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Nature, Reason, and the Legacy of Romanticism: Constructing Genre Fantasy

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney
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A little later, remembering man's earthly origin, 'dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return, they liked to fancy themselves bubbles of earth. When alone in the fields, with no one to see them, they would hop, skip and jump, touching the ground as lightly as possible and crying, 'We are bubbles of earth! Bubbles of earth! Bubbles of earth!'

Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise*

As quoted in John Crowley's fantasy novel *Little, Big* (1981)
To my parents, Kheng Hoon and Bengt Selling, without whom I would never have written this thesis, with love.
Abstract

This thesis examines the critical, cultural and historical contexts of the contemporary popular genre of fantasy fiction, arguing that the reasons underlying the genre's growth and popularity in the latter half of the twentieth century are due to its ability to express Romantic ideologies critical of western cultural modernity in an entertaining narrative form. It is the first study of its kind, combining methodological exploration of a notoriously disputed genre (fantasy) with historical and sociological analysis of the medieval and Romantic inheritance of fantasy. Innovative conclusions are drawn concerning both fantasy's lineage and literary value, and its relation to broader social contexts, such as attitudes to the environment and contemporary spirituality. Far from being the childish, escapist reading matter that critics have heretofore claimed, fantasy is intimately the product of, and the critic of modern western culture, expressing powerfully mythic concerns for contemporary, alienated consciousness.

Part 1, Fantasy, Nature and Reason, establishes an original critical methodology that firmly embeds fantasy texts within the contexts of their production and reception, emphasising that critical, social and historical contexts are crucial to a deeper understanding of the structure and function of the modern genre that grew out of the popular reception of J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings in Britain and the U.S.A. in the 1960s. Central to this analysis is a model of genre re-conceptualized as a field of cultural production, which necessitates the study of not only primary (fiction) texts, but also systems of classification including secondary criticism and the social and cultural milieu, reading context as a sort of text. I situate this methodology within the sphere of contemporary cultural studies, drawing particularly on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the "cultural field". I argue that fantasy has been constructed as a devalued "Other" associated with the excluded sphere of "Nature"
within dominant discourses that privilege the critical paradigms and forms of fiction historically associated with the valorised sphere of "Reason". This has led to the systematic exclusion and critical neglect of fantasy texts in modernist literary criticism, based on the genre's identification with the anti-modern, quasi-religious orientation of Romantic ideologies, as well as its status as a popular, commercial fictional form. Modern fantasy's strong dependence on "Story" and mythic modes of thought highlight its historical and cultural relationship to medieval Romance narratives, which I argue work to critically discredit the genre and relegate it to the category of mass popular culture, antithetical to dominant literary critical paradigms and the elite modernist novel. By re-visioning fantasy as a field of artistic, critical, social and historical meaning, a less hierarchical and exclusionary analytical stance is achieved, wherein the complexity of genre fantasy and its relevance to contemporary society can be revealed. These arguments are furthermore articulated within an overarching philosophical framework that highlights the dominance of the Reason/Nature dualism in western thinking: a binary that shapes the intrinsic character of the critical and methodological tools (our consciousness) with which we view the world.

Part 2, The Legacy of Romanticism, begins with an exploration of the neglected historical relationship between modern fantasy and Romanticism, demonstrating how the revival of interest in medieval vernacular Romance and "Gothic" medievalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was intimately linked to a Romantic protest against the rational empiricism of Enlightenment values. Far from being escapist and socially irrelevant, archetypal fantasy's medievalism challenges and critiques many of the hegemonic ideologies of modernity, particularly the dualism between Reason and Nature which underpins the overvaluation of discourses of capitalism, science, rationality and materialism, and forms part of an ongoing Romantic worldview. I argue that fantasy's utilization of the Romantic discourses of holism, spirituality and
the affective dimension advance an implicitly “spiritual” worldview, which forms part of its appeal to the secularized, individualistic ethos of late/post-modern alternative religiosity. This form of Romantic spirituality and utopian vision also underpins a great deal of western environmentalism, which further highlights the ways in which fantasy expresses many of the countercultural values that have gradually become incorporated into the mainstream of western thought since the 1960s. Contemporary genre fantasy thus constitutes a vital part of an ongoing cultural substratum of Romantic thought that has opposed the social conditions of rationalist capitalist modernity since the latter half of the eighteenth century, manifesting today in environmentalism and alternative spirituality movements.
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Conclusion

Appendix 1: Chronology of Texts

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One last thing, my son, be warned that writing books involves endless hard work, and that much study wearies the body.

Ecclesiastes 12:12

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Part I

Fantasy,
Nature and Reason
Chapter 1
The monsters and the critics

1.1 Introduction
The title of this introductory chapter, "The Monsters and the Critics", is borrowed from Professor J. R. R. Tolkien's essay of the same name, delivered as an address on the Old English poem Beowulf to the British Academy in 1936. The borrowing seems peculiarly apt for the topic on which I am about to embark; a critical exploration of the nature, origin and uses of the modern genre of fantasy literature. The deliberate self-reflexivity of "the monsters and the critics" certainly appeals, referring as it does to Tolkien's own critique of a long tradition of Beowulf critics, who (misguidedly, in Tolkien's opinion) regarded the fantastic elements, "the monsters", Grendel and the Dragon, in Beowulf as peculiar, distasteful or otherwise peripheral to the main thrust of the poem. For "A dragon," contends Tolkien, "is no idle fancy". This was an argument Tolkien was to advance throughout his literary and scholarly writings, and one that owes much to Romantic ideologies about the nature and value of the imagination and fantasy in literature since at least the eighteenth century. It is a debate that has continued in one form or another to the present day, converging, appropriately enough, on the popular genre of fantasy that coalesced around Tolkien's fictional masterwork, The Lord of the Rings, a text that has come to be centrally identified with a genre that tends to provoke, as Tom Shippey notes, the "twin reactions of popular appeal and critical rage".

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2 Ibid., 16.
A widely used, important word like “fantasy”, with an ancient etymology, carries with it a freight of history and ideological baggage which bears traces of the social changes that have operated upon the term. Fantasy carries multiple meanings across an array of disciplines ranging from psychology to literary studies, all of which invoke the creative, imaginative powers of the human mind and are therefore in some ways semantically related. Andrew Murphie reminds us that “Words can be sites of contests between competing social groups, as they attempt to assign and control specific meanings”. This is certainly the case with “fantasy”. I shall demonstrate how the meaning and value of “fantasy” has been a site of struggle between competing groups within the realm of literary discourse. This thesis participates in this struggle by reassessing the meaning and value of fantasy in English literary criticism as it relates to the contemporary mass-market genre so labelled through its everyday usage by publishers, book-sellers, readers and writers (though not necessarily scholars) since the late nineteenth century. I therefore examine how the modern genre has been perceived and constructed by critical theory, bearing in mind that literary theory “is not a disembodied set of ideas but a force in institutions”, shaped by communities of writers and readers.5

The prevailing view in Anglo-American criticism of the 1970s-80s sees fantasy as a fundamental expression of irrationality, divorced from all reason, reality, relevance and value to normative adult society. The main charges levelled against fantasy seem to coalesce around three related topics: its perceived childishness (that it is suitable only for children, and furthermore that adults should not read or enjoy it); its “irrelevance” to contemporary society or reality in general; and its “escapist” qualities. Fantasy’s escapism is brought about by its “impossible” content, which is closely related to notions of social irrelevance. Because this content often includes elves, fairies and

4 Andrew Murphie and John Potts, Culture and Technology (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 3.
pre-modern settings, fantasy is associated with children's literature; as Meredith Veldman states, "The conventional tendency to throw together children and fantasy arises from the conviction of both the child's greater gullibility and fantasy's inherent irrationality". Though fantasy's connections with the impossible – the empirically "non-real" – are an important part of this equation, they alone cannot fully explain the links with childhood or escapism, for example, or why these associations should be negatively evaluated.

The concepts of "genre" and "popular culture" are also central to this thesis. What does it mean that "fantasy" today signifies a popular genre of fiction? Fredric Jameson has identified "postmodernism" as the dominant cultural aesthetic of "late capitalism", which has characterized the global political economy of Western societies since the 1970s. "Genre" fiction, as it is commonly understood today, is a concept inextricably intertwined with commodity culture. It is no accident that fantasy as a commercial genre category arose in precisely this period, when the expansion of capitalism and the widespread commodification of culture profoundly affected the nature and the critical reception of artistic works. Massive social and economic transformations during this period resulted in changed forms of cultural production, and called for an interrogation of the role, methodology and future of literary criticism. The dominant realist aesthetic of modernism, which held sway in the literary field throughout most of the twentieth century, was at heart hostile towards mass/popular culture, and this has been strongly expressed in the critical reception of

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8 The 1960s and 70s coincided with the more general Americanisation of mass culture known as the postmodern condition. Furthermore, Stephen Neale notes that the focus of structuralism and semiotics on the single, individual text effectively excluded the analysis of genre and genres, see *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 5.
fantasy fiction. The “unreal” or “fantastic” elements of fantasy, its monsters and dragons, still provide an affront to many literary critics whose criteria of excellence are based on the paradigms of the modern realist novel and notions of “high culture”. The study of genre and popular culture therefore examines clashes over cultural value, where the classification of fantasy as a “popular genre” means that it is “unconsecrated” by the dominant discourse, and its texts and producers are systematically neglected or excluded from the literary field.

The idea of genre, that literature can be grouped into “kinds”, or “types”, is in fact deeply antithetical to traditional “liberal humanist” values and beliefs about what literature is and how it should be studied. The evident popularity of fantasy and its status as a genre or “formula fiction” has proven problematic for literary criticism based primarily on formalist principles, as popular storytelling’s reliance on conventions and stock motifs goes against the modernist valorisation of “originality” as a hallmark of literature. The assumption that great art should be “timeless”, transcending its own age to speak to “universal” human nature, was inculcated into the very foundations of English literature as a scholarly discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and has had ramifications for the ways in which we study modern “English Lit”. One major consequence of this ideology has

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9 Throughout this thesis I use the term “fantasy” to describe the literary genre, and “fantastic” in the common adjectival sense. When I say “fantastic literatures” or “literatures of the fantastic” I therefore mean literatures that employ fantastic tropes and devices, recognised as such generally in relation to mimetic or realistic fiction. When I refer to “the fantastic” in the Todorovian sense (as a narrow theoretical genre that has little to do with what is commonly understood as genre fantasy), I do so in inverted commas.


11 Tzvetan Todorov observed in 1970 that the prevailing attitude toward genre was that “We are told that it is pointless to speak of genres (tragedy, comedy, etc), for the work of art is essentially unique, valuable because of what is original about it that distinguishes it from all other works, and not because of whatever in it may resemble them.” The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 5.

12 Peter Barry, Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1995), 17ff.
been the idea that literary texts are entirely self-contained, and should be studied in isolation from their historical, political and cultural contexts, in order to appreciate their meaning unsullied by the vagaries of history. The study of genre examines how literature is categorized, the historical and economic reasons for the categorization, and the value of categorizing literature. This essentially comparative act demands an examination of extra-textual context, which is deeply at odds with the time-honoured technique of individualized close reading of decontextualized texts. The study of genre therefore brings us face to face with some of the most deeply held dogmas (unformulated, unstated, invisible yet pervasive) in the modern study of literature – a discipline founded upon a consensus of "canonical" taste that is increasingly challenged and difficult to justify.\(^\text{13}\)

This thesis is therefore as much about (literary) criticism as it is about fantasy literature. I will therefore be looking at "the critics" as well as "the monsters" of fantasy, paying particular attention to what the critics have to say about the monsters. In this sense my methodology is "metatheoretical" as it presents, compares, and criticizes existing theories and proposes a new critical paradigm where genre fantasy is regarded as a "field" of cultural production. I therefore consider critical texts to be "primary", where illustrative examples drawn from works of fiction are subordinate to the theoretical issues raised. Questions about the functions, methods and values of literary studies have remained central to the critical endeavour throughout the latter half of the twentieth century – a period in which the "project" of "theory" has gained ascendance. As Peter Barry observes, the ideological consensus of literary taste (that had held sway during the period of high modernism from the 1920s–50s), began to be seriously challenged from the 1960s onwards by the relativist stance of new theories that sought in essence to re-establish the connections between literary study, history,

\(^{13}\) The defence of the notion of transhistorical, culturally unbounded "high" literature is best exemplified in the work of the American academic Harold Bloom, the last of the Leavisites, in *The Western Canon* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994).
politics and philosophy. These issues were the crucible in which the discipline of cultural studies was formed, gaining prominence through the rise of feminist, sociological, anthropological and interdisciplinary research. This study is intended as an analysis of the nature of fantasy in general, re-examining the theoretical grounds of the category of genre, and as such is not concerned with individual authors and texts or the strategies of close reading that is generally the norm in literary studies. It is concerned more with the relationship of fantasy to other genres, and considers not only fantasy's place in the field of literature, but its relevance to contemporary Western audiences and society as a whole.

Whilst studies of a theoretical nature have been highly influential in shaping the critical field of the "fantastic", to my knowledge there have been only a very few that have critically evaluated or questioned the underlying epistemologies and assumptions of the leading theories of the fantastic themselves, and these have appeared only in the last decade or so. The systemic self-reflexivity and interrogative stance of such inquiries is no doubt partially due to the fact that by now enough of a corpus of criticism and of primary texts has accumulated to make such overviews possible. Of significance are changes in the critical milieu itself, wrought by the ascendance and influence of cultural studies, which takes as its outset the idea that all culture, including criticism, is itself socially constructed and therefore politically and ideologically motivated. Furthermore, as Andrew Milner points out,

the move from literary to cultural studies can in fact be read as one from a modernist to a postmodernist discourse about culture. This has never been simply a move from elitism to populism...but rather a progressive and practical dissolution of the very notion of a radical distinction between elite and popular cultures.

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14 Barry, Beginning Theory, 16.
15 Some notable examples of authors who have interrogated some of the assumptions of literary criticism are Mark Bould, Brian Attebery, Ursula Le Guin, Samuel Delany – in various writings.
16 Milner, Literature, Culture and Society, 58.
The combined influence of (theoretical) feminism, Marxism and sociology, and "real world" changes in modes of cultural production, such as the massive growth of popular/mass media culture, can be clearly felt in the focus and agenda of cultural studies. As such, my own study should itself be properly acknowledged as a product of its time, both expressing and contributing to contemporary critical paradigms.

Fantasy literature constitutes an increasingly popular genre of modern Western popular fiction, yet outside the specialized field of fantasy and science fiction criticism it has largely escaped the notice of contemporary cultural critics. Genre fantasy has been given short shrift within literary studies, its texts and authors marginalized in the struggle for legitimacy and recognition in the broader field of cultural production.\(^7\) If it is even mentioned, fantasy is very often regarded with suspicion, if not outright derision, being generally perceived as an anachronistic and politically conservative genre fiction of little interest to progressive scholars. Even within the field of scholarship of fantastic literature itself, science fiction has generally enjoyed greater critical respectability than fantasy, arguably due to its appeal to the hegemonic paradigms of science, progress, and rationalism.\(^8\) Hence the perception of fantasy as a subject not really "worthy" of serious critical attention has remained entrenched in

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\(^7\) It is interesting to observe that even within cultural studies texts that cover the range of pulp fiction from romance, crime, science fiction and cult television, fantasy \textit{per se} is conspicuously absent. One can guess at several reasons for this, one being the deeper and more well-known critical footprint of science fiction (under which fantasy is often subsumed); the intractability of fantasy criticism; and the politics of the cultural studies discipline itself. The latter can be seen in the history of the cultural studies, arising from (in Britain at least) a Marxist politics of resistance to bourgeois culture in an effort to recuperate an authentic "folk" culture of the working class, which would rule out fantasy as a literature predominantly of the middle class.

\(^8\) Science fiction has also attracted the attention of feminist authors and theorists, who have highlighted the subversive potential of sf utopian and dystopian traditions and experimental writing. Thus sf has been recognized by feminist theory (e.g. Donna Haraway's influential "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," \textit{Socialist Review} 80 (1985), 65-107; as well as the wider sf community, in the form of the James Tiptree Jr. Award for writing that challenges notions of gender. Fantasy, despite its significant proportion of women writers, not to mention feminist authors, retains the impression of being conservative and of little interest to gender theorists.
the broader field of literary and cultural analysis.\footnote{The perception of fantasy as not quite “legitimate” broadly persists despite the relatively constant outflow of postgraduate dissertations on the topic over the past twenty or so years and the occasional specialist course that is offered to meet student demand. Some recent PhDs on fantasy include Chantal Bourgault Du Courdray, “The Curse of the Werewolf: Nature, Culture and the Self since the Enlightenment” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2001); Kerrie Anne Le Lievre, “The World Is Changing: Ethics and Genre Development in Three Twentieth-Century High Fantasies” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, South Australia, 2003); and Holly E. Ordway, “The Development of the Modern Fantasy Novel” (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 2001).} This is a glaring omission, particularly in the fields of cultural studies and postmodern criticism, which purport to embrace the entire spectrum of popular culture and destabilise the boundaries between “high” and “low” culture.\footnote{“Postmodernism” is a vexed term with widely varying definitions being offered, including Alister McGrath’s “A general cultural development, especially in North America, which resulted from the general collapse in confidence of the universal rational principles of the Enlightenment”, to Ernest Gellner’s more visceral “metawaddle”. See Johannes C. Wolfart, “Postmodernism” in Guide to the Study of Religion, ed. Willi Braun & Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 38t. In this thesis, I am more concerned with postmodernity than postmodernism. Postmodernity is the lived experience of the late capitalist West, characterised by change, consumption, pluralism and individuality.}

It was this relative neglect of genre fantasy that inspired the present thesis. Though I did not initially approach this topic from within any particular “school” of criticism, my background in interdisciplinary Medieval Studies inclined me toward a functional approach, reading texts as cultural artefacts that are historically and ideologically constituted. The overwhelming worldwide popularity of fantasy narratives such as J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books (1997–2003), and Peter Jackson’s film adaptations of J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (2001–2003) is a multi-million dollar cultural phenomenon that cannot be ignored. There is now more need than ever for rigorous theoretical analyses of fantasy that are able to answer the how and why questions, such as: why is fantasy so popular amongst contemporary audiences, and yet shunned by critics? How and why has it developed the particular set of conventions that allow it to be recognisable as a popular fictional genre? In terms of medievalism, why does so much fantasy literature resemble medieval romance? What
ideological purpose and value does a particular vested image of the medieval hold for fantasy?

A brief description of what this study understands as “the genre of modern fantasy” is
apposite here. Though its historical roots and literary antecedents arguably lie in the
Romanticism of the eighteenth century, fantasy as a distinct “genre” with its own
narrative conventions only developed as a separate, easily recognizable publishing
category or commercial genre in the English-speaking West during the latter half of
the twentieth century. The contemporary field/genre examined here is centred on
book-length novels intended for adult audiences.\textsuperscript{21} Though the tradition of fantasy
short stories and weird tales in magazine format has formed a significant part of the
genre since at least the 1930s in the USA, and film, television and games are gaining
in importance, the novel form remains the primary focus of this study. Furthermore,
the fantasy field most readily accessible to me as an Australian is the post-Tolkien
Anglophone literature dominated by North American and British authors, which
comprises the majority of fantasy and science fiction texts in Australian bookshops.
These texts therefore form the core of my study.\textsuperscript{22} The cultural condition of late
capitalism has a “global character”, a world system forged in post-war North America
(a quality reflected in the dominance of the US fantasy publishing industry), so it
makes sense to generalize about “contemporary Western culture” as global and
inclusive, rather than segregated by national (or linguistic) differences.

\textsuperscript{21} Fantasy crosses the boundaries between adult and children’s literature, and reveals the arbitrariness
of these sorts of categorizations. I have therefore based my distinction on intentionality, as expressed
by author, publisher, and perceived in general by reading audiences. These boundaries are not strict,
however, and may change according to the eye of the beholder (habitus).

\textsuperscript{22} I have not tried to differentiate the texts along any lines of national character or tradition (partly
because of the difficulty and extreme subjective bias such assessments are subject to), choosing
instead to draw some broad brushstrokes in regard to “Western culture” in general, understood as the
contemporary Anglo-American media-dominated hegemony of consumer capitalism and scientific
rationality, along with the shared philosophical and historical roots of Western European society
rooted in classical antiquity and Christianity.
1.2 Methodological preamble and the scope of the project
This thesis is conceived as a broad survey of the terrain, re-viewing the existing map of fantasy, as well as suggesting possible new areas of critical speculation for future explorers. It does not pretend to offer a definitive set of solutions, or to be comprehensive in either scope or subject matter, but is rather an initial foray inviting further thought and research. My interest in the topic grew out of a desire to understand how the generic fantasy texts I experienced as a reader related to broader social and cultural processes, such as environmentalism and alternative religions or the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s-90s. These particular topics arose through the observation that many fantasy texts displayed a set of shared ideas or common attitudes towards the environment and modern technology that seemed to indicate some sort of nebulous, unspoken communality that I wanted to explore further.\(^{23}\) Despite my own perception that such thematic and ideological connections did indeed exist, when I turned to the secondary criticism of fantasy in search of answers, I found myself instead embroiled in shambolic and confusing debates about the definition of fantasy, into which questions of meaning and function rarely entered. In fact, such issues seemed to be actively discouraged by the very nature of (traditional) literary studies itself. This situation fuelled my conviction that comprehending the relations and formation of fantasy as a popular fictional genre is a compelling theoretical, practical and political problem deserving of critical attention.\(^{24}\) A study of the social, historical and cultural contexts of fantasy fictions will hopefully deepen and enrich our understanding of their meaning and relevance as cultural artefacts and indicators of social value in our rapidly changing world.

\(^{23}\) Interestingly, some of these connections were perceived by scholars of New Religious Movements (NRM)s within the discipline of studies in religion. See Stoddard Martin, Orthdox Heresy: The Rise of 'Magic' as Religion and Its Relation to Literature (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989); and Erik Cohen, Nachman Ben-Yehuda and Janet Aviad, "Recentering the world: the quest for 'elective' centers in a secularized universe", Sociological Review, 35:2 (1987), 320-346. Cohen et al discuss the sf community as an example of spontaneous organisation in response to spiritual/religious yearnings.

Formal, institutionalized scholarly study of the literature that has come to be called "fantasy” is relatively new. Fantasy criticism first emerged as an academic sub-discipline in universities in the 1970s, following the phenomenal popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* in North America. Prior to the 1970s, there were many writers who discussed the word “fantasy” and related terms in various contexts, but it is significant that the word was not normally used to designate “a specific group of writings”, in other words, a genre of fantasy.25 The foundations of both the genre and its study were laid during the rise of Romanticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, championed by critical discourses of “the sublime”, “the imagination” and “Faery” by writers such as Addison and Coleridge. Further defences of fairytale and early fantasy stories came from the pens of prominent authors of such literature, including John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton, culminating in J. R. R. Tolkien’s seminal essay “On Fairy Stories” (1939).26 However, it was not until the 1960s that fantasy fiction truly gained enough momentum and presence to be considered a separate modern genre, and it took the English translation of Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* in 1973, to bring theoretical credence to its scholarly study.27 The growth of a critical vocabulary of fantasy has thus evolved piecemeal, deriving not only from separate academic disciplines such as folklore, myth, psychology and studies of realistic literature, but also from traditions outside academia, such as publishing, fandom and journalism.28 This accretion of historical terminology has contributed to the current confusion over what the term “fantasy” actually designates, and how to define the contemporary genre – particularly

28 Ibid., xiv.
as the word has been used for both mental and psychological faculties as well as literary phenomena.

The careless mixing of terms and the proliferation of definitions that are mutually exclusive or simply incompatible, have led to a curious situation where the notion that "fantasy is undefinable" has become part of its definition.\(^{29}\) The operation of covert and overt evaluations of ideology and value included as part of the definition of fantasy have led to sharply polarised evaluations that tend to see fantasy either negatively as conservative or positively as subversive. Is genre fantasy merely "imitative dross... formulaic stuff"\(^{30}\), identified by "quest fantasies and anything with elves in it"\(^{31}\), or is it "a form of writing which is about opening up subversive spaces within the mainstream"?\(^{32}\) Or does fantasy actually form "the mainstream of Western literature until the Renaissance" and include works such as the Odyssey and the Epic of Gilgamesh?\(^{33}\) This bewildering array of opinions demands, as Hunter declares, "some kind of assessment of the theoretical assumptions particularly about genre and mode that lead to these statements: if only because the statements themselves become political fodder for future theorists, and more significantly because they may affect the ways in which a work is read".\(^{34}\)


\(^{34}\) Hunter, *Modern Allegory and Fantasy*, 38.
Hunter is not wrong when she calls fantasy criticism a “strife torn field” characterised by “wildly contradictory readings”, terminological vagueness, and the marked use of a polemical “vocabulary of value” used to distinguish not only between different writers (e.g. Tolkien or Poe), but also between readers of the same text or even different reading strategies within the one reader. This has led to widely polarized assessments of fantasy texts, ranging from the deeply hostile (fantasy as “a rampantly socio-pathological phenomenon” and “just a subliterature of mystification”) to the openly defensive or celebratory (“Fantasy seeks the undefinable; its subject is nothing less than the human spirit”). As Peter Hunt summarizes:

Fantasy literature is either taken seriously (and enthusiastically), or seriously rejected. It is the root of all literature, an area of advanced literary experimentation, and essential to our mental health; or it is regressive, and associated with self-indulgent catharsis on the part of writers; or it is linked to a ritualistic, epic, dehumanised world of predetermination and out of tune with post-romantic sensitivity: or it symbolizes the random world of the postmodern.

It is no wonder that fantasy has been largely ignored by speculative theory and neglected by cultural studies, as definitional problems render the main body of critical work on the subject impenetrable to anyone unfamiliar with the genre. A significant portion of critical works base their assumptions on internally self-evident grounds that are often opaque to methodological scrutiny and not easily adaptable to other theoretical perspectives. To co-opt Brian Attebery’s similar observations about science fiction, the term “fantasy” is “marked by rancorous debate over what it means,

35 Ibid., 1, 38.
how it came to mean what it seems to mean today, what is allowed to count as part of it, how it ought to be studied — and who gets to speak on these issues”.  

This is not a situation unique to fantasy scholarship. Aesthetic theory is in fact riddled with conflicting and incompatible paradigms. M. H. Abrams notes in regard to critiques of Romanticism:

The fact is that many theories of art cannot readily be compared at all, because they lack a common ground on which to meet and clash. They seem incommensurable because stated in diverse terms, or in identical terms with diverse signification, or because they are an integral part of larger systems of thought which differ in assumptions and procedure. As a result it is hard to find where they agree, where they disagree, or even what the points at issue are.  

This is not necessarily or inherently a bad thing in that much of the vigour and fascination of cultural criticism in fact lies in these disagreements, and conflict acts as a spark to the initiation of richer and more diverse critical insights. Nevertheless, there is a need to establish a common ground and frame of reference for speaking about fantasy that is both readily accessible and flexible enough to encompass a variety of methodologies. A student or researcher new to the study of fantasy might well conclude from the various conflicting definitions of the genre that it is much less of a problem to come up with a brief “working definition” of fantasy that lists some of its main conventions and formal characteristics, than to delve into the critical, sociological and historical reasons behind the definitions of fantasy or come up with an overarching theory explaining its current form. As Mark Bould notes, “definitional problems have made it easier to discuss isolated examples in critical contexts provided by other genres than to produce a theory of fantasy per se.”

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40 Brian Attebery, Decoding Gender in Science Fiction (NY: Routledge, 2002), 1.
It is clear that there is a distinct need for broad theoretical overviews of the genre that are not plagued by either the defensive stance or the dismissal of the popular that has marked earlier criticism. The work that has been done on alternative paradigms for theorizing fantasy has been suggestive but episodic. No concerted effort has hitherto been made to gather together a coherent theory of fantasy that takes into account social, political, economic and historical contexts of the genre’s production and consumption, nor its function, meaning and value to modern Western culture. This thesis will suggest an amalgamation of theoretical perspectives and methodologies in a synthesising hermeneutic that I hope will come closer to a broad theory of fantasy, allowing it to be approached and understood on its own terms.

One major theoretical and definitional obstacle can be traced back to primary confusions between fantasy as a genre, and fantasy or “the fantastic” as a literary mode. Several writers have pointed to “the fantasy/fantastic disarray” as stemming from Rosemary Jackson’s controversial *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1984) that conflated genre and mode, and proved a strong influence on subsequent critics. However, Hunter indicates that “the theory of genre, which could be expected to help with the definition, is itself in turmoil and inadequate to describe the activity of these writings”, leading not only to the conflation of genre/mode, fantasy/fantastic, but a lack of distinction between fantasy and allegory. Problems with what was perceived as the restrictive nature of genre theory and its “ghettoising” tendencies, led to what is tantamount to a boycott of genre in favour of mode in many of the more theoretically-orientated critics of the 1980s and 90s. The ahistorical nature of many

of these studies, the linking of genres with popular fiction and devalued mass culture, and the failure to take into account the contexts of the production and reception of texts, have contributed to what could be interpreted as a theoretical and critical impasse in fantasy scholarship.

Kathryn Hume’s wide-ranging study in 1984 indicated one of the fundamental sources of the problem: that Western literary theory has been geared towards the understanding of literature as representing reality, so that the mimetic mode, the imitation of life, is dominant. This deep-seated cultural bias has led to an impoverishment and distortion of the critical vocabulary available to talk about fantasy/the non-real. As Hume states, “We do not have the analytic vocabulary to frame our inquiries... Since our terms evolved to meet the needs of mimetic assumptions, only the mimetic elements in literature have hitherto worn faces”.\(^{46}\)

Such a situation immediately alerts us to the presence of a dualistic construction – the institutionalised assertion of a dominant discourse in the interests of power arrangements that construct the Other through exclusion and negation, a denial of self-hood. Fantasy has in this case become the disenfranchised Other to mimesis within the literary field.\(^{47}\)

The dualism of mimesis/fantasy corresponds to the dualities of high/low culture, literature/popular fiction, which can ultimately be shown to derive from the Reason/Nature equivalence through a set of “linking postulates” inherent in the Western logic of dualism.\(^{48}\) That the Reason/Nature dualism operates strongly in

\(^{46}\) Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), xii, 8.

\(^{47}\) Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1953) is the classic study privileging the mimetic mode in fiction, and asserting the primacy of this mode in all literary productions of the West, from Homer to the twentieth century.

\(^{48}\) In philosophical terms, linking postulates are “assumptions normally made or implicit in the cultural background which create equivalences or mapping between the pair.” Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 45.
critiques of fantasy is evident from the proliferation of statements such as this one by Robert Foust: "As critics we can no longer ignore fantasy, and yet we lack the lexical and conceptual tools with which to treat it. Criticism requires a systematic theory based upon Tolkien's assumption that 'Fantasy is a rational, not an irrational, activity'."\(^{49}\) In other words, there exists a need to re-conceptualise fantasy in a way that combats the logic of dualism. The solution I offer here is to reconstruct fantasy as a "field" of cultural production, firmly ensconced in the cultural and historical contexts which give fantasy a positive identity that acknowledges different genre categories, without succumbing to the othering discourses of dualism.

Despite Hume's early efforts, the deeply rooted assumption of the authority of mimesis as the legitimate frame of literature has on the whole continued largely unchallenged in the literary field.\(^{50}\) The failure to recognize or question the underlying premises determining what constitutes "literature" often results in, as Randal Johnson says, "the blind acceptance of the dominant definition of literary legitimacy".\(^{51}\) It thus becomes vital to first recognize the dualistic premises at work, in order to challenge and change them. As Pierre Bourdieu mentions in *Distinction*, "In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see is a function of the knowledge, or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programmes for perception".\(^{52}\) During the course of my research, I found that the "programmes for perception" encoded in modernist literary criticism carried within them a set of enshrined values that were inimical to a functional and


\(^{50}\) With some exceptions made for newly canonized works of "literary" magic realism and late nineteenth-century Gothic fantastic that have overcome the stigma of popular fiction that marks other fantasy works of a more commercially minded nature.


contextually based study of genre fantasy. These can be broadly summarized as an unwillingness to countenance the popular, generic attributes of fantasy, along with an unquestioned bias towards mimetic forms of fiction – perspectives that have served to uphold the traditionally dominant ideologies of English literary criticism to this day. These conceptual/critical “programmes”, when applied to popular fantasy fiction, seem to me both misapplied and inappropriate. It is the “blind acceptance” of dominant critical programmes that define “authentic” literature, which drives the ambivalence and contradiction seen in definitions of fantasy from leading scholars such as Manlove, Attebery and Grant. My efforts to uncover the sources of the critical devaluation of fantasy, along with a desire to formulate a more comprehensive explanatory model of the genre, led me therefore to a paradigm shift functioning broadly within the domain of cultural studies.

1.3 Approaches to popular fiction: Cultural studies, Bourdieu & the “field”

Cultural studies, or cultural criticism, is particularly interested in ideological aspects of popular culture and the role it plays in the social and political world. Cultural studies actively promotes a cross-disciplinary outlook in order to appreciate the complexity of all forms of cultural practice, enabling not only the examination of primary texts of popular fiction, but also what the construction of texts as cultural artefacts reveals about broader social processes. The rise of cultural studies since the 1960s has illuminated the need to “theorize” literature, through the application of theories and methods drawn sociology and Marxism, for example, in order to critique

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53 In Chapter 3 I advance the notion of fantasy as the Other to literature in what I call the “Weed Theory” of fantasy. The basic concept is that it is not fantasy’s inherent properties that render it unwanted, but the preconceptions of the literary critical discourse. The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934) defines “weed” (noun) as “wild herb springing where it is not wanted”, and “weed” (verb transitive) as “sort out (inferior parts or members of a quantity or company) for riddance, rid (quantity or company) of inferior members”, 1402.

taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature, meaning and function of cultural works.\textsuperscript{55} The focus on culture rather than literature (in a traditional sense) in cultural studies has meant a theoretical interrogation of the ways in which literature is constructed as a cultural practice, challenging “common-sense” views entrenched in the field and opening it up to a range of new perspectives and questions. As Brian Attebery observes, popular fictional forms such as science fiction and fantasy can serve as “useful tool[s] for investigating habits of thought”.\textsuperscript{56} The conceptual tools of cultural criticism possesses useful perspectives for the critique of fantasy, and though the genre has hitherto been ignored or overlooked as a valuable source material by many cultural studies scholars, this thesis attempts to wed the two areas and bring something new to each field in doing so. The study of the institutional framework of literature encouraged by cultural studies examines how criticism works to position texts and audiences through the imposition of labels (such as high/low, elite/popular) that affect cultural practices and the way they are studied. Cultural criticism is about the role that culture plays in our society, “not only for what it reveals about our social, economic, and political institutions, but also for how it shapes these institutions and our consciousness.” As Arthur Berger says, “culture, we now recognize, has consequences”\textsuperscript{57}

Of central importance to this thesis is Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the “cultural field,” one of the founding theories of contemporary cultural studies.\textsuperscript{58} Bourdieu’s model of field has been significant in terms of providing theoretical and methodological rigour to this study. Culture is conceptualised by Bourdieu as a field of relations of power. His analytical model of “field” takes into account the role of agents (writers, critics,

\textsuperscript{56} Attebery, \textit{Decoding Gender in Science Fiction}, 1.
\textsuperscript{57} Berger, \textit{Cultural Criticism}, 38.
publishers, audiences etc), and their *habitus* (systems of dispositions inculcated mainly through educational background), grounded within a field of social relations characterised by struggle or competition for power and capital – symbolic, political and economic capital, none of which is reducible to the other. The notion of field is invaluable to a more complex and historically contextualised understanding of the formation of fantasy as a genre, because it involves a *relational* mode of thinking, in which meaning and function are derived from a system of intertwined relationships between elements.

Modernist literary criticism has traditionally centred on the postulation of the originality ("genius") of the individual *auteur*, considering its task as "the interpretation of literary works as the achievements of their authors", a view justified by "the special value of great works: their complexity, their beauty, their insight, their universality, and their potential benefits to the reader".\(^{59}\) In other words, the study of literature has been fundamentally a discipline of "taste", based on how to value writing, and concentrated therefore on valued, that is, canonical, texts.\(^{60}\) Such an approach has sat uncomfortably with texts whose appeal has been largely commercial and popular. A number of critics of fantasy have recognized the limitations of the traditional methodological tools of literary criticism (such as formal analyses of style, structure, or character), in fully or adequately explaining the popular appeal of fantasy and its function or structure as a genre.\(^{61}\) Bourdieu's notion of field does not imply an outright rejection of aesthetic or formal properties, but it does oppose the Romantic conception of the artist as individual genius, as well as the "literariness" of a text residing in its inherent properties. The concept of the field means that each work is an expression of the field of relations as a whole.

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The analysis of literary form or language is an essential part of literary study, but has full meaning only when viewed relationally...and when reinserted into the objective field of social relations of which it is part and from which it derives.\textsuperscript{62}

The theory of the field leads to a rejection of internal textual analysis of individual works, and a rejection of class-based, socially deterministic or biographical studies as inadequate and reductive methodologies when taken in and of themselves, because in order to gain a full understanding of the work, a more holistic view is required: says Bourdieu, "what we have to do is all these things at the same time" (my italics).\textsuperscript{63}

This thesis endeavours to approach this synthesizing methodology through a combination of critical analysis of the secondary literature, an examination of the historical formation of the genre, close textual readings of primary material, and reflections on various social phenomena that may have affected the production and reception of modern fantasy literature.

My approach to genre is both eclectic and pluralistic, as I have deliberately applied the positive aspects from a variety of theoretical perspectives to the study of fantasy as seems relevant and useful. I am thereby able to recognize that some aspects of certain critical paradigms may be highly useful or only partially relevant to the work at hand; and whilst problematic aspects are criticized, they can be acknowledged without categorically dismissing the entire theory out of hand. A major instance where this eclectic, pluralistic perspective has been needful is in my application of Bourdieu’s conception of the cultural field: where his own writings tend to unproblematically accept high/low culture divisions and privilege “the [modernist] values of the priestly or mandarin strata”, I have used aspects of this theory of field to highlight how clashes over cultural value are grounded in social and historical relations.\textsuperscript{64} Major

\textsuperscript{62} Bourdieu, \textit{The Field of Cultural Production}, 14.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{64} Fowler, \textit{Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory}, 157. Fowler also notes that Bourdieu’s focus on the importance of the modernist aesthetic attitude also leaves out works popular amongst both educated
theorists of literatures of the fantastic, such as Vladimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson are also treated in this way, as some aspects of their critiques are very useful for conceptualising the workings of modern genre fantasy, whilst other aspects are seriously flawed or obstructive to my analysis of genre.\textsuperscript{65} In this study I often use "field" and "genre" interchangeably to refer to modern fantasy, as I have attempted to re-conceptualize the notion of genre as a field of cultural production. As Lynette Hunter has noted, the theory of genre has itself been in turmoil, especially when restricted to static notions of genre as a fixed kind associated with specific literary techniques, which has proven inadequate in describing the activity of popular genres such as fantasy or science fiction.\textsuperscript{66} The solution proposed here is a radical re-thinking of genre as field, which encompasses not only a recognizable set of texts, but also authors, publishers, critics, audiences and the various social and material processes, value systems, interpretative frameworks and so on, which all conspire together to allow us to produce and recognize a "genre" in the first place. This may seem at first glance somewhat of a circular argument, but it hinges fundamentally on Bourdieu's idea that "the work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art".\textsuperscript{67} This study takes as its outset Brian Attebery's depiction of genre as a "fuzzy set" of texts defined by central, prototypical examples\textsuperscript{68}, but seeks to build upon and expand this model by embedding it within the field of social relations. This means in effect, that texts are not viewed in isolation as somehow separate from

\textsuperscript{65} Vladimir Propp, \textit{Morphology of the Folktale} (Austin, Texas: Texas UP, 1928 [1968]); Todorov, \textit{The Fantastic}; and Rosemary Jackson, \textit{Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion}. These critics are examined in more detail in Chapter 2 (Mapping the territory) and Chapter 3 (Why are critics afraid of dragons?).

\textsuperscript{66} Hunter, \textit{Modern Allegory and Fantasy}, 1.

\textsuperscript{67} Bourdieu, \textit{The Field of Cultural Production}, 35.

their contexts of production and reception, but are regarded as expressions of the relationships constituting that system, and function as one element within it. Field is a powerful and useful concept for genre theory, as it avoids static or strictly bounded definitions, being characterized rather by a fluid, dynamic structure that reflects the relative positions of texts and agents in a constant state of change and struggle.

Further, the questions posed by critiques or theories and their underlying assumptions are not neutral, but are value-laden, and have the power to shape our responses to them. The way in which fantasy is defined does impact on the range of questions which can be put to the genre, and affects the richness of research findings and the value accorded them. If fantasy is defined as a purely escapist, commercial, formulaic genre which is negatively evaluated by the critic, this immediately implicates the genre’s readers/audience, who are also devalued, and the findings will undoubtedly be equally reductionist and simplistic. If the assumption is that we find what we are looking for, that the shape of the question determines the shape of the answer, it is because literary criticism is not a science – it is an argument based on rhetoric, the art of persuasion. By re-viewing the concept of genre as a field of cultural production, it is possible to change the programmes for the perception of fantasy, giving rise to a new set of questions and a new set of discoveries about the genre. The recognition by cultural studies that value is accorded by the valuing community, rather than being an inherent property of the texts themselves, has far-reaching implications for the study of literature.69 Aesthetic value is shown by Bourdieu to be itself socially constituted, and is consecrated in the belief systems legitimised by complex institutional frameworks such as academies and universities.70

Literary texts do not exist independently of the processes that give rise to the belief in the value of the work as art – a perspective that requires recognizing the function

of “artistic mediators” as producers of the meaning and value of the work, i.e. publishers, critics, agents, academies.\textsuperscript{71} This means that a careful examination of the secondary criticism is important in uncovering the values and disciplinary ideologies at play in the reception of cultural works such as genre fantasy.

The processes of “consecration” and “legitimation” of a cultural product are essential to the understanding of a work of art (such as a literary fantasy) as art, because “works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such.”\textsuperscript{72} This is where the function of “artistic mediators” or secondary producers of cultural products, such as critics, academic institutions, publishers, comes in – as producers of the meaning and value of the artistic work.\textsuperscript{73} Because art is only that which is recognized and acknowledged as art (a view which departs radically from the idea that an artistic object has any intrinsic properties or universal value), critics contribute to the symbolic production of the “total” work of art by inducing belief that something is indeed art or “literature”. Bourdieu maintains that

Every critical affirmation contains, on the one hand, a recognition of the value of the work which occasions it, which is thus designated as a worthy object of legitimate discourse... and on the other hand an affirmation of its own legitimacy. All critics declare not only their judgement of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about it and judge it. In short, they take part in a struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art”.\textsuperscript{74}

Critical works operating in the field or community of fantasy are engaged in a dialogue with each other and with the artistic works or writers in question.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 36.
Texts ranging from Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* to journalistic fiction reviews reflect the relative positions and strategies of their authors, who are engaged in competition for the interests specific to their field – not directly, in any economic sense, but within the field of power, where the capital at stake is symbolic – prestige, recognition, authority and status. This is relevant to understanding the field of fantasy, as each critical point of view or “position-taking” represents a gambit, a competitive stake attempting to assign and control the meaning and significance of the word “fantasy”. Critics struggle for the authority to determine what fantasy is (a genre, mode or psychological faculty), what it signifies, how it should be discussed, how it functions, what its value is, and what texts and authors can be legitimately identified with the term.

The heated debates surrounding the legitimacy of Tolkien as a worthwhile or canonical author, and his fiction as “literature” proper or something else – popular fiction, romance, fantasy, epic, juvenile fiction – are good examples of this struggle in action. In light of what I regard as the major impediment to fair and rigorous scholarly examinations of fantasy, namely the deep-seated critical prejudice against the modern popular genre, my own strategy or critical gambit is to “theorise” the existing field of fantasy scholarship. By doing so, I will interrogate the existing discursive practices used to make sense of fantasy texts, by challenging the value hierarchies and hidden presuppositions implicit in what critics say about fantasy.

The influence of Marxism on Bourdieu and contemporary cultural studies is clear in the assumption of the dialectical nature of culture, and in the idea that culture is understood to involve power, and helps maintain and create inequalities within and between social groups. Bourdieu argues in *Distinction* that taste is an expression of systems of domination, (material and symbolic power) acting to legitimise social
differences. Analysing the systems of classification brought to bear on fantasy is crucial, because these systems embody relations of power, often supported by ideologies such as the Reason/Nature dualism that are hegemonic and therefore go frequently unrecognised. This thesis thus participates in broader questions of aesthetic, literary and cultural value that have been articulated in debates about the English literary canon, taking part in the “struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art”. Hence a study of the system of evaluations and critical paradigms that have grown up around the set of texts recognized as fantasy becomes a map of the values, ideologies and interest groups at play not only within the academic discipline of English literature, but in the wider social and cultural context.

An analysis of the criteria for the evaluation and discrimination of fantasy texts exposes some of the core components at the heart of the judgment of “literary value”. What is at stake in the field of criticism is “the authority to determine the legitimate definition of the literary work and, by extension, the authority to define those works which guarantee the configurations of the literary canon”, and can be seen to work through (amongst other things) the application of the Reason/Nature dualism to select certain values and exclude others. Feminist theory also draws attention to the construction of legitimacy, power and authority in society, recognizing that dominant ideologies or worldviews represent the structured interests of various groups and agents in the field of cultural production. The combination of Bourdieu’s theory of field and ecofeminist philosophy is used here to examine some of the ways in which systems of authority and domination are reproduced socially in the workings of culture, shifting the focus of literary analysis toward the construction of meaning and value in popular cultural products and in everyday life.

75 Bourdieu, Distinction, 2-7.
76 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, 19-20.
77 Ibid., 20.
1.4 Dualism: Why Nature and Reason in fantasy?
The conceptual framework of dualism is central to this thesis, and owes much to perspectives developed within feminist theory, particularly the work of ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood.\(^7\) The feminist focus upon the way polarities of gender have encouraged viewing the world through a series of binary oppositions, has drawn attention to the insidious functioning of these gendered dichotomies within discourses of “mastery” in the West. That structures of mastery or domination are perpetuated through language and culture is an idea crucial to much feminist, postcolonial and postmodern philosophy concerned with the construction of difference, power, and the socio-economic grounds of oppression. The concept of dualism, defined as a particular kind of logical structure that involves unequal and institutionalised power arrangements, is fundamental in its construction of difference in terms of negation and exclusion from the dominant or defining category.\(^7\)

The Reason/Nature dualism is now widely recognized as one of the fundamental structuring dualisms that is deeply entrenched in the culture and intellectual traditions of Western society. From Aristotle’s formalization of logic, which asserted that “a is not non-a”, Western philosophers have been comfortable with defining by means of that which things are not, creating a logic of binary oppositions.\(^8\) “Reason” and “Nature” are to be understood in this context as political rather than descriptive categories, where human achievements of culture, intellect, progress, civilization and rationality come under the rubric of the “master” or dominant discourse of Reason, which defines itself in contrast to the oppositionally conceived and excluded sphere of

\(^7\) Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, passim. See also Du Courdroy, “The Curse of the Werewolf” which uses Plumwood’s conceptual framework extensively.

\(^7\) Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 42.

Nature. Thus "Nature" has come to be associated with "the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness. In other words, Nature includes everything that reason excludes".\(^{82}\)

I argue that the fundamental tensions created by the duality of Nature and Reason provides a discursive structure by which to make sense of the ways contemporary genre fantasy has been shaped by social, historical and critical forces and ideologies. My thesis is that popular fantasy fiction has been constructed by these processes as "the Other" to Reason, which is identified with the dominant modernist literary form of realism (mimesis) within the artistic sphere. In other words, the dualistic logic of Western thinking that polarises Reason and Nature is seen to function even at the level of literary theory/criticism, at work in constructions of "literary" versus "popular" fiction, fantastic versus mimetic modes, genre fantasy versus realism, and is embedded within the very concepts used to categorize and define types of artistic forms. It will be shown that the use of instrumental logic based fundamentally upon structures of otherness and negation, and expressed in terms of the Reason/Nature dualism, perpetuates limited and oppressive models of analysis that preclude more complex and nuanced understandings of popular cultural art forms such as genre fantasy.

Within the self-conception of genre fantasy itself, the Reason/Nature dualism has functioned historically in the self-identification of fantasy with Nature, primarily through the historical linkage of fantasy with Romanticism (which opposed the mechanistic, progressivist discourses of Enlightenment Reason), from which fantasy's anti-modernist values derive; but also from fantasy's close relation to other

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\(^{81}\) I have used capital letters in order to denote the political/philosophical categories of the Reason/Nature dualism and differentiate them from reason and nature as they are used in other contexts.

contemporary manifestations of "critical irrealism", such as (Romantic) environmentalism and alternative religious movements in Western culture. Texts that we now recognize as precursors to or influences on modern genre fantasy appeared in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and were specifically associated with Romantic discourses of the sublime and the imagination. These texts and ideologies coincided with a renewed interest in the "primitive" roots of newly industrialized Western society, namely the medievalist Gothic revival, and became aligned with various discourses of Nature and "the natural".

I argue that modern genre fantasy represents an ongoing strand of Romantic expression that continues to find currency today in representations of the self, nature and society. These discourses are furthermore shaped by a set of binary oppositions polarizing nature and culture, past and present, self and other. The concept of Romanticism is of central importance to this thesis. It sums up a system of values, a Weltanschauung or "worldview" established in the West during the second half of the eighteenth century, representing a critique of modern capitalist civilization expressed not only in literature, but in politics, philosophy and religion, as articulated by Löwy and Sayre. It is proposed here that the Romantic worldview, far from having disappeared, is alive and well today, finding vital outlets of expression not only in fantasy literature, but also in sociocultural movements such as environmentalism, pacifism, feminism and New Age religion.

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83 Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre introduce the term "critical irrealism" to designate "the opposition between a marvellous, imaginary, ideal, utopian world and the gray, prosaic, inhuman reality of the modern world", containing a powerful implicit or explicit challenge to the dominant bourgeois order of capitalist modernity. They specifically mention the presence of these neo-Romantic discourses in mass culture phenomena, including fictional texts such as Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, Michael Ende's The Neverending Story, and social movements such as the New Religious Movements since the 1960s, and the ecological Green Movement. Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity. (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 12, 225ff.


85 Löwy and Robert Sayre, Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity, esp. Ch.1.

86 Ibid., 225-40.
The latter half of this thesis investigates the rise of genre fantasy as a distinct literary phenomenon specific to the conditions of late twentieth century western society. I argue that the growth and popularity of the genre coincided with a period of massive social change, especially in the USA and Britain in the 1960s and 70s, and that this paralleled the growth of alternative religious movements (the “New Age”) and widespread environmentalism in Western societies. The discourses of both environmentalism and religion are invoked in many fantasy narratives through a Romantic aesthetic conflating “beauty”, the medieval, and the natural environment, implicitly critiquing the rational materialism and scepticism of modern capitalist society. This shared Romantic ideology and attitude towards nature forms a nexus between fantasy, alternative religiosity and environmentalism, which are linked through the framework of alterity invoked by the Reason/Nature dualism. Thus genre fantasy as a whole can be regarded as an artistic expression of a network of discourses deeply concerned with Nature, which both functions within, and struggles against, the rationalistic “machine” of modern capitalist society.

1.5 Conclusion
This thesis calls for a reassessment of the (relative) value of fantasy texts, no longer as the opposite pole of a binary opposition between literary and popular fiction, but acknowledged as having value and meaning on its own terms. It attempts to highlight the ways in which fantasy has been “othered” through its association with the subordinate pole of Nature in the Reason/Nature dualism prevalent in Western thinking. It sets about this task by approaching fantasy from several different angles, which roughly correspond to the two halves of the dissertation. Part 1 analyses the ways in which fantasy has been constructed critically and conceptually by traditional literary theory, proposing that the application of hierarchical evaluations has resulted in the systematic exclusion of popular fictional forms from mainstream literary
studies, as they are persistently defined by what they are not — which is high, literary, serious culture. After establishing this more multifaceted conception of fantasy as a field, Part 2 examines how the form, content and values of fantasy are inextricably intertwined through a historical survey linking medievalism, romance and antimodernism in a complex of attitudes and values understood as Romanticism.

Furthermore, it will be made clear throughout how the impact of dualistic conceptual structures informing much of Western thinking has impacted on and created a set of binary oppositions pitting Nature against Culture, that fantasy both conforms to and struggles against. Part 2 looks at the way modern fantasy relates to contemporary social, cultural, historical currents and suggests possible answers to the question, Why is fantasy so popular today? It is proposed that the increasing autonomy and importance of the ecological sphere, and the ideological changes represented by new religious movements resulting from massive social change, have found one form of expression in the Romantic values of modern fantasy. Far from being escapist and socially irrelevant, archetypal fantasy's medievalism challenges and critiques many of the hegemonic ideologies of modernity, particularly the dualism between Reason and Nature which underpins the overvaluation of discourses of capitalism, science, rationality and materialism, and forms part of an ongoing Romantic worldview. By examining the development of conventions of fantasy such as its narrative form (drawn from medieval romance), in their historical and cultural contexts, it will become plain how and why contemporary genre fantasy has become a useful cultural vehicle for the expression of certain "alternative" or heterogeneous ideas, through its gradual accretion of cultural and symbolic value as a representative of structural alterity.
Chapter 2
Mapping the terrain

Of course the very first thing to do was to make a grand survey of the country she was going to travel through. “It’s something very like learning geography,” thought Alice, as she stood on tiptoes in hopes of being able to see a little further.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

2.1 Introduction
This chapter maps the critical geography of the field of modern fantasy up to 1975, looking at what “the critics” have to say about “the monsters” of fantasy. Modern academic scholarship on genre fantasy emerged in the English speaking world in the 1970s, induced primarily by two factors: the advent of fantasy as a mass-market publishing phenomenon (triggered by the paperback publication of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*); and the influence of Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic* on the scholarly world upon its translation and dissemination into English. The ensuing critical interest in genre fantasy thus derived its principal theoretical orientations from two major traditions: the Romantic fantastic, iconically represented in the twentieth century by Tolkien, and theoretical paradigm of structuralism, whose primary influences in the field of fantasy came through the work of Vladimir Propp on the morphology of folklore, and Todorov’s structuralist theorizing of “the fantastic” in literature. I consider the work of these three scholars the foundation upon which modern fantasy scholarship post-1975 is founded.

The critical corpus of J. R. R. Tolkien is of immense importance to this thesis, and the first part of this chapter reassesses his seminal essay “On Fairy-Stories” in the light of a long tradition of Romantic theories of the fantastic, the sublime and the imagination, drawing especially on the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. I
emphasise the strong tradition of Romantic thought in critical defences of fantasy as a way of imaginatively re-creating and revisioning the world, connecting Tolkien's theories to later genre scholarship (for example, critics such as Brian Attebery and Colin Manlove). Propp and Todorov are very important and influential on later development of the critical field of scholarship on the fantastic, but unlike Tolkien, their work does not deal directly with the contemporary commercial genre of fantasy that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century, which leads to certain theoretical problems which are elucidated in the later parts of this chapter. Propp's "biological" model of genre has had ramifications for subsequent notions of fantasy as a limited, static "formula" fiction (which I will explore further in Chapter 4), while Todorov's privileging of abstract, "theoretical" genres rather than "historical" genres has contributed to the general anti-historical drift of modernist literary scholarship in America, as well as providing further justification for the devaluation of the historical genre of modern popular fantasy. Together, these three critics provide the theoretical background that contemporary scholars draw on to legitimize the various and often conflicting discourses about the genre of fantasy.

I will first sketch a brief historical overview of the field in the "modern" period, from the late nineteenth century to the present, as it is represented in the English-speaking world; the chapter will then concentrate on the works of Tolkien, Propp and Todorov as the foundation of modern fantasy scholarship.

2.2 Historical context of modern fantasy scholarship

Literatures of the fantastic, constituted as self-conscious aesthetic engagements with magical or supernatural elements or events, first appeared in the context of late eighteenth-century Romanticism. This is widely regarded as the dawn of the "modern" period, when primary belief in the supernatural was substantially "exploded"
after the establishment of the rational scepticism of the Enlightenment.\(^1\) Modern fantastic literature grew out of a renewed interest in vernacular medieval romances, oral folk and fairytale traditions, ballads, legends and oriental tales, and contributed an important part to Romantic discourses of the “sublime” and the imagination.\(^2\) The serious interest in fairytale displayed by key Romantic writers and intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as Coleridge and Wordsworth, the immense popularity of Sir Walter Scott’s modernised romances, and the literary fairytale by German Romantics such as Tieck, Novalis, and Hoffman, all attest to the centrality and importance attached to fantasy narratives in Romantic thought.\(^3\)

Donald Haase in fact argues for the existence of a “single, although multifaceted, Romantic theory of the fantastic” common to the Romantic movements in England, France and Germany.\(^4\) The idea of the “fantastic” used synonymously with “fancy”, “imagination” or “fancy”, was of central importance to Romantic literature and theory, though it is noticeable that the terminological confusion and misunderstanding characteristic of the field today was evident even in the early nineteenth century.\(^5\) Coleridge, for example, famously distinguished between the

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\(^5\) The multiple invocations of these terms in different contexts led Balzac to comment with some asperity in 1832, that the fantastic as a type of literature was already “overly worn out through the abuse of the name alone” ibid., 2247.
creative Imagination as primary, and "fancy" as a secondary, and lower, "mode of memory", while Wordsworth saw both fancy and imagination and creative faculties. German Romantic Johann Friedrich Richter, however, reversed Coleridge's hierarchy, defining Phantasie as the higher, creative power of the mind. What remains consistent throughout Romantic philosophy, however, is the idea of the fantastic imagination as a radically new mode of perception, and as the principle creative power ("the primary characteristic") underlying Romantic literature.

The role and validity of fantastic elements, folk superstition and the supernatural in this literature was nevertheless hotly contested in critical writings of the time, as Western society was rapidly becoming industrialised and modernised, and rationalistic discourses were becoming increasingly dominant. The Romantic "revolt" against the mechanistic worldview of rationalism, consisted of a celebration of "unreason" and the supernatural, facilitated by the subjective fantastic imagination and expressed in Gothic, supernatural, and fantastic art. Fantasy/imagination allowed a radical revisioning of positivistic perceptions of reality, imbuing the world with magic,

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[8] Ibid., 2249.

[9] The essays by Walter Scott, Addison, Richard Hurd and others in Sandner, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* are good examples of this continuing debate. Even then, there was a marked reactionary or defensive stance amongst those who sought to defend expressions of the "unreal" in art. Gary K. Wolfe notes, "Fantasy elements were widely regarded as superstitious and were generally tolerated only if supported by evidence of actual belief or if supported by didactic or moral purpose", Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), xvii.

[10] Tobin Siebers identifies the Romantic revolt against the dualising forces of Enlightenment Reason, stating that "Their response to Reason's unreason was radical indeed, for the Romantics chose to regard themselves as alien rather than risk the violence that creates alien categories", though ultimately "their defense was itself victimizing" as their celebration of "unreason" did not break the dualism, but only reversed it. Tobin Siebers, *The Romantic Fantastic* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 28-9.
spirituality, and the numinous, as formulated by Novalis: "By endowing the commonplace with a lofty meaning, the normal with a mysterious appearance, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the semblance of infinity, I romanticize it". 11 Fantastic literature, therefore, was a medium through which the Romantics sought to re-perceive the world and challenge the hegemony of positivistic rationalism, attempting to overcome the dualisms of Reason and Nature, subject and object, mind and spirit, self and other, by re-sacralizing material reality and the natural world. 12

By the Victorian era, however, mechanization was dominant, and theories of biological evolution and discoveries in archaeology and geology contributed to the power of scientific dogmatism and fuelled religious doubt. 13 The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had also witnessed the rise of the "realistic" novel, which echoed the scientific worldview in its attempts to accurately depict the "real" world naturalistically, particularly the social world. 14 Through its deep association with romance, fairy tale and religious idealism, the fantastic in literature became increasingly defined against the more "modern" and progressive narrative mode of realism, which came to dominate by the turn of the century as Romantic aspirations faded. The late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries witnessed the overwhelming dominance of realist forms of literature, championed by the hegemony of the modernist aesthetic in virtually all fields of artistic endeavour. Fantastic fiction such as literary fairytales, tales of the supernatural, Gothic, science fiction and fantasy

12 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 2377.
languished on the margins of the Anglo-American literary mainstream, largely confined to ephemeral periodicals and children’s literature.  

