

“There and Back Again”: Progress in the Discourse of Todorovian, Tolkienian and Mystic Fantasy Theory

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THE ACT OF LITERARY CRITICISM is always an act of creative fantasy. The critic constructs an internally consistent structure from fragments of texts, observations and (inevitably) personal biases, and this construction begins with a *what-if* proposition. What if literary texts have political implications? Might there be a correlation between a writer's gender and the language available for that writer's expression? Could it be that language itself is indeterminate, and, if so, what impact would this have on the Western tradition of liberal humanism? The critic speculates, fabricates an imagined network of logical implications and, in the case of publication, presents this fabrication for serious consideration by a scholarly community. The following act of literary criticism is, like all such acts, a fantasy of critical discourse. To survey a history of fantasy criticism—as I shall in this paper—is to build a meta-fantasy, a fantasy of fantasies of fantasy.

That fantasy has been dismissed or excluded from the canon of Western literature is a commonplace of the critical work on the genre. This sense of exclusion may be the strongest recurring theme across all forms of fantasy criticism, an otherwise highly heterogeneous field. Karen Michalson, for example, introduces her exploration of Victorian fantasy by suggesting that “certain readers will object to my subject matter as well

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as to my approach. Fantasy literature does not enjoy the kind of critical attention or prestige that other literary genres, like the realistic novel do” (i). Michalson then proceeds to examine the historical, “non-literary and non-aesthetic reasons” for the exclusion of fantasy from “the traditional literary canon” (i) as founded in Victorian England. Although her tone may appear unwarrantedly defensive (and perhaps it is), it resonates with my own initial ambivalence in approaching fantasy as a scholar. Although I have (and do) read what is often referred to as “genre-fantasy,” this material rarely appears in a scholarly milieu (i.e., literature courses). Rather, for many, the reading of fantasy is often characterized as a guilty pleasure or indulgence, carrying an implicit stigma.¹ Whether or not such a stigma exists in any universal sense, fantasy readers, writers and critics often *perceive* “fantasy” as a beleaguered and disrespected form of literature, the (alleged) perpetrators of this (perceived) stigma characterizing the genre as material more appropriate for children than adults or, at best, a variety of “light” or “unserious” reading. Ursula K. Le Guin names this phenomenon the “genrefication” of fantasy, a process by which *genre* becomes not a neutral descriptive term, but rather a label applied only to those types of literature that are other-than-serious (“Spike” 18–19).²

In spite of this apparent stigmatization, the “serious” study of fantasy has formed the basis of dozens of book-length critical studies since the early 1970s. Christine Brooke-Rose, in one of these studies, suggests that the late twentieth-century re-emergence of fantasy literature may be due to “a reality crisis” (3) in Western culture. She further argues that fantasy provides one possible response to a world in which “the very notion of progress has become untenable” (7) and “the real has become unreal” (9). For Brooke-Rose, fantasy embodies one mode through which authors may explore the implications of this unreal reality, and she thus attempts “to account for the return of the fantastic in all its forms” (7).

- 1 This perceived stigmatization seems particularly strong among students of English literature, who tend to downplay their own reading in this area (perhaps for fear of being characterized or perceived as a “fan”). Rather, fantasy-readers among this population are likely to point out that they *usually* read “serious” literature.
- 2 In practice, this stigma simultaneously both exists and does not exist. On the one hand, self-identified readers (and writers) of “serious” literature often profess disdain for such lowbrow forms as fantasy and science fiction. On the other hand, such traditional gatekeepers of culture as *The New York Times* and *The Globe and Mail* have recently begun to recognise literary value in certain “genre” novels. *The New York Times* recognised Sean Stewart’s *Resurrection Man* as a “notable book” in 1995, and *The Globe and Mail* identified Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* as one of the best 100 books published in 2001.

Unlike Brooke-Rose, my project is not to account for the reappearance of fantasy in contemporary Western literature, but rather to examine the various critical approaches to the genre that have appeared since the early '70s. My methodology echoes Erik Rabkin's approach to "world-view" in *The Fantastic in Literature*, where he suggests that "the study of the fantastic provides new tools for the analysis of world-view" (74). Rabkin develops these tools in terms reminiscent of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theories, suggesting that "a close analysis of metaphor, by attention to all language used to create a fantastic world, ... can discover the alternative perspectives of a writer, or, by extension, his culture" (79). He further points out that "the world of art, the world of games, the world of politics, so many worlds men make for themselves, are in a very fundamental way fantastic" (215). To this list of fantastic worlds, I would add the world of literary criticism, or, more properly, the world (and worldview) of literary critical discourses. Thus, by reflecting Rabkin's analysis of fantasy literature back onto fantasy criticism, a close analysis of fantasy critics' language and metaphor may also expose the implicit worldview(s) of these critics and discover certain "alternative perspectives" to the(se) established critical discourse(s).

My investigation of major critical approaches to fantasy will, in the interests of brevity, be limited to major book-length studies in the field, beginning with Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* and continuing to the present. This field of inquiry may be further structured (and managed) by dividing these studies into three broad approaches to fantasy theory, what I call the Todorovian, Tolkienian, and Mystic perspectives.³ This third division is not, for the most part, a critical approach, but consists of certain perspectives expressed by fantasy authors (and a few theorists) that have often been ignored or dismissed in academic criticism. Examining selected critical exemplars of each approach to fantasy, one may uncover the linguistic and cognitive strategies by which each of these critical communities affirms its own critical orthodoxy (i.e., "worldview") and dismisses alternate views which do not fit within that orthodoxy.

3 I have named each of these three approaches for a central, formative text. Thus, the Todorovians take their approach from Todorov's writing, the Tolkienians from Tolkien's writing, and the Mystics from the mystic tradition. However, Todorov would probably not agree with much of what I call "Todorovian" theory, and Tolkien could be more accurately characterized as a Mystic than a "Tolkienian." In each case, it would be a mistake to equate these central figures directly with the critical approaches inspired by, and developed from, their writing.

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Of course, my paper cannot be disentangled from my own worldview and assumptions (witness my own in this sentence), and none of the critical viewpoints summarized here are less than astute—although I happen to disagree with some of them. However, although any critical viewpoint tends to erase other viewpoints in the act of self-propagation, it may be possible to expose some of the perspectival erasures in both Todorovian and Tolkienian criticism without denying their key insights. Instead, a *Mystic* approach may embody an alternative to—perhaps a reconciliation of—these apparently opposed viewpoints. As fantasy criticism progresses away from the prescriptive and towards the descriptive, the re-emergent Mystic viewpoint may reconcile “ancient” and “postmodern” worldviews and—in deconstructing certain typically Western binaries—expose the circular nature of “progress” itself.⁴

The Todorovians: Constructing Deconstructive Fantasy (the Real as Unreal)

Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* was originally published in 1970 and was translated into English as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* in 1973. Richard Mathews, while pointing out antecedents as early as George MacDonald's "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893), suggests that Todorov's study "was the first serious scholarly attempt to comprehensively define the genre" (170). Although the question of how one distinguishes a 'serious scholarly attempt' from an 'un-serious, unscholarly attempt' remains problematic,⁵ Todorov's study does lay the foundations for several subsequent critical explorations of the genre.

