Orson Scott Card: An Approach to Mythopoeic Fiction

Michael R. Collings

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Abstract

Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 26. Discusses Card's fiction in the context of his own essay, "Fantasy and the Believing Reader" (reprinted in full as an appendix).

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ORSON SCOTT CARD
An Approach to Mythopoeic Fiction
Guest of Honor Speech: Mythopoeic Conference XXVI
Michael R. Collings

Occasionally my own not-yet-forgotten undergraduate training in semantics surfaces to remind me of the importance of definition, particularly of words we all assume we understand. A word such as "Mythopoeic" is open to a variety of definitions (to say nothing of the even more elusive word *fantasy*, a word that may be, as the bibliographer E. F. Bleiler writes, "almost all things to all men" (Manlove 1). Even narrowing the field to "mythopoeic fantasy" invites an enormous range of possibilities, including the consensus definition for this conference:

> the fiction of the Inklings (J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams); the winners and finalists of the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, which is given for works in the spirit of the Inklings; and other books that are to a significant degree like them. (Bratman)

While this may be relatively vague, it is as useful or more useful than the standard dictionary definition of *mythopoeic* as "productive of myths; myth-making." This bare-bones definition is largely *un*-helpful, as a matter of fact, because many such fantasists do not claim to be actively *making* myth; rather, they systematically incorporate pre-existing mythic patterns into their works. It would be difficult, for example to appreciate the intricate texturings of a *Perelandra* without understanding how cultural myth can be interwoven with story; even in a novel as "earthbound" as *That Hideous Strength*, myths — both ancient and modern, magical and scientific — blend to augment the power of Lewis's storytelling.

More recently, Orson Scott Card is among those contemporary writers who have explored the possibilities of mythopoeic fiction from the perspectives of Tolkien and Lewis. In "Fantasy and the Believing Reader," Card argues that the essence of the fantastic is "belief," in that the fantastic is effective to the degree that readers become "participatory" and embrace for the moment the universe of the story—including the myths it asserts—and allow the story to change them. There are, he argues, three ways of "believing" a story: epic, mythic, and critical, re-spelling each to differentiate it from its conventional homonym:

♦ **Epick** is "all story that is received by a group as its own story—as true of *that group*. It is all story that tells who *we* are as opposed to who *they* are."

♦ **Mythick** is "all story that is received by readers as true of all human beings, and therefore lets each reader define himself as like or unlike the characters in the book. It is believed on a personal, not group level."

♦ **Critick** is "all story that is received by readers as being detached from them. It defines the reader neither as a human being nor as a member of a group. Rather, critical readers evaluate the meaning or truth of the story consciously, usually detaching the meaning from the story itself."

Epick and *Mythick* do not require conscious decisions to believe; the reader simply accepts or rejects the fundamental assumptions of the story; "The self is named by the story, and so to doubt the story is to rename the self."

This differentiation is central to Card's writing, because the approach the reader takes *does* ultimately effect the way the reader perceives the text:

> Because critical readers read, not believing, but instead identifying and detaching meanings from the story, they are incapable of properly receiving a story that was written mythickly or epickly: They cannot receive a story that was written from belief. Likewise, mythick and epick readers, because they believe as they do, do not usually discern and detach meanings. The two methods are not compatible.

In addition, many stories do not respond well to critickal readings; the story breaks down to mere convention, particularly in fantasy:

> Critics examine it and find strong-thewed heroes saving damsels in distress, magic rings and prophecies, dark forces opposing the bright light of goodness, and the critics say, "cardboard characters. Endless repetition of meaningless conventions. Hack writing. Childish oversimplification of good and evil. Obviously written for the adolescent mind. Wish-fulfillment. Bourgeois and fascist and sexist and racist. Pure trash." And ah! the most damning epithet of all: "Escapist."

But fantasy often exerts power over us precisely because it *cannot* be reduced to distanced, critical statements of meanings: symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical, or otherwise. Even the "damning epithet" is itself incorporated into the way Card looks at such literature. Negative "escapism" occurs, not in reading mythopoeic fictions, but rather in creating the distanced, dispassionate, analytical and critical readings that sever story from reader:

> The detached reader is escaping, not from that set of fictions called reality, but from that most dangerous and fearful of all things, the true story. The closest thing to true communication between two human beings is story-tell-

ing, for despite his best efforts at concealment, a writer will inevitably reveal in his story the world he believes he lives in, and the participatory reader will forever after carry around in himself and as himself a memory that was partly controlled by that other human being. Such memories are not neatly sorted into fiction and real life in our minds. I know, of course, that *I* never stood at the Cracks of Doom and watched Gollum die. But that faith in the distinction between my own actions and the actions of fictional characters is merely another story I tell myself. In fact, my memory of that event is much clearer and more powerful than my memory of my fifth birthday.

Thus Card, like Lewis and Tolkien, ultimately depends on Myth (with the capital "M," to suggest those patterns of believing that order our perceptions of the universe), not so much to assert a meaning or moral as to *communicate* stories that become memories that in turn touch upon what he sees as the true underpinnings of those stories.

Of course, this statement requires that I now attempt the impossible — at least given Card's assertions about the nature of reading and understanding: I must attempt to give a *Critical* reading of a writer who approaches Story as *Epick* and *Mythick*.

Paradoxically, this attempt is made easier by the fact that, while the word *mythopoeic* might still remain vague, abstract, even ambiguous, two of Card's three ways of believing are fundamentally mythopoeic. Both "Mythick" and "Epick" require a commitment from the participatory reader to coherent patterns of belief that not only inform the story but that also define readers as belonging to *specific* groups and sharing *specific* identities. Two interconnecting "epicks" help define Card and his works: the "Epick of Mormonism" and the "Epick of America"; but encompassing both is the most fundamental and far-reaching of all, the "Myth of the Sacrifice."

Card has commented that he see himself as an outsider. Critics such as John Clute and Joe Christopher have noted the sense of "self-containment" (Christopher 2) in Lewis's works, the fact that, as an Ulster Protestant born in Catholic Belfast, Lewis belonged to a "surrounded but proselytizing faith" (Clute 244). There is a similar sense of religious isolation in Card. In "On Sycamore Hill," Card talks about how he came to write two short stories in *The Folk of the Fringe*. One evening, as the rest of a workshop group left for dinner, Card remained behind. He thought at first that he wanted to work on his stories, but the real reason had little to do with an unfinished story; it was in fact his awareness that as a Mormon, he was not truly part of the group:

Éthis wasn't my community. These guys were Americans, not Mormons; those of us who grew up in Mormon society and remain intensely involved are only nominally members of the American community. We can fake it, but we're always speaking a foreign language.(9)

In a very real sense, then, portions of Card's fictions are "epick"—Story that "is received by a group as its own story — as true *of that group.* " While Card is certainly interested in writing to as large an audience as possible, there is a core of meaning in his work that defines the primary group to which he perceives himself as belonging—these stories tell his "Epicks of Mormonism."

Readers are often aware of generally religious implications in Card's fictions. Gareth Rees points out in an online review of *The Worthing Chronicle* that the novel clearly defines Card's "moral imperative" that pain and grief are necessary for growth:

Even if, like me, you find this attitude disturbing and reeking of hypocrisy, we must take it seriously as it is a respectable belief within the Christian community. Indeed, it is perhaps a necessary belief for people otherwise unable to reconcile their belief in a loving and omnipotent God with the state of the world. Viewed in this way, *The Worthing Chronicle* is an attempt to justify God to His creation, a task that would tax a Milton, and it is not surprising that Card fails.

Rees does not accept the story Card is telling and thus, for him as a reader, books such as *The Worthing Chronicle* fail; yet Rees nevertheless recognizes that Card, like Milton (and not coincidentally, Lewis), constructs stories on religious bases that simultaneously lend them power *and* make them liable to attack from non-believers.

Initially, religious elements appeared sporadically in Card's SF/F stories, while *Capitol, A Planet Called Treason,* and *The Worthing Chronicle* suggested generalized Mormon references to some readers. By the early 1980s, however, Card's use of the "Epick of Mormonism" became more overt. Between July, 1982 and March, 1983, he combined Mormon themes with the form of Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. Published in an underground newspaper to a limited audience, *Notes of a Guardian Angel* (chapters 1-6), narrated the trials and growth of a young Mormon boy, and used Lewis's story both as a model and as a literary warrant to incorporate — to borrow Lewis's phrasing — "angels" instead of "space ships" into his fiction.

