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## LOST IN SCIENCE-FICTION: THE PRELUDE TO A. A. ATTANASIO'S *SOLIS* AS A CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE-FICTION READER'S GUIDE

Aurélie Villers  
Université de Nice

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*We all live by our fictions. They make us whole.  
We create stories in order to fill the emptiness that is ourselves.  
And because we must create them with strength from nothing, they make us whole.*  
*Solis*'s prelude, p.13

In the prelude of his novel *Solis*<sup>1</sup> (1994), Attanasio plays a dangerous game. Actually, this short text (13 pages) could be described as the best advocate against the reading of the consecutive novel, which is at the same time risky and contrary to the expectations of a reader familiar with what is at stake in a preliminary text.

Due to its position, a prelude generally exposes why and how the reader is expected to read the novel that is about to begin. It is not so much a question of attracting the reader as of holding his attention through clever rhetorical persuasion. According to Gérard Genette<sup>2</sup>, a preface – defined as any kind of preliminary text – aims at enhancing the text without being too conspicuously laudatory. It also has to inform the reader on the genesis of the story and, possibly, give all the pieces of information deemed necessary to help the reader's good understanding of the novel. More specifically, a prelude should expose the previous stages of the story, those that will not be told in the novel and are not necessary to its overall understanding, but which should help the reader get a feeling of completeness and give the story some kind of extra "reality". *Solis*'s prelude fails in many of these conditions. The information given is more puzzling than explanatory. It doesn't help the reader enter this new world of fiction at all. On the contrary. Once the prelude has been read, the reader is

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<sup>1</sup> All references given are from this edition: A. A. Attanasio (1994). *Solis*. London: NEL.

<sup>2</sup> See Genette (2002: 199-240), particularly the chapters devoted to prefaces : "L'instance préfacielle": 164-197, et "les fonctions de la préface originale".

completely lost and has a hard time making sense of the intricate pattern of these abstruse elements, and not simply because the character on which the novel is centered is no more the prelude's. A character who awoke from the dead, a time when chronology has been banned, opposite factions with improbable names such as the "Friends of the Measuring Class Not of Niels Abel" or the "Friend of Non Abelian Gauge Group", hard-Sf pseudo babble<sup>3</sup> (or is it real scientific discourse that is way beyond the lay-reader's understanding?), past centuries pirate slang mixing with poetic purple passages and the like are in no way reducing the reader's usual uneasiness and defamiliarisation that exist at the beginning of every new SF reading experience. The least you can say is that this prelude is neither helping nor self-laudatory. *Solis* undeniably brings little solace to its reader.

This opening falls into one of the categories defined by Genette: that of the "actorial preface", written by one of the characters – in most cases, the main character –, and not the true author. Mr. Charlie is a protagonist of the novel who is here promoted to preface writer. It is therefore a "fictional preface" which must have the reader pretend that he believes that it has truly been written by the character himself. To do so, *Solis* resorts to simulating an autobiographical excerpt. A mock compact is proposed to the reader: "I, Mr Charlie, who am writing this, am going to tell you how to read this tale, which is that of (a piece of) my life, and you will act as if you believed it were true". From this stage on, it is obvious that this preamble is about to play on some blurring of the definitions of author and character, partially thanks to a homodiegetic narration in this prelude.

As mentioned above, the prelude fails in most of its tasks. Where it is supposed to help, simplify, and/or explain the text that follows and to expose the conditions of its creation, it keeps confusing the reader. For, let us not forget that *Solis* is a science-fiction novel, and more requirements are attached to the preface of such a text. When entering a new science-fiction world, the reader feels necessarily estranged. And, let us be honest, this is precisely what he is looking for. This is science-fiction's defining feature, which Darko Suvin has conceptualized as "cognitive estrangement"<sup>4</sup>. Yet this estrangement has to be limited in time. On the one hand, even science-fiction cannot create an entirely unfathomable universe, and on the other hand, who can read loads of pages without understanding the slightest thing? Thus, cognition is provided and the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, this passage : "Spin, interval, charge, and moment are discrete properties, defined in integrer and half-integrer values, rational functions and ratios or nonconstructable numbers functioning as constants" Attanasio (1994: 5).

<sup>4</sup> See Suvin (1977).

novums are given “acceptable” logical explanations within the characteristics of the new world we are discovering.

To limit the reader’s estrangement, as well as to complete what a proper introduction should achieve<sup>5</sup>, years of science-fiction writing have seen the development of what are called “info-dump” sequences<sup>6</sup>. Thus are labeled explicit passages incorporated in the text, devised to fill in – even partially – the reader’s xenoencyclopedia<sup>7</sup> lacks. These tended to be extremely long and numerous in the early stages of science-fiction, and have become more sparse and subtle along the years. Their role is to direct the reader’s inferences and take in charge (part of) his cognitive activity. When they are well done and cleverly placed in the text, the reader doesn’t even realize that he needed extra information to make sense of the text. It also prevents him from wondering any further about other potentially unclear passages. Through info-dump sequences, the author takes in charge the reader’s cognitive activity and directs it. All that is left to him is a very temporary – therefore enjoyable – feeling of estrangement, a safe trip into the future.

Consequently, a helpful, didactic prelude would be all the more necessary in science-fiction. Let us then take a close look at *Solis*’s to analyse its “failures” before seeing how representative it is of how contemporary science-fiction texts treat their readers. The reader’s confusion, in this case, is due to complex overlappings of “possible worlds” as Umberto Eco defined the concept<sup>8</sup>. We will try to unveil this particular mechanism through an analysis of the incipit, arbitrarily expanded here to the first 50 lines of the preface.