As implied by the English title, Todorov explores literary genre from a structuralist perspective and repeatedly stresses the importance of a non-evaluative, objective and scientific approach, arguing that genre should be defined by an inductive process similar to that of scientific experimenta-

4 This is not to suggest that “progress” is “circular” (or pointless) in the simple, linear sense of following a one-dimensional straight line that returns through a smooth curve to its starting point. Just as space has (at least) four dimensions, including time, a conceptually “circular” progress (a return) may also be conceived multi-dimensionally to include memory, thus incorporating a recognition that “new” discoveries are often rediscoveries and that *progress-away-from* a given point need not be incompatible with a simultaneous *progress-towards* that same point.

5 This distinction is by no means trivial, since the definition of “serious” scholarship, twinned with a simultaneous expulsion of “unserious” scholarship, is a crucial step in establishing and (re)affirming a particular critical orthodoxy.

tion. The theorist collects a limited sample of works within the proposed genre in order to formulate “an abstract postulate” (Todorov 14), and hypothesize the structure of a “theoretical” genre. “Historical” genres, by contrast, are merely “a sub-group of complex theoretical genres” (Todorov 21). From the historical genre of 19th-century fantastic texts, Todorov induces his theoretical genre of “fantasy,” which he defines as the hesitation between an “uncanny” (natural) and a “marvelous” (supernatural) explanation of narrative events. An evanescent genre, fantasy exists only so long as the narrative remains ambiguous as to the ‘true’ explanation of the portrayed events. If, for example, the text requires that “new laws of nature be entertained ... [then] we enter the realm of the marvelous” (Todorov 41). If a text allows an explanation of events, however strange, within known natural laws, then that text embodies the “uncanny.” Todorov further proposes that “pure” fantasy is an obsolete genre, since “psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby made useless) the literature of the fantastic” (160).

Todorov’s work here is deeply rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis, and this reliance manifests most explicitly in his exploration of fantasy themes. The themes of fantasy, he suggests, may be divided into two main types: themes of the Self and themes of the Other, both of which transgress certain boundaries. Themes of the Self transgress the conventional, accepted “relation between man and the world” (139), tending to erase the boundary between mind and matter and manifesting in such forms as the assertion of pan-determinism (the breakdown of linear cause and effect), the collapse of the subject-object division (I am the world; the world is me), and the nonlinear transformation of time and space. Todorov equates the themes of Self with Freudian psychosis, since these themes express a (psychotic) mental state similar to those of “childhood, drugs, schizophrenia, and mysticism” (147) and disrupt the conventional real/unreal boundary. Themes of the Other transgress conventional morality, depicting the fantastic breakdown of the usual “relation of man with his desire” (139) and expressing a variety of “antisocial” desires (sexual, sadistic, etc.) within the text. Todorov equates the themes of the Other with Freudian neurosis, since these themes express the normally-repressed desires that produce neurosis, disrupting the conventional social/antisocial boundary. Consequently, Todorov concludes that “the function of the supernatural [in the fantastic text] is to exempt the text from the action of the [natural or social] law, and thereby transgress that law” (159).

In spite of his explicitly structuralist approach, Todorov’s concepts of narrative indeterminacy and licensed transgression of “natural law”

struck a responsive chord in the burgeoning poststructuralist movement and became a central influence for several poststructuralist/postmodernist studies of fantasy and the fantastic. Eric Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature* (1976), for example, suggests that "the fantastic does more than extend experience; the fantastic contradicts perspectives" (4). Positioning *Alice in Wonderland* as the paradigmatic fantasy, Rabkin asserts that "one of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspectives enforced by the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted" (8). Furthermore, Rabkin contends that "pure" fantasy must repeatedly contradict itself, consistently rejecting any single, fixed narrative reality. This continual reversal of narrative reality echoes Todorov's concept of narrative "hesitation," and, although Rabkin sees his own theories as "in serious disagreement" with Todorov's, he does admit that Todorov's study "anticipates some of the work here" (118).

Christine Brooke-Rose and Rosemary Jackson, unlike Rabkin, extend and modify Todorov's typology of fantasy in their respective studies, *The Rhetoric of the Unreal* and *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, both published in 1981. Brooke-Rose removes two of Todorov's restrictions on the fantastic: the restriction of fantasy to the nineteenth century, and the requirement of the uncanny-versus-marvelous dichotomy as the basis of narrative "hesitation." Instead, she locates the essence of the fantastic in the broader hesitation between two (or more) possible interpretations of narrative events, regardless of whether or not either interpretation requires a "supernatural" explanation. Brooke-Rose further suggests that this characteristic indeterminacy accurately reflects "the prevalent cultural metaphor, now more or less banalized, [which] is no longer that of order, or 'organic unity,' but that of entropy" (11). Jackson, like Brooke-Rose, also removes the temporal restriction on fantasy and modifies Todorov's terminology of the uncanny/marvelous polarity to that of a mimetic/marvelous polarity. From a Marxist and psychoanalytic perspective, Jackson suggests that the hesitation between the mimetic (realistic) and the marvelous (anti-realistic) subverts social "realities," arguing that "such violation of dominant assumptions threatens to subvert (overturn, upset, undermine) rules and conventions taken to be normative" (14). Each of these critics uses her modified Todorovian theory to examine the paradigmatically postmodernist fiction of writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Roland Barthes and Thomas Pynchon.

Lance Olsen's *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy* (1987) neatly summarizes the conclusion(s) of the Todorovian approach. Olsen embraces the stigmatization of "fantasy" in Western cul-

ture in a postmodernist manifesto of solidarity with repressed irrationality, declaiming that “there has always been a need to condemn or apologize for the fantastic, a need that is particularly ethnocentric, stemming from the deep belief in Western culture that ‘reality’ is somehow morally ‘better’ and aesthetically more ‘serious’ than ‘fantasy,’ that the conscious is somehow objectively preferable to the unconscious” (15). Clearly alluding to Todorov, Olsen suggests that “although ... rigorous work on the idea of fantasy began over fifteen years ago, nothing like a communally accepted definition has yet surfaced” (17). In this case, “surfaced” is precisely the correct term for Olsen’s theorizing, since it appears to coalesce and consolidate—to surface from—the crucial elements of preceding Todorovian critical thought.

Taking postmodernism as his starting point, Olsen argues that “post-modern fantasy has become the literary equivalent of deconstructionism, for it interrogates all we take for granted about language and experience, giving these no more than a shifting and provisional status” (117). He further argues, in agreement with Brooke-Rose, that the fantastic has become “the realism that our culture understands” (14). Cementing the modified Todorovian definition of fantasy, Olsen defines fantasy as “that stutter between two modes of discourse [the mimetic and the marvellous] which generates a textual instability, an ellipse of uncertainty” (19). Thus, Todorovian fantasy theory achieves the assurance of orthodoxy, an orthodoxy from which Olsen may comfortably (and prematurely) proclaim that “the postmodern mind has deconstructed the transcendental signified” (13).

Yet, Olsen’s apparent solidarity with “fantasy” as the repressed Other of Western literature deliberately and explicitly avoids any recognition (let alone validation) of “popular” or “genre” fantasy. When Olsen, writing in 1987, suggests that no “communally accepted definition” of fantasy exists, he is mistaken in the sense that this genre could easily be identified by (primarily) non-academic publishers and readers, and was at this time easily located under a convenient section-heading in most bookstores.⁶ Having neglected to read the latest postmodern literary criticism, non-academic audiences happily identified the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and other popular writers as “fantasy,” but Olsen expels this (admittedly intuitive, somewhat less-than-rigorously defined) popular genre from “fantasy” into the realm of the ‘marvelous,’ declaring the Tolkienian “marvelous” to be “compensa-

6 Granted, this section heading was not clearly or exclusively defined as “fantasy,” but the assiduous bookstore browser would most likely be able to infer the presence of “fantasy” within the broader shelving category typically labelled as “SF&F” or “Science Fiction and Fantasy.”