But with *Seventh Son* (1987), the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award winner in 1988, Card openly invited a much wider readership to share elements of his own religious heritage. This first volume of the saga of Alvin Miller in an alternate-universe America where magic, science, and religion all work, re-creates as fiction the "Epick" of portions of the Mormon past. Card so seamlessly incorporates episodes based on the early life of Joseph Smith, the first president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that historical motifs become as integral to his story as if he had imagined them.

Perhaps the best example of this occurs late in *Seventh Son.* Young Alvin fractures his leg while trying to save a millstone from breaking (not coincidentally, this stone is literally "carved out of a mountain with no hands" and helps establish Alvin as a "Maker"). Alvin heals his leg but cannot heal a spot of darkness in the bone itself, the signa-

ture of the Unmaker — a figure closely allied to Lewis's Un-man in *Perelandra*. Alvin realizes that the diseased spot must be surgically excised. As his older brother Measure prepares to operate, Alvin refuses wine to dull the pain. "I can stand the pain and hold right still, iffen you whistle," he assures his brother, who successfully removes the bit of bone that otherwise would spread and kill the young Maker.

The original of this episode is one of the best known stories in the Mormon community about the early life of Joseph Smith, ideally suited to Card's purposes in *Seventh Son*—to illustrate Alvin's courage, moral intensity, and spiritual power. Significant details are altered, but the power of the pattern remains, allowing Card to speak to Mormons and non-Mormons alike in a story informed with specific spiritual and moral values and at the same time equally engaging as an alternate-universe fantasy.

The five-part, 1700-page Homecoming series further develops the "Epick of Mormonism." On the planet Harmony, a computer-entity, the Oversoul, manipulates the family of Nafai to leave the city of Basilica and wander for years in the wilderness until they finally arrive at the place where the original colonists arrived 40,000,000 years before and where their ships have remained in stasis, awaiting this moment. Activating the ships, Nafai's group returns to Earth to re-establish humanity on their home planet. Throughout, Card displays his hallmark creativity, peopling both Harmony and Earth with fully developed cultures, both human and alien; generating internal and external discords to complicate Nafai's mission; even exploiting the complexities of time and space as he had done in *Capitol*, *A Planet Called Treason*, *Speaker for the Dead*, and *Xenocide*.

But underlying what seems a relatively conventional SF plot is something extraordinary. Early in *The Memory of Earth* (Homecoming, Volume 1), Nafai and his brother glance back down the road from the city gates: "If Nafai and Issib had delayed even ten minutes more they would have had to make this trip in the noise and stink of horses, donkeys, mules, and kurelomiĕ" (16). *Kurelomi* is an unusual word, but most SF/Fantasy readers would willingly accept such a nonce word used, apparently, to assert an alien environment. Mormon readers, however, would note that the word echoes a Book of Mormon passage describing an "exceedingly rich" society, where individuals owned horses, asses, and elephants, and "cureloms and cumoms" (Ether 9: 19).

Some dozen pages later, when Nafai's father describes a vision sent by the Oversoul concerning the imminent destruction of Basilica and ultimately of the entire planet, there is a moment of recognition potentially as startling as the lamb and the lion passage at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. What Wetchik describes is Lehi's vision of the destruction of Jerusalem, taken from the Book of Mormon. Wetchik and his four sons become analogues to Lehi and his four sons. The Palwashantu Index that Nafai must kill to obtain parallels the Brass Plates of Laban. And

from that moment it becomes clear that the plot movement throughout the Homecoming Series is based explicitly on narratives from the *Book of Mormon*.

If incorporating Mormonism were all that Card had attempted in the Homecoming novels or the Alvin Maker series, he would, I think, remain an excellent writer working on a narrow, parochial level. His just presenting Mormon history and theology in fictionalized form would have disturbed many readers, Mormon and non-Mormon alike. One reviewer, in fact, warns that the Alvin Maker series "is lifted, pretty blatantly, from the history of the Mormon Church.Alvin Maker is simply Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church, and the events in the story — from his anomalous birth, to the Red Prophet, and onwards — are all in the original story of Smith's life." Then, speaking as if all of this were a deeply protected secret, the reviewer concludes, "I'd love to see how Card wraps this all up without people beginning to notice." ("Orson Scott Card: Books")

Such comments miss Card's point entirely. Alvin Miller is not *just* Joseph Smith; nothing in Joseph Smith's life records suggest that he spent a year wandering the wilderness with Tecumseh or that he was present at a cataclysmic battle at Detroit. Nor is there anything in the Book of Mormon to foreshadow the pivotal role of women in the Homecoming series, or the central point that once humans nearly destroy themselves on Earth, this planet will be inherited by evolved rats and bats. To suggest that *all* Card is doing is re-creating Mormon theology is to argue that *all* Lewis does in *Perelandra* is to crib from Genesis, or that *Till We Have Faces* is *only* the Cupid and Psyche myth retold. Such assertions as much ignore the power of Lewis's fiction as they miss the power of Card's.

But Card only *begins* here. Then he moves on to wider implications — to more expansive "epicks" that incorporate wider and wider audiences and tap into the power of more pervasive cultural Myth.

The process is best illustrated in the Alvin Maker stories. *Seventh Son* incorporates much that is narrowly Mormon, but Card also suggests broader interests. Taleswapper mentions Ben Franklin's reputation as a wizard, possibly even a Maker; but Franklin himself claims that "The only thing I ever truly made was Americans." By "Americans" Franklin means more than just people born in a certain geographic location; by re-writing American history, Card illuminates the inner vision of what accepting that name means, justifying Taleswapper's rhetorical question: "Now tell me, Alvin Junior, was old Ben wrong to say that the greatest thing he ever made was a single word?" (*Seventh Son* 139)

The second volume, *Red Prophet*, departs almost entirely from the "Mormon Epick" of *Seventh Son* to concentrate on the "Epick of America" — here, the conflict between "Reds" and "Whites." Again, Card's treatment is consciously mythic. His "Reds" have a direct relationship

with the Land that no White can ever know, except Alvin. This relationship intensifies the mythic relationship suggested in tales about "noble savages" living harmoniously with Nature. Card's "Reds" feel the greensong, and through its power, can call animals for food, run for days without wearying, and enhance their true stewardship over the land. Card is no doubt aware that this version of the story is in part historically untrue; yet he is equally aware of the power of the myth and capitalizes on it, just as Lewis knew even as he was writing *Out of the Silent Planet* that there were actually no "canals" as such on Mars. (*Of Other Worlds* 50). Card's "Reds" may not reflect historical reality in every detail, but they do reflect one popular version of the myth of America's beginnings.

Late in *Red Prophet*, the prophet, Tenskwa-Tawa, speaks to Alvin's brother, Measure:

> The bigger a man is, the more people he serves.É A small man serves himself. Bigger is to serve your family. Bigger is to serve your tribe. Then your people. Biggest of all, to serve all men, and all lands. (185)

In the Alvin Maker series, Card begins by serving his own tribe, restructuring the story of Joseph Smith in a magical universe. As the series has progressed, however, that focus enlarges until in *Red Prophet*, Card emphasizes the larger context of the American nation, with its promises of freedom and liberty; and the third volume, *Prentice Alvin*, deals explicitly with another "Epick of America," the struggle against slavery. While Mormon elements occur, this volume is more directly about what America can and should be; it is about freedom and justice on all levels, from the personal to the public. The Alvin Maker series builds on the "Epick of America" to suggest not only lost opportunities in the past but potentials for the present; it is designed to elicit those remaining elements of greatness in the American Myth of dream and belief.

