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Fantasy and Reality: Are the Boundaries Changing?

I have always been rather taken with Ambrose Bierce's definition of prayer, which goes something like this—I'm quoting from memory—that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner, confessedly unworthy.

This is of course from *The Devils Dictionary*, one of the most cynical compilations you'll find. Whatever else it may be, though, fantasy is the genre that grants that prayer. In fantasy characters and plots break the laws of the universe with rampant abandon: people fly, become invisible, metamorphose, become giant or miniaturised, travel through time, have x-ray vision and other strange medical conditions that give them powers and talents unknown in the world of mundane reality. Fantasy by definition breaks all boundaries.

Not everybody appreciates this flagrant breaking of universal law. In his recent novel *Saturday* [Jonathan Cape, 2005] Ian McEwan writes of one day in the life of a neurosurgeon in London. Henry Perowne is his name and he is materially successful, happily married with two talented grown up children. His daughter, Daisy, a promising young poet has drawn up a reading list of sorts for her father and he has been following her schedule albeit with some reservations. He ploughs through *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* only to find that after hours and hours of reading he can encapsulate their messages in a few words and thus could have saved himself the bother of reading them in the first place: "...That adultery is understandable but wrong, that nineteenth-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so..." This is not a man likely to develop a passion for fiction.

There is fine comedy here, but as his next thoughts impact directly on our theme I would like to quote at greater length. These are Henry's thoughts:

"[*Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*] had the virtue, at least, of representing a recognisable physical reality, which could not be said for the so-called magic realists [Daisy] opted to study in her final year. What were these authors of reputation doing—grown men and women of the twentieth century—granting supernatural power to their characters? He never made it through a single one of those irksome confections. And written for adults, not children. In more than one, heroes or heroines were born with or sprouted wings—a symbol, in Daisy's term, of their liminality; naturally, learning to fly became a metaphor for bold aspiration. Others were granted a magical sense of smell, or tumbled unharmed out of high-flying aircraft. One visionary saw through a pub window his parents as they had been some weeks after his conception, discussing the possibility of aborting him.

Henry Perowne is a brain surgeon of course and "bound to respect the material world." Given this, Henry believes that "the actual, not the magical should be the challenge." The reading list had persuaded Henry that the supernatural was the recourse of an insufficient imagination, a dereliction of duty, a childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real, of the demanding re-enactment of the plausible."

A somewhat less fictional character, Joseph Conrad—much earlier—was similarly scathing:

“The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is—marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state. No, I am too firm in my consciousness of the marvelous to be ever fascinated by the mere supernatural, which (take it any way you like) is but a manufactured article, the fabrication of minds insensitive to the intimate delicacies of our relation to the dead and to the living, in their countless multitudes; a desecration of our tenderest memories; an outrage on our dignity. [Author’s note to *The Shadow Line*, 1920]

Among other things, this touches on the somewhat obvious point that the world as cutting-edge science currently understands it—the world of quantum mechanics with its quarks, glueballs and spots of matter existing simultaneously in two places, the wonders glimpsed from Hubble telescopes such as black holes and wormholes; and genomes, nanotechnology, genetic engineering...these things seem to render fantasy obsolete, much as some years ago Tom Lehrer saw Ronald Reagan as rendering satire obsolete.

But interesting as this point is, this is not really what Perowne and Conrad are saying.

Given what they *are* saying, perhaps I should sit down right now, waving my white flag. The prosaic Perowne and the elegant Conrad, far from helping us define the boundaries of fantasy, would allow fantasy no latitude at all.

But still when we consider the word *fantasy* and its relations we find *wonder*, *awe*, *amazement* and we note how these often translate adjectivally into words of high approbation: *fantastic*, *wonderful*, *awesome*, *amazing*... Even words Henry might prefer such as unreality and incredibility become as adjectives *incredible* and *unreal*. Whether these are describing a film, a car, a meal, a lover, or anything—no one can deny that these are applause words.

Perowne and Conrad make some quite pungent criticisms of fantasy but before addressing them, I need to nail my personal colours to the wall: in addition to being a poet, I am a writer of fantasy fiction. To date I have published five more or less fantasy novels for young people and three more have been completed and accepted for publication.

Perhaps by way of expiation I could claim that my own “irksome confections” are somewhat juvenile—for the simple reason that they were written for children, and this on the face of it might allow me to duck one of Perowne’s challenges. However, at least some have been marketed under the new generic “crossover” fiction; that is, books to be read and enjoyed by readers both juvenile and adult. I understand each book in the moderately successful Harry Potter series was issued with two covers: one clearly aimed at ten year olds, the other aimed at bank managers and others equally mature—people I guess who wanted to read the books without embarrassment on the train. However the term “crossover” more properly belongs to the books by people such as Philip Pullman in his *Dark Materials* sequence of novels: books which are multilayered and which can be read by bright younger readers but with dark and complex themes more properly understood by adult readers.

So what then are Perowne’s objections? If I could enumerate them they would seem to be:

- Firstly, that fantasy is childish. This is what I might call the condescending argument.

- Secondly, that the actual not the magical should be the challenge. That writing fantasy is a dereliction of duty. This is perhaps the functional argument.
- Thirdly, that fantasy is the product of an insufficient imagination. This is perhaps the qualitative argument.
- Fourthly, that fantasy represents an evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real. This is another version of the functional argument but has elements of the evaluative as well.