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tory, looking back to a lost beautiful and often aristocratic moral and social hierarchy that was communally and teleologically meaningful” (18). Nor is Olsen alone among the Todorovians in this assessment: Rabkin, although he sporadically quotes Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories” for rhetorical flourish, would not allow the world-building consistency of *The Lord of the Rings* to pass as fantasy; Brooke-Rose and Jackson examine Tolkien’s work primarily in order to dismiss it as unworthy of ‘serious’ consideration.

On the surface, the reason for the Todorovian critics’ dismissal of Tolkien seems self-evident: Tolkien doesn’t fit the Todorovian definition of “fantasy.” However, it seems strange that critics with such an outspokenly “objective” and “non-evaluative” approach to literature must so vehemently expel this particular type of writing with a negative value-judgment. Tolkien must be expelled from the critical discourse of “fantasy,” not only because he does not fit the proposed definition, but because he is—in a postmodernist critical milieu—embarrassing. Tolkien is embarrassingly conservative, embarrassingly patriarchal, embarrassingly Christian, embarrassingly anti-technology, and embarrassingly transcendentalist. If fantasy is to be taken “seriously,” then the postmodernist critic cannot allow Tolkien to be included within a “serious” definition of fantasy. Tolkien transgresses the transcendental signified of postmodernist orthodoxy, that being the void (or plenitude) left by the pluri-signifying deconstruction of language and all coherent (read: “oppressive”) belief-systems. All of the above reasons for Tolkien’s exclusion from the critical discourse of Todorovian fantasy seem natural, inevitable, and incontrovertible.

However, if the postmodernists, poststructuralists and deconstructionists have taught us anything, they have taught us to question natural, inevitable, and incontrovertible conclusions. Such conclusions (according to the orthodoxy) always arise from the unquestioned postulates of a given belief-system or worldview, erasing or repressing certain perspectives in a process of continuing self-validation. By seeking out the traces of suppressed narratives within a discourse, one may expose (and hopefully subvert) the process of this suppression. Tolkien’s expulsion from Todorovian definitions of “fantasy” is no exception to this rule, and tracing the progress of Todorovian fantasy reveals several ways in which this purportedly deconstructive discourse continues to re-inscribe and reinforce a particular worldview. Olsen himself points out that “in many ways postmodernism may be seen as continuing in the same vein as modernism; it too may be seen as a reaction against the dominant assumptions of the nineteenth century” (8). In its guise as “postmodernist fantasy,” however,

postmodernism may also re-enact some of the very nineteenth-century assumptions against which it reacts.

Conveniently, Eric Rabkin chooses Victorian England as one example of a particularly stable and self-affirming worldview against the backdrop of which he can explore the “alternate worldview” of Victorian fantasy.⁷ Rabkin describes the High Victorian perspective as a stable structure resting on a tripartite base: “The first leg was a particular perspective on history.... The second leg was a particular perspective on religion.... The third leg, and perhaps the leg that stands yet and balances the precarious structure of our own society, was a particular view of science” (82). Rabkin argues that *history* and *religion* have been undermined in the modern (or postmodern) era, yet a close examination of Todorovian criticism reveals the ongoing influence of at least two of Rabkin’s three Victorian perspectives, albeit in slightly modified forms.

The Victorians imagined history as an inevitable, evolutionary march of progress, and although Christine Brooke-Rose asserts that the “notion of progress has become untenable” (7), the language of progress consistently infects Todorovian criticism from its roots in Todorov to its apotheosis in Olsen. From the outset, Todorov suggests that the fantastic itself has been “made useless” (160), driven into obsolescence by the (progressive) development of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Later, Rabkin asserts in implicitly Darwinian terms that “there is an inexorable evolution within and among the genres” (209). On a broader level, even the term “postmodern” (a great favourite of the Todorovians) implies a historical progression from “less” to “more” enlightened, one dominant notion of the postmodern being the progression beyond an (obsolete) discourse of liberal humanism to a recognition of the “exhaustion” of outdated aesthetic, literary, and ideological formations. Whether or not the *notion* of progress has become untenable, the *language* of progress seems to persist—even in the face of its own obsolescence.

I will concede, for the moment, that religion may have lost some of its power as a structuring metaphor for Western society.⁸ Certainly, in contemporary Western society, both the religious impulse and belief in the “supernatural” have largely been expelled (or repressed) by the dominant

7 It seems interesting that Karen Michalson, Eric Rabkin and Lance Olsen all characterize the Victorian era as the era in which the “mainstream” and the “fantastic” seem most clearly separated and fantasy the most clearly repressed, while Todorov defines fantasy as existing exclusively in this same time-frame. However, a full exploration of this fascination with Victorians and Victorian fantasy remains beyond the scope of this paper.

discourse of science, the third leg of the Victorian worldview. As with the discourse of progress, the discourse of science (what I prefer to call “scientism”) infects Todorovian criticism at all levels. Todorov’s structuralist assumptions and emphasis on scientific methodologies implicitly (if subtly) downplay the existence of the “marvelous” in his writing. For example, one of Todorov’s definitions of fantasy asserts that “the fantastic is defined as a special perception of uncanny events” (90). That is, fantasy may be the hesitation between an uncanny and a marvelous interpretation of events, but the events themselves—even fictitious ones—must remain uncanny (natural), while the marvelous (supernatural) must be limited and rationalized as a “special perception.” Todorov also reduces the “mystic” perception of “reality” to a form of psychosis, on a par with childhood, drug-use, and schizophrenia.⁹ Brooke-Rose, expanding upon this type of dismissal, entirely removes the supernatural from her definition of the fantastic, and by the time Olsen writes, the Todorovians have effectively cleansed “fantasy” (as a critical term) of any taint of the supernatural.

Of course, this cleansing of the supernatural from “fantasy” should hardly be a surprise in such an implicitly hyper-objective, hyper-scientized discourse. In scientific discourse, the term “supernatural” carries a particular rhetorical weight, self-identifying as not-natural, not-scientific, and not “objectively” verifiable. Within this worldview, the “supernatural” is, by definition, impossible.¹⁰ Thus, the progressive expulsion of the super-

8 This concession remains problematic, since it would be more correct to recognize that the hegemony of secular rationalism, though relatively secure in certain areas of “Western society” (another problematic term), remains incomplete. To give just one salient example, the banishment of the supernatural from Western culture seems contradicted by a recent study, which found that “one out of five Americans believes he or she has seen an angel or knows someone who has,” and fully 77% of Americans believe that “angels, that is, some kind of heavenly beings who visit Earth, in fact exist” (“Angel Beliefs”).

9 Of course, one might argue that none of these categories of psychosis are necessarily “bad” or undesirable. Rather, as Deleuze and Guattari argue of schizophrenia in particular, and as many Todorovians argue more generally, these apparently “psychotic” mental states also have the potential to disrupt and subvert certain mental hegemonies. Todorov, however, does not use these terms for their value as subversive deconstructions of social conventions, and their potential value as positive terms is not recognized within his text.

10 When I say *scientific worldview*, I do not necessarily mean *the worldview of scientists and the scientific community*. Rather, I am referring to the colloquial understanding of science as “objective” and unbiased. Physicists, in particular, have known for quite some time that the accepted model of quantum mechanics demolishes the observer/observed dichotomy, and that “objectivity” is an unreachable goal. (*Reproducibility*, still a key criterion for verifiable, reputable

natural from Todorovian fantasy may be seen as a direct consequence of the hyper-objective tone and methodology that provide the theoretical and terminological underpinnings of this approach. It does, however, seem somewhat counterintuitive that an approach so ideologically linked to the undermining and subversion of “rationality” *in* literature should simultaneously remain so entrenched in a “rational” and “objective” approach *to* literature.