The "Epick of America" and the "Epick of Mormonism" similarly combine in *The Folk of the Fringe*, originally called "Tales of the Mormon Sea." Card's concern for America-as-Myth permeates the apocalyptic dream-visions of "America" and the carefully crafted theatricality of *Glory of America*, performed in "Pageant Wagon," as he forges these two mythic strands into one Story:

> it seemed a little strange that a show called *Glory of America* should have an equal mix of Mormon and American history. But to these people É it was all the same story. George Washington, Betsy Ross, Joseph Smith, Abraham Lincoln, Brigham Young, all part of the same unfolding tale. Their own past. (210-211)

The pageant defines the Myths that holds one community together. Card is not proselytizing for either, neither the truthfulness of Mormonism nor the sanctity of the America Dream. Instead, he creates a story about community that combines these Myths into a single entity. As the *Glory of America* ends,

> Éthe shouting faded, the clapping became more scat-

tered. The faint audience lights came on. A few voices, talking, began among the crowd. The applause was over. The unity was broken. The audience was once again the thousand citizens of HatchvilleÉ.

> Suddenly Deaver realized something.ÉFor a while tonight they saw and heard and felt the same things. And now they'd carry away the same memories, which meant that to some degree they were the same person. One. (214-215)

This is the power of Myth—the power to weld participants into a single community of structured memory and vicarious experience. In some cases, Card writes specifically for Mormon readers who will understand the full power of Card's images; in others, he writes specifically for Americans, who will recognize the power of the Myth of America, regardless of how far it might diverge from present reality; and, in stories such as "America," *Red Prophet*, and the Homecoming series, Card even warns readers of dangers to the integrity of those Myths. In *Red Prophet*, Tenskwa-Tawa sees an America divided, with Reds in the west and Whites in the East. In all other visions,

> the Red men dwindled, confined to tiny preserves of desolate land, until the whole land was White, and therefore brutalized into submission, stripped and cut and ravished, giving vast amounts of food that was only in imitation of the true harvest, poisoned into life by alchemical trickery. Even the White man suffered in those visions of the future, but it would be many generations before he realized what he had done. Yet here — Prophetstown — there was a day — tomorrow — when the future could be turned onto an unlikely path, but a better one. One that would lead to a living land after all, even if it was truncated; one that would lead someday to a crystal city catching sunlight and turning it into visions of truth for all who lived within it. (234)

In the vision of Tenskwa-Tawa, there is hope; in the America of the 1990s, we already live in the hopeless, desolate, dying land the Red Prophet struggled to avoid.

Card's exploration of mythic power extends beyond these "Epicks" of Mormonism and of America, however. Even earlier than his overt embracing of Mormonism and America as themes, he had asserted more encompassing mythic patterns. As the Red Prophet said, the greatest service is to "serve all men, and all lands." Among Card's earliest stories are a number that attempt to tell stories that touch on some of the most important Stories. In "Ender's Game" (1977), "Kingsmeat" (1978), "Hart's Hope (1980), and "The Porcelain Salamander" (1981), and others, Card investigates the "Myth of the Sacrifice," the mediator, the advocate, the Christ-figure. These stories are sometimes harsh and brutal, since he is concerned not simply with easy answers but with difficult realities, particularly when the sacrificial figure is only partially, or perhaps not at all understood by the ones who need salvation.

The epitome of the sacrificial Christic figure in Card's fiction is Ender Wiggin, whose very existence meets the needs of the larger community, and whose career as mili-

tary genius, as itinerant interplanetary mediator and advocate, as apostle to aliens, and as human link with the generative powers of God (emphasized in the title of the fourth volume, *Children of the Mind*) is based on serving larger and larger communities. As such, these stories anatomize the role of mediators — most often Ender Wiggin but occasionally others as well — in an attempt at understanding the psychological and spiritual dimensions of sacrifice within the context of Christic imagery and meaning. These novels occasionally discuss God overtly but they are essentially *about* atonement, sacrifice, mediation, and their effects on community.

Episode after episode in *Ender's Game* resonates with Christic, Biblical meaning, as when Ender as savior of humanity is aided by the chosen twelve closest to him and most capable of carrying out his mission (217); when, following the destruction of the buggers' home planet, Ender descends into the darkness of quasi-death for five days, during which he sees, understands, and accepts the consequences of his actions (330-332); and finally when, with the defeat of humanity's perceived enemies, he becomes "The child-god, the miracle worker, with life and death in his hands" (338). By the end of the novel, Ender has come as close as is humanly possible to being a Christ-figure, sacrificing all to save all, accepting the responsibility of a billion, billion deaths (311).

In *Speaker for the Dead*, Ender is now quasi-immortal; through time-space dilation, he has aged only a few years while 3,000 years have passed for the rest of humanity. Again, Ender is explicitly linked with messianic, mediational functions. To his sister's children, he is "their long-lost Uncle Ender, who was thought in every world to be a monster, but in reality was something of a savior, or a prophet, or at least a martyr" (88). He is the apostle to the piggies, who recognize his Christic function. Most significantly, he must witness the compact between humans and piggies by reversing his role from *Ender's Game*. Instead of being the sacrificer, he must sacrifice the alien named Human. To Ender's bitter comment that he is "cold and ruthless" enough to solidify the covenant in the only way the piggies will accept, Novinha responds that he is also "Compassionate enoughÉto put the hot iron into the wound when that's the only way to heal it." And, as Ender understands, "As one who had felt his burning iron cauterize her deepest wounds, she had the right to speak; and he believed her, and it eased his heart for the bloody work ahead" (374). He performs a passage into Life-after-Death that Human and others describe in terms of miracles and covenants, sacrament and resurrection, brotherhood and ascent into the light (380-381, 384). In the words of Bishop Peregrino, the Speaker's interference with the established structure of things on Lusitania has turned into revelation:

> It was the miracle of the wafer, turned into the flesh of God in his hands. How suddenly we find the flesh of God within us after all, when we thought that we were only made of dust. (385)

Even before *Xenocide* was published, Card acknow-

ledged that the sequel to *Speaker for the Dead* would be difficult to write:

> it will be even more different from the first two than *Speaker* was from *Ender*. It's cosmic Sci-Fi — discovering what everything is made of, what underlies the laws of the universe, that sort of thing. (Shirk 12)

"Cosmic Sci-Fi" — he same kind of Story that Lewis weaves in the Ransom novels, as we gradually understand the connections among all things within the Fields of Arbol, through Maleldil as creator. Card's discussions of philotes and philotic webs seem intended less as scientific, extrapolative suggestions about the actual functioning of universe and meta-universe than as metaphorical ways of defining the underlying Myth of creation and generation that shape his stories, especially the Story of Ender Wiggin, "sometimes monster, always something of a savior, or a prophet, or at least a martyr."

To varying degrees, Card's readership has responded to the power of Myth as it percolates through the Stories that embodies it. Yet the same acknowledgement of mythic power also makes these novels vulnerable to attack. As happens occasionally in Lewis studies, critics who do not accept Card's Myths as true may have difficulty accepting the Stories Card uses to define them, as when the Ender novels are rejected as neo-Hitlerian, male-oriented power-fantasies perpetrated by a misogynistic, myopic, militaristic anti-feminist (Radford); or when *A Woman of Destiny* is written off as a predictably formulaic romance (Quaglia). But for readers open to the Myths these writers explore, the Stories become things of enormous potential. And, in their own way, the Myths become means by which more difficult books can be approached and understood.

Much like Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, Card's most recent single-volume novel has elicited strong criticism for doing what it should not and for not doing what it apparently should. Yet, when one looks at it closely, *Lost Boys* (1992) is a logical conclusion thus far to Card's interlocking approach to three essential Mythic patterns.

Lost Boys seems on the surface a far cry from mythopoeic fantasy. In fact, most of it seems barely fantastic at all; only in the final pages does Card leave the world as we know it and enter another world, where Myth becomes Reality; but even there, he makes it clear that terms such as *fantasy* and *reality* are only relative in this novel. As Step Fletcher says about his son's apparent problems facing reality, "It's the real world that he's living in, only just as we thought, he sees it more deeply and truly than the rest of us" (376). In addition, long portions of the novel discuss the mundane concerns of making a living, of defining relationships, both family and social, of home and school and job. One reader writes that the novel is simply about a "struggling computer programmer with a strong religiousÉbackground and a son who is having weird experiences with video games. I really was caught up in the trials and tribulations of the programmer's life, but the subplot

of the boy is always kinda [sic] creepy in the background" ("Bob's Books"). Another reviewer, summarizes the novel as being about "a family who lose a difficult child to a murderer, but when he comes back as a ghost they are able to give him the perfect Christmas he never had when he was alive" (Rees).

