

## Excellent Foppery

*This is the tidied-up text of a talk I gave at [Readercon](#) in 2009. There was some fine discussion at the end of the session – with, among others, Christopher Cevalasco, John Crowley, Greer Gilman, Victoria Janssen, and Rob Kilheffer – but I’ve not attempted to replicate that here. A sequel talk, given at Readercon in 2010, is [here](#).*

The overview of what I’m going to say is that I’d like to try and describe or isolate a particular habit of human thinking, and then talk about how it manifests itself in works of fiction, fantastic or not. I’d like to suggest that it’s a problem if it’s used too much – or, at least, too much without any kind of underlying self-awareness or irony. I want to stress that these assertions about human cognitive habits aren’t in any way what a scientist would consider evidence-based: but I hope the heuristic approach I’m about to take will be suggestive enough.

I want to start by reading out a couple of things. The first is an extract from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. It’s from early in the play, Act 1 Scene 2. In the first scene, Lear has announced his intention to renounce the crown and divide the kingdom in three between his three daughters. However, because one of them, Cordelia, doesn’t make the appropriate noises of fealty he leaves her third to be fought over, and the council ends in chaos. In the second scene, two of his nobles, Kent and Gloucester are discussing what’s just happened. Gloucester says, among other things: “These late eclipses in sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourged by sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason, and the bond crack’d ‘twixt son and father.” A few moments later his bastard son Edmund is left alone on the stage and delivers this famous argument against what his father has just said:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars; as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are

evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star.

The central charge that Edmund makes about his father's habit of thought, in other words, is that it is a denial of agency. Now we, in the twenty-first century, might argue at the margins of what he's saying – we might note, for instance, that there is some evidence suggesting that a predisposition to alcoholism may be something genetic, something one can't do anything about. But it seems to me that we, as Edmund suggests, are far more equipped with cognitive habits that deny agency than accept it.

Let me outline the underlying model suggested by Edmund's speech. What I'd suggest – and it's hardly a revolutionary model per se – is that there's a world out there of inchoate stuff – what Rudy Rucker has called seething dogbarf – of which perception by humans is always partial and mediated not only by the limitations of our senses but by the social and cultural models we come equipped with. The human response to that raw perception – and probably an adaptive response – is to organise the seething dogbarf into categories, to impose narratives on it. One such narrative is called causality; and the kinds of behaviour the Edmund excoriates are what might be called narratives of excess causality. Let me read something else, from Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*. The narrator Severian recounts a story he's read about one of his predecessors as Autarch, Ymar:

Disguising himself, he ventured into the countryside where he spied a muni meditating beneath a plane tree. The Autarch joined him and sat with his back to the trunk until Urth had begun to spurn the sun. Troops bearing an oriflamme galloped past, a merchant drove a mule staggering under gold, a beautiful woman rode the shoulder of eunuchs, and at last a dog trotted through the dust. Ymar rose and followed the dog, laughing.

Severian then glosses this as follows:

Supposing this anecdote to be true, how easy it is to explain: the Autarch had demonstrated that he chose the active life by an act of will, and not because of the seductions of the world.

But Thecla had many teachers, each of whom would explain the same fact in a different way. Here, then, a second teacher might say that the Autarch was proof against those things that attract common men, but was powerless to control his love of the hunt.

And a third, that the Autarch wished to show his contempt for the muni, who had remained silent when he might have poured forth enlightenment and received more. That he could not do by leaving when there was none to share the road, since solitude has great attractions for the wise. Nor could he when the soldiers passed, nor the merchant with his wealth, nor the beautiful woman, for unenlightened men desire all those things, and the muni would have thought him one more such man.

And a fourth, that the Autarch accompanied the dog because it went forth alone, the soldiers having other soldiers, the merchant his mule and the mule his merchant, and the woman her slaves; while the muni did not go forth.

Yet why did Ymar laugh? Who shall say? Did the merchant follow the soldiers to buy their booty? Did the woman follow the merchant to sell her kisses and her loins? Was the dog of the hunting kind, or such a short-limbed one as women keep to bark less someone fondle them while they sleep? Who now shall say? Ymar is dead, and such memories of his as lived for a time in the blood of his successors are long faded.