Thankfully, the Todorovian approach does not constitute the final word on fantasy criticism. This is not to suggest that the Todorovians have not produced innovative and insightful explorations of the fantastic in literature: they have. Nor, in fairness, can the Todorovians be portrayed as having attempted to produce a “final word” in any substantial, conclusive sense. As Lance Olsen freely admits, postmodernism is “at best paradoxical and at worst failed” (13), and most Todorovians attempt more to open up discursive possibilities than to close them off. It would, however, be fair to point out that the opening up of certain discursive realms in Todorovian criticism enacts the rejection (or erasure) of certain other discursive realms, and one of the most prominent rejections enacted in this particular process is that of Tolkienian fantasy. Fortunately, the continuing popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novels assured that someone, eventually, would begin to take his work “seriously,” and a number of critics have taken up the task of engaging Tolkien’s work on its own terms. I call these critics the Tolkienians, since they tend to model their definitions of fantasy on Tolkien’s own in his essay “On Fairy Stories.”

The Tolkienians: Re-constructing the Wonder of Fantasy (the Unreal as Real)

In 1938, Tolkien delivered the Andrew Lang lecture in which he first publicly expressed his thoughts on “fairy-stories.” He subsequently revised this lecture, and the revised version was published as “On Fairy-Stories” in *Essays presented to Charles Williams* (1947). In his essay, Tolkien explores his own understanding of fairy-stories, acknowledging from the outset that this is a “rash adventure,” both because “Faërie is a perilous land” and because, although he is “a lover of fairy-stories ... [he has] not studied them professionally” (11). Although this admission seems both serious (“Faërie is a perilous land”) and tongue-in-cheek (“I have not studied them

scientific data, though similar to “objectivity,” is not the same thing.) Additionally, as Tolkien and others have suggested, the term “supernatural” is a misleading one when used to describe phenomena that, while remaining scientifically *inexplicable*, may be perfectly natural.

professionally”), many subsequent literary scholars seem to have taken Tolkien entirely at his word, dismissing his formulation of “fairy-story” as simplistic or naive.¹¹ Nonetheless, Tolkien’s formulations, both in his essay and his novels, have proved a central influence for many authors and a few critics of fantasy.

Tolkien defines fairy-stories, first, by postulating certain central characteristics of the form and, second, by exploring the possible uses and functions of this form. Fairy-stories, for Tolkien, are not simply stories about fairies, but are rather “stories about Fairy, that is *Faërie*, the realm or state in which fairies have their being” (16). The key elements of fairy-story are the production of *wonder* (through the action of human fantasy or imagination) and the fictional presentation of an internally consistent imaginative world. In fairy-stories, “the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary world which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed” (Tolkien 41). Thus, Tolkien rejects the “willing suspension of disbelief” as a poor substitute for the proper functioning of what he calls “Secondary belief,” a fully engaged belief in the narrative (though never “objective”) truth of textually represented events. Magic, in this context, is central to the fairy-story, and, although the storyteller may use the techniques of satire, “there is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in the story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away” (Tolkien 17–18). Rather, any hint that the represented magic is not “real” within the confines of the story threatens the proper functioning of Secondary belief, undercutting the intended narrative effect of “wonder” at the represented events to replace it with a more sceptical, cynical disengagement of the reader from the narrative reality of portrayed events.

For Tolkien, the function of fairy-stories is fourfold, offering “Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, [and] Consolation” (48). “Fantasy,” a natural expression of human desire, is the ability of human language and imagination to envision that which does not exist in the everyday world. “Recovery” refers to the recovery of the wondrous in the everyday, a cleansing of

11 Although Tolkien studied philology rather than folklore, his poetic translation of the “Beowulf” epic is still considered a consummate work of craft and scholarship. Although Tolkien did not work primarily as a folklorist, to suggest that he did not study fairy-stories “professionally” is, at best, disingenuous.

the (false) perception of the everyday as trite, familiar and fully known. Tolkien's formulations of "Escape" and "Consolation" are more involved, and I will not attempt to summarize them here for fear of distorting them in the process. In fact, "On Fairy-Stories," like Tolkien's fiction, remains curiously resistant to analytic, reductive readings, and this resistance is entirely consistent with Tolkien's conviction that "Faërie cannot be caught in a net of words, for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible" (17). Rather, the language of "On Fairy-Stories" casts an imaginative spell, operating on a level of evocative imagery as opposed to rational argument, and the text continually blurs (or, more properly, ignores) the distinction between the physically real and the imaginatively real. Tolkien repeatedly refers to fairies as if they were "real" beings, as when he describes "Faërian Drama—those plays which according to abundant records the elves have often presented to men" (54) or states that "it is from [the elves] that we may learn what is the central desire and aspiration of human Fantasy—even if the elves are, all the more in so far as they are, only a product of Fantasy itself" (55).

In the latter example, Tolkien explicitly recognizes the elves as fantastic, imaginary beings, and yet he simultaneously grants these imaginary beings agency in the "real" world. This conflation of the mundane and the marvelous is both a technique within and a central argument of Tolkien's essay. Asserting that the natural world is fully as wondrous as the "supernatural," Tolkien questions the natural/supernatural binary, particularly as this binary relates to fairies. Rather, he suggests that "*supernatural* is a dangerous and difficult word in any of its senses, looser or stricter. But to fairies it can hardly be applied, unless *super* is taken merely as a superlative prefix" (12). Where the poststructuralist Todorovians prefer to demonstrate the limits of objectivity by hyper-rationally interrogating the "real" as a knowable category, Tolkien engages playfully with "reality" by imaginatively reshaping it within the context of his essay.

Theoretical engagements with Tolkien's definition of fantasy proceeded concurrently with the Todorovian analysis and were initially lukewarm as to the value of the Tolkienian approach.¹² One early and influential engagement, C. N. Manlove's *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (1975), adopts and concretizes Tolkien's definition, characterizing fantasy as "a fiction

"Fantasy," a natural expression of human desire, is the ability of human language and imagination to envision that which does not exist in the everyday world.

12 For readability, I will treat the terms "fairy-story" and "fantasy" as equivalent in discussing the Tolkienian approach to the genre. Although this does not precisely reflect Tolkien's usage, it has become common practice and allows a more concise, coherent discussion of the materials under investigation.

evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural” (1). Within this framework, Manlove argues that the makers of fantastic worlds intend to “enlist their experience and invention into giving a total vision of reality transformed: that is, to make their fantastic worlds as real as our own” (12). Manlove examines five modern fantasists, including Tolkien, in order to judge them in terms of their own stated goals.¹³ He concludes that each author fails to achieve his goals, not primarily because of a failure of artistry or craft, but because successful fantasy—as judged by its own standards—may be conceptually impossible for the “modern” reader. Manlove attributes this failure to the problem of “*distance*, distance between the ‘real’ and fantastic worlds” (258). He asserts that the fantasist cannot, even in an imagined world, convincingly bridge the natural/supernatural gap for the modern Western reader, who lives in a world that has “isolated physics from metaphysics, reason from faith and nature from supernature” (259). Rather, for Manlove, the modern gap between the “real” and the “unreal” is too entrenched in the Western cultural mindset to be overcome by mere fiction.¹⁴

Brian Attebery’s *The Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) was one of the first book-length critical studies to both accept Tolkien’s definition of fantasy and to conclude that such a definition remained valid in a modern (and postmodern) context. Attebery’s approach is unique in its initial postulation that this type of literature (genre-fantasy) has value. Thus, Attebery states his goals as “first, to demonstrate how [contemporary fantasists] are broadening the range of modern fantasy and, second, to find a theoretical base that can account for their ability to do so” (xii). Attebery’s text is neither an apologia for fantasy, nor is it an evaluation of the genre. Instead, this study examines how fantasy manages to achieve its goals, the point of the investigation being description and explanation rather than evaluation.¹⁵

13 Manlove also examines texts by Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, and Mervyn Peake. Significantly, there is little overlap between Manlove’s list of fantasy authors and those of the Todorovian critics. This mutual exclusivity of author-lists remains more or less consistent throughout the development of both Todorovian and Tolkienian fantasy theory, with only one major exception. No one, regardless of theoretical biases, can completely avoid acknowledging Tolkien’s relation to “fantasy.”