Both responses are fundamentally inaccurate. Stevie's story is *not* a quirky sub-plot; it is the rationale for the entire novel, with Step Fletcher's difficulties at work defining one of several reasons why Step is unable to rescue his son until too late. The novel discusses Mormons and Mormonism, but not in the sense that its purpose is to convince readers that Mormonism is true; instead, religion illuminates Stevie's decisions, particularly his need to stop a vicious, spreading evil. And the Fletchers do not merely give Stevie "the perfect Christmas he never had when he was alive" (which is simply false to the novel); but rather their child finds the strength to bring one final, nearly "perfect" Christmas to the families of a killer's innocent victims. By rejecting Card's underlying Myths, these readers miss the power of the novel. It becomes merely, as one reader said recently, a very sad book.

The case is complicated by the fact the short story "Lost Boys" is a radically different story than the novel. This becomes immediately apparent in the tone of the original opening paragraphs:

Kristine and the kids and I moved to Greensboro on the first of March, 1983. I was happy enough about my job—I just wasn't sure I wanted a job at all. But the recession had the publishers all panicky, and nobody was coming up with advances large enough to take a decent amount of time writing a novel. I suppose I could whip out 75,000 words of junk fiction every month and publish them under half a dozen pseudonyms or something, but it seemed to Kristine and me that we'd do better in the long run if I got a job to ride out the recession. Besides, my Ph.D. was down the toilet. I'd been doing good work at Notre Dame, but when I had to take out a few weeks in the middle of a semester to finish *Hart's Hope*, the English department was about as understanding as you'd expect from people who prefer their authors dead or domesticated. Can't feed your family? So sorry. You're a writer? Ah, but not that anyone's written a scholarly essay about. So long, boy-oh! ("Lost Boys" 73-74)

This does not sound like the opening to a fiction; this is Orson Scott Card talking about his own life, his own family, his own frustrations. The story continues in this way for several more paragraphs, providing insights into Card's biography. Only with the introduction of an oldest child, "Scotty," does the story assert itself as fiction; Scotty is the vehicle by which Card tells a Story that is, in essence, his own "Epick," his own Myth.

When he took the story to the Sycamore Hill Writers Workshop, it was sharply criticized. Card quotes Karen Fowler as saying, "By telling this story in first person with so much detail from your own life, you've appropriated something that doesn't belong to you. You've pretended to feel the grief of a parent who has lost a child, and you don't have a right to feel that grief" ("Lost Boys" 89). Card's response is that "Lost Boys" contains a private Myth. Responding to Fowler's comments, Card discovered that

This story wasn't about a fictional eldest child named "Scotty." It was about my real-life youngest child, Charlie Ben.

Charlie, who in the five and a half years of his life has never been able to speak a word to us. Charlie, who could not smile at us until he was a year old, who could not hug us until he was four, who still spends his days and nights in stillness, staying wherever we put him, able to wriggle but not to run, able to call out but not to speak, able to understand that he cannot do what his brother and sister do, but not to ask us why. In short, a child who is not dead and yet can barely taste life despite all our love and all our yearning.

Yet in all the years of Charlie's life, until that day at Sycamore Hill, I had never shed a single tear for him, never allowed myself to grieve. I had worn a mask of calm and acceptance so convincing that I had believed it myself.É A story that I had fancied was a mere lark, a dalliance in the quaint old ghost-story tradition, was the most personal, painful story of my career — and, unconsciously, I had confessed as much by making it by far the most autobiographical of my works. ("Lost Boys" 90)

The story added a new dimension to Card's use of Myth by allowing him to include himself directly in confronting a truth that defines his life as a father.

When Card expanded the story into a novel, that private myth retreated. Step and DeAnne Fletcher replaced Scott and Kristine; Stevie, Robbie, and Betsy replaced "Scotty," Geoffrey, and Emily; the new child was Jeremy Zapata Fletcher instead of Charlie Ben. But *Lost Boys* retained touches of Card's private Story. The Cards moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, while the Fletchers moved to Steuben, North Carolina; but significantly the Fletchers set out from Vigor, Illinois—echoing Vigor Church near the Hatrack River area that Card used as a landscape for the Alvin Maker novels. Even as Card removes Orson Scott Card as character from the story, he replaced him with allusions to Orson Scott Card, author of other books that begin the process of exploration and discovery continued in *Lost Boys*.

Beyond this personal level, *Lost Boys* also illustrates Card's three consistent themes. The "Epick of Mormonism" is specifically represented. Throughout, Card provides his insights into the practical, everyday workings of a religion that, for him, is the focus of his life and his family's lives. He is so persistent in providing these details that it is easy to see why readers might feel that he is proselytizing; but the Mormon references are so functional, so integrated to the narrative that re-reading the short-story version, where religion is rarely mentioned, reveals a thin-

ness that mere word count cannot explain. For Step and DeAnne Fletcher, religion is real. Blessings work. Prophecy is possible. Prayers can be answered, although not always in the ways one might either wish or expect.

Thus, they of all people should be prepared when Scotty's life is touched by transcendence. Yet initially they fail their own beliefs. In *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis's Mother Dimble can kneel in evening prayer, before a near stranger, without any embarrassment; Card's Step finds it more difficult to do so. And in spite of their frequent contact with the spiritual, both Step and DeAnne persist on defining Stevie's "problem" in secular terms, including sending him to a psychiatrist, only to find that Dr. Weeks wants to *cure* Stevie of his religion, since she sees it as fostering an unhealthy mental state; yet she encourages her own son to associate with the Mormons, since among them his obsession with obtaining invisible powers and becoming a god will pass (she hopes) relatively unnoticed.

Still, the Mormonism remains secondary to other concerns. The novel is set in contemporary America. If in *Red Prophet* Tenskwa-Tawa has a horrific vision of a land poisoned and dying, devastated by the Whites, Step Fletcher *lives* in that vision. He brings his pregnant wife to a town enveloped by fumes from nearby tobacco factories; DeAnne constantly battles nausea because of the stench. His home is invaded several times by hordes of insects—june bugs, spiders, roaches; each time, the insects are seeking to escape a violation of the land as the killer buries yet another young victim in the dirt beneath the Fletcher's home. Even the steps taken to rid the house of the insects are themselves poisonous, the residue of the insecticide forcing the Fletchers out of their house and ironically inviting the killer inside.

And, most tragic of all, their world is a world of deception, greed, anger, and evil. A fellow Mormon, who should have provided strength and support for the new family in the area, perverts religion to her own end, frightening young Stevie with self-serving "prophecies" and false "blessings." The teacher who should have helped Stevie develop ties with his new community ridicules him to bolster her own self-importance. A young man who offers to babysit the Fletchers' children turns out to be a sex offender so near being a mere "creature" that Step hesitates even to speak his children's names when the man can hear. And, of course, at the center of the plot is the serial killer, the murderer of young boys, whose actions impel Stevie's need to redeem the killer's victims.

This is the America of reality, a place where Myth dissipates, a place already well on the way to the devastation and defeat that opens *The Folk of the Fringe*. Yet even here there are remnants of hope: new-found friends provide comfort and community; and by believing the unbelievable, a police investigator confirms the meaning of Stevie's sacrifice. In the end, the place that saw the difficult birth of one son and the death another becomes the community the Fletchers had been seeking:

Step and DeAnne buried their oldest boy in a cemetery on the western edge of Steuben, surrounded by thick woods full of birds and animals, a living place. They both knew as they stood beside the grave that their days of wandering were through. They had been anchored now in Steuben, both by the living and the dead. Little Jeremy would enter Open Doors [Clinic] when the time came; flowers would be tended on this grave. (447)

If *Lost Boys* remained merely an extended version of one man's private story, a story about the workings of a specific religion, or even a story about what America has become, then the novel would indeed be just "a very sad story." But there is more. Card's works, no matter how terrible, frightening, sad, or even apparently inconclusive struggle to move beyond the family, the tribe, even the people, to "serve all men, and all lands," and *Lost Boys* is no exception. This novel works because each level is an inherent part of something larger. And structuring the story is the Myth of Sacrifice.