“Swollen with dream, I awoke from the dead”, goes the first sentence. As a cleft sentence, it both omits the first verb and cunningly conceals its tense (I was swollen with dreams? I am...?) while postposing the key piece of information

<sup>5</sup> Let’s recall here that a fictitious preface is no common tendency in science-fiction novels. Science-fiction paratexts are more commonly composed of maps, indexes and glossaries, which are also strategies to compensate the reader’s xenoencyclopedia or memory lacks, particularly in very complex universes or long cycles (as for instance Frank Herbert’s *Dune*). They differ from info-dump sequences in that their reading is left to the reader’s choice.

<sup>6</sup> See Saint-Gelais (1999), for his developments on the notions of encyclopedia (borrowed to Umberto Eco), xenoencyclopedia, and info-dump passages (“passages didactiques”, in French), in particular the following chapters: “Mondes fictifs et encyclopédies imaginaires”, (1999: 135-141), “la stratégie didactique”, (1999: 141-148) and “Les problèmes du didactisme” (1999: 148-155).

<sup>7</sup> As defined by Richard Saint-Gelais, the reader’s xenoencyclopedia – differing from his encyclopedia, the whole of his acquired knowledge – is the knowledge pre-supposed by a (science-fiction) text so that it can be understood. It keeps expanding each time a new (science-fiction) text is read. For instance, once you have read Asimov’s *Foundation*, your xenoencyclopedia is enriched with the term “Psycho-history”. See Saint-Gelais (1999: 140).

<sup>8</sup> A state of things at a given stage of a story, as the reader sees it. See Eco (1989 : 145-150), in particular “Les prévisions comme préfiguration de mondes possibles”.

to put it into relief : having died, the character comes back to life. This element triggers the activation of the reader's encyclopedia, allowing him so far to classify this text as belonging to the "supernatural" – when he was expecting to read science-fiction... Waking up from the dead is a supernatural stories' trope. This is also what Richard Saint-Gelais sees as a piece of info-dump which has an indicative function<sup>9</sup> signaling a major element which allows the reader to recognize and/or classify the text he is reading. Is the text then going to play on different literary genres?

Two possible worlds seem to collide here: the "present" one in which the narrator "awakes" (or "world zero",  $W_0$ ), qualified by the first part of the sentence, and a second one barely evoked here: that of his past, the one in which he died (or "world minus one",  $W_{-1}$ ). Yet, although temporarily distinctive (past versus present state), a semantic continuity between  $W_0$  and  $W_{-1}$  is introduced by the text through the alliteration "dreams" – "dead". To complicate the matter, a third possible world is perceptible: the world of the narrator's dreams, taking place at a time distinct from  $W_{-1}$  and partially belonging to  $W_0$ , or at least having consequences on  $W_0$ . Let's call it  $W_0'$ . The rest of the incipit will prove that  $W_0'$  is parallel to  $W_0$  and designates a state of the narrator different from his  $W_0$  state. If the reader makes his inferences right, the first sentence of the text is already a very puzzling one.

Sentence 2: "When I tried to speak, all I could utter were small animal sounds." Another paradox: the author of the preface is incapable of speech, incapable of grasping words and seems to have regressed to some pre-human state, while actually able to transmit a message through well constructed alliterating sentences...

Sentence n°3: "So I just lay there in the dark, silent in the secret sea of images and memories that make our dreams". "[t]here",  $W_0$ , undergoes some contamination from  $W_0'$  ("dreams") now designated metaphorically by the alliterating expression "secret sea", while asking for the lost reader's cooperation through claiming a common experience: "our dreams". This is further proof that both worlds share the same temporality, as opposed to a past yet still perceptible world,  $W_{-1}$ , denoted through the word "remembering".  $W_0'$  is made of elements from  $W_{-1}$ , and has a perceptible influence on  $W_0$ .

The end of the first paragraph fully lapses into  $W_0'$ , with the narrator describing his erotic dreams: "I saw a beautiful woman making love to me." As  $W_0$  and  $W_0'$  are rendered through the same tense (preterit) –  $W_0'$  taking place both before and during  $W_0$  – it is difficult for the reader to decide whether the narrator is telling some past or present event. The last sentence triggered the

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<sup>9</sup> "un morceau didactique indiciel", as opposed to a cognitive one.

confusion. Is the narrator presenting the images that come back to him in  $W_0$  from his dreams in  $W_0$ , or is he casting himself back in  $W_0$  to recount them? The more the text unravels, the more the reader has a hard time making a clear chronological line of events and characterizing the possible worlds of the story. The very first sentence is deceitful indeed: predicting the presentation of a world in which you can come back from the dead (a possible  $W_0$ ) – the reader expecting some info-dump to understand the conditions that would make such an awakening possible – the text does the very opposite. It willingly forgets what it implicitly pledged to do, explains nothing of what it puts into relief to frustrate and lose the reader by developing the less real and less “solid” possible world ( $W_0$ ), the most fictitious and phantasmagoric one.

To sum up, at the end of the first paragraph, the reader is torn between three possible worlds:

$W_0$ : the world in which the story takes place, supposedly a world of reference, yet rendered doubtful because it is not described, and furthermore, because it is apparently a world in which you can overcome death.