Ultimately though, to me, Perowne seems to be missing the point. Of course there is mystery and wonder in the real world, enough for a million mind-bending novels, but for all that, there remains room for fantasy. Please. Fantasy is fun.

My first fantasy novel was called *Under the Rotunda*. The title derived from a little pairing of words that cropped into my head as I was walking a dog. Under the Rotunda. It was rhythmic—a silly little mantra. I have that sort of mind. I pictured a rotunda—a bandstand—a circular raised bandstand in a public park. Beside the stairs leading up to the bandstand was a tiny door. What was the purpose of the tiny door? I pictured tiny brass band players. How had they become tiny? What if an inept magician had somehow miniaturised them? Why would he do this? How could the situation be resolved? By posing and answering these *what if* questions a story emerged and I quite quickly set it all down on paper. It ended up being a quite charming fantasy story of about 170 pages.

Perhaps because I'd exhausted my imagination momentarily, but really because I was interested in the interface between the real, the mundane and the fantastic, I set the book in the quite recognisable reality of my home town, Christchurch, New Zealand. I set the book in actual suburbs, used actual street names, I used two actual rotundas in the book and much of the book's climax is set in Hagley Park, a huge central city space of park and garden.

This fusion—perhaps confusion—of fantasy and actuality caused major problems for a couple of the Henry Perownes my publisher was using for editors.

One came back troubled because she'd checked and discovered that the gates to Hagley Park were locked at nine o'clock therefore it wouldn't have been possible for me to have vehicles driving in and out of the park at midnight. I tried to explain that the book was *fiction*.

I had a scene where two of the protagonists were turned into giants by the magician in another failed attempt to return people to normal size—a device as old, of course, as *Alice in Wonderland*. In order to give an impression of their size, I said that they'd become so tall they'd risen beyond the trees, and I'd used a simile somewhere saying that from their new height the trees below looked like bonsai. This worried the editor who said that the trees would not look like bonsai because bonsai would be *too* small: the trees would look more like shrubs. I tried to explain that I was being *poetic*. The device was hyperbole.

A third Perowne, a scientist friend, came up to me at a party having read the book and explained patiently that of course I knew that the human body is structured to exist within certain parameters of physical size. If a human body was shrunk or stretched to the sizes I described, it could not possibly function. The skeletal framework could not support the mass, there would be

organ failure, no human that small or that large could possibly survive... I tried to explain that I was writing *fantasy*.

My ultimate argument is that in the house of fiction there are many mansions, and fantasy is one of them, and a legitimate one. Perowne's strictures sound like a very limiting prescription. Fantasy can do the things all fiction does: it can entertain, illuminate, educate; it can be didactic, romantic, tragic, comic. Without fantasy we would not have Gulliver, Alice, Brer Rabbit, Pantagruel, the Odyssey, if it comes to that. Nor would we have had the thousands of astonishing fantasies, speculative fiction and science fiction of the 20th and 21st centuries, written for both children and adults. Mr. Gradgrind would have hated fantasy. That is good enough for me to give it a big fat tick.

In short, the first and third arguments (that fantasy is childish and lacking imagination) are clearly subjective. The second and fourth arguments (the functional and the evaluative) seem to me to criticise fantasy not for what it is but for what it isn't and are unnecessarily prescriptive.

Finally, perhaps I should really address the question posed by my topic: are the boundaries changing? What I have said so far has been a defence of fantasy, a defence based simply on the idea that fantasy is a wide ranging exploration unhampered by natural laws. I do not feel fantasy should be criticised for not being what it patently does not set out to be.

However this has evaded the question of whether fantasy's boundaries are changing. It would be easy to say that fantasy has no boundaries by definition: as I suggested at the beginning of this talk, a genre where the laws of the universe are annulled.

However, as Lloyd Alexander, the writer of the wonderful Prydain series of fantasy novels, based on the Welsh myths, once remarked, and again I'm quoting from memory: the muse of fantasy wears good sensible shoes. This is the salutary reminder of the paradox that the un-believability must be believable, and it becomes believable by being grounded in a created reality. There must be, within the new rules established by the fantastic situation, a consistency. What the fantasy writer does is create an alternative reality, but that reality is governed by discernible limits, boundaries and rules. All fiction asks for a willing suspension of disbelief; fantasy asks that we go further. Willing suspension of disbelief is a contract: if you accept this, there will be a payoff in terms of enjoyment, artistic satisfaction and what have you. Given this, and given that both writer and reader abide by the contract, then perhaps we should argue that the boundaries of fantasy are as limitless as ever.

In one respect however, it could be argued that the boundaries are changing. In the late 20th century many forms of art became prone to a new form of expression, you know the one: heavily ironic and knowingly self-referential. There are mutual satisfactions in this post-modern approach: a conspiracy is entered into between both viewer and artist, or reader and writer. This is my material, but you know and I know that we shouldn't take this at face value—it's really an ironic joke, which I lay before you and that you're smart enough to see for what it really is.

Some modern fantasies introduce elements of these attitudes, and as a result have quite different tones—sensibilities from what has been before—and have explored the wonderfully comic possibilities of playing, as it were, against type. I'm thinking here of the work of Douglas Adams and the Discworld books of Terry Pratchett. In that these people and their disciples have

introduced, or re-introduced, this self-referential humour into fantasy—there aren't many jokes in *Lord of the Rings*—perhaps the boundaries are changing.