to make students discover inappropriateness by practicing it. For example: judge *The Lord of the Rings* as if it were a late-20th century realistic novel. (Deficient in self-evident relevance, in sexual and erotic components, in individual psychological complexity, in explicit social references. Exercise too easy, has been done a thousand times.) Judge *Moby Dick* as science fiction. (Strong on technological information and on motivation, and when the story moves, it moves; but crippled by the author's foot-dragging and endless self-indulgence in pompous abstractions, fancy language, and rant.) Judge *Pride and Prejudice* as a Western. (A pretty poor show all round. The women talk. Darcy is a good man and could be a first-rate rancher, even if he does use those fool little pancake saddles, but with a first name like Fitzwilliam, he'll never make it in Wyoming.)

And to reverse the whole misbegotten procedure: judged by the standards of fantasy, modernist realist fiction, with its narrow focus on daily details of contemporary human affairs, is suffocating and unimaginative, almost unavoidably trivial, and ominously anthropocentric.

The mandarins of modernism, and some of the pundits of postmodernism, were shocked to be told that a fantasy trilogy by a professor of philology is the best-loved English novel of the twentieth century. People are supposed to love realism, not fantasy. But why should they? Until the eighteenth century in Europe, imaginative fiction *was* fiction. Realism in fiction is a recent literary invention, not much older than the steam engine and probably related to it. Whence the improbable claim that it is the only form of fiction deserving the name of "literature"?

The particular way distinctions are made between factual and fictional narrative is also quite recent, and though useful, inevitably unreliable. As soon as you tell a story, it turns into fiction (or, as Borges put it, all narrative is fiction). It appears that in trying to resist this ineluctable process, or

deny it, we of the Scientific West have come to place inordinate value on fiction that pretends to be, or looks awfully like, fact. But in doing so, we've forgotten how to read the fiction that fully exploits fictionality.

I'm not saying people don't read fantasy; a whole lot of us *people* do; but scholars and critics for the most part don't read it and don't know how to read it. I feel shame for them. Sometimes I feel rage. I want to say to the literature teacher who remains willfully, even boastfully ignorant of a major element of contemporary fiction: "you are incompetent to teach or judge your subject. Readers and students who do know the field, meanwhile, have every right to challenge your ignorant prejudice. — Rise, undergraduates of the English Departments! You have nothing to lose but your grade on the midterm!"

And to the reviewers, I want to say, "O critic, if you should come upon a fantasy, and it should awaken an atrophied sense of wonder in you, calling with siren voice to your dear little Inner Child, and you should desire to praise its incomparable originality, it would be well to have read in the literature of fantasy, so that you can make some comparisons, and bring some critical intelligence to bear. Otherwise you're going to look like a Patent Office employee rushing out into the streets of Washington crying, 'A discovery, amazing, unheard of! A miraculous invention, which is a circular disc, pierced with an axle, upon which vehicles may roll with incredible ease across the earth!'"

I often wish I could indicate to such people that there are pleasant and easy ways to remedy their ignorance. I would to ask them to read J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, because to me the book is in itself a sufficient demonstration of the value of fantasy literature; but if they don't know how to read it, it will do more harm than good. They'll come away snarling *childish, primitive, escapist, simplistic*, and other mantras of the school for anti-wizards, having learned nothing.

Tolkien was himself a scholar, and while wearing his professorial hat he wrote essays about the kind of fiction he wrote. Anybody who wants to be able to think about fantasy literature would do well to begin with them. The best introductory guide I know to the domain of fantasy is the essay in his book *The Monsters and The Critics* (1984) Tolkien, called — unfortunately — "On Fairy Stories." (Why Tolkien, who came to have a murderous hatred of sweet little fairies of the Tinker Bell breed, used that phrase instead of the already acceptable words fantasy or fantastic literature, I don't know; but he did. All professors have a streak of madness.) At any rate, it's perfectly possible to disagree with Tolkien's explanation and justification of the nature of fantasy, but it is really not admissible to talk seriously about fantasy without knowing what he said. Critics and academics who refuse to recognize fantasy as literature must at the very least have read

Tolkien, both as critic and as novelist, and be able to justify their opinion against his opinion and his accomplishment.

Unfortunately, most of them have read Todorov instead. Tzvetan Todorov said many interesting things in *The Fantastic* (1975), but few of them have anything to do with fantasy. Anyone familiar with the literature he might have read has to admire his perverse ingenuity in getting off the subject. But then, I wonder how many of the teachers and critics who so stoutly refuse to consider fantasy as literature have read Bakhtin or Borges? Or Karl Kroeber in *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1988) or Brian Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) to name two of the most informed and thoughtful contemporary writers about the field? I wonder how many of them have actually read a fantasy novel since they were nine or ten years old?