In terms of critical studies of fantasy, very little was published apart from isolated defences by authors of fantasy stories: John Ruskin’s “Fairy Stories” (1868), published as a preface to a collection by the Brothers Grimm; George MacDonald’s “The Fantastic Imagination” (1893); G. K. Chesterton’s “Fairy Tales” (1908); and H. P. Lovecraft’s “Introduction” to Supernatural Horror in Literature (1927). These authors sought alternatives to modern capitalist society, and offered ways of perceiving reality that continued the worldview of Romanticism, which meant that critical discourse on the fantastic has thus tended to take up a reactionary, defensive stance, in keeping with the anti-rationalist reversal characterising Romantic thought. Gary K. Wolfe points out that “The industrial and scientific revolutions, with their overriding values of rationality and progress, tended to discourage the serious discussion of the values of the fantastic”, which encouraged recourse to defensive positions. Despite the fact that many fine fantasies for children were produced in the Victorian age, the prevailing attitude (given renewed scientific credence by new theories of evolution) was that fiction, like technology and human society, evolves from the more primitive to the more sophisticated and civilized. One critic in the Westminster Review in 1853 opines that “a scientific, and somewhat sceptical age, has no longer the power of believing in the marvels which delighted our ruder

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15 A few notable examples from the Victorian era in the English-speaking world were the prose romances of William Morris, fairy stories by George MacDonald and Charles Dickens, the scientific romances of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, the bestselling romances of Marie Corelli, Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, and H. Rider Haggard’s She. Brian Stableford, “The Nineteenth Century, 1812-99,” in Fantasy Literature: A Reader’s Guide, ed. Neil Barron (NY: Garland, 1999), 75. See also Attebery, The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature.


ancestors". The contested domain of the fantastic in fiction was thus marginalized in scholarly thought and endeavour with the triumph of the Modernist spirit, surfacing only for brief periods in the Symbolist and Surrealist artistic movements of the 1890s and 1920s respectively. The parallel relationship that I develop in Part 2 of this thesis between the counter-cultural position of fantasy literature and currents of twentieth-century alternative spirituality has its inception in the immediate post-Enlightenment period, when religious beliefs, like the fantastic elements of literature, became untenable for subscribers to Reason, best articulated by the Victorian evidentialist philosopher William K. Clifford.

By the time the modern age of "the Machine" reached its most conspicuous manifestation in World Wars I and II, the literature of fairytale and fantasy had fallen into disrepute, being increasingly considered "unhip, 'anti-modern', non-progressive, socially irresponsible, even déclassé", despite the fact that the related genre of science fiction had established a strong following on the grounds that it was thought to be rationalistic, modern, progressive and futuristic. It is against this background that J. R. R. Tolkien's seminal defence of fantasy, "On Fairy-Stories", should be considered.

2.3 The contribution of J. R. R. Tolkien

"On Fairy-Stories" is the first coherent academic theoretical treatise dealing specifically with what we recognize as fantasy today, and is foundational to the

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18 Ibid.
twentieth-century study of the genre. The essay is very much in the tradition of the
Romantic defence of the fantastic, expressing an opposition to, and critique of, the
conditions of industrialised modernity. The fact that Tolkien's own fantasy fiction
attempts to recover "a mythology for England" sourced from medieval romance
underscores the intimate connection of generic fantasy and scholarship following in
Tolkien's wake, to Romantic ideologies.22 "On Fairy-Stories" introduces several key
terms and concepts still used in fantasy criticism, such as "Secondary Worlds",
"secondary belief", "sub-creation", and "eucatastrophe". This essay is therefore very
well trodden ground for most genre scholars, but it has been subject to a variety of
conflicting interpretations, and the extended argument needs to be followed carefully
to avoid confusion. It is therefore worth elucidating Tolkien's arguments in some
detail, as they have strongly influenced virtually all fantasy scholarship that seeks to
define the modern genre in a positive light.23 "On Fairy-Stories" was addressed to a
generalist audience and is a wide-ranging commentary on the nature, uses and origin
of fairy-stories, which Tolkien specifically equates with literary fantasy.24 According
to Tolkien, a fairy-story is "a thing built on or about Fantasy, of which Fantasy is the
core".25 It is recognized as an important key to the nature and functions of his own
masterwork of modern literary fantasy, The Lord of the Rings, which he was writing

22 Tolkien was a core member of the now-famous "Inklings" group at Oxford in the 1930s, and along
with C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, was a well-known author of fantasy fiction. C. S. Lewis also
wrote critically about fantasy, for example in his short essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best
What's to Be Said"22 and "The Meanings of Fantasy" in An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge:
Cambridge UP, 1969) and he wrote widely and authoritatively on medieval literature, which was his
scholarly specialization at Cambridge University.

23 For information on the Inklings see Humphrey Carpenter, The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R.

24 The essay was originally an Andrew Lang Lecture given in 1939, and was first published in 1947 as
part of the collection Essays Presented to Charles Williams. All references to "On Fairy-Stories" are
Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays, ed. Christopher

at the time. Tolkien’s academic work as one of the foremost British medievalists of his day cannot be separated from his fictional corpus, and his thoughts on literary fantasy, myth and fairy tale are clearly expressed in stories such as “Leaf by Niggle”, as well as his academic essays on Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. His work as a philologist and his love of language also had a direct bearing on the creation of The Lord of the Rings. As he himself stated, his fiction was “fundamentally linguistic in inspiration... The invention of languages is the foundation. The ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse.”

Tolkien’s definition of “Fantasy” hinges on his insistence that it is a form of narrative (“story-making”) art originating in the “image-making” faculty of the Imagination essentially a Romantic view of the creative imagination. The Imagination gives us the capability of “forming mental images of things not actually present”, and is aided in the creation of fantasy by “the fantastic device of human language”. It was “the invention of the adjective” which gave us the linguistic power to say “the green sun”:

When we can take the green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter’s power... in such ‘fantasy’, as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator.

Tolkien’s emphasis on the linguistic origins and nature of fantasy/fairy-story should not be underestimated. It is axiomatic to his understanding of fantasy as primarily

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26 Tom Shippey’s The Road to Middle Earth is an excellent and detailed study of “the interlocking of philology and fiction” in Tolkien’s work; 1992 ed. (London: Grafton, HarperCollins, 1982), 240.
27 For more on Tolkien and Medievalism, see Norman F. Cantor, Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century (New York: W. Morrow, 1991), ch. 6, “The Oxford Fantasists”.
30 Ibid., 122.
“artistic in desire and purpose”31, and was a principle that underpinned his critiques of medieval literature (Beowulf and Sir Gawain) as artistic creations: “the understanding of a poem as a poem”, and not as a mere archaeological repository for historical remains.32 It is also essential to note the parallel Tolkien sees between the art of literary creation and the primary creation of the world by the Christian God. The value of this realization lies in the concomitant parallel between the reader of fantasy and the Christian believer.

“On Fairy-Stories” defends the “mythical mode of imagination”, in the style of Romantic writers such as Addison, Coleridge, George MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton, but Tolkien in addition brings to it his own intimate knowledge of medieval romance.33 He observes that there is an “instinctive” and “ancient” antipathy between lovers of fantasy and romance, and hostile critics possessed of a “correct and sober taste”34: “people who couldn’t stand his books hadn’t been able to bear Beowulf, or Pearl, or Chaucer, or Sir Gawain, or Sir Orfeo either”, says Tom Shippey.35 Tolkien attributes this animosity to a fundamental misapprehension of the function and significance of mythology and fantasy, and he is dismissive of the critical “taste” that “refuse[s] to admit that there can be an interest for us – the proud we that includes all intelligent living people – in ogres and dragons”. His “criticism of the critics” in “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” demonstrates Tolkien’s abundant awareness of a hegemony of “correct and sober taste” which identifies its

31 Ibid., 143.
33 Ibid., 15.
35 Shippey, The Road to Middle Earth, 4.
own preferences as Reason, dismissing the "unfashionable creatures" of folk-tale and myth as "a sad mistake."36

He continues along the same lines of argument in "On Fairy-Stories", defending the "unreason" of fantasy as meriting attention on its own terms, and criticizing the treatment of medieval romance, folk- and fairy-tale as "historical documents" because they are perceived as lacking literary merit.37 Tolkien is primarily interested in the meaning and value of fantasy, and its effects on the audience, which is why he objects so strenuously to reductive structuralist methodologies, such as Propp's Morphology of the Folktale which "dissects" stories into their components.38 His emphasis on the function of narrative regards "originality" as less important than the "recovery" or revivifying of old motifs and conventions in unique configurations, for "Who can design a new leaf?" he asks.39 "Originality" in this sense lies in the selection and fashioning of new stories from old elements, to "[give] new life to old tales - totally different from their former significance... a case of pouring new wine into old bottles" as he says in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.40 Tolkien is more interested in "the effect produced now by these old things in the stories as they are" (i.e., equating

36 He expresses this awareness, attributing the "depreciation of Fantasy" as due, in part, to "the natural desire of critics to cry up the forms of literature or 'imagination' that they themselves, innately or by training, prefer," Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 140. Tolkien's objection to Drama is also bound up in this, as drama is too "anthropocentric" for him, and classical school of literary criticism derived from Aristotle's dramatic and lyrical modes (as elucidated by Frye, for example) is not suitable for the non-human Otherness of fantasy. For more on this see Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," Note F, 160 & 40-2., also the critical preference for Drama and human Tragedy in Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 15.
38 Tolkien does not mention Propp and was probably unaware of his work. However, Tolkien's attitude here is unambiguously Romantic: Isaiah Berlin notes that "to dissect is to murder" was the motto of nineteenth-century Romantics like Schelling, Hamann and Herder, who objected to the "dissecting" mentality of rationalistic scientism. Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas (London: Hogarth Press, 1979).
fantasy/fairy stories with myth and theology), and feels that the most important question to ask of fantasy is "what, if any, are the values and functions of fairy-stories now?"\textsuperscript{41}

The value Tolkien ascribes to fantasy is rooted in the response of the audience, the "freedom of the reader" to interpret the story and discover its relevance to their own thoughts and experiences.\textsuperscript{42} The emotional response of \textit{pleasure} is for him a vital part of the function or "operation" of fantasy, and is fundamentally rooted in the awakening and satisfying of desire or wish-fulfilment, which for him was linked to Christian salvation. For this reason, Tolkien holds the view that a story told for pleasure and entertainment is just as worthwhile as "serious", moral, didactic literature. This emphasis on taking seriously the "entertainment" aspect of fantasy is important for high/low culture debates, challenging the long-held notion that literature must be didactic to be worthwhile; an idea that connects with the emotion/cognition duality operating within modern literary criticism. Of the \textit{Gawain}-poet, Tolkien considers it enough that he told "an exciting fairy-story well, in such a way as to produce literary credibility sufficient for entertainment".\textsuperscript{43} It is of note that Tolkien also writes from the perspective of a creator of fantasy, not just as a critic and scholar. The consistency of his thought is further demonstrated in his "Foreword" to the second edition of \textit{The Lord of the Rings}, in which he says that "prime motive" for writing the book was "the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them".\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{43} Tolkien, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," 90.
\textsuperscript{44} Tolkien, \textit{The Lord of the Rings}, xiv.
Tolkien's interest in what we would now call "reader response", particularly the inducement of pleasure, joy or wonder — positive affective responses to fictional narratives — is very much in keeping with Romantic discussions about the validity of fairytales and imaginative compositions since the eighteenth century. Coleridge defined poetry as "that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth", and that this "communication of pleasure" can also be attained in novels and romances.\footnote{Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, 1966 ed., Everyman's Library (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1817), Ch.14, 149-50.} Writer Anna Aikin (Barbauld), famous for her correspondence with Coleridge, contemplated the "very exquisite and refined pleasure" derived from the "pure terror" of Gothic romances, claiming that they "will ever retain a most powerful influence on the mind, and interest the reader independently of all peculiarity of taste".\footnote{Anna Laetitia Aikin (Barbauld), "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror," in Sandner, Fantastic Literature, 31.} Joseph Addison also provided an early defence of The Fairy Way of Writing (1712), emphasising its pleasurable qualities of "strangeness and novelty", and its ability to "raise a pleasing kind of horror in the mind of the reader and amuse his imagination".\footnote{Joseph Addison, "The Fairy Way of Writing (from the Spectator Papers)," in Sandner, Fantastic Literature, 22.} Tolkien's emphasis on the pleasure and joy derived from fantasy, particularly the "eucatastrophe" or joyous turn of the typical fairytale "Happy Ending", is therefore consistent with a major current in Romantic discourse.\footnote{Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 153-4.} Of interest to the pursuit of the Nature/Reason dichotomy is the interpretation of this perspective as advocating the primacy of experience over cognition, and the possibility of extending this notion of experience to something approaching the Christian understanding of mystical states.\footnote{This idea also relates to Aristotle's analysis of the function of tragedy, where seeing others go through extreme emotion provokes sensations of release in the viewer, by means of catharsis. T. S.
Tolkien argues that the essential function of fantasy art is desire. This is the desire to "escape" from "hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death", and to "recover" a sense of the freshness and clarity of the world "as things apart from ourselves". Tolkien's articulation of fantasy's purposes as Recovery, Escape and Consolation, consolidate his adherence to Romantic ideologies of the role of the fantastic. "Recovery" is the "regaining of a clear view", looking at everyday things like "stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine", with fresh attention and wonder; and to be "startled anew" by the colour green.50 This is precisely what Wordsworth intended in the Lyrical Ballads, according to Coleridge:

to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in the consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.51

Tolkien's function of "Recovery" in fantasy expresses the Romantic idea of the imagination as a "radically new mode of perception",52 where the world "may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity",53 the "lethargy of custom", inducing a resacralization of the natural world.

Similarly, Tolkien's "Escape" is "the escape of the prisoner" from the degrading and alienating conditions of industrial modernity: "mass-production robot factories", "the roar of self-obstructive mechanical traffic", "machine-guns and bombs"; an escape

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51 Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Ch.XIV, 147.
52 Haase, "Romantic Theory of the Fantastic," 2249.
53 Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 146.
“not indeed from life, but from our present time and self-made misery”. Tolkien held a deep love for the English countryside and mourned the encroachment of an ugly, polluting, urban industrial wasteland. In *The Lord of the Rings* this concern manifests itself through the evil-doings of the corrupt wizard Saruman who ravages the sanctuary of Isengard, effectively turning it into a factory for war machines, “filled with pits and forges”. Tolkien’s disapproval of Saruman is clear: “He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for living things, except as far as they serve him for the moment.” The importance of the environment and respect for other living things continues to be highly relevant theme in contemporary fantasy in the face of the current ecological crisis. As I discuss in Part 2 of this thesis, the landscapes of contemporary fantasy have become symbolically re-charged with an awareness of ecological issues, and it is notable that the growth and success of fantasy as a genre has in many ways paralleled the mainstreaming of environmentalist movements since the 1960s.

Tolkien’s fantastic escapism thus specifically critiques the social ills of modern urban life, as well as catering to “the Escape from Death” – a fundamental human desire, as nobody wishes to die under normal circumstances. The latter is closely linked to the “Consolation” aspect of fantasy, the “joy of the happy ending”, which for Tolkien signifies Christian redemption, but on a more general level, it lends the reader hope, a reflection of an essentially positive, rather than cynical outlook on life, and a

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54 Ibid., 148-51.
57 See Chapter 8: Green Dreams.
structurally fitting conclusion to the fairy-story form. The main functions that Tolkien articulates for fantasy thus hinge upon the response of readers to the story and the world around them, and to readers' desire for narratives that provide an alternative perception of reality.

The response of readers strikes directly at the heart of many critical problems with fantasy, because it is fundamentally a social and psychological issue, to do not only with the construction of the social subject (the "Ideal" or "Benighted" Reader), but also with the nature and construction of art itself and its relationship to "reality". This is an issue the Romantics, most notably Coleridge, were deeply concerned with in their discussions of "imaginative" fiction, and the precise nature of the relationship of fantasy and fairytale to the "real world" continues to be a stumbling block for criticism to this day. The problem centres on semantic confusions about the construction of "fiction" and art as "lies", from which follow the problems of truth-value and belief. The question of "belief" and fantasy is a central issue for Tolkien, and he is quick to point out the common but erroneous assumption that an "appetite for marvels" or fantastic fictions is linked to a childish inability to distinguish fact from fiction. Claims that fantasy and fairy-story are childish are demolished by Tolkien, who asserts that mistaken nostalgic notions about childhood and the


60 In regard to reader response, Reilly says: "We tend to talk in extremes when we deal with the problem. We suppose on the one hand the Ideal Reader, who when he reads Shakespeare is perfectly aware of the Elizabethan world-view, cosmology, physiology, theory of drama, vocabulary, and so on. On the other hand we suppose the Benighted Reader, ignorant of all the knowledge and insight possessed by the Ideal Reader." Robert James Reilly, Romantic Religion: A Study of Barfield, Lewis, Williams and Tolkien (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), 196.

61 What all these discussions skirt around is, I believe, the essential paradox that Bourdieu points out: that art is only that which we believe is art. The meaning and value of art lies in the contexts of its production and reception; the intent to produce art, its reception as an artistic product, and the belief generated that it is art. Therefore the construction and evaluation of the reader/perceiver and their belief systems are vital, being intimately concerned with both the nature of and the social value of the artistic product in question.
credulity of children are overstated. The ability to distinguish between fiction and reality, he argues, is “fundamental to the sane human mind, and to fairy-stories”. The keener and clearer is the reason,” he adds, “the better fantasy will it make. ... For creative fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it”.

This accords well with Tolkien’s statements in “On Fairy-Stories”, where he is very clear that “Fantasy is a rational not an irrational activity,” and that it is furthermore “a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity”. French Romantic Charles Nodier likewise argued in 1832 that the “true fantastic tale... profoundly moves the heart without requiring the sacrifices of reason”. These arguments highlight the self-consciousness of the Romantic conception of the fantastic first and foremost as art, an artistic (narrative/poetic) form that is intended not to escape from reality, but rather to reveal new, deeper, other, realities that require a contrasting recognition of the everyday world in order to function.

This is a vital point in Tolkien’s defence and delineation of fantasy. Central to his argument is the recognition that fantasy is primarily a form of narrative art capable of inspiring what he calls “literary belief” (analogous to religious faith), which is radically different from undiscriminating credulity:

What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful “sub-creator”. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter.

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63 Ibid., 132.
64 Ibid., 144.
65 Ibid., 139, 44.
Inside it, he relates what is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are... inside.67

In other words, the artist creates a story that invokes its own imaginative "reality" through the descriptive quality of language, for example, a world in which a green sun might be plausible. The world of the text is the "Secondary World" as distinct from the real or "Primary World", perceived not by the senses, but in the mind of the reader. Just as the Primary World, the empirical world in which we live, inheres "belief" in its truth and actuality, so too can fictional, "secondary" worlds take on truth-value, the "inner consistency of reality" that can (if successful) induce "Secondary Belief" – the acceptance that what is portrayed is "true" on some level, representative of some aspect of "reality" in all its slippery semantic probability.68 "The moment disbelief arises," says Tolkien, "the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed."69 The theological implications of this argument are unmistakeable.

In order for a "genuine" fairy-story to work, says Tolkien, it is essential that the story "should be presented as 'true' and not obviously a "figment or illusion".70 In other words, in order to realise "wonder" and desire, the fantasy/fairy story must present a frame in which the "marvels" within it are taken seriously, and not undermined by satire, allegory or any rationalizing "machinery" or explication that makes "a mockery of unreason".71 In this way he attempts to delimit the genre of fantasy, separating it out from related genres of satire, dream narrative, and science fiction. The accomplishment of creating a believable fantasy story is recognized by Tolkien as an act of extreme artifice: "narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent

68 It is easy to see why so much confusion results from the study of fantasy, when it uses terms like "truth", "belief", "reality" and "fantasy" which can mean all things to all people.
70 Ibid., 117.
71 Ibid., see note A, 157.
This property of self-conscious artificiality that Tolkien attributes to fantasy — which he regards as “the most nearly pure form” of art — is interestingly echoed by a Kawase, a Japanese master of ikebana, the art of flower arranging:

Showing something natural, in its native state, is not art. Artifice piled on artifice, giving you the illusion of the natural — that’s art. If you are going to draw people into your dream, then you must make it completely convincing. If the dream is not perfect, then it will feel unnatural. Only the most perfect dream approaches reality.

This statement encapsulates what Tolkien was trying to achieve with fantasy.

Tolkien formulates fantasy primarily in terms of art and desire, but for certain eighteenth and nineteenth century commentators like Addison and Coleridge, with whom he is in dialogue, the supernatural content (“Fairies, Witches, Magicians, Demons, and departed Spirits”) of fairy-stories was regarded with suspicion. Enlightenment rationalism distrusted such manifestations of the superstitious, “barbaric” pagan past, and questioned the moral and intellectual value of fiction that did not adhere to “the truth of nature” in both letter and spirit. Early defenders of the “fantastic” in Gothic romance and fairy-stories were at pains to make distinctions between rational, empirical “belief” and imaginative, “poetic” faith. Richard Hurd states that criticism of the “tales of Faery” fails when it “supposes that the poets, who are liars by profession, expect to have their lies believed. Surely they are not so unreasonable. They think it enough, if they can but bring you to imagine the possibility of them,” drawing a distinction between “conceiving”, i.e. envisaging and “believing.”

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72 Ibid., 140.
73 Alex Kerr, Lost Japan (Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 1996), 256.
75 Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Ch. XIV, 146.
By contrast, the Romantic Coleridge attempted to defend and reconstruct the "Imagination" as a faculty of Reason, and likewise saw "disbelief" as the appropriate response to the supernatural, which is momentarily and willingly suspended through the "interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth" of supernatural actions and events, "supposing them real".\(^\text{77}\) Living in the twentieth century where the supernatural has been thoroughly undermined\(^\text{78}\) by the secular-scientific worldview, Tolkien conceives of the (pagan) supernatural only as remnants of myth with an "arresting strangeness".\(^\text{79}\) He does not overly concern himself with the "content" of the fantastic since it is not content that is important as such; rather, it is the emotion elicited from fantastic narrative that matters. Tolkien therefore implicitly distinguishes between three kinds of belief: belief elicited by fiction, belief in the supernatural, and scientific belief in the reality of the empirical world (though they are essentially of a kind). When he says that "this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing", he therefore wishes to qualify that "belief" in a story, in fiction (secondary belief) is positive, enthusiastic, wholehearted belief, untainted by superstition, and that "disbelief" only arises in this context when the reader is bored: the "art" has failed.\(^\text{80}\)

Tolkien also disagrees with Coleridge about the nature and meaning of the terms "Fancy" and "Imagination" on a linguistic, philological level. Coleridge sought to reconceptualize the active, creative faculty of the mind in a way that was palatable to the discourses of Reason by assigning positive and negative values to the "Imagination" and "Fancy" respectively. "Fancy" comes from the Greek \textit{phantasia}.

\(^{77}\) Coleridge, \textit{Biographia Literaria}, Ch.XIV, 146.

\(^{78}\) Except in institutionalised religion, which is regarded by many as somehow exempt from charges of supernaturalism.

\(^{79}\) Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 139.

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 132.
(i.e. "fantasy") and originally suggested creativity, illusion and the freedom of the mind to play, whereas the Latin *imaginatio* is derived from the word "image", and had connotations of accurate imitation, the formation of visual images. During the Enlightenment, the word "fancy" became increasingly devalued, and Coleridge was influential in cementing the negative connotations of the term by redefining it as a passive (feminized), associative "mode of memory", while appropriating the creative, active, "vital" mode to the Imagination, which he divided into "primary" and "secondary" imagination. From a philological stance, Tolkien rejects Coleridge's shift in the meaning of "imagination" as a misapplication of the word, and he re-establishes its original Latin meaning as "the mental power of image-making", dismissing the claim that it is "something higher". He also considers Coleridge's technical distinction between primary and secondary imagination, and the devaluing of "Fancy" or "Fantasy", as both "inappropriate" and "inaccurate". To Tolkien, the "perception of the image, the grasp of its implications, and the control, which are necessary to a successful expression" – factors assumed to Coleridge's "secondary" imagination – are "a difference in the degree of the Imagination, not a difference in kind". Fantasy in Tolkien's meaning is *not* therefore in any way connected with lies, superstition or irrationality. It is essentially a form of art inspired by the "fantastic" elements of the imagination, which express themselves with most potency in the fantasy or fairy-story.

The story "Leaf by Niggle" most clearly articulates Tolkien's thoughts on fantasy, demonstrating that Story and metaphor may be the best way of describing something. The harried painter Niggle's attempts at painting a marvellous Tree are realised: his

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81 Seeman, "Tolkien's Revision of the Romantic Tradition," 75.  
82 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Ch.XII, 145-6.  
84 Ibid., 138-9.
Tree literally comes to life, is made real. Niggle, beholding the Tree, says, "It's a gift!"\textsuperscript{85} For Tolkien, the heart of fantasy lies in its potential to make a beloved story "come true", something he conceives of as a "primal" desire for "the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder".\textsuperscript{86} This is the desire he addresses artistically in Niggle's story, which is reminiscent of the ancient Greek story of the sculptor Pygmalion, whose statue of Galatea – a vision of the perfect woman – comes to life:

Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, it branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had often failed to catch. ...All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded.\textsuperscript{87} This is how Tolkien conceives of fantasy – as the creative act, and also the result, which is the fantasy text itself. Furthermore, Tolkien calls the art of creating a fictional world through narrative art "sub-creation", to distinguish it (in degree, though not in kind) from the work of the ultimate Creator, the Christian God, who practices the "Primary Art, that is, of Creation."\textsuperscript{88} The idea of fantastic art as imaginative "sub-creation" is a quintessentially Romantic concept. Coleridge expressed it in the \textit{Biographia Literaria} in this way: "The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM".\textsuperscript{89} This theological notion of sub-creation thus implies that the aesthetic form of fantastic art permits a glimpse of an underlying supernatural order and meaning to the superficial

\textsuperscript{85} Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf," 94.
\textsuperscript{86} Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 116.
\textsuperscript{87} Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf," 94-5.
\textsuperscript{88} Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 155-6.
\textsuperscript{89} Coleridge, \textit{Biographia Literaria}, 145-6.
formlessness of creation. Tolkien’s “sub-creation” is therefore another way of expressing the Romantic idea of the imagination as a “vitally creative act in which the imagination personally re-creates the universe, an act in which the subjective unites in a productive and unique way with the infinite... every act of subjective perception repeats the original divine act of creation”.

This fascination with the ability of language to create “reality” through “sub-creation” continues to be a strong thematic preoccupation for contemporary fantasists. Sheri S. Tepper plays on the idea of “literal” sub-creation in Beauty, where the fevered creation of the writer Ambrosius Pomposus comes to life as Chinanga, a verdant, exotic river world-within-a-world, “only a story” within the primary “Sleeping Beauty” narrative. Beauty manages to convey, within the fairytale form, both a modern eco-parable and a satirical dig at the postmodern metafictions of magic realism. The linguistic, rhetorical creation of reality is in fact a central preoccupation of modern Western philosophy, and its expression in genre fantasy is neither coincidental nor irrelevant. Ursula K. Le Guin displays a similar interest in linguistic sub-creation in her Earthsea fantasies, where Segoy (a dragon), creates the world of Earthsea through language, much like the Christian God. In The Other Wind, Le Guin says: “But the dragons speak: they speak the True Speech, the language of the Making, in which there are no lies, in which to tell the story is to make it be!”

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90 Haase discerns in the writings of French Romanticist Charles Nodier, the idea that the “escape” afforded by fantasy was not a “mindless flight from reality”, but rather “an initiation into an aesthetic realm of truth obscured by the reality of a fallen world”. Nodier wrote in 1836, “The beautiful chaos of the poets and, before them, the beautiful chaos of nature are only truly beautiful because they reveal a hidden order.” Haase, “Romantic Theory of the Fantastic,” 2256.
91 Ibid., 2249.
93 Sylvia Kelso, A Glance from Nowhere: Sheri S. Tepper’s Fantasy and SF, (Sydney, Australia: Nimrod, 1997), 12.
The *legitimacy* of the desire for stories to "come true" is justified by Tolkien through his own specifically Catholic viewpoint, as having a special relationship with Christian salvation myth. The Christian story is the ultimate "Eucatastrophe", as it is the ultimate story "made real" and true: "Art has been verified".\(^{95}\) The sub-creative act and the pleasure it can invoke in both creator and beholder as "partners in making and delight" is for Tolkien justified by its reflection of the joy of divine creation and is therefore a tribute, rather than a threat, to human nature and rationality, as they are part of the natural order.\(^{96}\) Despite Tolkien's specific religious slant, later critics and fantasists have successfully demonstrated that his ideas on the fantastic can be satisfactorily applied for analytical and creative use from a secular perspective.\(^{97}\) David Sandner, for example, points out that the transcendent aspects of the "fantastic sublime" found in the Romantic ideas of Tolkien, George MacDonald and even Wordsworth, can be "successfully read as the breakdown of language and meaning, the limit of the mind's ability to regard itself" - a concept explored in the linguistic creation of fantastic worlds by more secular writers such as Le Guin and Tepper.\(^{98}\) The interpretation of the sublime impulse of Tolkien-esque genre or "high fantasy" as purely secular and rhetorical is possible, because the transcendent world referred to lies outside the text itself, and as Tolkien makes clear in his reader-response oriented theory, the transcendent other is only accessed through mutual imaginative participation by author and reader alike - "partners in making and delight".\(^{99}\) Thus

\(^{95}\) Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", 156.
\(^{96}\) Ibid., 143.
\(^{98}\) Jean Paul Sartre also noted that Romantic fantasy appeared with "the triumph of secularized culture, and that it is a literature necessarily without conclusive and definitive meanings, since it does not serve transcendental purposes," Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Fantasy and Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 3.
the transcendentalist function of the Romantic sublime is beholden to the “freedom of the reader” as Tolkien says: *The Lord of the Rings* is exceptionally “undetermined”, hence its appeal to a wide audience and ability to be read as Christian, pagan, completely secular, environmentalist, anti-modern or Romantic, although the Christian orientation is strong, for those who recognize it.

I have indicated the essentially Romantic philosophical underpinnings of Tolkien’s theory of fantasy, which invokes “a common [Romantic] view of the imagination as a power of perception, revelation, and creation”.100 Though often overlooked, even by theorists of Romanticism, Tolkien’s defence of fantasy in “On Fairy-Stories” demonstrates the continued vitality of Romantic thought and artistic expression in modern fantasy. The Romantic desire to challenge the hegemony of rational positivists “who absolutely deny the fantastic” can be seen in Tolkien’s adherence to the Romantic concept of fantasy as a mode of perception that can imaginatively resacralize the world through an evocation of spiritual feeling.101 Tolkien highlighted the fact that fantasy taps into the *emotions*, the experiences elicited by desire, and that these emotions are the source of fantasy’s “peculiar quality” of joy and wonder.102 Significantly, German Romantic theorist Friedrich Schlegel defined “Romantic” as “That...which presents a sentimental subject in a fantastic form”, where “sentimental” means “that which appeals to us, where feeling prevails, and to be sure not a sensual but a spiritual feeling”.103

This “spiritual feeling” is what Tolkien calls “Joy” or wonder, which he, like Schlegel and other Romantics, ascribes specifically to the presence of the Christian Creator,

100 Haase, “Romantic Theory of the Fantastic,” 2258.
101 Ibid., 2250.
the fantastic sublime having a close affinity to religious experience.\textsuperscript{104} It is important to note, however, that the “spiritual” feeling evoked by fantasy can be used to describe the universally recognized experience of the “numinous”;\textsuperscript{105} and need not be connected to any particular religious creed or doctrine. In other words, the emotions elicited by successful fantasy “have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree” as an experience of the numinous, which has been used to describe a range of experiences of the sacred not confined to religion alone.\textsuperscript{106} This is an extremely interesting suggestion, highlighting fantasy’s multiple connections to experiences of the sacred or numinous, the supernatural, religion, and its fairytale function as a literature of moral or ethical import — in other words, fantasy’s dealings with social behaviour and social structures.\textsuperscript{107}

However, it is precisely this transcendental, religious aspect of Tolkien’s theory that has contributed to it being largely ignored or discredited by the mainstream of subsequent literary criticism. Brian Attebery notes, “few looked past [Tolkien’s] figurative language and religious orientation to see the underlying radicalism of his thoughts on narrative”.\textsuperscript{108} “On Fairy-Stories” also worked to disgrace genre fantasy further in the eyes of Marxist reformist critics of the 1970s and 80s, such as Darko Suvin and Rosemary Jackson. The fairytale properties of recovery, escape, consolation and wish-fulfilment championed by Tolkien were regarded as deeply suspect and ominously religious, “making the reader unquestioningly passive” — a

\textsuperscript{104} Sandner, The Fantastic Sublime, 51.
\textsuperscript{105} On the “numinous” see Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1959 [1917]), Ch. II & III.
\textsuperscript{106} As I shall demonstrate in Part 2: feelings of “spirituality”, the sacred, or “implicit religion” have been ascribed to the secular awe felt in the presence of nature by environmentalists, for example.
\textsuperscript{107} Tobin Siebers, for example, proposes that the magic and supernaturalism of the Romantic fantastic is best viewed from the perspective of anthropology, stating that “Implicit in most theories of magic is the idea that superstition organizes social behaviour representationally,” Siebers, The Romantic Fantastic, 37.
\textsuperscript{108} Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, 18.
dangerous opiate for the masses – and its transcendentalism party to the values of “an outworn liberal humanism”.

Furthermore, the consensus of English Literature from the 1930s–60s rested upon the scientifically-oriented ideologies of modernist literary criticism, which, with the rise of structuralism (from the 1950s on), served to quash investigations of a religious or transcendentalist nature, as Romanticism itself began to be regarded as an expression of proto-fascist conservatism.

2.4 Vladimir Propp and the mid-twentieth century cultural shift

Other historical factors also overrode close critical engagement with Tolkien’s defence of fairytale and fantasy until the mid-1970s, chiefly the absence of easily accessible fantasy texts in the popular market (in Britain and America) from the 1920s to the early 1960s. Genre editor Gardner Dozois notes that by the 1950s, “very little fantasy was being published in any form, and fantasy as a genre, as a separate publishing category, did not exist”.

Science fiction stories thrived in the American “pulp” magazines that catered to the newly literate mass-market audience from the 1880s to the 1940s, justified by science fiction’s supposed didactic function and appeal to science, a catch-cry heavily promoted by genre editors such as John W. Campbell. Fantasy had no such mitigating properties, and its engagement with things “not real” meant that it remained largely in disfavour. However, audience demand for such stories meant that fantasy was often “disguised” as science fiction, or hybridised as “science fantasy” where fantastic elements were given scientific-sounding rationalisations. Dozois describes a typical “disguising” technique:

get your characters to another “planet” as quickly and unobtrusively as possible, and then, once you’re there, spend the bulk of your time telling a standard fantasy swashbuckler with Jackson lots of swordplay and evil

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110 Dozois, ed., Modern Classics of Fantasy, xii.
wizardry, with the magic disguised as "alien technology" or, even better, as "PSI powers".\textsuperscript{112}

These developments in popular culture reflect wider social currents and ideological trends. The late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century saw the consolidation of modernist ideologies of rationalism, progress, and faith in science, firmly ensconced in Western culture, and the dominance of high modernism and abstraction in art. These ideologies were reproduced and endorsed in academic institutions, where the study of English Literature, founded on key notions of the liberal humanist method propounded by F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richards in the 1920s, became the unquestioned norm in Britain and America from the 1930s to the 1960s.\textsuperscript{113} The "New Criticism" maintained a "decontextualised approach" to studying literary texts as discrete, independent artefacts that could be analysed in a more "scientific" manner.

So when Vladimir Propp's \textit{Morphology of the Folktale} burst onto the scene in 1958, promising a scientific method for classifying literary texts according to their structural properties, it was met with great enthusiasm. Propp's narratological analysis of Russian fairytales has had a lasting influence on studies of fantasy and popular genre fictions, and an enormous impact on diverse fields of folklore, linguistics, mythology, anthropology and literary criticism. Whilst Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" is extremely useful for discerning some of the functions and values of the fantasy form, Propp's emphasis on structural properties led the way towards more accuracy in the description and classification of fantasy as a genre. Propp's \textit{Morphology} was originally published in Russian in 1928, but did not appear in English translation until thirty years later. Propp was influenced by the Russian Formalist school of criticism of the 1920s, whose emphasis on the formal, technical properties of texts enabled a more "scientific" and empirical study of literature. Formalism lent the ideology of

\textsuperscript{112} Dozois, ed., \textit{Modern Classics of Fantasy}, xiii.

\textsuperscript{113} Peter Barry, \textit{Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory} (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1995), 27ff.
modernist literary criticism a much sought-after scientific credibility, and endorsed the time-honoured study of texts in isolation, as narrative structures could be empirically observed and their results replicated.\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Morphology}, Propp challenges the traditional generic categorization of folk and fairytale according to theme and content, rightly pointing out that this method was arbitrary, imprecise and inconsistently applied, leading to "total chaos".\textsuperscript{15} Propp proposed instead to investigate the formal, structural features of fairytales, classifying them by their underlying structural commonality. His motivation is very clear: he stated that literary science could approximate the "physical and mathematical sciences" in terms of adopting a terminology and classificatory system much like Linnean system used in biology. Morphology is in fact a biological term meaning "the study of forms", and by using it Propp meant that it should be possible to classify literary genres as if they were biological specimens: "it is possible to make an examination of the forms of the tale which will be as exact as the morphology of organic formations", entailing a mimicry of science in the study of literature.\textsuperscript{16}

The method of classifying genre according to content or theme alone has a "common sense" appeal that continued to be a trap for generic studies of fantasy and literary criticism in general. This method ultimately ends up with an amorphous, arbitrary list of content motifs or themes, resulting in unhelpful generalizations such as "spaceships and robots" equals science fiction, while "dragons and wizards" equates to fantasy. As Propp noted, such classifications can be "nothing more than a conventional index, the value of which is extremely dubious".\textsuperscript{17} Propp's formalist

\textsuperscript{14} Vladimir Propp, \textit{Morphology of the Folktale}, 2nd revised ed., (Austin, Texas: Texas UP, 1968 [1928]), Intro to 2nd Ed.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., xxv.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 8. Christine Brooke-Rose provides an amusing example of the ultimately arbitrary and confusing nature of this method, quoting a story by Jorge Luis Borges about a Chinese encyclopaedia
approach to the problem of categorizing genre was radically different from the theme and content based descriptions of folklore extant at the time. He proposed that the generic similarities of fairytales derived from their underlying narrative structure which could be analysed according to the functions of the characters or *dramatis personae*.\(^8\)

Propp saw functions as the basic elements or building blocks of narrative, understood as “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action”, fixed in a strict and unvarying sequential order.\(^9\) The functions of various characters, such as the villain or the donor (provider or magical agent), are determined by the role they play in relation to the hero’s story, and the interacting roles of these characters move through a fixed narrative sequence to an inevitable resolution – the fairytale happy ending. Thus though the individual characters may change from story to story, their functions remain constant. This fixed narrative pattern has become known as the “fairytale formula”, and is recognized as basic, uniform form of story-telling repeated throughout the world, despite the “amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and colour” of individual retellings.\(^10\)

Propp’s method can be a powerful technique enabling an understanding of the interrelationships between different narrative conventions based on structural

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\(^9\) Propp determines that there are thirty-one functions that various characters play out in an order determined by the tale itself, where the functions number such as: (ix) “Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command”, (xviii) “The villain is defeated”, (xix) “The hero is married and ascends the throne” Ibid., 21, 25–65.

\(^10\) Ibid.
similarities rather than content. It exposes the essentials of storytelling: narrative patterns that are found again and again, holding some sort of significance and providing satisfaction to audiences the world over. The fairy tale structure underlies many kinds of narrative (including Jane Eyre and Star Wars), and as Attebery observes, “there seem to be few more satisfying routes to a happy ending”\textsuperscript{121} This indicates that the “tried and true” narrative formula of the fairytale is one of the ways in which humans make sense of the world, by encoding social meanings and significance in narrative structure or Story.\textsuperscript{122} Modern genre fantasy (especially Romantic Tolkienesque or “high fantasy”) is structurally organized along these lines, encasing the ancestral “fairytale” structure within the stylistic form of the realist novel, and operating “within the realm of the manifest impossible”.\textsuperscript{123} Propp’s identification of the structural coherence of the basic narrative pattern of fairytale thus clarifies the underlying aesthetic “order” that Romantic theorists thought vital to the proper expression of the fantastic. The progression of fairytale narratives towards the emotionally and structurally satisfying “happy ending” partially explains why the Romantics chose this form of narrative to express their ideals of transcendence and the sense of a meaningful, coherent world order: because order and meaning is established on a dual level (structurally, through the narrative order, and contextually, by submerging story conventions within a supernatural world order), giving the action an added sphere of meaning and significance.

Brian Attebery makes cogent use of Propp’s functions in The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature, examining the common fairytale structure of early American

\textsuperscript{121} Attebery, The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature, 13.
\textsuperscript{123} Attebery, The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature, 13.
fantasies from Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” to L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*, as a means of identifying generic conventions of modern fantasy like plot and character. In his later *Strategies of Fantasy* Attebery also illuminates how Propp’s “functions” can be applied to the analysis of character in fantasy, finding it a useful tool for understanding fantasy’s archetypal characters, who do not conform to psychological notions of character or personality employed in realistic novels – a standard which critics have come to regard as the norm. The “archetypal” characters of fantasy, derived from the oral roots of folkloric stories, romance and fairytale, are often accused of being two-dimensional, lacking a quality of psychological “realism” that twentieth-century readers have come to expect. Propp's emphasis on the functional role of characters offers a way of affirming the legitimacy of “fairytale” or symbolic, archetypal characters, whose “primary significance is their advancement of the story”.

2.5 Some examples of fantasy plots employing Proppian analysis

Like traditional fairytale, modern genre fantasy is very clearly structured around common story patterns and archetypal, role-bound characters such as hero, helper, adversary; these are defined by their function in moving the plot along. Fantasy manipulates these storylines and characters self-consciously, often drawing attention to its own artificial qualities through conventionalized plot devices and narrative stylization, so that the stories can seem like “an abstract play of codes and motifs”. The evident game-like quality of fantasy becomes another narrative device to play

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124 Ibid.
125 Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, passim.
126 Ibid., 71.
with in the hands of fantasy authors such as Sheri S. Tepper. In The True Game characters take part in elaborate social games of power, prestige and warfare that have become ritualized to resemble a giant game of chess, where pawns are the peasant underclass, sacrificed in bloody battles between ambitious “Gamesmen” who manifest powerful magical talents such as sorcery, telepathy, necromancy and shape-shifting.\textsuperscript{128} Tepper plays on the ritualized, conventional aspect of characterisation in fantasy, evident in popular fantasy role-playing games such as “Dungeons and Dragons”, where players “game” and “move” against each other in systematized character roles with set talents and powers that determine the moves they make, much like chess, but with real personalities factoring into the game pieces. She also manages to comment on the ritualized, game-like quality of human social behaviour in general, that can be codified and ritualized (as anthropologists and mythologists have noted) in religion, mythology and fairytale.\textsuperscript{129}

Modern literary fantasy combines the symbolic, ritual resonances of functional fairytale archetypes with the stylistic devices and psychological traits of literary social realism to create “realistic”, believable characters with individual personalities that yet fulfil obvious, often predetermined roles in the service of the story. Characters in modern fantasy thus become more than individuals – their very existence and actions inhere mythical significance, often signalled by symbolic “role-markers” such as colour coding; bright, light qualities signifying daylight and goodness, darkness as evil or night, red as passion or blood and so forth, such as Tolkien’s shining light Elves versus the dark foulness of the Orcs. In this way fantasy characters often reflect not only fundamental psychological principles such as “beauty” or “evil” personified, but they also become “upholders of moral and intellectual standards”, a quality that is

\textsuperscript{128} Sheri S. Tepper, The True Game (1985; reprint, omn).  
\textsuperscript{129} This also taps into Bourdieu’s notion of the social field as a game (in The Field of Cultural Production), and the researches of noted medievalist Johan Huizinga, author of Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1970 [1939]).
often extended to the secondary world and landscapes of the fantasy world itself.\textsuperscript{130} The fairytale tropes of the desolate, barren Wasteland and the fruitful, harmonious Garden also manifest similar symbolic and psychological resonances as individual characters in fantasy, and contribute to the mood and meaning of the story. Just as the blighted, desolate wasteland of Mordor in \textit{The Lord of the Rings} evokes the darkness, evil and hellishness of archetypal evil and the devastation of war, so too does the magical harmony and stillness of the Immanent Grove invoke a sense of natural beauty, balance, and the inter-connectedness of all living things that underpins Le Guin's \textit{Earthsea} books, informed by her philosophical Taoism.

Attebery rightly observes that narrative "realism" attempts to hide its structure and usage of narrative conventions beneath a surface of apparent reported reality, whereas popular fantasy openly admits its reliance on traditional storytelling forms and motifs, making them explicit and primary; actively drawing attention to the "necessity of collusion between writer and reader".\textsuperscript{131} Characters in fantasy are often portrayed as conscious that they are players in a story, taking part in a greater scheme that they may or may not be cognizant of, though the reader certainly is. Sheri S. Tepper's \textit{True Game} books, beginning with \textit{Jinian Footseer}, a \textit{bildungsroman} featuring the young wizard Jinian, employ this device. As her story unfolds (in \textit{Dervish Daughter} (1985) and \textit{Jinian Star-Eye} (1986)), Jinian discovers that her role is to work out "what was really going on" behind the ritualized façade of the tale. A Dervish tells her: "There are truths in these old tales, Jinian. They persist. The very words persist, century after century. Like rituals. Not merely tales for amusement, but rituals of truth".\textsuperscript{132} This is a very clear example of the way modern fantasy deliberately and self-consciously reflects on its own use of fairytale structures and motifs, implying

\textsuperscript{130} Attebery, \textit{The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature}, 13.

\textsuperscript{131} Attebery, \textit{Strategies of Fantasy}, 70, 87.

\textsuperscript{132} Sheri S. Tepper, \textit{Dervish Daughter} (London: Corgi, 1985), 182.
that their significance lies in the telling of the tale for its own sake, as “rituals of truth” whose meaning is shaped through interaction with the reader. As Attebery put it, “The pleasure is in seeing believable analogs of humanity acting out the patterns of fairy tale or myth”.33 Even just going through the motions, acting out a role or function as part of a story is significant in this context, as “A character in a fairy tale is what he does”, and a sense of meaning is inherent in the action.34 Although Jinian doubts her own ability, the reader knows better, being aware of the nature of fairytale inevitability and the hero’s function as articulated by the sinister and sarcastic Oracle: “Well, of course you will do it, my dear. Quite unmistakably. You’re the heroine type. A survivor. When it comes to matters like that, one always wants a heroine type”.35

Propp’s Morphology has thus played an important part in the development of modern fantasy criticism, offering a theoretical framework for the analysis of structure and characterization which (when applied with a sympathetic outlook) can be used to demonstrate that fantasy’s form of narrative evocation is not inferior to realist or mimetic descriptions, merely different. Propp’s methodology must be applied sympathetically, because the temptation to apply such a potentially reductive theory to only some texts (for example texts with an obvious plot structure and functions common in popular generic fiction) and not others (mimetic fiction that disguises its reliance on narrative conventions) is strong, and has been used for discriminatory evaluative purposes. This is evinced in the characterization of genre fantasy as “formula fiction”, where Propp’s functions are used to reduce the individual details of genre stories to their bare bones, emphasising their repetitive, formulaic nature in a derogatory fashion. Tolkien complains of the technique of comparing “skeleton plots”

33 Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, 86.
34 Ibid., 71-2.
35 Tepper, Dervish Daughter, 153.
in the study of medieval romance, speaking of "the habit . . . of pondering a
summarized plot of Beowulf, denuded of all that gives it particular force or individual
life, [which] has encouraged the notion that its main story is wild, or trivial, or typical
. . . Yet all stories, great and small, are one or more of these things in such
nakedness".136

The use of formalist and structuralist methodologies such as Propp's to the exclusion
of other readings is perilous as well. Purely formalist structural approaches like
Propp's have been criticized as sterile for their lack of concern with the context and
meaning of texts, and the fact that they deal solely with internal textual structure in
isolation from social and cultural contexts.137 Propp's methodology is useful for
discerning or describing underlying textual structures, but the limitations of this
method are bound up in its empiricism: it cannot explain the uses, appeal or function
of the kind of story structure it depicts, nor how these are interpreted in different
social contexts by different audiences. The meaning and function of tales reside in
the particularities of their telling, the way conventions of structure or character are
manipulated by the author and interpreted by readers, and given life and individual
import with each retelling, where meaning is generated by social and cultural context.
In his "Introduction" to Morphology of the Folktale, editor Alan Dundes cautions,
"Clearly, structural analysis is not an end in itself! Rather it is a beginning, not an
end", and is useful when regarded as a first step in analysis, in which generic form is
ultimately related to the culture that shapes and receives it.138

Another side-effect of an uncritical application of Propp's morphology stems from his
methodology's inherent bias towards hero-centric readings - a legacy inherited from

137 Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, Alan Dundes, "Introduction," to 2nd ed, xii.
138 Ibid., xiii.
Aristotle’s classical theory of genres, which centres on the hero’s actions and degree of divinity in relation to the social environment.\textsuperscript{139} Structuralist and formalist readings, including Propp’s schemata, Jungian archetypes, and Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth”\textsuperscript{140} have been highly influential and persistent in studies of modern fantasy, emphasising a trend towards close readings that focus on hero-figures to the exclusion of other textual elements and interpretations.\textsuperscript{141}

2.6 Tzvetan Todorov, structuralism and “the fantastic”
Structuralist readings of modern fantasy were particularly influential during the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of the impact of “theory” on Anglo-American literary criticism. The “scientific” orientation of formalism and structuralism provided a legitimating framework attractive to theorists interested in fantastic literatures, possibly because, as Le Lievre speculates, “their point-by-point rigour lends to a marginalised genre, and field of study, an appearance of scientific validity and psychological applicability . . . that trumps the commonly-levelled charge of escapism”.\textsuperscript{142} Literary theorists’ desire to emulate scientific discourse meant that modernist theories dominated by Saussure, Marx and Freud were themselves methodologically limited by orthodox empiricist assumptions. As Attebery notes, “large areas of human experience do not lend themselves to exploration through the methods of the physical or even the biological sciences”; experiences like the human search for meaning that fantasy, myth and religion tap into.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{140} Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, (London: Abacus, 1975 [1949]) combines elements drawn from structuralism, social anthropology, myth and ritual, and Jungian symbology.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{143} Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, 27.
It is interesting that Propp’s work also stimulated the thought of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose structuralist interpretations of myth was foundational to the formation of Structuralism as an intellectual movement in France in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{144} Significantly, Lévi-Strauss was instrumental in eliminating the study of religion, magic, and the sacred, as valid areas of investigation in anthropology and sociology. This theoretical predisposition profoundly affected structuralist methodologies in literary criticism.\textsuperscript{145} This becomes significant for the study of fantasy, because the most widely influential theoretical work on fantastic literature, Tzvetan Todorov’s \textit{The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre}, has a structuralist orientation that impacted profoundly on subsequent interpretations of genre fantasy.\textsuperscript{146}

\textit{Introduction à La Littérature Fantastique} was published in 1970, and translated into English in 1973. This work was in many ways a catalyst for the dramatic rise of academic scholarship on fantastic literatures in the mid-1970s: what Gary K. Wolfe calls the “academic awakening” of genre studies; when the systematic study of fantasy and science fiction started to get underway at universities, and the first book-length studies of popular genres were published by academic presses.\textsuperscript{147} Scholarly study of the neglected genres of the fantastic were by this stage engaged in “an extended game of catch-up”, lagging sorely behind the strong public demand for fantasy narratives.

\begin{flushleft} \footnotesize
\textsuperscript{144} Barry, \textit{Beginning Theory}, 39. \\
\textsuperscript{145} Siebers, \textit{The Romantic Fantastic}, 36. \\
\textsuperscript{146} Todorov's influence on the study of fantastic literature had such an impact on the critical field, that in the "Preface" to the proceedings of the 1980 International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, Collins and Pearce note that “the structural analysis of Tzvetan Todorov appeared to be the most widely adopted starting point, so much so that applications of his criteria to a text soon began to draw impatient boos or groans from audiences,” Robert A. Collins and Howard D. Pearce, eds., \textit{The Scope of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the First International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature and Film} (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), “Preface”. \\
\textsuperscript{147} Wolfe, \textit{Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy}, xxx.
\end{flushleft}
that had resulted in what I call the "Tolkien Explosion" on American university campuses in the 1960s and 1970s. Even by the mid-1970s there was a distinct lack of basic reference material: "even the most respected of genre authors were excluded from standard literary reference works".\textsuperscript{148} At the same time, the increasing use of fantastic imagery and stylistic devices on the part of major literary figures such as Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Pynchon, Italo Calvino and Vladimir Nabokov, brought the fantastic increasingly to the attention of the literary academy.\textsuperscript{149} Todorov’s formal study of "the fantastic" thus was a timely discussion of genre theory, combining "an essentially Aristotelian attitude" toward genre, with a scientific rigour and structuralist view of literature derived from Russian formalists such as Propp.\textsuperscript{150}

Todorov’s notion of "the fantastic" as a genre expressing "the hesitation" experienced by a reader or character when faced with a supernatural event is the most frequently cited definition of fantastic literature in academic circles. Nevertheless, much confusion has arisen from the conflicting interpretations of genre fantasy engendered by the application of Todorov’s theory by later critics, such as Rosemary Jackson and Kathryn Hume in the 1980s. Todorov’s structuralist outlook and prioritisation of "theoretical" over "historical" genres, (where "the fantastic" is understood as a theoretical genre, but "Romantic" or popular genre fantasy is a historical genre) has contributed not only to incompatible definitions of fantasy as a literary "mode" or as a "genre", but also to the systematic critical marginalization of contemporary popular genre fiction in the Romantic tradition of Tolkien. Critical struggles over definitions of fantasy and the fantastic do not take place in a vacuum, but are discursive practices shaped by educational and cultural forces and institutions that are

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., xi.

\textsuperscript{149} Attebery, \textit{Strategies of Fantasy}, 19-20.

engaged in constant competition for the authority to decide what constitutes legitimate works of art, and their meaning and value. The struggle between discourses (such as those seeking to ostracise genre fantasy, and those championing its relevance) reflects in turn the real interests, ideologies and values of diverse critical communities, who are all engaged in struggles for symbolic power - prestige, recognition and status in the field.

It is therefore neither surprising nor insignificant that Todorov's definition of the fantastic should be so influential in the 1970s, when the habitual consensus of literary criticism based on the institutionalized taste and values of privileged modernist discourses (Leavisite "liberal humanism"), began to be challenged by the rise of "critical theory" in the Anglo-American critical community, which demanded theoretical explicitness and accountability in the study of literature. Significant social and economic upheavals resulted in the postmodern condition from the 1960s, meaning that the traditional social consensus and old certainties dominating Western society, including taken-for-granted methods of studying literature, came increasingly under fire from Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, and structuralist criticism.

Furthermore, changing modes of cultural production (including the dominance of global mass media, television and mass publishing industries) were steadily eroding the distinctions between "high" and "low" culture, literary and popular fiction, and popular genres such as science fiction were gradually growing more acceptable in mainstream culture and as objects worthy of scholarly scrutiny. There was still considerable critical ambivalence about the status of popular genres as "literature" or even "artistic" products, however, and Todorov's own preference for more "canonical" works of nineteenth century fantastic literature and the ambiguity inherent in his

51 Barry, Beginning Theory, 35-36.
abstract theory of genre, set up a pattern for justifying the exclusion of modern popular fantasy that persists to this day.

Amongst the reasons for the frequent citing of Todorov’s work (particularly in the 1970s-80s) there was undoubtedly an element of prestige, where critics interested in the marginalized literatures of the fantastic sought the symbolic power and critical cachet that Todorov, as a key influential figure, brought to the genre. The fact that Todorov was part of the inner circle of the prestigious and hugely influential French Structuralist school; a student of Roland Barthes and colleague of Gerard Genette and Helene Cixous, which whom he co-founded the literary theory journal Poétique; lent immediate and much-desired status and authority to the study of the fantastic.\(^{152}\) Robert Scholes divulges a certain prejudice reigning in the Anglo-American academy of 1975 when he states that it is Todorov’s theory of “structuralist poetics” that allows him to approach “with entire seriousness one of the humbler literary genres – the fantastic”.\(^{153}\) Todorov’s logical, scientific expository style, and structuralist methodology has a clarity and appeal that is still evident, particularly in his matter-of-fact theoretical approach that aims at explanation rather than evaluation, and avoids the rhetorical excesses and efflorescence of earlier essayists such as Tolkien and Northrop Frye. Todorov’s interest in hitherto ignored fictions of the fantastic brought them to the attention of the critical establishment, and theorised them in a way that was rendered them interesting to scholars of literary postmodernism.

The school of fantastic criticism that developed in continental Europe discussed a tradition of literature in which the English-language “Secondary world” fantasies of William Morris, Lord Dunsany, and E. R. Eddison that predated Tolkien’s work,


\(^{153}\) Ibid., Scholes, viii.
did not figure because they were hardly known on the continent.\textsuperscript{54} Furthermore, genre fantasy as an Anglo-American publishing phenomenon in the wake of the "Tolkien explosion" in America in the mid- to late 1960s, had not yet gathered enough momentum to come to the attention of continental theorists such as Todorov. Rottensteiner noted that by 1983, the "continental" school of criticism continued the trend of ignoring commercial genre fantasy, often denying that it even belonged in the same category of literatures of the fantastic, which included authors such as Tieck, Poe, Henry James, Lewis Carroll, Lovecraft, Marquez and several science fiction writers, including Stanislaw Lem. The notion that Tolkien-esque fantasy is not actually "fantastic literature" at all persists to this day.\textsuperscript{55}

Many of the positive qualities characterising the on-going project of "theorising" literary studies that began in earnest in the 1970s can be seen in Todorov’s work, such as the demand to spell out clearly what critical criteria are being applied and why. He wishes to discover the "mechanism" governing the generic expression of "the fantastic", invoking the scientific method of deduction, and formulating an "abstract hypothesis" about genre in a theoretical manner. Todorov thereby provided one of the first serious, methodologically rigorous attempts to theorise the notion of genre in a climate where the valorization of the uniqueness, originality and "genius" of great works of literature was the norm, so that speaking of genres was generally regarded as "pointless", as value was predicated on difference, not resemblance to other works.\textsuperscript{56} As Todorov argues, such a position infers that the designation of "genre" be limited to mass-produced, stereotypical texts of "popular" literature, as "the notion of genre in that sense would be inapplicable to strictly literary texts", which are "artistic", not

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 2241.
\textsuperscript{56} Todorov, \textit{The Fantastic}, 5.
“mechanical” cultural products. Todorov champions the existence of genres and the necessity of elaborating generic categories for contemporary works, as “failing to recognize the existence of genres is equivalent to claiming that a literary work does not bear any relationship to already existing works.” Whilst this is vital theoretical step that challenges the traditional boundaries between high and popular culture, and thereby works toward a contemporary understanding of fantasy as a genre; however, Todorov’s own notion of “genre” and his elucidation of the properties of “the fantastic” have in fact proven problematic (“confused matters greatly” as Attebery put it) for studies of genre fantasy.

Todorov, it turns out, does not actually deal with “contemporary” texts at all, but with the nineteenth century “fantastic”, which “no longer exist[s]”. Part of the terminological confusion exacerbated by Todorov’s use of the term “fantastique” stems not only from the divergent meanings of the word fantastique in French and English, but also from the different connotations arising from the word’s everyday usage, and the narrow meaning historically ascribed to it in theoretical discourse. As Brian Attebery points out, in continental theory, “La littérature fantastique’ is an entirely different genre, confined almost exclusively to the nineteenth century and represented in English by such texts as Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw”.

Todorov draws on the works of Henry James, E. T. A. Hoffman, Guy de Maupassant, H. P. Lovecraft, Cazotte, Jan Potocki and Franz Kafka, among others. However the real confusion, I believe, originates in Todorov’s invocation of “genre” as an abstract, theoretical entity. He draws a primary distinction between historical

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157 Ibid., 6.
158 Ibid., 8.
159 Ibid., 166.
160 Rottensteiner, “European Theories of Fantasy,” 2236-7.
161 Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, 20.
genres, which "result from an observation of literary reality", and *theoretical* genres based on abstract hypotheses, "a deduction of a theoretical order", following ancient classical works on poetics by Aristotle and Plato.¹⁶² Todorov's genre of "the fantastic" is a *theoretical* genre (deduced from theory), an abstract literary category, much like Frye's mode or *mythoi* of romance: the fantastic is thus not in fact a concrete historical genre, it is an abstract principle or pattern which manifests itself in certain texts (and need not therefore be confined to a particular historical period).¹⁶³ The paradox of Todorov's fantastic, and the confusion it engendered in subsequent applications, arises from his idea that "the fantastic" is an abstract structural quality that could (and does) surface in texts understood today as genre fantasy; but the assumption (common to structuralist poetics) that this element *can* be abstracted belies the fact that "the fantastic" is actually predicated on historically specific preconditions (a secular-scientific world view), which the theory itself masks.