So mine in time shall fade too. Of this I feel sure: not one of the explanations for the behavior of Ymar, was correct. The truth, whatever it may have been, was simpler and more subtle. (ibid)

This seems to me a wonderfully clear exposition of what I've been describing: a world of of seething dogbarf out there, and the human effort to understand it by imposing meaning on it. (And, in parenthesis, I'm suggesting that any act of literary criticism that goes beyond paraphrase into interpretation is doing the same kind of imposition of narrative.) Now, to be sure, I'm glossing over a few epistemological quandries here, such as to what extent there "really is" an objective world out there, as opposed to one constructed in the act of

perceiving it and putting it into language; but since philosophers have been kicking that one around for a couple of millennia, I suspect we're unlikely to solve it between now and 7.40pm. All I'm asking at the moment is to agree the distinction between a world of, quote unquote, raw facts and the meanings we impose on them.

I said earlier that one of the kinds of meaning we impose on the seething dogbarf is called causality. One might say that the enterprise of science is the enterprise of trying to be as rigorous as possible about causality, to accept only those linkages between cause and effect that remain when all other explanations have been excluded. And one might say, further, that there's a whole category of thinking that results from the attempt to understand the world as having more causality than it really does: paranoid conspiracy theories, astrology, homeopathy, attempts to understand the Bible by anagramming the first letter of each verse in Aramaic, and so on. I don't want to go too far down that road – and I do want to allow that reasonable people might be able to disagree about whether, say, Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman who killed JFK. But I hope the general point is clear.

If one of the kinds of meaning we impose on the seething dogbarf is called causality, another is clearly called story. The word "story", I think, carries with it the notion of entailment, of one thing following another. It has to be admitted that the world out there – the seething dogbarf – is not naturally story-shaped, and that one of the things that any writer does is to render it into some kind of narrative form: a beginning, a middle, and an end, as they say. My point, however, is that different writers do this to differing degrees. Here's the critic James Wood talking about Chekhov:

What did Chekhov mean by 'life'? I wondered this while uncomfortably watching a Broadway production of *A Doll's House*. Mild, slippery Chekhov once told Stanislavsky with soft surprise, as if it were something too obvious to say: 'But listen, Ibsen is no playwright!...Ibsen just doesn't know life. In life it simply isn't like that.' No, in life it simply isn't like that, even when sitting in a theatre. It was summer. Outside, the Broadway traffic sounded like an army that is getting close but which never arrives. The fantastic heat was sensual, the air-conditioners dripping their sap, their backsides thrust out of the window like Alisoun who does the same in Chaucer. Everything was

the usual noisy obscurity. Yet inside, here was Ibsen ordering life into three trim acts, and a cooled audience obediently laughing and tutting at the right moments, and thinking about drinks at the interval – the one moment of Chekhovian life being that, in the lobby, the barman could be heard putting out glasses, tuning up his little cocktail orchestra. The clinking was disturbing Ibsen's simpler tune.

What Wood is saying, in the terms I've been using up to now, is that Ibsen is a writer who imposes more story on life than Chekhov, and that his, Wood's, aesthetic preference is for Chekhov because of this. More generally, one can say that for most people most of the time life does not have a plot, and the more a plot is imposed on underlying material, the more it veers away from what might be called "pure naturalism". "Pure naturalism" is of course a bit of a strawman in this discussion; in the terms I've been using, it's not something that can ever be attained in fiction, but we might say that someone like Chekhov is much farther along the path to it than most writers.

That leads to a further suggestion, which I'm going to take up most of the rest of the talk with. It seems to me pretty clear that to write in any kind of mode of the fantastic is to impose more causality on a story than to work in the mimetic. I talked earlier about choices; in the fantastic, the author is at liberty to choose to an extent the setting, the degree to which it shares what we currently know as natural laws, the geography, and so forth. All these choices are acts of shaping – shaping that, by definition, is not permitted to works of the mimetic. It might further be argued that this provides an aesthetic justification for a critic like Wood effacing or avoiding the possibility of worth in fantastic stories: if your criterion for "worth in a story" is "like-life-ness" – specifically, the extent to which it mirrors how people behave in our world – then axiomatically any deviation from depiction of that world is going to be less worthwhile. (In parenthesis, for anyone who heard John Clute's talk at Readercon last year about John Buchan's *Greenmantle*, this provides an account of the problem he was describing. John's point about *Greenmantle* was that, despite being an entirely mimetic work, it felt fantastic because the web of coincidences, swapped identities and so forth that held it together seemed more than could be understood as mimetic. In the terms I'm using, Buchan was imposing more story on his material than it could ordinarily be expected to hold. To take a very much simpler example, a work not normally thought of as fantastic but actually full to bursting with excess