$W_0$ : the unreal world of dreams, alternating with  $W_0$  on which it can leave some traces

$W_{-1}$ : the world of the narrator’s past, the least fictitious one (a world in which you die and cannot come back); the one that is the closest to the reader’s.

The situation could be depicted as follows:  $W_{-1} < W_0 // W_0$ .

The second paragraph confuses the matter a step further. “A blast of little birds, spooky as minnows, flared across my brain”. One reads here a metaphorical description of the effects of dreams, the way  $W_0$  is perceived from  $W_0$ . “And once more I was in the dark depths of the secret sea, another lewd dream beginning to shape itself around lubricious sobs”. The reader is sent back to the first sentence of this paragraph to reinterpret it anew. What is experienced in the first sentence is simply the preliminary state announcing a relapse into  $W_0$ .  $W_0$  can then happen before, during and after  $W_0$ .  $W_0$  being the most powerful state in this universe, the narrator is put through a perpetual alternation between these two worlds, a cyclical one. The only means for him to make sense of  $W_0$  would be to interrupt these relapses into  $W_0$ .

“The only way to stop it was to remember I was dead”. Hence  $W_{-1}$  is, for the narrator, a means of making  $W_0$  unique and perennial, of countering the effects of  $W_0$ .  $W_{-1}$  and  $W_0$  are now antagonistic when they were presented as chronologically consecutive in the very first sentence of the text. How can they be both consecutive and mutually excluding one another? “[I]mages and

memories” indeed “make our dreams” (p.1), and thus blur and falsify the relation between  $W_{-1}$  and  $W_0$ .  $W_0$  is a distorted vision of  $W_{-1}$  – even though an irresistibly alluring one – which taints  $W_0$ .

At last, the narrator chooses to qualify  $W_{-1}$  a little more (from his  $W_0$  point of view): “Long years before, so long ago now that almost all of that past is now forgotten, I met death”.  $W_{-1}$  precedes  $W_0$ , and the narrator is finally promising to fill in the logical impossibility mentioned in the first sentence. The reader expects to be told how, through a temporary lapse into  $W_{-1}$ , there can exist a  $W_0$  in which you can come back from the dead. From the first sentence to this one, all that has taken place is a complex strategy to mislead the reader while appearing to convey reliable information about the world he has just entered.

Full of promises, the third paragraph begins with an explanation, albeit a partially metaphorical one: “a dim time ago, a jellyfish snared my heart”. This is followed by a poetic and metaphorical description of the narrator’s feelings and impressions while dying.  $W_{-1}$  cannot be “pure”. It is only describable through the narrator’s state in  $W_0$ , and through some  $W_0$  vocabulary: the “dim time” and the metaphor typically evoke the narrator’s  $W_0$  idiolect. What does make  $W_{-1}$  different from  $W_0$ ? What is more, the lexical fields of  $W_{-1}$  and  $W_0$  overlap: wouldn’t the “secret sea” be the real one in which the narrator got stung by a jellyfish? Hasn’t  $W_{-1}$  been dimmed to the  $W_0$  narrator by  $W_0$ , which also expands in between  $W_{-1}$  and  $W_0$ , and further alienated the past world to the  $W_0$  narrator? Promises of explanations once more increase the complexity of the reader’s process of understanding the story he has just started to read. If that wasn’t enough, the following sentence has both reader and narrator fall back into  $W_0$ , without a warning: “The woman with hair like dead ivy took me in her mouth [...]”.

Paragraph four keeps forcing the reader through false tracks and unfulfilled expectations. “I’d read somewhere an aboriginal healer’s explanation of why some patient die”. The reader is more than willing to grasp the didactic signal and hang on to the word “explanation” with all his strength. Before that, let us notice that the direct connection between  $W_{-1}$  and  $W_0$  has been reestablished without an explanation as to how  $W_0$  has been left. The past perfect shows that in  $W_0$  the narrator remembers a piece of information dating back to  $W_{-1}$ . The reference to death is brought into focus as the last item of the sentence. Is it, to a reader who is beginning to understand the workings of this text, another signal that the promised explanation (one that has to fall back to  $W_{-1}$  to explain  $W_0$ ) will not be provided?

“ ‘The spirit is a boomerang. It is not meant to come back. It returns only when it misses its target’ ”. This is quoted without any explanation, neither by the  $W_0$  narrator nor by the  $W_{-1}$  Aboriginal character who originally delivered it.

The reader is left on his own to interpret the metaphor and apply it is what links  $W_{-1}$  to  $W_0$ . This general truth in the simple present tense would mean that the narrator had missed some kind of goal in  $W_{-1}$  and has now been brought back in  $W_0$  to complete it. The narrator is still reasoning in  $W_{-1}$  terms in this future world of  $W_0$ . Incidentally, this redirects the reader's attention to  $W_{-1}$  where the narrator apparently did something wrong, or rather, failed to do something right. Any explanation is at best metaphorical and vague.

"And then, after a maddeningly long time, I was pulled from the secret sea, and the dreaming stopped". Paragraph five adds to the confusion. What came before then belonged to  $W_0$ , from which the narrator is now freed and back to  $W_0$ . What is  $W_{-1}$ , then? Is the real (past) world a dream, and with it, any logical explanation that would allow the narrator to make sense of his world, the reader to make sense of his text? "I heard weird voices, genderless, childlike". This flaunts another paradox: it is in  $W_0$ , with its tropes signaling science-fiction, that the reader feels most at home. Weird entities, barely perceptible, genderless and without age, is a clear signal of science-fiction extraterrestrials or post-humans as they could have evolved to in a far future. The signal is conspicuous to a science-fiction reader. As it is probably the first entry in his xenoencyclopedia, it is impossible to resist to.