Consequently, much of the terminological confusion between fantasy/the fantastic as mode or genre can be traced to the joint predilection for abstraction and the studying of texts isolated from their social contexts. Todorov's work continued the classical Aristotelian tradition of poetics, which postulates that literary language has special properties (literariness) and thereby "says what non-literary language does not and cannot say", and that this resides in "an abstract structure which is a mental construction".¹⁶⁴ He therefore asserted that "The Fantastic' is a name given to a

¹⁶³ Todorov explains his theory of genre thus: "the genres we deduce from the theory must be verified by reference to the texts... On the other hand, the genres which we encounter in literary history must be subject to the explanation of a coherent theory... The definition of genres will therefore be a continual oscillation between the description of phenomena and abstract theory," Ibid., 21.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 22, 17.
kind of literature, to a literary genre"165 Fishelov succinctly criticises the Todorovian opposition between theoretical and historical genres:

the construction of 'theoretical genres' seems to be either problematic or, as a means of explaining actual literary genres, simply useless. . . . it seems pointless to try to construct innumerable abstract tables of theoretical genres when they are of no help in dealing with actual historical genres.166

Historical dimension and extra-textual context are vital as they carry information about factors such as the contexts of production, and the conventions that have arisen around texts that influence their meaning and generic classification. This is the problem with studying texts in isolation from context: genre is determined by multiple factors, including author's intention and the forces impacting on the production of the text (publishing conventions); its physical appearance; where is it sold and how it is reviewed; in other words, the multifaceted field of cultural production that establishes the meaning and value of the work as art. Abstracting to the degree advocated by Todorov and his followers misrepresents the complexity of generic classification, significantly occluding of the processes of textual production.167 Interestingly, the ahistorical nature of modernist (and postmodernist) literary criticism is connected to the historicising tendencies of Todorov's structuralism. Structuralism perpetuates synchronic studies of literature in isolation and was therefore embraced by the mainstream of literary studies as it allowed the perpetuation of bias through selective sampling in favour of canonical texts. This works in favour of the values of the dominant groups of modernity:

By considering canonical texts, the labour involved in their production is reduced to the familiar biographical and contextual details of individual

165 Ibid., 3.
writers, solitary geniuses who transcend the material conditions of their historical and material situations, and whose bodies reify the social division of labour underpinning the ideological notion of authorship. This leads to the negative view of genre as constraint and, arguably, to the naïve celebration of resistance to hegemonic incorporative strategies. In stark contrast, the concept of genre as field which I employ in this thesis introduces the element of concrete historicity: it is worth noting that even in 1975 Stanislaw Lem called for a need for theories “emphasizing the diachronical linkage culture”, that is, the acknowledgment of the historical dimension of generic development through time, which affects the form, meaning and conventions attached to different genres. It must be recognised that genre is a process; it is fluid, it changes with each new text over time, and is not a static, unchanging category.

2.7 Bringing Todorov into dialogue with Tolkien: the Sublime

Tobin Siebers raises a further challenge to Todorov’s position, noting that a major methodological assumption carried over from structuralism in his theory of the fantastic is the elimination of the supernatural from critical consideration. Siebers demonstrates that nineteenth century authors of the fantastic made clear connections between superstition, the supernatural, and theories of the fantastic. He therefore identifies Todorov’s refusal to consider or account for the supernatural as a major flaw in his treatment of the fantastic.

The supernatural leads naturally to a consideration of the sublime. This, like genre, is an historically situated category, and unsurprisingly Todorov privileges the

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169 Lem, “Todorov’s Fantastic Theory of Literature.”


modernist, Freudian subject and the tradition of the fantastic that views it as a break, or a shock in consciousness (though it must be noted that he does not discuss the sublime explicitly). For Todorov, this model is privileged over the Tolkienesque and Coleridgean Romantic sublime which sees it as leading to consolation and recovery – the reformation of the subject, not merely its disruption.)

To bring Todorov and Tolkien into dialogue with each other, it is necessary to offer a perspective on the operation of the sublime in the Western tradition. Thomas Weiskel formulates a working definition of the structure of the sublime, suggesting that the experience of the sublime is divided into three phases: in the first phase, the mind is in a determinate, habitual relationship with the contemplated object; in the second phase, in an overflow of feeling, “the habitual relation of mind and object suddenly breaks down. Surprise and astonishment is the affective correlative, and there is an immediate intuition of a disconcerting disproportion between inner and outer.” The relationship between mind and object perceived becomes “radically indeterminate”. Todorov’s “fantastic hesitation” can be situated at that moment when “the relation between the signifier and the signified breaks down and is replaced by an indeterminate relationship.” As Sandner says, the second phase is “experienced as the tearing of a veil between this world and another field of experience altogether,” an experience of the numinous, which has been described in literature as the irruption of “the fantastic”, the supernatural order into the world.

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172 Though David Sandner (in *The Fantastic Sublime*) discusses the structure of the Romantic sublime in relation to Victorian and Tolkienesque fantasy, and to Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny”, to my knowledge, no parallels have yet been drawn explicitly linking Todorov’s fantastic to theories of the Freudian sublime as contrasted with the transcendental resolution of the Coleridgean tradition of the “positive” sublime.


174 Ibid.

This break with reality is characteristic of the tearing asunder of the veil of reality, a new form of perception engendered by the creative imagination in Romantic thought.

In the third phase of the sublime moment, “the mind recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object such that the very indeterminacy which erupted in phase two is taken as symbolizing the mind’s relation to a transcendent order.”

This third recovery phase, resulting in a new insight, can be prevented, resulting in what Weiskel calls the “blockage of the sublime”, which is “an abridgment of the sublime moment so that we are confined to the second phase and await futilely the restorative reaction which never comes, except ironically.” Sander describes this phenomenon: “the tearing of the veil becomes an endless tearing, an opening without end or release, where the third or restorative phase never comes.” To me, this is a description of the Todorovian fantastic “hesitation”, where the sublime moment ends in confusion, bewilderment and the breakdown of perception, which is not restored by new insight.

Sigmund Freud describes this kind of blockage as taking part in the confusion of the German words *heimlich* (clandestine, covert), and *unheimlich* (uncanny, eldritch). According to Freud, “the supernatural is found to be the natural, the other is distressingly discovered to be the self”. This view of the fantastic is a deeply anthropocentric one that in effect precludes the existence of any authentic Otherness outside of human thought and consciousness, as all experiences are ultimately experiences of the self. Karl Kroeber insists that Freud’s attitude toward the fantastic in “The Uncanny” aided in exorcising Romantic fantasy from the

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176 Ibid.
mainstream of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature by means of its thoroughgoing psychological reductionism. This is significant, in that Kroeber sees the fantastic as originating in "the possibility of an authentic otherness", where "The fantastic is exactly what one cannot identify with, something that is not mankind as mankind knows itself". Romantic fantasy is therefore a considered protest against the anthropocentric view, upon which Freudian assumptions rest. Todorov's theory of the fantastic, which explicitly states that the reader must approach the fantastic from a purely secular worldview, experiencing "hesitation" when confronted by an apparently supernatural event, is thus congruent with the Freudian universe, which ignores the fact that many texts of Romantic fantasy do not leave room for "hesitation". Kroeber avers that "Hesitancy, one is tempted to say, is exactly what effective fantasy does not permit": it simply presents "the impossible" or the supernatural other as real, whether the characters of readers believe it or not.

2.8 Conclusion

What Todorov and other theorists of the modern fantastic form appear to be skirting around, hinting at, but not ever quite coming out and stating, is that the context of modern fantasy can be dismissed when considering its function and interpretation. Rejecting the lead of Tolkien in "On Fairy-Stories" Propp, Todorov and their followers preferred a structural-functionalist interpretation of basic fantasy motifs to an investigation of their significance in the historical context of the Western Romantic tradition. The incommensurability of the Romantic and scientific world-views is occasionally alluded to; Kroeber acknowledges that "Romantic fantasy indeed thrusts itself into an environment hostile even to conceiving the possibility of its

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181 Ibid., 3.
182 Ibid., 4.
existence, and Clute defines fantasy as conceived in opposition to a consensus worldview, but most modern critics of fantasy take for granted the undisputed hegemony of the modern, secular-scientific worldview. I know of no studies of fantasy that take specifically as their subject a thorough exploration of fantasy's historical connections and labyrinthine interactions with the trajectory of modern Western society's process of secularization and reclamation of esoteric spirituality/religiosity.

It appears that Kroeber may have intimations of this connection, as he speaks of "fantasy's bare survival in marginal forms throughout the era of Modernism", due to "the modernist aesthetic's hostility to fantasy as serious art" that began to wane in the early 1960s, allowing a revival of fantastic literature and criticism. It must be noted that atheism, agnosticism and secular humanism were ushered in with the advent of Modernism, and only began to give way to alternative spiritualities in the 1960s, and that it was the members of the counter-culture which embraced both fantasy literature and religio-spiritual alternatives to the Judeo-Christian mainstream and the culture of disbelief. The popularity of formerly despised fictional forms such as fantasy in the 1960s is related to other social phenomena, including increased affluence which resulted in notably greater sales of books and periodicals, as well as the encroachment of television sets into suburban homes. Those fascinated by fantastic literature and alternative spiritualities were generally affluent and well-

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183 Ibid., 5.
184 John Clute and John Grant. The Encyclopedia of Fantasy (London: Orbit, 1999), 338.
185 Kroeber, Romantic Fantasy, 2.
186 Adam Possamai, "Cultural consumption of history and popular culture in alternative spiritualities", Journal of Consumer Culture, 2: 2 (2002), 204-7. Possamai discusses the foundation of the Church of All Worlds in 1962. This church was based on Robert A. Heinlein's sf classic Stranger in a Strange Land (1961), and ushered in a raft of quasi-religious bodies devoted to popular fictional forms, including film and television.
educated, and well-equipped to cope with the rapid changes of that decade. Creative acts such as the foundation of the Church of All Worlds in 1961, based on a popular sf novel, and the valorization of primal cultures in contrast to decadent modernity, signalled the collapse of boundaries between “high” and “low” culture.

This fact substantially undermines the arguments of Marxist critics such as Rosemary Jackson, whose desire to dismiss Tolkien and genre fantasy stems from a strong negative bias against this form of popular commercial literature, regarding it as merely an opiate for the masses. This results in an operative bias which both prevents her from adequately following up the implications of her own methodology when it comes to Tolkien, as well as producing a prejudiced misapprehension of Tolkien's theory of fantasy. The wholesale application of Todorov's fantastic as if it were synonymous with the contemporary genre, effectively excludes non-canonical texts through the “sly application of nonuniform values in order to introduce a hierarchy consonant with a pre-existing canon,” thereby privileging texts that uphold the values of modernism and valorise the modern sense of spiritual dislocation and social anomie, which the Romantics connected specifically to the rise of the worldview of Enlightenment Reason. The mainstream of modern genre fantasy displays many of the Romantic values championed by Tolkien, implicitly (or explicitly) expressing the belief that the psychologically and spiritually destructive aspects of modernity are best combated through the restorative holism of the faculty of Imagination, which perceives the world anew, imbuing reality with a renewed sense of meaning.

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Chapter 3
Why are critics afraid of dragons?

She was merely reflecting, in perfect good faith, something that goes very deep in the American character: a moral disapproval of fantasy, a disapproval so intense, and often so aggressive, that I cannot help but see it as arising, fundamentally, from fear... I think we have a terrible thing here: a hardworking, upright, responsible citizen, a full-grown, educated person, who is afraid of dragons, and afraid of hobbits, and scared to death of fairies. It's funny, but it's also terrible.

Ursula K. Le Guin, "Why are Americans afraid of dragons?" (1974)

3.1 Introduction
Why are critics afraid of dragons? The epigraph indicates a widespread hostility toward fantasy, a "moral disapproval" not confined to American society, but which seems to be deeply ingrained in modern western culture. In her essay, Ursula K. Le Guin discusses the widespread hostility in America towards literatures of the fantastic, proposing that it arises from an intense "moral disapproval" of fantasy embedded deep in the American psyche. She attributes this to the utilitarian Protestant "work ethic" (famous linked by Max Weber to the rise of capitalism) which rejects the "pleasure and delight" gained from fantasy fiction as "childish or effeminate, unprofitable, and probably sinful". Le Guin's arguments in defence of fantasy, "imaginative fiction", as spiritually rewarding and emotionally "true", correspond closely to Tolkien's seminal arguments in "On Fairy-Stories". Even though Le Guin was writing in the mid-1970s and Tolkien in 1939, appreciators of fantasy continue to feel the need to justify their love of the genre against perceived hostility toward it even today. Brian Attebery concurs: "Nearly every writer of fantasy

has felt compelled to offer some kind of defence of his work, to demonstrate that the marvellous is not arbitrary or irrelevant to human life".3 The critics whom Le Guin identifies as being afraid of "dragons" and "hobbits" are thus reacting to the perceived danger the excluded Other poses to the dominant social order: it threatens to destabilize the dominance and control of those who have a vested interest in maintaining boundaries and hierarchical oppositions such as those erected between literature and generic fiction, high and popular culture.

My aim is to reorient current thinking about genre fantasy by exposing the underlying dualistic premises and presumptions inherent in the dominant modernist literary paradigm, that are shown to be ultimately hostile and discriminatory to popular genre fiction (crime, romance, fantasy, science fiction and others). The following sections examine more closely how the deeper systems of value operating in the field of literary criticism have been constructed through the politically and ideologically motivated institutionalization of discourses of Reason and modernity, that sanction a bias against the popular in general, and fantasy in particular, as a revival of the pre-modern romance form. My efforts are geared towards radically recontextualizing fantasy, embedding the genre back into the political, social and historical contexts from which it has been severed by the decontextualizing force of dominant formalist literary criticism. In order to regain this more holistic perspective of fantasy, the concept of genre as a "field" including texts, community and socio-cultural contexts, is engaged to provide a more functionally orientated explanation of how and why fantasy is relevant to contemporary western society. As Jonathan Culler observes:

    Literary theory is not a disembodied set of ideas but a force in institutions. Theory exists in communities of readers and writers, as a

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discursive practice, inextricably entangled with educational and cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{4}

This defensive stance is not limited only to fantasy authors, but to scholars and critics who wish to validate the genre, such as Ann Swinfen's \textit{In Defence of Fantasy}, and the writings of John H. Timmerman, Patrick Curry, and Tom Shippey.\textsuperscript{5} However, these are minority voices, as modern genre fantasy, the sort that is sold and marketed as such in bookshops, is “continually neglected, and even despised, by modern academic criticism”\textsuperscript{6}. The negative attitude towards fantasy is expressed not only by the hostility of dominant modes of critical discourse, but is manifested in the academic marginalization of genre texts and authors. This occurs not only through the omission of fantasy texts from general English studies curricula, but often more subtly in choice of texts included in studies which purport to be about “fantasy”, but in actuality ignore popular texts that most readers associate with the genre in favour of more canonical ones. The “respectable” genre of fantasy that the great majority of English literary scholarship approves of is very definitely not contemporary “genre” fantasy: its roll-call most often includes authors who are safely dead and validated by history, or fashionably \textit{avant-garde}, ratified as “literary” magic realism or subversively postmodern. Favoured canonical authors thus include Mary Shelley, E. T. A. Hoffman, Henry James, Thomas Pynchon, Franz Kafka, and occasionally Mervyn Peake or Lewis Carroll.

An interesting development is the use of the rubric "the fantastic" by Anglo-American critics of a postmodern persuasion to justify their exclusion of the popular, following the example set by theoretical heavyweight Todorov's *The Fantastic*, and Rosemary Jackson's influential *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Critics whose works one might expect to discuss genre fantasy (given the presence of "fantastic" in their titles), but who in fact dismiss, omit or ignore contemporary, popular manifestations of the genre, include Eric Rabkin, Neil Cornwell, Tobin Siebers, Christine Brooke-Rose and Lucie Armitt, to name only a few. It pays therefore to be wary of the narrow, technical meaning the word "fantastic" has acquired in literary scholarship since the mid-1970s. Chantal Bourgault Du CourdRay observes that use of the term "fantastic" in specialist literary scholarship has shifted from its generally understood meaning as an adjective describing unreal fictions:

this strategy has come to signify that the author will be adopting concepts deriving from postmodern literary theory which elaborate the subversive strategies of certain texts and which advocate resistance to the concept of genre. 

Even within criticism of genre fantasy "proper", critics will often choose more dense, obscure, complicated or "difficult" examples, in other words, more "literary" genre texts for examination, proving that marginalized genres such as fantasy are "worthy" examples of postmodern literariness. But as Axel Kruse observes, this only serves to maintain the boundary between high and low (or commercial culture), perpetuating a

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focus on high culture and the traditional concerns of English literature as a
discipline. Moreover, declares Shippey, "None of the criticism of this type does any
justice to the inventiveness, subtlety, and literary skill of scores of authors writing
now".

The deep-seated bias against fantasy can even be found in Cultural Studies, as there
are still very few scholarly texts that utilize examples from genre fantasy. Science
fiction has been much more "theorized" than fantasy, and many works, such as
Clarke's 2001: A Space Odyssey, Orwell's 1984, Wells's The War of the Worlds or
Huxley's Brave New World have now become canonical popular cultural icons, due in
no small part to their obvious concern with modernity, science and technology.
Andrew Milner's excellent Literature, Culture and Society included a section on the
science fiction film Blade Runner and the classic horror film Frankenstein. Scott
McCracken devotes chapters to detective fiction, popular romance, science fiction and
gothic horror in Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction, but does not once even mention
fantasy, despite the fact that it far outsells science fiction and horror in terms of
popularity. Besides, science fiction and the gothic fit in nicely with McCracken's
overall theory of "transgression" and utopian impulses in popular fiction, qualities that
fantasy is generally perceived as seriously lacking. It is this neglect of, and continued
ignorance about the positive qualities of fantasy, that this study seeks to address.12

The ambiguity and contention observed in the field of fantasy operates at all levels;
from arguments about the nature of the genre, to its marginalisation in scholarly
debates. This indicates that it is a "liminal" field; a space that falls between the
boundaries of legitimately recognized social authority. It is precisely through this

12 It is pleasing to see that Clive Bloom's recent Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900 (Basingstoke,
liminality that the field of fantasy can offer new perspectives on the broader field of cultural production. As a site of struggle between orthodox and heretical groups and interests, it becomes a nexus through which to observe some of the processes of cultural and social change continuously at work in society.

3.2 Wrestling with the problem; is fantasy literature?
Ever since J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings placed fantasy as a separate genre firmly on the modern critical map fifty years ago, disputes have raged amongst critics as to whether or not this text and subsequent fantasies are actually “literature”. George Watson describes The Lord of the Rings in 1982 as “more of a phenomenon... than a work of literature, and more of an addiction than either...”.
Brian Attebery notes that sixteen years earlier, in 1968, “virtually nothing in the way of theory had been proposed for the examination of fantasy”, and critics were not only extremely limited by the lack of a conceptual vocabulary, but were also fighting against the accumulated weight of “a received tradition of critical thought” that forced even critics admiring of Tolkien’s work to conclude that it was “not literature”.
Though Attebery himself has done much to rectify the situation, the weight of received opinion is still generally opposed to any true acceptance of dragons and hobbits as acceptable fare for rational adults and responsible educators.

All this inclines me to believe that the roots of this “fear” of fantasy lie much deeper than mere scholarly ignorance and misapprehension, and if so, it belies an institutional misunderstanding that is grounded in much larger ideologies functioning in western society. As Foucault has shown, discursive practices such as those at work in constructing the subject of genre fantasy occur in “specific, power-laden institutional

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contexts, that delimit the boundaries of what can actually be said", and that what is at stake is "a politics of knowledge... Epistemological issues are instrumental to political ones. It is difficult not to be convinced by Attebery’s astute arguments about fantasy’s "capacity to challenge our notions of literary art", and his persuasive examination of fantasy from the perspective of postmodernist literary theory. Nevertheless, Attebery is still attempting to challenge traditional literary criticism on its own grounds, by justifying the practice of fantasy using critical approaches such as narratology, stylistics, and features of literary postmodernism that are based on the same assumptions and dualistic concepts of the nature and value of literature that marginalized the fantastic in the first place.

Attebery himself recognizes the limitations of his largely text-based analysis, and points to the solution as lying in fantasy’s socio-historical contexts, when he wishes for someone of a possibly neo-Marxist persuasion to “investigate the problem of what calls ‘the ideological nature of form’ as it is raised by fantasy”. Both Attebery and Jameson shy away from a more in-depth examination of the ways modern fantasy as an incarnation of the romance mode, is put to “quite different symbolic uses as the form itself is adapted to the varying historical situations”, which is what this present study investigates. Recent Marxist writers such as China Miéville and Mark Bould have provided useful perspectives on how Marxism can be adapted specifically for the study of fantasy, but more general insights have come from Marxist principles as modified by interdisciplinary cultural theories, that focus on the creation and institutional perpetuation of cultural practices.

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15 Ibid.
16 Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, Ch. 2 & 3.
17 Ibid., 31.
The set of cultural practices and ideologies in question, revolve around the meaning, uses and value of “literature”. What is literature? The definition that concerns us here is the modern sense of the term as “imaginative writing”, a restricted meaning which only evolved in the modern West with the development of Romanticism in the eighteenth century. Literature for us has come to mean “writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect”. It is interesting to note that modernist literary criticism has placed the emphasis for consideration on the former, “beauty of form”, stressing poetics, the surface quality of language, rather than “emotional effect”, which Tolkien and other scholars of fantasy and popular culture highlight. However, the term “literature” only becomes problematic when it “ceases to be merely descriptive and shifts to being evaluative”. It is in this sense of evaluation that literature is applied to fantasy, and fantasy is found wanting. “Literature” is not being used descriptively when Maxim Jakubowski can say in all earnestness that “fantasy lost its status as a literary genre and became a commodity”. The underlying assumption is that literature is valued writing, a thing of status that has some (presumably) innate “literary” qualities of which being a “commodity” is definitely not one. Assumptions such as these, which in fact underlie the foundations of the modern western study of literature as a whole, beg the question of who is doing the valuing?

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20 Culler asks: “what distinguishes [literary] from non-literary works?”, “are there any essential, distinguishing features that literary works share? ...works of literature come in all shapes and sizes and most of them seem to have more in common with works that aren’t usually called literature than they do with some other works recognized as literature” Culler, Literary Theory, 20.
21 Ibid., 21. See also Andrew Milner, Literature, Culture and Society (St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1996), Ch.1.
23 Ibid., 7.
3.3 The Weed Theory of Fantasy

Jonathan Culler, echoing Bourdieu's reasoning, states that like all art, literature is a category that refers "not to specific properties but only to changing criteria of social groups". There is no identifiable "essence" of literariness that makes a text literature and not just any other writing, except its context. In its broadest sense, literature is "a set of texts that cultural arbiters recognize as belonging to literature".

The "cultural arbiters" who were in power during the formation of English literary studies as a discipline from 1890-1950, the heyday of European and American modernist art, were privileged white males who helped to shape not only the discipline of Literature, but also the self-conception of "modernity" itself. Rather than ask "what is literature?" Culler suggests that a more pertinent question is, "what makes us... treat something as literature? ...what is involved in treating things as literature in our culture?" Culler illustrates this conceptual shift by asking, "What is a weed? Is there an essence of 'weedness' - a special something, a je ne sais quoi, that weeds share and that distinguishes them from non-weeds?" The answer is no: "Weeds are simply plants that gardeners don't want to have growing in their gardens."

The parallels with genre fantasy are startlingly obvious: I call it "the Weed Theory of Fantasy". Modern literary studies have focussed on attempting to identify an "essence" of fantasy, as if it were a physical or biological specimen, and not a social, culturally constructed category. Fantasy criticism has directed its efforts to trying to isolate features that distinguish fantasy from other kinds of fiction through content and structural analysis, by saying that fantasy contains magic and dragons, it has a

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55 Culler, Literary Theory, 22.
56 Ibid.
58 Culler, Literary Theory, 22.
59 Ibid.
fairy-tale structure, produces the affect of wonder and so forth. These things are descriptively true, but they are not in themselves enough to distinguish fantasy precisely from other genres such as science fiction, magic realism or horror. Nor are they able to explain the consistently negative evaluations that have entered into the concept of genre fantasy as being not-literature. Fantasy cannot be defined without intellectual dishonesty as being by nature marginal or inherently inferior to other forms of literature. According to the Weed Theory of Fantasy, genre fantasy is fiction that critics do not want in the garden of literature. Despite the best efforts to describe fantasy, the value judgment involved in the categorization of literature means that fantasy has been defined by exclusion - by what it is not, by what it does not do - fantasy has been defined as the Other to Literature. Therefore, the question to ask about fantasy is not what it is, but what makes us treat fantasy as not-literature? What is involved in treating/categorizing something as genre fantasy in our culture? The Weed Theory of Fantasy highlights the fundamental thrust of my approach: to openly recognize the structures of domination and "othering" at work within the field of literature, and to assert to possibility of finding alternative ways of conceptualizing genre fantasy that are less evaluative and hierarchical, enabling the construction of difference that is neither devalued nor excluded from the continuum of literary art.

A large part of the critical reception of fantasy has involved its exclusion from serious scholarly consideration by the critical establishment: fantasy is not literature because it is not recognized by the dominant cultural arbiters as belonging to literature. As Attebery states, "We must either redefine literature or exclude Tolkien - and with him much of modern fantasy".30 In the recent J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century, Shippey speculates on the nature of the repeatedly expressed outrage about Tolkien's work by influential sections of the literary elite: "Very probably the reason for the dislike has a good deal to do with the reasons for the success. Tolkien has

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30 Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, 19.
challenged the very authority of the literati, and this is never forgiven”. This is true in a number of ways: the massive popular success of The Lord of the Rings by definition rendered it unpalatable to the essentially elitist underpinnings of the modernist literary project, and has inspired a great deal of suspicion that both the quality and quantity of admiration generated by the book has “cultish” qualities. If the mass media can be considered a touchstone for dominant or mainstream opinion, upholders of the status quo, it is noticeable that both the fantasy and science fiction genres as a whole are frequently referred to in pejorative tones by the media as “cult industries”; both terms of vilification according to the time-honored tenets of Leavisite literary criticism. As mentioned in Chapter 1, “taste” is an expression of systems of domination that act to legitimise social differences, and by devaluing popular culture such as fantasy by criticizing the taste (or lack thereof) of the masses, a distinction between “elite” and “popular” audiences is maintained. It becomes clear that the criticism of the texts often contains an implied criticism of the reader.

Unsurprisingly, Tolkien criticism overflows with examples of journalistic vitriol and reviews busy upholding the status quo and the interests of dominant social groups. Ever since Edmund Wilson’s infamous review of The Lord of the Rings in 1956 as “an overgrown fairy story... juvenile trash”, and Philip Toynbee’s rather premature observation in 1961 that this “dull, ill-written, whimsical and childish” book has “passed into a merciful oblivion”, reviewers in prominent newspapers and journals have continued to judge fantasy with the thinly veiled contempt that provoked Le Guin into announcing that critics must be “afraid of hobbits”. A particularly ripe example is Jenny Turner’s 2001 article for the London Review of Books, “Reasons for Liking Tolkien”, which illustrates abundantly the reasons why many critics “fear” fantasy. Turner provides a straightforwardly Freudian interpretation: adults

shouldn’t like Tolkienesque fantasy because it represents “tit”, an “infantile comfort”. In other words, the irrational “black pit” of fantasy represents the threatening, feminized Other that the adult male ego must destroy or reject in order to attain an independent adult identity.

Though Turner strives to be cleverly ironic, it is interesting that the entire article is structured around an emotionally laden polemic that constructs the enjoyment of a literature proscribed as “childish”, as fearful, “scary” and threatening. The sensible adult Jenny Turner rejects her “secret shameful self” who has a “naughty hobbit habit” – a source of shame and embarrassment, because it is not part of an “acceptable adult dinner-party persona”. Turner finds it “alarming” that “it is possible for readers to live their whole lives through Tolkien’s universe...it has cubby holes for all sorts of urges to hide in, like Star Trek or Star Wars”. Turner implies that the “grown ups” who enjoy this sort of literature cannot tell fiction from reality, they are deviants “taken in” by a “curiosity, a work of paraliterature” that has “an occult presence” and is “anti-intellectual... massive, hollow and a little sinister”. Tolkien himself “ran off the rails somehow, and produced a long mad book”, which has “obvious” problems with “elves and so on”.

The message is clear: Tolkien was mad, his book “interesting, but tinged with madness”, and adult readers who enjoy it must be deviant, shameful, and probably mad, seeking to escape to the pre-natal security of the womb.

Unfortunately this kind of simplistic, emotional, and ill-defined disapproval of fantasy is not confined to journalism, but is even found in various incarnations in scholarly texts, where “taste” often masquerades as “analysis”. In a book on screen adaptations, Erica Sheen notes that the production of this kind of emotionally hostile criticism –

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35 Ibid.
“not just animosity, but *incoherent* animosity, suggests that what is at stake is institutional definitions and identities rather than textual forms and contents.”\(^{36}\) The “incoherent” and amorphous nature of these expressions can indicate the presence of *ideology*; values so deeply entrenched and institutionalized that they elude articulation and definition.\(^{37}\) Institutional values and protocols “behave as if they are consensual”, and strive to maintain a façade that they are a consensus opinion, when in fact they often are not. Sheen also states that, “reviews are not just abstract analysis. They have a force of institutional performance”.\(^{38}\) Hence statements such as this one by Turner, that critics are “kidding themselves that Tolkien is a respectable, canonical author about whom one produces sober traditional academic writing”, represents an attempt to coerce readers into adopting the dominant, supposedly consensual institutional ideology in regard to which literatures and authors are “canonical”.\(^{39}\) These statements about the nature of fantasy and its audience are important because they produce “a kind of truth that is more suitable to meet a basic need of the institutions: the need to control”.\(^{40}\)

This attitude is rooted in the cultural hegemony of the privileged, educated classes as the arbiters of good taste since the eighteenth century, and carries a legacy of class-based hostility towards the uneducated lower classes, regarding them as passive, unthinking, and easily manipulated. The implicit belief is that art addressed to the masses must of necessity be more limited than art intended for an (unidentified) elite audience. These attitudes should be viewed historically in the light of changing modes of cultural production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when modern technologies such as pulp printing presses made books and magazines


\(^{37}\) Sheen furthermore suggests that we might view this condition “not so much as a loss of articulation as an articulation of loss,” Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Turner, “Reasons for Liking Tolkien” (cited).

\(^{40}\) Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 10.
cheaper and more accessible to a larger, middle-lower class population. Science fiction still carries with it the stigma of "pulp fiction" from the American pulp magazine publications of the 1920s-30s when the short story was the mainstay of the genre. Historical attitudes towards new technologies is also evident in early twentieth-century attitudes towards film and television, which were initially regarded as vulgar, popularising art forms, entertaining dross for the masses, and lacking in status and respectability. This view is rapidly changing however, as social changes resulting from the widespread acceptance of new technologies such as film, television and computers are reflected in the increasing status of popular cultural studies. The immense commercial and critical success of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy has had a huge impact on the acceptance of fantasy as a legitimate area of study in educational institutions. So we must banish antiquated notions of the limited value of popular genre fictions, and look closely at their social and cultural contexts to gain an understanding of what they do offer us.

Shippey's notion of genre fantasy as a "challenge" to the authority of the *literati* is thus also true in the sense that the struggle for symbolic or cultural value surrounding fantasy is generated from within the field of literature itself. The collapsing boundaries between popular and high art cut straight to the heart of the "crisis of literature" that has characterized literary study in the West since the 1960s. The pluralism of postmodern culture celebrated by cultural theory necessarily entails the "collapse of older institutionalized claims to authoritative cultural judgment" and it also means the "end of literature" as it has been traditionally understood.41 Objections to this "profane mongrelisation"42 reflect the constant battle to define what kinds of art are orthodox or canonical; that is, approved by the dominant classes and institutions as representing their values and interests; and which are deemed

“heretical”, in seeking to transform or redefine the field. The mutual participation in these struggles for symbolic power and cultural prestige defines the field of cultural production. The constant “conflicts between rival principles of legitimacy” are an expression of the positions that various agents; writers, reviewers, critics and readers; take within the given field. Bourdieu’s emphasis on the social conditions of production thus radically contextualizes the struggle between competing discourses. This struggle takes place not merely in “the ethereal realm of ideas”, but is a manifestation of power struggles between social agents, “who have entirely real interests in the different possibilities available to them as stakes and who deploy every sort of strategy to make one set or the other prevail” (my italics). The rhetorical stances of various critics on the subject of the “monsters” of fantasy, therefore ultimately reflects the real interests of different groups competing for social status and recognition within the field of cultural production.

3.4 An end to dualisms?
I believe that a much more radical subversion of the critical paradigms brought to bear on fantasy is required, one based on an “ethics of refusal” that both exposes and critiques the logic of opposition that has governed traditional literary studies. This involves uncoupling the dualisms and problematizing the rigidity of boundaries and reductionist positions that deny difference. As Val Plumwood states, “an adequate resolution of dualism requires recognition of both continuity and difference.”

44 Ibid., 43.
45 Ibid., 34.
47 Plumwood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, 125.
Dualistic thinking has been so widely accepted and internalised in western society, due to its association with the principles of logic and its claims to high status "objective knowledge", that it is all too easy to mistake polarities such as rational/irrational as logical givens, rather than as social conventions. The oppositional logic of dualism forestalls the consideration of non-oppositional categories, that is, "an alterity that is neither identical nor different"\(^{48}\), so that the push towards binarism results in a loss of subtlety and complexity; criticisms of the dominant forms of reason entail "the rejection of all reason and the embrace of irrationality" (my italics).\(^{49}\) Difference is thus emphasised at the expense of shared characteristics, which poses significant problems for the categorization of literary genres, which in fact often have more overall similarities than differences.

This is what the Weed Theory of Fantasy underscores: fantasy becomes not-literature because of unequal power arrangements internalized as natural and normal, through a dualistic structure that constructs difference as alien and inferior.\(^{50}\) This explains some of the deeply polarized and antagonistic reactions that have characterised criticism of the fantastic. The dialectic of binary opposites is itself the product of power struggles and negotiations between different groups of people in the social and cultural fields. Fantasy, through its multiple associations with Otherness (unreason, non-realism, infantilism and femininity, spirituality and the sublime, Romantic antimodernism) has been assessed negatively in accordance with rationalist ways of being and knowing that privilege the aesthetics of masculinist modernity, progress and science. Its popularity thus poses a challenge to the hegemony of the discourses of Reason and its associated institutions (technology, progress, expansion, colonialism and so on). The critics whom Le Guin identifies as being afraid of


\(^{49}\) Plumwood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, 4.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 42.
“kiddilit” and “dragons” are thus reacting to the perceived danger the excluded Other poses to the dominant social order: it threatens to destabilize the dominance and control of those who have a vested interest in maintaining boundaries and hierarchical oppositions such as those erected between literature and generic fiction, high and popular culture.

Le Guin provides some insightful observations in her “Introduction” to *Buffalo Gals And Other Animal Presences*, a collection of her stories and poems about animals.51

Critical terror of Kiddilit is common. People to whom sophistication is a positive intellectual value shun anything “written for children”; if you want to clear the room of derrideans, mention Beatrix Potter without sneering. With the agreed exception of Alice in Wonderland, books for children are to be mentioned only dismissively or jocosely by the adult male critic. ...In literature as in “real life”, women, children, and animals are the obscure matter upon which Civilization erects itself, phallologically. That they are Other is (vide Lacan et al.) the foundation of language, the Father Tongue.52

With delightfully acidic passion, Le Guin delves to the heart of the prevailing critical ideology about fantasy: it has been constructed as Other, along with children, women and animals, who are associated with the category of Nature; that which is excluded from the defining adult male self who identifies with Reason, civilization, and the discourses of “mastery”.53

52 Ibid., 10.
53 It is noticeable that the assertion that a discipline is to be taken “seriously” by (dominant Western) society, is often accompanied by attempts at legitimation through highlighting qualities deemed as masculine, adult, and “civilized”. The importance of establishing the study of literature as a “science”, and therefore respectable, is much in evidence particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, by influential theorists such as Propp, Todorov, Frye, and the literary schools of Structuralism and (Russian) Formalism. In fact, I posit that the reason these approaches to literature became so influential, was precisely because they lent “literary science” credibility by appealing to the dominant discourses of Reason, masculinity, modernity and progress. This phenomenon can also be seen in the assertion of “hard”, masculine SF as opposed to “soft” feminized fantasy.
As mentioned in Chapter 1, Val Plumwood illustrates how Western culture and intellectual traditions are permeated and structured by an “interrelated and mutually reinforcing” set of dualistic categories, such as male/female, Reason/Nature, mind/body, civilized/primitive, rationality/ emotion, self/other. The gendered polarities of Nature and Reason underpin Western concepts of modernity, progress, humanity and development, which are engendered through rejecting, excluding and devaluing that against which the dominant discourse defines itself. Le Guin is intensely interested in these ideas, which are cogently expressed throughout her fictional corpus and with particular power in her fantasy stories, such as Buffalo Gals, Always Coming Home and the last two books of the Earthsea series. In these narratives, Le Guin explores the “continuity, interdependence, and community of all life, all forms of being on earth”, against which male-dominated Western civilization defines itself.54

The oppressive nature of Western discourses of Reason that deny all forms of Nature, (as a political and metaphorical category) is deeply interrogated by Le Guin in the later Earthsea books, where she deconstructs her own earlier notions of heroism and the magical mastery of wizardry. She challenges many of the taken-for-granted tropes of genre fantasy, including traditional notions of heroism, exploring how the private, traditional domain of the home and the feminine can also be heroic; and how this personal sphere is intimately linked to wider political structures, particularly inequalities between men and women; linking issues of gender and social power to institutions of education and government. The main institution and heart of wizardly power in Earthsea, the school of Roke, is revealed to have been built upon the exclusion of women from the institutionalized learning in the True Speech, the “Language of Making” which gives the power to control things by naming them truly. In a somewhat essentialist manner, Le Guin reveals that the magical power of

54 Le Guin, Buffalo Gals, 11.
the celibate male wizards of Earthsea is only gained by denying and excluding women's power. In the first three books, written in the 1970s, she takes for granted that there is a saying in Earthsea: "Weak as women's magic, wicked as women's magic." In the final books of Earthsea, Le Guin interrogates her own assumptions, asking how and why did these beliefs come about?

Ged, once Archmage, now husband and adoptive father, explains:

    The Mages of Roke are men – their power is the power of men, their knowledge is the knowledge of men. Both manhood and magery are built on one rock: power belongs to men. If women had power, what would men be but women who can't bear children? And what would women be but men who can?55

The philosophical underpinning of the Earthsea series is the Taoist principle of equilibrium, the balancing of opposites, light and dark, yin and yang, male and female. The magery of Roke is shown to be built upon a "Father Tongue" that not only denies animals and foreign races the concept of "soul", but also denies death, which constitutes a transgression against the natural cycle of living and dying. The hierarchical polarization and separation of Reason from Nature, humanity from animals, man from woman, is shown by Le Guin to be ultimately false, dehumanizing and destructive, both politically and spiritually. Her final vision for Earthsea is a powerful expression of Romantic values, including ecology, spirituality, the feminine and the re-sacralization of the natural world.

In addition to this affirmation of that which was previously repressed, Le Guin seeks to sidestep the problems caused by the duality of gender, and create something Other – something beyond rules and institutions and the limitations that male/female power struggles bring. This Other is the Dragon. Here we see the power of this fantasy icon revisioned as a new thing. Dragons are mysterious, neither good nor evil,

neither male nor female. "The dragon defies gender entirely" says Le Guin. "The
dragon is subversion, revolution, change — a going beyond the old order... of
oppression. It is the wildness of the spirit and of the earth, uprising against
misrule." Dragons and humans were once one people, and the True Speech is the
native tongue of dragons that men now have to learn. In the conclusion to the
Earthsea series, *The Other Wind*, the damaged child Tehanu and the ignorant
peasant woman Irian are revealed to have both dragon and human natures; their
power is stronger than all the wizardry of Roke, and is shown to be both more
natural and free.57

Fantasy, through its multiple associations with Otherness (unreason, non-realism,
spirituality and the sublime, Romantic antimodernism) has been assessed negatively
in accordance with rationalist ways of being and knowing that privilege the aesthetics
of masculinist modernity, progress and science. Its popularity thus poses a challenge
to the hegemony of the discourses of Reason and its associated institutions. The
critics whom Le Guin identifies as being afraid of "kiddilit" and "dragons" are thus
reacting to the perceived danger the excluded Other poses to the dominant social
order: it threatens to destabilize the dominance and control of those who have a
vested interest in maintaining boundaries and hierarchical oppositions such as those
erected between literature and generic fiction, high and popular culture: "The
continual and cumulative overcoming of the domain of nature by reason engenders
the Western concept of progress and development".58 The logic of dualism and the
structures of otherness and negation correspond to "classical" logic, the logic of
instrumental reason, which is the leading logical theory of modernity. As Plumwood
observes:

58 Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 3.
it is still necessary to stress that critiquing the dominant forms of reason which embody the master identity and oppose themselves to the sphere of nature does not imply abandoning all forms of reason, science and individuality. Rather, it involves their redefinition or reconstruction in less oppositional and hierarchical ways.\textsuperscript{59}

3.5 Modernism and dualism

Amongst scholars who discuss and defend modern fantasy, there often exists a curious ambivalence or contradiction in their evaluation and definition of genre fantasy, which attempts to draw a distinction between “good” and “bad” or authentic and inauthentic fantasy. Colin Manlove, Brian Attebery, John Grant and Maxim Jakubowski provide the clearest examples of this ambivalence, which I shall examine in a variety of contexts, as it reveals (with paradoxical clarity), the precise lines along which contemporary thinking about genre fantasy has fractured, exposing the mechanism behind the deep divisions between the aggressively hostile and openly celebratory views. The mechanism of which I speak is the dualistic political and philosophical conception of Reason defined in opposition to Nature, an idea which is deeply entrenched in western culture and its intellectual traditions.\textsuperscript{60}

Dualistic constructions are formed from the perspective of power, where existing forms of difference are exaggerated so that any relations of continuity and dependence between the defining self and the other are denied, and the other is seen as an inferior and alien realm.\textsuperscript{61} The oppositions between culture and nature, human and non-human, reason (intelllect) and emotion are constructed in this way, and correspond to the Western identification of humanity with Reason; intellect and higher mental capacities, which the non-human and the sphere of Nature are defined as lacking. This thinking has not only affected the way Western culture has conceived of and

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 42.
treated the natural world, but it has also created oppressive structures legitimating the domination and control of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as Nature. The fracture lines discerned in evaluations of fantasy stem from the genre's long association with the excluded sphere of Nature: the fact that fantasy deals fundamentally with modes of human thought and experience - imagination, belief, faith, the supernatural, the impossible - that are not amenable to the discourses of rationality as they have been conceived by Western culture.

Feminist theorists, including Julia Kristeva have contributed to the critique of the intellectual assumptions and social conditions underlying the modernist discourse of twentieth-century academic culture. Academe has traditionally been dominated and monopolized by male theorists and critics, and has tended on the whole to marginalize feminist writers and issues. Bridget Fowler notes that “In Western societies, masculine domination is accomplished by the workings of educational institutions and particularly through the cultural capital acquired by men”. What is commonly regarded as “literature” today derives largely from the privileging of the realist novel and modernist avant-garde “high” art predicated on the institutionalized, authoritative value judgments of an educated, middle-class, white Anglo-Saxon masculinity. The historical concept of “modernity” is furthermore deeply entangled with the artistic movement of “modernism”, as a circular logic informs the construction of both, in that modernist art both expresses and informs what we commonly regard as the “modern”. Rita Felski clarifies this:

We typically derive our view of the modern not only from the metanarratives of historical and sociological thought, but also from the primacy of certain exemplary works of high art in received histories of

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62 Ibid., 4.
65 Milner, Literature, Culture and Society, 55.
Western culture. The modernist canon, paradoxically, is seen to provide a heightened perception of a historical reality that it has itself helped to construct.\textsuperscript{66}

Modernism is not a unified school of art. Nevertheless it is usually associated with "decentered subjectivity, aesthetic self-consciousness, subversion of narrative continuity and an emphasis on paradox, contradiction and ambiguity". Furthermore, these artistic developments are explained with reference to the conditions of "modernity" in the twentieth century: rapid social and technological change, "the crisis of linguistic meaning and scientific knowledge, the death of God, the discovery of the unconscious, the horror of the Great War."\textsuperscript{67}

Most commentators on modernism have until fairly recently read these developments in purely masculinist terms, using the works and lives of "great men" to characterise the modernist consciousness, with the work of only a few avant-garde women such as Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolfe and Hilda Doolittle as the exception to this rule. Despite the feminist "revisioning" of the modernist project, the majority of studies still present only a partial and limited version of modernity which continues to privilege radical, transgressive and experimental art, shedding little light on the relations and reactions other groups have had to the conditions of the modern world.\textsuperscript{68} This has led to a certain wilful blindness about the gendered character of modernity and modernist discourse, and the male hegemony of modernist literary canons.\textsuperscript{69} Thus the experience of modernity has been almost exclusively mediated by

\textsuperscript{66} Felski, "Modernism and Modernity: Engendering Literary History," 191.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{68} The marginalisation of gender-related issues continues even within theoretical debates critical of the modernist and postmodernist projects Brooks, Postfeminisms, 117.
\textsuperscript{69} As Andrew Milner has demonstrated, even amongst hard-line defenders of the Western literary canon, there are considerable discrepancies, such as the inclusion of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and Milton’s Paradise Lost in Harold Bloom’s canon, both of which are omitted by T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis in their conceptions of canonical works; Milner, Literature, Culture and Society, 138ff. Even though Bloom’s more recent canonical list in The Western Canon “evades the more brutish forms of Anglocentric cultural chauvinism” evinced by earlier versions, Milner points out that
the worldview of “cosmopolitan, bohemian, white, middle- and upper-class”, predominantly male artists - an institutional view which promotes the consensus that this is representative of the whole of society, and yet manages to ignore the greatest mass of modern art: the popular.\textsuperscript{70} The Romantic discourse of fantasy has been one of the reactions to the conditions of the modern world (modernity) that has been expelled from the metanarrative of “modern progress” and projected into an archaic Otherness, an irrelevant anomaly.

3.6 Modernity, consumer capitalism and the commodification of romance

Genre fantasy has long been recognized as the modern form of the romance “mode” that was revived by the Romantic movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{71} Modern fantasy is very similar in form, structure and content to medieval European romance, which Sir Walter Scott described as “a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents”;\textsuperscript{72} whereas a novel he defined as “a fictitious narrative, differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human

\textsuperscript{70} Felski, “Modernism and Modernity: Engendering Literary History,” 196.


\textsuperscript{72} Gillian Beer’s 1970 monograph lists typical elements found in romance narratives: “The themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and romance hero, profuse sensuous detail, simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance), a serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday, a complex and prolonged succession of incidents usually without a single climax, a happy ending, amplitude of proportions, a strongly enforced code of conduct to which all the characters must comply.” \textit{The Romance} (London: Methuen, 1970), 10.
events, and the modern state of society". J. R. R. Tolkien, modern fantasist and philologist \textit{par excellence}, claimed that \textit{The Lord of the Rings} was in fact "not a ‘novel’ but an ‘heroic romance’". Tolkien is in fact referring to a long battle waged between the novel and romance forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was won decisively in the early twentieth century by the dominance of modernist realism which favoured the literary form of the "novel". Ian Watt notes that the rise of the novel as a new literary form in the eighteenth century was defined by the appearance of psychological "realism" as the defining characteristic differentiating this work from previous fiction.

Indeed, David Sandner observes that,

> Fantastic criticism develops in inverse relationship to the intensity of eighteenth-century claims for the realistic novel, each form requiring the

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74 Colin N. Manlove, \textit{Modern Fantasy: Five Studies}, (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 1. This book has the virtue of being the first contemporary study (post-Todorov) that deals specifically with the modern genre of fantasy, though Manlove too suffers from the ambiguous attitude towards popular fantasy affecting many critics in the 1970s-80s.


76 Andrew Lang discusses this "Battle of the Books" in his essay "Realism and Romance", \textit{Contemporary Review} 52 (1887): 683-93; likewise, Nicholas Daly notes that "By the last quarter of the nineteenth century the novel had consolidated its position as the middle-class literary form \textit{par excellence}.


78 Watt notes however that "one’s initial reservation must surely be that the term itself [realism] needs further explanation, if only because to use it without qualification as a defining characteristic of the novel might otherwise carry the invidious suggestion that all previous writers and literary forms pursued the unreal", \textit{Rise of the Novel}, 10. This is a nuance often lost on defenders of fantasy who seek to legitimate the form through associations with an ancient and exalted lineage of "unreal" fictions, ranging from Homer’s \textit{Odyssey} to Shakespeare, such as Richard Mathews, \textit{Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination} (New York: Routledge, 2002).
other for self-definition. Increasingly throughout the century, the novel and romance are marked off from one another as, respectively, realistic or fantastic.\textsuperscript{78}

The term “realism” was first used as an aesthetic description in the early nineteenth century opposing “realistic” portraits of everyday life to the stylised “idealism” of neoclassical painting. In literature, “realism” became synonymous with “low life”, in the “realistic” novels of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, closely associated with the fact that “Moll Flanders is a thief, Pamela a hypocrite, and Tom Jones a fornicator”.\textsuperscript{79} Andrew Lang described late nineteenth century realism as concerned primarily with “the unrelentingly minute portraiture of modern life and analysis of modern character, the unrelenting exclusion of exciting events and engaging narrative”, complaining that though the writers were undoubtedly talented and skilled stylists, their novels were “limited in scope” and often displayed a tendency “to find the Unpleasant Real in character much more abundant than the Pleasant Real... the Realists, while they certainly show us the truth, are fondest of showing that aspect of it which is really the less common as well as the less desirable.”\textsuperscript{80}

Nevertheless, Watt defends the novel as the definitive literary form of modernity, claiming that “the novel’s realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it.”\textsuperscript{81} The “way” of presenting life in fictions of realism was regarded as the product of a more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life than had ever been attempted before. However, as Watt observes, “It is far from clear that this ideal of scientific objectivity is desirable, and it certainly cannot be realized in practice.”\textsuperscript{82} Watt believes that the heart of issues surrounding the novel’s “realism” is

\textsuperscript{79} Watt, \textit{Rise of the Novel}, 11.
\textsuperscript{80} Lang, “Realism and Romance”, 687-8.
\textsuperscript{81} Watt, \textit{Rise of the Novel}, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
an epistemological problem: that of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality it imitates. He argues that the nature of the novel’s “realism” lies in its fundamentally “modern” intellectual orientation towards the particular, the concrete, and the individual. The novel form constituted a break from medieval scholastic thinking which relied heavily on tradition and the weight of authority to discern the truth. The philosophy of Descartes promoted the pursuit of truth through the verity of individual experience as independent from past thought, and independently innovative rather than deriving authority from exemplary past models. Hence the primary criterion of the novel is “truth to individual experience... which is always unique and therefore new.” According to Watt, the novel is therefore the logical literary vehicle of modern culture which sets an unprecedented value on “originality, on the novel” (the new). The eighteenth-century novel was “realistic” in the sense that it denoted “a belief in the individual apprehension of reality through the senses”, and emphasised “originality” in its modern meaning as “underived, independent, first-hand” rather than “the first instance” of something.

The novel form thus arose from the epistemological recognition of the fundamental subjective materiality of the individual’s experience of existence/the world: “that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it.” Genre fantasy (as we recognize it today) utilizes the literary form of realism in the way its stories of the fantastic are presented (in prose, novelistic or short story form). Fantasy’s departure from ‘realism’ comes from the sense that it does not present the kind of life we have come to expect and associate with most realistic novels.

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83 For example, Bernard of Chartres’ famous quote about the relation of medieval thought to classical authority: “We are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants”. Christopher Brooke, The Twelfth Century Renaissance, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969), 60.
84 Watt, Rise of the Novel, 13.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 14-5.
87 Ibid., 12.
Watt defines the narrative techniques of characterization and presentation of background as especially important in the evocation of literary realism: “the novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualization of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment.”

It is notable that modern fantasy demonstrates the importance of both of these features as part of its narrative repertoire in evoking the sense of “belief” and wonder in modern readers. Fantasy imitates the narrative conventions of the realistic novels in this sense of creating a literary environment that is verisimilar enough in detail to allow the reader to accept the “reality” of the situation in the same way they would in a work of conventional “realistic” fiction.

Just as the adversarial aesthetic movement of high modernism self-consciously opposed itself to mass/popular culture, so too did the modernist literary canon reject commercial popular “fiction”, which was denied the status of “art” to become merely a “commodity” fetish, worthless and irrelevant. The establishment of the study of modern vernacular literature in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was furthermore strongly motivated by a desire to educate the ignorant masses in the best of the national culture, the (male) genius of the British tradition, in order to combat the “cultural decline” and democratization of culture produced by the Industrial Revolution).

Milner comments that “high modernism thus typically ascribed a ‘redemptive’ function to high art, which would at the very least ‘save’ itself, and possibly even humanity, from the philistinism of mass society”. But who were “the masses” that required such edification?

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88 Ibid., 18.
89 Milner, Literature, Culture and Society, 9; and Peter Barry, Beginning Theory, 12ff.
90 Milner, Literature, Culture and Society, 56.
During the later nineteenth century, the notion that mass culture was properly the province of females and the lower classes, while elite culture remained the privilege of educated males gained ground, so that the traditional exclusion of women from the realm of legitimate art takes on “new connotations in the age of the industrial revolution and cultural modernization”. Andreas Huyssen argues that during the nineteenth century, mass culture became associated with women, while “authentic” culture remained men’s culture. The ignorant masses of modern society were not just the new socially mobile working classes, but also women, who challenged the traditional bastions of male-dominated culture. Popular culture for the masses has thus been characterized as sentimental, uncritical, inferior and implicitly gendered as feminine: the irrational Other of the superior male high culture of Reason. Karl Kroeber states that “Only by fortifying its boundaries, by maintaining its purity and autonomy, and by avoiding any contamination with mass culture and with the signifying systems of everyday life can the art work maintain its adversary stance”.

The gendering of popular/mass culture as feminine meant that modernism opposed itself to those characteristics traditionally ascribed to the feminine: passive, sentimental, and emotional. The sentimentality, emotion and affect of popular culture (the genre of romance) was gendered feminine and excluded from the canon of admirable masculine modernism, the Other to its definition as literary, hence demoted as non-literary fiction. Romanticism attempted to reverse this polarity, highlighting Nature as virtuous and masculine (for example, Andrew Lang’s writings, and the medieval primitivism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).

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92 Huyssen, 47
94 Andrew Lang, in “Realism and Romance”, railed against the hegemony of the modern realist novel (“tales of introspective analysis”), arguing “Not for nothing did Nature leave us all savages under our white skins; she has wrought thus that we might have many delights, among others ‘the
Defenders of Romance in Britain attempted to represent realism as a noxious weed of foreign origin, imported into Britain from America and the European continent, whereas they strove to establish for romance a solid British lineage stemming from historical romances of Walter Scott, connecting to a grand tradition of British fiction. Modernism however asserted the dominance of Reason over Nature by exploiting the more deeply entrenched gendered opposition of Reason to emotion or sentimentality, rejecting the affect-laden narratives of romance and its blatant popularity as signs of a degraded, threatening mass consumer culture. Modernism’s unmitigated hostility to popular fiction and its readers won out over the minority of dissenters defending romance:

modernist literary criticism, through its devaluation of the popular romance as a completely commodified form, has made it difficult for us to perceive any critical dimension to the romance.  

It is important to note the transformation of late Victorian literary scene through the emergence of a mass market for books as part of development of modern consumer culture in late nineteenth century Britain. Daly chronicles the associations and relations between “significant” and popular writers in this period, before the consolidation of the dominance of high modernism, before Huyssen’s “great divide” between high and popular culture, suggesting that for a brief period there was a comparatively undifferentiated literary market. Henry James, Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells collaborated and socialized with H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson and George Du Maurier:

Authors whom we now see as “serious” and those whose names we have all but wiped from the slate of literary history, or consigned to the nursery as writers of children’s literature, debated the merits of their particular schools, but they did not see themselves as radically different in kind.

joy of adventurous living”, and of reading about adventurous living”, that is in modern romances like H. Rider Haggard’s She. The vogue for the Northern Scandinavian “Gothic” romances in the late eighteenth century also highlighted its virtuous, masculine qualities as positive attributes. See Daly Modernism, Romance and the Fin De Siècle, 1999.

95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 27.
They wrote for the same magazines, were published by the same houses, and, in the case of the men at least, sometimes belonged to the same clubs.⁹⁷

Daly examines the particular strand of fin-de-siècle popular fiction known to contemporaries as the "revival of romance" from 1880 to the beginning of World War 1. Popular adventure romances by H. Rider Haggard (King Solomon’s Mines 1885) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s (Treasure Island 1883) created the perception of new direction in fiction. Daly argues that this revival of romance was a "distinctly modern phenomenon, and that it was shaped in the same historical mould as literary modernism".⁹⁸ Daly argues for the existence of a "popular modernism" existing in an increasingly dualistic relationship to elite modernism. Regardless of critical debates, the romance outsold novels of realism or early modernism of Conrad and James. Treasure Island contravened the now near-impassable divide between children’s and adult fiction, and Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde and Haggard’s King Solomon’s Mines and She were bestsellers at a time when publishing industry undergoing major changes: “The romance, then, appeared at the same time as a publishing boom that looked forward to the mass-publishing trends of the twentieth century”.⁹⁹

It is important to recognize that this constituted a significant cultural shift from older, expensive modes of literary production intended for a restricted elite market, to the mass production of cheaper products for vastly expanded market.⁹⁰ Colin Campbell fascinatingly suggests that both the Rational, scientific modernists and the Natural, experiential Romantics had distinct, contradictory understandings of what

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⁹⁷ Ibid., 4.
⁹⁸ Ibid., 9.
⁹⁹ Ibid., 19.
¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.
the emergence of mass consumption really meant.\textsuperscript{101} High modernism's tendency toward "pure style" may be understood in terms of "the rationalization of life under industrial capitalism, and in particular the over-development of certain human capacities (e.g. analysis, abstraction, quantification)".\textsuperscript{102} However, for people to think of themselves as consumers, the choosing individual self as arbiter of taste and morals must already be a developed concept. Romanticism's stress on experience and the value of pleasure and sensation was a natural base from which consumer behaviour could flourish :

What the Romantics did was to redefine the doctrine of individualism and the associated idea of improvement or advancement. Instead of individuals improving themselves in this world through hard work, discipline and self-denial, they substituted the idea of individuals "expressing" or "realising" themselves through exposure to powerful feelings and by means of many and varied intense experiences.\textsuperscript{103}

Early Romantics were inclined to view themselves as elite and the experiences they sought as available only to a select few sensitive souls. However, as I demonstrate in Part 2 of this thesis, the notion of the specialness of the individual and his or her "right" to freedom of expression, through the pursuit of experiences and the consumption of products, cultures (through travel) and relationships has pervaded every aspect of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Western society; indeed, traditional appeals to institutions (family, churches, government) and tradition (history, religion) are ineffective against the assertion of the primacy of the modern Romantic self.\textsuperscript{104} The quest motif found in modern fantasy explicitly plays to the same audience, by highlighting the charismatic, choosing hero(inc) for the reader to identify with.

\textsuperscript{102} Daly, \textit{Modernism, Romance and the Fin De Siècle}, 10.
\textsuperscript{103} Campbell, "Romanticism and the Consumer Ethic", 287.
Critical essays of the late nineteenth century saw the term "romance" take on a particular identity, chiefly defined through "its opposition to the 'plotless' American novels of Henry James" and other more "realistic" novels. An axis of differentiation coalesces around the realism/romance divide, with the "analytical novel" representing modernism and the "romance of adventure" constituting its Other. However, in terms of consumer demand, the romance was the clear winner, as "[b]y the last quarter of the nineteenth century the novel had consolidated its position as the middle-class literary form par excellence". Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle all defended the revival of romance in the late nineteenth century. Stevenson regards reading romances as an attempt to recapture the immersive reading experience of childhood, becoming engaged in the story in a way that analytical contemporary realism distanced itself from, offering a holiday from constant intellectualizing. In other words, he mounted a defence of romance as escapist experience that takes the reader out of their own narrow subjectivity: "rapt clean out of ourselves", emerging from the reading experience in an altered state, "incapable of sleep or of continuous thought", and to set aside "judgment", and be "submerged by the tale as by a billow" offering dreamlike escape, and satisfying "nameless longings." Haggard likewise defends romance as satisfying the "weary" public's craving for escapism, "to be taken out of themselves" and escape from "the toil and emptiness and vexation of our competitive existence". Eulogists of romance tended to emphasise its long lineage and its link to "a universal and timeless human fascination with narrative itself". Lang, in particular, emphasises the strong element of storytelling as ritual, which distinguishes it from decadence of modernist novel. This primacy of story is the principal theme of Chapter 4 of this thesis.