14 Manlove’s choice of the descriptor “modern” to describe these fantasists and contemporary Western culture is a significant one. Avoiding the term “post-modern” entirely, Manlove does not acknowledge or use postmodernist criteria or theories in his investigation.

15 This approach, though similar to that of the Todorovians, differs in the crucial

Approaching Tolkienian fantasy on its own terms, Attebery attempts to demonstrate its compatibility with literary postmodernism. Rather than opposing the Todorovian perspective, Attebery neatly sidesteps the whole of Todorovian criticism by dismissing it as irrelevant to his own investigation, defining what I call *Tolkienian fantasy* simply as *fantasy* and acknowledging the Todorovians only insofar as to note that “Todorov has confused matters greatly in *The Fantastic* (1975) [*sic*], which has almost no bearing on the kind of fantasy we are discussing here” (20). Nor does Attebery assert, as it may seem from the reconciliation of Tolkienian fantasy with literary postmodernism, that Tolkien is a postmodernist. Although Attebery suggests that “it should be clear to attentive readers of *The Lord of the Rings* that Postmodernist criteria are much better suited to explaining its success than are realist or Modernist criteria” (40), he also qualifies this statement: “Despite his interest in language, metafiction, and the origins of narrative, Tolkien is not a Postmodernist. For one thing, he was born at the wrong time.... Like his contemporaries, Tolkien was schooled in commonsense realism and had to find his own way around it” (41–42). Within the restrictions of these caveats, Attebery rehabilitates the Tolkienian concepts of “wonder” and “secondary worlds” by demonstrating their compatibility with various postmodern critical rubrics.

Linking the Tolkienian concept of *wonder* to the Marxist concept of *estrangement*, Attebery suggests that Tolkienian wonder

may best be described as an alternative formulation of the idea of estrangement ... [where] through the formal manipulation of their linguistic representatives we are made to see familiar objects and experiences as strange, distant from ourselves.... In [Victor] Schlovsky’s and [Bertold] Brecht’s Marxist view, the initial familiarity was an illusion produced by the mystifications of bourgeois ideology and hence must be replaced by estrangement as a preliminary step toward social revolution. (16)

For the Todorovians, the technique of estrangement makes familiar objects or situations appear as disconcerting, alien or incomprehensible, and this is the conventional understanding of the term. However, Attebery’s Tolkienian

sense that the Todorovians, while professing a descriptive approach to literature, tend to judge literary texts by the extent to which these texts conform to the theoretical frameworks grounding their investigations. Attebery, by contrast, selects a group of texts, openly states his own biases (he likes fantasy), and then searches for theoretical frameworks which can explain the operation of the texts under investigation.

ienian reformulation suggests that a different type of estrangement may be enacted by the juxtaposition of the familiar with the marvelous in a fantastic narrative, producing *wonder* (a positive experience), and thus undoing what Tolkien calls the “penalty of ‘appropriation’” (59).

Just as Tolkienian wonder may be conceived of as an alternative formulation of estrangement, Tolkien’s “penalty of appropriation” may be conceived of as an alternative formulation of *reification*. In its most general sense, reification is the (false) conversion of an abstract concept into a concrete thing. In the discourse of sociology, for example, reification could take the form of “treating a model or ideal type as if it were a description of a real individual or society” (“reification”). However, “reality” itself may be reified in the sense that a mental abstraction of “reality” (whether that “reality” is a person, a thing, or a situation) may be mistaken for the “reality” itself, thus limiting any given reality to a faded, incomplete abstraction of itself. Tolkien argues that “creative fantasy,” in opposition to this mental appropriation of reality “may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn to flowers or flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you” (60).

Rather than hesitating on the border *between* the mimetic and the marvelous (as in Todorovian fantasy), Tolkienian fantasy operates simultaneously on *both* sides of the mimetic/marvelous border by granting simultaneous and equal credence to both the mimetic and the marvelous. Both in the Todorovian and the Tolkienian cases, the reader’s notion of the “familiar” or “real” is unsettled by the admixture of the “real” and “unreal,” the Todorovian strategy being to expose the real-as-unreal, the Tolkienian being to present the unreal-as-real.

This presentation of the unreal-as-real also operates more generally in the Tolkienian construction of internally consistent fantasy worlds. Attebery points out that “the form of fantasy,” this presentation of the unreal-as-real, “itself implies a degree of self-reflexiveness and authorial manipulation of reality. It makes its metafictional statements most effectively when it seems most ingenuous” (46). Referring to John Crowley’s postmodernist Tolkienian fantasy, *Little, Big*, Attebery argues that “Crowley, knowing full well we do not believe, reports the impossible so faithfully that we begin to question the nature of belief itself” (45). Thus, where literary realism assumes some degree of representational accuracy, the narrative conventions of Tolkienian fantasy express “a continuous assumption that everyday language lies, that coherent characters are inventions of the observer, and

especially that orderliness and convention properly belong to the realm of the imagination” (Attebery 54). Rather, Tolkienian postmodernists “make use of the fantastic to investigate the way narrative ... creates the realities it seems merely to reflect” (Attebery 53). Where Todorovian fantasy undermines reality within the text, refusing to resolve into a singular, representational narrative, Tolkienian fantasy undermines reality in the mind of the reader, presenting an internally consistent textual reality that is implicitly *not-real*. As in the case of Todorovian “hesitation” versus Tolkienian “wonder,” these apparently antithetical approaches of narrative de-construction and re-construction appear to be complementary strategies, each approaching a similar goal (i.e., to expose the constructedness of “reality”) from a different direction.

However, Attebery’s Tolkienian approach can no more escape the restrictions of a particular worldview than any other, and, as in the case of the Todorovians, Attebery’s language tends both to expel the supernatural and to reinforce a Victorian-influenced notion of linear progress. Unlike Tolkien, Attebery sets up a sharp and clear distinction between the natural and the supernatural, defining fantasy as requiring “some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law” (14). Setting aside the demonstrable existence of practicing witches (such as Marion Zimmer Bradley) who write “fantasy” texts,¹⁶ this definition neatly elides the question of what constitutes “natural law” while simultaneously reinscribing the notion that fantasy must be predicated upon a *violation* of natural law. In the rationalized discourse of literary criticism, of course, this type of sleight of hand is required to maintain scholarly credibility. For example, if Attebery were to suggest that the reality of fantasy might be as real as—or even more real than—everyday, consensual reality, he would undermine his own credibility as a literary critic.¹⁷ He must carefully clarify that when he uses the word “magic,” what he really means is “the narrative and semiotic code we call magic” (73). This (re)enforcement of the natural/supernatural binary becomes most apparent in Attebery’s treatment of myth as it relates to “indigenous fantasy.”