The comfort of a reassuring possible use of the reader's xenoencyclopedia will not last, of course. "Mr Charlie! Can you wit what we say? Be hearty, my Mr Charlie." And be hearty, reader. You get the narrator's name, and the side information that he is human and accompanied by other characters. The second protagonist announces another possible promise of explanation, a medical one – "Medullary compression of the gibbus. Man, man! Be you hearty or be you gone!", yet you lose the comfort of finding yourself in a literary genre you know. All this could have been taking place in a future society. Then, how to account for this archaic phrasing? End of paragraph.

"I was blind, and apart from those eerie voices, I could hear nothing". A text is usually a very lazy mechanism only resorting to repetition when necessary. The "eerie voices" are doubling the "weird voices" (only five lines above) when no transition was particularly needed, and add nothing. Yet a new hint is given in the second part of the sentence. This sentence is then commenting on the way the narrator thinks: he functions in a loop and needs going back a little to keep advancing. This could qualify the relation established between  $W_{-1}$  and  $W_0$ .

"Wild thoughts spilled through me: Was I in a coma, hallucinating all this? Were the strange voices and erotic episodes prodromal of brain damage?" Now at last the reader feels at home. The word "hallucinating" has automatically re-opened his encyclopedia to the well-known page of the supernatural ontological

hesitation trope: either this world is real yet impossible (supernatural, a  $W_0$ ) or the character has been hallucinating it all (logical reduction of a supernatural element, a  $W_{-1}$ ). This is very comforting indeed to the reader who is able to put together the previous  $W_{-1}$ ,  $W_0$  and  $W_0$ , he has been building. The strange voices ( $W_0$ ) and the erotic dreams ( $W_0$ ) are phenomena taking place in  $W_{-1}$  where the narrator has suffered some kind of brain damage (caused by the jellyfish bite?). Even the “medullary compression of the gibbus” could be a sentence which came up from  $W_{-1}$  unmodified to the narrator’s consciousness in his  $W_{-1}$ , (his perception of  $W_{-1}$ , modified because of his brain damage, therefore parallel to  $W_{-1}$ ). For the very first time, the reader’s conjectures happily meet the narrator’s, making him at last feel like the “Model Reader” he wishes to be.

“Or was I, in fact, dead, as I had long before surmised, remembering too well the wreath of thorns about my heart [...]” The reader’s respite was brief indeed. He no more pictures his narrator lying on a sick-bed, being taken care of by doctors after having suffered a jellyfish bite. His new possible world is still a supernatural one where a person can regain some consciousness after death, and is capable of acts of remembrance. To each new sentence is now attached a new arrangement of possible worlds. So far, the reader and the narrator are formulating hypotheses, the narrator actually voicing those the reader may be building, both of them trying to make sense of a world, of a text. The end of the paragraph develops this idea of a story exploring what death actually is, through a character who is experiencing it (“[...] I lay dying, [...] looking back and seeing my body curled like a seared insect [...]”)

Yet the reader has now grown into mistrusting any too likely explanation. The last sentence of paragraph seven reopens the game: “Oh, yes, I was dead – I think...” Another cleft sentence, another doubt, but most of all, a new tense to qualify  $W_0$  (simple present), which means that this  $W_0$  is different from the first sentence’s  $W_0$  (preterit)...

The key to understand the prelude holds to Charlie’s obsessive ontological hypotheses, turning into questions<sup>10</sup>, alternating with his avowed mental losses<sup>11</sup>. The later, along with his need for basic information, direct the reader towards a metafictional reading of the prelude. Who actually is Mr Charlie? Only the reader’s metaleptic embodiment inside the story. Too much detail, identifying Charlie’s queries to the empirical reader’s, directs such a reading. Besides being overwhelmed by ontological questions; both are but (slow)

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<sup>10</sup> “Who? Who are you!” (p. 3), ““What?” I didn’t understand. ‘Where am I?’” (p. 3), “I was utterly confused. (...) ‘Who are you? Where am I?’” (p. 3), ““Where am I?”” (p. 7), ““Who are you?”” (p. 7).

<sup>11</sup> “ ‘Idon’t understand,’ I whined, unnerved by all that was happening to me. ‘Please help me.’”, Attanasio (1994: 4).



brains plunged into a futuristic world, that doesn't make much sense to them; both are now deprived of a body; and both hear strange yet familiar voices. This is indeed what a reader feels like while in the act of reading, forgetting his body, now only a brain hearing his own mental voice echoing the sentences of the text. "Abruptly, I saw shimmery blue words scrolling across my field of vision, and I heard a voice very like my own [...]" (Attanasio, 1994: p.4). The prelude is the description of the reading experience.