105 Daly, Modernism, Romance and the Fin De Siècle, 17.
106 Ibid., 16.
108 Haggard, writing in Contemporary Review, 51 (1887), 172-180, quoted in Daly, 175.
109 Ibid., 21.
The same dualistic constructions were at work in the subordination of romance by institutionalised modernist literary discourse. Modernism, hegemonically defined by F. R. Leavis, T. S. Eliot and the American New Criticism, represented realist modernism as "an island of 'real' culture in a sea of homogeneous and international mass culture" opposing bland mass civilization to embattled canonical minority elite culture."\textsuperscript{110} This ignored the reality of the developing consumer market, where the inexhaustible number of choosing selves require an expanding variety of products to satisfy their desires. This means that even the most vulgarly defined mass market is not a uniform market, with one product alone required to satisfy all consumers. Some associations were developed and remained constant. For example, Huyssen notes that the characterisation of "woman as avid consumer of pulp" fiction is one of central paradigms of modernism from Madame Bovary on: "woman... is positioned as reader of inferior literature — subjective, emotional and passive — while man... emerges as writer of genuine, authentic literature — objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means".\textsuperscript{111}

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which the romance form was revived in the nineteenth century, to serve as a literary/cultural Other to the emergent modernist fictional mode. Romance as Other was associated with female readers, mass culture and the popular, and was thus denigrated by the advocates of Enlightenment Reason in the form of industrialized modernity. The romance form has been demonstrated to be the direct ancestor of the modern fantasy, and the novel as the principal fictional form in which it appears. Fantasy, like romance, through its multiple associations with Otherness (unreason, non-realism, spirituality and the sublime, Romantic antimodernism) has been negatively assessed by rationalist ways of being and knowing

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{111} Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide, 46.
that privilege the aesthetics of masculinist modernity, progress and science. Fantasy's growing popularity in the twentieth century as a genre poses a challenge to the hegemony of the discourses of Reason and its associated institutions. The dualistic logic of negation and exclusion that underlies the modernist literary endeavour thus perpetuates within its own methodologies a hierarchy of value that identifies formal experimentation and an adversarial, "subversive" stance as the only "authentic" art, while stigmatizing the representational and straightforwardly "narrative" art of popular culture as regressive, sentimental and restricted in both scope and value.\textsuperscript{112}

The valorization and over-valuation of rationality (Reason) over emotion and affect that have informed this dualism, further contributes to the association of a Romantically anti-modern genre such as fantasy, with the feminine and other related forms of sociocultural marginality.\textsuperscript{113} In a critique of genre theory, Vincent Leitch observes, that "Because genres amalgamate linguistic and social with literary conventions, they are linked with social formations, including the institutional and ideological elements of such formations" revealing the "dubious hierarchy of value assigned traditionally to literary kinds from tragedy to epic to Gothic fiction and popular romance".\textsuperscript{114} The danger of such unexamined ideological prejudices is the prevention and occlusion of whole fields of artistic endeavour from fair and unbiased critical scrutiny.\textsuperscript{115} Enshrined (institutional) literary (discursive) practices such as the "close reading" advocated by Leavis, and the focus on narrative structure and content to the exclusion of other critical strategies, encode the agenda of modernism, and have reinforced a general tendency to exclude popular narrative fiction from rigorous intellectual scrutiny – as well as setting up boundaries and hierarchies within those

\textsuperscript{112} It is notable also that influential Marxist theorists such as Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School also privilege \textit{avant-garde} art over mass culture: "high art was privileged as a site of authenticity, mass culture anathematized and sociologically 'explained' as a site of manipulation," Milner, \textit{Literature, Culture and Society}, 43.

\textsuperscript{113} Brooks, \textit{Postfeminisms}, 118; and Plumwood, \textit{Feminism and the Mastery of Nature}, 24.

\textsuperscript{114} Leitch, "(De)Coding (Generic) Discourse," 83.

\textsuperscript{115} Felski, "Modernism and Modernity: Engendering Literary History," 197.
popular forms that are studied, privileging some forms over others. Deconstructing the discourses that have shaped critical discussions of fantasy opens up the debate to different theoretical perspectives, and challenges the very notion of genre, value hierarchies, and the critical assessment of popular culture.
Chapter 4
The story’s the thing

Not one story, no, not one story with one ending but a thousand stories, and so far from over as hardly to have begun...

John Crowley, Little, Big (1981)

4.1 Introduction
In this chapter I revisit in greater depth the concept of genre and its importance to the study of fantasy fiction. I will reinvigorate the somewhat neglected and undervalued idea of genre within the field of fantasy criticism as a highly relevant and useful tool for understanding the form and function of contemporary fantasy, presenting genres as complex analogical concepts that refer to “a dynamic cluster of formal, stylistic and thematic features” grounded in historical, social and cultural contexts.¹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, genre simply means a “kind”, or “type”. When applied to literature however, the term “genre” has come to mean texts that cater to specific types or kinds of interests and interest groups, and has become synonymous with the pejorative phrase “formula” fiction, used by the modernist literary establishment to back claims that “popular” fiction (romance, fantasy) is a factory-produced commercial product for the undiscriminating masses, devoid of originality, individuality and value, and as indistinguishable from one another as bars of soap.

By emphasising the primacy of “storytelling” (Story) in fantasy, the interactive nature of narrative is foregrounded, offering a challenge to reductionist methodologies that relegate popular genre fictions to mere “formula”. This simplistic perspective is

grounded in the critical habit (encouraged by modernism and structuralist methodologies) of abstracting texts from the social, cultural and historical contexts of their production and reception. This technique falsifies the evaluation of the meaning and relevance of popular commercial narratives in particular, as it encourages the latent dualistic tendencies of modernist criticism to characterise mass culture (romance, fantasy) as the Other to "literature" through the covert and biased evaluations inherent in this abstracting methodology. The re-conceptualisation of genre as a "field" of cultural production grounded in the historical reality of valuing communities, and the focus on the "performance" aspect of Story (taking authorial intentions and active readership into account) highlights the polysemous nature of popular fictions such as fantasy, bypassing the homogenising and downgrading operations of the high culture/low culture, Reason/Nature dualism in modernist literary analyses.

4.2 Fantasy as formula: the bar of soap analogy

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the core of traditional literary studies in the twentieth century has been to teach the valuation and appreciation of "great literature", which is counterpoised to a feminized popular commodity fiction, as part of an attempt to uphold the boundaries of traditional white male cultural authority as expressed in the values of literary "liberal humanism".\(^2\) The mapping of "highbrow" and "lowlbrow" aesthetic valuations across the non-commercial/commercial axis that originated at the turn of the (twentieth) century, furthermore precludes the potential for recognizing and analysing the ways in which all forms of cultural/artistic production in consumer capitalist societies take place "within conditions provided by

capitalist economic relations and practices and hence the ways in which the production and consumption of all art works are conditioned by commodity forms."

Critics generally tend to select texts that most resemble those they have been trained to understand, and in the formative years of modern fantasy criticism in the 1970s-80s, the inbuilt biases of formalist literary methodologies resulted in an ambiguous evaluation of the value and function of popular generic fantasy. It is therefore no surprise that in 1990 Maxim Jakubowski could claim that:

Post-Tolkien fantasy has become a commercial rather than a literary genre... from the mid-1970s onward, fantasy lost its status as a literary genre and became a commodity... fantasy writing since (and because of) Tolkien has thus become a sad prisoner to market forces, an increasingly formulaic landscape of worn clichés, duelling swords and warring dragons, a vast kingdom or unending wish fulfilment for a generally passive, often subliterate audience.  

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was the first twentieth-century fantasy to become a contemporary mass-market publishing phenomenon, a product of the globalization and Americanization of consumer capitalism known as postmodernity.  

This is one of the reasons why Tolkien looms so large in the field of fantasy, as the impact of his work is recognized as instrumental in the creation of fantasy as a separate publishing genre (which I will explore later in this chapter). To critics such as Jakubowski,  

\[3 \text{ Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 9.} \]


\[5 \text{ Development of genre theory in Britain in 1960s and 70s coincides with the more general Americanisation of mass culture known as the postmodern condition. This was also the period in which fantasy first became a commercial genre through mass-marketing in primarily North American publishing industry. This period also saw introduction of structuralism and semiotics into British and American literary criticism. "Increasingly, structuralism and semiotics focused either on the single, individual text, or on the general principles of signification and the politics of signifying practices, thereby effectively excluding the priority of the specification and analysis of genre and genres." Neale, *Genre*, 5.} \]
fantasy then became just “a category in the media marketplace, where books to a large extent lose their individual identity and become a simple product, much like soap”.6

Jakubowski is only one of the legion of critics who have succumbed unthinkingly to the theory of the “mass market” as catering to the “lowest common denominator” in society, regarded as a “generally passive, often subliterate audience”, and feminized through negative associations with the subordinate pole of the male/female, elite/popular, Reason/nature oppositions. Popular fantasy is thus devalued, feminized and downgraded as the Other to (elite, masculine) “literature”, and Jakubowski equates the genre to female romance novels, “which offer similar placebos of harmless escapist fare”, bearing little relation to “the social, moral or political problems of the late twentieth century.”7 As the second part of this thesis demonstrates, fantasy is in fact intimately connected to many of the major social, political and cultural movements of the twentieth century (the rise of global capitalism, alternative spirituality movements, ecological activism and “ideologically anti-modern” modernity). The conception of popular genres as “formulaic”, in which inheres a set of unyielding conventions limiting the creation and reading of such fictions, effectively blocks further analyses of fantasy’s social relevance by the inherent limitations of its own premises.

Genre fictions such as fantasy that are perceived as catering to “the masses” are by implication definable, limited in scope, function, relevance and value, as opposed to Literature – high, serious, canonical fiction, which is assumed to hold a transcultural appeal and value. In other words, “genre fiction” equals “formula fiction”, reducible to limited props and motifs, “a list of items” fixed in a recitation of formula, regarded

7 Ibid.
not as a literary tradition but as a commercial commodity.\textsuperscript{8} Brian Attebery calls this kind of fantasy “formula fantasy”, which he defines as “a popular storytelling formula that is restricted in scope, recent in origin, and specialized in audience and appeal ...essentially a commercial product”, predictable, uniform and unindividuated.\textsuperscript{9} He amusingly supplies a recipe for concocting a typical formula fantasy:

Take a vaguely medieval world. Add a problem, something more or less ecological, and a prophecy for solving it. ...To the above mixture add one naïve and ordinary hero who will prove to be the prophesied saviour; give him a comic sidekick and a wise old advisor who can rescue him from time to time and explain the plot. Keep stirring until the whole thing congeals.\textsuperscript{10}

The rub is that “formula fantasy” is in fact indistinguishable from “genre” fantasy, which Attebery tries unsuccessfully to segregate from formula, using “genre fantasy” to designate “stories that are more alike than required by the mode, and yet less uniform than dictated by the formula.” This strategy reveals the biases of orthodox critical dogma at work even within studies such as Attebery’s, which attempts to embrace the commercial “genre” of fantasy itself.

It is interesting to observe how often a critical unwillingness or inability to confront established dogma results in the arbitrary creation of “new” genres or the reassignment of a text to a more “authentic” genre, conforming to the ideals of the dominant critical establishment, in an effort to imbue the subject with more prestige and social status. Such a tactic is consistent with the dualistic operations of the modernist aesthetic, evident in the fear of contamination, that “bad” formula fantasy will devalue the genre even further. Stripping fantasy of its populist component is a

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 11.
way of neutralizing the threat to the hegemony of orthodox traditions, but it also works against the establishment of serious studies of fantasy, and its inclusion in literary curricula. There has been an ongoing tendency (or temptation) in fantasy scholarship to attempt to separate out “bad” from “good” fantasy and classify it as different in kind, not just degree. This is a critical strategy which attempts to redeem fantasy from the stigma of “genre” fiction through the (ultimately unsuccessful) separation of superior from inferior works, where lesser valued texts are relegated to the “formula”.

Even the erudite Encyclopedia of Fantasy (1997), which deals specifically with the modern popular genre, succumbs to the institutional prejudice against mass market fiction, particularly evident in John Grant’s entry on “Genre Fantasy”. Grant is fairly open about his operative critical biases, acknowledging the “exceptional difficulty” of defining genre fantasy “without pejorative implications”.12 Grant also tries to define genre fantasy as a different kind of fiction from “other” fantasy, its most distinguishing feature being familiarity: “on being confronted by an unread genre fantasy book, one recognizes it; one has been here before, and the territory into which the book takes one is familiar”. This statement contains a wealth of buried, unacknowledged content regarding the contexts of reception (and production) of contemporary texts, as well as making unsubstantiated assessments which rest entirely upon the knowledge of an implied reader, whom Grant describes as “unimaginative”. In short, says Grant, genre fantasy can be summed up as “imitative dross”, “formulaic stuff” churned out by commercially-minded, unscrupulous publishers in order to make a quick profit and “fulfil their monthly quotas” by playing on the vanity and insecurities of readers who “through the reading of a Genre Fantasy, can feel themselves to be, as it were, vicariously imaginative”. In fact, according to Grant,

“genre fantasy is not at heart fantasy at all, but a comforting revisitation of cosy venues, creating an effect that is almost anti-fantasy”.

The irony is that it is never clear exactly what qualifies as genre fantasy and what does not, especially since Grant notes that “genre fantasy” is presented in a format “indistinguishable” from the “full fantasy” he valorises. Indeed, there is no difference between the two, except in the tastes and perception of the critic. There appears to be no other criteria for discriminating between “true” and “genre” fantasy, apart from the wilful assertion that “full fantasy” is whatever Grant, or the implied tasteful, informed, imaginative reader (who assumingly agrees with orthodox taste) really, really likes. In other words, the entire definition rests on a forceful yet vague assertion based solely on the dubious authority and connoisseurship of the bourgeois masculine social elite. The implication is that only the passive, unthinking, easily duped and manipulated masses, the feminized and denigrated Other, would enjoy the worthless dross of “genre” fantasy.

Attebery contends that “The marketplace... tends to push fantasy toward formula”\(^4\), where “fantasy-as-formula”, as opposed to “genre”, is “essentially a commercial product” whose success depends on “consistency and predictability: one expects every box of detergent to be interchangeable with every other”. In one sense Attebery is correct: market forces do play a considerable part in the shaping of cultural products, and every artistic product participating in the cultural conditions of late capitalism is in some sense “commercial”. Further to this, Neale argues that all forms of artistic signification are subject to pressure from external forces - the specific economic and social conditions of production in the culture industry, and the forms of artistic distribution and audience reception. He suggests that “generic conventions and the

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, 11.
genre form itself should be viewed as one of the variants of the modalities of that pressure.” The often-made argument that the economic forces operating upon generic fictions push them towards a lack of individuation, “formula” fictions, is true in the general sense that the need for profit is built into the capitalist system within which the products function. However, it is overly reductionist and simplistic to assume that these market forces completely overwhelm individual texts, and that genre texts are created from one undifferentiated cookie-cutter mould. Genres are convenient categories for the commodity industry, and economic factors certainly play a role in the shape of genres, but they do not explain the existence of particular genres (how did the fantasy genre arise in the first place, and how and why is market interest in it sustained?) nor do they account for the continued production and consumption of generic texts.16

The specific economic structures and practices of the sphere of production and distribution of cultural products, including marketing, reviews, advertisement and so forth, “[contribute] fundamentally to the demarcation of genres, the establishing of categories and classifications within the social process” of generic fantasy as a field of cultural production.17 Western culture is now dominated by consumer capitalism, and the unbounded nature of the modern economy goes some way to explaining why readers continue to buy and enjoy even obviously repetitive and formulaic novels. As Colin Campbell argues, Western individuals are taught to want consumables and, in order to promote economic growth, “wanting to want” becomes the “hallmark” of the consumer. Campbell’s argument is particularly significant in that he rejects the notion that such desire is a psychological orientation, reiterating firmly that the desire to

15 Neale, Genre, 10.
16 Ibid., 52.
17 Ibid., 14.
consume "is not rooted in human psychology but in the culture of our civilization." Fantasy writers and critics often attempt to uncouple fantasy from the "real world", by negatively asserting that it is unrealistic or positively asserting that it is the product of the creative imagination, but as I demonstrate in Part 2 of this thesis, it is entirely inaccurate to suggest that fantasy exists in isolation from the social. The economic arguments here presented are but one example of the multiple dependencies fantasy has with the society that produces and consumes it.

As Neale states, the inclusion or at least recognition of the component elements of popular literary genres in a non-evaluative manner is essential to a re-evaluation of the meaning and significance of the cultural practices of modern genres. It therefore becomes vitally important that notions of genre based on such arbitrary distinctions — ideologically constructed as "truth" — should be openly recognized as a set of historically and socially determined prejudices that serve only the interests of a powerful few, operating ultimately to actively obstruct a functional and substantially analytic understanding of genre fantasy. To find such strategies in operation even amongst "pro-" fantasy scholars highlights the extent to which modernist ideologies have become institutionalized, internalized to such a degree that they have become "natural" and "normal". This is evident in the inconsistency, ambiguity and contradictory definitions and evaluations of fantasy, which render it opaque to rigorous analytical scrutiny. A cultural studies approach (such as I offer here), which considers context as well as text, offers the potential for examining more closely the effects of various forces at work in the social production of popular fiction.

4.3 Judging Books by their Covers: Genre as Commercial Category

Neale proposes that the mechanisms of both individual texts and generic systems need to be explicated/specified. The role of the commercial publishing industry, whose structures and practices avowedly push fantasy into a formulaic aesthetic through the (social) practical and economic constraints upon textual producers needs to be examined in greater detail.\(^{19}\) The problem with the “bar of soap” metaphor of genre fantasy as formula, is that “it posits a fairly direct relationship between economic structures and practices and the existence of genre” without taking into consideration the existence of pre-existing structures of conventions, modalities, modes perhaps, such as the fairytale or romance, that also affect the shape of the genre.\(^{20}\) The announcement of fantasy as formula effectively prohibits even thinking about the complex nature of the economic, social and historical relationships that are involved in the concept of genre. Genre as formula cannot even begin to answer the question of why fantasy uses the romance mode, nor what this choice of narrative convention means to both producers and audiences, how it affects the meaning that the texts convey?

Contemporary fantasy is a well-established field of cultural production, centred primarily on book-length mass-market literary fiction that is marketed, sold and recognized as “fantasy”. Fantasy as a genre is not limited only to written texts – it also includes film, visual art, graphic novels and computer games. Most people have an idea that Peter Jackson’s blockbuster *The Lord of the Rings* films and George Lucas’s film *Willow*, along with role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, are part of the broader field of fantasy. The distinction between the different cultural forms or media that contribute to the genre of fantasy as a whole is quite artificial. When audiences think of “science fiction” or “fantasy” they do not necessarily restrict

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\(^{19}\) Neale, *Genre*, 13-4.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 14.
themselves to the literary manifestation of the genre. Scholarly criticism of fantasy has tended to focus on the literary texts however, and the “heart” of the genre is still arguably the novel form, with film adaptations generated from books that are popularly and widely consumed, though there is considerable cross-influence, especially in gaming. The short story is still of significance, and provides many budding writers with a format on which to cut their teeth; but the contemporary publishing industry for adult fantasy is built around the full-length novel of around 150,000 words on average.

The preference for the “fat fantasy novel”, or for books in a trilogy or series, has become the norm expected by writers, publishers and audiences. This is already one very good reason why it is simply not enough to consider only primary texts and readers in the construction and conception of genre. Gary K. Wolfe observes that “the marketing and acquisitions practices of publishing houses have tended to emphasize certain conventions” within the genre, so that extra-textual devices like maps, glossaries, genealogies, and multi-volume novels (“the fat fantasy trilogy”) have become standard signifiers of the genre. Neglecting to take into account the forces present in the production of the text can lead to false notions about the nature of art, and the role and status of the author as an “individual genius” or “true artist” whose primary concern is with “artistic integrity” unsullied by the taint of crass

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commercialism.23 “Commercial marketing category” is therefore another way of defining modern genres.24

Genres are descriptive categories denoting sets of texts that share certain similarities, family resemblances, which allow them to be grouped together and identified with a label such as “fantasy” or “crime”. It is possible to recognize that a text belongs to the genre of fantasy because it is categorized under that heading in bookshops and libraries. Fantasy is usually grouped together with science fiction (sf) in a separate section away from “General Fiction”, in recognition of their shared, specialized readership. Genre fantasy is usually instantly recognizable by its bright, lurid book covers, often depicting a dragon or a person clad in medieval-style garb wielding a sword.25 The contents may include maps of the “secondary world”, appendices, genealogies of the fictional characters, a cover blurb advertising that the book is “Better than Tolkien” and a stamp of approval by a well-known author in the form of a catchy excerpted review. These devices serve not only to catch the attention of readers through commercial marketing strategies; they also act as important extra-textual signifiers of genre. In short, one initially recognizes genre from its contexts; where you come across it and what physical form it takes. Author Michael Chabon, in Locus magazine, talks about “the whole packaging thing, how the same book can be presented differently for genre or mainstream audiences”:

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24 This includes the “mainstream” genre of literary realism.
First of all, it's apparent that by virtue of changing the artwork and typeface on the jacket, and the overall look of a book, you can completely alter the way someone's going to interpret it. (That also applies if you change the font inside the book; if you use a more distinguished-looking font like a Garamond.) ...[If] they had published that book as a science fiction novel, people would just avoid it by virtue of the fact that it was so labelled. You do judge a book by its cover - or which section of the bookstore you bought it in.  

A clear example of the effects of marketing and presentation strategies on genre perception is the re-packaging of bestselling fantasy to appeal to a different readership. J. K. Rowling’s bestselling children’s fantasy, the Harry Potter series, proved so popular with adults that publishers soon issued editions with “tastefully” plain, sombre colours, designed to appeal to “grown-ups” who would otherwise be too ashamed to be caught publicly reading a children’s fantasy. The association of eye-catching bright colours and lavish illustrations with popular pulp fiction, and/or with children’s books, is a development worthy of further investigation, but the tactic must have met with some success, as others have followed suit, such as HarperCollins Voyager Classics series, which reissued Raymond E. Feist’s fantasy favourite Magician and numerous other bestsellers (including David Eddings) with plain covers. This is an intriguing phenomenon which reveals a great deal more about how “adulthood” is constructed – the social pressures dictating what are “appropriate” tastes and desires for “grown-ups” in Western societies – than it reveals about the nature of fantasy. Even more fascinating to observe are the ways in which this status quo is upheld in the critical literature surrounding fantasy, and how the modern concept of popular “genre fiction” itself has been shaped by assumptions about audiences and the construction of legitimate desires.

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We judge books by their covers in more than one sense, however. The extra-textual signifiers of genre are not simply there for the purposes of identification and evaluation, but can also aid in understanding texts, decoding their content by alerting the reader that the text is to be read in a certain way. “Reading, says Pierre Bourdieu, “is only one means among others, even among professional readers, of acquiring the knowledge that is mobilized in reading.”

A text presented as fiction, for example, will be read quite differently to a text demarcated as non-fiction. Literary hoaxes, such as MacPherson’s infamous “Ossian” poems (1762), or Helen Demidenko’s The Hand that Signed the Paper (1994), provide powerful insights into the way expectations can shape the reception and interpretation of texts. Both of these texts were presented deceptively – MacPherson’s poems as translations from an ancient Gaelic Bard, Ossian; and Demidenko’s novel supposedly based on the true experiences of her Ukrainian family. Both proved to be fabrications, and the ensuing outrage and controversy gives some idea of the effect presentation can have on the reading of a text.

The presence of maps, genealogies and glossaries in many fantasy books is therefore not only a marketing device, but also a signal of genre belonging in a number of ways. It may alert the knowledgeable reader that the text refers to the successful fantasy prototype set by Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, and probably contains an imaginary “secondary world”, some sort of journey and so on, typical of genre fantasy. These devices also act as aids to readers, allowing a fuller immersion into the imaginary worlds and geographies of fantasy: maps for example can make a described journey easier to follow. Furthermore, co-opting the symbolic devices (maps and genealogies) and narrative techniques of factual historical discourse can lend these

works of art, cultural products, is always a social and political act, not merely one of factual empirical observation.

28 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, 32.
fictions an air of "truth" or credibility. Tolkien's impact on the genre is in this regard undeniable: much of the strong appeal of Middle-earth lies in its perceived verisimilitude. Tolkien's meticulously created world, complete with histories, languages, and phases of the moon, aspired to be as real and convincing as a possible. Tolkien explained, "I wanted people simply to get inside this story and take it (in a sense) as actual history". What becomes clear is that readers bring a host of prior assumptions, external knowledge, expectations, personal inclinations or dispositions – what Bourdieu calls habitus – to the reading and assessment of texts.

Fantasy, sf, crime, and romance are brand names, but they also act as labels for genre groupings. They are ways of easily identifying a product, a physical object – be it a book, film, or computer game. However, this is neither the whole story, nor the only way of establishing genre. Aside from initial appearances, textual content is the most intuitive and obvious way of determining genre, though this is fraught with problems. How does one categorize a novel like Elizabeth Knox's *The Vintner's Luck*, about a man's love affair with an angel? To me it reads distinctly like romance or fantasy, and it certainly has magical and fantastical elements, yet it was published by Vintage, a mainstream "literary" imprint, and was certainly not sold, marketed, reviewed or generally recognized as genre fiction. This is also true of A. S. Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, which is a collection of fairy stories. Byatt is a winner of the prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize, and this book was sold in a beautiful collector's hardcover edition. Like Margaret Atwood's "science fiction" novels, or

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32 For example *Oryx and Crake* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).
works of magic realism, Byatt’s work is not generally found in the Fantasy section of bookstores, regardless of its thematic content. Brian Attebery notes that, “Few fantasists are supported by the system of university patronage by which we often recognize ‘serious’ writers. Nor are their books generally published by prestigious hardcover houses and university presses”.

It is important to recognize that both Atwood and Byatt have considerable status and critical prestige as authors of institutionally consecrated works of “literature”, and this is reflected in the critical perception of their texts. As “high” literature, their texts are not regarded as being part of a “genre”, which is a term generally reserved for “popular” fiction. Bourdieu emphasises that “no cultural product exists by itself, i.e. outside the relations of interdependence which link it to other products”, and furthermore, that artistic works function symbolically as transformed expressions of the underlying social relations of “actual” agents.

Genre is thus clearly not solely a textual function, but is inseparable from the network of social and material relations constituting the field of cultural production, and should be viewed not just as an abstract category, but as part of a community of texts, ideas and social agents.

“Genre” as it is commonly understood today is a product of twentieth-century Western capitalist consumer culture, and it is a loaded term carrying a variety of implications that need to be unpacked for full comprehension. The impact of contextual signifiers of genre may seem obvious, yet such analysis is remarkably scarce in the scholarly literature on fantasy, which for the most part has cultivated an attitude towards literature as disembodied texts, separate from the contexts of their production and reception. Tom Shippey concurs, saying that “The fantastic’, as academically defined and studied, is just not the same phenomenon as the bestseller

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33 Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, 11.
34 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, 32.
genre of ‘fantasy’ now to be found in every bookshop”.

This critical attitude has deep ramifications for the study of contemporary genres, whose nature is implicitly bound up with the conditions of consumer capitalism. Taking texts out of context makes it difficult to fully determine their value, meaning and social significance as cultural artefacts. The “success” of a book, and hence its value, can be judged in a number of different ways, from the number of copies sold (“bestsellers”), to critical success by winning prizes, or by peer reviews in significant newspapers and journals. All these are examples of forums for establishing artistic and/or commercial value, supporting Bourdieu’s claim that value is not an inherent property of artistic works, but is created by the valuing community.

Books do not just succeed “on their own” through the sheer force of the artist’s genius. There are a multitude of factors involved, including literary agents and the publishing apparatus that produces the finished, packaged product – which is aimed, marketed, sold, and distributed with a market audience in mind. If a book is priced right, and is readily available, it is more likely to gain public attention. An interesting example is Karen Joy Fowler’s novel, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, which hit the mainstream bestseller lists in 2004 and is now found in airport bookshops internationally. Fowler has long been a highly respected author within the field of the fantastic (fantasy, science fiction and horror), but was little known outside the field until this book. She comments in an interview that she thought the idea for *The Jane Austen Book Club* was “commercial”, basically a “mainstream” book which would sell “better than I usually sell, but that’s not setting the bar really high”. But there was a kind of activity around the book in the publishing house before it came out, that I could see was different”, muses Fowler. “People could see how to

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sell it. Apparently it's important that the reviews in the mainstream press are very early, and you have a critical mass of them all at once. And all of that happened.37 Evidence such as this suggests that there are forces at work in the production of texts which strongly affect the distribution, availability and perception of texts, all of which feed into their overall critical evaluation and designation into different genres.

The force of conditions of capitalist production works to "institutionalise a set of expectations" which it strives to fulfil in order to guarantee the meaning and pleasure derived from the experience of particular kinds of narrative, but also to generate desire through constant redefinition.38 There is thus a dual level of expectation generated by genre: the expectation of getting a recognizable generic product that meets "a set of basic conventional requirements" (such as fantastic content, fairytale structure, the elicitation of joy and wonder), but furthermore generates the desire and necessity for difference and novelty, which is where the skill and style of individual authors comes into play - a difference of degree, and not kind, of writing.39

The contradictory nature of genre, that it appears on the one hand to be a clearly defined system, and on the other hand, constantly evades detailed elucidation, definition or "essence", is accounted for by the fact that genre is not an "entity", but a category functioning in the social field. Neale conceives of genres ultimately as processes of systematisation, not systems themselves (that function to provide both regulation and variety).40 This is why I strongly believe that a conceptualisation of genre as a field of cultural production provides the theoretical complexity necessary to account for, and apprehend, the nature of genre as encompassing an indeterminate continuum of texts, signifying codes and discourses, created, apprehended and

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37 Ibid.
38 Neale, Genre, 54.
39 Ibid.
40 Neale, Genre, 50-1.
processed by a culturally and historically situated community, that is subject to constant (internal and external) change and flux, that yet manifests historical development and provides a recognizable pattern of regulation and variety. Bourdieu's concept of the cultural field has the capacity to explain how and why generic expectations are generated, as well as underscoring the fact that they are cultural products and as such are not wholly determined by the social and economic forces at work in their production. Genres include coherent and systematic groupings of texts, as well as related sets of expectations which shape the meaning and value of those texts.

4.4 Story, formula and narrative conventions

It is argued in this thesis that the element of story, having a strong narrative dimension, is crucial to the fantasy genre, and that although story has been denigrated by modernist literary criticism, its power connects with the mythology of pre-modern cultures, and its performative dimension makes it sufficiently powerful to overcome hackneyed elements and predictability. It is asserted that the proof of the tale is in the telling, and that each author (and active reader) takes the lifeless tropes produced by Proppian dissection, and through a new assembling of them, makes them live again.\footnote{Alexander Jones ed., \textit{The Jerusalem Bible: Popular Edition} (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974 [1966]), Ezekiel, Ch.37, pp.1215-16. This biblical passage is especially relevant because it tells of Yahweh's revival of desiccated human bones. Propp sought to reduce story to its bare bones, the component elements, which once reduced, were no longer "story". The reanimation of so-called "stock motifs" results in living stories, which involve readers through their powerful generation of affect.} Even the most poorly written text may have some valuable element of innovation or the ability to invoke pleasure. Encapsulating the wisdom of ages, Tolkien expresses it this way:

\textit{Fairy} is very powerful. Even the bad author cannot escape it. He probably makes up his tale out of bits of older tales, or things he half remembers, and they may be too strong for him to spoil or disenchant.
Someone may meet them for the first time in his silly tale, and catch a
glimpse of Fairy, and go on to better things.42

The nature and purpose of Story or narrative lies in the telling, says Tolkien: “a
thing told in its entirety”.43 Reducing folk and fairy tales to their component motifs,
plot devices and so forth has led to many statements along the lines of this story is
“about” this, it is “a version” of this, or is “the same story” in essence: the bare bones
of story or plot outline, which Tolkien believed completely missed the point of what
“Story” or narrative is all about.

The comparison of stories involving common elements and bar of soap is a false
comparison, however; can a story really be compared to a physical object? Tolkien
thinks not: it is in the details and the execution, he says

   It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual
details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life
the undissected bones of the plot, that really count.44

It has been argued that modernist literary criticism’s bias against Story or narrative art
has contributed to the paucity of fantasy criticism today.45 Karl Kroeber identifies
one of the weaknesses of established (modernist) literary criticism as its inability to
deal adequately with narrative art forms, due to modernism’s own anti-narrative
agenda. Though he does not extend his argument to encompass contemporary
popular culture, it is clear that Kroeber’s identification of the positive qualities of

42 This was written as the beginning of a preface to a new edition of George MacDonald’s fantasy
tale, The Golden Key, which, incidentally, Tolkien evaluated as “illwritten, incoherent, and bad, in
spite of a few memorable passages”. This preface eventually grew into the semi-autobiographical
story Smith of Wootton Major. Tolkien’s preface was never finished, but the story Smith itself is a
reminder to critics not to dismiss out of hand what they don’t like or understand, as it may be of
great value to someone else. Humphrey Carpenter, J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography (London &
43 See Karl Kroeber, Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times (New
44 Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 120.
45 Clute, Encyclopedia of Fantasy, 900.
story or narrative, especially the element of repetition or retelling, is a vital key to unlocking some of the ways in which popular works, as well as revealing its critical potential and appeal. Through a deepened understanding of the social purposes of narrative, the notions of mass or popular culture and its audiences as simplistically formulaic, unreflectively conformist and uniformly unoriginal, are challenged and problematized.

According to Kroeber, storytelling has been “persistently misunderstood” in the twentieth century, largely due to the dominance of Modernist principles in critical and aesthetic theory, which privilege novelty and originality over repetition and convention in literary texts. Contemporary narrative theory has been unable to explain or take into the account the fact that “stories are always retold and are meant to be retold, reheard, reread, that narrative is a repeating form of discourse – in which every repetition is unique.” Kroeber argues that “narrative” is the discourse most translatable across time, place and cultural boundaries, amenable to adaptation and translation to suit new environments whilst retaining distinctively recognizable elements. Religion, for example, is one of the great narrative discourses, using example, story, and parable to articulate, consolidate and disseminate complex ideas. Indeed, as Kroeber stresses, “Every innovative work is constructed of traditional material. If a text does not sustain the memory of traditional construction, its innovativeness will no longer be perceived.”

Ian Watt locates the emphasis on originality to the detriment of tradition and convention in the emergence of the modern novel in the eighteenth century. For works in other genres, recognition of their literary models is often important and sometimes essential; evaluation depends to a large extent on an analysis of the

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author's skill in handling the appropriate formal conventions. The novel's primary aim of conveying the impression of fidelity to the immediacy of human experience means that it is damaging for a novel to be viewed as an imitation of another literary work: attention to any pre-established formal conventions can only endanger its success.\textsuperscript{48} Hence, problems arise in assessing and accepting genre fictions, which are judged (within their fields) as successful or original, depending on their handling of generic conventions.

Commercial commodities or formula fictions are not inherently inferior to "literary" texts, but commodification and mass production carry their own stigma: the social inferiority of being appreciated by "the masses". The democratisation of culture thus renders the "popular" problematic. In a cultural environment where originality, subversion, individuality, and difference from the norm are valued highly, literary forms that are seen to conform to relatively predictable models or stereotypes are downgraded and devalued. This begs the question: what constitutes originality in a work of art, when authors always need to create a meaningful common ground in order to connect to the reader? This common ground is shaped by mutually understood social and psychological codes expressed in the text as narrative conventions or formulas.

John Cawelti, an early champion of studying popular culture, argued that the use of formulas need not detract from the "aesthetic force" or emotional enjoyment of a work.\textsuperscript{49} The "once upon a time" fairytale formula signifies that we will be encountering a narrative of the fantastic, and we anticipate a sequence of events and possibilities that we generally expect to end in a "happily ever after". The art of formula fiction lies in playing upon audience expectations, by subverting or

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 13-4.
conforming to generic expectations in a delicate balance between predictability (which provides the pleasure of anticipation satisfied) and innovation (where the unexpected generates curiosity and surprise and keeps audiences interested). Amongst the subset of texts classified as fantasy, there is a struggle to create new forms that subvert the model begun by Tolkien. Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000) and China Miéville’s *The Scar* (2002) are two recent examples that specifically align themselves as antagonistic to Tolkien’s “formula”, though they continue to function within the field of fantasy and are recognized as such. This underlines the reasons why prescriptive or static models of genre with rigid boundary demarcations are bound to fail: because genres, as fields of cultural production, are constantly in a state of flux and change. With each combination of the fresh and innovative with traditional formulas, new themes and motifs emerge that have the potential to influence and expand the limits of the field and perhaps even start a new genre altogether. Originality then becomes not simply the first appearance of new inventions, but the skilful reworking and recycling of known themes and materials.

Every genre engages subjective mechanisms of narrative balance: the desire for “the pleasure of the process” (the tale is in the telling) and the desire for the “pleasure of its closure”, which takes different forms, with different pleasures and expectations for each genre.\(^5^0\) Suspense and pleasure are generated by playing with tension and anticipation, between what the author or the convention sets up as a possibility, and the actual narrative outcome - if it be thwarted, subverted, or granted. According to Cawelti, the use of formulae, or established conventions, need not detract from the “aesthetic force” or emotional enjoyment of the work. On the contrary, what is sought is an encounter providing maximum excitement, without an overpowering sense of insecurity and of danger. Fantasy literature does this through the “construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty,

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\(^5^0\) Neale, *Genre*, 26.
and the limitations of the world of our experience.” Cawelti makes a case for the artistry involved in creating formulaic texts, emphasising the element of pleasure in the appeal of “formula fictions”. The conventions and meanings of conventional “formula fantasies” are capable of being analysed as highly significant indicators of cultural values, assumptions and concerns common to its group of readers and writers. Cawelti did not distinguish between genre and formula, suggesting only that a genre might be the limits for a set of related formulae. He did not thus interrogate the notion of popular fiction as formulaic, and though he championed the positive qualities of popular culture; therefore, Cawelti did not ultimately challenge the notion that there is a fundamental distinction (in kind) between elite and popular art.

Cawelti notes that the predictable, formulaic nature and “escapist” function of “popular” fiction, fantasy included, is devalued and degraded as being an inferior or perverted form of “fine” art, instead of being seen on its own merits as amply fulfilling its goals of providing enjoyment and pleasure. However, in viewing the primary function of popular cultural art forms such as fantasy as forms of recreation and entertainment, Cawelti implicitly concurs with the traditional valuation of “high” art or “literature” as serious, authentic and non-commercialised culture, particularly when he argues that popular fiction should not be judged by the same aesthetic standards used to evaluate high art, whose aims and effects he claims are completely different from formula fictions.

As Stephen Neale states, the distinction between high and popular art is based on separate premises governing the conditions of creativity, the degree of “contact” between artist and audience, and the degree of artistic autonomy/control the creator

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has over the materials.\textsuperscript{53} The separation in \textit{kind} of serious, high art from commercial, popular “entertainment” blocks the possibility of rethinking the “ideology of subjectivity” and the nature of the contract involved in creating artistic/genre conventions. The distinction (between high and popular art), says Neale, rests on “a fundamentally complicit acceptance of the basis of ‘high art’ ideologies” – the idea of the autonomous and transcendent power of the individual artistic genius, of which (high) art is the pure (unmediated) expression.\textsuperscript{54}

Vincent Leitch suggest that genres can be partially defined as “identifiable recurring patterns of linguistic, social, stylistic, structural, tonal, presentational, and thematic conventions subject to transformations and linked with certain historical periods and social groups”.\textsuperscript{55} It is precisely at this nexus that I wish to situate genre formation – the embedding or interaction of literary fields within the domain of the social, political and historical – the wider “cultural archive” as Leitch puts it, where genres are conceived of as “sets of historical and literary conventions joined to linguistic and social conventions”.\textsuperscript{56} The audience expectations generated by genres highlights the fact that genre is not just a collection of texts, but is formed by a community (fan groups, readers, writers and film directors, producers, publishers, teachers, librarians, academics), who produce and establish meanings through certain \textit{shared interests and expectations}. It is these interests and expectations that shape the conventions we associate with genre fictions. Texts are engaged in \textit{dialogue} with each other, with texts outside the genre, and with audiences/readers in the wider community.\textsuperscript{57} It pays be especially wary when approaching genre and critiques of genre, not to confuse “taste”, biased values and preconceptions, with “analysis”. The idea is to understand

\textsuperscript{53} Neale, \textit{Genre}, 8.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Vincent B. Leitch, “(De)Coding (Generic) Discourse,” \textit{Genre} 24 (1991), 84.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 85.

\textsuperscript{57} Another term for this is “intertextuality”. For a clear explanation, see Adam Roberts, \textit{Science Fiction}, ed. John Drakakis, \textit{The New Critical Idiom} (London: Routledge, 2000), 189.
speculative fiction on its own terms. Genre is a useful concept only when used to describe rather than to evaluate.

It is clear that theories that look to the text as the sole locus of meaning miss half the equation: that of reader response and interpretation. As Dominic Strinati says, texts “become significant when they are located within the social relationships which produce and consume them”.

In the process of reading books or watching films, we re-symbolize the text and make it our own, relating emotions, characters and events to our lives and the world as we understand it. Texts therefore come to vary in meaning for different social groups, and over time. An understanding of the function and appeal of generic formula fictions can be brought to bear upon the issues surrounding film adaptation. Central to adaptation studies is the notion of “fidelity” or “faithfulness” to the original text. Mass culture criticism’s assumption of passive audiences and the power of the media in determining meanings are clearly undermined by audience reactions to film adaptations of books.

Joy Boyum’s study of film adaptation points to the high degree of participation and emotional involvement in audiences of film adaptations that are familiar with the source text. Film adaptations of well-known novels trade upon audience desires for “recycled” narratives, where part of the attraction lies not only in the anticipation and curiosity of seeing the text “come to life” visually, but also in reliving the experiences and emotions elicited by the book. This is analogous to the experience of reading formula or genre literature, where the desire for repetition of an enjoyable experience creates reader expectations of a particular literary genre. Thus the notion of

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60 Ibid., 44.
dialogical contracts between audiences and texts eliminates the idea of passive, unthinking masses by empowering the audience as creative agents with an active role in the production of meaning. The success of an adaptation often depends upon the degree to which the film directors are able to persuade us of the acceptability and validity of their interpretation. Similarly with genre texts, which are even more dissimilar from each other than film adaptations – they may use the same motifs, such as the dragon or princess, but each individual execution will be completely different in style, tone, meaning and interpretation from every other text.

The desire to replicate the pleasurable experiences elicited by narrative is an important factor in considering the purpose of generic fictions, in understanding how and why "formulas" come about, in short, because they work: people enjoy them and want more. Stephen Neale draws together the role of desire and the function of repetition and novelty in the formation of genres: "Desire is always a function of both repetition and difference" he states. According to Neale:

Desire is founded in the difference between on the one hand the initial experience of pleasure, the mark established by that experience and which functions as its signifier(s), and on the other, future attempts to repeat the experience, future repetitions of the signifier(s). Desire is hence also founded on the urge to repeat and the impossibility of even being able to do so.

Genres regulate the variety of desired experiences across the totality of the genre, they organise and systematise the degree of difference between individual texts and the generic system, which creates the appearance of coherence across the "fuzzy set" of the genre, enabling a comparison of degrees of difference before a text morphs recognizably into another generic grouping. Moreover, repetition and difference function in a dialectical relationship, they are not functionally separable. Genres

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61 Neale, Genre, 48.
62 Ibid.
establish relations of similarity and difference. Genres therefore exist to process and contain the diversity of individual texts into recognizable patterns and systems of signification. The notion of difference between individual texts is not incidental, but fundamental to the structure and pleasure, of genre: "if each text within a genre were, literally, the same, there would simply not be enough difference to generate either meaning or pleasure. Hence there would be no audience."63

Generic motifs and conventions such as dragons, spaceships and ghosts are found in fantasy, science fiction and horror, but the weight and function ascribed to these elements, and a myriad of other considerations, including extra-textual signifiers, help the reader to determine generic differences, and as Attebery's fuzzy set acknowledges, this is a malleable process open to individual interpretation. To me, Le Guin's Always Coming Home (1985) reads like a fantasy text, but to others it may seem like science fiction. Sheri S. Tepper's True Game series depicts the colonization of the planet Lom by a colonial spaceship, but the overall style and the way the spaceship functions and is described within the story is compatible with the typical stylistic, thematic and ideological conventions of fantasy. It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that infuses with life the dissected bones of the plot.

Arguments such as these, emphasising the function of genres as interactive processes as opposed to static, limited and self-contained formulas, highlight some of the limitations of structural analyses such as Propp's morphology, which breaks down narratives into discrete units that invariably recur in the same order (the fairytale formula).64 By emphasising on the similarities between texts, and distilling the actions of the texts into "motifs" or sub-units, purely structuralist analyses ignore the

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63 Ibid., 50.
64 Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale (Austin, Texas: Texas UP, 1968 [1928]).
importance of specificity and difference in the generation of textual meaning. Kroeber criticises the reductionism and absolutist tendencies of this approach, claiming that it achieves coherence at the expense of other aspects of narrative construction, especially the interactive aspect and the role of repetition in genre. It is the bits that are left out in constructing stories, as well as the conjunction of themes and sequence of events that generates a particular meaning in stories. In the generation of new stories, subunits or motifs are reused and reshuffled, and the reordering of narrative sequences can give rise to radically different meanings, since it is the relations between themes, rather than the fulfilling of a set and unvarying formula that creates generic conventions.\(^65\) Kroeber argues that:

a written text, just like an oral performance, is by someone, to someone, and about something. If we lose sight of any one of the three elements in this social transaction, we falsify the text. A predominant mode of falsification afflicting recent criticism arises from concentration solely upon the text, what is said to the exclusion of who it says to whom – and to what purpose.\(^66\)

In other words, texts should be regarded primarily as historical artifacts, not, as Propp suggests, natural objects, as comprehending the meaning of a narrative is a function of the situation within which we apprehend the text.

In regard to fairy stories, Tolkien believed that “it is more interesting, and also in its way more difficult, to consider what they are, what they have become for us, and what values the long alchemic processes of time have produced in them” (my italics).\(^67\) In other words, instead of reducing the “soup” of story to the bare bones – its sources or individual thematic components, it is more useful to try to understand the story on its own terms – “the story as it is served up by its author or teller” –


\(^66\) Ibid., 41-2.

though of course, Tolkien quips, “I do not...forbid criticism of the soup as soup”.

He is firmly opposed to reductionist critical methods which miss the meaning or purpose of narrative and attempt to break it down into some sort of content that can be separated from form or the context of the whole.

The picture is greater than, and not explained by, the sum of the component threads. Therein lies the inherent weakness of the analytic (or “scientific”) method: it finds out much about things that occur in stories, but little or nothing about their effect in any given story.

Following Tolkien, Kroeber also believes that “Story” cannot be distilled easily into any “single, totalizing abstraction” and argues that one must abandon the concept of a “master plot”, “a single pattern definitive for every narrative”, because stories are phenomena as diverse as the cultures they arise from, and elicit widely diverse and culturally specific responses which cannot be reduced to a single, universal explanatory formula. The tale of Romeo and Juliet, for example, is very different when told by Shakespeare, as opposed to a Native American Indian version of the same.

4.5 The Tolkien Explosion

Recent studies of fantasy (since the 1990s) acknowledge that definitions of the genre must allow for some flexibility, as well as a certain amount of specificity. Achieving this balance is not as easy as it sounds, however. Fantasy requires a definition, or better yet, a (set of) descriptions that is “just right” - not too broad, not too narrow - and blurry enough to squeeze in Goldilocks, the three bears and the dragon Kalessin.

The best expression of this principle hitherto is found in Brian Attebery's 1992 Strategies of Fantasy, where he takes a pragmatic approach to the problem of genre. Attebery describes genres as “fuzzy sets”: categories "defined not by boundaries but by

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68 Ibid.
69 Kroeber, Retelling/Rereading, note 1, 121.
70 Ibid., 8-9.
71 Ibid., 44-5.
We tend to group genres around central examples that best seem to describe the "essence" of that category of texts, but the boundaries shade off into other sets or genres, so that a book on the margins may belong to one genre or another, depending on one's own interests. According to Attebery's "fuzzy set" model, there are no definitive or rigid genre boundaries, so that fantasy texts often overlap with science fiction, romance, gothic horror, realistic, or historical fiction.

This conception of genre acknowledges that one individual's reading of fantasy is not necessarily going to be the same as another's, given that the genre today is large enough to encompass David Edding's Tolkienian adolescent adventure series *The Belgariad*, Kirsten Bishop's postmodern "New Weird" novel *The Etched City*, and Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori*, a fantasy set in a fictionalized medieval Japan. Using fuzzy set approach, Attebery proposes that the "fantasy genre" describes the set of texts that resembles in one way or another J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's work can in many ways be regarded as the "centre" or most recognizable, prototypical text of modern fantasy, largely because of his immense popularity; that is, his novel is the most widely known, publicized (and imitated) work of fantasy to date.

Fantasy today, as a separate publishing and marketing genre, grew out of the phenomenal success of the Ballantine paperback editions in America in 1966. Even though *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in 1954 in Britain, it did not gain a "cult" following until in the early 1960s Ace books "pirated" illegal cheap paperback copies of *Lord of the Rings* which led to a very public publishers' war between Ace and Ballantine Books, who had the authorized copyright on the novel in the United States. Enormous publicity was generated by this contest, drawing media attention to the American fan movement which now made itself vocal in defence of the

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72 Attebery, Strategies of Fantasy, 12.
author’s copyright. The genre of modern fantasy that has since grown to cluster around *The Lord of the Rings* a central, defining text could undeniably be seen to be “cashing in” on the Tolkien phenomenon. Publishers actively continue to encourage Tolkien “imitations” (the most notorious being the *Shannara* series by Terry Brooks) and new texts are validated by comparison with Tolkien’s “masterpiece”.

Tolkien was not the first author to write what we regard as modern fantasy (that honour is usually accorded to William Morris), but as Tom Shippey remarks, “*The Lord of the Rings* however altered reading tastes rapidly and lastingly”.73 Without the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, fantasy may not have become a recognizably separate genre in its own right, and may have continued to be subsumed under science fiction, fairytale or general fiction. As Gardner Dozois observes, “After the Tolkien Explosion of the late 1960s, it became possible to make a reputation as a fantasist by writing novels alone”.74 Tolkien’s success created a sizeable industry and audience for fantasy which not only encouraged and inspired other writers to work in the genre, but also created a market category, a “genre” label for new works as well as older writings.

Texts such as Hope Mirrlees’ *Lud-in-the-Mist*, that had never received wide circulation or had fallen into obscurity, were published or re-issued in response to a clearly expressed audience desire for the like.75 Evidently, fantasy existed pre-Tolkien, but Tolkien’s fiction revealed a widespread but latent and “unexpressed desire for pure fantasy”, which appealed to a similar audience who read science

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ficiton. Poul Anderson, one of the great early American fantasists, recalls that his first attempt to sell his Norse myth inspired fantasy, *The Broken Sword*, in 1948, was repeatedly rejected by editors who felt it would not sell. It finally got one short-lived print run in 1954. After the Tolkien explosion, *The Broken Sword* was released in a revised version in Lin Carter's Ballantine Fantasy series for Random House publishers in 1971, along with many other out-of-print, forgotten fantasies, including William Morris's ground-breaking prose romances. The great writers of "pulp" fantasy, A. Merritt, H. Rider Haggard, Robert E. Howard, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Fritz Lieber and others "were embraced decades after their original publication due to the thirst for fantasy created by J. R. R. Tolkien".

Gardner Dozois, who is still a very active editor and publisher in science fiction and fantasy, comments that as a youth in the late 1950s, avidly consuming mass-market science fiction paperbacks, *The Lord of the Rings* although already published in Britain, was issued in hardcover, which made it doubly inaccessible to the younger generation of Americans hungry for fantastic fictions. This highlights the importance of taking contexts of cultural production into account when examining the hows and whys of the formation of modern fantasy as a genre. The availability of affordable paperback editions actually made fantasy available to a mass readership. This signalled the beginnings of "fantasy" as a separate publishing category. *The Lord of the Rings* is still extremely popular, and a recent survey by Waterstone Bookshops, Channel 4 and The Folio Society showed that it topped the list of the hundred most popular books in England, New Zealand and Australia. The "Middle-earth" franchise is today a multi-million dollar international industry,

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77 Ibid., 28.
78 Ibid., 16.
79 Dozois, ed., *Modern Classics of Fantasy*, xiii.
especially in the wake of Peter Jackson’s critically and popularly acclaimed film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The popular acceptance of Tolkien’s version of the fantastic gave coherence to an otherwise disparate set of earlier texts rooted in the Romantic revival of the “Gothic” Middle Ages from the second half of the eighteenth century to Victorian medievalism, including the fantasies of William Morris, George MacDonald and Lord Dunsany.\(^8\) These texts are now recognized as influences on and precursors to Tolkien’s style of Romantic, medievalist fantasy. As F. R. Leavis stated in *The Great Tradition*, “the work of all great creative writers gives a meaning to the past”; they have a “retroactive effect”, creating a tradition out of texts that came before, as well as accreting a tradition for those coming after.\(^9\) *The Lord of the Rings* was the kernel around which modern fantasy as a separate genre accreted, generating not only new texts “in the style of” Tolkien, and building new conventions, but also retroactively creating a “tradition” out of texts that came before. No doubt these sentiments, applied to popular culture, would have Leavis turning in his grave, but “A genre”, as Ursula K. Le Guin states, “is a formal tradition”.\(^8\)

The tradition that has arisen from Tolkien’s alternative world fantasy resembles it not so much in detail, but more fundamentally in terms of content, structure and reader response.\(^4\) Fantasy follows the narrative patterns of romance as the traditional

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\(^8\) Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, 14.


vehicle for non-realist or fantastic elements. Tolkien himself consciously turned to medieval romances such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the Old English epic Beowulf, as well as folk and fairytale traditions for inspiration. The modern genre has continued to draw on the conventions of heroic romance: male dominated, quest-centred stories about heroes arguably still form the “centre” of the fuzzy set, and western European folk- and fairy-tale traditions, Norse and Celtic myth, Arthurian legend, medieval romances and “sword and sorcery” motifs drawn from American pulp fiction such as Robert E. Howard’s Conan the Barbarian (1935) are heavily plumbed sources. Today, the much-imitated combination of “Tolkienesque” pseudo-medieval Otherworldly settings, stock characters and re-hashed fairytale plotlines, are so familiar to contemporary audiences that the heroic quest, dragons, and magic have become archetypal generic conventions. Since the early to mid-1980s, mainstream fantasy has become so saturated with these iconic motifs that there is a thriving sub-genre of comic, satirical fantasy that makes fun of its own traditions. Two of the best-known authors of comic fantasy are British authors Terry Pratchett of Discworld series fame, and Diana Wynne Jones, whose Tough Guide to Fantasyland and The Dark Lord of Derkholm are indispensable aids to uncovering the central conventions of the genre.

The conception of genre as a fluid “field” of constant struggle, change and innovation, prevents even the notion of “fuzzy set” from becoming moribund. There is a strong tendency in literary criticism to emphasise the formulaic aspects of genre fiction, encouraged by stultifying notions of “genre”, the semantic difficulties of “definition”, and a critical focus on structure and content to the exclusion of other shaping factors. It is, however, a mistake (though a common one) to assume that genre fantasy is nothing more than a collection of these readily-identifiable icons, a

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85 Published in novel form 1950, first published in Weird Tales magazine as “The Hour of the Dragon” (1935).
list of props and motifs fixed in a recitation of formula rather than a literary tradition with its own history and values.\textsuperscript{86} "Genre" implies that there is a certain degree of self-consciousness expected of generic texts. Genre readers and writers dip into "the Cauldron of Story", as Tolkien calls it\textsuperscript{87}, communicating through the common stock of concepts, images and established patterns to produce variations on a theme. There is awareness that one is reading/writing within a tradition that has arisen organically because people enjoy it; find it meaningful, want to write like that; or want to experience more of the same. Every writer in the genre may serve up a story "soup" concocted from similar materials, but each version is going to be a unique re-telling: soup is still soup, but there are infinite variations on the theme.

However conventionalized or formulaic fantasy has since become, the process of how it first became a "genre" through critical consensus is a fascinating one. The Lord of the Rings was markedly different from the British fantasies that enjoyed renown in the late Victorian era and the early twentieth century. As one of the more positive reviewers noted, it was "not metaphysical like E.R. Eddison's [fantasies], nor theological like George MacDonald's".\textsuperscript{88} William Morris's prose romances did not bear that much resemblance to Tolkien's writing as a whole, despite their common goal of Romantically re-imagining the Middle Ages. Morris's rather inaccessible and archaic style deliberately set out to distance readers emotionally in order to better foreground narrative structures and thematic features, as did his flat and unengaging characters, following closely the style and structure of medieval romances. One of Tolkien's great innovations was to combine the content of traditional medieval romance with the techniques of modern psychological characterization; he freely

\textsuperscript{86} Le Guin and Attebery, The Norton Book of Science Fiction, 21-2.
\textsuperscript{87} Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", 125-7.
mixes stylistic register, character, point of view and narrative voice, sympathetically engaging the modern reader's emotions and rendering the secondary world more "real" and believable. His great innovation - the Hobbit, the perspective of the little, ordinary person - captured the imagination of the modern world so thoroughly that the word has entered not only the English dictionary but the tomes of scientific anthropology. Tolkien understood the value of Hobbits, "in putting earth under the feet of 'romance', and in providing subjects for 'ennoblement' and heroes more praiseworthy than the professionals."  

Certainly Tolkien's portrayal of the courage and heroism of the ordinary, "little" person in the face of overwhelming odds, a perspective forged in the trenches of World War I, has found strong purchase amongst many social movements, including Romantic environmentalism, that seek to change or challenge the oppressive machinery of modern capitalist society. It was more than just the superficial or particular details of Tolkien's version of fantasy that ignited the imagination of the post-war Western world. I argue that it was in fact Tolkien's strongly Romantic worldview; with its powerful critique of modernity, combined with a utopian message of hope and a re-visioning of the natural world; that appealed to certain sections of the western populace strongly affected by the massive social changes taking place in the latter half of the twentieth century.

If we look for underlying similarities binding the huge array of fantasy stories together in a genre, the common factors are Romantic ideology and the desire to escape from modernity, powered by a sense of loss and desire. The common thread is the rejection of aspects of technological modernity, though the reactions to it differ; the responses range from 1970s urban fantasy, bringing the numinous into the

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modern urban cityscape, to a pastoral return to nature and a resacralization of the natural world. What is significant is that all these responses are intimately connected to relevant issues in their historical context, and read as relevant to the reader’s own experiences or inclinations.

It is interesting to compare how Tolkien’s message of “hope” contrasts with the worldview of American fantasist Robert E. Howard’s Conan stories in Weird Tales magazine fiction of the 1930s. Howard is renowned as one of the creators of the “Swords and Sorcery” sub-genre of heroic fantasy. His richly brutal barbarian worlds were fuelled by interests in American frontier stories, ancient history and lost civilizations. Evolutionary theories and the new science of archaeology informed much of his work, which was written during and after the Depression years in the United States, culminating in the stories of Conan the Barbarian (c.1930-6). Howard’s Hyborian Age “complete with Picts, Lemurians, Stygians, and Atlanteans” took advantage of the “imaginative space” opened up by late nineteenth- early twentieth-century archaeological discoveries and excavations.90 The common denominator is still a strong rejection of the modern world, powered by “some deep sense of the dissatisfaction of modern urban life”.91

“Swords and Sorcery” as pioneered by Howard showed a civilization in decay and decadence, an ultimately doomed and failing empire. Into this crumbling civilization, Howard’s “Barbarian” hero strode forth, a powerful depiction of a return to nature and the rule of might, military prowess and the sword. Howard’s Conan was governed by strong and bloody passions, primitive desires, and “fears too primordial for any civilized man to comprehend. His life was often a bondage of taboos, sharp

91 Ibid., xix.
sword-edges, between which he walked shuddering". The barbaric world of "Swords and Sorcery" in Howard's vision was a vivid realization of Hobbes' theories of life in "the state of nature": "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". This vision had appeal; Howard's work was emulated and later collected and reissued most famously by L. Sprague de Camp in the 1950s, and later found a new audience in the fantasy readership generated by Tolkien's work. The coherent mythic underpinnings of Tolkien's narrative, the sense of immense and epic purpose and grandeur, had a coherence and sense of salvation, hope, and triumph that was not evident in the fragmentary and bloodthirsty tales of barbaric civilizations, occult evils and unspeakable horrors of "Sword and Sorcery", where pure survival against the odds is the sole consolation. These depicted fallen civilizations, permeated by a sense of degeneracy, despair, brutality. This is also the case in H. Rider Haggard's She, where colonialism and the British sense of Empire, and the influence of the developing discipline of archaeology (confronting fallen civilizations), coalesce into a tale of "modern man blundering into dangers and terrors of ancient origin." With Tolkien, evil is brought back to the homeland, not confronted far from England's soil as in She, and is furthermore all-pervasive: the machinery of destruction and modernization was to be found right in the heart of the homeland (The Shire); nothing is spared from the inexorable mills of progress; the modern Machine, and the apparatus of the technocratic industrialist state.