causality is your typical Road Runner cartoon. Wile Coyote launches his cannon-ball off a thousand-foot cliff; it plummets precisely onto the see-saw it's aimed at, sending the Acme anvil vaulting into the air as the Road Runner whizzes past. Then, and this is the central point, the anvil comes down exactly on the coyote's head. Were you to try to implement this plan in the real world, any number of things would prevent this outcome; but we feel, in some primitive sense, that it's the right ending ("just desserts") for the anvil to end up falling on the coyote.)

Before I get onto the relevance of this to the fantastic, I want briefly to try to ask why we might feel stories "ought" to be shaped this way. I think it has something to do with childhood, and something to do with suffering. When we are young, we like to feel that we are the centre of the world; one of the things that we take as a mark of adulthood is the recognition that there are other people in the world whose interests and values are as important as our own. And, equally, if we're ill or suffering in other ways, it's an obvious human response to see that suffering as the centre of what matters about the world. The riposte to that is contained in W H Auden's great poem "Musee des beaux arts", about Breughel's painting showing Icarus plunging into the sea.



Breughel (and Auden interpreting Breughel) are here opposing the excess-causality view of the world with what might as well be called contingency: the randomness and noise of the world will always be present around any excessively shaped (excessively mythic) happening, just as James Wood's barman will always be clinking the glasses at the back of the Ibsen play.

OK. On now to the kinds of works Readercon is most concerned with. In the context of the model I've just described, the case for the fantastic goes more or less as follows: the nature of history in, say, the last 250 years has been so extreme in many ways that a mimetic response is not sufficient to tell the story of how we got where we are. There is, to put it very crudely, an ever-increasing amount of seething dogbarf. Therefore, in order to respond fully to the world a story needs to be more shaped than the "facts" will allow in order to respond fully to the things we want to hear stories about. That shouldn't be taken as a blanket aesthetic statement on my part, that the more "story-shaped" a work is, the better it is – or even that it necessarily responds more fully to the world. And it's certainly not a blanket aesthetic statement about the relative worth of the fantastic and the mimetic. But I think this idea about what motivates the use of the fantastic might serve as a useful pointer to considering some specific works.

If we're talking about imposing more meaning on the world (its "history", its "facts") than is known, then fantasies of history are an obvious place to start. Tim Powers's *Declare* (1999), for instance, takes the known facts of the spy Kim Philby's life and interpolates other events neither proven nor disproven by the historical record. He's doing so in order to make an argument about Philby and the nature of his betrayal that he could not do using just "the facts". The same is true of, say, any story in which a secret society persists through history, like Liz Hand's *Benandanti*. Whether or not such a society "really" existed, they're in the story to make concrete the persistence of a particular kind of idea – whatever's the root motivation for that society – and to make the idea embodied and addressable. Related to these kinds of fantasy of history are what might be called fantasies of personal history: I'm thinking here of works like Gene Wolfe's *Peace*, Peter Straub's *Lost Boy Lost Girl*, or Christopher Priest's *The Affirmation*, where first person narrators (often writers) impose their persona to shape events – often traumatic events – into narratives they can, as it were, live with.

Another kind of narrative of excess causality which tends to push a story towards the fantastic is paranoia. Here, of course, sf and fantasy give a plethora of examples to choose from: the solipsisms of van Vogt's protagonists in works like *Slan*, the genuine fear of Bester's Ben Reich in *The Demolished Man* that he will be will be found guilty of murder – and, indeed, the superb coup towards the end of that book when, for a while, it seems that

the world really is solely organised around Ben Reich. One index, I'd suggest, of increasing sophistication in the genre is the extent to which a paranoid character is perspectivised and shown as someone who might be wrong. By the time we get to, say, Philip K Dick, we're given a dual vision. The protagonists in a novel like *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* may be onto something genuine about the shape of the world, or they may simply be delusional, mentally ill. That duality, and the resulting tension, gets more pronounced as Dick's career wears on so that by the time you get to a late novel like *Valis*, either option (revelation or mental illness) seems both plausible and devastating. The same could be said of Tyrone Slothrop's odyssey across liberated Europe in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, a novel whose amplitude and detail both convey Slothrop's paranoia and, to put it crudely, the craziness of his paranoia.