This essay designedly began with a children's book, *Harry Potter*; for in talking about fantasy, it is necessary to include what is called children's literature (something that certainly never occurred to Todorov). The capacity of much fantasy literature to override age-boundaries, to me a most admirable power, is to the anti-wizards a degrading weakness. That a novel can be read by a ten-year-old implies to them that it must be faulty as an adult novel: out comes the mantra, *primitive escapist simplistic* – in a word, childish. "Oh, those awful orcs," Wilson squeals cutely, believing himself to be imitating a reader of fantasy. The modernists wanted so badly to be perceived as grown-ups that they left a legacy of contempt for children's literature that is still barely questioned. Scholars of "kiddy-lit" are relegated to a drab kindergarten annex to the canonical structure of Literature, an outhouse, an embarrassment to the architects of Importance.

In my school for magic on the Isle of Roke in *The Earthsea Trilogy*, we say that children's books must be included in serious discussion of literature, and one reason we give is that many of the great works of imaginative fiction can be understood and appreciated by a child as well as by an adult — and vice versa. The understanding and appreciation may be different in kind, but its quality is the same, and deserves critical consideration. To throw a book out of serious consideration either because it was written for children, or because it is read by children, is in fact a monstrous act of anti-intellectualism. But it happens daily in academia.

The prejudice is by no means only against fantasies; any novel accessible to children is suspect. The principal reason Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* has never been given its rightful place in the curriculum or the canon of English novels is probably the notion that, since it can give immense delight to a twelve-year-old, it cannot possibly reward an adult reader. That this is a mistaken assumption can be easily proved by reading *Kim*; but prejudice is easier, and safer. Respectability lies in never raising one's eyes from the texts of Flaubert or James, which can at least be guaranteed to bore most children almost as quickly as *The Swiss Family Robinson*.

Lewis Carroll is one of the few writers for children who escapes defenestration — partly, perhaps, because of his mathematical games in the Alice books, which daunt most literary people, and the hoopla about his sexuality, which allows them to speak of him, if not his texts, in adult terms, signaling and sniggering over the children's heads. So much foolishness has been written about Carroll, indeed, that I wonder if I am wise in wanting the critics and professors to talk seriously about children's books. Will they insist on burrowing after sexual perversion in the author as the only way of making the book respectable?

I have been asking for thirty years why most critics are afraid of dragons while most children, and many adults, are not. It is a question that really, by now, deserves some answer other than the repetition of mantras; for the restriction of literary fiction to a "mainstream" of realism becomes daily less tenable, more, dare I say, fantastic. It is not only the incursion from South America that must be dealt with, but the frequency of treason and defection in the ranks of contemporary literary fiction in English. What is the critic to do when he sees one of A.S. Byatt's impeccably adult, dourly sophisticated heroines turning slowly and elaborately into a troll? He (the pronoun has been considered and accepted) is being asked to deal with a fantasy: with, as Karl Kroeber puts it, "an artistic experience of confronting as real what one knows cannot be real, the arousal of belief in the unbelievable" (48).

What does it mean, that a woman turns into a troll? It may mean as much, and have as many meanings, as a girl's turning into Emma Bovary. It may indeed mean more, to more people. Incompleteness and suggestion are very powerful tools for the artist of our time; the impossible, the incredible, the fantastic, suggest the limitations and the falsity of ordinary perception. In the useful words quoted by Kroeber, Madame Bovary has "the imposing completeness of a delusion"— but we may prefer, in this age, "the broken fragment of truth."

Forced not to dismiss fantasy but to deal with it, the untrained mind, unable to perceive the rules the story works by, may perceive it as meaningless. To excuse or hide its failure of comprehension, it may then label the story surrealist, dada, etc. But while surrealism is a subversion of meaning, fantasy is a construction of meaning, perhaps purely linguistic, perhaps more than that. Successful fantasy narrative is notable for its strong inner coherence; its rules are not those of the ordinary world, but it never breaks them.

The untrained mind trying to deal with fantasy is likely to try to rationalize it — to "explain" it as reflecting an order outside the order of the story, whether theological or psychological or political, anything so long as it's familiar. But fantasy is not allegory. (And allegory is fantasy only, rarely, when as in Spenser, obeying its rational conventions it yet flies free among its own inventions.)