4.6 Conclusion

Modernism, seeking to distance and separate itself from the past, categorized storytelling and narrative as "primitive", a practice peculiar to less advanced or developed peoples, defined as on the margins of, and hence Other to, the modern

93 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1651]), 186
94 H. Rider Haggard, She (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1887]).
West. This is important, as it has already been suggested that Tolkien’s understanding of fantasy resembles theological discourse, and that *The Lord of the Rings* and other writings by Tolkien were intended to function as a new mythology for England. The rejection of narrative therefore carries theological implications, and the rise of interiorized stream-of-consciousness voices in modernist fiction is indicative of the reduction of all to the sphere of the human, with psychology, as has already been noted, substituting for the deeper meanings once located in communally held myth and religion.⁹⁵ These connections will be further explored in Part 2 of this thesis.

The modernist project went further than merely questioning the appropriateness of narrative and working within traditional literary formats. Modernism, positioned in the emerging secularity of the post-Christian West, questioned the apportionment of values to cultural activity. Tolkien’s writer was a subordinate creator, whose work resembled the creative activity of the Christian God. Modernist creativity was seen as the special quality of the artist, and as its assumptions were agnostic, if not atheistic, this creativity was not understood as stemming from any superior source. Rather, art was to be produced for art’s sake, and artists were excused from conventional morality and social responsibility, as their creativity rendered them apart from ordinary human beings. Kroeber notes that:

Modernism was the first aesthetic system to ask whether excellent art did not require the exclusion of traditional narrative, as it was the first to deny that art should have ethical significance. Since stories always evoke judgmental responses, the place of narrative in modernism could only be uncertain, and that uncertainty led to the misvaluation of narratives by modern and postmodern critics.⁹⁶

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⁹⁵ Examples of such modernist fiction include James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf.
Within the visual arts, the growing acceptance of abstract and non-representational art reinforced the sense that narrative and mimetic forms were outmoded and redundant. Every picture tells a story (or a thousand, depending on the authority cited) but the abstractions of the Suprematist Kasimir Malevich seemingly precluded the need for story. Malevich’s “Black Square” (1915) and “Suprematist Composition: White on White” (1918) aggressively proclaimed the death of narrative (though not, interestingly, of meaning, although the meanings proclaimed by Suprematist artists would be far removed from those held by mainstream society). Celebrants of modern art claim it is by escaping “the vulgarism of popular storytelling” and subject matter (i.e. non-representation) that arts such as painting became “serious, intellectually significant”.

Modernist art attempts to exclude the ethical from the artistic with its concentration on pure sensory surface and immediate intensity, precluding the kind of dialogue narrative art entails. The ideal of aestheticism, as championed by artists such as Kandinsky and Mondrian, “denies the authority of any political or economic or religious or philosophical system to shape art’s methods or purposes”. This divesting of the aesthetic from the ethical has led to a “liberation” of art which can have both positive and negative consequences: there is often a strange sense of detachment which the viewing of certain kinds of contemporary art seems to require, in which the mind is forced to both confront sights of ethical horror and brutality, yet simultaneously detach oneself from the emotions elicited to regard the piece as abstract art. Sheri S. Tepper complains of something similar in her strident critique of “horror” writers in Beauty, which echoes Kroeber’s warning that this kind of

99 Ibid., 35.
liberation “may contribute to a de-moralized society in which the most inhuman brutalities become not only imaginable but even ignorable”.100

The anti-modernism of Tolkien’s fantasy should be viewed in this context, as a rejection of the “amoral” quality that the social and ethical detachment of the Kantian aesthetic underlying modernist art demands. Modernism itself deliberately rejected many of the Romantic and humanistic conceptions of nature and humanity, entailing a “removal of the old metaphysics of Nature – a metaphysic of ‘depth’, profundity, ‘unseen presences’,” so that “the surfaces of things can come into their own again, and be seen truly for what they are, ‘without false glamour’”.101 Brian Wicker’s critique of writer Alain Robbe-Grillet highlights some of the problems with abstract modernist art of this sort – that it threatens to become one-dimensional, and with its sole attention to the superficial, the surface present, it becomes opaque to any interpretation and defies even the ordinary logic of reality.102 In a world of mere objects there can be no morality, as the “causal nexus linking one thing with another”, what we call narrative, is taken away (precluded, excluded). Asking the “Why” question or seeking explanations for phenomena is rendered completely irrelevant, as such art (art for art’s sake) is designed to make questioning and answering redundant. This supposed freedom from “things”, “ideology” and “meaning”, which is the stated aim of such aesthetic exercises, also however leads logically to amorality, and freedom from the tyranny of morality may become another type of bondage. For Robbe-Grillet, this kind of liberation is that which allows one to see reality for “eternally what it is, simply there, directionless and meaningless”, a vision of the modern world as a hell “of a squalid and unheroic kind, expressing effectively and depressingly what it is like to live alone, to be alone, to move about in

100 Ibid.
102 Ibid., 186.
a world which leaves you alone, confronting you with its own meaninglessness”, says Wicker.\(^{103}\)

The final ramifications of modernist “liberation” turns out to be “almost an apologia for one-dimensional industrial man’s exploitation of the environment for his own squalid ends” where man, in Robbe-Grillet’s own words, “agrees to use it [the world] for material ends; a utensil; as such, never has depth, a utensil is merely matter and form – and destination”. Nature in this view has no value outside of its utility. Wicker’s criticism is that “in dividing man from objects, [modernism] has failed to take account of the fact that... man is both an object and a subject”\(^{104}\), a philosophy that hinges entirely on a conception of man as important only as abstract consciousness, resulting in a complete denial of the body (Cogito ergo sum taken to its extreme and ultimately illogical conclusion). Genre fantasy’s adherence to the “spiritual” program of the Romantic tradition, with its sublime re-sacralisation of the world can thus be regarded as part of a greater societal quest for the restoration of meaning and morality to the modern social world. Part 2 of this thesis will consider in more detail the role of fantasy as an implicitly moral, “religious” literature, dealing with ultimate concerns, social responsibility and ethical behaviour of the individual.

It is clear that modern fantasy is a commercial industry with a sizeable market, with products including not only written texts, but also art and cinema, which have been created by and in turn generated a wide network of social phenomena, including New Age religions and recreational groups. At its centre is an image of the Middle Ages constructed primarily as a reaction to, and critique of, late-capitalist Western society. Commercial fantasy, with its heavy reliance on an image of the medieval, constitutes “a cultural response to the post-modern moment that has been ignored or

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 190.

\(^{104}\) Ibid.
downgraded, not merely by canonical critics, but by constructors of postmodernism and proponents of non-canonical literature like science fiction. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the devaluation of fantasy stems partially from methodological issues to do with the perception and construction of popular genre fictions. The reconceptualisation of genre as a field of cultural production, linked to historical and social conditions of production and reception acknowledges that genres have an active social role in generating meaning, functioning as living components within the construction of socio-historical reality, rather than simply as reflections of it. Genres are "determining factors, not simply determined ones".

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106 Neale, Genre, 16.
Part 2

The Legacy of Romanticism
Chapter 5

Romantic medievalism

The dubitations of a Bostonian spinster may be made as interesting, by one genius, as a fight between a crocodile and a catawumpus, by another genius... But if there is to be no modus vivendi, if the battle between the crocodile of Realism and the catawumpus of Romance is to be fought out to the bitter end – why, in that Ragnarok, I am on the side of the catawumpus.

Andrew Lang, “Realism and Romance” (1887)

5.1 Introduction

Part 2 of this thesis examines the cultural and ideological legacy of Romanticism as it is expressed in the genre of modern fantasy. I will investigate the connections between modern fantasy, romance and medievalism, arguing that the dominant medievalist imagery of archetypal fantasy is linked historically and politically to an ongoing cultural critique of the rationalistic and mechanistic values of modernity, conceptualised as a “Romantic worldview”. Having discussed the critical construction of genre fantasy by the dominant discourses of twentieth-century modernist literary criticism in Part 1, I will now turn to the Romantic tradition’s defence of fantastic literature as it arose in the late eighteenth century, through a radical re-evaluation of medieval romances, in which fantasy functions strongly.

The battle between “the crocodile of Realism” and the “catawumpus of Romance” that Andrew Lang refers to in 1887, represents the final zenith of a British tradition valorising the legitimacy of romance and fantasy which, during the course of the next couple of decades, would be decisively won by the institutionalisation of high modernist

1 Andrew Lang, “Realism and Romance,” Contemporary Review 52 (1887), 683–93.
discourses favouring the realistic novel.² This chapter therefore examines the ascendance of Romantic discourses from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, which championed the positive force of romance as an integral part of the new aesthetic of the “sublime”. The “battle” between realism and romance, was the product of a century of intellectual and artistic ferment that saw a radical re-evaluation of the hitherto neglected and despised vernacular romance narratives of the Middle Ages; particularly those of the “Gothic” North, Scandinavia and Iceland, which were contrasted to classical and contemporary models of the poetics of “reason”. Old Icelandic or Gothic texts were considered prime examples of the primitive sublime in ancient poetry, and became so popular during the course of the nineteenth century that Lang could casually allude to the cataclysmic “Ragnarok” from the medieval Norse Eddas, as a gesture to the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, the authoritative antiquity of romance as opposed to the brash modernity of realism. The revolutionary social, intellectual and economic changes taking place in the late eighteenth century, thus initiated an ongoing discourse of “medievalism” as a focus for political and ideological discourses that continue to play out dualities between past and present, medieval and modern, romance and realism, Nature and Reason, to this very day.

My approach in Part 2 is informed by the outlook and methodology of the “new cultural history” that arose in the mid-late 1990s, informed by a more functional, ideologically-oriented view of historical research. History is no longer regarded as a process of uncovering certain immutable truths or objective facts about the past. Instead, the focus is upon the interpretative function of the discipline of history, analysing the uses of the past, and considering how the past is constantly reinterpreted.

² The relationship between the late nineteenth century revival of romance, realism, and the discourses of modernism is discussed by Nicholas Daly, Modernism, Romance and the Fin De Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
in ways that render it relevant to the present, and to certain social groups. Some of the fundamental questions asked by this "new cultural history" are:

What is the relationship between a cultural artefact (novel, poem, painting, essay, performance, building) and its world; how does this thing reflect that world, and how may the thing have transformed it? This necessitates a close reading of both text and context as crucial, with context read as a type of text.\(^3\)

The relationship between the cultural artefact, genre fantasy, and its world, is embedded within the concept of genre as a field of social relations outlined in Part I. There I established the immediate critical and generic contexts of modern fantasy, examining how fantasy has been constructed as "the Other" to the model of Enlightenment "Reason" governing modernist literary discourse, which has led to a generally devalued perception of fantasy as a puerile, commercialized form of romance. Part 2 of this thesis therefore examines in more detail the social, cultural and historical contexts of fantasy, proposing that fantasy's intimate relationship with the discourses of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism and medievalism, reflect the values and ideologies at work in the pre-generic historical background of the genre, and continue to have an effect on the role and function of fantasy today.

By looking at the pre-generic discourses of romance in the Romantic era, the relationship and relevance of the modern generic form to social and cultural history, and its complex relationship to the ideologies of modernism and the conditions of modernity, become clear. I argue that the ambivalence lying at the heart of modern "primitivist" conceptions of the Middle Ages enabled medievalist discourses to express a broad range of Romantic ideologies that have been deployed in the service of many different political stances and values, both radical and conservative; championing the

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aesthetic theories of the sublime, and promoting new forms of romance fiction in the
guise of the Gothic novel. Alice Chandler concurs, that medievalism did not support
only one ideology, as is often assumed, but was deeply polarized: in England, the
authority of the Middle Ages was used to validate both freedom and order, liberalism
and conservatism⁴, such as the Edmund Burke’s counter-revolutionary conservatism,
contrasted with Shelley’s radical pro-revolutionary stance regarding the French
Revolution.⁵ Chapters 5 and 6 establish that, far from being only, or merely, an
expression of conservatism or wistful nostalgia, fantastic medievalism is an inheritance
and continuation of eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantic anti-modernism,
which utilized the image of the Middle Ages as the Other to modernity in “a complex
blend of accommodation and protest” foundational to an understanding of the
“revolutionary” aspects of Romanticism.⁶

This chapter argues that the currently dominant form of commercial genre fantasy not
only follows the model of heroic romance established by J. R. R. Tolkien, but is also a
legacy of the Romantic revival of medieval vernacular literatures, which formed part of a
quest for alternatives to the worldview of Enlightenment neo-classicism. Literary
fairytales, Gothic tales and romances that we now recognize as precursors to or
influences on modern genre fantasy, appeared in the late eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries, and were specifically associated with Romantic discourses of the sublime and
the imagination.⁷ The appearance of these texts coincided with a renewed interest in
the “primitive” medieval roots of newly industrialized western society, namely the oral


folk traditions and romance narratives of the "Gothic" North. Through the discourses of eighteenth-century primitivism, these texts became aligned with the political sphere of Nature, the Other to dominant discourses of Enlightenment Reason, and were regarded as authentic expressions of "the natural" and "the sublime" by Romantic theorists. I demonstrate how fantasy is historically and culturally linked to rise of Romanticism and the revival of medieval romance forms through the framework of "medievalism", understood as the ideologically motivated re-visioning and use of the European medieval past in order to construct, critique, and comment on contemporary society.

5.2 Othering the Middle Ages: Modernity and the Rise of Medievalism
Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Britain and Europe witnessed a general revival of interest in the Middle Ages – its literature, architecture, political and social structures – as a source of literary inspiration, an object of academic enquiry and as a model for social change. Medievalism developed partly as a response to the great historic changes, and social and economic upheavals surrounding the French and Industrial Revolutions, but it was also an integral component of the radical intellectual and emotional "shift of consciousness" characteristic of the "Romantic Revolution" of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In general, the "Romantic" view that developed during this period promoted an idealized image of the Middle Ages as a

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8 Parts of this chapter have been adapted from Kim Selling, "Medievalism and Modern Fantasy: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy Fiction" (Unpublished Honours thesis, The University of Sydney, 1997).
9 Jacques Barzun, Classic, Romantic and Modern (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961). 98, dates European Romanticism from the period 1780-1830, and the period prior to 1790 is designated "Pre-Romantic". See also Alice Chandler, A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 7. However, Löwy and Sayre argue that this discreet periodisation or historical compartmentalisation of Romanticism obscures its structure as an ongoing worldview or "collective mental structure" motivated by anti-modernism and anti-capitalism, and stretching over the entire modern period from the late eighteenth century to the present day. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 13ff.
kind of mythical, primitivist “Golden Age” of harmony, simplicity, joy, order, faith and creativity, which was contrasted to the tumult and squalor of the modern world. This Romantic construction of the Middle Ages as iconic Other is one of the lasting myths of modernity, which has retained its deep symbolic and cultural value as a medium for social critique to this day.

Modern fantasy participates in an on-going discourse that Western modernity conducts with its own historical roots and past, particularly the European Middle Ages, in a phenomenon scholars today identify as *medievalism*. Medievalism denotes a set of attitudes, perceptions, interpretations, beliefs and uses of the medieval past in both academic and popular discourses. Medievalism is, in short, “the survival, revival, or recreation of the Middle Ages” especially as it manifests itself in recreating aspects of the medieval world, a practice popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. Some examples of British Romantic medievalism include the predilection for Gothic architecture, such as Horace Walpole’s medieval folly at Strawberry Hill, A. W. N. Pugin’s Gothic-style Houses of Parliament, and George Gilbert Scott’s “restorations” of the medieval parish churches and cathedrals. Re-enactments of medieval life were particularly popular with the British nobility, who staged elaborate recreations of medieval courtly life, including dressing in medieval costume and jousting, like at the famous Eglinton Tournament of the late 1830s when the Victorian zeal for “chivalry” was at its peak. Medieval courtly love and the ideals of chivalry were especially

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10 Medievalism is also a scholarly discipline that seeks to investigate the ways in which the medieval past has been interpreted, and the historical, socio-cultural and political reasons underlying particular views and discourses about the Middle Ages. See Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee & Stephen G. Nichols, ed. *The New Medievalism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991)


13 Mancoff describes the huge anticipation that heralded the Earl of Eglinton’s medieval Tournament spectacle in the summer of 1839, which ended in rather ignominiously when a torrential storm and lack
important to Victorian ideals of virtuous masculinity and femininity, and the rage for Arthurian legend was popularized by Victoria's Poet Laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson.\textsuperscript{14}

There was a strong political dimension to Romantic medievalism, ranging from the conservative paternalism of Thomas Carlyle and the "Young England" Catholic neofeudalist revival movement\textsuperscript{15}, and the Christian fantasies of Charles Kingsley and George MacDonald, to the socialist utopian models of John Ruskin and William Morris. It is clear that medievalism is employed in the discourses of Romantic anti-modernism, valorising the past and criticising the present through the medium of the historical Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{16} It is important, however, to note that these discourses are ideologically constructed, and that the Middle Ages privileged and promoted is itself a politicised vision. Chandler concurs that medievalism in general "embodies a fluctuating dynamic between the actualities of medieval history and the requirements of contemporary ideology".\textsuperscript{17} I argue that this fluctuating dynamic is one of the core components lying at the foundation of modern fantasy, providing links to fantasy's romantic anti-modernism and its fundamentally politicized character, which has been


\textsuperscript{15} The short-lived Young England party was formed from radical young Tories from the privileged gentry, who sought (with the backing of Carlyle's rhetoric) to revive the concept of noblesse oblige ("the feudal belief that privileged status implies social obligation") and apply it to a paternalistic model of the welfare state that re-established the power of the aristocracy. See Mancoff, \textit{The Return of King Arthur}, 38-9.

\textsuperscript{16} As articulated by Löwy and Sayre, \textit{Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity}.

\textsuperscript{17} Chandler, "Carlyle and the Medievalism of the North," 190.
overlooked by the modernist dismissal of romance and medievalism as unreflective nostalgia.\textsuperscript{18}

The changed estimate of the Middle Ages was a reaction to the two dominant currents of the eighteenth century, rapid and dislocating industrialization (which depopulated rural areas and resulted in teeming conurbations), and the rational philosophy of the Enlightenment, with its de-emphasising of religion, emotion and spontaneity in favour of secularism, cognition and utilitarianism. The rise of Romantic medievalism in this period should be viewed in relation to the social, economic, and intellectual forces and technological changes of the late 1700s, which effected the transformation of “traditional” into “modern” Western society. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the crucible that forged the modern Western world as we know it, along with its key ideological conceptions: modernity and modernism.

The modern world was founded upon the triumph of the Machine through the social transformation of the Industrial Revolution, which slowly changed patterns of production and consumption, and reorganised economic and social power in the West, beginning with Britain.\textsuperscript{19} The gradual shift to increasingly mechanized, large-scale production in industries such as textiles and engineering, the growth of factories, urbanisation and the depopulation of the countryside, and the onset of the steam engine, provided visible evidence of the great changes being wrought in Western culture at the time. The French Revolution impacted substantially on the political and social contexts of the time, leading to an increase in socialist and democratic ideas and the gradual diminishment of the power of monarchical systems of government. Taken together, the industrial, social and scientific revolutions stimulated and accompanied the

\textsuperscript{18} To be discussed in Chapter 6 Romantic Anti-modernism.

huge social and economic changes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, transforming Western Europe from a rural-agrarian to a modern industrialized society.

The "Age of the Machine" was also accompanied by the growing acceptance of a mechanistic, empiricist and rationalist view of the universe. Beginning with the scientific and intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the educated classes of Europe increasingly elevated rationalist and empiricist epistemologies as "secular solutions to the world's woes". The Enlightenment proclamation of the autonomy of reason based on empirical observations as the only reliable view of reality, categorically rejected the authority of religion and revelation. As Meredith Veldman states, people progressively embraced "a this-worldly focus that replaced divine authority with human intellect. The nonmaterial realms of existence and meta-rational modes of understanding were dismissed as irrelevant or attacked as illusory". The demise of theological certainties heralded the emergence of the modern subject as constructed by Enlightenment Reason, heralding a shift from a predominantly religious worldview to one grounded in more individual subjectivity.

The triumph of the mechanistic view of reality however, was challenged by the development of the Romantic movement, which constituted an influential minority protest articulated in new forms of poetry, fiction, the visual arts, architectural, economic and political reform. Enlightenment philosophies of Reason have themselves been characterised as reactionary, excluding all forms of faith and superstition out of fear.

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21 Veldman, Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain, 10.
of succumbing to the excesses of religious persecution in previous centuries. The extremism of Enlightenment rationalism was objected to by Romantic thinkers such as Rousseau, Hamann, Goethe, Herder and Burke, who saw the enlargement of scientific systems of thought in every area of human experience as stifling and distorting, leading to "the erection of monstrous bureaucratic machines" that ignored individual difference in favour of utilitarianism uniform laws, scientism and mechanism at the expense of non-quantifiable spiritual experience. This led to the rise of holistic, organic metaphors of the world conceived of as a living organism, replacing the mechanistic intellectual model of the world as deterministic clockwork machine.

In the quest for alternatives to the dominance of Western Reason in the new modernist self-image, the early Romantics turned to discourses that had been Othered and excluded from the ideologies of the modern: Nature and the medieval past, re-invigorated with a sense of the numinous and the spiritual. In the Romantic view, the sublime is viewed as a quasi-religious or spiritual experience of transcendence, which connotes a move away from rational consciousness or analytical apprehension to something more experiential, immediate or unmediated. The pre-modern Middle Ages thus became constructed as an "age of faith", whose previously despised religiosity and superstition became the means to combat the exclusionary practices of Enlightenment Reason and the restrictions it was perceived to impose on the totality of human experience. The Romantic fascination with the "fantastic" romances of the medieval period was therefore in part due to the association of romance with religion and

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superstition, which was transformed by the theory of the sublime into an aestheticized, literary version of religious experience.²⁶

It is important to note however, that Romanticism itself was a product of the newly secularised worldview of the Enlightenment and the social conditions of modernity. Though Romanticism does manifest counter-Enlightenment philosophies, rejecting the principles of universality, objectivity and rationality for a more intuitive, spiritual outlook and the organicism of social life, this is only one aspect of Romantic thought, and should not be thought of solely in terms of a neat opposition, as this potentially occludes the effect of prevailing social conditions, especially the impact of industrialisation. Romanticism thus projects a distinctly “modern” mentality which can be characterised as “modern anti-modernism”: as Löwy and Sayre put it, “the Romantic view constitutes modernity’s self-criticism”.²⁷ “Modernity” was constructed as beginning with the Renaissance, and thus consciously separated from the preceding Middle Ages, which were defined categorically as “pre-modern” and hence lacking regulation and order. As Bruno Latour states, “The adjective ‘modern’ designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word ‘modern’, ‘modernization’, or ‘modernity’ appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past”, an opposition which usually employs dualistic power relations favouring modern over pre-modern.²⁸

Therefore, the view of Romanticism I subscribe to is Romanticism as Weltanschauung, a structuring “worldview” representing a critique of the conditions of modernity in the name of values and ideals drawn from the pre-modern past, generally focussing on an

²⁶ Siebers, The Romantic Fantastic. 21ff.
²⁷ Löwy and Sayre, Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity, 21.
image of the Middle Ages as the Other to modernity.\textsuperscript{29} The central element which unites the diverse manifestations of Romantic thought from the late eighteenth century to today is the structural opposition between the value systems of Romanticism, generally associated with the sphere of Nature, and the value systems of modernity, constructed within the sphere of Reason. "Modernity" in this sense refers to the social conditions and intellectual positions that became hegemonic in the West in the latter part of the eighteenth century with the rise of industrial capitalism: rationalization, bureaucratisation, secularization, urbanisation, reification, characterised by a general "disenchantedment" (Entzauberung) of the world with the dominance of instrumental rationality and mechanistic models of perception.\textsuperscript{30}

As the ideals of Enlightenment Reason hardened and began to be critically scrutinized by intellectuals like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the distorting influences of excessive "civilization", and rationalisation at the expense of emotion led to a call to "return to nature" and the simplicity of primitive societies.\textsuperscript{31} Rousseau's writings had a profound influence on the Sturm und Drang movement in Germany, with his denunciation of the arbitrary artificiality of modern civilisation and his idealisation of the primitive freedom and spontaneity of more primitive societies.\textsuperscript{32} The long association of medievalism as a type of nostalgic, popular primitivism thus began with the formation of the Romantic worldview.\textsuperscript{33} Margaret Omberg considers the second half of the eighteenth century as characterised by a type of "cultural Primitivism", which springs from the "desire for a simple life, usually born of dissatisfaction or even disgust with an over-sophisticated,

\textsuperscript{29} Löwy and Sayre, \textit{Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity}, 17-8.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 18-9.
\textsuperscript{33} Brian Stock, "The Middle Ages as Subject and Object: Romantic Attitudes and Academic Medievalism," \textit{New Literary History} 5:3 (1974), 537.
urban society”. This desire for the “simple life” was not a new sentiment, having been expressed as early as the first century AD by the Roman historian Tacitus, who contrasted the virile “noble savages” of Celtic and Germanic society with the corruption and effeminacy of the courts of Tiberius and Caligula.

With the flowering of Romantic thought in the late eighteenth century, the “primitive” aspects of “Gothic” medievalism were suddenly re-evaluated positively, and came to connote liberty, simplicity, spontaneous community, virility and authenticity of lifestyle. The supposedly more “natural” emotion, vigour and spirituality of medieval peoples, particularly as expressed in the poetry and vernacular romances of the “Gothic” Germanic and Scandinavian North, gave voice and shape to the dissatisfaction felt by many intellectuals with the conditions of early capitalism and industrialism, and the Middle Ages were held up as a yardstick against which modernity was found wanting. The “antimodern” impetus behind this image of the Middle Ages as a “Golden Age” persists today, and is exploited vigorously in the rhetoric of the fantastic.

The Romantic critique of modernity has been characterised as being bound up with an experience of loss and alienation, where the past (either mythical, like the Garden of Eden, or historical, like the Middle Ages) becomes idealised as possessing values and

35 Tacitus, in the Germania, concludes that though the lives of many of the German (Gothic) tribes are “astonishingly savage and disgustingly poor”, they “count their lot happier than that of others who groan over field and other men’s fortunes in the hope of profit and the fear of loss. Unafraid of anything that man or god can do to them, they have reached a state that few human beings can attain: for these men are so well content that they do not even need to pray for anything”. Similarly in the Agricola, Tacitus describes that the conquered Britons under Roman rule were “gradually led into the demoralizing temptations of arcades, baths, and sumptuous banquets. The unsuspecting Britons spoke of such novelties as ‘civilisation’, when in fact they were only a feature of their enslavement”. Tacitus, The Agricola and the Germania, trans. H. Mattingly (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Classics, 1948), 141 & 73.
characteristics lost from the modern world. The construction of the medieval as a form of primitivism could not have existed without the assumptions and values of modernism, as the dualistic construction of the past is defined in relation to its difference from the present. As Barkan mentions, "Primitivism has always involved contested ideological forces... the process seems to have generated a set of responses inseparable from what we have come to call modernism".37 Modernism, the dominant cultural ideology of the social condition of modernity, constructed itself through a series of dualistic oppositions that involved the simultaneous construction of a set of defining, subordinate Others: the representations of pre-modernity and primitivism, whose reality depends on but is subordinated to, the dominant discourses of modernity. Löwy and Sayre argue that the past is always idealised in the operations of Romanticism in counterpoint to the particular lack perceived in contemporary society that Romantic critics wish to address:

The Romantic vision selects a moment from the actual past in which the harmful characteristics of modernity did not yet exist and in which the human values that have been since stifled by modernity were still operative; that the moment is then transformed into a utopia, shaped as the embodiment of Romantic aspirations.38

The utopian "Golden Age" selected by eighteenth century Romanticism that I will discuss here, is the invocation of the medieval "Gothic" as the image of sublime anti-modernism par excellence. This image of the medieval Gothic as Other is still a powerful fixture in contemporary western thought against which many discourses of modernity define and identify themselves, highlighting the continued relevance of this construction to dualistic oppositions such as past/present, reason/emotion, culture/nature, modern/primitive (pre-modern).

38 Löwy and Sayre, Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity, 22.
5.3 The Sublime and the Gothic origins of Romance

The stereotypical images of the Middle Ages, such as chivalrous knights, harp-playing Celtic bards and horn-helmed bloodthirsty Vikings that still abound in popular culture today, sprang out of a new evaluation of the medieval “Gothic” during the second half of the eighteenth century.39 “Gothic”, like “Romantic” is a vague and indeterminate expression that has metamorphosed in meaning and usage over time. It began as a term to denote a single Germanic tribe in Late Antiquity, but by the eighteenth century, “Gothic” had stretched to encompass not only the primitive Germanic peoples and cultures of Northern Europe, but also almost everything “medieval” – that is, non-classical, including architecture, art and literature from the Middle Ages – becoming through such associations synonymous with the word “romantic” itself.40 This section traces the connections between Gothic, medieval, Romantic, and romance literature that developed in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, addressing the neglected historical and cultural background of modern fantasy, demonstrating its strong association with medievalism and Romanticism.

From its origins in the seventeenth century, the term “romantic” was clearly associated with medieval romance narratives, the adjective being coined, according to David Duff, in the 1650s in order to distinguish between the “truth of nature” and the “falsehood of romance”.41 “Romantic” and “romance” were thus originally pejorative terms connoting anything “unnatural”, “unreal”, or “marvellous”, associated with the “fantastic” and the “sentimental”. By the end of the eighteenth century, medieval romances had been discredited by two hundred years of hostile criticism, condemned by the Puritans on

moral and religious grounds, and dismissed by the Enlightenment as embodiments of supernaturalism and magic, regarded as belonging to the unenlightened Dark Ages of primitive superstition. Enlightenment Reason thus constructed romance as the irrational, superstitious Other to literatures that followed classical models; and “romantic” connoted “a language of the absurd”, aligned with other elements associated with the excluded sphere of Nature such as femininity, emotion, spirituality, and the medieval.

However, in the middle of the eighteenth century, romances began to be viewed more sympathetically as alternatives to the value systems of early modern rationalism were sought. What changed in the course of the 1700s was the literary estimate of work previously judged as “barbaric” but which was now thought to demonstrate evidence of the unchecked and unfettered imagination and emotion of “uncultivated” peoples untainted by the stultifying analytical rationality of modern life. Ancient poetry and romances that had been despised by Enlightenment critics were now (based a reversal of the Reason/Nature dualism) deemed to possess a “sublime” quality: passionate, exciting and disturbing, involving both affect and experience which could transport people out of the ordinary, involving a more immediate, instinctive “gut reaction” unmediated by rational cognition.

The idea of the sublime originated with Greek critic Longinus, but did not give rise to a radically new aesthetic until it was taken up by Edmund Burke in the mid-eighteenth century and developed later by Kant. Burke’s influential treatise, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757) formed

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42 Ibid.
43 Ashfield and De Bolla, eds., The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory, 1-16.
the kernel of theories of the aesthetic sublime. In the section entitled “On how words influence the passions,” Burke asserts that:

'The languages of most unpolished people have a great force and energy of expression; and this is but natural. Uncultivated people are but ordinary observers of things, and not critical in distinguishing them; but, for that reason, they admire more, and are more affected with what they see, and therefore express themselves in a warmer and more passionate manner.'

Burke’s primitivist notion that “uncultivated” or primitive people were “not critical”, or less rational than “polished” moderns, was founded upon eighteenth century beliefs concerning social evolution. Society was thought to develop in the same manner as human beings, moving in a natural progression from childhood to adulthood in a chronological evolution of increasing sophistication and civilization. This meant that earlier societies were regarded as being formed in the infancy of civilization, and to their people were attributed child-like thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Early humans in primitive societies were thought to be closer to nature and thus more emotional, impulsive, imaginative, and open to experience, than the fully developed, mature sophistication of contemporary “civilized” people. Margaret Clunies Ross argues that:

Most eighteenth-century people were confident that the society in which they lived was in almost every respect superior to societies of the past and that those former societies’ intellectual achievements were rude and primitive in comparison with their own. They saw themselves as fundamentally different from and superior in achievement to human societies of the past, yet they came to believe that, in their own sophistication and refinement, they had lost contact with some of the more spontaneous and powerful human states of consciousness and expression that they believed characterised past societies.

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This reflected the idea that "rationality" or reason was reserved for the fully adult human, whereas undeveloped humans (primitives, children, women) were closer to the state of nature and animality. They were therefore less ruled by reason and at the mercy of unmediated emotions, reproducing the dualisms of reason/emotion, culture/nature and the larger political categories of Reason/Nature. Primitive societies and peoples were thus viewed as living in a natural, Edenic state from which modern humans had fallen, but which they had also paradoxically surpassed, and become civilised and more rational.

Poetry was regarded by the leading scholars of the time as the earliest form of human intellectual creation, more spontaneous and less mediated by the faculty of "reason", so that it was capable of demonstrating "the workings of the human mind in its almost original state of nature". Ancient poetry was thus thought to be the key to interpreting past societies, because it was believed that poetry was a first-hand, unmediated record of human expression and emotion and therefore the most authentic source for recording history at the time of composition. It was the best preserver of "the most picturesque and expressive representations of manners" claimed Thomas Warton, and was thus able to transmit to posterity "genuine delineations of life in its simplest stages". This quotation from leading literary critic Hugh Blair epitomises the primitivism and anti-rationalism, combined with a sense of the "picturesque" qualities of the natural world that constituted the aesthetic of the "sublime":

In the infancy of societies, men live scattered and dispersed, in the midst of solitary rural scenes, where the beauties of nature are their chief

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48 The "wild Indians" of North America were the most frequently mentioned "contemporary primitives" in the eighteenth century and to their oral literatures was extended qualities of the sublime found in ancient European poetry. But on the whole, as Clunies Ross states, "literary theorists and authorities of the polite world like Samuel Johnson regarded oral literatures as inferior to literate ones, a prejudice among literates that has persisted into the late twentieth century". Ibid., 34-6.

49 Ibid., 24.
entertainment. ...Their passions have nothing to restrain them: their imagination has nothing to check it. ...As their feelings are strong, so their language, of itself, assumes a poetical turn. Prone to exaggerate, they describe every thing in the strongest colours; which of course renders their speech picturesque and figurative. ... Hence, poetry, which is the child of imagination, is frequently most glowing and animated in the first stages of society.\textsuperscript{50}

Medieval literature thus came to be regarded as the creation of simple, uncorrupted, child-like people living closer to nature, and its residual orality lent it an air of fresh spontaneity and naïveté connoting innocence and childhood.\textsuperscript{51} The "primitive" aspects of medieval society and literature, which had been regarded by Renaissance and Enlightenment society as uncivilized and barbaric, were now valorised as expressions of a simpler, more emotionally intense society, without the artifices and sterility of "rational" civilisation.

Largely as a result of the efforts of literary historians like Paul-Henri Mallet, Thomas Percy and Thomas Warton in the 1750s–70s, "Gothic" became interchangeable with "romantic" as a term of praise for literatures demonstrating the qualities of passion, superstition, fantasy and the sublime, reversing the Enlightenment polarity of medieval romance as childish, superstitious nonsense. The revival of "Gothic" romances was a systematic reinterpretation of old material adapted and often distorted to fit the values and needs of contemporary society. This resulted in a new evaluation of "barbaric" texts from Northern Europe as examples of the "sublime", which meant that they possessed "shattering powers of a special and mysterious kind, derived from nature and from wild illiterate bards, not from the cultivated arts of educated poets".\textsuperscript{52}

“Gothic” or Old Norse poetry, regarded as the epitome of medieval Scandinavian culture, was brought into the public eye in the mid-eighteenth century, in a social, political and intellectual context that had a vested interest in viewing ancient European poetry as a form of “reaffirmation” of cultural and national identity separate and distinct from the overweening shadow of classical Greece and Rome. This Romantic impetus was fed by a latent need in eighteenth-century society to reassert itself in terms of a new symbolic order at a time when it was felt that the Enlightenment neo-classical ideal had played itself out. This was connected to the rise of European nationalism and a desire to seek greatness in the “native” western European past not dominated by Classical models, which involved increased interest in and attention on a model of Northern and Celtic literatures. The strong medievalist strand in Romantic thought can thus also be seen as partly driven by a societal quest for origins – the creation of a national self-consciousness and self-assertion fuelled by patriotism and emergent nationalism.

Historically, this “anti-classical” sentiment was inspired in large part by the underlying current of hostility in Britain towards France, due to the Napoleonic wars and the aftermath of the French Revolution. France’s connections with Rome and Latinity were strong: Catholicism, its Latin-derived language, and Napoleon’s claim that France was the rightful heir to the Holy Roman Empire all played a role in the eighteenth century French neo-classical revival. England’s political opposition to France led to a desire to promote Britain’s non-Latinate, Teutonic heritage. The burgeoning of British nationalism also provided ideological reinforcement to the quest for distinctly “Germanic” institutions, such as Protestantism, the English constitution, and the

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vigorous spirit of the "Teutonic" peoples embodying the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the British Isles.\textsuperscript{55}

It had been argued in the seventeenth century that the "free spirit" of the Gothic peoples of Northern Europe was institutionalized in their "democratic" governmental structure, from which the English parliamentary constitution was thought to have originated, and that these freedom-loving and enlightened institutions had evolved in England despite the heavy "yoke of Rome" and successive waves of invasion.\textsuperscript{56} This opposition between Gothic freedom and Roman tyranny was further capitalised upon during the eighteenth century in part by Romantic nationalistic self-interest. In the quest for a new mythos scholars and artists turned to the hitherto neglected texts of "Gothic" origin: that is, texts from medieval Iceland, Scandinavia and Britain.

Philosophical justification for this rhetoric of the Northern Gothic was provided by the "climatic" theories of the French Enlightenment philosopher Baron de Montesquieu, who legitimated further inquiry into medieval vernacular literature by tracing "all manifestations of freedom in Europe back to Scandinavian roots."\textsuperscript{57} Montesquieu's publication in 1748 of \textit{The Spirit of the Laws} (\textit{L'Esprit des Lois}) was the \textit{locus classicus} of the idea that the Northern nations were the source of European liberty.\textsuperscript{58} Montesquieu provided a "scientific" explanation for the myth of Gothic freedom by associating climate with character; a kind of psycho-biological model reminiscent of the classical doctrine of cardinal humours. The idea was that cold dampens passions and


\textsuperscript{56} The positive association of liberty with "the Gothic" as opposed to the tyranny of Rome, arising out of the constitutional debates of the seventeenth century are discussed by Samuel Kliger, "The 'Goths' in England," esp. pp.107, 112.


\textsuperscript{58} Omberg, \textit{Scandinavian Themes in English Poetry}, 53.
encourages vitality, whereas heat multiplies the passions and the vices. The icy northern climate therefore supposedly stimulated the virtue and fierce vigour of the Germanic peoples, whilst the sultry heat of the southern Mediterranean encouraged the decadence, vice, corruption and lethargy of the Romans. Through its air of scientific rationalism and objectivity, this theory lent credence to contemporary attempts to assert the superiority of the North in all fields of human endeavour.

French historian Paul-Henri Mallet was one of Montesquieu’s disciples, and the principle transmitter of his ideas to “the man of good taste” through his *Introduction to the History of Denmark* (1755-56) and *Edda: Documents of the Mythology and Poetry of the Ancient Scandinavians* (1781). Mallet provided intellectual justification for promoting Northern over Southern European artistic history (which had for so long been the benchmark of European civilization) by presenting Norse poetry as primary examples of the Gothic “sublime”. Mallet was the first critic to apply this new aesthetic to Old Norse (Icelandic) poetry, and make it accessible for the first time to the European general reading public. He presented Norse poetry as an exciting alternative to classical tradition through a radical re-reading of the Norse *Eddas* as examples of Gothic sublimity, masculinity, and virtue, which contrasted to the identification of the Roman Empire with decadence, corruption and slavishness, greatly adding to the growing enthusiasm for Germanic poetry. Drawing on Tacitus, Mallet also

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60 See Clunies Ross, *The Norse Muse in Britain*, Ch.1, who highlights the vested interests present in Mallet’s texts, given that he was engaged by Danish King to write a eulogistic history of Denmark in French.
62 The widespread currency of these rather peculiar and obviously ideologically motivated notions is aptly illustrated by none other than Coleridge, who captured this popular view in his *Historical Sketch of the Manners and Religion of the ancient Germans* (1796), stating that “The dark forests of Germany were inhabited by... a free nation, fierce in the enthusiasm of a warlike superstition”, who were engaged
introduced the claim that early Scandinavians were the inventors of romantic love; predating the later medieval Age of Chivalry; and thus were responsible for the literary invention of the romance in Europe.\textsuperscript{63} Mallet’s views on Gothic/Scandinavian poetry greatly inspired intellectuals such as Thomas Gray, Thomas Percy, James McPherson and Johann Gottfried Herder, who all proceeded to translate and imitate ancient poetry, presenting it as a sublime alternative to classical models of poetics\textsuperscript{64}.

Another motive for seeking out ancient English or Gothic material was the growth of interest in the varying historical experience of the human race: the disruptive influence of massive social and economic changes wrought in European society, and the input of new voyages of geographical discovery in Asia and America led to an increased appreciation of the divergent development and variety of human societies, emphasising differences of custom, belief and behaviour, and prompting a more relativistic outlook on social experience in intellectuals like Montesquieu.\textsuperscript{65} Colonial expansion brought Europeans into contact with contemporary “primitive” societies like the North American Indians, whose primarily oral culture was thought to be less subject to the artifice and cultivation of “advanced” literate civilizations, and was thus regarded as more in touch with nature and hence expressive of “sublime” passion.\textsuperscript{66} Mallet wrote that

\begin{quote}
The soaring flights of fancy may possibly more peculiarly belong to a rude and uncultivated, than to a civilized people. The great objects of nature strike more forcibly on rude imaginations. Their passions are not impaired by the constraint of laws and education.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{in a contest with the “timid slaves of Rome, accustomed to crouch beneath every libertine or tyrant that oppressed them”. In Clunies Ross, \textit{The Norse Muse in Britain, 1750–1820.} Appendix 1, 218.}
\footnote{Ibid. 45.}
\footnote{Lönnroth, “The Nordic Sublime,” 33-4.}
\footnote{Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” 2.}
\footnote{Clunies Ross, \textit{The Norse Muse in Britain}, 34-5.}
\end{footnotes}
In contrast, Mallet thought that modern poetry was “nothing more than reasoning in rhime, addressed to the understanding, but very little to the heart”. In direct opposition to the cold, intellectualization of Enlightenment Reason, the new aesthetics of the sublime valorised the irrational, emotional “flights of fancy” that primitive peoples were (supposedly) gifted with. Where previously (in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) the primary focus of research into the Middle Ages was associated with the need to settle legal and ecclesiastical disputes, there was now an interest in the social experiences of past societies, which stimulated attention to medieval vernacular romances. These types of texts were now sought after as examples of the primitive passion of the indigenous ancestors of Western Europe.

The revival of ancient poetry in the eighteenth century thus grew from several factors, stemming not only from European nationalistic desires to discover their own “indigenous” literary heritages, but also from the expansion of the literary canon by “those who considered themselves arbiters of literary taste [and] found ancient poetry to possess qualities of sublimity and simplicity and thus set about providing specimens of it for literary consumers”, who were themselves expanding to include a growing number of readers lacking a formal classical education, and notably more female readers. This meant that in order to reach this wider audience, ancient poetry had to be published in English translations in popular outlets such as magazines and anthologies, which were more readily accessible and attractive to the average reader. Previously (in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) only a small, elite group of scholars had access to ancient poetical texts, and then only to the Graeco-Roman classical corpus and other Latin texts. This changed by the mid-eighteenth century when non-classical “indigenous” or

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68 Ibid.
70 Clunies Ross, The Norse Muse in Britain, 1750-1820, 33.
"ethnic" works (Welsh, Irish, Gothic) were made available in English translation, with great stress laid upon the authenticity and genuine antiquity of these texts as rivals or co-equals to the classical tradition, and able to communicate symbolic, esoteric truths about nature and spiritual mysteries lost to over-cultivated modern people.

5.4 Popularising the Medieval North
This section considers the contribution of key figures such as Bishop Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton and James MacPherson in popularising the literature of the medieval north. Part 1 of this thesis has delineated the crucial issue of popularity and its relationship to emergent capitalist modes of production and consumption. It is no accident that the creation of a middle class reading public occurs in the eighteenth century, the times of change wrought by the Industrial revolution, as mass production of books resulted from increased mechanization and lowered costs. Conversely, the increased affluence of the middle classes meant that disposable income could be spent on reading materials. The growth of libraries and other public spaces (museums, galleries) meant that books and cultural artefacts were available to a greater public than ever previously. Both Enlightenment Reason and Romantic Nature were in agreement that the individual consciousness was the seat of thought, taste and aesthetics, and thus the process of self-improvement by means of literature and art was enthusiastically embraced by the middle and upper classes.71 Trevor Ross describes how

something happens in the eighteenth century to the way in which works of art and literature are viewed. No longer considered rhetorical or didactic instruments, they become prized as autonomous creations

71 Colin Campbell, "Romanticism and the Consumer Ethic: Intimations of a Weber-style thesis", Sociological Analysis, 44:4 (1983). Campbell states that "This emphasis upon the uniqueness of personality becomes a new and powerful doctrine and is today enthroned in the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying a vast array of cultural and social institutions. Its significance, however, is easily underestimated unless we recognise how far it causes individuals to seek within themselves for a source of inspiration and moral guidance which they would formerly have found outside", 285.
where the aesthetic value of a “work of art” became divorced from its social function. Ross posits that the epistemological shifts concerning the function and status of art arose from a change in the attitude to how literary value was perceived, “a change from production to consumption, invention to reception, writing to reading”. It might equally be argued that all of these shifts posited that the individual consciousness (as reader) was central, in contrast to earlier understandings.

Bishop Thomas Percy was arguably one of the most influential scholars of his time, greatly popularizing medieval Gothic studies amongst academic and literary circles. He translated Mallet’s History of Denmark and Edda into English, publishing them as Northern Antiquities in 1770. Percy’s indebtedness to Mallet is also shown in his publication of Five Pieces of Runic Poetry (1763), three of which were taken from Mallet’s works. However, it was chiefly the extremely successful Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765) that gained Percy the attention and admiration of scholars and poets such as Wordsworth. Percy and other medieval revivalists genuinely believed in the power of ancient poetry to “forcibly strike a feeling imagination”, to produce a “gut instinct” that appealed to the lost primitive within that longed for primary, authentic experiences unmediated by analytical reason, which was both valorized and regarded with suspicion by Romantics. In consequence, only certain kinds of ancient poetry were regarded as genuinely “natural”, like much Old Norse poetry, but other areas such as Anglo-Saxon (Old English) literature, continued to be reviled and disregarded, leading

72 Trevor Thornton Ross, The Making of the English Literary Canon: From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century (Montreal; Buffalo: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 6.
73 Ibid., 5.
to a rather narrow range of non-classical ancient poetry that was filtered down to the public as representative of the whole.  

Percy's *Reliques* was first published in 1765, and the first volume of Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* in 1774. Both of these works were ideological in orientation, presenting seamless accounts of the medieval past modified to suit tastes of present audiences, and have much in common with fictionalized accounts of the medieval past found in Gothic novels. Authors moulded the past to fit contemporary ideologies, selecting evidence from history to reify current values, creating a blend of fact and fiction. Popularizers and disseminators of this ideologically modified view of the Middle Ages such as Percy and Warton found enthusiastic audiences: Percy's *Reliques* went through four editions during his lifetime, indicating the broad appeal of this vision of the medieval. Clunies Ross states that:

Literary theorists of the age had strongly-held ideas about what ancient poetry was like, and these opinions led them to seek out poems that they thought exemplified their ideas and to ignore those that did not; their preconceptions led them to adjust their translations of medieval poems to suit contemporary views of what their contents and style should be; and thus to prefer a free over an exact translation. Although the seekers after ancient poetry claimed it was valuable because it gave a true delineation of life in its simplest stages, they had no scruples about changing what they found if it did not conform to their views of what it ought to be or if what it offered seemed to be an affront to late eighteenth-century standards of polite literary taste.  

Often direct or literal translations of old texts were deemed "uncouth" and dissatisfactory when they did not meet with eighteenth-century expectations of

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76 Classical models of poetry directed eighteenth century scholars to seek in ancient poetry those subjects they expected would accord with this template. The kinds of materials that were preferred were those following classical, male-oriented themes dealing heroic exploits and warfare, ancestral pride, civic virtue and life in heroic societies, as well as favouring certain poetic forms such as the epic and ode. See Clunies Ross, *The Norse Muse in Britain*, 39.

77 Ibid., 25.
primitive poetry.\textsuperscript{78} Old English poetry, for example, was severely neglected because of its evaluation by critics such as Thomas Warton as “little more than religious rhapsodies” tainted by Christianity, not reflecting the genuine “native images” of early English in their “pagan state” as was sought after in ancient poetry.\textsuperscript{79}

This curious blend of apologetics and enthusiasm for the genuine value of ancient poetry exemplifies the ambivalence residing at the heart of these primitivist constructions of the medieval, itself a product of the paradox of “the modern” which (as Latour says) entails at once an antagonistic opposition between past and present, Nature and Reason, that inhere relations of power resulting in “winners and losers”.\textsuperscript{80} Eighteenth and nineteenth century literati were simultaneously enthralled and repelled by the absurdity of medieval superstition, and yet undoubtedly fascinated by the fantastic and marvellous narratives they presented.\textsuperscript{81} Northern poetry, such as The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrok, was now valued by contemporary society as an exhibition of the “primitive spontaneous genius” of medieval people, particularly the Germanic ancestors of the English.\textsuperscript{82} To the eighteenth-century English gentleman, Ragnar Lodbrok thus epitomized an image of the “swashbuckling northern hero” embodying the ideal physical and moral toughness of primitive virtuous masculinity.\textsuperscript{83}

During his own lifetime Percy’s work was somewhat overshadowed in the public eye by the immense popularity of James MacPherson’s “Ossianic” poems. MacPherson’s “ancient epics” Fingal and Temora were purportedly written by the Celtic bard Ossian, and appealed directly to the public taste for “Gothic passion”. Ossian expressed “the

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{80} Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, 10.
\textsuperscript{81} Donatelli, “The Medieval Fictions of Thomas Warton and Thomas Percy”, 438.
\textsuperscript{83} Omberg, Scandinavian Themes in English Poetry, 109-23.
quintessence of the naïve northern literary genius” and provided “a literary demonstration of Montesquieu.”\textsuperscript{84} Ossian embodied and fulfilled the craving for ‘sublime’ poetry, full of images of the supernatural terror, tempestuous Nature, mystery and violence that were sought in the Celtic and Teutonic past. The Gothic North had finally fulfilled public expectations by producing “an epic poet fit to dethrone Homer”. \textsuperscript{85}

It is ironic that Ossian was by and large a literary forgery, as the poems were composed by MacPherson himself, based on his knowledge of oral Gaelic poetry, and not translated from an ancient Gaelic bard. The effect of Ossian’s smooth cadenzas was to render harsh and unmusical actual Gothic poetry to the ear of the general public, who much preferred MacPherson’s “correct and elegant” verses to the “crudity” of the real thing.\textsuperscript{86} It appeared that the public “wanted a taste of the ‘true Celtic spirit’, which, at the same time, ought to agree with what they expected of it.”\textsuperscript{87} Ossian’s popularity demonstrates how much “Gothic” medievalism of the late eighteenth century was based on the projection of mythical desires onto the created paradigm “Gothic”, rather than the historical reality of early medieval Celtic and Germanic societies.

The Ossian poems were especially well regarded because of their pure “pagan” spirit, as it has already been noted that the Romantic advocates of the medieval preferred it to be uncontaminated by Christianity, which was equated with civilized values and the institutionalization of religion, by-passing the core element of experience in favour of rigid and ossified dogma. Because of their “pagan” nature, the Ossian poems were regarded as the epitome of subliminity, a concept integral to the developing ideology of

\textsuperscript{84} Greenway, \textit{The Golden Horns}, 88-9.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{87} Quoted from Ker’s comments on the expectations of MacPherson’s contemporary, Home, in Ker, “The Literary Influence of the Middle Ages,” 230.
Romanticism. Hence Gothic medievalism can be related to other manifestations of the search for authenticity and meaning through the “irrational” (or non-rational) medium of mystical experience, as the experience of the sublime is very like Rudolf Otto’s quasi-theological *mysterium tremendum*; the feeling of mystical awe in the face of the supernatural. Non-Gothic Romantics such as William Wordsworth popularized the notion that transcendent experiences could be triggered by the appreciation of nature, and this was further developed in the nineteenth century by (among others) the American transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, whose works influenced William James’ seminal study of non-institutional mysticism, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Advocates of Romanticism were engaged in the fabrication (or “discovery”) of connections between multiple societies and historical periods that were united by the fact that they all represented an Other to the Enlightenment West. In the *History of English Poetry*, Warton blended oriental fantasies with the Gothic sublime in a style similar to Ossian, and Gothic fictions such as William Beckford’s novel *Vathek*, associated orientalism and medievalism through the dualistic construction of Otherness to modern Western society. Fantastic mythological texts and poetry with strong heroic content and the emotional outpourings of “wild” imaginings were of most interest to scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Donatelli comments that Percy and Warton’s scholarly texts did not serve as a source for Gothic fiction, but rather scholarly and fictional works shared the same medieval imagery “because these texts

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88 See especially Hugh Blair’s “Introduction” to *The Poems of Ossian*.
were conceived in a similar cultural matrix and were aimed at similar audiences.”

Horace Walpole’s medieval folly in the grounds of Strawberry Hill, for example, inspired him to write the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, (1765) which contained strong elements of “the fantastic”, and medievalist supernaturalism.

The popularity of Walpole’s Strawberry Hill and Percy’s *Reliques* serve as a reminder that “the pseudo-medieval was often more attractive than the genuine article”.

Physical evidence of the greater passion, creativity and spirituality of medieval people was also sought in medieval Gothic architecture. By the mid- to late eighteenth-century, the “Gothic vogue” or “Gothic Revival” was well under way, and medieval architecture was regarded as the embodiment of Gothic freedom, providing a visual focus for literary medievalism. The late eighteenth-century obsession with the primitive and the “picturesque” was fuelled by a desire for emotion, authenticity – the “irrational” Other pitted against the rationalism of the Age of Reason. The proliferation of fake ruins and neo-Gothic architecture represent attempts to recapture a sense of the past as a stimulus provoking mystical sensibility and the imagination. The quest for mythological ur-texts that are “untainted” by Christianity continues to hold currency today in the “New Age” quest for authenticity.

As we have seen, the interest in literary medievalism was reasonably widespread in Britain and France in the late eighteenth century, during which time many medieval texts were modernized and brought into print for public and scholarly consumption. Percy’s *Reliques* greatly intensified interest in literary medievalism during the 1760s and

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91 Donatelli, “The Medieval Fictions of Thomas Warton and Thomas Percy”, 442. Donatelli documents the popularity of the use of the image of recovered ancient manuscripts as a narrative convention common to Gothic fiction, the Ossianic poems, and genuine antiquarian activities, 445-6.


94 As will be discussed in Chapter 7 of this thesis.
70s and was a great favourite of Sir Walter Scott's. Scott was himself a notable editor, reviewer and translator of medieval literature. He produced, for example, the first ever "modern" edition of the Middle English poem, *Sir Tristrem*, from the famous Auchinleck manuscript in 1804, and was in close contact with many of the most notable medieval scholars of the day, such as Joseph Ritson, Robert Southey, George Ellis and William Godwin, not to mention Jacob Grimm. Scott himself was an important medieval scholar of his day, and the influence of his *Sir Tristrem* edition should not be overlooked, as it remained popular throughout the nineteenth century and shows evidence not only of Scott's groundbreaking scholarship, but also of the way in which he used medieval texts to further Scottish nationalistic claims. This supports my view of examining texts and their scholarly and popular cultural contexts as sites of sociocultural struggle and political discourse; highlighting the fact that medievalism is "an active cultural process and not a neutral re-imaging of a more or less authenticated past".

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96 Scott's familiarity with the Auchinleck manuscript, which Chaucer himself drew on indicates that he knew many of the most important Middle English romances extant, including *Amis and Amiloun*, *Floris and Blanchefleur*, *Guy of Warwick*, *Arthur and Merlin*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Bevis of Hampton*, and *Horn Childe*, as well as fragments from the Alexander legends and Richard the Lionheart, amongst others. Scott also knew Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, though not the manuscript version, as well as various *fableux* and Sir Gawain poems, and was considering editing the *Morte Darthur*, which Southey finally edited in 1817. Jerome Mitchell, *Scott, Chaucer, and Medieval Romance: A Study in Sir Walter Scott's Indebtedness to the Literature of the Middle Ages* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987). For Scott and Norse literature, see John M. Simpson, “Scott and Old Norse Literature”, in *Scott Bicentenary Essays: Selected Papers Read at the Sir Walter Scott Bicentenary Conference*, Ed. Alan Bell (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973).

97 Matthews, “Quaint Inglis” 36ff.

5.5 Romance, faery and the fantastic sublime
Jerome Mitchell examines in detail Sir Walter Scott’s indebtedness to and extensive knowledge of Middle English romances, which he used as sources for story patterns, character types, motifs, style, structure and inspiration in his own fiction, arguing that an understanding of Scott’s debt to medieval romances holds the key to explaining the appeal of his fiction. Scott was one of the most significant and influential popularizers of medieval romance in the nineteenth century, by bringing the strong “Story” qualities of into the modern form of the novel.99 Interestingly, Scott’s lifelong passion for medieval romances started at a very early age, inspired by chapbook literature containing simplified rewrites of popular romances, of which he had acquired over one hundred by the age of ten, and almost two thousand over the course of his later life. Wordsworth and Coleridge also figured amongst the men of letters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who acknowledge their debt to childhood readings of fairytale and romance traditions in chapbook literature as deep influences on their later writings.100

Coleridge, born in 1772, unambiguously connected his childhood passion for fairytales (chapbook versions of the Arabian Nights, medieval romances and so forth) to his experience of the greater-than-human sublime: “From my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &c &c – my mind had been habituated to the Vast – & I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief.”101 Wordsworth also regards his childhood

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99 Mitchell, Scott, Chaucer, and Medieval Romance. Ibid.
100 Chapbook literature encompassed a huge range of popular literature in a relatively cheap “reader’s digest” form, usually with woodblock illustration prints, which made widely available such disparate texts as Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, Don Quixote, the Arthurian legend, Dick Whittington, Dr Faustus, Robin Hood, medieval romances, Robinson Crusoe, Charles Perrault’s fairy tales, The Arabian Nights, and Aesop’s fables. The major components of this extremely popular chapbook literature were, however, fairy tales (native English and French translations), and medieval and Arthurian romances. Jeanie Watson, Risking Enchantment: Coleridge’s Symbolic World of Faery (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 6–22.
101 Watson, Ibid., 8. Coleridge’s identification of being “habituated to the Vast”, the sublime, and the experience of wonder in literatures of the fantastic is further explored by David Sandner, Fantastic Literature.
reading of fairytales and romance as significant for his moral growth and love of the natural world in *The Prelude* (Book 5, 1805):

no vulgar fear... Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen
Such sights before among the shining streams
Of fairyland, the forests of romance . . .

A strong connection is thereby established between the "solitary rural scenes" and "the beauties of nature" that according to Blair inspired the primitive poetic genius of the Gothic North, and the experience of the mystical sublime as expressed by Wordsworth and Coleridge, connected specifically to fairytales and romances. That Wordsworth and Coleridge were so positively disposed to fairy tales is interesting, in that they were not highly regarded by the intelligensia at the time. Coleridge's daughter, Sara, published her own children's fairy tale *Phantasmion* in 1837, but complained to a friend,

In these days, to print a Fairy Tale is the very way to be not read, but shoved aside with contempt... works of this class are wholesome food, by way of variety, for the childish mind. It is curious that on this point Sir Walter Scott and Charles Lamb, my father, My Uncle Southey, and Mr. Wordsworth were all agreed.

The prevailing English attitude in late eighteenth century was that fairy tales were dangerous to the rational mind. This view changed somewhat with the publication of the Brothers Grimm's *Fairy Tales* (1832), and the literary fairytales of Hans Christian Andersen (1846). Coleridge's Romantic philosophy of fantasy should thus be seen in the context of the late eighteenth-century revival of oral folk ballads, fairytales and Gothic medieval romances, forming part of the backdrop for questions of aesthetic taste and value in Romantic discourse.