Stevie is not just a "problem child" who sees imaginary friends, plays phantom video games, and ignores his parents. He is a vehicle by which Card can mourn his own "lost boys"—yes: but on a much larger scale, he is an icon for innocence and purity; as Detective Douglas says:

there's some people who do things so bad it tears at the fabric of the world, and then there's some people so sweet and good that they can feel it when the world gets torn. They see things, they know things, only they're so good and pure that they don't understand what it is that they're seeing. I think that's what's been happening to your boy. What's going on here in Steuben is so evil and he is so good and pure that he can't help but feel it. The minute he got to Steuben he must have felt it, and it made him sadÉ. The rest of us, we've got good and evil mixed up in us, and our own badness makes so much noise we can't hear the evil of the monster out there. But your Stevie, he can hear it. He can hear the names of the boys [and]É your Stevie takes those names, and he makes friends out of them. (374)

Douglas is close to the truth, but even he does not fully understand that Stevie achieves more than just naming the lost boys. In a climactic exchange, Step threatens to ban Stevie from the computer, Stevie's main connection with the lost boys. "You can't," Stevie cried, "That's the only thing they're staying for! If I can't play they'll go away!" (410). Step answers that maybe the boy is spending entirely too much time playing Atari.

"Not as much as you spend on the IBM in there," said Stevie.

"That happens to be my work," said Step. "That happens to be what pays for our house and our food and Zap's doctor bills."

"Are you the only one in the family who has work to do?" Stevie demanded. (411)

Several pages later, DeAnne makes the correct connection, even though neither she nor Step understands it completely:

"The funniest thing," said DeAnne. "You know when he said, ÔYou're not the only one with work to do?' or whatever it was he said?"

"Yeah, I didn't know whether to be delighted to see him showing so much emotion or appalled that for the first time in his life he was yelling at his father."

"Do you know what went through my head when he said that?" said DeAnne. "I thought, ÔWist ye not that I must be about my father's business?'" (412-413)

At this point *Lost Boys* ceases to be merely a sad book and becomes a powerful one, because Stevie *is* pure and good and perceives the tear in the worldÉand he has the courage to act to stop it. Through his courage, he can hold onto the lost boys long enough to teach them one thing that brings hope out of tragedy: how to be seen.

It is not an accident that the story closes on Christmas, nor is it as one reader suggests a "schmalzy" manipulative ploy on Card's part (Rees), any more than it is a schmalzy manipulative ploy on Lewis's part to signal the collapse of the White Witch's power by the appearance of Father Christmas. Instead, at the season of Birth and Hope, the lost boys both give and receive a final gift:

As Bappy [the killer] was led away, as the bodies were brought out of their hidden graves and under the police lights of that bitter cold Christmas Eve, one by one the boys inside the house no longer had the strength or the need to keep trying anymore, and they said good-bye, and they were gone. One moment there, the next moment not there. Then their parents left, weeping, clinging to each other, with just a whispered word or two from Douglas. "Tell no one," he said. "You don't want your boy's name in the press. Just go home and thank God you had a chance to say good-bye. One small mercy in this whole cruel business." And the parents nodded and agreed and went home to the loneliest Christmas of their lives, the Christmas in which questions were answered at last, and love was remembered and wept for, and God was thanked and blamed for not having done more. (442)

This is a tremendous weight for one boy, one Story, to bear; and Card's control comes perilously close to breaking. Yet I think that control does hold; the story does ultimate imitate the deeper, brighter Story that Card wants to tell. There may in fact be "monsters in the mall" — evil close to us, unseen and unidentifiable except for its consequences; but there are also those willing to sacrifice in order to bring that evil into the light and defeat it. Card gives us the externals—an apparently disturbed child, whose parents struggle to find clues as to how to cure him—with the resolution only becoming fully understandable at the end of the story. With Stevie's parents, readers are invited to watch him make difficult decisions; yet the readers do not understand his preliminary decisions any more than Step and DeAnne do. The intensity and power of Stevie's sacrifice requires that it be revealed at precisely the correct moment, transforming what had seemed to be a "realistic" novel into a deeply "mythopoeic" one.

In speaking about the *eucatastrophe* of fairy stories, Tolkien provides a paradigm for the final effect of a story such as *Lost Boys*:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially "escapist," nor "fugitive." In its fairy-tale — or otherworld — setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. ("On Fairy Stories" 68)

In its final pages, Card's text emphasizes the effects of this pattern: the sudden "turn" that, far from providing emotional closure, reveals that on more fundamentally mythic levels, the story opens outward, inviting readers "farther in and farther up"; the "sudden and miraculous grace" that brings consolation by intruding the supernatural into the frighteningly real world Card has re-created, a world of serial killers and missing children. And the final paragraphs of *Lost Boys* provides precisely the emotional response that Tolkien defines:

It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to the child or man that hears it, when the "turn" comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art. ("On Fairy Stories" 68-69)

Appendix: Fantasy and the Believing Reader

For the last half-century English-language literary criticism has been captured by a system of belief called Modernism or, in its later permutations, New Criticism. If literary criticism were merely a club for people who think they understand Ezra Pound, there would be no reason for fantasy writers and readers to take it into account. Unfortunately, however, this particular school of literary criticism has acquired the status, in too many minds, of Truth. Too many writers, eager to understand what it is that makes their stories happen, have learned to say "classicism" and "Romanticism"as if Hulme's use of the words made any sense; to speak contemptuously of "naive identification"and the "pathetic fallacy"; and to discuss their own work as if the reason for writing stories were to convey meanings in such a way that only a trained reader can receive them—and the untrained reader can receive nothing at all. With more and more fantasy writers being affected by this critical movement, and more and more critics turning their techniques to fantasy, it is time that this school of literary criticism were put in perspective in relation to fantasy stories.

Authority for Belief

Literary criticism is the stories we tell ourselves about our stories. When we speak of a literary work's "meaning" we may be telling a story about how the author intended the word to be read, how the proper audience of the work would have understood it, how the work is received by a modern audience, what the work tells us about the author and his community or even how we think the work should have been written and how it compares to that standard of measurement. In all cases, however, we are telling a story—that is, we are giving an ordered account of causally related events.

By tacit agreement we believe our literary stories in one way, as fiction, and our critical stories another way, as history. No one would attempt to prove that, say, *Hamlet* is "true" or "false," though we regard it as being a truthful play. No one would dream of criticizing Shakespeare's writing of the play because Claudius didn't "really' kill Hamlet's father. The center of belief in fiction is in the author's assertions of causal relationships—from this there is no appeal. On the other hand, when Stephen Dedalus argues that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's working out of his own psychological problems caused by the death of his son Hamnet, we can protest that this argument is false or invalid or not justified by the evidence. The center of belief in criticism is historical — the ultimate authority from which there is no appeal is the "real" event. Since, of course, the "real" event is forever unascertainable, we can quarrel forever about proof in criticism (and all history). What does *Hamlet* really mean? Is the story we tell about *Hamlet* true or false. In the meantime, however, while we may assert that Stephen Dedalus's account of *Hamlet* is false, we cannot say meaningfully that it is "true" or "false" that Dedalus said it, for Dedalus exists as a character in fiction and if Joyce tells us Dedalus said it, we must accept this without appeal, unless Joyce himself gives us reason within the text to doubt his own statement.

This distinction between fictional and historical centers of belief is rarely clearcut, however. Historical and realistic fiction both imply some appeal to the historical center of belief, for example. In earlier times, writers and readers were not so fussy about what must be justified by "reality" and what might be authoritatively invented by the writer. Where an individual writer and his audience place themselves on that continuum varies from work to work, even from paragraph to paragraph, and individual readers, too, will bestow or withdraw authority from a story on a historical or fictional basis depending on their own expectations and experience.

Ways of Believing

When a writer tells a story to his community, he will, consciously or not, assume that the community will define itself in relation to the story. I have noticed differences in the way I believe stories, whether fictional or historical, and for clarity I distinguish three general types of belief:

epic, mythic, and *critical.* These names are not arbitrarily chosen — I mean them to resonate with many old intensions and contrast with many old extensions of the words. However, they are not parallel terms, and I wish them to be; and since I will use them in a restricted and in some ways arbitrary way, right alongside the more traditional meanings, I will risk annoying you with affectation and will distinguish these special senses and odd grammatical uses of the words with etymologically unjustifiable but visually parallel spelling changes.

