

RE/CONSTRUCTING FAITH: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS IN CURRENT FANTASY.

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Speculative fiction has always concerned itself with the religious imagination. Its themes cluster around the mysterious and the transcendental and, as modern science has concentrated on the empirical, speculation in the areas of metaphysics and theology has been transferred into the realm of fiction. As Brian Stableford remarks,

It was the religious imagination of people such as Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) which first envisioned an infinite universe filled with habitable worlds, and it was visionaries like Athanasius Kircher and Emanuel Swedenborg who first journeyed in the imagination to the limits of the Solar System, and beyond. John Wilkins, who first supposed in all seriousness that people might go to the Moon in a flying machine was a bishop, and so was Francis Godwin, the author of the satirical cosmic voyage *The Man in the Moone* (1638). Other early speculative fictions were attacks on religious cosmology and religious orthodoxy by freethinkers such as Cyrano De Bergerac, Voltaire, and, later, Samuel Butler ... Boldest of all the 19th-century speculative fictions, Camille Flammarion's *Lumen* (1864), was the result of the astronomer's desperate need to reconcile and fuse his scientific knowledge with his religious faith.¹

The early adaptation of Christian tradition for a secular audience by creators of fantasy can be well illustrated with the Christian monastic tale of the Quest for the Holy Grail (c.1225). The story is part of the huge compilation of French Arthurian tales known both as the Prose Lancelot and as the Vulgate Cycle and, although its creator[s] remain shrouded in mystery, it is clear that the story is the product of a Cistercian monastery. It was designed to undermine

the tenets of *fin amor*. This courtly love, described as woman worship was, as Loomis remarks, "... revolutionary in two aspects. It defied the teachings of the Church and the conventions of society by rejecting marriage, as then determined by property and pedigree, and substituting a relationship based on free choice."² Moreover, the cult of the Virgin flourished as courtly poets transferred this secular woman worship to the heavenly Lady, further enraging the patriarchal church hierarchy. And since the supreme fictional manifestation of *fin amor* was Sir Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere, King Arthur's queen, what better way to counter it than in a quest tale that shows Lancelot reject Guinevere as a temptress and turn to an exclusively masculine holy quest for the grail?

The process of adaptation of Christian material in the story of the Saint Graal produced a literary method that is still with us today. One of its primary components is the medieval narrative appeal to *auctoritas*, the authority of the teller of the tale. In this case, authority was taken from the scriptures, including apocryphal material. The tale offered a structural model that was understood as scriptural: it was analogical, rather than allegorical. "It was possible ... through the mode of analogical evocation to build a structure that was in all respects like Scripture, though not an imitation ... And it is precisely in the expectation-fulfilment pattern that this is made clear: the *Queste* is a literary microcosmos reflecting a typological macrocosmos."³

Another aspect of this method is evident in the creation of fictional characters whose putative genealogy establishes a link with authoritative texts: thus Galahad, a post-figurative Christ, is carefully presented as having an unimpeachable right to quest for the Grail. As the child of Lancelot and Elaine, he can claim direct descent from both Joseph of Aramathea and the Fisher King, combining divine and secular right for his ascendancy. His very name is laden with messianic significance, derived from the Vulgate Old Testament word 'Galaad'. It means 'heap of testimony', and later came to refer directly to Christ — an association remarked upon particularly in the Cistercian *Sermons on the Canticles* of Gilbert of Holland. Thus the new character is given a niche that aligns him with older, "true" sources, and allows him to claim some of their authority for his fictional exploits. A modern example of the fictive use of the messianic Galaad is J.R.R. Tolkien's story of Gil Galad the Elven King, a hero

who is both warrior and saviour of his people in the created cosmology of Middle Earth.

This technique of creating authoritative analogies is still very much in vogue. C.S. Lewis, a catholic apologist who described himself as a 'moralist and novelist' combined the methodology of scientific romance with theological discourse in his religious fantasies *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Voyage to Venus* (1943) and *That Hideous Strength* (1945) The latter is, perhaps, very close indeed to the structural technique of the Grail stories, as it links modern theology with the Arthurian mythos of Merlin, drawing authority from both sources.