A first person narration is well known for entailing identification between the empirical reader and the narrator/character. It is a means of having the reader "enter" the text, for, when reading Charlie's "Who am I?" the empirical reader mentally says it as well. The author thus forces self-questioning onto the reader. Charlie is the reader as he sees himself immersed into the "mirror-polished" version of reality that the text is:

Briefly, sight returned to me [...]. I was lying on a mirror-polished floor [...] and reflected in it was my face – or not my face, not the features I remembered [...]. That was *me*? [...] What had happened to the gift of my face? Where were my limbs and torso? (Attanasio, 1994: 3)

Glimpses of sight are periodically returned to Charlie, which represent the empirical reader's own flashes of consciousness as to his real situation, himself in the act of reading. The answer to the question "where" can only be a place in between the real world of the empirical reader and the fictional world of the story, the diegesis into which the empirical reader is given a fictional incarnation. The prelude takes place in the "limbo" of fiction, that hypothetical, immaterial place inside the reader's brain where his reality meets the diegesis of *Solis*. To the possible worlds of the incipit now correspond three other: To the infra possible world,  $W_{-1}$ , corresponds the real world of the empirical reader,  $W_R$ ; the upper possible world of  $W_0$  is the fictional world of the diegesis,  $W_D$ ; the expended world of dreams,  $W_{0'}$ , now the world of the text's limbo,  $W_L$  (or meta-world). The new relationship between these different spaces can be symbolized as follows (with  $W_L$  overlapping on the other two the ways the  $W_{0'}$  of dreams partook of  $W_{-1}$  and  $W_0$ ):

$$W_R < W_L < W_D$$

Reality < Meta-dimension < Fiction

The effect of reading upon the reader is depicted as an experiment carried out on him, through electrodes, by superior entities: "Pull the electrode [...]", orders one entity. And here is what ensues: "The blue words vanished [...]. I felt the silence of the wind opening in me again, and then darkness came

on” (Attanasio, 1994: 5). End of paragraph. The text physically mimics what it is doing to the reader’s brain. The stream of words stops at the end of this paragraph, the reading process pauses for a moment, and silence – the windy silence of a brain emptied of its own voice reading – and darkness follow. Each of such pauses momentarily brings the reader back into the text’s limbo, having not yet left the text/reading for good nor having closed the book and gotten back to reality. The blue color of the words is one more clue to the interfacing nature of  $W_L$ , very much like the way blue hypertext links are interfaces allowing real empirical computer users to access some content inside the immaterial space of the world wide web.

When the prelude starts making sense to the reader with a metalepses-oriented turn of mind, Charlie mysteriously regains consciousness in the presence of a key entity that will at last deliver the long expected info-dump loads. The Charlie/basic-science-fiction-reader has now confessed his secret pursuit: “I wanted to see what would become of us. I wanted nothing for myself other than to see.” (Attanasio, 1994: 10). For what other reason would you have your brain cryogenized? And what better reason to read science-fiction if not to get an idea of what our future may be like? So now, this entity, who says its name is Sitor Ananta, can get rid of our queries in a few words, as if confirming what we have been surmising all along: the gist of the prelude lies somewhere else, not in understanding the nature of  $W_0$ . Charlie is the cryogenized brain of a man from the past, revived by a faction referred to as the “lewdists” who used it “the way you in your time would have used a cathode monitor to view pornography” (Attanasio, 1994: 9), their archaic pirates’ babble, a translator problem. Then Charlie had been stolen by another faction, the “Friends of the non-Abelian Gauge Group” who directed his newly regained capacity for speech to interrogate him on “the relations between psyche and physics, [...] mind and matter”( Attanasio, 1994: 4), before falling into Sitor Ananta’s possession, the conditions of this acquisition remaining unexplained.

Let us again follow Charlie’s/our interrogations when encountering Sitor Ananta: “Who are you?” (Attanasio, 1994: 7). An evolutive description of this entity is given once the Charlie/reader entity regains consciousness in its presence:

A spongy, circular floor was directly below me. Outside its perimeter, tiles of tessalated turquoise and black marble supported swerves of amber that, after a moment, I saw were chairs and a long table. An adolescent girl sat at the table with a gold stylus in her hand. [...] She touched the stylus to a moonpiece, a silver shadow-smudged disc compact as a watchface, and the clarity of my vision sharpened. I saw [...] the faceted lump of her Adam’s apple – and

realized that she could be a he. [...] The hermaphrodite [...] told me, with lips not in synch with what was spoken: 'You are dead.' (Attanasio, 1994: 7).

The genderless entity (is its first attributed gender a remnant of the girl of his dreams?), sitting at a table and using a "stylus" to make things clearer to its addressee, is a fictitious incarnation of the text's author (meeting the author, the gist of your reader's dreams). This is confirmed by its name which is a near anagram of Attanasio's, yet cut in two (each half having gained an extra letter), not the real author (not the "he") but an auctorial entity (an "it"). It's the Model Author, a derivation of the real author as he can be conceived by Charlie/the reader, now granted a fictional incarnation; a superior entity in this limbo where what the real author says reappears after a time lap in his fiction, his "lips not in synch with what was spoken". And Sitor's avowed aim is to understand the second faction's motives.

On the one hand, Sitor is presented as superior to both the lewdists and the Friends. It finally gets definitive hold of Mr Charlie. But most of all, in this limbo where we float, it is granted five fingers when the Friends were described as having only four. Sitor is closer to a real human being while the others are clearly associated with fictitious creations<sup>12</sup>. Yet it shares puzzling traits which somehow identify it with them. The three of them get precisely whatever information or action they want from Charlie. They can make him speak as they want ("Say more Mr Charlie" demands one of the Friends. "And so I did." (Attanasio, 1994: 4-5)). And all are depicted as highly manipulative. The first abrupt vision of blue words was caused by this: "A four-fingered hand manipulated something above my line of sight" (Attanasio, 1994: 4). All of them have direct control over Charlie.