In “Recapturing the Modern World for the Imagination,” Attebery examines the “gulf between story and history” (129). He asserts here—as he

16 For a fascinating and respectful examination of modern magical practice in London, England, including an exploration of magicians’ use of fantasy texts as instructional materials, see Tanya Luhrmann’s *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*. Luhrmann’s text is an anthropological participant-observer study examining the process by which rational, reasonable and typically well-educated Londoners become both believers-in and practitioners-of the magical arts.

Where Todorovian fantasy undermines reality within the text, Tolkienian fantasy undermines reality in the mind of the reader.

has earlier, and as Manlove did before him—that realistic fiction “emulates history in all its muddle and sprawl,” thus becoming “essentially reportorial” (129). Fantasy, in contrast, “more or less bypasses history by inventing a setting in which every object, incident or motivation may be assumed to be in service to a comprehensive narrative pattern” (Attebery 130). In examining what he calls “indigenous fantasy” (129), Attebery argues that *myth* unifies the discourses of “history” and “story,” reflecting “a time when this division, between story and history, did not exist or seemed unimportant” (130). By “indigenous fantasy,” Attebery refers to fantasy that is set in—or “indigenous to”—everyday, contemporary reality, rather than isolated in the traditionally distant secondary worlds of Tolkienian fantasy. Thus, he argues that indigenous fantasy reunites “history” and “story,” injecting a new, contemporary mythic discourse into an otherwise myth-deprived postmodern culture. Although Attebery’s assertion that both “myth” and “indigenous fantasy” conceptually unify history and story may be accurate, his expression of this concept remains unfortunate, since it suppresses several potential perceptions of “myth” in both ancient and present times.

Attebery seems to suggest that, somewhere in an unspecified past, mythic discourse was indistinguishable from everyday or “historical” discourse. The assertion of such a former lack-of-distinction implies two antecedent assumptions: first, that human cultures have only recently learned to distinguish between different forms of discourse; second, that any recognizable, distinct form of discourse must be ultimately distinguishable as *either* real *or* unreal.¹⁸ Yet, it is easy to imagine “ancient” storytellers and audiences as violating these assumptions. These “ancient” audiences could easily have made a distinction between mythic discourse and everyday discourse, not by categorizing one as “real” and the other as “unreal,” but rather by categorizing each of the two as equally real *in different ways*. This third possible perception of myth touches on the

17 Charlotte Spivack, while no more willing than Attebery to suggest that “magic” could be real, clearly rejects the characterization of fantasy as violation-of-reality. Rather, Spivack points out that “to define fantasy in terms of the impossible is to define possibility in terms of scientific realism” (4).

18 The distinction between the “ancient” belief and “contemporary” disbelief in myth also implies a third underlying assumption. This distinction banishes myth and myth-based cultures to a distant past, ignoring the fact that, in spite of various imperial powers’ best efforts, many indigenous cultures still exist in the contemporary Western world. Many of these cultures continue to maintain their culture and myths in an active, living form within the surrounding context of contemporary Western culture.

Mystic approach to the fantasy/reality distinction but, suffice it to say for the moment that the division of narrative into a simple binary of history versus not-history is both artificial and reductive. Tolkien himself recognizes the artificiality of this division when he points out that “history often resembles ‘Myth,’ because they are both ultimately of the same stuff” (35). One might be tempted to propose that the more naive conception of “history” and “story” is the contemporary, artificial division of the two into strictly oppositional categories.¹⁹

To summarize, then, Attebery successfully avoids the tendency to use theoretical frameworks as evaluative tools, approaching Tolkienian fantasy as a receptive, sympathetic reader. Unlike the Todorovians, Attebery believes that “the task of literary theory is to provide a framework capable of accounting for the story’s success on its own terms, rather than denying that its aims are achievable or worth the attempt” (17). As with the Todorovians, however, Attebery’s implicit world-view limits the range of possibilities within his discourse. Thus, Attebery’s text once again re-inscribes, to a certain degree, a pseudo-Victorian notion of “progress,” reconstructing the real/unreal binary and erasing the contemporary existence of cultures from which myth has never been banished.

The Mystic Approach: Deconstructing the Real/Unreal Binary (A Reconciliation)

In *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (1997), Richard Mathews incorporates, extends and, to some extent, opposes Attebery’s Tolkienian viewpoint. Continuing the Atteberian movement away from the prescriptive and towards the descriptive application of theory to “genre” fantasy, Mathews uses a typically Tolkienian definition of the genre, stating that “fantasy ... may best be thought of as a fiction that elicits wonder through elements of the supernatural or impossible. It consciously breaks free from mundane reality” (2).²⁰ In further agreement with the Tolkienians, he also argues that “the fantasy writer’s freedom to depart from realism involves

19 To be fair, it should be noted that Attebery does not *explicitly* characterize mythical discourse as naive or simplistic, although this is an implicit effect of certain of his terminological choices. Rather, Attebery welcomes the re-emergence of mythic discourse in contemporary fantasy.

20 Although Tolkien is not, strictly speaking, a “Tolkienian” (see note 3), this definition, in its dependence on *impossibility*, does implicitly accommodate Tolkien’s more explicit assertion that “creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; in a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it” (56). In each case, “fantasy” self-consciously or escapes the shackles of “reality,” although Mathews’ definition

Like Attebery, Mathews acknowledges the existence of Todorovian fantasy (which he calls the “postmodern fantastic”) but excludes this form of literature from the realm of fantasy proper.

an obligation to coherence and to the establishment of a relationship with the reader’s experience” (3), reinforcing the importance of a coherent secondary world to the fantasy narrative. Like Attebery, Mathews acknowledges the existence of Todorovian fantasy (which he calls the “postmodern fantastic”) but excludes this form of literature from the realm of fantasy proper. However, Mathews does incorporate the contributions of Todorovian theorists such as Olsen and Jackson in his most sweeping claims for the genre, arguing that fantasy is “a literature of liberation and subversion. Its target may be politics, economics, religion, psychology, or sexuality. It seeks to liberate the feminine, the unconscious, the repressed, the past, the present, and the future” (vii). Nor does Mathews seem quite as preoccupied as Attebery with demonstrating fantasy’s sophistication in the face of its perceived naïveté. Diverging from Attebery’s strictly Tolkien-centric conception of the genre, he acknowledges certain non-Western, non-Tolkienian influences—such as “Native American oral storytelling” (13) and Eastern mysticism—on contemporary, post-Tolkienian fantasists.

In “Completing the Circle: Language, Power, and Vision” (135–151), Mathews explores the influence of the Eastern mystic tradition on Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* tetralogy.²¹ Here, he examines the circular, ever-returning structure of these texts, as well as the juxtaposition, complementarity, and fluidity of male and female perspectives in Le Guin’s narrative. Although the story of *Earthsea* focuses initially on the magical power of true names and naming, Mathews finds that the final novel (*Tehanu*) explores an “expression of vision and power beyond language, beyond naming” (149). Central to the final book, retroactively transforming the tetralogy, is “a quiet epiphany, a moment of illumination: real change is no change at all but merely a change in perception” (Mathews 150). Mathews concludes that the central structure of Le Guin’s work “is the Eastern circle

shifts the emphasis away from Tolkien’s “recognition of fact” towards the more positively formulated *liberation* of “story” from conventional “reality.”

