The Skeptical Fantasist: In Defense of an Oxymoron
by R. Scott Bakker

I was crossing campus not so long ago and I happened to bump into one of my old professors. She greeted me with a warm smile and congratulated me on my success writing *children's* fiction. After swearing under my breath, I explained to her that I wrote *epic fantasy*, and that if anything, it was as adult as adult could be. The idea, I told her, was that in today's electronically balkanized society, genre was the only place where it was possible to write 'literature.'

She did not look convinced. But then I've been to several literary festivals now, and I have a pretty good sense of just how deep the pigeon-hole goes. We humans have three pound brains, and we live in a universe so big that we regularly see starlight older than our species. We are overmatched. As a result, we tend to economize by packing our terms with implicit judgements. In literary circles, 'epic fantasy' has all the cache of 'bag lady' or 'redneck' or even worse, 'corporation.'

Which brings me to my question: What should *skeptics* make of fantasy fiction? What kind of judgements should they pack into the term?

I think it's safe to assume that whenever 'fantasy,' as a generic term, appears within publications such as *The Skeptical Inquirer*, it connotes something negative. Fantasy, after all, is the bane of the skeptic. It is belief in the fantastic, measured by the yardstick of science, that is the target of relentless critique by the champions of science education. So you might say that my question answers itself, that it's like asking what priests should make of pornography. What should skeptics make of fantasy fiction? Not much.

But as obvious as this may seem, I want to argue the contrary. I want to argue that the world needs more skeptical fantasists. Many more.

Fantasy and the Scientific Worldview

People are usually surprised when I tell them that fantasy fiction is as much a product of science as is science fiction. The knee-jerk assumption seems to be that fantasy is pretty much as 'unscientific' as any genre can get. The story of science and science fiction seems pretty obvious: as the technological dividends of science leveraged more and more change, people became more and more aware that the future would no longer resemble the past. Since people abhor uncertainty almost as much as nature abhors vacuums, it was only a matter of time before they began stringing narratives across their now indeterminate future, using pseudo-scientific extrapolation as a yardstick to sort between competing possibilities. Of course, this is an oversimplification. As cultural phenomena, the full story of science and science fiction is bound to be far more complicated–if not out and out intractable. But, given the limitations of our three pound brains, I think it's fair to say that this story catches something of the essence of the relation.

Biblical literalism entails a magical belief in how words work. Perhaps the literary establishment and the way it systematically devalues those forms of fiction Biblical literalists actually read needs to shoulder some of the blame for scientific illiteracy.

- R.Scott Bakker

So what about science and fantasy fiction? Here the relation is less obvious, but every bit as direct. Put simply, science is what makes fantasy fiction *fantastic*. As the technological dividends of science leveraged more and more change, people became more and more aware that their *present* knowledge no longer resembled their past knowledge. Where science fiction, one might say, constructs pseudo-knowledge of the future, fantasy fiction reconstructs the pseudo-knowledge of the past. The two genres can be seen as the flip sides of the same scientifically mediated coin, as attempts to use narrative to compensate for an ever more isolated 'cognitive present.' The worlds depicted in fantasy fiction typically operate on principles long since discredited by our contemporary scientific worldview. In terms of basic structure, very little separates Middle-earth from prescientific worlds like Biblical Israel or Vedic India or Homeric Greece.

So what is the draw of fantasy fiction? Contemporary culture is certainly awash in various fantastic representations. Fantasy writers such as Robert Jordan, Terry Goodkind, and George RR Martin are regulars on the bestseller lists. The receipts for Peter Jackson's recent cinematic adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* have surpassed the GDP of some small nations. JK Rowling is perhaps the first writer in history to become a billionaire, thanks to the popularity of *Harry Potter*. What is it about magical worldviews? Why, aside from morbid intellectual curiosity, should anyone *care* about our ancient, self-congratulatory delusions?

Why this mass fetish for reliving dead beliefs?