One of the Friends is more specifically depicted as having "a face of black gelatin, expressive, a teenager's face, boy or girl, I couldn't tell. The lake of its dark features was placid, clear enough that I could see the cumulus clouds of its brain enlarging with the thunder of dangerous thought." (Attanasio, 1994: 4), and further down, "[t]he figures in transparent armor had gathered around me, and I could see the thunderhead thoughts behind their rapt faces as the blue words vaped by" (Attanasio, 1994: 5). The lewdists, the Friends and Sitor Ananta, are all "transparent", manipulative characters barely hiding their brains at work. Where Umberto Eco conceptualized one Model Author, Attanasio presents several auctorial entities in his prelude; the auctorial entities being potentially plural in science-fiction, just as the possible worlds

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<sup>12</sup> As Charlie comments about and to Sitor: "I stared at the creature, noted its fully human form, its five-fingered hands. 'You're not like the others'" Attanasio (1994: 7).

built by the reader can be. Attanasio's science-fiction text presents three conflicting yet complementary auctorial entities: the "lewdists" interested in the fantasmagoric, dream-like, metaphorical and poetic dimension, the Friends centered on the scientific formulation and conceptualization, and finally, Sitor, having the motivation that is the closest to the real author's, that of explaining to the reader what a text a fiction is, having him experience how it works, while conveying necessary didacticism when the risk of losing him for good (namely, of having him close the book) is too high. Sitor, the meta-auctorial entity, gets the upper hand, and our travel into the limbo of fiction can go on. Sitor is also the one that feels the most threatened by the Friends, the "meta" dimension being often very close to the (pseudo-)logical, theoretical and scientific tendency of fictional texts, both highly relying on the cognitive process.

The three are fighting and will keep on fighting all along the novel to get definitive hold of Mr Charlie. Hence, the novel will be a story of thefts and escapes. Charlie, the reader's brain, is no more the narrator but the object of all three entities' desire; and Sitor, the evil android, cast as a proper author, the indefatigable pursuer that will keep the action going.

"Where am I?" Charlie takes a particular attention to spatial localization, which is all the more striking as the unreal place he woke up to resists description. What does the space of fiction, described from its limbo, look like? In the first stage of the prelude, while still in the company of the Friends, Charlie concentrated on what was above him: "I [...] stared meekly *upwards* and saw – [...] human figures in transparent armor" (Attanasio, 1994: 3-4), "a four-fingered hand manipulated something *above* my line of sight [...]" (Attanasio, 1994: 4)<sup>13</sup>. Above the incarnated Model Reader are the first cloudy auctorial entities, the Friends. Charlie can also see himself "lying *on* a mirror-polished floor" (Attanasio, 1994: 3) when with the Friends, and he perceives "a spongy circular floor directly below [him]" (Attanasio, 1994: 6-7) right before meeting Sitor. Between the airy skies of the author(s) and the reassuring floor of the text, Charlie is "*suspended in mid-air*, for [he] c[an] look *down* and see that [he] ha[s] no body" (Attanasio, 1994: 6). Many times does he insist on his being suspended between these two spaces: "Just as before, when I was *adrift* in the secret sea of erotic images, now I *hovered in an airy space* of words and numbers [...]" (Attanasio, 1994: 5). Meeting Sitor lifts him up from the floor (he is now above it and not directly on it). He is floating in the limbo of the text, the meta-dimension allowing him to peer outside, where Sitor sits: "Outside [the spongy, circular floor's] perimeter" (Attanasio, 1994: 7) are the chairs and table where Sitor awaits him. Sitor is not above but beside Charlie,

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<sup>13</sup> Our italics.

adding another dimension to the so far vertical presentation of the text. It is sitting on horizontal equal terms with the Model Reader. That dimension is the key interest of Attanasio's in here, probably even the subject of the prelude. In a brief paragraph Sitor presents Charlie's current state (the physical description of his brain and the cause of his death). The paragraph ends with "*Subject: Outis, Charles*"<sup>14</sup> (Attanasio, 1994: 7). We are given the real identity of the narrator. According to the way his name defines him, his characteristics is to be "out": out is Charles, Charlie is out(side), the reader stands out of the text. The pun on his name is telling: his place is to stand outside, his state is to be dead (or "out"). The prelude places its reader in the limbo of fiction, on an equal (horizontal) plane with the meta-Model Author. From there, the sight is dizzying indeed: "I looked away, surveying where I was: Slabs of jasper circled us like dolmen rocks, the spaces between them paned with crystal sheets flecked with mica. I peered upward into a boiling light of dust motes towering into thermal acid clouds" (Attanasio, 1994: 7); "[a]t the sight of my name [...] I reflexively looked down and immediately snapped my gazed back up, brutally aware I had no guts" (Attanasio, 1994: 7).

This poetic and metaphorical description of the limbo, the first stage of the meeting with Sitor, had "lewdist" overtones. Now Sitor can move up to its real interest, having cast away the lewdists as "atavists [...] a harmless bunch of degenerates" (Attanasio, 1994: 9): "'The others [i.e. the Friends] are the reason I am here', Sitor Ananta said" (p. 8), "It's the Friends of the Non-Abelian Gauge Group I want to know about" (Attanasio, 1994: 9). Sitor belongs to the "Commonality", which the Friends threaten with their purely abstract conceptualization. A science-fiction text cannot be all metaphors. Neither can it be all theory. It has to be considered as a "commonality" of these two dimensions, plus the metafictional one.