One of the most successful attempts to deal with formal religion in speculative fiction is Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1955-7). Miller, a Catholic convert, produced a post-nuclear holocaust novel which follows the fortunes of the Catholic Order of Leibowitz, named after a twentieth century physicist who founded the order and decreed its holy task of preserving knowledge throughout the dark age that he predicted would follow global destruction. The novel depicts the Order at three half-millennium intervals, showing its growth, exploring the nature of religious vocation, and examining the interplay of politics and theology in an isolated religious community. The story is an extrapolation on the role that organised religion might play in reconstructing a devastated world, and the members of the order may be seen as representatives of all human survivors. A similar theme may be found in Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), which shows a primitive post-holocaust society clinging to the remnants of Anglicanism at Canterbury, and constructing new holy stories from the few scraps that remain. Both novels employ the structures of religious life as we understand it to give verisimilitude to the future worlds of their fiction.

Not all uses of power in the scriptures are positive. A great many modern tales are centred on the repressive aspects of ideological *auctoritas*. In this context, Galaad turns up again in a recent extrapolation from the Old Testament, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). The tale, based on the story of Rachel and Leah, depicts a misogynist monotheocracy in the newly created fundamentalist Christian state of Gilead, named, of course, for the place of biblical testimony. This is a cautionary tale of gender politics in which Gilead is a feminist vision of hell-on-earth, where women

are wholly owned by men, grouped and even colour-coded according to traditional female functions: they are wives [in blue robes, striped for econo-wives], handmaids [in red], servants [in green] or whores [in Playboy bunny costumes] — there are no other available roles.

In many respects, *The Handmaid's Tale* is an examination of the ways in which well-meaning people allow their good intentions to pave the road to hell, and use biblical authority to do it. The Gilead monotheocracy is explicitly what might be expected from groups such as female apologists for patriarchal religions. The social structure is the kind of nightmare that results when moral platitudes are translated into practice, so that the moralists get literally what they asked for — the letter of the slogan — and are trapped by it.

This is a clear warning to those who would use their freedom of speech to advocate the repression of others. In Gilead, sin has become synonymous with crime. Religious fundamentalism has operated in society as a negative, reductive force, illustrated in the text by the motif of an appallingly literal interpretation of the biblical situation of Jacob and Rachel's maid Bilah. The childless Rachel suggested to Jacob that he should 'go in unto her [Bilah]; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her' [Genesis 30:1-3]. No-one seems to have consulted Bilah about this; nor are the modern Handmaids given any alternative. Biblical precedent also provides authority for Gilead's cruel denial of medical assistance at childbirth: 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children' [Genesis 3:16].

Liturgical structures also provide the model for wholly fictional religions. Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), for example, constructs a world in which a large portion of political power is held by a female religious order, the Bene Gesserit. The sisterhood specializes in mind control, allowing the text to explore the tension between the human need for faith and the desire for authority. Here, for example, is the Bene Gesserit Litany against Fear, a mantra used to strengthen the resolve of the order's adherents:

I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it

*has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.*⁴

One of the more interesting aspects of the relationship between theology and speculative fiction is the ways in which writers have used the fictional form to explore the relationship between science and theology. The eighteenth century gothic novel employed a largely decorative use of supernatural tropes to provide the delightful frisson of imagined terrors for its leisured audience. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), however, went far beyond this, drawing on classical conventions of tragedy within a Christian moral framework for a serious exploration of scientific hubris. Frankenstein's experiments usurp the divine prerogative of creation, producing their own monstrous retribution. Unlike the horror-focused films of our own century, Shelley's text uses the gothic form to explore what is in essence the continuing problem of inadequate development of a code of research ethics to govern the relationship between science and its moral contexts.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the enormous impact of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution lent impetus to large numbers of scientific romances devoted to exploring the rift between the scientific and the religious imaginations. The desire for a reconciliation between scientific knowledge and Christian theology still occupies a central position in popular imagination — indeed, the popular scientific writings of Stephen Hawking devote space to oblique speculation concerning proof of the existence of God. The continuing speculative power of this metaphysical problem is evidenced by the large body of fiction dealing with the work of heretic Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), whose attempt to demonstrate that evolution is part of the divine plan has formed the basis for many novels, including Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1950), Clifford Simak's *A Choice of Gods* (1972) and *Project Pope* (1981), George Zebrowski's *The Omega Point Trilogy* (1972,1977,1983), and Jack Dann's *Junction* (1973). Entire fictional universes constructed in response to Teilhard include one of the science fiction genre's most important works in recent years, Gene Wolfe's tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun* (1980-1983) and *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987), while Dan Simmons' recursive two volume *Hyperion Cantos* (1989, 1990) also uses Teilhard extensively.

The method of associating protagonists with divine discourse is, of course, derived from earlier mythological narrative patterning. In Classical heroic tales it is usual for heroes to claim descent from the gods: almost all of the celebrated antagonists in Homer's Trojan war — itself fought for the semi-divine Helen, daughter of Leto and Zeus, sister to Castor and Pollux — could claim at least one divine bloodline. Indeed, the semi-divine heroes often found themselves facing the gods themselves on the battlefield as, for example, when Achilles, son of the river nymph Thetis, finds himself opposing Ares, the god of War, fighting side by side with Trojan Hector. It is a very powerful narrative technique claiming, by association, divine authority and permission for the tale itself.

As the study of myths became popular in the twentieth century, students of such luminaries as Carl Jung, J.G. Frazer, Joseph Campbell, Jessie Weston, and Robert Graves began using mythographic detail to enhance the construction of secondary fictional worlds. Just as writers discussed earlier in this paper adapted Christian theology, so other writers have drawn heavily upon the structures of older mythologies.

The recent fantasies of Canadian Guy Gavriel Kay are a case in point, since his works show a clear progression from myth through faith to religion. In mythic *Fionavar* there is a universe of Homeric interaction between gods and mortals. In *Tigana* there is a less naive world where, although the gods are yet present, and may occasionally intercede for their worshippers, there is also overt manipulation of myth for purely secular purposes. In *A Song for Arbonne* the gods remain completely offstage in a world where religion has replaced faith, and the clergy of opposing organisations deal in the artificial manipulation of the laity through carefully designed theatre which reinforces political positions — we learn, for example, that the 'arrow of the goddess', "crimson dyed, fletched with crimson owl feathers" [Viking, Canada: 1992, p.512] which flew arching through the sky to kill the debauched king Ademar in the midst of battle, was in fact the product of a little pre-emptive religious engineering by Beatriz, High Priestess of Rian.

Kay's mythology is complex, a conflation of myths modified to make contextual sense. The world of *Tigana* has two moons [a silver and a blue] and one sun, complemented by a triadic religion of two goddesses and one god — Eanna, Morian and Adaon,

respectively ruling sky, underworld, and sea — Eanna of the stars, Morian of portals, goddess of the dead, and Adaon of the waves. The basic belief is that humankind was created from the initial incestuous union of divine mother/sister and brother.

The religious observances of the Triad are part of the very fabric of life in the world of *Tigana*, and are inextricably bound up with the politics of power. A major political and social change occurs when one Marius, having overcome his attackers in the Oak Grove for the seventh time in succession, despite his ritual maiming, has decided that: "*Seven is sacred ... By allowing him this latest triumph the Mother Goddess has made known her will. Marius has just declared himself King in Quiliea, no longer only the consort of the High Priestess*".⁵ This shifts the sexual balance of power associated with the province's religious affiliations: "I thought [comments one character] they had a matriarchy there." "So [replies his interlocutor] *did the late High Priestess*."⁶

Although the text of *A Song for Arbonne* maintains the structural fiction of *Tigana's* solar system, the triadic mythology has been relaxed by the more orthodox medieval dialectic opposition of female and male principles. Kay's alignment of the cult of the troubadours, exponents of ideal earthly love, with the worship of Rian as avatar of transcendent idealized love, places Arbonne's official religion in the position of the Cathars, whose Church of Love was founded on the feminine principle, the mother of Logos. In this way the depiction of Rian resembles the historical appropriation of the fertility aspect of Artemis with the role of Mother as intercessor for the dead, evident in some medieval worship of the Virgin Mary as she was adored in the rituals of courtly love.