The 'Anthropomorphic Imperative'

Contrary to appearances, human beings are not inclined to believe things willy-nilly. Everyone thinks their cognitive commitments are 'compelling,' somehow. Before the institutionalization of scientific inquiry, however, the only real constraints on our theoretical claim-making were social and psychological. Without the appropriate social mechanisms to test our claims against 'truth conditions,' which is to say, without science, our practices of theoretical claim-making were effectively divorced from the natural world. This isn't to say that our ancestors could just make things up–if anything the limits on what claims could or could not be made were far more exacting than those found in science today. It just means that those theoretical claims were primarily fixed by 'assertion conditions,' which is to say, what others let them claim, and that these conditions were in turn informed by historical quirks, various social organizational demands, and the egocentric vicissitudes of human psychology. For our ancestors, the natural world was more a narrative than a cognitive constraint.

The extraordinary thing is that despite the vast historical and geographic differences that distinguish various cultures of claim-making, they all seem inclined to make the same theoretical mistakes. In particular, they *anthropomorphize*, they use social and folk-psychological concepts to explain natural phenomena. For our prescientific ancestors, the world was literally like extended family, something to be understood and engaged in the language of desire, affect, and intention. When the crops failed, they shook their fists at the heavens, much as they would at their neighbor. They used the crude logic of interpersonal exchange to pattern their environmental interventions: they made payment in the form of sacrifices, and they were careful to observe protocol, or 'mind their manners.' To their mind, the natural world not only watched, it *kept count*, and when individuals or communities failed

to keep up their end of the bargain, it punished.

The imposition of social and psychological categories on the world seems too universal to be the product of convergent cultural evolution. Humans are anthropomorphic rationalizers by nature; it's scientific reasoning that requires hard work. Perhaps anthropomorphizing is simply an evolutionary 'spandrel' of some kind, a side-effect of our capacity to understand one another. Perhaps, given the ability of psychological explanations to approximate causal realities, it inadvertently led to crucial adaptive successes. Perhaps, given the practical irrelevance of the truth content of so many anthropomorphic theoretical beliefs, the capacity to believe them was selected for reasons of social cohesion. One need only look at the galvanizing effect of propaganda in times of war to see that we humans have a decided tendency to rally around deceptions. It isn't, generally speaking, rational self-interest that sends soldiers into harm's way so much as the shared commitment to abstractions. Our actions turn on our beliefs. When the margins of survival are tight, interdependent communities require tenacity and pitch-perfect coordination, which is to say, conviction and orthodoxy—demands that are common to anthropomorphic worldviews.

In any case, it seems clear that humans possess some kind of innate 'anthropomorphic imperative.' If so, the yen for the kinds of obsolete worlds so common to fantasy fiction becomes easy to explain, at least in part. The reason so many find themselves drawn to fantasy could be same reason science seems to cut against the grain of human psychology: we are predisposed to look at the world in human terms. Since we are given to comprehend the world as a kind of extended family, perhaps we find a certain comfort in 'familial worlds.' Perhaps we *need* to return to them from time to time.

I know I do.

Know Thy Enemy - Literally!

As it turns out, I'm not alone. Millions of Americans seem to be embracing out and out anthropomorphic worldviews, and not simply as a form of entertainment.

The growing profile and influence of literalist religious beliefs should be a matter of deep concern, not only for skeptics, but for the world as a whole. Religious beliefs are not pernicious in of themselves; on the contrary, there's ample evidence that suggests they are socially and psychologically positive. The problem is one of commitment. Thanks to the vagaries of confirmation bias and interpretative underdetermination, pretty much *any* belief can be rationalized to one's own satisfaction. The human tendency is to turn the yardstick upside down, to reason backward from our conclusions to our premises. This is why scientific reason requires that we suspend our commitment to our conclusions: otherwise our cognitive shortcomings are such that we can always *make them true*. We cannot honestly debate beliefs we do not think debatable—it really is as simple as that. And this makes the prospect of reaching rational consensus between disparate believers, which is difficult enough even in ideal circumstances, all but impossible in a variety of crucial social contexts. It becomes a case of 'my way or the high way,' and at a time in human history when we can perhaps least afford it.