The Friends could lose the reader indeed. Here is how Sitor didactically presents their conception of the (science-fiction) text. "The real and imaginary parts of the wave amplitude are indistinguishable, that is, they can't be separated in some absolute way. Such constraints are functions of observer consciousness [...]. The observer perspective is what's important here" (Attanasio, 1994: 9, like the other quotations in this paragraph). To one who observes the text, be it a meta-Model Author or a Model Reader, it indistinguishably mixes real and imaginary elements. That is obvious fact. What it means by "wave amplitude" is next explained: "The relative ascription of plus and minus signs, used to define oscillations of wave amplitudes, requires the component of "-i, the imaginary value called *i*". To define the oscillations of a text, you

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<sup>14</sup> Italics in the text.

need to know its imaginary part. From then on, you are able to perceive its oscillations into the more real (+) or the more imaginary (-). “It’s the idea of the thing, for it posits both a thing and its absence”. Fiction is indeed made of the accumulation of representations, and not actual things, because they both really exist in the reader’s mind and don’t exist, being “absent”, deprived of a material manifestation in the reader’s reality. These are here obvious facts stated under the alluring guise of highly theoretical formulation. “It’s easy to believe that a thing can exist out there” – here, were Charlie is, in the space of the text – “independent of the observer”. The position taken here is an enunciative abyme effect moving from the diegesis the reader is discovering to his reading a book in the real world. “But the posited absence of a thing is obviously an expression of consciousness”. It indeed takes an act of consciousness and self-reflexivity for the reader to reactivate the status of the story in his real world, that of an absent thing, an absent paradigm. “So you see, all energies, forces and fields that make up the material expression of things are functions of an abstract geometry. An abstract geometry, which requires *i*, is a function of consciousness”. A text of fiction is an abstract geometry required to give in, more or less, to imagination. Its status, its genre, can be specified by specifying the value of its ‘*i*’ factor – its use of imagination – and, let us add, its ‘*I*’ factor, the degree to which the ‘*I*’ of the writer gets a say. It takes the reader an act of consciousness to realize it. A very muddled demonstration for a very banal fact regarding the nature of fiction.

The “where” and “who” have now been defined – albeit in a twisted way – the prelude at last accomplishing its task. The empirical reader has been made aware of what was expected of the Model Reader he may, may not or may partially have been by a metafictional Model Author. Let us call them Charlie and Sitor. What is to become of the reader when the true story begins? “And now there are two options for us, two uses for you” (Attanasio, 1994: 11). The auctorial entity has been shown as being plural. Now the prelude, again presented as obeying Sitor’s will, moves on to set up two Model Readers, two possible reading entities that can both prove successful at reading *Solis*. Well, supposedly.

“If we wish – and the decision is entirely mine –”: retrospectively, the ‘us’ acknowledging the two options are not Sitor and Charlie but this ‘us’, this ‘we’, is the association of all three auctorial entities, even though the decision actually belongs to Sitor – or so Sitor is let to believe. If it wishes, then,

[...] you will be installed inside the governing center of a very powerful machine. There you will serve the Commonality by extracting and refining useful ores. After each successful work cycle, the amygdala and limbic core

of your brain will be magnetically stimulated, inducing sustained pleasurable rapture so gratifying you will sing praises of me and the Commonality for the trouble we took to revive you.

The first Model Reader posited by the text is a whole brain placed at the core of the machinery of the text, and his job will consist in extracting elements useful to its proper understanding, its refining. This, successfully done chapter by chapter, or macro-proposition by macro-proposition<sup>15</sup>, will be the source of the pleasurable reading experience we readers are all craving for, and will lead us to praise the god-like writer who made us reach that ecstatic state. At last the prelude turns humorously self-laudatory.

“Of course, a mining factory requires a cooperative intelligence. If you prove uncooperative [i.e. if you are not Model Reader n°1] then I recommend that your brain be parsed into sections useful to operating smaller devices”. Model Reader n°2 is one with a less extended xenoencyclopedia. If refining the ores of the novel *Solis* proves too difficult a task for the reader, then (didactic) help will be provided to him, leaving him with the processing of easy micro-sections of the text. Are we here defining two Model Readers for the future text, or rather defining two types of science-fiction texts (the past ones, loaded with info-dump passages, processing most of the text for the reader, doing most of his cognitive activity in his stead, versus contemporary SF texts that rely on the acquired xenoencyclopedia of their readers and therefore deem them able to process all its dimensions (including its meta-dimension) by themselves)? Here is the deal, anyway: “If you cooperate, you will live usefully and indefinitely without pain or suffering. If you choose not to cooperate, the resectioning of your brain will be conducted humanely. You will simply go to sleep and not wake up” (Attanasio, 1994: 12).

Of course, the reading/understanding of the prelude has been deceptive and difficult enough. Charlie, the passive reader in us, chooses to go for Model Reader n°2: “The idea of going to sleep and not waking up sounds pretty good to me”, I said”. “[...] I knew that if Sitor Ananta so desired, a few squigs of the stylus would render me utterly pliant. [...] The look of surprise on that smug, puerile face was well worth the stabs of pain that followed when Sitor Ananta got stylus in hand” (Attanasio, 1994: 12).