Epick is all story that is received by a group as its own story—as true *of that group.* It is all story that tells who *we* are as opposed to who *they* are. Most of the Old Testament was originally written and read epickly, because the audience was the people of the book. They received it as an account of how *we* came out of Egypt, how *we* prospered or declined according with *our* obedience to or rebellion against God.

Mythick is all story that is received by readers as true of all human beings, and therefore lets each reader define himself as like or unlike the characters in the book. It is believed on a personal, not group level.

Epick and mythick are alike, however, in this: The decision about whether or not to believe is not consciously made. The story simply is or is not true. The self is named by the story, and so to doubt the story is to rename the self.

Critick is all story that is received by readers as being detached from them. It defines the reader neither as a human being nor as a member of a group. Rather, critickal readers evaluate the meaning or truth of the story consciously, usually detaching the meaning from the story itself.

Because critical readers read, not believing, but instead identifying and detaching meanings from the story, they are incapable of properly receiving a story that was written mythickly or epickly: They cannot receive a story that was written from belief. Likewise, mythick and epick readers, because they believe as they read, do not usually discern and detach meanings. The two methods are not compatible. Once I have treated a story critickly, I am no longer capable of treating it mythickly or epickly; I can only pretend to do so, or tell myself a story about what it was like when I *was* capable of participatory reading.

Criticism as Story

Because criticism is also telling stories, however, it is important to remember that a critic can be treating a literary work one way and treating his own story about that work in another. Critics generally read all literary works critickly, which leads to attempts to decode *Faerie Queene,* map *Ulysses,* patronize the naivete of Edgar Rice Burroughs, or despise the superficiality of Pope. The critic almost invariably believes his own story about these works. Only a few critics in each generation are able to write their criticism critickly, to detach themselves from their own stories about stories.

At the moment I seem to be functioning as a crickal critic, for I am aware that my definitions, my naming, my stories about stories about stories are all artificial constructs and not "true,"but merely useful. However, this account of my own attitude is also a story and to be crickal I must call *it* into question, because in fact I would not write these ideas if I did not, at some point along the way, believe in them. I at least believe in my unbelief, which certainly names me as a believer. Which could bring me to paradox if it were not for the fact that part of the story that I tell is that belief is, at some point, inescapable. Whoever detaches himself from one story and ceases to name himself in relation to it invariably attaches to another story, if only the story that he is now detached.

Of course you see where this leads. Coleridge and Wordsworth must define themselves as different from their predecessors and yet identify themselves as belonging in the same company. They are Milton, but they are not-Milton, just as a child names himself as Mother and not-Mother. They treat their predecessors' stories crickly, detaching themselves from those stories. They replace them with their own epick story, which they believe and which accounts for their predecessors and themselves and sets the world in order. T. S. Eliot and others must repeat the task, endlessly redefining themselves. It is the universal pattern of all writers that they must both identify themselves with and distinguish themselves from their predecessors.

Yet this account (an oversimplification of Bloom) is also a story. It is epick to those who believe it as a true account of how we (literateurs) work. It is mythick to those who believe that this process of naming through doubting old stories and telling new ones is universal.

Those who tell themselves the story that naive (mythickal or epickal) belief is primitive, while detached, crickal understanding is more advanced, are inevitably disturbed by this circularity, for if the crickal view is "better"or more elevated, this account of it makes true crickt forever as unapproachable as true reality. The fully detached stance is impossible, because the detached stance itself requires belief in detachment.

But this is not disturbing to those who believe that only a small number of our stories can be received crickkly. We could not live if we were crickkal about even a small fraction of the stories we are told. The critic who no longer believes the capitalist story probably still believes the mythick stories of gravity, humanity and fair play. The critic who no longer believes in the Bible epickly or mythickly probably still believes in the objective reality of bread and the causal relationship between chewing, swallowing and surviving. Because the crickkal view is only possible to the unbeliever, and all thought and language depend ultimately upon unquestioned belief in something at some point, to regard the crickkal view as divine is to consign oneself forever to hell.

The Critic's Tale

The novel began as a rebellion against romance. Romance, which had been the soul of an age in which real knights shed real blood, no longer satisfied uncultured writers, who turned to writing romances about their contemporaries and called them "new"romances, or novels. The novel caught on, not because it appealed to intellectuals, but because ordinary readers loved it.

Since then, however, the novel has been captured by another story, a critical tale of self-existing texts, in which it is praiseworthy to put distance between the reader and the story, in which it is forbidden for a "good"reader to identify with a character or consider his own experience of the novel as anything more than the "pathetic fallacy." All that was valuable in novels was that which was publicly verifiable. In this way criticism could approach the absolute correctness of science, in which only repeatable public experience is regarded as valid.

Literateurs found this method exciting and productive, and so they believed it and started acting it out. They kept their distance from the texts they read, and instead analyzed, breaking stories into pieces, discovering connections between them, and then writing elaborate discursive paraphrases of the "meaning"of this or that great work of literature. The result was the creation of a special priesthood of correct readers, together building a tower of stories about stories which, presumably, would take them to heaven.

The result was sometimes absurdity, as when scholars who did not believe in Milton's God thought they could understand Milton's work. And as these priests of detached and transcendental reading told each other more and more stories about stories, writers began to believe them and write fiction for them. Such fiction was no longer written to be believed. It was written to be analyzed and translated into discourse, and the only story that was believed anymore was the epick tale of the pure-minded critic, who, using absolute standards, officially given him by observation but actually given him by God, decided what was good and what was bad in fiction. Trembling, the writers who believed in this story awaited the verdict of the critics, who sometimes turned their thumbs upward, but more often proved their power by destroying the poor supplicant with his first novel.

Unfortunately, the majority of literature in the world does not fit this critical method. When most stories are analyzed, they break down into a jumble of meaningless fragments that seem almost interchangeable with the fragments of every other such story. To the critic who guards the temple doors, such tales are plainly unworthy offerings at the altar, for they cannot be consumed by the hungry horde of priests behind the curtain. It is dust on their tongues.

Fantasy is one such sort of writing. Critics examine it

and find strong-thewed heroes saving damsels in distress, magic rings and prophecies, dark forces opposing the bright light of goodness, and the critics say, "cardboard characters. Endless repetition of meaningless conventions. Hack writing. Childish oversimplification of good and evil. Obviously written for the adolescent mind. Wish-fulfillment. Bourgeois and fascist and sexist and racist. Pure trash." And ah! the most damning epithet of all: "Escapist."

The bourgeois, unpriestly reader leaves his dull world of work and worry and escapes to a land of magic, where good and evil are clearly separated, where he can pretend that he is the strong and fearless hero, where he doesn't have to cope with reality. And since this reader does not read deciphering meanings from the text, he is obviously not seeking truth, but rather avoiding thought. Only the stupid or the lazy read it.

Thus the critic-priests tell a story about fantasy that explains away their inability to apply their method to it. Any work that cannot be coped with is disposed of. And so the critics have created their epick tale of good literature clearly separated from bad literature, in which a few strong, heroic writers and critics stand against the evil, swarming masses of subhuman intellect, hewing the monsters Fantasy, Mystery, Science Fiction, Gothic, Historical, in order to rescue the virgin damsel Truth and take her safely home, where she may be raped at will.

The tragedy is not that so many critics believe this story and act it out, dressing up in their tweeds and sweaters to go quarrel about minor points of doctrine at MLA and other conferences. The tragedy is that those who are condemned by them, excluded by them, *also* tend to believe this story, and regard *themselves* as second-class citizens. The result is that they either apologize for the stories they love, deny those stories, or try pathetically to make those stories fit the standards of the critic-priests, who occasionally, grudgingly, admit such works into the canon of minor works. But only after the "meaning" of the work has been safely detached and translated into discourse. And occasionally a work of fantasy is so important that it cannot be ignored. Then the critics must work over the story unbidden, getting it under control as quickly and thoroughly as possible, lest too many readers discover that they have had a powerful experience that was far better than anything the critic-priest ever gave them.