Opposed to the music of "*goddess ruled Arbonne*" is Gorhaut, whose official religion is that of the masculine god Corannos — a conflation of the warrior cult of Mithras with dour Christian piety into a priesthood dedicated to the destruction of any form of female power. Historically, Gorhaut is aligned with the position of medieval Rome, whose distrust of the intellectual freedom and female power of the Courts of Love contributed to the accusations of Albigensian heresy.

However innovative, this form of narrative still derives *auctoritas* from its mythological and historical antecedents. Post-modernism, however, destabilises the authority of realist narrative. Where Kay's fictive world is structured around an

identifiable alternative religious system, David Zindell's recent novel *Neverness* (1989) draws on the authority of literary convention and mythic tropes to engage the reader in a playfully serious tussle for possession of the text. Its self-conscious and often arbitrary borrowings from myths and mythologies allow something like serendipity to shape our awareness of the myth-systems by which we have always lived. The text's self-conscious elusiveness of meaning becomes a metonym of much wider unknowability.

The central figure of Malory Ringess plays out the role of headstrong hero, his mythic and quasi-divine status established by a series of textual clues. His birth is an updated form of parthogenesis, in which his mother steals DNA from her sister's husband to fertilise her own egg. Unwitting incest with his sister produces a son [central figure of the second book of this cycle, *The Broken God*], ripped untimely from her womb when she is killed as a witch. It is his fate ultimately to merge with the Solid State Entity, the interstellar goddess, whose transubstantiation from human to divine status has followed an earlier, similar path.

Science, the extrapolation of which is one of the tropes of the genre, is, from the reader's perspective, a dominant presence in this novel. But the subversion of this dominance begins at the very start of the novel, with a quotation from *A Requiem for Homo Sapiens*, a fictive future study by the "Timekeeper and Lord Horologe of the Order of Mystic Mathematicians":

On Old Earth the ancients often wondered at the origin of life, and they created many myths to explain the mystery of mysteries.⁷

These myths include the mother-goddess Mumu, the father-god Yahweh, and a goddess of chance, named "Random Mutation".

In an oblique reference to Isaac Newton, human beings are seen as children "playing with pebbles and shells by the seashore". Twenty-five chapters later, in "The Great Ocean of Truth", the direct quote from Newton recalls this throwaway image. And at the end of the book, Malory stands, fisher-king from *The Wasteland*, on the beach of Neverness, playing with pebbles, contemplating the outward journey of the galaxy from "the still point of creation".⁸ It is as though all the questionings and explorations of science remain the tossing of pebbles, a child-like enquiry that cannot hope to encompass what it seeks to possess. Its

epistemologies take their place among the many mythologies, metaphors that seek to describe the indescribable.

"The natural state of the human psyche" says Carl Jung, "consists in a certain jostling together of its components and in the contradictoriness of their behaviour — that is, in a certain degree of disassociation. Buddhism calls it attachment to 'ten thousand things'".⁹ Resolution in *Neverness* — such as it is — comes through the text's unformalised but reiterated direction of the reader towards the zen state of reconciliation and acceptance. "Each moment", says Malory, "I believe, we die, but each moment too, we are reborn into infinite possibilities."¹⁰

Naive residual notions of personal access to ultimate knowledge cannot survive the overwhelming chaos of the global electronic information net. Speculative fiction, however, offers a literary forum in which some of Malory's infinite possibilities can be explored. In the face of secular uncertainty, its multiplying forms suggest metaphorical resolutions of the apparently competing demands of epistemology, mythology and religion.

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