21 Although, in its current (possibly final) formulation, Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series comprises six books (including *Tales from Earthsea* and *The Other Wind*, both published in 2001), this series was considered to be “complete” at the time of Mathews’ writing. For ease of speech, I have chosen to refer to the series as Mathews writes about it. Nor is Mathews’ analysis mistaken simply because more books followed after what he (accurately, at the time of his writing) considered to be the “final” volume. Rather, Mathews’ argument could be extended to suggest that *every* new book in this series retroactively transforms *all* of the preceding books. Indeed, one could productively argue that this type of repeated, retroactive transformation is a key defining characteristic of any Le Guin series.

composed of yin and yang, light and dark, male and female, that makes the whole” (151). In this evaluation, Mathews edges away from the Tolkienian conception of fantasy and towards what I call the “mystic approach.”²²

Mysticism has manifested itself in both Western and non-Western cultures for thousands of years, taking such forms as Taoism, Buddhism, various shamanistic traditions, and the Celtic mysticism (both Christian and non-Christian) of Europe and the British Isles, to name just a few. Academic discourse, however, tends to expel mystic perspectives as suspect, irrational or—in the cases of postmodernism and poststructuralism—falsely transcendental. And yet, if one can set aside such presuppositions, mystic assumptions appear strikingly compatible with contemporary, postmodernist approaches to “reality.” Paradoxically, the newer-than-new discourse of postmodernity reproduces certain realizations which may also be (and have been) reached through the older-than-old framework of mysticism: the inadequacy of language to accurately reflect reality, the arbitrary construction of human meaning-making systems, and the tendency of rationalized discourses to suppress a reality that exceeds the grasp of the rational mind. In this sense, the mystic perspective may represent a major element of the “unseen and unsaid of culture” (Jackson 4) expressed in fantasy literature.

In his 1980 essay “Mysticism, Esoterism, and Fantastic Literature,” Didier T. Jaën proposes that “the thematic impact of fantastic literature rests on its relationship with the mystical or esoteric view of reality” (105). In order to engage productively with fantasy, Jaën argues that the critic must acknowledge and respect the mystic perspective that lies at the heart of fantasy literature. The mystic viewpoint arises from the conviction, “typical in both Western and non-Western societies, modern and pre-modern alike, ... that the world of appearance is an outward manifestation of a background reality, that the relationships and inter-relationships among observed phenomena derive their linkage to covert factors or forces ‘behind’ the world of appearance” (Tiryakian 4). Although humans may directly perceive this “background reality” by intuitive processes, the reality itself exists in a non-rational, extra-linguistic state that can never be fully expressed in rational, linguistic terms. The “basic or central event” of the mystic experience is the direct, intuitive experience of “union or unity”

22 This perspective on fantasy literature could be more properly termed “the mystic approach to reality as typically expressed in fantasy.” However, this more accurate description is too long for repeated or easy use, and I will hereafter use “the mystic approach” or “the mystic approach to fantasy” as a convenient and not-too-misleading shorthand for the longer phrase.

with the inexpressible real (Jaèn 106), and this experience of union with the real has two logical consequences: “the dissolution of the individual or personal self into the union,” and “the fusion or union of the self with that which is not the self.”²³ In each case, the mystical experience of union dissolves “the mental categories that rule everyday life, such as time and space and the laws of cause and effect,” since “there are no causes and no effects where everything is in everything else; every cause is in every effect” (Jaèn 106).

Jaèn points out that the mystic experience maps directly onto Todorov’s themes of the Self, further arguing that many “authors of fantastic literature have been clearly influenced by mystical or esoteric views” (105). In their own reflections on the workings of “fantasy,” several influential modern fantasists have provided ample evidence to support such a claim. For example, when Tolkien describes the “eucatastrophe” essential to fairy-stories, he describes it in clearly mystical terms: “The peculiar quality of ‘joy’ in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth.... In the ‘eucatastrophe’ we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far off gleam of *evangelium* in the real world” (70).²⁴ The mystic perspective also neatly illuminates Tolkien’s wariness regarding the application of the term “supernatural” to fairies and his consequent assertion that “it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural” (12). If, in his references to fairies and the realm of Faërie, Tolkien intends to refer to the mystic “background reality,” then this reality is indeed more “natural” than the artificial limits imposed by human rationality.²⁵

23 The use of “logic” to explore the implications of an “intuitive” experience may appear contradictory, but as Jaèn points out, “one does not have to be a mystic to conceive intellectually of such unity, at least in an approximative sense, and envision its consequences or logical corollaries (even though this concept of unity does away with all logical categories)” (106).

24 Tolkien’s reference to “*evangelium* in the real world” is an explicitly Christian one, in that he believes all fairy-stories to be dim echoes of the one fairy-story that has occurred in the “real” world. This factually “true” story is, for Tolkien, that of “the birth of Christ” in which “Legend and History have met and fused” (71–72). However, the explicitly Christian elements of Tolkien’s philosophy need not detract from the underlying mystic convictions which simultaneously (if implicitly) inform his thinking. (See note 26 for further discussion.)

25 It should be noted that Tolkien would not refer to his own perspective as “mystic” any more than he would refer to it as “Tolkienian.” In “On Fairy Stories,” he only mentions mysticism once, asserting that “fairy-stories as a whole have three faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man” (31). Tolkien’s meaning here

Charles Kingsley, C. S. Lewis and, Ursula K. Le Guin have all expressed similar sentiments in their respective analyses of “fantasy” and its operations. Charles Kingsley states that his own goal in writing fantasy (his novel *The Waterbabies*) is to show “that there is a quite miraculous and divine element underlying all physical nature; and that nobody knows anything about anything” (245). C. S. Lewis, a contemporary and friend of Tolkien’s, explains the action of “fairy land” upon the reader as follows: “Fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth” (29). Ursula K. Le Guin, the most explicitly mystic of the modern fantasists, puts the case most bluntly, stating that “fantasy is true, of course. It isn’t factual, but it’s true” (*Language* 44).²⁶

Le Guin’s observations echo Jaèn’s conclusions regarding the mystical underpinnings of fantasy—or, more accurately, Jaèn’s conclusions echo Le Guin’s observations, since the Le Guin passages quoted here were published before Jaèn’s article. Le Guin succinctly states the fantasist’s perspective as follows: “The artist deals with what cannot be said in words. The artist whose medium is fiction does this *in words*. The novelist says in words what cannot be said in words” (*Language* 158).²⁷ Jaèn makes a

is far from clear, nor does he return to the term “mystic” except to suggest in passing that “the fairy-story ... may (but not so easily) be made a vehicle of Mystery” (31). Jaèn’s description of the “mystic union” correlates more precisely with Tolkien’s description of “wonder” as a primary effect of fairy-stories than it does with Tolkien’s “Mystical” face of fantasy.

26 For each of these authors, fantasy may echo a different “background reality.” Tolkien, Kingsley and Lewis, for example, are all Christians, and believe that the “background reality” approached through fantasy is that of a Christian divinity, which can never be fully comprehended in human terms. Le Guin, by contrast, believes in a more idiosyncratically defined, Taoist-influenced conception of divine or universal order. What all of these fantasists have in common, however, is the conviction that such a background reality exists, that this reality is wondrous and beyond rational comprehension, and that the human “truth” of such a reality may best be expressed through explicitly non-factual stories and fantasies.