For the skeptic, it's difficult not to see the rise-to-prominence of literalist religious belief as a kind of social failure, and an ominous one at that. On a cynical reading, one might say that very many Americans, including the President, live in a prescientific version of Middle-earth. Many pin this failure on the education system and the declining rates of scientific literacy. Although I think these are undoubtedly important components of what is likely yet another theoretically intractable social phenomenon, I think there is another, obvious culprit which has been overlooked. Even though there is rarely, if ever, any convictions in the court of social criticism, it always serves to round up *all* the possible suspects.

Interpretative Literacy

Literalist religious beliefs, no matter what their stripe, all share a commitment to what might be called interpretative monism, a belief that infallible interpretations of religious texts are not only possible, but actually exist. The implausibility of this belief is such that very few critics waste words critiquing it. But it really is remarkable if you think about it: religious literalists actually assume that they, out of all the faiths and all the scriptures and all the interpretations, have more or less *lucked* into the 'one true one.' Now the social and psychological mechanisms that underwrite such blatant exceptionalism are too numerous to cover here. What I would like to draw attention to, however, is that many of the contrary-to-fact religious beliefs (such as 'young earthism') that cause so much consternation in scientific circles actually *fall out of this*. The problem of scientific literacy, in effect, is preceded by a problem with *interpretative literacy*. And this is not the purview science education.

Pretty much everyone agrees that the scientific establishment needs to do a better job at communicating, and if the number of titles and the sales of popular works of science nonfiction are any indication, many have taken this message to heart. But no one, to my knowledge, is talking about a parallel failure of the literary establishment. You would think an institution which purports to be thoroughly self-critical would at least consider the issue. After all, who else should bear institutional responsibility for *interpretative* illiteracy? Within the literary establishment itself, the consensus seems to be that the culture industry is largely to blame, that in the interests of reaping the efficiencies that follow from standardization, the media corporations have literally trained the capacity for critical interpretation out of consumers. Since these self-same corporations have a stranglehold on mass communication, the assumption seems to be, pretty much all the literate can do is wring their hands and avoid all things commercial like the plague. The system, the story goes, can only be resisted 'from the margins.' No one, they might say, laments interpretative illiteracy more than they do, but so long as the system continues unchecked, there is precious little they can do.

Of course this story is an oversimplification. Nor is it the case that all the literati buy into even its most sophisticated versions. But nonetheless reproductions of this tale float around university literature departments like bits of messenger RNA, ready to undo any damage to the master code that not only determines the form and content of all things literary, but also secures the authority of those with the proper institutional credentials. But what if this family of explanations is little more than a flattering rationalization, the kind we humans are wont to cook up to rationalize our authority? What if, far from the refugees of crass commercialism many in the literary establishment take themselves to be, *they are it's unwitting authors?*

In a recent television interview, I was asked about this year's disconnect between the movies that won the Oscars and the movies that pulled down the biggest box office receipts. The answer I gave, the answer which inspired me to write this article, was simply that people in the arts, like people in general, have a tendency to form communities based on shared interests and values. This is well and fine, I said, except that the subsequent tendency for the members of any given community is to communicate inward and to begin defining themselves against the members of other communities, usually in self-serving ways. 'They' become the arrogant elites, the ignorant masses, and so on. External differences get leveled, and somehow, in the course of things, the whole point of communication, which is to speak *out*, to expand rather than to entrench perspectives, seems to be forgotten.