Rational inexplicability does not automatically imply moral irresponsibility or social irrelevance; one would think a critic might know that from having read the poetry of the last two hundred years; but the lesson seems not to be taken. The tendency to explain fantasy by extracting the fantastic from it and replacing it with the comprehensible reduces the radically unreal to the secondhand commonplace. Thus we have attempts to reduce *The Lord of the Rings* to an apologia for Tolkien's Catholicism, or a kind of private mental asylum from his experiences in the First World War, etc. Such rationalizations may be earnestly perceived as a defense of fantasy, but are in fact refusals of it, attempts to explain it away. Only by approaching it on its own terms can a reader begin to apprehend the moral stance and the social relevance of a fantasy.

But having said that, I must hasten to say that *reducing* a fantasy to its ethics or its politics is as bad as any other reductionism. The purpose a fantasy serves may be as inexplicable, in those terms, as is a dragon. The purposive, utilitarian approach to fantasy, particularly folktale, of a Bruno Bettelheim or Robert Bly, and in general the "psychological" approach to fantasy, explaining each element of the story in terms of its archetype or unconscious source or educative use, is deeply regressive; it perceives literature as magic, it is a *verbomancy*. To such interpreters the spell is a spell only if it works to heal or reveal. Most critics of fiction now eschew such reductive readings; even those who admit that reading a novel may have a profound and lasting effect on the mind and feelings of the reader, possibly including healing and enlightenment, are clear that the effect is not to be prescribed and often may not even be defined. If literary criticism doesn't demand purposive "meaning" of realism, why on earth does it demand it of fantasy?

Children's books are particularly defenseless against utilitarian interpretations and judgments. I am appalled to see my fantasies discussed in journals and columns of children's literature as if they were tracts. That there could be more to a child's book than a brisk story and an explicit ethical lesson — that children need active imagination more than closed moralities, that they respond to beauty in language, that they read to learn how to ask questions more than to be told answers — all this sometimes seems to be a matter of utter indifference to those who judge children's books. But then, how much can one ask of critics and reviewers who are routinely despised and ignored by their peers and inferiors in academia and journalism?

The habit of reducing text to political-economic terms prevents many Marxist and neo-Marxist critics from reading fantasy at all. If they can't read it as utopian, dystopian, or of clear social relevance, they're likely to dismiss it as frivolous. They see kings, and assume reactionary politics; they see wizards, and assume superstition; they see dragons, and assume nonsense. A literal mind is a great asset to reading fantasy,

and so is a liberal mind, but not when it has been programmed too rigidly. Still, I welcome any socially conscious reading of fantasy so long as it isn't ideologically puristic, for many fantasies are intolerably complacent in their half-baked, bourgeois feudalism.

The charge that the whole enterprise of fantasy is "escapist" has been discussed by Tolkien and others, and only the ignorant continue to repeat it. It is a fact, however, that much fantasy, especially of the "heroic" kind, seems on the face of it socially and historically regressive: withdrawing from the Industrial Revolution and Modern Times, the fantasy story is often set in a green, under-populated world of towns and small cities surrounded by wilderness, beyond which the exact and intricate map in the frontispiece does not go. This certainly appears to be a return to the world of the folktale. So it is; and to the world of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Swift, and Wordsworth, the world of literature and human experience up until a couple of centuries ago: lost now to city folk but still inhabited by many others, and still accessible in memories of childhood, hours or days in the woods or the fields, vacations in the mountains or by the shore — the country, the world we call, since it is no longer natural to us, "nature."

Fantasy's green country is one that most enter with ease and pleasure, and it seems to be perfectly familiar to most children even if they've never been out of the city streets. It partakes of the Golden Age, whether mythic or personal, though it may also partake of the darkness that ends all golden ages. Nostalgia is probably essential to it. Nostalgia is a suspect emotion these days, and I will not attempt to defend it, aside from saying that I think it fuels more great poetry, perhaps, than any other emotion. But I will defend fantasy's green country.

Tolkien's Middle Earth is not just pre-industrial. It is also pre-human and non-human. It can be seen as a late and tragic European parallel to the American myth-world where Coyote and Raven and the rest of them are getting things ready for "the people who are coming" - human beings. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, the non-human beings of Middle Earth are "dwindling" away or passing into the West, leaving the world to mankind alone. The feeling is not so much nostalgia as bereavement, the grief of those exiled from dear community, tears by the waters of Babylon.

My Earthsea, and the familiar forests and towns of much fantasy, are not informed by that great vision: but I think they too imply that modern humanity is in exile, shut out from a community, an intimacy, it once knew. They do not so much lament, perhaps, as remind. The fields and forests, the villages and byroads, once did belong to us, when we belonged to them. That is the truth of the non-industrial setting of so much fantasy. It reminds us of what we have denied, what we have exiled ourselves from.