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102 Wordsworth claims that his childhood reading of fairytales provided an education in understanding and mediating life's natural experiences, particularly the experience of death, which the "rationally educated" child may lack. In *The Prelude*, Book 5, Wordsworth describes seeing death for the first time in the shape of a drowned man, yet (as the poem states) he had come across death in romance and fairytale, which lent that man's death a natural dignity and grace. Watson, *Risking Enchantment*, 21.
103 Ibid., 11.
104 Ibid., Note 1, 209.
Fairy tales, incorporating the remnants of older myths, are repositories of symbolic significance. As Jeanie Watson notes, the “Romantic preoccupation with the medieval and the oriental are attempts to remove the ‘always distant country’ in terms of time and space”, and for Coleridge, the “Land of Faery” is “mental space” independent of any particular place or time, “it is neither in the domains of History or Geography, is ignorant of all artificial boundary”. Not only the content, but also the form of fairy tales and romances are pre-modern, medieval in origin, and we see here how the very quality of their timelessness, the “Once upon a time” indeterminacy of their action (located outside of history or geography), appealed to writers such as Coleridge (and later Tolkien) in their search for a literary language of spirituality capable of expressing “the Universal”.

The eighteenth-century novel was “realistic” in the sense that it denoted “a belief in the individual apprehension of reality through the senses”, and emphasised “originality” in its modern meaning as “underived, independent, first-hand” rather than “the first instance” of something. This contrasts with the view implicit in Romantic fantasy; that reality is not apprehended through the senses alone, but through a “mystical” perception, a holism that is sensory, intellectual and emotional. Where the form of the realist novel arose from the epistemological position of the fundamental subjective materiality of the individual’s experience of reality/the world: “that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it”, as Watt claims, as early as 1712, Joseph Addison articulated an argument subsequently elaborated and echoed by all defenders of “Romantic” literature, namely that the value of “the faerie way of writing”

105 Coleridge’s Notebooks, 3: 4501, quoted in Watson, Risking Enchantment, 24-28.
106 From the perspective of a champion of modernist realism, Ian Watt states, “Modern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke, and received its first full formulation by Thomas Reid in the middle of the eighteenth century.” Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 12.
resides “precisely in the fact that the author does not follow nature and imitate the real world, since by inventing a world of his own, he thereby demonstrates his creativity and originality, these being the attributes valued by the new poetics.”

Coleridge’s idea of being “habituated to the Vast” bears the imprint of eighteenth century conceptions of the sublime expressed by poetic “genius” through contemplation of “some object awful, great, or magnificent.” This notion (“the Vast”) forms the kernel of Coleridge’s Romantic theory of the function of Faery and fairytales as a symbolic encounter with the transcendent immaterial world of the Spirit, a holistic vision of (Gnostic) truth and knowledge. The language and genre of fairytales gave Coleridge a means for expressing his most important metaphysical, religious and philosophical concerns. The use of fairy tale structures and motifs gave Coleridge a symbolic language representing symbolic experiences with a transcendent reality, “an encounter with mystery” as Coleridge struggles to articulate the nature and meaning of creativity, and the meaning of human existence. Watson writes:

the tale of Faery allows him to present the joy of Oneness... And because the tale of Faery as a symbolic story is an artistic form, it provides a safe vehicle... for the exploration of the irrational in human experience and the exploration of the darkness and mystery of Mystery.

In Coleridge’s and Tolkien’s Romantic theories of literary creation, Faery signified a sacred space or consciousness that attempted to reconcile the dualities between subject and object, mind and body, symbolic and literal. The influence of neo-Platonic

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109 Watson, Risking Enchantment, 15.

110 Ibid., 25-6.
thought on Coleridge is frequently acknowledged, chiefly the Western esoteric view that the world is perceived as "a vast assemblage of correspondences", and all things have relationships with all other things ("as above, so below"). Material phenomena therefore inhere divine correspondence, or the world spirit (a symbolic, monist view). The Romantics developed what is essentially a holistic world view representing an organic cosmos where "All are but parts of one stupendous whole/ whose body Nature is, and God the soul." Thus the Romantic roots of much New Age thought are clear, as is the common link with fantasy as a popular vehicle for this kind of holistic spirituality. This Romantic holism is also congruent with (or has influenced) ecologically-oriented theories such as James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which has been embraced by many neo-pagan and New Age movements.

The Romantic revolt was against the development of a purely utilitarian, ultra-materialistic application of Enlightenment Reason, that led to the belief that only the externally verifiable material world is real. The Romantics, in essence, objected to the loss of the immaterial world of the spirit, Imagination, the supernatural, sensuously experienced but empirically unverifiable. They championed the cause of the emotional knowledge that had been sacrificed to ensure the primacy of Reason, the rational intellect. Andras Sandor remarks on affinity of religious and fantastic in terms that echo the Romantic protest:

The space left empty by the withdrawal of myths under the onslaught of Enlightenment has been filled with stories, and the stories which have so far been closest to myths are fantastic stories.

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113 See further material on this in Chapter 8 Green Dreams.
Several recent critics of the fantastic, notably David Sandner and Tobin Siebers, have also drawn attention to the fact (often denied or overlooked) that the process or experience of the fantastic lies close to religious experience.\footnote{David Sandner, *The Fantastic Sublime: Romanticism and Transcendence in Nineteenth-Century Children’s Fantasy Literature* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1996), 51; Tobin Siebers, *The Romantic Fantastic* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press), 1984.}

I argue that fantasy today continues to celebrate (and mourn) the presence of the supernatural, “magic” and “faith” that seemed to absent itself from the world with the supreme dominance of the rational, empiricist materialist outlook. Whether it is intentional or not, the shape and language of Romantic fantasy tends towards a fundamentally “religious” sensibility. The experience of Faery, Wonder, or mystery (whatever name it goes by) parallels in a literary, secular form, the experience of religious mysticism, and the quest for meaning and order that was traditionally answered by the Christian religion in the West. David Sandner also links the religious and the sublime, saying that the sublime

\[\text{draws much of its power from the literature of religious conversion, that is, from a literature that describes major experiential transformation, the mind not merely challenged and thereby invigorated but thoroughly “turned around”}.\footnote{Sandner, *The Fantastic Sublime*, 51.}

In both Romantic poetry and fantastic literature it is possible to see a movement towards the idea of “transcendence”. Thomas Weiskel suggests that the sublime in Romantic poetry replaced, or at least attempted to replace, earlier methods of transcendence, whether religious or otherwise:

\[\text{The Romantic sublime was an attempt to revise the meaning of transcendence precisely when the traditional apparatus of sublimation –}\]
spiritual, ontological, and (one gathers) psychological, and even perceptual — was failing to be exercised or understood.\textsuperscript{117}

It is important to note that there are in fact several theories of the sublime that arose in the eighteenth century and developed along different trajectories; including Edmund Burke's dark, “awesome” sublime, Kant’s intellectual sublime which was detached from emotional affect, and Coleridge’s conception of the sublime arising from pleasure.\textsuperscript{118} In this thesis I am primarily concerned with the affective models of the sublime out of which theories of the fantastic grew, as Kant’s association of the sublime with the faculty of detached Reason (which transcends the body and hence achieves intellectual mastery over Nature) is the standpoint most valued by modernism, and has become the dominant aesthetic paradigm today, thus discussed very widely elsewhere.\textsuperscript{119} The radical transformation of the sublime of fear into an experience of aesthetic rapture called up by the “glory” of the natural world was engendered by Coleridge and Wordsworth in a Romantic reversal of the Reason/Nature dichotomy.

The view of the sublime promoted by eighteenth-century theorists such as Burke is one grounded in a psychology of pain and pleasure, where the experience of the sublime is associated primarily with fear, pain, awe and the annihilation of the self without the threat of actual danger to one’s existence — the frisson of mortal fear was thought to excite sublime emotions.\textsuperscript{120} Burke wrote:


\textsuperscript{118} Anne K. Mellor, \textit{Romanticism and Gender} (New York: Routledge, 1993), 87.

\textsuperscript{119} The privileging of the Kantian aesthetic by elitist, masculinist modernism clearly reflects the values and agenda of this powerful group in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Kant’s affirmation of an isolated, transcendental Reason effectively erases the body, the physical, and Nature — all traditionally feminine properties. Furthermore, this aesthetic of pure Reason necessitates the removal of the realm of the aesthetic from the social and ethical considerations, effectively legitimising the distancing of works of art favoured by elitist modernism from the taint of the feminised masses, historical context, and other social and ethical considerations. See for example Mellor, \textit{Romanticism and Gender}, 88–9.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 85.
Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger . . . or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.\textsuperscript{124}

Furthermore, this kind of fearful sublime is, according to Burke, “always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly”. The sublime for Burke is therefore associated with powerful “violence, pain and terror” and the awareness of mortality and infinitude – power beyond the ken of the human mind – which, when the perception of danger passes, mellows into astonishment and admiration.\textsuperscript{122} The early “Gothic” romances of the violent, “barbaric” Norsemen epitomised the awesome sublime of terror as delineated by Burke and his followers.

Burke’s conception of the sublime has been identified as the dark, “negative” sublime expressed very clearly in the Gothic novels of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, “Monk” Lewis, Charles Maturin and nineteenth century tales of the fantastic and supernatural horror such as those by E. T. A. Hoffman, Edgar Allen Poe and Washington Irving, where the sublime is experienced as a break in reality occasioned by an encounter with the supernatural often leading to despair and confusion. This is the tradition of the sublime privileged by modern fantasy critics who follow Tzvetan Todorov’s model of the fantastic conceived of as the moment of “hesitation” and shock experienced by a person who “knows only the laws of this world” (that is, adheres to the modern, rational-secular worldview) on being confronted by what appears to be a supernatural event.\textsuperscript{123} In Chapter 2 (Mapping the Territory) I drew attention to the correspondences between Todorov’s “fantastic hesitation” and the second stage of the tripartite structure of the sublime, described as a “tearing asunder of the veil of reality”, a breakdown in

\textsuperscript{124} Burke, \textit{A Philosophical Inquiry}, 58-9.

\textsuperscript{122} Mellor, \textit{Romanticism and Gender}, 86.

meaning and the overwhelming and fragmentation of the subjective self or psyche.¹²⁴ In many ways it is unsurprising that the dark or negative aspects of Romanticism expressed by Burke and “the Gothic” sublime has been the model most favoured by postmodern critics of the literary fantastic, as the shattering of perception associated with the second stage of sublime experience has also been characterized as “spiritual death”, conceived of as “the loss of the ability to perceive the world through the eyes of the imagination; the result of this loss is a cold, senseless, random, and fragmented world to which human beings can feel no inner connection” which the Romantics connected specifically to the rise of the mechanistic science of Enlightenment Reason and the advent of modernity.¹²⁵

Whereas Burke represented the “divine” in nature as gloomy, oppressive and overpowering, Coleridge and Wordsworth’s “natural sublime” emphasised the joyous, positive aspects of the numinous “Spirit” present in both nature and humanity, in which a revitalised view of the cosmos is achieved and the subject/ego is reconfigured in a “spiritual rebirth”.¹²⁶ The experience of “oneness” – “one Life within us and abroad”, as Coleridge described it, represented within the sublime experience a recognition of continuity, an erasure of difference between self and other, human and environment, male and female, nature and the divine.¹²⁷ This holistic, organic conception of the sublime, characterised by wonder, profound joy, a sense of oneness with the universe, is clearly echoed in Tolkien’s “Recovery”, “Consolation” and “Eucatastrophe” in his theory of the fantastic in “On Fairy-Stories” as discussed in Chapter 2. Anne Mellor also points out that the positive qualities of the sublime evoked by Wordsworth and Coleridge were more conducive to contemporary female interpretations of nature as a “sister” with whom one could commune and live in harmony, peace and cooperation,

¹²⁵ Hanevraff, “Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection”, see esp. his discussion of Morse Peckham’s definition of Romanticism as “positive” and “negative”, 246-250.
¹²⁶ Ibid.
¹²⁷ Mellor, Romanticism and Gender, 89.
while much Gothic fiction accepted the predominantly masculinist view of the dark and alienating sublime propounded by Burke.¹²⁸ The positive, joyous tradition of the sublime has also proven very amenable to the values of contemporary environmentalism and recent re-evaluations of the pastoral mode (especially in Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s poems) as a form of early environmental discourse.¹²⁹

5.6 Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Romanticism’s interest in the marvellous, the supernatural and “the genuine reaction of wonder” as expressed in the aesthetic of the sublime, was part of a wider societal quest for “an antidote to narrow, shallow, predictable, and impoverished constructions of reality” thought to have been engendered by Enlightenment Reason.¹³⁰ Ludwig Tieck, one of the early authors of modern literary tales of the fantastic, characterized disbelief in the supernatural as a form of “enlightened blindness to other kinds of reality” revealing his own deliberate agenda in writing fantastic tales as “a critique of a narrow and ultimately reductionist view of reality”, and should be read in context of “the Romanticist effort to re-enchant the world.”¹³¹ The history of fantasy writing and criticism should therefore be read in light of the Romantic agenda to restore a sense of the “numinous” which was felt to have been denuded by the rise of a mechanistic scientific worldview, and could be combated

¹²³ Ibid., 90-106.
¹³¹ Ibid., 5-9.
only through the restorative holism of the imaginative faculty to perceive the world anew.  

The vehicle of this holism and "spiritual rebirth" was expressed in literature by the element of sublime affect or experience (both negative and positive) in the form of the romance. As I have argued, the rise of Romanticism was integrally bound up with a radical re-evaluation of medieval romances and fairytales in the late eighteenth century as part of the new aesthetic of the sublime, which sought in the "primitive", savage past – epitomised by the valorisation of the Northern, "Gothic" literatures of Iceland, Scandinavia and the "Teutonic" countries – a new conceptual paradigm to challenge the hegemony of mechanistic, over-rationalistic Enlightenment thought. Romance was thus constructed as the Other, belonging to the sphere of Nature in contrast to Reason; a literature of wonder, affect and the poetic sublime.

Late nineteenth-century Romantics such as Andrew Lang constructed the romance as a more vigorous, masculine form than the realist novel, which was seen as a foreign, possibly corrupting and decadent importation into the indigenous tradition of British literature, which was now viewed as originating in the Gothic romances of Northern Europe. These discourses continued to appeal to the strong tradition of primitivist medievalism that arose in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. Lang for example, based his defence of the "modern romances of adventure" (for example the novels of H. Rider Haggard and Robert Louis Stevenson) against the dominance of the realist novel, on an appeal to the "old barbarian" within, the pre-modern consciousness lurking beneath the superficial veneer of civilization. Lang claims that the romance form champions "stories told for the story's sake", arguing that "If one were wholly

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132 Hanegraaff, "Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection", 250.
civilized, and “cultured”... the savage tale would have failed to excite.” Romance’s essential “story” elements that hark back to roots of storytelling in primitive human culture: Lang asserts that “the natural man within me, the survival of some blue-painted Briton or of some gipsy” is pleased by a “Zulu love story” – “a story so terrible, so moving, in the long, gallant fight against odds, and the awful unheard-of death-agony”, conflating the otherness of the Gothic with British imperialism and orientalism in a general appeal to the primitive, “natural” Other. Modern romances are “savage survivals”, says Lang, “but so is the whole poetic way of regarding Nature.”

What can be more barbaric than the opening of the Saga [of the Volsungs]?... There is no more natural, true, and simple picture of human nature, human affections and passions, in Balzac or Shakespeare, than that scene from a savage tale which begins with the loves and hates of serpents and were-wolves.

The Romantic appeal to the savage, primitive Other, and the strong association of medieval romances of the Gothic North (such as the sagas of the Icelanders), with discourses of Romantic anti-modernism continued to thrive in the nineteenth century in the fantasy fictions of William Morris, George MacDonald and John Ruskin, and is still utilised in fantasy, environmentalism and alternative spirituality movements today that seek to ideologically oppose the values and conditions of modernity through appeals to the Romantic discourses of Nature.

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133 Lang, “Realism and Romance”, 689.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 690.
136 Ibid., 692.
Chapter 6

Romantic anti-modernism

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean.

William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise* (1868)

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 examined the conjunction of medievalism, the sublime and the sphere of Nature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and how these social currents influenced the revival of the romance form in literature. This revival asserted the primacy of narrative against the emerging modernist literary form. These ideological currents offered a powerful critique of modernity, which I call Romantic anti-modernism. Throughout the nineteenth century this current gained strength symbiotically with the advance of technological, industrial modernity. Advocates of the medieval, such as William Morris in the nineteenth and J. R. R. Tolkien in the twentieth centuries, waged war against the Machine and the concomitant devastation that accompanied its ascent; environmental degradation; huge, sprawling conurbations of phenomenal ugliness; widespread immorality or amorality resulting from the breakdown of proper relationships between people; and slipshod mass production which robbed objects of beauty and thus intensified the meaninglessness of modern existence by impoverishing people’s emotional range. It is not difficult to conclude, as Löwy and Sayre do, that the “nostalgic” attitude of the Romantics is related to a profound experience of loss which is the result of rapid and far-reaching
social change. It is my contention however, that it is mistaken to label Romantic anti-modernism "nostalgia"; the intention was not merely to draw attention to the superior qualities of the (medieval) past, but to build alternative societies within the present. Thus it can be seen that Romantic anti-modernism is itself a distinctly modern intellectual orientation. This chapter will explore certain articulations of Romantic anti-modernism in their social and historical contexts in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly as expressed through the medium of romance/fantasy literature.

Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity (2001) by Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre argues compellingly for the persistence and breadth of the Romantic cultural heritage as a significant and widespread protest against aspects of capitalist modernity that continues to play an important role in contemporary social movements such as environmentalism and new spiritualities. Romanticism has been simultaneously seen as a "retrograde tendency", conceived of as a conservative, counter-revolutionary reaction to the principles of the French Revolution that sought a return to hierarchical medieval civilization; and also as an anarchic, revolutionary utopian movement geared towards freeing the chaos of the unfettered imagination. Löwy and Sayre suggest that the way out of these equally narrow and ultimately neutralizing oppositions, is to embrace the concept of Romanticism as a spectrum encompassing a multiplicity of cultural beliefs that ultimately manifest a "worldview" deeply critical of modernity.

This broad conception of Romanticism as Weltanschauung (a worldview or "collective mental structure") provides the most convincing overall explanatory model

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2 Ibid., 6-7.
to account for the diversity of Romantic thought in art, literature, philosophy, politics and other social phenomena, drawing attention to the ideological similarities underlying these expressions in a framework that is able to take into account the social and historical dimension of each separate manifestation.\(^3\) In the elucidation of a commonly held worldview across the board of Romantic thought from the eighteenth century through to the present, \textit{Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity} highlights the importance and value of historically and culturally contextualizing cultural products and relating them to broader ideological currents, thus gaining a perspective that single author or period studies are unable to accomplish, and countering the tendency to limit research within artificially imposed “historical periods”.

The hegemony of modernism in traditional literary studies (as delineated in Part 1 of this thesis) has constructed Romanticism as limited to specific authors or periods that were historically labelled as such; and formalist methodology has encouraged the detachment of texts from their social and historical contexts, thereby circumscribing and inhibiting more wide-ranging conclusions about the cultural significance of Romantic anti-modern protest. Even the commonly held observation of Romanticism as “the opposite” of the Enlightenment, the “counter-Enlightenment” revolt against neo-classical and Enlightenment ideals of rationalism, universality and objectivity\(^4\), is too neat and simplistic to account for the nuances and range of Romantic thought and philosophy which frequent deploy the same images (from

\(^3\) Ibid., 14.

medieval romance for example) in the service of completely opposing ideologies.\(^5\)

Given the dominance of abstracting and empirical methodologies prevailing well into the last decades of the twentieth century, it is no wonder that Romanticism has been most commonly viewed in a series of binaries focussed solely on literary style (Classicism–Romanticism), philosophy (rationalism–irrationalism) or a superficial reaction to events such as the French revolution or Industrial Revolution.\(^6\) The sustained dominance within Anglo-American literary studies of a construction of Romanticism as a “mere” literary school centred on the canon of British Romantic poets, and stripped of its wider cultural, political and philosophical dimensions is evident even in relatively recent books such as Aidan Day’s *Romanticism* (1996). As this text is designed for students of English literature, the focus is on British Romanticism and the canon of Romantic male poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats), concentrating on formal stylistic elements in individual works confined to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\(^7\) This view has been promulgated as the most common understanding of Romanticism, and though the relevance of Romantic concerns to us today are acknowledged, there is no hint that the cultural tensions that saw the emergence of Romantic thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still being reworked in not dissimilar forms today.

Like the term “fantasy”, the expression “Romantic” is notoriously difficult to define, because it has been used to designate not only a particular literary and artistic period (whose boundaries are notoriously negotiable), but also various political, historical, economic, and philosophical movements and ideologies. The very nature of

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\(^7\) Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Day does look at recent debates on the nature of Romanticism, but his project is confined to attempts to enlarge the canon beyond the “big six” male poets to include some female Romantic authors.
Romanticism has been characterised as inherently contradictory and enigmatic, being variously regarded as revolutionary, conservative, retrograde and utopian, even at the level of individual texts and authors, such that some critics have proposed banning the use of the term altogether. The confusion and lack of critical consensus regarding Romanticism bears striking similarities to critical perceptions of fantasy (including various attempts to dissuade people from using the term critically), a situation that, I propose, has not arisen entirely by coincidence. I not only suggest that the existing genre of fantasy is in fact a significant expression of contemporary Romanticism (and thus subject to many of the same bases for critique), but that the philosophical dualism of Reason and Nature permeating Western thought has undergirded and shaped both the nature of these Romantic phenomena and critical perceptions of them. The telltale characterization of both fantasy and Romanticism as indescribable, elusive and enigmatic thus acts as a signifier of Otherness, described in negative terms as a lack—a denial of selfhood, subjectivity and value, often ascribed to the subordinated or oppositional Other within discourses of mastery.

Romanticism has amongst other things been described as passive, morally degraded, lacking in virility, and above all, “feminine” in a distinctly pejorative vein, where femininity is equated with sentiment, impressionability, intellectual inferiority, incoherence and idiosyncrasy. It seems clear that Romantic concerns with nature, the imagination, myth and spirituality have contributed to its inferiorization in the dualistic Reason/Nature hierarchy, and many of its positive aspects denied and excluded from the sphere of Reason and modernity. The values of early twentieth-century modernism (constructed as a discourse of mastery within the sphere of

8 Ibid., 1-2.
10 See Chapter 5 Romantic Medievalism.
Reason) were not only regarded by many as having supplanted (and eradicated) Romanticism, but have had a telling effect on critical paradigms and attitudes. Modernist criticism has on the whole sustained an antagonistic relationship with Romanticism, characterised by denying, ignoring and repressing the persistence of Romantic culture into the present day.\footnote{Ibid., 147.}

Historically, Romanticism furthermore acquired a strongly negative reputation during the World War II through its association with fascist ideologies, thereby polluting and discrediting the entire spectrum of Romantic values to the extent that some scholars have interpreted the entire history of Romanticism as a mere prelude to fascism.\footnote{Löwy and Sayre, Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity, 66.} A remarkable example of this assessment occurred in 1945, when the British-led allies in occupied Germany sought to ban the publication of Grimm's fairy tales on the grounds that they had made German children susceptible to lies and irrationality, and were thought to have influenced Nazi atrocities through the "Teutonic" cruelty of the tales.\footnote{Zipes notes that the ban did not last long nor succeed in any convincing fashion as the Grimm's fairy tales are now considered the epitome of the proper, classic fairy tale form throughout the world; Jack Zipes, "The Contamination of the Fairy Tale, or the Changing Nature of the Grimm's Fairy Tales," Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts 11:1 (2000), 77. For more information on the role of fairy tales in Nazi Germany, see Jack Zipes, "The fight over fairy-tale discourse: Family, friction and socialization in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany", in Jack Zipes, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization (New York: Routledge, 1991 [1983]), 134-69.} The condemnation of fairy tales and fantasy as illogical falsehoods is hardly new, but this extremist reaction demonstrates the need not to underestimate the power of ideology and circumstance upon the aesthetic and cultural reception of artistic products. It seems clear that these knee-jerk reactions to Romantic writing, whilst understandable in the immediate aftermath of the war, are overly simplistic and extremely reductionist, denying complexity and depth to the Romantic worldview that in reality encompasses a diverse spectrum of values and
beliefs that have nothing to do with fascism. As Löwy and Sayre note, “while the Nazi ideologues were unquestionably inspired by certain Romantic themes, this influence does not justify rewriting the entire history of political Romanticism as a simple historical preface to the Third Reich.” Undoubtedly this unsavoury taint of fascism, which also drew the study of mythology into disrepute, has contributed to the rejection of contemporary manifestations of Romanticism as possibly right-wing and conservative, thus encouraging the view that it is better to regard Romanticism as a discreet, long-gone historical period.

The following section will examine more closely the specific association in nineteenth-century Romantic thought of the Machine as a symbol representing the constellation of modernist values and institutions: rationalism, technology, progress and science; becoming furthermore a metaphor for the increasing mechanization of social experience and the corresponding transformation of psychic, creative and intellectual life, associating the machine with what is considered “unnatural”. The dualism between Reason and Nature in Western thought thus becomes symbolized by an opposition between mechanistic and organic modes of thought, where a utopian strand of Romantic medievalism is used to comment on and critique the consequences of modernisation with its accompanying technological, social and economic upheavals.

6.2 Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris: nineteenth century anti-modern protest

Politicised Romantic protest, usually expressed by the intelligentsia, developed in the context of the industrial, intellectual and political revolution stemming from the

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14 Löwy and Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, 6 for examples and further references to this kind of criticism.

Enlightenment. Central to its advocates was the notion that the social cost of modernisation had been too high; community, religion, tradition, labour and the arts had all suffered dislocation and vulgarization as Europe raced heedlessly forward, embracing the future at the expense of the past:

Rooted in a romantic world view, this protest challenged the seemingly inevitable outcomes of the industrial and intellectual revolutions. It offered contradictory assessments and definitions of democracy but sought a common aim: the enhancement of the quality of life for the ordinary individual as well as for the elites.\textsuperscript{16}

Following the Romantic agenda, the individual’s internal self and well-being became inextricably linked to well-being of society as whole, and intellectuals such as Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris initiated a “quest for reintegration” that sought to reconnect individuals to a society that had been changed beyond recognition from a centuries-old traditional order by the forces of economic, social, political and cultural revolution that was modernity.\textsuperscript{17} This revivifying Romantic quest was built upon a re-visioning of the past and a new appreciation of the world now gone as a source of values that had been lost in the process of industrialization and needed to be restored to modernity, seeking to reintegrate what they saw as a splintered self and social community, with people alienated both themselves, the products of their labour, and reconnect them to the past and the natural world. The Middle Ages were reconstructed as a utopian, pre-urbanized and un-rationalized “Golden Age” when people lived in harmony with the natural world within an authentic and fully integrated community held together by the bonds of pre-industrial village life and community religion. The anonymity and fragmentation of modern society seemed impoverished in contrast to this image of the medieval past as rich in spirituality and community, integrated with the seasons of the natural world. Nineteenth century


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
cities were viewed as filthy, socially and morally depraved, and terribly damaging to humanity.

The new machinery of the industrialized modern world not only fundamentally transformed the appearance of the physical world with the building of railways, factories, steam engines, giant smoke-stacks and urban agglomerations; it also affected emotional, artistic and intellectual worldviews, including the growth of scientific thought and a decline in intellectual certainty. Thomas Carlyle explicitly connected the physical mechanization of society to philosophical “mechanism”, drawing attention to the fact that the scientific worldview depended on a view of the universe as a machine: purely physical (material), orderly and ultimately predictable; encouraging a focus on the material rather than the spiritual universe.\(^8\) Carlyle condemned utilitarian beliefs in social progress, via machines and statistics, as eradicating all mystery and wonder from human life, without which existence would ultimately become dehumanised and meaningless.

Carlyle admired the machine and technological progress for the material prosperity they could bring, but he expressed doubt about their effects on the spiritual and social dimensions of modern existence.\(^9\) Carlyle warned against the intellectual narrowing and limitations imposed by the mechanistic worldview, arguing of the dangers arising from an attitude where “what cannot be investigated and understood mechanically cannot be investigated and understood at all”, including such “infinities” as Wonder, Love, Fear, Poetry and Religion.\(^{10}\) In his highly influential *Past and Present*, Carlyle wrote explicitly of his rejection of the Victorian ideals of material and


\(^9\) Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain*, 15.

economic progress as socially divisive and spiritually impoverishing. For him, the
ideal community was that of medieval religious monasticism, in contrast to the
brutally fiscal and anonymous relationships of the modern day. In a direct line of
descent from earlier traditions of Romantic protest, the medieval past became for
Carlyle and his followers an ideal of authentic, meaningful community and spiritual
harmony between self and environment.\textsuperscript{21} For Victorian Romantic anti-modernists,
the image of the Middle Ages was employed as standard of resistance; a symbol of
order, coherence, stability, community, faith:

Within this meaningful, purposive universe, individuals existed not as
competing self-contained units, but rather as interdependent parts of an
integral whole. Reintegration and reconnection lay at the heart of the
medievalist vision just as they undergirded the Romantic quest.\textsuperscript{22}

Further, this political anti-modernism challenged the types of employment now
available to citizens. Greater economic prosperity might result from industrialization,
but the intimate and creative relationship between the craftsman and his creations
was absent. John Ruskin’s vitalistic conception of the natural world as a living
organism imbued with transcendent, spiritual qualities was the foundation of his
critique of industrialization. He felt that the numinous qualities of nature could only
be apprehended by the non-rational conception of the soul, thus articulating a
rejection of the scientific, mechanistic worldview and the desecration of natural
creation by the machine. For Ruskin the industrial city and the machine became
symbols of the presence of religious “evil” manifested through the works of man, in
which the beauty and joy of organic life and the natural world (God’s creation) had
been sullied.\textsuperscript{23} By emphasising the spiritual, religious dimension of human
experience, manifested in non-quantifiable properties such as “soul”, Ruskin criticized

\textsuperscript{21} Veldman, \textit{Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain}, 15-6.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{23} Sussman, \textit{Victorians and the Machine}, 76-103.
the political and economic foundations of Victorian society (in *Unto This Last*), especially the *laissez-faire* model of economics which assumed that humans were motivated solely by economic self-interest. Ruskin’s religious view underpinned his ethical critique of modernity, falsifying the economic policies which decreed that competition, rather than morality or justice, governed the social relations that led to wealth and social progress. His Christian outlook was also expressed by his admiration of the Christian moral framework of medieval society, which he envisioned as more communal and less selfishly individualistic, in contrast to the dehumanising and alienating means of production ushered in by machine labour. Ruskin’s deeply subversive message was that true wealth was not to be found in money or material possessions, but rather in the wholeness of social and spiritual relations, embodied in the organic metaphor of Nature rather than that of the Machine, and his attack on the major economic assumptions of the day became foundational in British socialism, though his medievalist ideals of community were far from democratic.\(^{24}\)

William Morris was deeply influenced by both Carlyle and Ruskin, and amongst his many contributions to late Victorian art and intellectual culture was his secularity of Ruskin’s Christian views on the nature of human creativity and ethical behaviour into a modern socialist framework.\(^{25}\) Morris’s political and “practical” socialism grew directly out of his passion for the art, history and literature of the Middle Ages, fostered by his early extensive reading of medieval romances and fairytales in chapbook literature, as well as the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott.\(^{26}\) Morris was a gifted and prolific artist across a variety of media (including design, publishing,

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\(^{24}\) Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain*, 19–20.


handicrafts and fiction writing), and he believed that his love of art and history helped to motivate his turn to socialism, as he thought that the progress of modern civilization was destroying the very things he loved, turning history into "inconsequent nonsense" and making art merely "a collection of the curiosities of the past which would have no serious relation to the life of the present."\textsuperscript{27} His aesthetic sensibilities and sense of social justice were outraged by "the filth of civilization", and he documents in "How I became a Socialist" how he became "conscious of the wrongs of society as it now is, and the oppression of poor people..."\textsuperscript{28} and the alienation of the working classes from spiritual and aesthetic satisfaction and from the fruits of their labour. Morris states that even though he was financially well-off, he was always aware of a feeling of latent discontent, a "vague sentiment of repulsion to the triumph of civilization", but that like many, he was "coerced into silence" by the hegemony of modernist middle class ideologies.\textsuperscript{29} It was not until he came across the writings of Carlyle and Ruskin that he finally found a form in which to express his discontent with modern society, and could voice his objections to the "Whig" mentality of "modern prosperous middle-class men who, in fact, as far as mechanical progress is concerned, have nothing to ask for, if only Socialism would leave them alone to enjoy their plentiful style."\textsuperscript{30}

Following the example set by Ruskin and Carlyle, Morris harnessed his love of the medieval into a potent practical, aesthetic and political critique of Victorian society and the mechanistic, progressivist values of modernism, which are expressed clearly in his poem \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, which I have excerpted above. Morris's anti-modern sentiments are clearly expressed in his description of "dull squalor of civilization", the

\textsuperscript{27} William Morris, "How I Became a Socialist", In \textit{News from Nowhere and Other Writings} (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 382.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 380.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 381.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 380.
image of “the hideous town” that London had become “overhung with smoke”, spreading pollution and ugliness like a disease, juxtaposed with an idealistic, image of pre-industrial London as a semi-rural paradise, “small, and white, and clean”.31 Morris was not one for mincing his words, and seldom has there been as forceful an articulation of Romantic anti-modernism as Morris’s statement that “Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization.”32

Morris describes himself as “careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind.”33 Morris’s love of the natural world was conjoined to his medievalism in a Romantic aesthetic equating beauty with the “picturesque” qualities of nature valued by the discourses of the sublime, evident in his description of Victorian city life as a “sordid, aimless, ugly confusion” from which “the pleasure of the eyes was gone from the world”.34 This secularized discourse of the sublime, picturesque quality of nature continues to be utilized not only in modern fantasy literature (especially the works of J. R. R. Tolkien), but also by the rhetoric of much contemporary environmentalism, such as in Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962), the foundational text of the modern ecological movement.35

32 Morris, “Socialist”, 381.
33 Ibid., 382.
34 Ibid., 381-2.
35 Rachel Carson’s, Silent Spring (London: Penguin, 1962) and the modern Romantic “Green” movement will be discussed further in Chapter 8 Green Dreams.
Morris’s association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood\textsuperscript{16} (founded by the painter John Everett Millais) and his involvement in the Arts and Crafts movement were important manifestations of Morris’s real desire to oppose the compartmentalization and standardization of life and work imposed by industrialization, promoting a holistic view of the individual’s creative, aesthetic and psychological needs by encouraging the use of local products and hand-crafted goods as a protest against the uniformity and alienating processes of production induced by mass-produced works. Morris firmly believed that only through the abandonment of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist system would authentic community and ethical patterns of consumption be restored to modern society.\textsuperscript{37} Even though the twentieth century medievalist fantasies of C. S. Lewis and Tolkien were not specifically socialist in orientation, they continued to draw on the same Romantic vision and mythology of the medieval past as part of their own protest against the conditions of industrial society, tapping into the same contrast between the authentic community of the Middle Ages and the atomization and crass commercialism of urban industrial modernity.

The connections between fantasy literature, medievalism and Romantic anti-modernism are made explicit in Morris’s prose romances of the 1880s–90s, which are regarded as the first instances of the contemporary “Secondary World” fantasies made popular by Tolkien in the mid-twentieth century. These romances were based partly on Morris’s fascination with Northern literature (he had begun learning Old Icelandic in with Eiríkr Magnússon in 1868 and travelled to Iceland in 1871. He was

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\textsuperscript{16} The Pre-Raphaelites named themselves thus “out of banter, defiance, and a belief that the art of the Middle Ages provided a greater truth to nature than had been seen since the days of Raphael”, Veldman, \textit{Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain}, 21; see also Alice Chandler, \textit{A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 193.

\textsuperscript{37} Carole Cusack, “An Examination of the Ideologies Underlying Nineteenth Century Scholarly Researches into the Viking Age” (Unpublished Honours thesis, University of Sydney, 1984), 59-68
impressed by the hardiness, independence and the “classless” nature of both medieval and modern Icelandic society, “a true community that fostered individual strength and creativity”.38 Even in the nineteenth century, the immense importance of Iceland for Morris, not merely as symbol, but as a living society which exemplified all his hopes for humanity was recognized. In 1899 his biographer, J. W. Mackail wrote:

the journey through Iceland in the summer of 1871 had, both before and after its occurrence, an importance in Morris’ life that can hardly be overestimated, and which, even to those who knew him well, was not wholly intelligible... the heroic stories of Iceland stood in his mind at the head of the world’s literature: the deeds which they chronicled were the summit in their tragic force of all human achievement and the Icelandic Republic represented more nearly than any other state of things recorded in history, the political and social framework of life which satisfied his mind and imagination... with such depth of awe and prostration of spirit a pilgrim might approach the desolate and holy places of a land where gods had once walked in the likeness of men.39

Morris’s first “true” fantasy romance with a happy ending was *The Glittering Plain* (1890), a retelling of the thirteenth century *Havelok the Dane*, and was written in the same year as his famous socialist utopian tract, *News from Nowhere*. His last romances, five in all (with the final two published after his death in 1896), are what Amanda Hodgson describes as “the culmination of his attempts to master the romance form and as expressions of his conviction that it provided a powerful and valuable vehicle for serious ideas”.40 Hodgson’s excellent study of *The Romances of William Morris* (1987) convincingly demonstrates the evolution of Morris’s attitudes to the value of history and the ‘usefulness’ of artistic re-creations of the past, focussing on his much-neglected prose fiction and poetry as central to an understanding of his political and artistic endeavours as a whole. As she mentions in

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38 Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain*, 22.
her “Preface”, “Morris was not a designer and a Socialist who happened to write in his spare time”.\textsuperscript{41} In fact, such was the impact and importance of his early fiction to his contemporaries, particularly \textit{The Earthly Paradise} that Morris was invited to be Poet Laureate after Alfred, Lord Tennyson, but he refused.\textsuperscript{42}

In his last romances Morris draws more eclectically from historical material, creating clearly imaginary works with an idiosyncratic, highly formalized style approximating that of genuine medieval romance. Morris's political empathy with Socialism continue to be explored (more covertly) in his fantasy romances, as can be seen in the recurring portrayals of different ways in which society is organized and illustrations of social relations in what for him were ideal societies. The most sophisticated expression of both Romantic anti-modernism and socialism in the writings of William Morris is arguably his retellings of the Icelandic Sagas. His immersion in \textit{Volsunga Saga}, which he published as \textit{Sigurd the Volsung} resulted in a highly ideological text, which added much to the medieval original. Rather than an individualistic hero, Morris conceives of Sigurd as a champion of the oppressed and a liberator of all peoples. As Lloyd Eric Grey observes:

Although in \textit{Sigurd} Morris was working on the creation of a great epic poem for the race, designed primarily as literature and not as propaganda, and although he was following closely the Old Norse models, he could not help registering his disgust with conditions under the “old gods” — with materialistic concepts — and, by the introduction of his own ideals, hinted at the nature of things as they should be.\textsuperscript{43}

Throughout these romances, Morris shows a concern with the importance of good leadership chosen or ratified by the will of the people; his ideal rulers are loved by both noble and common folk, tyrants are shown to be forceful, unjust and

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., ix.
dehumanise the population. His personal commitment to causes such as the
preservation of historic buildings also signals his concern for the material evidence of
the past, as well as its literary products.

6.3 Fin de Siecle Romanticism

By the end of the nineteenth century, four centuries of European conquest and
cultural appropriation of the rest of the world was suddenly accelerated, driven by
internal impulses and fuelled by the “pace of political expansionism and technological
and social change.”\textsuperscript{44} New technologies such as photography and film contributed to
the ease of bringing back images and representations of other cultures, countries and
landscapes, resulting in a proliferation and confusion of imagery, so that “imaginative
and real spaces became enormously difficult to distinguish”.\textsuperscript{45} The new techniques of
mechanical reproduction resulted in a massive transformation of cultural discourses,
including (but not limited to) the visual and literary arts, and the proliferation of
social science disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology, that had a
profound impact on shaping early twentieth-century modernist discourses. These
discourses were remarkably consistent across Western culture before World War 1,
and were polarized by dualistic categories of Otherness: the contrast of primitive
“savages” to high-tech Western culture, the past versus the future of civilization,
evincing an implicit belief in the gap between the “savage” and “civilization”.\textsuperscript{46} As
Edward Said wrote, “the fundamental historical problem of modernism” was that
“Europe and the West were forced to take the Other seriously”.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds., \textit{Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} This was a continuation of the discourses of cultural primitivism discussed in Chapter 5 of this
thesis.
\textsuperscript{47} Edward Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors”, \textit{Critical Inquiry}, 15
Primitivism and exposure to cultural Otherness caused major reorganizations in Western thought and writing, and major modernist intellectuals such as Sigmund Freud and Sir James Frazer were part of the fin-de-siècle generation who "found their worlds turned upside down (or vastly enlarged) by the inescapable comparison of Western norms of rationality, behaviour, and sexuality with non-Western counterparts", and stimulated intellectual ferment in social theorists and key artistic and literary figures such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Paul Gauguin and T. S. Eliot. Many of the same issues regarding knowledge and evidence, and anxieties about "space, time, and their stability, and the ‘troubled and even panicky theme of the corporeal’" can be witnessed in Frazer's anthropological myth-theory in The Golden Bough, Einstein's theoretical physics and early modernist science fiction stories, vampire tales and time travel stories such as the "scientific romances" of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne.

During the late nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century, the Symbolist movement in the visual arts swept through Europe, characterised by a heightened awareness of the power of the subconscious imagination, and a focus on myth, symbols and dreams as more important to art than mimetic representation. Some well-known figures from this period are Gustav Moreau, Arnold Boklin, Gustav Klimt, Edvard Munch, as well as the English Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Aubrey Beardsley, compatriots of William Morris. Freud's theories of the unconscious in particular contributed to the interest many writers and artists had in the occult, as the veracity of dreams, the imagination and patterns of subconscious thought were substantiated by the new theory of

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49 Ibid., 16.
psychoanalysis as expressing meaningful but secret, hidden codes and significances.\footnote{Mircea Eliade, “The Occult and the Modern World” In Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 53-4.} It is interesting to observe that much contemporary visual art of the fantastic, particularly the art of fantasy book-cover illustrations, bears a striking (and not uncoincidental) resemblance to Symbolist art, as well as to the later revival of dream, myth and symbol in the mid-twentieth century art of the Surrealist movement.

This brief turn-of-the-century flowering of highly symbolic, decadent art has been for the most part viewed askance for the greater part of the twentieth century, after the impact of two world wars and the uncompromising vision of the Modernist movement. Symbolism has often been regarded as an incomprehensible aberration by modernist critics, with its melancholy idealism and longing for a lost past seen as naively sentimental and filled with an empty nostalgia betraying a perceived lack of comprehension or acceptance of reality.\footnote{Michael Gibson, Symbolism (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1995).} When looked at within the context of its time and historical circumstance, however, Symbolism makes perfect sense, and in fact more than a few leaders of Modernist art, such as Vassily Kandinsky, had been through a Symbolist phase. The movement had a particularly strong flourishing in parts of Europe that had been strongly Catholic, and were experiencing the sudden upheaval of Industrialism, such as France, Scandinavia, Germany and Eastern Europe. The effects of the latter was felt strongly by the sudden influx of people moving from largely rural areas to the newly industrialized cities of Europe, as well as huge mass migrations to the North American continent, abandoning the country peasant lifestyle and its (Catholic) traditions, which had not changed a great deal since the Middle Ages. The sense of change and disorientation should not be underestimated, and the art of this period leading up the first world war is testimony to the bewilderment people felt, groping after meaning in the face of rapid social and
technological change, as well as a being aware of the loss of a traditional past, lifestyle and values that were never to be regained.

Britain did not experience Symbolism with the depth and intensity of much of continental Europe, perhaps because it was a Protestant country and as the birthplace of industrialism, had experienced its effects relatively gradually, rather than in a sudden catching-up. However, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, with whom William Morris was notably associated, was formed at this time; and though one of their aims was, as the title suggests, the recapturing of attention to the natural, realistically observed world before the impact of the painter Raphael; there was a similar turn to mythological themes and legends, particularly of the Middle Ages, which had been strongly in vogue in the British arts for over 120 years (since the 1750s).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century also witnessed a rebirth of interest in mythology, which can be viewed as a parallel cultural process to Symbolist art and poetry. Mythology, previously dismissed as inferior, primitive and superseded by Christian theology, was revived as post-Enlightenment secularization forced Christianity from the centre to the periphery of Western culture. Its chief scholar and popularizer, James George Frazer (1854-1931), produced the encyclopaedic *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890 (in two volumes) and culminating in the third edition of 1911-15 (thirteen volumes). This revaluation of myth combined with the popularity of the romance form provided the crucible in which modern fantasy was forged. It has already been noted that the content and critique of fantasy has much in common with the status of mythology in modern Western from Frazer to the present century.

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Fantasy, like its relative myth, has been defined by what it is not. This stems from a peculiarly Western perspective inherited from ancient Greek philosophy in which myth is defined by its opposition to “reality” (i.e. myth is fictional) and to rationality (i.e. myth is irrational). This sets up a series of problematic paradoxes attempting to separate the real from the non-real and the rational from the irrational in a limiting dualistic manner that has never been adequately resolved by Western philosophy. If we examine the etymology of “myth”, we see that it originally meant “story” or “narrative”, but as Coupe states, “in time what the Greeks called mythos was separated out from, and deemed inferior to, logos [word]. The former came to signify fantasy; the latter, rational argument”. With this in mind, it is not so surprising that fantasy, as the defining Other against which modernism, realism, high literature, and science fiction define themselves, frequently comes under the rubric of mythos where the opposing other excludes itself as logos and therefore legitimate.

6.4 The significance of political Romantic anti-modernism

T. J. Jackson Lears argues that at around the turn of the twentieth century, there was a spread of “anti-modern” sentiment amongst the educated upper and middle classes in both Europe and America. The very people who had benefited most from modern culture began to “recoil from an ‘overcivilized’ modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience supposedly embodied in medieval or Oriental cultures.” But what is most important about Lears’s analysis of anti-modernism is his insistence that:

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55 Ibid.
56 Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004). In Chapter 1, “Muthos and Philosophia”, Brisson explains how the shift from oral to literary culture involved the devaluation of narrative (the chief means by which memory encoded knowledge prior to writing), 5-14.
Anti-modernism was not simply escapism; it was ambivalent, often coexisting with enthusiasm for material progress... Far from being the nostalgic flutterings of a "dying elite", as historians have claimed, anti-modernism was a complex blend of accommodation and protest which tells us a great deal about the beginning of present-day values and attitudes.  

It is important to pay attention to the commonplace and unexamined use of the word "nostalgia" in cultural criticism, as it is often used pejoratively in order to dismiss discourses that oppose or challenge many of the primary ideologies of modernity, particularly the notion of "progress". Manifestations of medievalism such as Romanticism and fantasy literature (which, as I have demonstrated, participate in the Othering of the Middle Ages by modernity) are often accused synonymously as being "nostalgic", retrogressive, escapist, the ideological function of their invocations of the (pre-modern) past as kulturkritik thereby obscured by negatively loaded rhetoric and dismissed as anachronistic and socially irrelevant. Such rhetoric overlooks the complexity and ambiguity of anti-modern discourses, as Jackson-Lears states.

David Lowenthal also recognizes the subversive potential of "nostalgia" as a critique of the present in the post-war years of the twentieth century, noting that there was a proliferation of nostalgic sentiments, especially amongst the middle-classes and expressed in popular media and fictions, of people wishing that they lived "at the turn of the century", or "when life was simpler", in "the good old days".  

A character in a science fiction novel of the early 1960s states tellingly, "For the first time in man's history, man is desperate to escape the present." Lowenthal notes that until the 1970s, the values, discourses and rhetoric of modernity still held great appeal for the

Western middle-classes, and the idea of being “modern”, with all that entailed (faith in material and economic progress, scientific advancement and technological innovation as a cure to all ills), had not yet lost its charm, and literatures of “nostalgia” were yet fairly scarce. The loss of “faith” in modernity and “progress” in the 1960s and 1970s manifested variously in the post-modern “crisis” of Reason, expressed in popular declamations of the “woes” of the present, prompting the observation that “the profusion and frankness of our nostalgia... suggest not merely a sense of loss and a time in trouble, but a general abdication, an actual desertion from the present.”

The “nostalgic” element of many modern fantasy narratives may thus be regarded both as a symptom of social malaise and as a way of reaffirming social cohesion and a sense of identity at times when “fundamental, taken-for-granted convictions about man, woman, habits, manners, laws, society and God [are] challenged, disrupted and shaken”. This connects well with William Morris's utopian ideals, if the understanding of “utopia” in its original (etymological) sense, as “no-place”, “that which does not yet exist anywhere” is strictly adhered to. It is important to realize that these “no places” have their roots in their creators’ discontent with the present, and utilize selective understandings of the past, and that “[w]ithout nostalgia for the past there can be no dream of an authentic future.”

6.5 Modern fantastic medievalism
The investigatory potential of the concept of genre fantasy as a field of cultural production is thus made clear in its emphasis on the inclusion of critical, historical

60 Lowenthal, The Past Is a Foreign Country, 12.
61 Ibid.
62 Löwy and Sayre, Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity, 254.
63 Ibid., 255.
and cultural contexts informing the reading of texts. Methodologies that ignore the
social and historical contexts of literary texts or unreflectingly downgrade popular
fantasy as merely a commercial formula circumscribe and inhibit more wide-ranging
conclusions about the cultural significance of fantasy's Romanticism, persisting as part
of a milieu of social protest, and effectively work to prevent a more nuanced
conception of modernity itself as a complex field of struggle between orthodox and
heterodox groups, values and ideologies.

The conjunction of the medieval, the Romantic sublime and the natural form a
strong ideological current used to bolster cultural critiques of modernity that
culminated in their present form in the highly influential and widely imitated works
of J. R. R. Tolkien, the progenitor of the modern fantasy genre. By examining the
development of conventions of fantasy such as its narrative form, (drawn from
medieval romance) in their historical and cultural contexts, it is plain to see that
contemporary genre fantasy has become a useful cultural vehicle for the expression of
certain "alternative" or heterogeneous ideas, through its gradual accretion of cultural
and symbolic value as a representative of structural alterity. Fantasy represents a
discursive space that nurtures explorations of the Romantic paradigm and its
challenge to "the epistemological and ontological hegemony of the rationalist
paradigm".64 The Romantic construction of the medieval as iconic "Other" is one of
the lasting myths of modernity, and has retained its deep symbolic and cultural value
as a medium for social critique. This antinominal impetus is exploited vigorously in
modern fantasy.

Recently, interest in the Middle Ages has manifested in twentieth-century
"alternative" and popular culture, such as the "New Age" spirituality movement,

64 Chantal Bourgault Du Coudray, "The Curse of the Werewolf: Nature, Culture and the Self
since the Enlightenment" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2001).
“Dungeons and Dragons” role-playing games, and Hollywood films including *The Princess Bride* (1987), *The Fisher King* (1991), the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (2002-4) and George Lucas’s *Star Wars* franchise, and medieval-inspired comics and graphic novels. It is noticeable that all of these expressions of medievalism have strong connections with fantasy literature. For example, Christopher Frayling comments that “Heavy Metal” music represents “one of the strongest images of the Middle Ages to have emerged from within contemporary popular culture; a shaggy image, of darkness, brute force and irrationality,” with an “iconography which manages to conflate Tolkien’s *Hobbit*, the Book of Revelation, Goths and Vikings, Celtic myth, sorcery, the Black Death and motorbikes.”

Recreational groups, role-playing and computer games, along with fandom and specialised fantasy and science fiction conventions, form an important part of commercial fantasy’s “social matrix.” The medieval past has been imbued with a sense of being more vivid and dramatic than our own age, with its colourful costumes and customs, and is an attractive alternative to “mundane” life in the everyday world. The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), for example, combines recreational medieval re-enactments and an awareness of fantasy’s link with historical and idealized medievalism. The group was started in California in 1966 by a group of science fiction and fantasy fans, one of whom was Marion Zimmer Bradley, neo-pagan, Liberal Catholic priest, and best-selling author of the feminist Celtic-Arthurian fantasy, *The Mists of Avalon*. Today it comprises more than 25,000 members.

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world-wide who strive to selectively recreate the Middle Ages “as they should have been”.

Umberto Eco, Italian medievalist, semiotician and author of the bestselling medieval detective story *The Name of the Rose*, stated in the 1980s that “the Return of the Middle Ages” was a “hot topic”:

We are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination.

What we are witnessing is a collective endeavour to seek relevance in the medieval past and relate it to contemporary needs and society. Eco himself tends to be dismissive of popular cultural manifestations of “fantastic neomedievalism” such as *Star Wars*, Disneyland and *Conan the Barbarian* as an “avalanche of pseudo-medieval pulp in paperbacks, midway between Nazi nostalgia and occultism”, that is hardly worthy of serious academic consideration; though he willingly entertains the notion of “a new feudalism”, consisting of “post-modern neomedieval Manhattan new castles such as the Citicorp Centre and Trump Tower...with their courts open to peasants and merchants and the well-protected high-level apartments reserved for the lords.”

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67 “Sword and Sorcery” fantasy author Poul Anderson also belonged to the SCA, which Lin Carter described as “a rather enormous group of people interested in Medievalism who regularly hold tournaments and revels in ancient costume... These tournaments, by the way, are serious and very beautiful.” Poul Anderson, *The Broken Sword*. Lin Carter ed. (London: Sphere Books, 1971 [1954]).

68 Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Minerva, 1986), 63. The whole of Section 2: The Return of the Middle Ages, from pp. 61-85, is relevant to this topic.

69 Eco’s cavalier attitude to “fantastic neomedievalism” reflects common assumptions about modern popular culture as a mass-produced commodity, passively consumed by a largely unthinking and easily manipulated audience, that is reproduced regularly in academic discourse and serves to perpetuate the high culture/low culture divide established in the heyday of modernism in the 1920s Domenico Pietropaolo suggests that “The study of medievalism in art and literature should be as independent as is logically possible from pre-established notions of aesthetic and intellectual excellence, since its material expressions must include works representative of the entire hierarchy of culture, from the trivialization of the medieval world in amusement parks to its sublimation in the recondite
While medievalism is not a new phenomenon, it is undeniable that the “fantastic Neomedievalism” of modern fantasy fiction has had a huge impact and influence on the direction the English-speaking world’s fascination with the medieval has had since the 1960s. The “oscillation” between academic and popular medievalism Eco refers to, is more accurately viewed as a fusion of fantastic idealisation and scholarly neomedievalism in many works of contemporary fantasy, as well as in its literary antecedents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{70}

The approach I use here for understanding Romantic and contemporary popular medievalism (for example in generic fantasy), is nicely summarized by John Simons, who defines medievalism as:

A process by which the Middle Ages is experienced as an historical entity capable of offering meaningful and even satisfying intellectual, aesthetic, political, and religious images to subsequent societies. This is to say that medievalism is the process by which the Middle Ages is transformed into a useful discourse out of which can be produced ideologies and practices which comment upon or contest other contemporary beliefs”.\textsuperscript{71}

Approaching fantasy from this medievalist stance has enabled my investigation of some of the ideological functions and values of fantasy today. I maintain that medievalism operates strongly within the genre of modern fantasy, functioning to

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\textsuperscript{70} Many writers of contemporary fantasy are themselves medieval scholars, including C. J. Cherryh, Sara Douglass, and Ursula Le Guin (who has a degree in Renaissance literature). Others, such as Mary Gentle, Kate Elliott, and George R. R. Martin are notable for the meticulous research into the society and customs of the Middle Ages that informs their epic fantasies. George R. R. Martin, A Song of Ice and Fire (Series) (London: Voyager, HarperCollins, 1996-) draws on the history of the War of the Roses, and Kate Elliott’s Prince of Dogs, Crown of Stars (Series) (London: Orbit, 1997-). Volume 2 includes a bibliographic note detailing her research into the life of the early medieval saint Radegund, Macrobius’s Commentary on the Dream of Scipio and histories of Merovingian and Ottonian courtly and clerical culture.

implicitly comment upon and contest many of the social conditions and beliefs of modernity, such as rationalist materialism, scientific reductionism and consumer capitalism, associated with the overvaluation of Reason above the sphere of Nature. The re-conceptualisation of the Middle Ages as being able to offer “meaningful and ... satisfying intellectual, aesthetic, political, and religious images to subsequent societies” challenges the entrenched assumption that fantasy's medievalist imagery automatically generates, or is a product of, a nostalgic, conservative, escapist and ultimately irrelevant worldview.

My research into the ideological and functional underpinnings of genre fantasy takes existing studies on fantasy's Romantic elements one step further, suggesting that fantasy has not only developed out of and been informed by the historical Romantic movement, but that it exerts an on-going transformative influence upon the world today as a neo-Romantic discourse that participates in the cultural sphere of contemporary spirituality and environmentalism. I argue that fantasy literature can be viewed ideologically as part of a broader societal reaction against the rationalistic, anti-heroic, materialist and empiricist discourses upon which modern Western culture and society are founded – in other words, it perpetuates and revitalizes the Romantic worldview in the contemporary world.

6.6 Conclusion

Medievalism in modern fantasy can be seen as part of a process of transformation, whereby “a new readership is incorporated within the dialogue of past and present in which it finds the narratives necessary to define itself and the representations of experiences which provide aesthetic contrasts to its own”.72 Modern fantasy did not assume its contemporary from until after World War II and after the publications of

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J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Lewis and Tolkien used fantasy to articulate a romantic protest against the shape and structures of the contemporary world and to assert that humanity must renew its relationships with its past, the natural world, and the spiritual realm.\(^73\) Both these authors were devout Christians, as was their older contemporary G. K. Chesterton, who early on wrote “The Ethics of Elfland,” in which a belief in the “blood of the gods” running in veins of ordinary folk was expressed, to justify the use of folk traditions, legends, fairy tales as sources of wisdom. Chesterton eventually became a Roman Catholic and employed Christian terminology to express the sacredness of every human being. He also looked back to Romantic image of medieval as example of ideal community, unified by shared religion and shared sense of purpose, yet diverse and varied in unique local traditions and customs; a democratic statement of spontaneous “folk culture” arising from the grassroots of society, not imposed by elites.\(^74\)

It is clear that medievalism is a heterogenous phenomenon, rather than a monolithic construction. It is capable of subsuming Morris’s atheism, Chesterton’s Roman Catholicism, and Ruskin’s anti-Catholicism, but there is nevertheless a shared faith in the Romantic rejection of the modernist industrialized life, and a quest for reintegration of humanity with itself, community and environment.

It is worth reproducing in full a passage from *Bureacracy in Modern Society* (published by Peter Blau and Marshall Meyer in 1971) that perfectly captures the idealized “Golden Age” representation of the Middle Ages in the late twentieth century:

Much of the magic and mystery that used to pervade human life and lend it enchantment has disappeared from the modern world. This is largely

\(^73\) Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain*, 39.

\(^74\) Ibid., 30–6.
the price of rationalisation. In olden times, nature was full of mysteries, and man’s most serious intellectual endeavours were directed toward discovering the ultimate meaning of his existence. Today, nature holds fewer secrets for us. Scientific advances, however, have not only made it possible to explain many natural phenomena but have channelled human thinking. Modern man is less concerned than, say, medieval man was with ultimate values and symbolic meanings, with those aspects of mental life that are not subject to scientific inquiry, such as religious truth and artistic creation.\textsuperscript{75} [my italics]

Implicit here is a dissatisfaction with, and critique of, the rational materialism and scepticism engendered by scientific thought. "Progress" is regarded as ultimately dehumanizing, and "scientific advance" is specifically pinpointed as stripping away the "mystery" and "enchantment" of the world, leaving it spiritually barren and meaningless. There is a yearning for the richness and "authenticity" that medieval life is imagined to possess, and a lament for the lost "sense of wonder" that less "rational" people feel in relation to the natural world. As C. S. Lewis once put it, the Middle Ages are imagined as "a larger, brighter, bitterer, more dangerous world than ours."\textsuperscript{76}

The overwhelming Catholicism of the Middle Ages, with its belief in the supernatural (saints, miracles, sacred relics, witchcraft and mystical experience) provides a powerful image of an age of spirituality, which is then sharply contrasted with the image of the sanitized, spiritually barren and unfulfilling late twentieth century of mass capitalism and industrialization. The medieval world of modern fantasy literature is persistently portrayed as a time when life was rich, satisfying and authentic: people had causes to fight for that imbued existence with meaning and purpose. This is, of course, a very selective and positive view of the Middle Ages. An

\textsuperscript{75} Charles Elkins, "An Approach to the Social Functions of Science Fiction and Fantasy", In \textit{The Scope of the Fantastic: Culture, Biography, Themes, Children's Literature (Selected Essays from the First International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature and Film)}, Robert A. Collins and Howard D. Pearce, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 29.