This is precisely what, I want to argue, has happened with the literary establishment. Their argument against the corporations is belied by the fact that those selfsame corporations have no problem publishing 'difficult works' in the literary mainstream. In fact, the diversity available to readers in this the age of internet retailing is nothing short of staggering. In some respects, the so called 'margins' are doing quite well in the marketplace. So then what is the problem? How could one country develop two such radically different conceptions of *how words work*?

Isolation seems to be the obvious answer. Though literalist Christians are more than willing to share the 'Good News,' few in the literary establishment seem willing to take the 'bad news'– that outside of science, few if any interpretations warrant more than the most conditional commitment–in the opposite direction. Why? Because no self-respecting literary professor or writer would be caught dead knocking on doors in *those* narrative neighborhoods.

In my own case, it didn't take me long to realize that talking about epic fantasy was not likely to win me respect and admiration in my English Literature program. Fantasy fiction was lowbrow. It was a crass, commercial genre, not worthy the scrutiny of the learned. It certainly wasn't what I now know it to be: an opportunity to speak out, to use the frequency of shared interests to communicate different values, different perspectives, to people engaged in their own ingrown conversation. Religious literalists, not surprisingly, have an affinity for anthropomorphic worldviews. They love fantasy.

The literary establishment, I'm suggesting, is caught in vicious circle, a dysfunctional social circuit where their attitudes toward various forms of popular culture have the aggregate effect of sorting the future producers of cultural artifacts into two different camps, those with literary ambitions and those without. The former, filled with the desire to be 'taken seriously' by scholars and review editors alike, then go on to communicate subject matters that primarily interest readers who likewise desire to be taken seriously. The latter, who are primarily concerned with giving readers *only* what they want, generally avoid the ambiguities that teach readers the fundamental lesson of interpretation: distrust. The problem isn't that they do this–they are clearly producing something of value for millions of people–it's that they do this in a system that leaves whole swathes of cultural production to them alone.

Like the paranoid whose suspicion so alienates others that he makes his delusions true, the literary establishment robs mass culture of those with the yen to challenge, and redirects them inward, so bringing about the very ornamental, commercial culture it so often criticizes. Using

the institutional mechanisms at their disposal, they hoard what they think is valuable, then accuse everyone else of poverty. And none are so poor as religious literalists, which should come as no surprise. The authorized subject matter, be it 'tea and torment' or 'narrative experimentation,' simply does not appeal to the vast majority of them. But how does one blame another for lacking an *acquired* taste? Especially when those who claim to believe in the so-called 'transformative power of literature,' communicate only to those more or less already transformed. When they write on frequencies only the like-minded can receive.

Conclusion

So what should skeptics make of fantasy fiction? Much–much indeed.

If it is the case that humans are innately predisposed to find wonder, comfort, and delight in representations of anthropomorphic worlds, then perhaps it is not such a bad thing that they do so under the category of *fantasy*. If fantasists are inevitable, let them all be skeptical. Fantasy fiction, and genre fiction in general, represents an opportunity to communicate in the most profound sense, which is to say, to negotiate common ground between drastically different perspectives. Given the insularity of literary fiction, this is difficult if not impossible, which could very well mean that it isn't, in any practical sense, 'literature' at all.

There needs, at any rate, to be a wholesale reevaluation of terms and objectives within the literary community. In the last self-critical upheaval, the glorious mess of the 'post-modern turn,' the literati somehow convinced themselves that, despite our dismal track record when it comes to making theoretical claims outside the institutions of science, nothing was wrong with using prior commitments to contextualist or constructivist theoretical claims to condition our commitment to scientific theoretical claims. This makes no sense, insofar as it amounts to using Ted Bundy's testimony to convict Mother Theresa. It makes even less sense to assume that holding any *philosophical* position, even one as apparently radical as social constructivism or post-structuralism, means that all the important critical work is done.

Ask any skeptic: the work is never done. When over half the nation is oblivious *to the very thing that makes literature possible*, interpretative pluralism, it's safe to say the blame is stacked pretty high. The time has come to pass it around.

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