Animals were once more to us than meat, pests, or pets: they were fellow-creatures, colleagues, dangerous equals. That is at least part of the truth of my dragons. They remind us of what we are throwing away. What fantasy generally does that the realistic novel generally cannot do is include the nonhuman as essential. The fantasy element of *Moby Dick* is Moby Dick. To include an animal as a protagonist equal with the human is - in modern terms - to write a fantasy. To include anything on equal footing with the human, as equal in importance, is to abandon realism.

Realistic fiction is relentlessly focused on human behavior and psychology. "The proper study of mankind is Man." When fiction disobeys Pope and begins to include the Other, it begins to shade into the ghost story, the horror story, the animal story, or science fiction, or fantasy; it begins the movement outward to the not-entirely-human. Even "regional" fiction, always looked at disparagingly by the modernists, is part of this movement, sliding from human psychology into that which contains it, the landscape.

We need better definition of terms than the ones we have. Thomas Hardy's Egdon Heath is in itself entirely realistic, but its centrality to *The Return of the Native* decentralizes the human characters in a way quite similar to that of fantasy and even science fiction. Melville's white whale isn't a real whale; he's a beast of the imagination, like dragons or unicorns; hence *Moby Dick* is not an animal story, but it is a fantasy. Virginia Woolf's *Flush* is an animal story, because Flush is (and was) a real spaniel; but of course it is also a novel about Robert and Elizabeth Brownings; it is also definable as a fantasy, since the dog is a central character, and we know what he is thinking; but then we know what the dog is thinking in the hunting scene in *War and Peace*, too, which does not make *War and Peace* a fantasy. . . . The clean sharp definition of what realism is and what fantasy is recedes ever further, along with any justification for throwing genre out the window.

I venture a non-defining statement: realistic fiction is drawn towards anthropocentrism, fantasy away from it. Although the green country of fantasy seems to be entirely the invention of human imaginations, it verges on and partakes of realms in which humanity is not lord and master, is not central, is not even important. (In this, fantasy may come much closer to the immense overview of the exact sciences than does science fiction, which is generally obsessed by a kind of imperialism of human knowledge and control.)

The only world we know of, now, that isn't shaped and dominated by human beings, is "long ago." "Far away" won't do any more, unless we leap to a literally other world, an-

other planet, or into an imagined future - and these options will be labeled science fiction, even though they may well be fantasies grasping at the specious plausibility, the pseudo-rationalism, which "Science" and "the Future" provide.

It is a fact that we as a species have lived for most of our time on earth as animals among animals, as tribes in the wilderness, as farmers, villagers, and citizens in a closely known region of farmlands and forests. Beyond the exact and intricately detailed map of local knowledge, beyond the homelands, in the white parts of the map, lived the others, the dangerous strangers, those not in the family, those not (yet) known. Even before one learns about this small world of the long human past, most children seem to feel at home in it, and many to keep an affinity for it, to be drawn to it lifelong. They make maps of bits of it — islands, valleys among the mountains, dream-towns, dream-roads that do not lead to Rome - with blank spaces all around.

The monstrous homogenization of the world has now almost destroyed the map, any map, by making every place on it exactly like every other place, and leaving no blanks. No unknown lands. A hamburger joint and a coffee shop in every block repeated forever. No others; nothing unfamiliar. As in the Mandelbrot fractal set, the enormously large and the infinitesimally small are exactly the same; and the same leads always to the same again: there is no other; there is no escape, because there is nowhere else.

In reinventing the world of intense, unreproducible, local knowledge, seemingly by a denial or evasion of current reality, fantasists are perhaps trying to assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves. They are trying to restore the sense — to regain the knowledge — that there is somewhere else, anywhere else, where other people may live another kind of life. The literature of imagination, even when tragic, is reassuring, not necessarily in the sense of offering nostalgic comfort, but because it offers a world large enough to contain alternatives, and therefore offers hope.

The fractal world of endless repetition is appallingly fragile. There is no illusion, even, of safety in it; an entirely human construct, it can be entirely destroyed at any moment by human agency. It is the world of the neutron bomb, the terrorist, and the next plague. It is Man studying Man alone. It is the reality trap. Is it any wonder that people want to look somewhere else? But there is no somewhere else, except in what is not human, and in our imagination.

If we want to get out of the Mandelbrot set world, that's where the roadmap is. Exact, intricate, inexplicable, and indispensable.