\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in Norman Cantor, \textit{Inventing the Middle Ages}, 213.
equally valid image of the medieval world is the barbaric, brutal, filthy world of Vikings and the Inquisition, of oppressed and starving peasants, of fanatical and bloodthirsty crusades and heresy hunts - a time of lawlessness and chaos, where women (and many men) had little freedom, and life-expectancy was short.

Although this chapter details a range of political uses of medievalism, the type of Romantic protest employed by both Lewis and Tolkien expressed their fear, as "old-fashioned Tories," that post-War Britain would decline into an impersonal and bureaucratic state, which they saw as a threat to local community cohesion and the personal freedom of individuals. They criticized the negative aspects of the welfare state's indifference to ordinary people's lives in an effort to aid "the greater good". This focus on the power and significance of ordinary individuals' actions choices is very obvious in Lord of the Rings, as is its author's faith in friendship, intellectual effort, and the relevance of past history to the present. Tolkien's work should be read in the context of the Great Wars of the early twentieth century, and grew in part out of his own personal experiences in the trenches of World War 1. Tolkien managed to capture in The Lord of the Rings a sense of the monstrosity of modernity: world wars, extermination camps, and fascism, equating modernity with "Mordor", the blighted wasteland of evil. His Romantic anti-modernism fundamentally challenged the modernist rhetoric and ideology of "progress" which describes the horrors of war as properly belonging to a less "civilized", primitive past, a regression into "barbarity". This means that people are astonished that such horrors are still possible "in our time", in the twenty-first century. Yet these horrors made possible by industrial modernity. There is nothing comparable in the past, or even amongst so-called "savage" peoples. Technology and industrial development are what

77 Ibid., 92.
has made such atrocities possible. Against this backdrop, Romanticism appears as a beacon of sanity and moral commitment: Coleridge noted that:

I do not doubt, however, that it is sometimes good to contemplate in the mind, as in a picture, the image of a greater and better world; otherwise the intellect, habituated to the petty things of daily life, may too much contract itself, and wholly sink down to trivial thoughts.

Romanticism, constructed as a worldview that specifically opposes many of the dominant values, ideologies and social conditions of modernity, offers a variety of alternative perspectives that attempt (in differing degrees of success) to escape from the dualistic logic governing modern Western culture. The discourses of Romanticism I have delineated (such as fantastic neo-medievalism) offer the possibility of envisaging an alternative to modernity and capitalism, a “third alternative” offering the promise of overcoming the dialectic of opposition, seeking “a new culture, a new oneness with nature, a new community.”

In conclusion, the Romantic critics have focussed unerringly on the dark underside of bourgeois thought and the liberal individualist worldview: the irrevocable loss of traditional human and cultural values, alienation and anomie, the degradation of nature, the inevitable and unrestrained dominance of technology (both positive and negative), and the reduction of life to quantifiable data. They have frequently been accused of being backward-looking, nostalgic, ultra right-wing elitists, but it is difficult not to agree with Löwy and Sayre’s assessment that the Romantics “have brought to light the harm done by Western modernization.”

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82 Ibid.
Chapter 7

Imagining alternatives: fantasy and alternative spirituality

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious; it is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.

Albert Einstein (1930)

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that fantasy’s utilization of the Romantic discourses of the sublime, holism and affect, advance an implicitly spiritual worldview. I argue that this forms part of the genre’s appeal to the secularized, individualistic ethos of post-Christian religiosity. Fantasy expresses many of the countercultural values that have been gradually incorporated into the mainstream of Western culture since the 1960s, constituting a vital part of an ongoing cultural substratum of Romantic thought in contemporary society.

There are close connections between genre fantasy and religio-spiritual discourses. I have already noted the relationship of romance-derived fantasy narrative and mythology, where meaning is created for a particular culture through the oral performance of Story. The opposition between Reason and Nature which has been traced in this thesis also highlights significant congruences: when Enlightenment Reason triumphed, the traditional religion of the West, Christianity, was marginalized because of its non-empirical nature; and Romantic critics, whether Christian or not, all favoured the revival of “spiritual” attitudes to Nature and other quasi-mystical experiences. In Chapter 5 I noted that Western esoteric currents
(alchemy, astrology and occultism in general) were an implicit component of Romanticism, and this contributed to the conception of romance/fantasy (as literary forms) as deviant, which was reinforced by their popular reception. Sociologists often note that deviance can be used as an indicator of areas of possible social change, and the labelling of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* as “ctic” suggests that the values it espoused had become sites of struggle against those values proposed by dominant defining power groups. As David Chidester notes, the “inherently oppositional character of the notion of “religion” creates problems for the study of the subject, and furthermore, “the discourses and practices of popular culture raise problems of definition and analysis for the study of religion” as the very term “religion” is contested in popular cultural practices and beliefs.¹

Chapter 6 argued that Romantic discourses acted as a form of cultural criticism. This chapter adopts a sociological view of alternative spiritualities, employing Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s understanding of the “New Age” as inheriting a secularized version of Western Esotericism, which has always functioned as culture criticism against dominant Judeo-Christian ideals. This connects to the Reason/Nature dichotomy, in that esotericism accords primacy to experiential knowing, where Christianity prefers dogmatic formulations. Esotericism becomes a reservoir of ideas that have been Othered from or felt to be incompatible with dominant trends in Western culture; and a cultic milieu with an ethos of “seekership” develops, which mines this resource for values alternative to mainstream Western culture.²

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Fantasy’s inheritance from Romanticism includes the crucial notions of the sublime, the value of supernaturalism, and an aestheticized appreciation of the numinous. These concepts constitute an implicit religion; which fantasy and romance as moral literatures actively promoted. Scholars of religion have long argued that modernity is inevitably accompanied by the process of secularization; “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.” Initial formulations of the secularization thesis argued for the inevitable decline of religion, but early twenty-first century views suggest that much religious belief has become merely “invisible” or unrecognisable (e.g. private and interiorized, or pertaining to content not traditionally understood as religious), prompting a re-evaluation of traditional ways of defining religiosity. Oppressive public institutions and the alienation of the private individual, an unstructured private sphere and other consequences that Romantics directly attributed to Western modernity, contribute to a modern crisis of meaning. This chapter investigates ways in which fantasy literature and alternative spiritualities imagine alternatives to contemporary Western modernity.

7.2 Fantasy and religion

I started noticing in recent years increasing attention in the popular media to the idea that fantasy literature seems to have some sort of relationship to the “alternative culture” of the “New Age” spirituality movement, but exactly what that connection is, nobody seems to be able to define clearly. Some work has been done on the

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5 Ibid., 3-5.
6 Parts of this chapter are taken from my previous publication, Kim Selling, “Imagining Alternatives: Fantasy, New Age & the ‘Cultic Milieu’,” in Seeking the Centre, ed. Colette Rayment and Mark L. Byrne (Sydney: Religion, Literature and the Arts Press, 2002), 180-90.
connections between science fiction and countercultural movements, but these
studies are mostly oriented towards fandom and do not investigate fantasy’s historical
genealogy of Romanticism. The boom in the popularity of modern fantasy literature
in many ways parallels the growth and mainstreaming of what is known as “New Age”
alternative religiosity in the West since the mid-1970s. Scholarly observers have long
noted connections between fantasy and science fiction literature and alternative
spirituality and occult themes and social movements, but aside from the observation
that the association exists, little or no work appears to have been done in the area.7
In 1976, Studies in Religion giant Mircea Eliade observed, “The literature of fantasy
and the fantastic, especially in science fiction, is much in demand, but we still do not
know its intimate relationship with occult traditions”.8 Ten years later, Margot
Adler, a neopagan and scholar, stated “There has always been a relationship between
science fiction and the occult, but it has often baffled serious scholars”.9 Outside of
sociologically-oriented studies in religion, there is on the whole a great reluctance to
broach the relationship of popular religion and literature, perhaps because of a
continuing taboo against discussing religion in “secular-scientific” society, plus a
possible fear of accusations of partiality attached to such an approach.10 The result is

7 It is noteworthy that the majority of work in this area comes from a religious studies or sociological
perspective, rather than from a literary one. There remains a stigma attached to discussions of
religious perspectives within the literary field, particularly, I might add, non-Christian or non-
traditional religions. Some of the few literary examples that do discuss religious aspects of fantasy are:
Didier T. Jaén, “Mysticism, Esotericism, and Fantastic Literature”, The Scope of the Fantastic:
Theory, Technique, Major Authors, Robert A. Collins and Howard D. Pearce, ed., (Westport,
CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 105-11.; Michael Clifton, “Jewels of Wonder, Instruments of Delight:
Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Science Fantasy as Vision-Inducing Works”, Intersections: Fantasy
and Science Fiction, George Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP,
8 Mircea Eliade, “The Occult and the Modern World,” in Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural
9 Margot Adler, Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other
10 Adler for example states that “I have noticed that many intellectuals turn themselves off the
instant they are confronted with the words witchcraft, magic, occultism, and religion, as if such ideas
a dearth of scholarly analysis in an area that is ripe with possibilities for a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between social, cultural and artistic movements in the contemporary world.

I should clarify that there is a considerable amount of scholarly criticism dealing with religion in fantasy, but this tends to be almost exclusively Christian, engaging primarily with explicitly Christian authors, themes and morality. This is unsurprising given the dominating presence of Tolkien and the famous "Inklings," the Oxford Christian fantasists (Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams), in the field. The result is a fairly strong sub-genre of fantasy scholarship devoted to a Christian point of view, often with an implicit or explicitly committed theological agenda or ideological position. This work evinces a notable absence of critical comment on non-Christian religious perspectives and esoteric ("irrational") currents, and when such critical comment manifests it is generally hostile or polemical and oriented towards refuting the validity of both fantasy and popular unchurched religion in the field as a whole.

...words like witch and pagan do not rest easily in the mind or on the tongue." Ibid., 5.


12 Even here most explicitly religious work is most often delegated to special or separate anthologies in the field or to special interest publications, for example the journals New Age or Premise.

This chapter asserts that the fantastic in literature, and the occult are intimately linked through their status as structurally deviant groups and beliefs, setting themselves up as the Other; alternatives to dominant ideologies. I argue that fantasy is an “implicitly religious” literature intimately concerned with moral actions and “spiritual” feelings, and that it has in common with alternative religious movements not only a shared set of ideologies rooted in Romantic antimodernism, but also a shared community, indicative of an atmosphere of increased religious pluralism in most western industrialized countries during the latter half of the twentieth century. Gauging from the types of response elicited, and from which quarters, it is possible to build up a picture of the field of fantasy as a type of social deviance (that is, a site of ideological conflict) specific to the conditions of late-capitalist modernity, forming part of the same spectrum of heterodoxy as “New Age” religious movements. The two elements associated most negatively with fantastic fiction have been charges of “escapism” from the “real world” and the phenomenon of “fandom”, which is stigmatised as cultic behaviour. When examined, these criticisms are revealed as emotional rhetoric, having more to do with moral accusations directed at fantasy’s readership rather than solid criticism of the literature itself. I argue that the diverse New Age spirituality groups share in common dissatisfaction with the two main institutions of knowledge and morality in the modern West, namely science and institutional religion, and that they can be identified collectively as a cultural group (the “cultic milieu”) seeking alternative values and beliefs. Fantasy literature forms part of the creative substratum of this “cultic milieu” or social movement, which constitutes a powerful critique of the dominant worldview in contemporary industrialized societies.


14 See the discussion in Chapter 3 of the critical reception of Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings.

15 Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization”.
As discussed in Chapter 5, modernity is regarded as beginning with the Enlightenment, which is constructed as the great historical break with the past ushering in a modern, secular-scientific worldview. During the Enlightenment (from the late seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century), the triumph of Reason, built upon "an understanding of man as rational, autonomous and in control of the universe," emerged. The rise of the rational self, however, was constructed upon the categorical rejection of religion, the supernatural and mystical worldviews, a move which was resisted by the Romantic movement through its championing of the aesthetics of the sublime and the rise of the fantastic tale. The "fantastic" as defined by both Todorov and Tolkien (in Chapter 2), involves an aesthetic confrontation or relationship to the supernatural, the worldview of the superstitious, whether it be regarded a violent irruption of the supernatural ("the fantastic") into a secular world leading to the breakdown of the subject and madness (Todorov); or the sublime experience of wonder resulting in the reconciliation of the self to a renewed vision of wholeness (Tolkien).

Jane Shaw draws attention to the gendering of the Enlightenment rational self as the creation of a male elite, formed through the othering of the masses, women and the "irrational" lower orders of society. Enlightenment rationality was constructed through the rejection of religious practices, which were relegated to the domain of the supposedly less rational masses and popular belief, so that the idea of rationality was (and continues in fact to be) circumscribed by gender, education, social status and ethnicity. "Popular" religious culture was presumed to be different and separate from the intellectual culture of the elite in accordance with long-held dualistic beliefs that

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17 Ibid.
construct the popular as sharply and irrevocably divided from the privileged elite sphere and viewed as an inferior sphere of otherness. The story of modernity itself is tightly bound up with these notions of the rise of “rational man”, and the supposed decline of religion during the Enlightenment era. The domain of modern Reason has thus been founded upon the rejection of religious beliefs, practices, and discourses of the supernatural, the miraculous and revelation.18

Such strongly dualistic separations have since been challenged by the rise of poststructuralist theories in the 1990s however, and Shaw proposes that along with the rise of the “rational self”, the modern notion of “religious experience” also emerged during the Enlightenment as a mutually dependent (dualistic) category. Shaw suggests that the rational self was created through the distancing of intellectual concepts of Reason from everyday religious practice, with the rise of competing interpretations of miraculous events offered from the discourses of religion and the new objective scientific worldview.19 Shaw emphasises that “the rational self of the Enlightenment period needed such ‘irrational’ events in order to create his identity”.20 The creation of the rationalized, secular modern world in Enlightenment Reason is thus a dualistic construction of “denied dependency” founded upon the othering of the social experience of women and “the masses”, to whom “religion”, “irrationality” and “superstition” are attributed as negative qualities.

In this chapter I explore the connections between fantasy literature and religion (fantasy’s characterisation as a “cultic” phenomenon), proposing that fantasy’s status as a “popular” fiction means that it becomes more susceptible to negative evaluations of

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18 Ibid., 61-2.
19 Ibid., 64-7.
20 Ibid., 70.
popular-as-irrational, which becomes associated (through “linking postulates”\(^{21}\)) to the rationality/religion dualism created through the Enlightenment rejection of the supernatural. In an effort to reconstitute and break down the obstructive reductionism of such dualistic constructions, I argue instead that the view of modernity as thoroughly secularised is a false one, deriving from the rejection of religiosity gendered as female and devalued as popular. This dualistic opposition ignores the variety of contemporary religiosity in the West (for example in the rise of the “New Age” movement in the 1960s) and changing forms of “religious” experience which, following the massive social changes and rise of postmodern consumer-capitalism in the latter half of the twentieth century, have entailed a shift away from traditional religious forms (Western Christianity) and institutionalised religion, to a more individualistic, subjective “spirituality”.

Such an argument calls for a revision of traditional conceptions of “religion” and “religious experience” as institutionalised structures, towards more complex “psychologised” and sociological explanations which permit the existence of a plurality of religious-like experiences, including fantasy’s “sense of wonder” as part of the spectrum of modern aestheticized spirituality. I also draw connections between fantasy’s utilization of discourses of the Romantic sublime, characterized as a diffuse, non-institutionalised sense of “the sacred” or “the numinous”, as part of a quest for alternative ways of perceiving reality. This search for alterity I see functioning as part of wider discourses and social movements of anti-modern ideological protest that continue the project of Romanticism, regarded as an oppositional discourse to the

\(^{21}\) See Chapter 1 of this thesis; also Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993) on the association of different dualisms to Reason/Nature through linking postulates.
dominant values of modernism, but participating within the complex of "modernity" itself: "modernity's self-criticism".\textsuperscript{22}

Religion is generally defined by scholars as having to do with issues such as ultimate meanings and transcendence, engagement with forces outside human control, possibly but not necessarily involving supernaturalism or God(s). It is important to recognize that "religion" is a highly contested term, and that there is no single, accepted definition. Hence, in this thesis my working definition of religion (which is often more implicit than explicit, and could also be termed "spirituality") is that it is "the subjective disposition toward ultimacy" or "a potential ultimate that becomes sacred".\textsuperscript{23} This definition of religion differentiates itself from both historically recognized structures and institutions concretizing and expressing sets of belief codified in doctrine. The religious impulse in humanity, the "spiritual hope which must be accepted on faith", are beliefs or a form of knowledge not a rationally quantifiable or empirically provable. This is an anthropological view of the sacred as arising from and reflecting human social experience, hence "the sacred always reflects the social, yet it is not the worship of the social, but rather the feeble simultaneous seeking-grasping of a transformation of present social relations that we can imagine, yet not realize."\textsuperscript{24} This evinces a strong parallel with fantasy literature: religion and mythology often appear to discuss matters and realities remote from everyday concerns, yet they stem from such concerns; fantasy narratives describe worlds very different from late capitalist modernity, yet spring from and critique that reality. Both religion and fantasy have utopian aspects, expressing ways of making this world more acceptable, especially in coming to terms with death, disease, and injustice.


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
Religion can offer an explanation for evil, and play an important role in consolation and comfort (as Tolkien noted); and heroes and saviours in fantasy literature are thus very appealing. The two are also linked by the fact that they both attract “seekers” because seeking for otherness, for betterment, stems from dissatisfaction with social formations and the desire to find better ways of satisfying human needs and yearnings.

Debates still rage about what constitutes “secularization”, a term which began to have currency in the sociological field from the late 1950s, becoming “the reigning dogma” in the sociology of religion by the 1970s. Secularization posits the “loss of functionality of religion”, its increasing relegation to the private, rather than the public sphere of life. Wilson states that where the legitimising institutions of authority for social control and knowledge were once dependent upon religious sanction and endorsement, social control and authority in the modern West is now located in constitutional institutions – secular law, government, and a system of knowledge based on doubt/critical scepticism rather than faith. In short, according to this model, “Religion has lost its presidency over other institutions” which is demonstrated by the (supposed) reduced influence of religion in public spheres of authority. Indeed, “the underlying assumption was that ‘people’ have become or are becoming ‘less religious’”. Significantly, like the discourse of Romantic antimodernism, secularization was a statement about the present, intimately linked to an ideological image of the past; in other words, the belief in the decline of present day religiosity was based on notions of high levels of religiosity in the past. However, it is important to note that “secularization, secularity, or the secular is always relative

57 Ibid.
to some definition of *religion* or the religious*.*28 The most damning evidence against the viability of the "secularization thesis" (which declares the demise and decline of religious belief with the advent of industrialization and modernity), has been the growth and persistence of New Religious Movements (NRM)s in the "secular" West, as well as the very real and strong presence of religion in the world political arena (e.g. Israel, the Middle East, Ireland). Whilst the traditional religion of Christianity appears to be in decline in the West, alternative forms of religiosity have been gaining ground since the 1960s.29

Some signs indicating that there is a connection between fantasy literature and "New Age" or alternative religiosity movements, have been noted in media accounts of the "cultic" element of fantasy, as well as in the hostility of many traditional Christian churches towards a perceived "occult" element present in some fantasy literature.30 My curiosity was fuelled by noticing bookshop groupings of New Age, occult, myth, and fantasy literature together, as well as noting how often discussions of fantasy and science fiction literature in mass media were peppered with allusions to "cults", New Agers, and religion, usually in a negative and sensationalized manner. Many "literary" media observations, reviews and opinion pieces link fantasy literature with cultic movements and stereotyped social behaviour such as fandom, often using this angle to cast aspersions upon the readership and community comprising the genre.31 One example of this type of assertion is a review in *The Guardian* newspaper by Andrew Rissik of academic Tom Shippey's *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, entitled "Middle Earth, Middlebrow". In a highly pejorative tone, Rissik states: "Professor

30 Most notoriously J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" fantasy series, undoubtedly due to its phenomenal popularity and extensive media coverage.
31 The links between Tolkien's opus and "cult" groups was also noted in J. S. Ryan's thesis "Tolkien: Cult or Culture" (Armidale, N.S.W.: University of New England, 1969).
Shippey's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* is a belligerently argued piece of fan magazine polemic. Rissik asserts that Tolkien was a "secular mystic", and his books are full of "prepubertal moral certainties", an "escape into dream", a "childlike... never-never land" whose work is only regarded as worthwhile by "hard-core Tolkien addicts who have elevated his books to the status of a cult", furthermore opining that "I doubt whether popularity has any significance." My argument is that contrary to this opinion, popularity is of great significance.

What we are witnessing is a power struggle between different social groups: the elite bastion of "highbrow" academics in the literary institution and the media, and the supposedly ignorant mass population (the average reader) for control over determining what constitutes "literature" and aesthetic taste. The literature of the fantastic is contested not only within academia, but also within segments of the wider society: witness the controversy over J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" books which have caused a furore within certain segments of the Christian community and have been banned from many Christian schools, such as the Christian Outreach College on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. Rowling's fantasy books have been so widely accused of, amongst other things, encouraging witchcraft and occultism that a Vatican bull clearing Rowling's intent was apparently issued in order to settle the

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32 Andrew Rissik, "Middle Earth, Middlebrow," *The Guardian Weekly*, September 14-20, 2000. This kind of assertion is only too typical of much of the literary establishment's (unexamined) assessment of popular fantasy literature, as discussed in Part 1, Chapter 3 of this thesis.
33 As discussed in Chapter 3, Why are critics afraid of dragons?
34 Stephanie Peatling, "Wizard Warning for Young Christian Minds", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 2001, reports that the Rev Robert Frisken, head of Christian Community Schools Ltd, comprising about one hundred independent schools in Australia, was concerned at the "inversion of morality" perceived in the Harry Potter books, (which have sold more than 30 million copies worldwide) and wrote cautioning letters to parents saying the books should carry "warning stickers". The report also states that the Bega Valley Christian College in NSW will not stock the books in its school library, and that the American Library Association found them "the most challenged books of 1999" with efforts to censor Harry Potter in libraries and schools reported in nineteen states in the U.S.A.
question. What is the meaning and significance of this umbrage over fantasy texts within the primary religious institution in the modern West, the Christian Church?

7.3 Deviance and the cultic milieu

We already have one major clue in the (now fairly common) linkage of the word “cult” with fantasy literature. Fantasy author Terry Pratchett comments,

_The Lord of the Rings_ is a cult classic. I know that’s true, because I read it in the newspapers, saw it on the TV, heard it on the radio. We know what “cult” means. It’s a put-down word. It means “inexplicably popular but unworthy.” It’s a word used by the guardians of the one true flame to dismiss anything that is liked by the wrong kind of people.  

Pratchett draws a clear connection between fantasy’s popularity with the masses and its status as a “cult”. In Chapter 3 I discussed the dualistic relationship between “high” status culture favoured by powerful elites (and disseminated as the norm by the apparatus of the mass media) and popular culture, devalued precisely because it is valued by the masses, “the wrong kind of people”.

Though “cult” means “a system of religious worship; devotion, homage, to a person or thing”, deriving from the Latin “cultus”, to worship⁷, the term has come to have generally negative overtones. According to Chidester, the term “cult” has derogatory associations in lay terminology through its long usage in the religious discourse of:

an extensive and pervasive anti-cult campaign that has endeavoured to deny the status of “religion” to a variety of new religious movements by

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³⁵ See also the short piece on the contents of the Vatican bull concerning Harry Potter in the popular female-oriented _Witchcraft_ magazine, _32_ (2003), 12.

³⁶ Pratchett in Karen Haber, ed., _Meditations on Middle Earth_ (New York: Byron Preiss, St Martin’s Press, 2001), 75.

labelling them as entrepreneurial businesses, politically subversive movements, or coercive, mind-controlling, and brain-washing "cults".  

In fact, he continues, "the basic opposition between 'religion' and 'superstition'... has been crucial to the very definition of religion in Western culture", which means that "cults" become "superstition" and are therefore regarded as more morally suspect than organized "religion". This highlights how difference has been utilized by dominant or powerful groups in society to create dualistic oppositions through discourses of "mastery", where the values of the powerful are hyper-differentiated from groups perceived as oppositional, threatening or engaged in social competition with the dominant group. The religion/superstition binary further more engages the rational/irrational, Reason/Nature dualities, where superstition is constructed as heretical, uncanonical, and unclean; in other words, the use of "cult" and notions of irreligion are always implicated in methods of social control to defuse perceived threats to the establishment.

Even within sociological debate use of the word "cult" has been problematic. By the 1980s, the concept of "cult" was widely regarded as too emotionally loaded to be of use to scientific debate, and was gradually dropped in academic discourses on religion. However, prior to the widespread demonization of the term, Colin Campbell in 1972 referred to the sociological concept of cult as "any religious or quasi-religious collectivity, which is loosely organized, ephemeral and espouses a

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38 David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball", 760.

39 "The ancient Latin term religio, indicating an authentic, careful, and faithful way of acting, was defined by its opposite superstition, a kind of conduct that was originally based on ignorance, fear, or fraud." Ibid., 748.

40 See for example Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) for anthropological theories of social control and concepts of "purity" and social "liminality".

41 Swatos and Christiano note that within the discipline of sociology, "to term a group a cult is sociological bad manners: it biases analyses from the start", so much like the concept of "race", "cult" is used as a reference term to popular usage in inverted commas. "Secularization Theory," 209.
deviant system of belief and practice. 

Cults are often mistaken for sects in lay terminology, though they are structurally very different. Sects are generally highly organized, tightly-knit religious groups centred on a charismatic leader figure, such as the Church of Scientology or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and generally espouse a single creed. “Cults” on the other hand, tend to be ephemeral, unstable and unstructured groups that make few demands on their members. They tend to have fluctuating belief systems and undefined boundaries, making them highly individualistic and usually tolerant of other belief systems.

There is thus a sharp distinction between “cult” and “sect”, in sociological terminology based on the social cohesion of these groups, where sects are rigidly defined, stable, structured groups with clearly defined beliefs that last over time, that make many demands on members, and tend to be intolerant and exclusivist, as opposed to the loose-knit, individualistic community of “cults”, where members do not often act in common as a group. Many Christian groups (such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and so forth) are therefore actually “sects”, while Neo-paganism or Wicca have “cultic” qualities. The labelling of any social group as “cult” or “sect” therefore, is determined not by any innate properties or set of beliefs, but rather through the social alterity of the group, its perceived status or difference in relation to normative, institutionalized religions (such as mainstream Western Christianity, Islam or Buddhism).

“Cultic” phenomena are therefore regarded from a sociological perspective as deviant groups, that is, groups of any persuasion not associated with dominant or

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42 Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” 120.
44 Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” 120-1.
45 Campbell argues that the “special character of cultic groups [stems] from their deviant or heterodox position in relation to the dominant societal culture.” Ibid., 120.
institutionalized religions and are therefore regarded as Other. Deviance, as a sociological term, inheres difference from a given social norm, a “centre”, of behaviour, belief or lifestyle, and is universally present in human societies. It is important to note that deviance is always culturally relative, as it has to be understood in the context of its social system.\(^{46}\) Deviance necessarily implies social conflict, and is typified by situations where “individuals or loosely organized small groups with little power are strongly feared by a well organized, sizable minority, or majority, who have a large amount of power”, (i.e., the classical situation for the formation of dualistic structures).\(^{47}\) These sites of conflict are often indicative of areas where social change and the re-negotiation of cultural values might be taking place.\(^{48}\) It is therefore possible to see how the aforementioned conflict between segments of the established Christian Church and the perception of cultic or occult associations with fantastic literature can be understood in light of changing patterns of religious belief and behaviour in contemporary western society. The cultic association of fantasy and science fiction arises not only from the well-known sectarian beliefs of the Church of Scientology (established by science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard in 1954),\(^{49}\) as well as the Church of All Worlds (inspired by Robert Heinlein’s science fiction novel, \textit{Stranger in a Strange Land}, founded 1962)\(^{50}\); but also from the “cultic” qualities of fandom, which Michael Jindra argues “exists in the liminal area between


\(^{47}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{48}\) For example, the dualistic conflict of high/low culture outlined in Chapter 3 reflects changing forms of cultural production and changing patterns of social mobility at the turn of the nineteenth century, and is related to the realism/romance divide (Chapter 5) as well as the “crisis” of English studies and the rise of “theory” (Chapter 1) in the postmodern era.


entertainment and seriousness” and is stigmatised because of the “religious” behaviour of adherents, as well as its deviance from institutional religious beliefs and practices. Furthermore, the shared literary sources of fantastic fictions in non-Christian myth, romance, legend, astrology, magic and witchcraft is common to a broad range of popular modern-day “cults”, primarily the “New Age” spectrum of heterodox beliefs which is set up in opposition to “religion” as well as “science” in Western culture.

The prevalence of “cultic” groups depends on the presence of a nurturing social environment which Colin Campbell defined in 1972 as the “cultic milieu”: the “cultural underground” of deviant beliefs and practices that is always present, though at times less visible, in society. The “cultic milieu” is the supportive environment that generates new cultic beliefs and cult-prone individuals. This “milieu” is characterized by mysticism, pre-Christian pagan traditions, the occult, magic, as well as deviant science and technologies. Despite their apparent diversity, all these beliefs/practices can be regarded as constituting the single entity of the cultic milieu. The beliefs and discourses of the cultic milieu includes not only occultism and magic, spiritualism and psychic phenomena, but also alternative medicine, faith healing, lost civilizations, UFO-logy, alien abductions and conspiracy theories, held together by a common position as heterodox in relation to dominant cultural orthodoxies, and facilitated by “magazines, periodicals, books, pamphlets, lectures, demonstrations and informal meetings through which its beliefs and practices are discussed and

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52 As I discussed in Chapter 5, medieval romances (the precursors of modern fantasy) were often prized precisely for their “pagan”, pre-Christian themes.
53 Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” 120.
54 Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 16.
disseminated.\textsuperscript{55} Hence literatures of the fantastic (science fiction, fantasy, horror), can be viewed as part of the communication structure of the cultic milieu, participating more generally in the spread and currency of alternative or heterodox worldviews, beliefs and ideas.

7.4 The New Age movement and cultural criticism

The “New Age” spirituality movement grew from the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s in the Western industrialized world, the term itself originating from widespread enthusiastic predictions about the imminent dawn of a new epoch, the “New Age of Aquarius”, characterised by humanism, a sense of community and a growth of occult knowledge.\textsuperscript{56} The term as we now understand it however, only came into common currency during the 1980s-90s with the mainstreaming of the New Age, as a standard expression conveying a general idea of alternative cultural trends, connoting ideas and practices concerned with “spirituality”.\textsuperscript{57} The New Age is regarded as a religious “movement”, suggesting broad shifts in religious ideas and sensibilities, and is directly related to rapid social change in Western society after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{58} “New Age” lumps together a vague and eclectic assortment of groups and interests, including neo-pagan and neo-Christian religions, UFO-cults, alchemy, occultism, astrology, alternative or “natural” medicines such as herbalism, aromatherapy and crystal healing. The very difficulty of defining the New Age, “its vagueness and its fluency” strongly suggests characteristics of the cultic milieu, as well as the fact that the New Age is not one organized group but rather it encompasses many cults, whilst subgroups within it develop and disappear all the time.\textsuperscript{59} It is to be

\textsuperscript{55} Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,”, 122-3
\textsuperscript{56} Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 1-12.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{59} Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 1.
noted that not all New Religious Movements are "New Age", although New Age has become a loose umbrella term synonymous with all culturally deviant new religious movements, including those who reject the label or are indifferent to it.

Predominant strands influencing New Age thinking are eco-feminism, environmentalism, anti-industrialist and anti-technology sentiments. There is a resurgence of interest in Eastern spirituality, Celtic revival, European paganism, and marginal religious groups such as heretical sects, millenialists, Gnostics, pagans and witches. The emphasis on mystical enlightenment and the search for unity with Nature and the universe is a major theme, and is especially marked in "nature" religions such as strands of Neo-paganism, Wicca, Druidism and worship of the Mother Goddess. The strong influence of popular medievalism and feminism on New Age religiosity, particularly since the 1970s, is evident for example in the New Age reinterpretation of the medieval saint Hildegard, who is regarded in some circles as a "manifestation of the Goddess" or the "Abess of eco-feminism". This kind of popular medievalism is shared by fantasy literature, Romanticism and New Age beliefs, suggesting a structural and ideological communality. The "otherness" of medieval literature and society as a repository of "authentic" myth and spirituality holds a deep fascination for both New Age religion and fantasy literature, and indicates their common source in Romanticism.

The most comprehensive and persuasive definition or explanation of the New Age phenomenon to date is Wouter Hanegraaff’s model of the New Age as kulturkritik or "cultural criticism": a cultural sub-stratum (the cultic milieu) of beliefs intended to provide alternatives to normative or dominant value systems in society. This sociological model follows Colin Campbell’s view of cults and cultic phenomena as

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examples of cultural deviancy. Campbell noted earlier that there tends to be "a common consciousness of deviance within the milieu and the need to justify their views in the light of the expressed ridicule or hostility of the larger society." Some commentators have seen manifestations of the New Age such as the rise of interest in magic, the occult and witchcraft as symptomatic of a "broader cultural interest in the 'irrational'" arising periodically in society at times of social stress and change, although its characterisation as "irrational" connotes a negative evaluation indicating a perceived threat to normative beliefs and the hegemony of Reason. Hanegraaff's persuasive thesis is that the contemporary New Age movement is the cultic milieu of the late twentieth century. New Age is actually the wide scale recognition or self-awareness by people of the fact that they themselves and others were a part of the cultic milieu, and began to refer to this environment of social change as a "movement". James Beckford argues that

new religious movements are important indicators of stressful changes in culture and society. They are also interesting attempts to come to terms with rapid social change by imposing new interpretations on it and by experimenting with practical responses. They therefore amount to social and cultural laboratories where experiments in ideas, feelings and social relations are carried out. They are a normal aspect of social life and a critical guide to societal problems and prospects.

It is notable that it was during these past two decades with the mainstreaming of the counterculture that the fantasy genre experienced unprecedented growth and popularity, and I argue that this is not a coincidence.

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61 Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," 122.
63 Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 10-17.
Countercultural spirituality can thus be viewed as a contemporary social movement, geared more toward changing social meanings than rigorously associating as a collective. There are commonly shared goals, as well as shared understanding as to how to strive normatively to enact them, despite relatively loose organization. These social networks (such as “hippy”, homosexual, feminist or environmentalist communities) feature an alternative set of values, explanations, lifestyle choices, and communication systems that often are enacted in micro, everyday settings. “This dislike of what is perceived to be mainstream rules and dogma is what gives these clusters of individuals a sense of social solidarity in the absence of an explicit shared creed or organization.”65 One need not belong to a highly-organized group to consider oneself to be part of and contributing to the larger social movement. However fluid such movements are, those who identify with them collectively suggest a recognizable expression of social dissension.66

The unifying ideology of the cultic milieu is seekership, which is essentially the adopting of a problem-solving perspective, a search for meaning, while defining conventional religious institutions and beliefs as inadequate. More and more people have been faced with a “crisis of meaning” due to the alienating structures of modernity. The New Age cultic milieu is composed of people who are “searching for some satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve their discontents.”67 The millenialist and mystical overtones of New Age-ism can be seen as attempts to fill a spiritual vacuum and foster a sense of community and identity in the increasingly secular and dislocated atmosphere of modern capitalist society.

66 Ibid., 59.
67 Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” 123.
The youth culture of the 1960s countercultural “hippie” movement, was characterized by an orientation towards “passive resistance, movement and the search for new experience, disaffiliation, spontaneity, ego-expressivity, short-term hedonism, subjectivity and the cultivation of the self”, including a “profoundly anti-bureaucratic and anti-organisational emphasis.” This adds up to a profound rejection of modernity, which could be viewed as a legacy of, or continuation of, Romantic antimonodernism.

“Modernity” is characterized by a radical split between the public and private spheres, where the rationalism and utilitarianism of public institutions (work, law, and government) are seen as oppressive, abstract and incomprehensible, and alienate the private life of the individual. Meanwhile, the private sphere of relationships, beliefs, and personal life becomes increasingly unstructured and permeated by a profusion of moral choices which often leads to a sense of meaninglessness, moral ambiguity and disorder. Much of the post-modern concern with “otherness”, stems from a more general search for identity, community, and meaning, arising from the sense of Durkheimian anomie and the rootlessness that people experience in a very fluid, socially mobile, industrial world. The decisions guiding the mobility and flow of labour, resources, capital, and information are in the hands of increasingly globalized and bureaucratic mechanisms, in which the decision-making process appears extremely abstract and far removed from the control and comprehension of the ordinary individual. As Camilleri and Falk note, “Alienation is both cultural and

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physical as communities are separated from their histories, from the fruits of their labour, and from the decisions that shape the space in which they live.\textsuperscript{71}

Thus there is a sense of some sort of common goal permeating New Age philosophy, despite its lack of any explicit or unified ideology, and this can be explained by the fact that "all New Age trends, without exception, are manifestations of a widespread cultural criticism directed against the institutionalised values of modernity and intended as alternatives to currently dominant religious and cultural trends."\textsuperscript{72} In other words, at the centre of New Age beliefs, is a reaction to and rejection of the dualism of established Christianity as the dominant religion in the West, as well the reductionism of scientific rationalism: New Age attempts to move towards a more holistic alternative culture that synthesizes both spirituality and science into a more integrated whole. The overarching ideology or common thread seems to lie in a Romantic ideology containing the kernels of belief that we see as a common element in New Age religion, modern environmentalism, and fantasy literature: the relocation of divinity and sacredness to the Self, and to Nature.

7.5 Romantic esotericism and cultural criticism

It is important to note that esotericism is more than a reactionary "need to react against the reigning episteme."\textsuperscript{73} The negative rhetoric characterising new religious movements in the twentieth century as a primitivist return of irrationality wilfully overlooks the continuous historical presence of the cultic underground as a form of social dissent. This rhetoric is perpetuated by the histories of dominant institutionalized religions which emphasise continuity and stasis at the expense of


\textsuperscript{72} Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture}, 515.

change and complexity. As Beckford states: "the history of religion could be written as an unceasing struggle between the forces of institutionalization and disruption", and should be viewed as a complex field of competition between various social groups and ideologies. Mircea Eliade draws attention to the "occult explosion" of new religious movements in North American youth culture in the 1960s and 1970s as a resurgence of periodical interest in Western esoteric traditions. He highlights the continuity of interest in the occult, esotericism and mysticism in the West and its periodic resurgences of respectability and prestige at certain times, such as in the Hermetic and alchemical vogues of the Italian Renaissance.

Eliade's observations on the importance and impact of occult and alternative spirituality movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are especially pertinent as they highlight the often overlooked influence of Western esoteric currents on Romanticism. This period of early modernity saw the rise of many influential esoteric societies and beliefs, such as Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, the Order of the Golden Dawn (which included William Butler Yeats and other prominent literary figures), Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Society, as well as secret societies such as the Rosicrucians and Freemasons, and the proliferation and massive popularity of works by Mesmer, Swedenborg and Freud. According to Eliade, the primary aim of mystical groups and secret societies of the eighteenth century was the recovery of humanity's state of original grace and unity before the Fall through initiation into occult rites and knowledge aimed at gaining a mythical pre-Lapsarian spiritual perfection. Given the strong currents of primitivist thought

75 Eliade, "The Occult and the Modern World," 47-51
and the quest for sublime alterity and authentic experience I discussed as essential to the growth of Romanticism in Chapter 5, it is plain to see how esotericism and occultism were congruent to the mainstream of Romantic thought. Furthermore, medieval romances and Gothic literature and provided common literary sources for symbols of central mystical importance to both occult groups and Romantic poets, such as the Arthurian Grail legend, the Temple of Solomon, the Order of the Knights Templar and the workings of Hermetic and medieval alchemy.  

As I noted in Chapter 6, the late nineteenth-century Symbolist movement in art had strong interests in mythology, the fantastic and the occult, but these interests were also present throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The occult, magic, and mystical lore had a strong influence on many of the key authors of the Pre-Romantic and Romantic Movements: Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Balzac, Baudelaire, Yeats, Alistair Crowley, Rimbaud and Andre Breton number amongst prominent writers of the literary avant-garde fascinated with the occult spectrum of beliefs. In 1890 Anatole France wrote of his French contemporaries, “a certain knowledge of the occult sciences became necessary for the understanding of a great number of literary works of this period. Magic occupied a large place in the imagination of our poets and our novelists”. The notions of the Imagination, the unknown and the mysterious were of central importance to the Romantic aesthetic of the time, and literary creations often reflected and disseminated ideologies and themes propounded by esotericism and alternative spiritualities – particularly the belief in the possibility of

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80 Ibid., 51.
“a personal and collective *renovatio* – a mystical restoration of man’s original dignity and powers.”\(^{81}\)

However, the powerful attraction of the occult and alternative ideational systems to many of these artists and writers lay its position as “the Other” to the beliefs of the bourgeois establishment of the day, allowing it to be utilized as a critique and rejection of dominant social, religious, ethical and aesthetic mores and values: in other words, Judeo-Christian religious and moral values and Greco-Roman Renaissance neoclassical ideals.\(^{82}\) There was a distinct turn to occult groups and epistemological systems such as Gnosticism which was constructed as the Other to orthodox Judeo-Christianity through its history of persecution and opposition to the established Church.\(^{83}\) European imperialism and colonial expansionism also brought with it increased exposure to the religious beliefs and mythologies of non-Western culture, resulting in an intensified interest in the “otherness” of Eastern and Oriental religious and mystical traditions such as Chinese, Indian, Egyptian and Persian. The Romantic concern with “otherness” and the quest for alternative philosophical and experiential paradigms to rationalist, materialist modernity are still very much in evidence in the beliefs and concerns of the contemporary cultic milieu (the New Age). The turn to the past and discourses of Nature and cultural Otherness, as well as the turn to mystical experience and spirituality remains “one of the most typical forms of Romantic reaction in the fact of the disenchantment of the world produced by modernity” from the late eighteenth century till today.\(^{84}\)

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\(^{81}\) Ibid., 52.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 52-3.


7.6 Contemporary anti-modernism: the revolt against science

Many social commentators since the 1960s have spoken of the "crisis of science" in relation to the rise of the counterculture and alternative religious movements. Harriet Whitehead connects the "essentially religious impasse" of late twentieth-century modernity to "the failure of science in the twentieth century to fulfil its promise of a better world, or a world more "humanly habitable" in both cognitive and emotional terms", leading to an "existential vacuum" and a desire to re-enchant a world that had been "stripped bare" by mechanistic science.\textsuperscript{85} The scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are often cited as the origin of modern society's "fall" from a natural state of grace, and the Industrial Revolution, "technology" and "science" in general are further implicated in the Romantic revolt against Enlightenment notions of progress and development. Andrew Ross notes that:

Skepticism about the social, economic, and environmental costs of technological development has become a permanent, often militant, feature of public consciousness. Cynicism about the remoteness of technocrats and fears about "technology out of control" – no matter how unfounded these fears are in their assumptions about the autonomy of technology – are both now regular conduits for the expression of ecological values. The mystique of technology continues to command admiration, especially in war, but decades of accumulated technoskepticism now make us wary of according to technology more power than it already has in our daily lives.\textsuperscript{86}

In addition to increasing scepticism about the benefits of unbridled technological development, Ross also draws attention to the "-growing legitimation crisis of scientific rationality" itself. It is safe to say that since the advent of postmodernity in the 1960s, many of the founding certitudes of modern science have been demolished. The positivist methodology of science and its claims to ultimate, "context-free"

\textsuperscript{85} Whitehead, "Reasonably Fantastic", 555.
objective truths have been heavily criticized by sociologically-oriented disciplines such as feminism, ecology and anthropology, which have contributed to the erosion of the scientific institutions’ authority to “proclaim and authenticate truth”\textsuperscript{87}. Philosophers of science such as Paul Feyerabend have sought to “dethrone” science to reveal its fundamentally ideological nature, underscoring the need for sharp critiques of claims to “objectivity”, by demonstrating their basis in particular moral and political assumptions about nature and society.\textsuperscript{88}

Scientific research, and experimental method as a tool or technique, are very often confused and conflated with the philosophies of rational materialism and utilitarianism which are assumed to underpin all scientific endeavour and blurs the distinctions in a detrimental manner. This confusion has contributed to the mistrust of scientific method as well suspicions about unbridled technological development. Hence it is important to distinguish between scientific method and the “belief” or “faith” in science: “Scientolatry” or “Scientism”. As Adler articulated, “Science is a method, a technique. And technology is very useful. The problem is not with the tools, but with this idolatrous attitude toward science, this secular religion that denies all other aspects of being human”.\textsuperscript{89} The dogmatic belief in “science” as religion, Scientism, has been encouraged by the long-held dominance of philosophical positivism, which attempts to dismiss all other belief systems as “superstition” and thus irrational and unnecessary.\textsuperscript{90} Whitehead observes that

\[ \text{The doctrine of Positivism bears witness to the fact that science served as a medium for the rechannelling of religious energies, for in it we recognize both an attitude of adulation toward technologic possibilities and an attempt at a comprehensive understanding of the human situation rather} \]

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{89} Adler, Drawing Down the Moon, 397.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 396.
than the only partial understanding that science is legitimately able to provide. 91

Implicit in the anti-science attitude of many new religious movements is the idea that Scientolatry’s “spiritual poverty” arises from its assumptions about the purely physical or material nature of the universe, which is viewed by Romanticism as not only reductionist, but impoverishing in its denial of the metaphysical and supernatural aspects of human experience.

The self-conception of the New Age community is of a radical alternative to the authority of scientific positivism’s “high priests”. While the positivist orthodoxy of establishment science is ostensibly rejected by new Age beliefs, the complexity of the phenomenon as cultural protest means that it, like Romanticism itself, is a blend of protest and accommodation functioning within the sphere of modernity, science and technology. As Ross states,

While they are ostensibly opposed to the elitist, corporate workings of the official scientific and technical research environments, today’s scientific countercultures share many of the methodological claims about absolute truths in nature observed by establishment science. 92

Adler also notes the ambivalence and contradictory attitudes towards science, technology and their ethical and social implications within Neo-pagan communities. 93 Neopaganism is a predominantly urban, white, middle class phenomenon, and whilst urban living and technology are embraced by most Neo-pagans, there are open conflicts polarized between outright rejections of technology and modernity, and beliefs in the socially salvific potential of technology as a tool, so that the crux of the issue is usually related to debates about the ethical uses of modern technology.

91 Whitehead, “Reasonably Fantastic”, 555.
92 Ross, Strange Weather, 18.
93 Adler, Drawing Down the Moon, 398.
7.7 Fantasy and the Romantic protest against modernity

The idea discussed in this chapter is that the rise of the literary genre of fantasy is intimately connected to contemporary Western social currents and concerns, and that its very presence holds evidence of changes in belief systems, such as the rise of alternative spirituality movements and the increased privatization and individualization of religion in the modern West. The powerful influence of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* on Anglo-American New Age belief in its infancy, and its "cult" impact on university campuses in the 1960s and 1970s has been widely noted. This highlights the *community* aspect of fantasy as a field that has arisen as a social phenomenon primarily in highly industrialized, urban environments amongst a young, socially mobile audience; its growth and influence paralleling the mainstreaming of the New Age movement since the 1960s. Not only do fantasy texts draw upon many of the same Romantic values and discourses as alternative spirituality and movements, but there is a considerable overlap in community: Margot Adler notes that many Pagans and Witches not only read, but also write fantasy and science fiction (e.g. Marion Zimmer Bradley, Diana Paxson and Juliet Marillier). Fantasy can thus be understood as participating in or intersecting with the broader social movement of the "New Age":

> science fiction and fantasy probably come closer than any other literature to systematically exploring the central concerns of Neo-Pagans and Witches. Such writers of science fiction and fantasy are bound less than any others by the political, sexual, and racial mores of their society. ...Science fiction has been the literature of the visionary; it has been able to challenge preconceived notions about almost everything, while at the same time attending to fundamental questions of the age. No wonder then, that not only do many Pagans and Witches read science fiction, but some of them write it. In my travels I came across four well-known

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94 David Glover, for example, reads *The Lord of the Rings* as having a transformative effect on the cultural "underground" in the late 1960s, and helped to define the values and aims of the counterculture movement. "Utopia and Fantasy in the Late 1960s", 203-7.
science fiction and fantasy writers who were members of Neo-Pagan
groups.95

Many of the central concerns of the population of the cultic milieu are expressed in
fantasy and science fiction literature, with key issues being ecology, issues relating to
changes wrought by science and technological innovation, gender roles and changing
perceptions of reality.96

Based on the hypothesis of the cultic milieu, one could predict that fantasy would
attract those people most affected by the modern “crisis of meaning” through closest
proximity to modernizing forces. In other words, one would expect highly urbanized,
educated individuals in industrial or bureaucratic occupations to be the most likely
audience for fantasy literature.97 Indeed, surveys of science fiction and fantasy fandom
seem to indicate that this is the case.98 A 1983 fan study conducted at several North
American conventions found that the participants were on the whole young
Caucasians: 94% were under forty years of age, with half between the ages of twenty
to twenty-nine. Half of the respondents were women (this figure might have grown
since then) and 92% had been through higher education or were still students,
indicating a highly literate group with avid reading habits. 73% were single
(unmarried) and 78% professed to be atheists or adhered to no organized religion.

95 Adler, Drawing Down the Moon, 185.
96 Adler notes several of these concerns as expressed by neopagans who find exploration of these
issues in fantasy and science fiction literature.
97 The profile of those most likely to be affected by the crisis of modernity is given by Hunter, “The
98 Clearly more research needs to be done in this field, as there is a distinct lack of recent data on the
readership of fantasy as a separate publishing category per se, partly because it is a very new genre, and
partly due to the prioritising of science fiction, under which label fantasy has often subsumed; for
example in Camille Bacon-Smith’s Science Fiction Culture, (Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 2000). Both the literature and readership of fantasy overlaps with science fiction,
and most people read in both fields but may display a stronger preference for one or the other. For
these reasons I have relied on studies of sf fandom to provide a picture of the overall field of the
fantastic that encompasses both genres.
Significantly, about 20% said they believed in or practiced witchcraft or neo-pagan religions. Fans are the active readership of fantasy and science fiction, attending conventions mainly for fun and to mingle with like-minded people. As with the wider New Age cultic milieu in general, there are degrees of involvement in cultic activities, and the vast majority of the fantasy/sf readership is only superficially involved, reading fantasy as a source of escapism and entertainment.

Where the forces of modernization are strongest in society; in general amongst its educated, white-collar youth; the confusing dislocations of modern life provoke the greatest sense of spiritual and moral malaise and confusion. The field of fantasy, its texts and extra-literary community, provides an alternative centre for belief and revitalization of alienated moderns, and as such it participates in the same countercultural ideology as the New Age cultic movement. Viewed in the light of the wider socio-cultural stratum of the New Age cultic milieu, fantasy can be seen as a territory through which new cultural items are introduced, functioning as a potentially subversive site of social change and intellectual creativity that should not be ignored. By tapping into the emotional and imaginative substratum at the foundation of religious experience, fantasy can express alternate ways of perceiving reality.

The presence of the cultic milieu points to the undeniable fact that, contrary to the theory of secularization, religion is alive and well in the modernized West. People may not have become quantifiably less religious, but their religious behaviours and the avenues of religious belief and expression have become much broader during the second half of the twentieth century. The religio-spiritual dimension of life has also been profoundly affected by consumer capitalism, and it is reasonable to call the

99 Phyllis and Nora Day, "Freaking the Mundane: A Sociological Look at Science Fiction Conventions, and Vice Versa", in Patterns of the Fantastic, Donald Hassler ed., (Mercer Isl.: Starmont House, 1985), 91-102. The study was based on a self-selection survey of 700 people in Midwest American conventions.
pluralistic reality of the modern West a “spiritual marketplace”. The process of secularization has resulted in a competitive marketplace of ideas and belief systems associated with the increased pluralisation accompanying the conditions of modernization, i.e. the emergence of high-tech multinational capitalism. As Bloch notes, “the locus of authority regarding religious belief has largely shifted to the self, and in the presence of multiple religious claims, people feel relatively unconstrained to pick and choose from a variety of options”.  

Fantasy literature dovetails with this changed religious climate in a number of ways. The appeal of fantasy as a moral literature that is implicitly religious in a cultural context of increasing subjectivization (where the locus of religion and morality is increasing relegated to the individual self rather than formal institutions) is apparent. This situation, as analysed by Robert Reilly thirty years ago, is still highly relevant. He documents elements of the “current religious situation” at the beginning of the 1970s as a kind of democratisation of religion, pointing to “the extraordinarily fluid condition of formal Christianity in Western Europe, England, and America” and the changes occurring with the recognition of the plurality of religious experience – a “new recognition on all sides of the validity of all sects and churches”, including non-Christian alternatives, such as Buddhism and New Ageism. Orthodox Christians, says Reilly, can no longer talk of the “one true religion”; at best they can only talk of the “truest” religion among many true religions.

Reilly describes the new mood of religious and social change that characterized the 1960s era in the West as something like a society-wide existential crisis heralded by “a distrust of tradition and institutions, a reluctance... to believe only on authority, a turning within one’s own mind and conscience for final answers” – the next

generation’s reactionary counterpoint to the conservatism of the immediate post-war years of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{101}

It is into this climate of disaffected alienation and changing perception of the locus of morality (as residing in the self rather than in religious institutions), that Tolkien’s implicitly religious \textit{Lord of the Rings}, with its searching focus on individual ethical codes of conduct and behaviour, the value and importance of friendship, solidarity and community, made its explosive impact. I agree wholeheartedly with Reilly’s analysis of why \textit{Lord of the Rings} became so popular in the 1960s and 1970s (enough to become a “cult” book) and why it continues to attract readers to this day:

The fact that it is a moral drama without reference to anything beyond itself, particularly without reference to a formal moral code or to any kind of religious institution. Its characters are faced with existential moral choices of the same quality as those the readers of the trilogy are faced with.\textsuperscript{102}

Fantasy on the whole is deeply interested in existential concerns, and despite what some religious critics say, Tolkien anticipates the same “distrust of tradition and institutions, a reluctance... to believe only on authority, a turning within one’s own mind and conscience for final answers”\textsuperscript{103} that Reilly identified as being an important part of the cultural and religious climate of Britain, the USA and Europe in the early 1970s.

7.8 Conclusion

The New Age movement on the whole, exists to counter the existential crisis or vacuum created by anomie and spiritual rootlessness in modern industrial life, by attempting in various ways to restore a sense of higher order and meaning to everyday

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{101} Reilly, \textit{Romantic Religion}, 222.
\item\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 222.
\end{footnotes}
life. Fantasy fictions transcend "the bland ordinariness and meaninglessness of life in the modern world", through the "sense of wonder", which provides a safe, controlled and transitory encounter with the spiritual.\textsuperscript{104} Furthermore, fantasy provides alternate worlds, which are complete and meaningful, following their own internal logic, where good and evil are plainly delineated. Clearly there is a strong desire for this kind of moral fiction amongst the young, disenfranchised community of the cultic milieu. Van Ikin, a senior lecturer at the University of Western Australia, and well known Australian science fiction and fantasy editor and reviewer, attributes the rise in popularity of fantasy to the fact that ordinary readers... are getting stories that they would describe as positive and triumphalist, where good overcomes evil. They would see a lot of the literature that's around today as complex in defining moral values – and therefore one of the attractions of fantasy fiction is that it's moral in a reassuring way. That doesn't mean it's simplistic, but it does draw borders, and people find that reassuring.\textsuperscript{105}

This ties in with the narrative appeal of Story in romance-tradition fantasy, as was discussed in Part 1 of this thesis.

Traditionally, religion supplied total and final explanations, not so much for intellectual and technical as for emotional and ethical problems. It is the increasing dominance of the intellectual, scientific, technical, and practical over the emotional and the moral which is the basic premise of the inherited model of secularization.\textsuperscript{106} Through its concern with ethics, morality and spirituality, fantasy has become one of the imaginative discourses of "alternative culture", its motifs, symbols and ideological substructure influencing and itself feeding into what Meredith Veldman describes as

\textsuperscript{104} Hunter, "The New Religions: Demodernization and the Protest against Modernity", 10.

\textsuperscript{105} Barrowclough, Nikki, "There Be Dragons". \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, Saturday, August 21, 47-51. p. 50.

\textsuperscript{106} Wilson, "Secularization: The Inherited Model," 18.
a sub-current of Romantic anti-modern ideological protest. As Fantasy literature can therefore be seen as part of a commercial and creative substructure that plays a part in the dissemination and acceptance of heterodox beliefs and ideas into wider society.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Tolkien affirms in his tract “On Fairy-Stories” that the experiences elicited by reading fantasy (the sense of wonder, Eucatastrophe), can be religious experiences”. This parallels the religious experience found in “secular spirituality”, environmentalism and neopaganism, and in the cultic milieu generally. In other words, the high premium laid upon subjective aesthetic experience by Romantic doctrine was linked specifically by Tolkien to a reinterpretation of Christian belief. One could see it in a sense that Western Christianity was “translated” into not only the experience of individual subjectivism prized by Romantic doctrine but also (more specifically in Tolkien’s fiction) that Romantic subjectivism was “elevated” or revealed as being capable of being profoundly religious. The subjectivization of religious experience and the sacralization of aestheticized individual subjectivism are parallel processes, and are particularly facilitated by the medium of mythological narrative.

Mythmaking, the creation of literary fantasy and religious (Christian) belief and worship are all component parts of the same phenomenon, according to Tolkien. Mythmaking and storytelling are potentially religious acts, through the process of sub-creation. The storyteller, author, and artist are creators in image of the Christian God as Creator/Maker, and thus story and image glorifies all creation, and may function as a form of worship. Thus fantasy, according to Tolkien, is an

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107 Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain*, 47.
effective form for communicating religious truths.\textsuperscript{109} From a non-Christian perspective, in Jungian theories of fantasy there is an emphasis on human communality through myth and the collective unconscious.\textsuperscript{110} Ursula K. Le Guin believes that romantic fantasy has the potential to evoke shared human participation in mystery through the evocation of myths stored in the collective unconscious, which constitutes our common humanity:

It means that we can communicate, that alienation isn’t the final human condition, since there is a vast common ground on which we can meet, not only rationally, but aesthetically, intuitively, emotionally.\textsuperscript{111}

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated that both contemporary fantasy literature and the alternative religious scene are inheritances of the Romantic period, distinctively modern reactions against modernity, industrialism and capitalism. However, both manifest the characteristics of modernity and participate in consumer capitalism, functioning as a marketplace for alternative constructions of meaning, which may be explicitly religious, implicitly religious, or generally “spiritual”. In all cases, the viewpoints articulated champion Nature over Reason, experience over dogma, community over isolation, and are clear inheritors of the Romantic tradition.


Chapter 8

Green Dreams: fantasy and environmentalism

The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day!


8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that one of the essential thematic concerns of genre fantasy is the exploration of the relationship between culture and nature. The environmental crisis is often perceived as one of the most pressing and potentially harmful social and ethical problems facing twenty-first century society. The magnitude of this problem and its ramifications for all aspects of life can be seen in the growth of environmentalism or ecology as an autonomous sphere of intellectual, theoretical and moral discourse, increasingly differentiating itself and becoming more independent from the political and economic spheres. Environmentalism itself is becoming a major structuring discourse through which to critically assess modern institutions and ideologies. By acknowledging the centrality of environmental considerations to

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2 Bronislaw Sierszynski states that “Over recent decades, but most markedly since the late 1980s, there has been a profound change in public life in many Western counties, as ‘the environment’ has come to take a prominent, and seemingly permanent, place in political discourse.” Nature, Technology and the Sacred (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 84.

recent transformations in the traditional institutions of modernity⁴, we acknowledge the need to move beyond the limits of narrow state-centred politics to a more global model. It is clear that fantasy's deeply-rooted concern with Nature can no longer be interpreted solely in terms of the traditional Left-Right political models ("the old political ideologies of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism") that have on the whole proven inimical to understanding popular fantasy on its own terms.⁵ When viewed from an ecocritical perspective, generic fantasy's Romantic medievalism and pastoral ideals no longer seem retrograde or irrelevant, but rather articulate a powerful critique of modernity shared by environmental movements throughout the 1980s and 90s. This chapter will briefly examine some of the ways in which fantasy intersects with, and forms part of, the wider field of environmentalism, giving fresh insight into the genre independent from the political and economic analyses that have proven so reductive and incapable of grasping the spectrum of values genre fantasy articulates.