We can see this process at work with *The Lord of the Rings*. The book was written by a formidable scholar, but he was not a critic-priest. He was a lover of old stories that were told back when people willingly sat open-mouthed listening to tales of heroes. Saga, epic, myth, fairy tales — and Tolkien set out to write just such a story. He declared again and again that he detested allegory in all its forms, including modern symbolism. He was not writing meanings. He was telling a story. Of course, the critic-priests already have an answer to that. Never listen to the writer, they say. Only examine the text. Writers have an embarrassing way of scoffing at the critic's interpretations. The text, however,

submits silently to torture and dismemberment.

In *Lord of the Rings*, the three characters of Frodo, Sam and Gollum are really three aspects of a single character. Frodo is the superego, Sam the ego, Gollum the id. We have the story firmly under control, for we have renamed the characters to place them within a non-threatening tale.

Or try this: The scene at the Cracks of Doom is the temptation of Christ. The ring is Satan. Frodo is the sin of pride, succumbing to Satan's offer of all the kingdoms of the world. Gollum is the sins of the flesh, who used the ring for murder, theft and catching fish, and finally, in the scene at the Cracks of Doom, it is no accident that Gollum *bites off Frodo's finger* and then, in his triumph, dances his way backward into the fires of hell. Gluttony destroyed itself and Frodo, as the will to power, survived only because he was broken and maimed. Only Samwise, the person who was, significantly, untouched by the power of the ring, emerges unscathed. And so we have an allegorical reading which can be extended quite interestingly throughout the work.

We can search the *Lord of the Rings* for patterns of imagery; we can decipher the meaning of the different races; we can talk at great length about the bourgeois virtues affirmed by the scouring of the Shire, and argue about whether Sam or Frodo was the figure most rewarded. Yet a few of this what made *Lord of the Rings* a powerful experience to millions of readers?

Already, however, albeit with the best intentions in the world, *Lord of the Rings* is being required in college courses and is undergoing just such critical treatments. I do not resent this because there is something inherently bad about critikal reading. On the contrary, there is an excitement to the rituals of criticism. It is an emotional experience to take pieces of the broken-up text and assemble them in a meaningful pattern. It is, in fact, a valid creative act to tell such stories about stories, and I think this is why the critic-priests have survived so long. Anyone who has read the rhapsodies of Frank Kermode or the great sagas of Northrop Frye knows that within the community of critic-priests there are powerful, true-seeming tales.

The danger is not the fashionable critics' tale-telling, but in their insistence that these stories about stories be believed, not as *fictions*, but as objectively true *history*. And most critical commentary is as helpful in understanding stories as Genesis is in understanding the origins of life. It is very lovely, but it doesn't account very well for all those fossils. The epickal stories of the critic-priests, however exciting they are in their own right, do not even begin to explain what really happens in the experience of participatory reading.

Fantasy cannot be read critikly. It cannot be translated into discourse. Its fit reader cannot remain aloof and detached from the story, searching for meanings in the interstices of the tale. The fit reader of fantasy is not a spectator but a participant. Mythickly or epickly, the fit reader of

fantasy attempts to believe, and if he does not believe, it is because he and the writer cannot comfortably dwell in the same unconscious world, not because fantasy itself is by nature unworthy.

The Act Of Reading

In a sense, all reading is participatory in that it requires the reader to follow along the sentences and apprehend the words. Readers are trained to recognize discrete symbols as letters, and discrete groups of symbols as words. The very fact that words are separated by neat little spaces, and sentences by universally agreed-upon marks, carries its own meaning. But readers do not think about the symbols they are reading while they are reading. They simply receive them, and unconsciously sort them out. Each symbol-group arouses its own set of responses in the reader; but even then, it is not the words we read, but the relationships between the words. *Of* means nothing by itself. But add more and more words, and *of* becomes ripe; a reader receives *of* differently because of its context, and receives everything else in the sentence differently because *of* is there.

In receiving stories, we go through a similar process. We are told of certain events, with a certain pattern of causal relationships among those events. Each event changes our view of all other events. And, as with reading letters and words, the overwhelming majority of those changes, those relationships among events, are conceived unconsciously, uncontrolledly, and we never notice them at all.

This model of how we receive stories is remarkably similar to how we receive the events of our own lives. Things happen; we act, others act. Each event is unconsciously assigned a causal relationship — either intentional, mechanical or random — to all other events. And from all this we develop the unconscious but unquestioningly believed story of the world that makes us who we are. We call this "real life" as opposed to fiction, but in fact our own lives are merely stories we have unconsciously told ourselves about events. Our self exists only in our memory.

But it is more complex than this. We also hear the stories other people tell us about ourselves and about themselves. A child, engrossed in play, performs a socially unacceptable behavior in his pants; his mother, who believes certain tales about such things, says, "That's so *filthy*," and the child believes. "You are so dumb," and we believe. "You are so beautiful," and we believe. Our very self is constantly being revised according to our experience and the stories others tell us.

This works in the other direction too. We are constantly revising our experiences according to that set of unconscious beliefs we call our "self." We believe some stories, we doubt others; we unconsciously decide some experiences are important and remember them, and decide others are trivial and forget them. Thus our self edits our experience of the world, and our experience of the world revises ourself in unmeasurable, unaccountable ways.

This is how we read, except that the events of the story have already been edited by another person. The author's absolute control over the written text translates into a great deal of control over our ordering of the events in the story. We edit the story unconsciously as we read, deciding what is important and what is trivial, what is true and what is false, but to a considerable degree we will still be influenced by the shapes the writer has imposed on the tale.

Furthermore, the writer's shaping of the work is also unconscious to a greater degree than critical theorists would like to admit. Even writers who follow a tight plan, controlling, as they think, every word, every gesture of a character, every meaning of a line — even they are still, as human beings, trapped within that set of beliefs that is themself. For their decisions about what is true and important, their selection of events, eventually comes down to what *feels* important and what *feels* true.

In this unsortable storm of belief, there is no such thing as publicly verifiable truth, because there is no such thing as perfect communication, and without perfect communication there is no verification. The doctrines of the critic-priests are really an attempt to surmount this problem by cutting story down to a more manageable thing: discourse. Detached reading gives the reader the illusion of control — the illusion that "good" writers are in control of their stories, the illusion that "good" readers can receive *the* meanings of those works. In fact, however, a detached reading is not a reading of the story at all. The detached reader is not allowing the writer to give him vicarious memory of events that were ordered by another hand. Instead, the detached reader is continually rebuilding the events and language of the story into his own safe and comfortable discourse, which he knows he can deal with because it is his almost unchanged self.

This method works. But it is, if you will forgive the term, *escapist.* The detached reader is escaping, not from that set of fictions called reality, but from that most dangerous and fearful of all things, the true story. The closest thing to true communication between two human beings is story-telling, for despite his best efforts at concealment, a writer will inevitably reveal in his story the world he believes he lives in, and the participatory reader will forever after carry around in himself and as himself a memory that was partly controlled by that other human being. Such memories are not neatly sorted into fiction and real life in our minds. I know, of course, that *I* never stood at the Cracks of Doom and watched Gollum die. But that faith in the distinction between my own actions and the actions of fictional characters is merely another story I tell myself. In fact, my memory of that event is much clearer and more powerful than my memory of my fifth birthday.

You see why the critic-priests must shun participatory reading, must deny it, must refuse it. Participatory reading puts your very self at risk. It will and must change who you are. This may be much of the reason why most people never read stories at all after they leave adolescence. Con-

sciously or not, they do not wish to change, and so they avoid an experience that will unavoidably change them. The critic-priest, with his detached reading, does precisely the same thing. He avoids the experience of reading a story, in exchange for the experience of affirming the story that he is a superior, elevated, fit, and above all non-bourgeois reader. It is a story that is not dissimilar to the story of the divine right of kings or the infallibility of popes: It bestows power and privilege, provided that enough other people believe it.