The general point I'm edging towards here is that, having said that the fantastic tends to have more story imposed on it than the mimetic, there is a spectrum within the fantastic of more or less story imposed. At one end of the spectrum, all of the following devices are indicators of a great deal of story being imposed: the protagonist as a "chosen one"; any kinds of prophecy or foreshadowing; the protagonist having what seems a magically easy ride through events; more generally, "Mary Sue" stories. Indeed, one extreme end-point of what I'm describing is slash fiction: authorial imposition there taking the original material – Kirk and Spock's relationship in *Star Trek*, say – and either seeing in it or bringing to it a homoerotic charge almost to the exclusion of all else.

I have to confess that a lot of fantastic works that are of most interest to me are at the other end of the spectrum: those which, despite the authorial shaping of a world that's not our own, refuse the neatnesses of story and closure. It seems to me that if there's a single author who's built his career round this kind of work, of celebrating contingency, it's M John Harrison. This may also be one reason why for many sf fans, used to their stories making a certain kind of sense, a Harrison novel like *Light* can seem rebarbative, grumpily satirising the tropes of space opera for no good reason. Other works and authors spring to mind, though: Delany's *Dhalgren* is one obvious example, not just for its formal innovations. And one then remembers Delany's line in one of the letters collected in his book *1984* (a letter of 14/10/84 to Greg Tate) that he is "no longer interested in the closing cadence

that ends so much narrative fiction...the fall from 'dominant' to tonic" (268). That seems to me an enormously suggestive line. The act of a symphony or other musical structure including that final cadence could be seen, from the viewpoint of 2009, as a kind of contractual obligation of the rules of tonal music that began to fall apart at the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century; it is, in other words, an imposition of causality or story on musical language. There's a side-road here I don't really have time to go down, around the idea that what I'm describing in this talk has its analogues not just in music but in the visual arts, and that the fantastic's embodiment of greater degrees of causality than the mimetic has driven both its tendency to what we might call "naive" narrative and also its position, as David Hartwell has argued, as the anti-modernist literature of the twentieth century.

I want to conclude, though, by voicing two meta-ideas around this theory. First: It's one job of critics to come up with formulations, ways of seeing bodies of work, that somehow manage to be encompassing; and it's one job of writers – although they may not articulate it this way – to come up with works that game or otherwise escape whatever formulations may attempt to encompass them. (And, even more galling for critics, to do so before the critics come up with those formulations.) Last year at Readercon, for instance, I found myself articulating an early version of this model in a panel on John Crowley's Aegypt sequence. Those novels present us (I said) with not one way of imposing sense on history but many, all contradictory and all getting history wrong, misprising it: astrology, climacterics, turning history into story, and so on. Each of those offers – to return to the musical language for a moment – a different kind of tonality, none of which in the end is sufficient. As I've said a couple of times before, the terror that book three of that sequence, *Daemonomania*, evokes in me is the terror that no means of storying the world will work, that storying will always get the world wrong and so fall apart; and the release of the fourth book, *Endless Things*, is that like, say, the return to hymn-like simplicity in the slow movements of late Beethoven it also finds sufficient certain kinds of earned simplicity. So Aegypt got there before me, as did a number of other works, particularly ones that are self-conscious about the act of storying: if I had time I'd talk more about, say, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Book of the New Sun*, *The Tempest*, or *The Arabian Nightmare*.

The second and final meta-question I want to ask is why: why do we have this urge to impose meanings like story or causality on the seething dogbarf. I gave partial guesses at this earlier: that it's a kind of adaptive response, that in certain ways we need to do so to survive. But there's another side too, which I think is terror at the alternative. I want to finish by quoting a successor to Edmund in Lear, Rorschach in Alan Moore's Watchmen. He's talking, as did Edmund, about the idea that, in one way or another, humans abjure responsibility for what's around them. He says:

The cold suffocating dark goes on forever and we are alone.... There is nothing else. Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us.

Story and causality, then, are consolations. They're illusions, maybe, but they're illusions we need. And for that reason, if you share the logic I've set out, so is the fantastic.