27 One could argue that this project of the novelist applies not only to fantasy, but to all fiction, and such an argument would be correct. However, as Brian Attebery points out, fantasy tends to be particularly self-aware in this respect, since it approaches this “impossible” task by depicting that which is conventionally considered to be “impossible” in the everyday, mundane world. As I (and Brian Attebery) have argued earlier, the fantasist depicts the impossible as real, implicitly challenging the accurate re-presentation of “reality” by demonstrating the constructed and imaginary nature of *all* realities, “real” or “unreal.”

Ursula K. Le Guin, the most explicitly mystic of the modern fantasists, puts the case most bluntly, stating that “fantasy is true, of course. It isn’t factual, but it’s true.”

similar observation in a near-paraphrase of the Le Guin passage, pointing out that “intuitive knowledge cannot be explained in rational or linguistic terms; it is an experience that can only be hinted at, approximated by language” (110). Thus, fantasy is “an attempt to transcend, through language, the limitations of language; a language that attempts to transcend itself by hinting beyond itself, because what it hints at cannot be expressed in language” (Jaèn 110).

While the correlation between Jaèn’s mystic approach to fantasy and fantasists’ own formulations of the genre is fascinating, the parallels between the Todorovian and mystic perspectives are even more so. One consequence of the postmodernist stance is “a radical scepticism of the capability of language to respond to the universe” (Olsen 9). The mystic correlative of this stance is a radical scepticism of the capability of language to respond *directly* to the universe; any approach to “truth” must always be elliptical, non-representational and necessarily incomplete, since the “background reality” cannot be expressed, only experienced. Todorovian fantasy, in particular, “reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinizes the category of the real” (Jackson 21). Similarly, the mystic perspective reveals reason and *all representations* of reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs. Where Todorovian fantasy “is moving towards the non-conceptual ... it moves into, or opens up, a space without/outside cultural order” (Jackson 43), mystic fantasy is moving towards the *super*-conceptual, that which cannot be conceptualized rationally, yet may be directly perceived on an intuitive level. Mystic fantasy moves into, or opens itself to the possibility of a *reality* without/outside cultural order.

(In)Conclusion: On Playing God

In this paper, I have constructed a fantastic progression of fantasy criticism over the past three decades. Starting with the Todorovians, the discourse of the discourse of fantasy entered literary criticism and proposed the fantastic as a legitimate area of “serious” study. Simultaneously, the Todorovians rejected the “marvellous” as antithetical to the postmodern turn in literature. For the Todorovians, the portrayal of any internally consistent reality (even an explicitly marvellous portrayal) remained fundamentally incompatible with the central goal of *deconstruction*: the dismantling of the artificial and arbitrary constructions of “reality” and “rationality” that

Fantasists, by the nature of their *métier*, cannot help but be acutely aware of the fact that, as Le Guin puts it, “the novelist’s business is lying” (*Language* 156).

have typically dominated modern Western culture. In the Tolkienians, literary criticism began to approach the “marvelous” on its own terms, demonstrating the compatibility of “genre” fantasy with several aspects of postmodernity. Thus, Attebery shows how the construction of a Tolkienian secondary world can enact a sophisticated naiveté in which everyday, primary “reality” is both enriched and challenged by the translocation of the everyday into the realm of the “marvelous.” Finally, the mystic approach to fantasy recognizes the underlying goals of several early and contemporary fantasists and rehabilitates the intuitive as one possible alternative to the rational. This approach may even reinvigorate the oft-postulated nihilism of the postmodern turn by reasserting the *potential* existence of an underlying “truth” or “reality” while at the same time fundamentally denying the complete expression of this truth or reality in purely linguistic, representational forms. Mystic fantasy enables the portrayal of the non-rational as something other than the collapse of the rational, thus providing an alternative to the rational/irrational binary itself. However, this progression of fantasy remains—though intellectually satisfying—a fantastic construction.

Although this paper has divided fantasy criticism into an apparent temporal progression of three perspectives, these perspectives have not, strictly speaking, developed in such a linear manner. Although Attebery’s Tolkienian perspective responds to Olsen’s Todorovian viewpoint, the sources in which these perspectives are rooted appeared in reverse order: Tolkien published “On Fairy-Stories” in 1947, and Todorov published *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* in 1970. In this case, the “newer” approach is also the “older” one. Furthermore, by comparison to the Todorovian and Tolkienian viewpoints, the mystic approach to fantasy can hardly be said to encompass a critical movement at all. The mystic approach, having its full scholarly expression in one article in 1980, inspired no book-length studies, nor did it attract any direct successors in fantasy criticism. Paradoxically, however, the mystic perspective appears immanent both in fantasists’ own reflections on their craft and in the Todorovian and Tolkienian critical schools. On a broader scale, the mystic perspective simultaneously extends backward into ancient times and forward into the paradigmatically newer-than-new perspective of postmodernity. In this sense, the “newest” approach may also be the “oldest.”

The mystic perspective, particularly as it finds expression in fantasy literature, provides an escape (in the positive, Tolkienian sense, the escape of the prisoner) from the recurring binaries of Western versus non-Western, rational versus irrational, progressive versus conservative,

sophisticated versus naive, and history versus story. In a world where “the very notion of progress has become untenable” (Brooke-Rose 7), mystic fantasy counteracts the persistent illusion of a “progression” within the art of storytelling, demonstrating that the oral discourse of myth may very well embody many of the same principles as the most contemporary textual expressions of postmodernism.²⁸ In constructing new, imaginary and consistent worlds, a mystic approach to fantasy acknowledges and incorporates multiple worldviews by demonstrating *both* the validity of these worldviews *and* the necessarily constructed and incomplete nature of *all* expressible worldviews. In travelling, like Tolkien’s hobbit, there and back again, we may find that the combination of “there” and “here,” the circular journey, complicates and enriches our (illusorily) stable notions of “reality” by *transforming*, rather than *deconstructing* the world in which we live.

“Reality” may be a story that we construct and tell both to and for ourselves, but it is not *just* a story. The very notion of a coherent self may be an artful fiction, but it is not *just* a fiction. Fantasy, as seen from the mystic perspective, recognizes these paradoxes and implicitly promotes them in its discourse. To approach fantasy from a mystic perspective is to recognize the internal super-, sub-, and non-logic of the text. To approach fantasy on its own terms, and to fully appreciate its implications within a postmodern world, one must accept (though perhaps never understand on a rational level) what any given fantasist may or may not know, but always intuitively:

Even when [fantasists] are making entire universes, they are only playing. But they are not playing God. It looks as if they

²⁸ Although a full exploration of “story” and “storytelling” in fantasy remains beyond the scope of this paper, John Clute and Gary Westfahl, in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, argue that story is a central characteristic of fantasy. Briefly put, fantasy asserts the continuing relevance of story in the contemporary world, whereby story (in the sense of a told narrative) remains a productive reflection of (and on) human consciousness. Further, Clute and Westfahl suggest that this centrality of story to fantasy may be a major factor in the ongoing critical neglect of the genre, pointing out that “20th-century criticism has not concentrated on Story ... instead tending to devalue genres and individual works in any genre which are deemed to depend too deeply upon ‘primitive’ devices such as storytelling” (Clute 900). However, Brian Attebery points out that many literary postmodernists have returned to such devices and “draw freely on the storytelling arts.... [Although,] in order to establish license to do so, they frequently issue disclaimers about the seriousness of their enterprise, saying that they are merely playing with language and the signs that derive from it” (49).

were, to the rational mind, but the rational mind notoriously cannot see what's happening in fantasy, or why it happens. How can you play God, after all, when you have understood what the intellect cannot understand—that God is only playing God? (Le Guin *Language* 125)

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