Well, Sitor never said that turning into Model Reader n°1 would be painless. And the author leads the game we willingly play as long as we keep reading. He chose to make us Model Reader n°1 by a 13-pages-long “squig of the stylus”. We never were given the choice, were we? “When I woke next, I

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<sup>15</sup> A stage of the Fabula’s architecture, see Eco (1989).

was there, in the command core of a mining factory, somewhere, I assume, in the Asteroid Belt, writing you” (Attanasio, 1994: 12).

The ontological question “Who am I?” now has to be addressed, if not answered. Who is Charlie – so far assumed to be the prelude’s Model Reader - now able to write? Who is saying “I” in this text? Who is the author of the following passage inserted between the time spent with the Friends and Charlie’s fall into Sitor’s hands:

I am a blue animal that trembles softly. I am a mind without a body calling to you. Can you hear me? Do you see my smile in my words, sad and evil? Sad because I am utterly alone. Evil because I am dead and yet alive. My voice radiated through space. Past lives drift by. The damned descend into the darkness. Can you hear me? Listen. A dead man visits you. Listen to me someone. Look, this sounds like ranting to you. I know. I want to speak calmly, rationally now. I want to say the truth as I’ve known it. I want to say a story – my story. Say a said. And more. Say a body. Say a way back. Say at least a place. Say something. But no one hears me. Do you hear me? (Attanasio, 1994: 6).

Who but the text itself could thus be addressing its reader, exposing its own ontological qualms, pleading to exist by being heard/read. Who but the metafictional text telling its own story (at least something, anything), the imaginary existing only if it’s made real by being read, a dead piece reawakened each time it is read? Further proof of this is given a few lines before the prelude ends:

[...] and I feel I must write to retain some sense of myself – to be someone. Otherwise, I am just this machine, a regulator of drill trajectories, coolant flow rates, melt runs, and slag sifters. [...] But every once in a sad while, I need to affirm my sense of myself, to create the fiction that I am something more than this. (Attanasio, 1994: 12-13)

The text needs to be an auctorial character with a voice, instead of a mere effective machine, it needs to be a narrator, and it is a textual machine that also needs at times to expose its own inner mechanisms to make us believe it is much more than what it appears to be.

I am going to send what I have written here. And when this is received by the Commonality, I may be cut into smaller, more convenient parts – but by then it will be too late. My story will continue to exist, expanding into the dark at the speed of light, maybe even to be heard by you. And if you do read this, then I will have failed better than I could have hoped” (Attanasio, 1994: 13).



The textual entity presents itself as pre-dating its acquisition and rendering by the author who intervenes after the preliminary level of some self-generation, the way you can oppose the “Fabula” (the fundamental overview of the story which follows the logical development of the action) to the “Subject” (the story as it is told and appears to the reader, with its possible temporal manipulations). But this infra-level of the Fabula cannot be annihilated by any of the author’s manipulation operated on the original Fabula.

And so –

With my soul in my mouth, I begin –

*Swollen with dreams, I awoke from the dead...* (Attanasio, 1994: 13).

Thus ends the prelude, which in a way was a prelude to itself, ending on its very first sentence. And so begins the novel *Solis*, having as a first sentence the actual last one from the prelude: “With my soul in my mouth, I begin” (Attanasio, 1994: 15), italics then omitted. The prelude, a boomerang that keeps coming back, first missed its target when the novel won’t, having at last found its Model Reader. The novel abbot to begin will not be a cyclical message sent into the void.

*Solis’* prelude has reaffirmed the growing part left to metafiction in contemporary science-fiction. It also highlights what the science-fiction novel is now becoming. After having relied on intradiegetic novums to estrange the reader – and the reader having grown used to this after more than a century of science-fiction stories – the science-fiction text as presented by Attanasio here has displaced its novums and cognitive process, or rather, it has doubled them, on the embedding level of metafiction. The reader is now defamiliarized either because he hasn’t read enough past SF books and suffers from irreparable lacks in his xenoencyclopedia – you won’t be told what FTL drive is anymore –, or because the novums presented are no more offered through ready-made, reliable info-dumps, but most of all, because the very conditions in which the “Subject” (in Eco’s terms) is told is estranging: see the enumerable ellipses, analepses and prolepses in contemporary storytelling. We now recurrently witness estranging complications of the Fabula in a Subject that multiplies and confuses the temporal sequences (see for instance the highly unlinear Subject of the television series *Lost*) on top of having already distilled novums that await over-delayed explanations. Embedding story lines and complicating the chronological chain partake of the same strategy.

*Solis* won’t explain what an “androne” is, no more than it will reveal the principle its story is based on: how the “Lewdists” were able to have Charlie come back from the dead. The dual relationship of estrangement and cognition

has moved to the way the Subject is presented and to the reader's Isotopy<sup>16</sup>. The reader is left on his xenoencyclopedic own as regards the disambiguation of the story, and cognition will only be partially granted on the meta-level by presenting him with his Model, the pre-thought image of himself he has to follow to reach textual plenitude, i.e. cognition. With *Solis*, science-fiction's founding trait has then been moved "outside the box" of the most embedded diegesis, to a (meta)place where reader and author are closer to one another – and can even sit at the same table – but where the stakes are higher, as is the manipulation of the second by the first. Wherever you place it, though, be it inside or outside the diegesis, the pleasure of willingly getting lost will remain, knowing that whichever Model Reader you are, you will still be looked out for, and found again.

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<sup>16</sup> As presented by Umberto Eco, an Isotopy is the disambiguation of a text by its reader, his coherent interpretation of the story.