Of course, not one, not even a critic-priest, really reads *everything* critickly. The emotional impact of believed stories is at the heart of even the most detached of formal criticism. Canonical texts are all right to believe. The bludgeon of detached reading is only used with full force against non-canonical stories — that is, against those very stories which cannot possibly be comprehended by a critickal reader. It is a catch-22: To be read with belief, a story must be admitted to the canon of great or good works; to be admitted to the canon, a story must be designed for critickal reading or already have such a strong claim to greatness that critickal interpretations have been forced upon it.

ion because it must be believed mythickly to have any value at all. But fantasy is hardly alone in that exclusion. All art that is, in Hulme's definition, Romantic, and all fiction that is Romance, belongs outside the courts of the temple. Fantasy is certainly not identical with other sorts of romance, or we would not be able to name the genre and believe the name.

We do not start out believing whatever the writer throws at us in a story. Each genre and subgenre has its own way of inducing us—or seducing us—to keep reading long enough to believe. Importance and truth—that is what we look for in all our reading of stories. When we reject a story we usually do it because it failed in one of those areas; because we did not believe it or because we are bored. In coarser terms, we either say, "Oh, yeah?" or "So what?"

The writer, because he is telling a story that feels important and true *to him*, does not ask those questions of himself. But the reader does not, a priori, agree with the writer's assessment of what is important and true. Therefore the writer uses tricks to keep readers paying attention for a while. Eventually the tricks break down, because they are only illusions. Eventually the reader will decide, consciously or not, whether the story itself is true or important. But in the meantime, the tricks can keep working for a long time.

In each genre there are ways of creating the illusion of importance and the illusion of truth. The critic-priests, in fact, provide one of the most powerful machineries for sustaining an illusion of importance. How many people would choose to read Henry James or Virginia Woolf if no one told them that *The Ambassadors* or *To the Lighthouse*

were pivotal or seminal works? This is not to say that these novels are not really important or true, merely that they depend on the critical story about them for most of their readers. Without that critical buttressing, most readers would give up in despair by the time they reached James's thousandth comma or the second page, whichever comes first.

In the genre of literary stories, the writers openly call for that same critical approval. And to attract it, they create the illusion of importance primarily through imitating the vices of the "great" novels. They make their works deliberately boring, put as much introspection between events as possible, and in short imitate the conventions and forms of their genre to signal to the reader that this is a work which may well meet with approval from the oracle. Also, the literary genre writer often tries for obscurity, forcing the reader to probe for hidden meanings because there is no detectable surface sense. In short, such works seduce the reader into the rituals of critickal reading.

The literary genre also sets up the illusion of truth. In the realistic novel, the writer spins a web of detail that corresponds with verifiable contemporary experience. The reader recognizes these details and they keep him believing that what is going on here could happen in the real world, that it is true. In the self-conscious novel, the narrative voice is either mocking or mocked, undercutting belief by drawing the reader to an ironic platform from which author and reader together can despise error. This, too, draws the reader into believing the author by accepting his choice of what to disbelieve.

How are the illusions of importance and the illusions of truth created in fantasy? Where the realistic novel depends upon recognition of details of contemporary life, the fantasy writer has long depended on recognition of conventional devices. Because the writer is invoking events that the reader has believed before, the reader is induced to believe again. However, competition with the novel has forced the fantasy writer to use both methods.

The conventions are still there, but a wealth of detail is also provided. The detail in fantasy, however, does not correspond with the contemporary experience. While the causal relationships among events are recognizable, the details create a world that is changed in certain important respects — the possibility of magic, the distance from the present time. Yet in the best realistic fashion, the modern fantasy writer gives us so much detail that the story seems to be taking place in *a* real world. This works only because the realistic novelist has taught readers to believe in detailed realities; but then, it was only necessary in fantasy because the realistic novelist taught readers to expect detail and doubt whatever did not have it.

The illusion of truth, however, is not so important to the fantasy reader as the illusion of importance. The critickal reader, in ridiculing fantasy, usually makes much of the fact that the stories seem so pretentious. The characters and the narrator so often speak in a formal, elevated

language — Ursula LeGuin even considers this essential. The stories always seem to be about a world-changing struggle between good and evil. All of civilization as we know it seems to hang in the balance.

But those elements are not universal in recent fantasy. Most modern fantasy sustains the illusion of importance in other ways. One useful device, perhaps most effective because this is a generally irreligious age, is ritual—not just for magical purposes, but for purposes that can only be called worship or celebration. The ceremonial honoring of Frodo and Sam before King Aragorn is one such ritual, in which each of them, given a new name and a new story, is presented formally to the people of the land for public honor. One thinks also of the parallel scene in *Star Wars* and the honoring of Thomas Covenant as a hero in his own world after his return from the land.

Another device that sustains the illusion of importance is one that troubles many critics — the almost inevitable cruelty of fantasy. Violence alone is, indeed, an attention-getting device. But the cruelty of the most powerful fantasies goes beyond mere blood and thunder. In Gene Wolfe's *Shadow of the Torturer*, the scenes of death are all ritualized, and pain is a sacrament; in *Lord of the Rings*, too, Frodo is made holy by his suffering, and his dismemberment becomes part of his name. Stephen Donaldson's leper, Thomas Covenant, lives in a ritual of self-protection, in constant fear of unspeakable, insidious decay. There is something about the ritualizing of suffering that makes it seem more important. In the story of Christ, it matters less that Jesus died than that he chose to die, that his death was important to other people, that it was excruciating and slow, that it followed certain forms and certain words were said. A common form of execution was turned into a holy and important thing because of the way the story of it is given to us. These same elements of ritualized cruelty are no less powerful in fantasy, and so they are frequently invoked.

Behind the illusion of importance however, fantasy really is important to the believing reader. The point of fantasy is not its novelty—the same conventions can be endlessly repeated because what matters is not the event, but the way the events are fit together and the importance that is given to them by the characters. Losing a finger is unfortunate; Frodo's losing a finger is his personal redemption and the redemption of the world. And yet as soon as I express it in words like that, I have paraphrased and turned it into discourse, and therefore removed its effect. The power of fantasy is not in the fact that a sacrifice has taken place, but that the participatory reader remembers the experience of sacrificing. What makes the *Riddlemaster of Hed* important is not that there is an identity crisis when God turns out to be the devil, but that *I* the reader remember experiencing the terror of that moment, without comfortably naming it "identity crisis." It was myself at risk, myself who suffered. And the very subjectivity of the experience makes it resist the fashionable language of criticism today.

Does this mean that all criticism of fantasy is futile? Of course not. What it means is that we must be aware that the fashionable critical paradigms are completely inappropriate to fantasy — and to most fiction that real people like to read. The Modernist epick is an assertion of power over all story-telling, and it must be not just doubted but destroyed, and not just destroyed but replaced. It would be foolish to replace it with another map to be laid over stories to "make sense"of them. It is the idea that one must make sense of stories at all that is harmful. Stories *are* sense, and do not need to have anything *made* of them at all. Critickal reading of most stories is unintelligent unless it follows a genuine mythick or epick reading: It is time to stop crediting the criticism of those who have not read with belief. It is time to propose new canons of great literature, new methods of critical approach, and new purposes to be accomplished in the examination of a text. The elitists have sneered at good stories without any answering scorn quite long enough.

What sort of criticism is valid? Since every story is, in a way, a revolutionary act, and since stories can be powerful forces for changing individuals, they inevitably have moral force and can be dangerous. Any critic who reads a story that is morally detestable to him has a perfect right to answer the story on those grounds. Since every writer has different strategies for handling the illusions of truth and of importance, it is appropriate for a critic to call attention to stories that offend his personal taste. That is, after all, what I am doing right now. There is always room for critical *response* to stories, as long as it is understood that such responses are eccentric and we do not allow any one school of thought to have a privileged position—especially not a school of thought stupid and arrogant enough to consign an exceptionally vital and powerful literature to oblivion. ❦

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Footnotes to "BREASTPLATES OF SILK"

6 It is perhaps significant that according to Greek myth, the spider was originally a woman who was turned into an insect for daring to compete with Athena — the patron goddess of all "things devised by mind or hand" — in her weaving ability (Atchity & Barber 25).

7 Although the oppositional relationship between Galadriel and Shelob is commented on extensively, one of the most insightful and useful explorations is Peter Damien Goselin's "Two Faces of Eve: Galadriel and Shelob as Anima Figures".

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