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the ways in which popular fantasy literature, far from being irrelevant or apolitical with no relation to or concern with the "real world", is in fact intimately interwoven with contemporary debates, value systems and social issues. It will be shown that the modernist tendency to think of the modern period, modernity as a monolithic, uniform entity is mistaken. The analysis of fantasy as a relatively liminal cultural field and the conflicts it has generated form a picture of contemporary society that clearly demonstrates the flexible, multi-dimensional character of modernity. Modernity is shown to be a complex field of protest and accommodation encompassing both anti-modernist and modernist

⁴ Modernity, as taken to mean the commodity marketplace, science and technology, social policy and ideologies.
ideologies simultaneously as part of its social and cultural constitution comprising a plurality of modernities. The genre of fantasy on a micro-level, and modernity on a macro-level are viewed as dynamic systems of change and flux, indicating “conflicting forces within the culture at large” as well as the constant incorporation and accommodation of various forms of (social) dissent.⁶ I have chosen to concentrate on only two of aspects of fantasy’s immersion in cultural debates: environmentalism and religion, not only because they have been relatively neglected in scholarship of the fantastic, but also because it quickly became clear that the two areas are interwoven or interrelated, and seemed to a shared common ground that expressed itself quite clearly in a great deal (even a majority), of fantasy literature since the 1970s.

Modern fantasy literature has been undeniably affected by contemporary ecological debates, and as an increasingly popular art form, adds a potentially influential voice to these concerns. During the latter half of twentieth century there has been an increasing intensification of environmental concern and a concurrent examination of human interactions and relationships with natural surroundings: concerns which are also apparent in fantasy literature. My interest in this area arose out of the observation that fantasy literature seems increasingly to be articulating environmental concerns. Issues pertaining to the ecological crisis are intimately connected to the “crisis of science” I discussed in Chapter 7, where a general awareness of the detrimental effects of the Reason/Nature dualism in Western culture has been articulated in a loss of faith in the ideologies of Reason, progress, technology and science, which are seen by neo-Romantic spiritual movements as underpinning Western assumptions about the role of nature as an unlimited exploitable resource.⁷

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⁶ Andrew Murphie and John Potts, *Culture and Technology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 4.
⁷ Andrew Ross, in *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits*, observes that “Our current ecological crisis demonstrates that the consequences of such artificial divisions of knowledge about the world have been quite deadly, and that is why the crisis of science today is also a crisis of our culture.” (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 12.
Fantasy’s contribution to contemporary cultural debates have been overlooked and downgraded, as the spectre of fantasy’s anti-modern “nostalgia” and “escapism” looms large. However, as I have demonstrated, fantasy’s Romantic medievalism and anti-modernism are intimately connected to many of the major concerns of contemporary Western society, such as the alienating, dehumanising elements of modernization and industrialization, the social, ethical and environmental ramifications resulting from the unbridled use of modern technologies without thought to social responsibilities and environmental degradation, concerns over the quality of life for humans and other life forms now and in the future. The Romantic Entzauberung, the disenchantment of the world, and a sense of profoundly loss and change is expressed in fantasy, often in conjunction with themes of nature, death and transformation. Tolkien encapsulates this feeling of Romantic loss in *The Lord of the Rings*:

It is sad that we should meet only thus at the ending. For the world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air. I do not think we shall meet again.⁸

Tolkien’s work inadvertently articulate many of the fundamental concerns of the counterculture and the burgeoning ecological “Green” movement of the 1960s through his blend of Romantic anti-modernism and powerful images of the sacrality and beauty of nature given voice through the poetic power of myth where the “green earth” is a matter of “legend” that is being lost, degraded and eroded by Western modernity.

8.2 Environmentalism and the rise of fantasy in the 1960s
As mentioned in Chapter 7, Tolkienesque genre fantasy was an important influence in the countercultural *Zeitgeist* of Western culture in the post-war period of the 1960s and 1970s, characterized by widespread political and cultural movements which

were a continuation and extension of the Romantic protest against modernity and the social conditions of Western industrial society. Meredith Veldman links the ideologies of the (New Left) “culture of protest” with the concurrent rise of environmentalism as a social movement in 1960s Britain, identifying their common values and concerns as originating in the Romantic cultural and social movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the 1960s (in both Britain and the USA, possibly across the entire western world) the environmental, political and social consequences of the post-war modernization process were beginning to be seriously questioned. The bureaucratization and impersonal nature of industrialized mass society began to be heavily criticized as inhumane, along with the social alienation and breakdown of traditional communities brought about by rapid change. The real cause of environmental degradation was thought to be caused by unbridled and unchecked scientific and technological development without thought to consequences, resulting in a distrust of technology and increasing scepticism about the value and validity of the modern notion of “progress.” Arthur Mol observes that so strongly were these anti-technological “antimodern” values held during the latter half of the twentieth century, that one could state with confidence that during the 1980s-90s,

The common denominator of environmental movements around the world [was] their antimodern ideology. Environmentalists of the time, with their many distinct theories and practices, and widely varying tactics, shared an anti-modernist attitude. Environmental movements shared a “clear and undisputed position toward modernity and the project of modernization” and were relatively “united in attacking the basic

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10 Ibid., 108-9.
institutions of modernity, such as capitalism, industrialism, modern science and technology, and the bureaucratic nation-state.\textsuperscript{13}

It is no accident that the formation of fantasy as a commercial genre occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, and its growing popularity throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century paralleled the growth of both the environmentalist movement and the mainstreaming of alternative religions in the modern West. The most popular type of Romantic fantasy (sometimes called “high fantasy”) came to dominate the genre, following largely in Tolkien’s mould. It is notable that though \textit{The Lord of the Rings} sold well in Britain in the 1950s, it did not become a “cult phenomenon” until the 1960s when his anti-modernist sentiments captured the popular feeling of dissent and indeed clearly articulated the mood of countercultural protest and the ideals of community and ecological concern it represented.\textsuperscript{9} This chapter explores how these Romantic anti-modernist values were not restricted to Tolkien alone, but have continued to be expressed by the entire genre of fantasy that developed in Tolkien’s wake, and persist in relevance to today’s society. Reading fantasy does not necessarily lead to or correlate with political engagement, but like the counterculture of the 1960s, the utopian desire for alternatives can spark engagement with as well as withdrawal from a culture of anti-modern protest.\textsuperscript{14}

Less clearly articulated have been both fantasy’s and environmentalism’s connection to the rise of alternative religious/spirituality movements and the move to an atmosphere of increased religious pluralism in most Western industrialized countries during the latter half of the twentieth century. I argued in Chapter 7 that the ever-

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 583.

\textsuperscript{13} Veldman, \textit{Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain}, 108. As Veldman notes, “Tolkien, through his fantasy, provided like-minded protesters with the means to articulate their protest”, 110.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 108.
increasing boom in the popularity of modern fantasy literature in many ways parallels the growth of what is known as “New Age” alternative religiosity since the mid-1970s. In his examination of the relations between contemporary alternative medicine and modernity, David Hess suggests that there is indeed a strong “link between the environmental movement and alternative health and spiritual movements that secular, academic researchers and environmentalist leaders tend to underplay.”\textsuperscript{15} Hess proposes that concerns about the natural environment extend to encompass a generalized anxiety about the modern lifestyle environment and its impact on physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. The “modern lifestyle of rapid pace, impoverished social relations, stressful workplaces, and alienation” become part of the spectrum of environmental risk assessment. “In this cultural context”, says Hess, “the spiritual becomes an antidote to the toxicities of modernity: carcinogens, chemotherapy, bad relationships, and generalized stress.”\textsuperscript{16} Reconnecting with Nature and changing humanity’s attitude towards the natural world is seen by both environmentalists and alternative spirituality movements as the solution to relieving the existential alienation of modern western urbanites, which is also regarded as the root of ecological destruction: the mind-body dichotomy is echoed in the separation between human culture and nature.

Fantasy literature can be regarded as part of a commercial and creative substructure of the “cultic milieu” that plays a part in the dissemination and acceptance of heterodox beliefs and ideas into wider society. It works through constant adaptation to contemporary cultural contexts in order to be acceptable to modern audiences and mentalities; in short, it involves the mainstreaming of countercultural impulses. New developments and directions in the fantasy genre continue to grow as


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
environmentalism and alternative religions themselves become incorporated into modern institutions. The equation is neither simple nor uni-directional as cultural and institutional transformations are affected on both sides of the “centre/periphery” divide. Fantasy enters into debates on what it means to live in the modern world, the consequences of modernization and the state of contemporary modernity in western culture.

According to the Romantic account of the modernization process, “nature has been progressively mechanized and instrumentalized, cleansed of mysterious forces and meanings.” The discourses of both environmentalism and religion are invoked in a Romantic aesthetic conflating “beauty”, the medieval, and Nature, implicitly critiquing the rational materialism and scepticism of modern capitalist society. Generic fantasy’s Romantic medievalism and focus on “low-tech”, pre-industrial landscapes render it an attractive option in western societies where; as Andrew Ross noted in the early 1990s; “skepticism about the social, economic, and environmental costs of technological development has become a permanent, often militant, feature of public consciousness.” According to the Romantic worldview, progress is assumed to be dependent upon the exploitation of nature, and is regarded as ultimately dehumanising and destructive.

Sheri S. Tepper’s (1991) novel, Beauty, uses the Sleeping Beauty fairytale as a framework to present the Middle Ages as an idyllic Eden retaining a sense of the sacred and magic which vanishes with the advent of “electric lights” and “science” – industrialization and modernization. Beauty’s time-travelling medieval heroine unfavourably compares her experience of the dystopias of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with her own life in the fourteenth century:

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18 Ross, Strange Weather, 10.
Later came science and electric lights, a time when people sitting in well-illuminated rooms said, 'Nonsense, we can conceive of anything at all.' Any horror. Any disgusting, vomit-making thing... 'We can speak it, we can say it, make stories of it, until there is nothing that is not there on the page for the eye to see, for the mind to comprehend, for the child in each of us to be corrupted and eternally tainted by. Innocence. Gone, forever, with the unthinkable and the unspeakable.'

With the advent of "electric lights" and "science", mystery and a sense of "the sacred" are lost, and the forbidden fruits of technological knowledge and the power over nature eventually corrupt and destroy Beauty's innocent medieval Eden.

The importance of aesthetics when talking about nature is not to be underestimated. Byerly notes that "all of the major environmental groups depend on selling an attractive vision of nature". There has been a shift towards the (mass) consumption of the aesthetic and scenic landscapes, chiefly through tourism and leisure. This involves re-imaging "nature" and rendering it accessible and comprehensible to the public by providing it with an idealized image of nature that it desires. Nature, in one way or another, is often regarded as a commodity, whether it be for the mining of natural resources necessary to the functioning of societies, or as an aesthetic leisure-time commodity, where nature in the form of national parks are experienced as entertainment and a way of connecting to "authentic" and sublime Nature. The Romantic view specifically opposes the utilitarianism that the mechanistic, materialist outlook of Enlightenment Reason promotes. Veldman stresses that nature to the Romantic imagination is a source of the sacred, holding more than just physical presence, and that nature as a living entity holds the potential for the reintegration of the self with society and the rest of the living world. She notes,

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This sacralization of nature served as a form of protest against materialist, industrializing society and its view of nature as insignificant apart from its utility as a resource to be plundered.\textsuperscript{21}

In Tepper's novel \textit{Beauty} this point is made forcefully; "The Creator makes whales who sing in the deep, and men kill them to put their oil in lipsticks."\textsuperscript{22}

For the majority of urban dwellers in industrialized countries, the impact of the natural world on everyday life is radically different from the experiences of people living in less highly technologized and developed environments, and also from the experience of "nature" and "wilderness" in the medieval past. Nature has become "the Other" for modern Westerners in way that is entirely different from its "otherness" to our ancestors or to other socio-cultural groups. Fantasy as a genre has arisen as a social phenomenon primarily in highly industrialized, urban environments amongst a young, socially mobile audience who are located primarily in urban centres where there is generally not much contact with "wild" nature (as opposed to domesticated nature, such as gardens or farms, cultivated nature which many regard as not "Nature" proper). Location of sacred in nature may also be read as function of increasing Otherness of nature, its unfamiliarity, and hence mystery and sacrality through rarity for modernized urban dwellers.\textsuperscript{23} This is in keeping with Karl Kroeber's argument about the reasons for the rise of Romantic fantasy, that is, in response to "the total humanization of life" through technological domination of nature since the end of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Tepper, \textit{Beauty}, 438.
\textsuperscript{23} This is connected to the notion of nature as Leisure - a picturesque aesthetic experience - sacred as aesthetic. Alison Byerly's article discusses the idea of nature in the contemporary West, thought of as "wilderness" areas, primarily national parks. This essentially hinges upon an idea of "pure" nature supposedly untouched by human (hence "artificial") influences, and becomes the "nature" of middle class leisure, another kind of commodity, albeit with important symbolic, cultural and aesthetic properties, i.e. nature as a "picturesque commodity", Byerly, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," 59.
The environmentalist movement has sought to alter humanity's perception of Nature as an exploitable resource by raising reverent awareness of human interconnectedness with the environment. Often the behaviours and goals of New Age and environmentalist movements may be indistinguishable, though their motivations may differ. For example, often alternative spiritualist groups and movements promote concrete environmentalist stances and action (recycling, ecologically-friendly energy solutions, reforestation, wilderness conservation, animal liberation) alongside spiritually oriented information, as part of their critique against alleged Western dualistic separations of the material/secular and spiritual/sacred worlds perceived in both mainline churches and the secular state.\(^{25}\) Bloch argues convincingly that

both actions and discourse regarding environmentalism can suggest a collective purpose and ideology, even while they are not framed within the discreet boundaries of any one organization or rigorously-organized creed."\(^{26}\)

The sacredness of the Earth, the natural world, is a salient point promoting the alternative movement's holistic view of sacrality, so that typically, scientific discourse is used within a spiritual framework that addresses the Reason/Nature dualism in Western thought, and also hints at an "ecological and humanistic vision' that need not involve the 'supernatural', yet still has some connection to what is alleged to be spiritual".\(^{27}\) This is reflected in genre fantasy's utopian vision of alternative worlds that implicitly critique the dualisms of Western culture thus seek to re-enchant the world through a "personal and inner awakening" where the world is perceived anew through the faculty of the Imagination. The evocation of the past in Romantic primitivist discourses does not seek an acutal return to the conditions of past

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 59.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 58.
societies, but to seek instead a rediscovery of nature which will redeem modern
alienated individuals from the "depredations of industrialism and the 'cash nexus'
deformation of human relations."\textsuperscript{28}

This shared Romantic ideology and attitude towards Nature forms a nexus between fantasy, alternative religiosity and environmentalism. The religious pluralism of the New Age social movement can be seen as part of a society-wide search for "a means of emotional communication between man and the natural world".\textsuperscript{29} The separations between mind/body, culture/nature (Reason/Nature) are seen as related aspects of the same problem: that of a fundamental duality in Western thinking brought about by the materialism and mechanization of philosophical rationalism institutionalised in modern science, and the dualism of traditional Christianity. This shared ideology and attitude towards Nature that formed during the Romantic era, forms a nexus between fantasy, alternative religiosity and environmentalism. Fantasy has become one of the imaginative discourses of "alternative culture", its motifs, symbols and ideological substructure influencing and itself feeding a sub-current of Romantic anti-modern ideological protest.

The prevalence of the mostly idyllic version of the medieval European world in modern fantasy and neo-paganism can be seen as a continuation of the powerful arguments for a "return to nature" put forward by the Romantic Movement. Neither paganism nor fantasy is monolithic; manifestations of Romantic environmentalism are highly eclectic, autonomous, and individualist, which is compatible with the wide range of consumer products from which modern Western people choose, and the "cultic milieu" as a source of alternative beliefs, which are selected at will.


\textsuperscript{29} Bate, \textit{Romantic Ecology}, 17.
Neopagans have a sense of aliveness and “presence” in Nature; their beliefs are often polytheistic, animistic, or pantheistic. There is a clearly articulated goal of living in harmony with nature, and pagans “tend to view humanity’s ‘advancement’ and separation from nature as the prime source of alienation.”

Paganism manifests a turn to the past and the reinvention and reclamation of ancient religions, especially pre- or non-Christian, mystery and ecstatic religions as source of inspiration; this is the use of past, including ancient myths and symbols, transformed for modern relevance:

They are reclaiming these sources, transforming them into something new, and adding to them the visions of Robert Graves, even of J.R.R. Tolkien and other writers of science fiction and fantasy, as well as some of the teachings and practices of the remaining aboriginal peoples.

This attitude stems directly from Romantic antimodernism, which is in direct opposition to discourses associated with modernist ideas of progress, technology, and science. This thesis has demonstrated how fantasy literature too is aligned with discourses of the Past, antimodernism and “otherness”. There is a complex blending at work in the interfaces between fantasy and science fiction literature, religion and environmentalism. Fantasy literature for example, demonstrates considerable overlap in the values, ideologies, themes and sources it draws upon, as the alternative spiritual movement and environmentalism.

One partial explanation for this is the overlap in communities – the same people that are attracted to fantasy literature may be attracted to the values espoused by alternative spiritualities and environmental movements, and vice versa. The area where there is greatest overlap between ideas expressed in and through the medium of the fantasy genre and alternative spirituality, is in the form, the articulation of

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31 Ibid.
concepts through themes and tropes drawn from world religions, mythology and folklore — sources and motifs capable of bearing religious and psychological loading applicable in a number of different contexts. The alterity of the fantasy genre itself defies or at least problematizes the supposed duality or separateness of the real and the imaginary, the "mundane" and the magical, so the holistic views of alternative spirituality find easy expression through some of the common metaphors of literary genre fantasy. Fantasy as a form has proven eminently able to express the "new" modes of understanding human-nature relationships and forms of interdependency conceptualised by both alternative spiritualities and ecological science. The assimilation or mainstreaming of New Age ideologies and practices can thus be interpreted as part of the "reflective reorganization of industrial society's institutions to cope with the ecological crisis," which is reflected back in a dialectical process, as these with the increased acceptance of these initially heterodox ideas, countercultural movements themselves become increasingly integrated into the mainstream.33

Fantasy literature can be seen as part of the commercial and creative substructure of the cultic milieu, which plays a part in the dissemination and acceptance of heterodox beliefs and ideas into the wider society. Fantasy achieves this through its narrative form: narrative is where "abstract ideas are made flesh," and Story is an accepted vehicle for conveying ideas on a more symbolic level. The crucial defining characteristic of fantastic literature is its ability to provoke a "sense of wonder" in the reader, hence fantasy fiction is a literature of affect: it works (like much Romantic art) on the level of emotions. This experience of the in fantasy — delight, mystery or awe, the *mysterium tremendum* Rudolf Otto defines as characteristic of an encounter

with the divine or numinous, which is the essence of religious feeling. By transporting the imagination thus out of the everyday, fantasy easily allows for the possibility of perceiving different ways of being and experiencing life.

8.3 Religious Holistic Environmentalism

Holistic environmentalism is manifested most archetypally in Deep Ecology, James Lovelock’s *Gaia* hypothesis, and the influential (especially in the United States) *Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold (1949) whose rhetoric of *community*, as Catherine Albanese notes, comes closest to a *religious* conception of environmentalism.\(^{35}\) Albanese draws attention to a religious model of environmentalism, “one too often dismissed for its mystical vagaries and impracticalities or, alternately, embraced with romantic effusiveness... but little substantive direction”.\(^{36}\) Her focus is on the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson in American environmentalist thought, and how he offers a clearly articulated religious model for environmental ethics, and is extremely influential. Emerson’s *Nature* (1836) created the American Transcendentalist movement in literature, philosophy and popular culture. Emerson’s circle privileged nature as a category/entity for conversation, reverence, self-reflection; and nature included cultivation of inner human nature. The group also formed experimental nature-oriented communities and social reform (such as Henry David Thoreau’s Walden) and had a strong religious orientation, which was especially appealing to the American middle class at the start of the twentieth century. Albanese urges a reconsideration of religious models of environmentalism, maintaining that:

> the religious rhetoric of Emerson’s Transcendentalism can supply a more complex, nuanced, and compelling way to see and understand contemporary environmentalism and its battles than the political model, especially the political model of liberalism... It can also provide a

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., 30.
moderating position that offers a comprehensive framework for descriptive and prescriptive understanding.\textsuperscript{37}

Emerson’s cosmology resembled that of Western Esotericism, in that he recognized the existence of correspondences (for example, the microcosm of the human world reflects macrocosm of nature).\textsuperscript{38} He drew on Neo-platonic idealism, among other philosophical currents. However, Emerson’s philosophy posited contradictory ideas about nature and the ethics stemming from these: one the one hand real, material nature as divinity made immanent provided a template for human’s ethical actions, but on the other hand, this material reality was subordinate to an ideal world in which spirit and thought reigned supreme.\textsuperscript{39}

Ecology is “concerned in the largest sense with the relationship between living beings and their environment”\textsuperscript{40} In fantasy, the cultural myth of Nature that comes across is that the environment and the non-human are very much alive and meaningful, interacting and essential in some way to human action and existence. If ecology is the study of how organisms relate to their environment, the increasing emphasis in modern fantasy on stressing the patterns and networks of interdependence and interrelationships between living beings and their world can be seen as lying at the heart of an ‘ecological mindset’. “Scientists made it their business to describe the intricate economy of nature; Romantics made it theirs to teach human beings how to live as part of it”, making that step from theory to application.\textsuperscript{41} This quest led Romantics to assert “a belief in an organic universe”: “No longer was the world a perfectly running machine, conforming to ideal and perhaps divine patterns. Instead,

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{39} Albanese, “Having Nature All Ways”, 35-6.
\textsuperscript{40} Bate, \textit{Romantic Ecology}, 36.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 40.
the Romantics perceived their world as a growing organism, capable of change and infinite diversity" — new concepts of nature, history, community.⁴²

Thus Romantic protest, reclaimed and remade traditional meaning and values, in the face of an increasingly mechanized, industrialized world, the values of which they uncompromisingly rejected.

There is concern over the ecological crisis expressed in fantasy literature. However, most fantasy expresses these concerns indirectly through the use of myth and symbol. The creation of coherent alternative worlds such as Tolkien’s Middle-earth or Ian Irvine’s Three Worlds in *The View from the Mirror* (1999-2002), is one of the hallmarks of archetypal fantasy which foregrounds to an unusual degree the importance of environment. Even when it is used predominantly as a background for human action, nature or the land in fantasy is always implicitly understood as being alive and meaningful in some way. The land or world thus becomes like a character, intimately connected to the action of the story, and more importantly, exerting a presence or consciousness demanding respect.

The setting or landscape of fantasy is intimately connected to the action of the story; it is an inextricable part of the story having a role analogous to “character”. Even if it is just to provide the heroes or protagonist with physical challenges to deal with in some way, mountains, jungle, sea or weather, or merely as a background for human action, Nature in the modern fantasy story is portrayed as being alive and meaningful in some way. Often the land/environment itself acquires symbolic content — such as a wasteland that suffers and reflects the barren nature of its people or ruler, it is a living entity that may be healed or may die, rendering it unsuitable for meaningful life to continue there. The challenges and danger, as well as the beauty, of the physical

⁴² Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 12.
landscape often serve to temper and test the characters in the story, which is thus inextricable from the depiction of ethical dilemmas and the development of characters the fantasy story presents.

Nature in fantasy is imbued with symbolic content, reflecting the emotional or moral charge of the story; a common theme is the Land which may die or thrive according to nature of its people or ruler, as in Patricia McKillip's *Riddle-Master* trilogy (1976-9) which draws upon Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1948) through the notion of sacral kingship intimately tied to the land. Nature itself becomes inextricable from the ethical dilemmas and characterization presented in the story. Another common motif is the anthropomorphizing of the physical environment through magical beings closely connected with or personifying aspects of nature, such as Tolkien's Ents, sentient trees, elves, nature spirits and deities (the Green Man, the Goddess). It is notable that fantasy draws on the same corpus of myths and sources used by popular western esotericism, and that both have their roots in Romanticism. Modern fantasy increasingly stresses the interdependence of humans on other, non-human species and upon larger, cosmic or natural forces.

Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood argues that the reductionism and mechanism of Enlightenment Reason underpinning Western scientific accounts of "objectivity" and "modernity" have contributed to the reductionist, utilitarian treatment of non-human nature, and the devaluation of the environment through the Reason/Nature dualism deprives Nature of "mindlike", qualities. The denial of all forms of "reason" ("mind") to the category of Nature means that the non-human world is denuded of agency and meaning, so that it becomes possible (in mechanistic epistemologies) to

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view nature as a Machine, stripped of "teleology, agency and intentionality". Veldman suggests that one way of resolving or overcoming the Reason/Nature dualism involves extending the concepts of "autonomy, agency and creativity" to the non-human natural world. She suggests that in order to move past the mind/nature, human/nature dualisms, a non-reductive resolution is required, where humanity is conceived as "more animal and embodied, more 'natural'", and furthermore that Nature be recognized as possessing more "mindlike" qualities, thus restoring qualities of "Nature" to humanity, and properties of "Reason" to nature. This essentially involves the adoption of an "intentional stance" toward "earth others", where Nature is recognised as akin to humanity, forming a web of continuity and difference. Veldman states that "We need to understand and affirm both otherness and our community in the earth". Tolkien's naming of individual trees imbues nature with intrinsic worth, as they are seen as subjects in their own right with purpose and teleology.

In McKillip's *Riddle Master* series, this notion is encapsulated when Morgon ruminates on the significance of the land-law:

> Slowly he began to understand the roots of the land-law. The bindings of snow and sun had touched all life. The wild winds set the vesta's speed; the fierceness of seasons shaped the wolf's brain, the winter night seeped into the raven's eye. The more he understood, the deeper he drew himself into it: gazing at the moon out of a horned owl's eyes, melting with a wild cat through the bracken, twisting his thoughts even into the fragile angles of a spider's web, and into the endless, sinuous wind of ivy spiralling a tree trunk.

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44 Ibid., 125-7.
46 Ibid., 137.
47 Ibid., 137.
Anti-mechanist proposals for alternative paradigms of understanding and bridging the reason/nature divide often incorporate a need to reconceive the world in several different ways. For example, as “immanent divinity present in nature as a whole, making it ‘alive’ and lifting it out of the sphere of pure materiality”,49 or by using concepts drawn from new areas of scientific theory like systems theory or quantum theory, which are “holistic rather than atomistic, and thus to allow for more continuity between the human and the natural than conventional scientific concepts.”50 Hence the essentially Romantic emphasis on holism and the idea of an organic, interconnected universe is simultaneously a solution to and a critique of these underlying dualities. Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea books (1968-2001) depict a dynamic cosmos where the interconnectedness of all things is maintained through a magical Equilibrium or balance. The movement is towards the re-establishment of a harmonious state, where not only the individual hero/psyche is made whole, but the imbalances between men and women, humanity and nature are also overcome through the shift towards a more egalitarian and ecologically balanced society.

Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories” also states that fantasy literature expresses the desire to communicate with other living things. Humans with “the Wit” in Robin Hobb’s The Farseer Trilogy (1995-7), for example, have magical telepathic bonds with wild animals, and the dragons of The Liveship Traders (1998-2000) are an endangered species which not only communicate with but cause physical mutations in humans: human and non-human blend and merge. The desire to communicate with non-human Otherness very strongly expressed in fantasy. The emphasis is on continuity with rather than separation from Nature: there are no sharp distinctions; the boundaries are blurred. It is eminently able to express the holistic visions at the heart of New Age and environmentalist critiques centred on altering humanity’s

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 125.
relationship to the Other: its estranged self, and non-human Nature. However, the shapeshifters and werewolves of fantasy, such as the Metamorphs of Robert Silverberg’s *Majipoor* books (1980–) and Patricia McKillip’s *Earth-Masters* (in *Riddle-Master*), point to the ambiguities in humanity’s relationship to wild, chaotic, dangerous Nature.

Fantasy uses the literary technique of “defamiliarization” to imbue the sphere of Nature with “intentionality”, through the imaginative revisioning of the natural world, restoring to it a sense of “wonder”, freshness and vitality that combats the reductionism of mechanistic views. Tolkien calls this the “Recovery” function of fantasy (as I outlined in Chapter 2), where a “clear view” is regained. Hope Mirrlees’ *Lud-in-the-Mist* gives a wonderful example of the regaining of this “clear view” where the natural world becomes imbued with magic and wonder:

There is no a single homely thing that, looked at from a certain angle, does not become fairy. ... Think of an autumn wood, or a hawthorn in May. *A hawthorn in May – there’s* a miracle for you! ... Well, all these things are familiar sights, but what should we think if never having seen them we read a description of them, or saw them for the first time? A golden river! Flaming trees! Trees that suddenly break into flower!

Tolkien’s “Eucatastrophe” can also be read as a celebration of the joy and the pain of life, where the sublime moment engenders a transcendent experience. Ursula K. Le Guin brings together the idea of a holistic connection with nature, Tolkien’s “Recovery” and re-visioning of the glory and wonder of the natural world, as well as a profound sense of “Eucatastrophic” joy, longing and awareness of the morality of all life in *The Furthest Shore*:

Arren saw the world now with his companion’s eyes, and saw the living splendour that was revealed about them in the silent, desolate land, as if by a power of enchantment surpassing any other, in every blade of the

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wind-bowed grass, every shadow, every stone. So when one stands in a cherished place for a last time before a voyage without return, he sees it all whole, and real, and dear, as he has never seen it before and never will see it again.\textsuperscript{52}

Patrick Curry sees Tolkien’s mythology as a remedy for the ills of “pathological modernity” though the re-sacralisation (or re-enchantment) of nature, reconnecting human nature and the non-human world in an accessible cultural idiom.\textsuperscript{53} The popularity of genre fantasy can be read as evidence of the failure of modernity, evincing a desire to “repair and revitalise our broken relations” with ourselves, our fellow humans and the earth: “the pastoral fantasy nostalgia invented is after all an image of a world in which men and women feel at home with themselves, with each other and with nature, a world in which harmony reigns”, in other words, in a Romantic utopian revisioning of human relations with Nature.\textsuperscript{54}

8.4 Feminist Ecotopias: Ethics, justice and social responsibility
One of the major concerns of modern environmental thought is the wide-scale, irreversible change to the face of the planet due to unrestrained human development and the utilitarian attitude towards nature that views it merely as a source of raw materials to be exploited without regard for consequences or limitations.\textsuperscript{55} Hence the issue of limits to growth, progress and human expansion is of great importance to ecological thinking, and is intimately related to issues of social justice, equality and

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 182.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{55} Parts of this taken from unpublished conference paper: Kim Selling, “Green Dreams: Ecotopian Themes in Fantastic Literature.” Paper presented at the International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, (Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 1999).
the distribution of wealth and power in society.\textsuperscript{56} We can see many facets of these arguments reflected in modern fantasy literature. Sheri S. Tepper, particularly in her novel \textit{Beauty}, is very concerned with human expansion and its consequences, and a strong \textit{leitmotif} throughout her work is that of social justice and responsibility as related to environmental impact and gender equality. Ursula K. Le Guin's \textit{Earthsea} books evince a deep awareness of the importance of setting limits to power and the consequences of transgressing, especially as related to power imbalances between men and women, and human relations with the non-human world. Tolkien is another writer with obvious environmental concerns, which have been dealt with in depth by Patrick Curry in \textit{Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity} (1997). However, Tolkien's main focus was upon the destructive uses of power and unrestricted industrialization, as well as the importance of individual choice in these matters, rather than the issue of social justice favoured by many feminist authors.

Fantasy has the capacity to offer visions of societies in which we could live in harmony with the environment and all other life on this planet. This is an \textit{ecotopian} vision, by which I mean a "ecological utopia", where the ideal society is one in perfect balance and harmony with its natural environment.\textsuperscript{57} I wanted to see how eco-fantasy conveyed an environmental message, and I was struck by the fact that, especially in Tepper's works, a catastrophic model of environmental disaster is portrayed, after which an idyllic, post-apocalyptic ecotopian society is established. This harmonious ecological society is often ushered in by a female messianic figure, and within it, women and the non-human pointedly have an equal social role and status.

\textsuperscript{56} Ross, \textit{Strange Weather}, 5 ff.

\textsuperscript{57} A rough definition of a possible sub-genre of "ecological fantasy" would be one where one of the \textit{primary} themes of the book is about the relationship between the characters and the environment \textit{per se}. That is, where the environment is essentially a character in the story. Often the stories involve a thinly-veiled critique of modern Western society's attitudes to and treatment of, Nature and the non-human.
What intrigued me was this: why have two highly popular authors of the fantastic, Tepper and Le Guin, taken on this particular theme of eco-disaster combined with a utopian happy ending? One reason for this model is that Tepper and Le Guin have employed powerful Western eschatological myths as a vehicle for the articulation of their environmentalist and feminist concerns. Furthermore, I wanted to raise the notion that the environmentalist and feminist movements can be seen as inherently utopian modes. This in the sense that they not only envision models of better, more perfect societies according to their principles, but also establish a critical perspective on modern society, fuelling a desire for betterment, alternative ways of social and moral functioning.

“Utopia” is an ambiguous term, meaning both “no place” and “good place”. The meaning of utopia as “no place” has powerful implications for fantasy, which tends on the whole to locate itself spatially as an “otherwhere”, as well as retaining the possibilities of “otherwhens”. It is important to recall that the most important function of utopia and the utopian mentality has been to comment on and critique the present. Utopia, like fantasy, is rooted in the desire for difference, wish-fulfilment, for human society to be other than what it presently is: utopia springs out of the tension between “what is” and “what ought to be”. Utopia may have lost some of its political drive toward large-scale social reformation, but none of its original impetus toward the transformation of human social relationships and the quality of life. The strength of “ecotopian” visions lies in their continued relevance to modern industrial society addressing issues the social and moral sphere, rather than merely in the economic and technological realms of many traditional utopian visions.\footnote{Kelly Seasmith, “News from Somewhere: A Case for Romance-Tradition Fantasy’s Reformist Poetic,” Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts 11:1 (2000), 63ff.} \footnote{Such as Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backwards.}
Brian Attebery argues that fantasy and utopia are two completely different and incompatible impulses, and that in fact "fantasy and utopia are neighbours at war. The existence of evidently ecotopian fantasy texts led me to question Attebery’s conclusions. Basically Attebery adheres to the not uncommon assumption that Utopia is by definition a realizable blueprint for social action, which by nature involves totalitarian, prescriptive “social engineering”, ultimately stifling all human desire, creativity and freedom under its benevolent veneer. Attebery maintains that fantasy is anti-utopian in preferring a society that is “less ‘perfect’ and more free”. In this belief Attebery is not alone. In fact, Krishan Kumar says that,

In our own century... hostility to utopia has been well nigh unremitting. It has been attacked for its basic way of proceeding, for its fundamental assumptions about the nature of humanity and society. It must lead, so the claim goes, to tyranny and totalitarianism. Much of this stems from the fact that the modern utopia is inextricably linked with the socialist experiment. As Kumar says, “The modern utopia is the socialist utopia.” There is, therefore, a tendency for all the varieties of utopia to be lumped together as one and the same thing: “No discrimination is made between the intentions of critics and satirists such as Thomas More and constructive social

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61 For example, in Attebery’s reading, utopias leave out the “longing for what can only be dreamed of”. (1986, 8) “Utopias attempt to show how mankind could satisfy all needs, whereas fantasy, as Tolkien says, exists not to satisfy desire but to awaken it.” Ibid., 8.
62 The latter quotation is by Nicholas Berdiaev, used by Aldous Huxley as the epigraph to Brave New World. See also Krishan Kumar, Utopianism (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1991), 93.
63 Ibid., 90.
64 Ibid., 94.
theorists such as Saint-Simon".\textsuperscript{65} This, Kumar argues, is "to deny the richness and multiformity of the utopian inheritance."\textsuperscript{66}

Within the "green dreams" of ecotopian fantasy, the traditional fantasy trope of "healing the Wasteland" takes on a much more overtly ecological bent. Not only is the individual (hero/psyche) made whole, and the world restored to a state of harmony, but the imbalances and perceived rifts between men and women, humanity and the natural world are also healed through the shift towards a more egalitarian and ecologically balanced society. Due to the long-standing symbolic association between Nature and the feminine; and the parallels between the exploitation of Nature and the oppression of women; feminism and ecology are often linked in the same texts.\textsuperscript{67} Both Tepper and Le Guin tend to emphasize positively the links between Nature and "the feminine", in accordance with eco-feminist principles involving explorations of "female heroism" and the re-establishment of balance and harmony through the agency of a female messiah.

The technique of contrasting the utopia to an explicit dystopia which takes the form of an intensification and exaggeration of existing gender and environmental relations is an effective way of highlighting the present imbalances and injustices in our society.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 96. Much of the contemporary hostility to utopia can be traced back to the widespread acceptance of Karl Mannheim's conception of utopia back in the 1940s and 50s. Mannheim himself sought to remove utopia from the stigmatization of escapist, impossible fantasies, by "perversely" putting the emphasis on the \textit{realizability} of utopian ideas. The distinction between "plausible" utopias and "unrealizable" fantasy is a false dichotomy which leads us to accept an artificial distinction between "real" and "fantastic" utopian visions. This engenders confusion as to what is and is not acceptable to the genre of fantasy fiction itself.
\textsuperscript{67} Ecotopian themes within fantasy raise the problematic issue of how to categorize the increasing number of hybrid works by contemporary authors such as Tepper, which not only show a disregard for traditional genre conventions by conflating the techniques of fantasy and science fiction. Furthermore, the ethos of change wrought by the utopian visions of the Green and feminist movements are compatible with the deep structure of fantasy, but are changing its traditional concerns.
Le Guin's *Always coming Home*, for example, describes the post-apocalyptic ecotopia of the Kesh, who live in perfect symbiosis with their natural environment: animals, plants, landscape and people are unified in an overarching cosmology. This harmonious matriarchal ecotopia is set off by comparison to the dystopian vision of the warlike Condor men who destroy the environment and treat women as slaves and breeders.

It becomes clear from Le Guin's description of the Kesh (to whom “people” also includes non-human animals), and Tepper's sophisticated talking beasts and sentient trees in *The Family Tree*; that these two writers are espousing a biocentric view of the world. This view is a fundamental tenet of most environmentalist movements. Basically, biocentrism situates human beings within the greater web of life, as a part of the ecosystem and not above it, as opposed to anthropocentrism which regards humanity as somehow above and beyond Nature. The environmental movement has sought to alter our perception of Nature, substituting the industrial revolution's pre-occupation with the environment as a more or less inexhaustible source of resources, with a model which regards Nature as something to be valued and cherished. As I have argued, at the centre of the environmental perspective there is often a reverence for Nature which borders on the religious, as Nature itself becomes imbued with divinity.\(^{68}\) Environmentalists often describe a sense of awe, beauty, an experience of unity with nature akin to the *mysterium tremendum* of traditional religious experience. (i.e. Rudolf Otto's definition of 'the sacred') Therefore religious studies scholars such as Daly consider environmentalism a kind of "secular spirituality", an alternative way of understanding humanity as part of the natural world which

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functions as an antidote to the alienation felt by many urban dwellers. This accounts for the rapid growth of ecological concern and "New Age" ideology.\textsuperscript{69}

The quasi-religious aspect of environmentalism could also explain the prominence of rhetoric of eco-catastrophe, prophecies of disaster and the end of the world, because "concern for the environment is at its core, a concern for the fate of the earth".\textsuperscript{70} Eschatology, and end-of-the-world fictions, have flourished since the end of the nineteenth century, as the unprecedented change and global wars which have characterised the modern world have propelled us into a state of permanent crisis. Disaster fictions translate the traditional Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic world-view of "crisis-judgement-reward" for the faithful, into secular, scientific values, where the responsibility for doomsday is firmly on humanity's shoulders.\textsuperscript{71} These are trademarks of what Wagar calls "secular eschatology", which, unlike the biblical millennium, is typified by the freedom of the individual's choice and actions ultimately to determine the outcome.\textsuperscript{72} We can see this at work most clearly in Tepper's millennial visions.

The influence of feminism results in a "softening" of some of the more extreme environmentalist eschatologies through the utopian tendency towards optimism and peaceful resolutions, imagining better futures for women. The apocalyptic streak is strong in Tepper's works; for example, in The Family Tree humans are bound in

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 445-9.
silent penance to act as slaves for other animals after a genetically engineered virus wipes out everyone except those capable of respecting Nature. But a new society arises anew giving hope to humanity to finally fulfil its ecotopian potential. The implicit message is that an ecologically harmonious and balanced society will also be one where the current gender imbalances are righted, and in fact, it is implied that the superior "feminine" qualities of spiritual sensitivity, co-operation and pacifism, will be the enabling factor in the fruition of these ecological utopias. Here we see the underlying ecotopian principle at work: that it is only through "the creation of a just and participatory society" that a "healthy and benign relationship to the natural world can be developed." Thus ecotopian thought can be characterized by the belief that it is only through a radical transformation of (Western) human thought and traditional social relations that "the world can be reborn." The ecotopias discussed in this thesis function less as practical blueprints for a viable society, but they are no less genuinely utopian in that they present new ways of thinking, philosophies and ideas about living in harmony with the environment, which may yet be realizable.

8.5 The Garden in the Machine: fantasy in the modern age

It is important to realize that our idea of "Nature" is always a cultural construction, its meaning and value constantly shifting and changing with different societies and historical eras. The values assigned to the natural world fluctuate: Nature becomes a fluid, ever-shifting repository of symbolic value. In this section I will look at historically contextualizing the way Nature has been represented in fantasy, using the texts of J. R. R. Tolkien and China Miéville as primary examples. Fantasy has been recognized as a genre that is intimately concerned with nature and humanity's

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73 Lee, "Environmental Apocalypse," 120.

74 This section has been adapted from an unpublished conference paper, Kim Selling, "Other Nature: (De)Constructing the Natural in Fantasy." Paper presented at the International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, (Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 2004).
relationship to it. As I discussed above, genre fantasy's archetypal text, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, has been held up as an avatar of the ecological Green movement, especially in its formative years in the 1960s and 1970s. Tolkien's image of the pastoral idylls of Middle-earth destroyed by the onset of industrialism, (iconically symbolized by the Machine - Saruman's war factory and the wasteland of Mordor), has resonated strongly with environmental movements since the 1960s. Certainly ecological concern has been a passionate theme in many fantasy texts throughout the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, particularly in the works of Sheri S. Tepper, Ursula K. Le Guin, Patricia McKillip, and Stephen R. Donaldson.

What I would like to emphasise, is that though a Romantic ecological perspective grafted from Tolkien has been pervasive throughout the genre, it has not been a consistent, static or undisputed view. An examination the construction of nature in a recent text, like China Miéville's *The Scar* (2002), reveals a sea-change, an interesting shift in the sensibility of genre fantasy over the past fifty years. I argue that there have been intimations of a move away from the dominant image of "the Machine in the Garden"; where the industrial machine is conceived primarily as an ugly, unwanted intrusion into the pastoral idyll of nature, which Leo Marx identifies as a central theme in early twentieth century American literature; to an image of "the Garden in the Machine", where the machine gradually becomes part of nature, the natural landscape. *The Scar* fascinates me precisely because though it sets itself up as antithetical to Tolkien's brand of Romantic fantasy, in spite its differences (in

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setting, tone, and character) it is still recognizably fantasy, continuing to explore the
genre's essential concern with the relationship between culture and nature. This
supports the notion that genre fantasy is not a monolithic, uniform entity, but rather
a site of complex cultural negotiation, a field of struggle between competing
discourses engaged in an ever-changing dialogue with itself and wider society.

As I mentioned earlier, the formation of fantasy as a commercial genre occurred
during the tumultuous post-war decades of the 1960s and 1970s when the social and
environmental consequences of wide scale modernization (urbanization and
industrialization) began to be felt. Modern society was increasingly perceived (by the
educated middle classes) as alienating and dehumanizing, and the unchecked growth
of science and technology, symbolized by "the Machine" was blamed for degrading
the natural environment. The "green" ideology that emerged in the 1970s continued
to gain currency throughout the 1980s and 1990s, encouraging the development of
"ecocriticism" (which is devoted specifically to exploring the relationship between
literature and the environment) as a separate field of literary studies.\footnote{Glotfelty and Fromm, eds.,  \textit{The Ecocriticism Reader}.}

Both fantasy and environmentalism share roots in the Romantic movement,
particularly in the use of the pastoral as a mode of social critique as seen in the works
of writers such as Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau. As I noted in Chapter 6,
William Morris, arguably the first modern fantasist, wrote (in "How I became a
Socialist"), "Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of
my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization."\footnote{William Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," in \textit{News from Nowhere and Other Writings} (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 381.} Certainly the use of the
pastoral in fantasy has continued from Morris through to Tolkien and his successors,
to provide a strong critique of modernity in its turn to a pre-industrial past, to nature,
and a simpler, more authentic and meaningful existence. In response to the “sordid, aimless, ugly confusion”\(^8^0\) engendered by the Industrial and French revolutions and Enlightenment materialism, Romanticism promoted an organic view of nature, placing the transcendent within the natural world (the numinous or spiritual as located in Nature). Both modern environmentalism and fantasy have regarded the roots of the ecological crisis as lying in the Loss of this transcendent Garden, the Fall from wholeness (physically and spiritually). There is a sense of profound existential alienation: the mind-body dichotomy is echoed in the fundamental separation between human culture and the nature. Fantasy problematizes this separation, questioning, like the mage Ogion in Le Guin’s Earthsea books, “Who we are, and where our wholeness lies...”\(^8^1\)

With the beginnings of Industrialism, Leo Marx identifies changes to the pastoral response in American literature, with the sudden, discordant appearance of the Machine (iconic of modern technology and industry) rudely interrupting the harmony of Nature’s Garden. As mentioned, Tolkien used the image of the Machine in the Garden to great effect as a powerful image of anti-modern protest. It articulated an anti-modern iconography shared by the burgeoning environmental activism of the 1960s, used to particular effect in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962).\(^8^2\) It is significant that Carson couched the idea of environmental degradation in terms of a story, a fable about a “once upon a time” that is being lost and destroyed:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of

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\(^8^0\) Ibid.


orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. ...Along the roads, laurel, viburnum and alder, great ferns and wildflowers delighted the traveller's eye through much of the year. ...Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. ... The roadssides, once so attractive, were now lined with browned and withered vegetation as though swept by fire. These, too, were silent, deserted by all living things. ... No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.\(^{83}\)

Carson's eco-fable of environmental destruction and the loss of a pastoral idyll found strong resonances in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which was published in the same period. Nevertheless, *The Lord of the Rings* does not present a straightforward message of eco-conservation. Whilst the Shire is a pastoral paradise, its survival depends upon strictly policing its boundaries with the outside world, keeping the menace of the Old Forest at bay. Verlyn Flieger\(^ {84} \) points out a fundamental contradiction in *The Lord of the Rings*, that "wild nature and human community do not coexist easily". In giving voice to the trees, Tolkien acknowledges that non-human life has its own agenda and survival at stake that is not necessarily compatible with human society. As Treebeard famously says, "I am not altogether on anybody's side, because nobody is altogether on my side." After all, (says Flieger) how are hobbits with handsaws different from orcs? Despite different motivations the result is still the destruction of wild nature: human settlement inevitably has an effect on the environment: Tolkien once mused, "To trees all Men are Orcs".\(^ {85} \) This identifies the fundamental paradox inherent in the cultural construction of the natural: does culture/civilization make us un-natural? Are humans (and human culture) part of or separate from nature? These questions may be ultimately

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\(^ {83} \) Ibid., 21-2.

\(^ {84} \) Flieger, "Taking the Part of Trees: Eco-Conflict in Middle-Earth," 150.

\(^ {85} \) Ibid., 157.
irresolvable and they echo tensions found within the Green Movement itself and in wider society.

It is important to note that "environmentalism" is not a uniform, monolithic structure: there are internal cultural clashes within environmentalist thought and within the social movement itself. Albanese points to the ever-present struggles and competition within the field of environmentalism (both movement and academic field), arguing that far from having a unified or uniform agenda or theoretical/philosophical understanding, the inherited models and ideas underlying the environmental movement today "often pull in different directions and promise different goals and goods".\(^86\) In fact there are considerable differences, and even direct disagreements/disparities, between environmentalist perspectives, such as ecologic, biocentric, economic, liberal schools of environmental thought. Scholars such as J. Baird Callicott and Barbara Noske have explored in detail the often conflicting and directly oppositional beliefs and actions of "animal liberationists" (who concern themselves mainly with ethics concerning "sentient animals") and "land ethicists" (such as deep ecologists, or followers of Aldo Leopold) who tend to be more concerned about whole systems and species rather than individuals.\(^87\) Problems arise within environmental debates concerning conflicts between the rights of individuals within and between species; and the broader notion of ecological interrelatedness, of place and space within a larger community/ecosystem.

Writers of the sub-genre of "urban fantasy" (which has flourished since the mid-late 1980s) force a re-evaluation of the concept of nature by finding in industrial cityscapes the same qualities of "the numinous" generally associated with the natural world. As Sylvia Kelso notes, this works to collapse "the industrial/pre-industrial opposition" so

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\(^{87}\) See Ibid., note 13, p.25.
prevalent in genre fantasy, so that “the city now is the Land”. This reflects the changed geography of the post-modern urban-industrialized landscape: Machines are gradually becoming an accepted part of the Garden.\textsuperscript{88}

In urban fantasy, the modern cityscape becomes naturalized, numinous – like the non-human natural world in romantic, pastoral fantasy, it acquires spiritual resonance. It achieves this through language, stylistic devices linking the artificial with the natural: the industrial world and the machine become infused with a sense of wonder, associated with positive rather than negative values.\textsuperscript{89} This is certainly true of China Miéville’s \textit{Perdido Street Station} (2000), \textit{King Rat} (1998) and \textit{The Scar} (2002).\textsuperscript{90} \textit{The Scar} has some particularly striking imagery: here the machine is made flesh, organic: it bleeds and dies and is irrevocably fused into the natural and human landscape. The machine becomes nature, further blurring the distinctions between artificial and natural, human and other. Here is a marvellous image of “Machinery Beach” made up entirely of rusting machine parts:

Bellis looked down at her cupped hands. They were full of thousands of minuscule ratchets and gearwheels and ossified springs, like the innards of inconceivably tiny clocks. Each particle of wreckage a grain like sand, hard and sunwarmed, smaller than a crumb. Bellis let them sift from her hands, and her fingers were stained the dark blood colour of the shoreline – painted with rust.\textsuperscript{91}

The opening pages of \textit{The Scar} immediately set the tone of the book with an acutely “scientific” ecological awareness, depicting “complex ecosystems flourish[ing]” in the depths of the ocean: possibly the last true wilderness on earth.\textsuperscript{92} Miéville deliberately


\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{91} Miéville, \textit{The Scar}, 275.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 1.
flouts the traditional conventions of archetypal (Tolkienesque) or fairy-tale fantasy in his Hobbesian reading of life in the State of Nature as generally “poor, nasty, brutish and short”. This is “Nature, red in tooth and claw”, characterized by conflict, by predator and prey relationships where all life destroys and is constantly at war in an endless competition for the survival of the fittest. This image is a far cry from the “lovely green hollow” of Tolkien’s pastoral Lothlorien or the harmonious cooperation of McKillip’s “land-law” in the Riddlemaster trilogy. Miéville presents an alternative view of nature as community, not as one drawn together in peaceful cooperation and mutual respect, but as an intricately balanced dance of savagery, a Darwinian struggle for survival, where “a brutality of evolution obtains”.

This nature is not the Romantic one, it has changed to suit the uncertain temperament of twenty-first century urbanites living in fluid, mobile, post-capitalist societies, positing a changed relationship to the natural world and to each other. Middle-earth’s pastoral medievalism mourns the loss of long-established social cohesion and stability disrupted by external forces, and laments the destruction of the old order that Tolkien lived through during the transitional pre- and between-war period early last century. Miéville’s brutish brave new world is very much a product of the new millennium – he taps into the contemporary urban experience of fractured communities and identities, of rapid and violent social upheavals, alien colonists, refugees adrift, immigrant communities – the post-modern experience of globalization, post-colonialism and multiculturalism.

This is a world of indiscriminate, antagonistic and violent meldings – communities thrown together by happenstance (the pirate city of Armada, and the city of New Crobuzon itself as an organic melting pot peopled by a wild assortment of human and

93 Ibid.
alien hybrids and species: the insectoid khepri, cactus people and the anophelii, the bizarre mosquito people). These violent graftings emphasize The Scar’s central metaphor of disruption, damage, there is scarring on every level: the individual emotional scarring of refugees adrift on the Armada city; the violent clash of cultures and pidgin languages through trade, war and colonization, and finally, the Scar on the world of Bas Lag itself tearing the very fabric of reality on every level. Here what is “natural” is constantly being reformed in violent, conflict-loaded meldings and reappraisals on every level.

In many ways this is a deliberate response to Tolkien’s conservative Romantic organicism: Mieville’s celebration of hybridity rejects any notions of purity, including universalizing concepts of good and evil or nature versus culture, preferring instead a more “vague, pluralist reality”.94 One of the most striking examples of hybrid nature are the “Remade”, where (human) criminals such as Tanner Sack are “remade” as Frankensteinian cyborgs, part human, part alien or part steam engine using a fusion of magic, (Renaissance) science and bio-engineering. The distinctions between human, animal, alien and machine are increasingly blurred, extending human self and society to encompass a broader Nature. The Scar’s central metaphor of scarification is not only the tale of wounding, the destructive disintegration of wholeness and loss, that Tolkien portrays in Lord of the Rings (the destruction of the Shire, the departure of the Elves), but moves beyond that to the next stage: the process of healing and scarring. Scars mean damage has been done, but it also means survival, “Wounding and healing in a new configuration.”95

The Scar is on many levels a story about hope and healing, of reconciliation very much in keeping with the central themes of genre fantasy. An ecocritical reading of

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94 Ibid., 413.
95 Ibid., 601.
Mieville's post-industrial fantasy reveals the voice of a generation bearing the scars of environmental crisis and destruction. However this is not reason enough to despair—it is not after all, the end of all things—nature, including human nature, is adaptable, can survive and move on to something new:

They had 

scarred,

they had 

broken

the world. And, in doing so, they set free forces that they were able to tap. Forces which allowed them to reshape things, to fail and succeed 

simultaneously

— because they mined for possibilities. A cataclysm is like that, shattering a world, the rupture left behind: it opens up a rich seam of potentialities.

We can read into this an alternative meditation on contemporary society's ecological dilemma: this is not a message of preservation or conservation, but rather a movement towards change, the re-establishment of equilibrium at a new level. It points to a more complex kind of this-worldly redemption, rather than one of Romantic transcendence. There is an acknowledgment that things are never going to go back to the way they used to be: much has been irrevocably and irrevocably lost or destroyed, but we can change and find new solutions to problems, and we can tolerate the paradox of simultaneous failure and success. Nature does survive, despite our wounding. Scars mean that one has survived to fight another day. Perhaps this is the voice of a new, more nuanced environmentalism, one of compromise and practicality as environmental sphere becomes more entrenched in the mainstream.

8.6 Conclusion

In the past two decades, the attitudes of environmentalists toward modernity and modernization have changed dramatically. The landscape of "green" positions and ideologies toward modernity has become far more complex, ranging from de-modernizers or anti-modernists, through various kinds of modernists (including neo-Marxists) to post-modernists. If anything, we can conclude that compared with the

96 Ibid., 410.
1970s and 1980s, environmentalists have become less hostile toward modernity. This reflects the changing cultural geography of late capitalist Western modernity, and is evinced not only through the pluralization of environmentalist discourses and attitudes towards the modern world, but also in the mainstreaming of the anti-modernism of the Romantic "cultic milieu" as New Age religiosity becomes gradually incorporated into general cultural assumptions. The tensions and co-existence of different views of nature in genre fantasy thus highlights pluralism of late capitalist consumerism: "Modernization largely means a universalization or democratization process".

The co-existence of contradictory positions toward Nature and the environment argues for a re-visioning of modernity itself as a complex field of struggle, rather than the monolithic structure suggested by the dualistic discourses of modernism. The modernist discourses of scientism and rationalism failed to provide answers to questions of "meaning" in life, and to satisfactorily encompass the full range of human social experience. These perceived omissions or failings are addressed by countercurrents within modernity itself, primarily through the value system and discourses of Romanticism. Many of the ethical problems concerning social responsibility and human relations with the natural world and the non-human were also perceived not to be addressed by dominant institutions of modernism, and the rise of the ecological sphere as a consequence of modernization indicates a major area of cultural change and social development in the modern West.

Genre fantasy proposes a radically different reading of the culture/nature, Reason/Nature divide, reflecting a more relativistic, pluralistic outlook of the post-industrial, post-modern age. Fantasy as a popular cultural artefact may not offer

concrete solutions to the ills of modernity, but it continues to explore, in a highly relevant way humanity's ever-changing relationship with itself and the natural world. Fantasy, as a popular cultural discourse, at least holds the promise of giving narrative and symbolic coherence to many popular questions and contemporary anxieties.
Conclusion

This thesis has explored the critical, historical and social contexts of the modern literary genre of fantasy fiction, demonstrating that genre fantasy participates in and contributes to major contemporary cultural debates about the variety and meaning of human experience in the modern world, particularly how Western humanity constructs and relates to the non-human environment and the sphere of Nature. I have argued that modern fantasy articulates and continues many of the central concerns of Romanticism, constructed as a worldview that opposes the dominant values and ideologies of modernity, such as philosophical mechanism, rationalism, utilitarianism, and the belief in material and technological progress at the expense of quality of life, the destruction of nature and limited views of the variety of individual human experience. I therefore emphasise the Romantic inheritance of fantasy and its relation to broader social contexts, such as attitudes to the environment and contemporary spirituality movements.

Part 1 asserts that fantasy's contribution to contemporary cultural debates have been overlooked and downgraded due to the "Othering" of fantasy as irrelevant, escapist nostalgia, which I trace to the cultural and structural association of fantasy with the (political) sphere of Nature, and to the methodologies and assumptions of the dominant modernist literary criticism, which construct fantasy in a negative relation to the privileged form of literary realism or mimesis. I therefore re-examined the existing critical literature on fantasy with the aim of reorienting current thinking about the cultural value and function of genre fantasy by exposing the underlying dualistic premises and assumptions (opposing Reason and Nature) inherent in the dominant modernist literary paradigm, which are shown to be ultimately hostile and discriminatory to popular genre fiction. The system of institutionalised domination and negation within modernist literary discourses has led to a perception of popular genres as "formulas": abstract, totalising, unchanging and strictly defined entities — a
view that precludes more nuanced and less (negatively) evaluative analyses of their form, function and relation to society. I charted the emergence of this dualistic interpretation of fantasy against the rise of the realistic novel and the formation of the academic discipline of English Literature, emphasising the ways in which appeals to the “superior” sphere of Reason have been utilized in the consecration of hierarchical social and ideological power relations. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the “field” of cultural production, I re-contextualised genre fantasy within the social conditions of its production and reception as a commercial genre, suggesting that the methodology of the cultural field provides a way to overcome the workings of the Reason/Nature dualism by connecting fantasy to its immediate, concrete social and cultural milieu.

Chapter 2 examined closely the three texts I consider foundational to the contemporary study of fantasy post-1975, namely Tolkien’s Romantic defence of fantasy “On Fairy-Stories”; Vladimir Propp’s formalist study of the structural properties of fairytales, Morphology of the Folktale; and Tzvetan Todorov’s The Fantastic, whose structuralist, theoretical orientation impacted profoundly on subsequent critiques of genre fantasy. I emphasise the continuity of Romantic thought on the role of fantasy and the imagination in Tolkien’s theory, connecting Coleridge’s idea of a joyous, religious “sublime” with Tolkien’s articulation of fantasy’s purposes as Recovery, Escape and Consolation. In contrast, Propp and Todorov’s emphasis on structure rather than function, and the denial of the role of religion, “superstition” and the supernatural, occlude the connections between fantasy and Romanticism, meaning that Todorov’s “fantastic hesitation” is not clearly articulated as a version of the dark, “Gothic” sublime, which I trace back to Edmund Burke’s “negative” Romantic affect. Todorov’s prioritisation of “theoretical” over “historical” genres and his concentration on canonical works contributed furthermore to the ahistoricizing tendencies of modernist and postmodernist studies of “the
fantastic”, and to the systematic critical marginalization of contemporary popular genre fiction in the Romantic tradition of Tolkien.

A large part of the critical reception of genre fantasy has involved its exclusion from serious scholarly consideration by the modernist critical establishment: popular fantasy is constructed as the “Other” to literature (the “Weed Theory” of fantasy), through dualistic processes that devalue popular fictions and mass culture as irrational, associated with the inferior sphere of Nature and gendered female, while “authentic” elite art and culture remained in the sphere of masculine Reason. Modern fantasy’s strong dependence on “Story” and mythic modes of thought highlight its historical and cultural relationship to medieval romance narratives, which I argue work to critically discredit the genre and relegate it to the category of mass popular culture, antithetical to the dominant literary critical paradigms and the elite modernist novel.

By expanding and reworking the concept of “genre” as an interactive historical process to include the commercial and social formation of genre fantasy, and the values of the community that shapes the meanings and functions of fantasy texts (i.e. by re-conceiving genre as “field”); I counteract some of the more simplistic and reductionist approaches to genre as a “formula”, by recognizing the complexity of the popular cultural field. Re-visioning fantasy as a field of artistic, critical, social and historical meaning inheres an analytical position that is less hierarchical and exclusionary, revealing the complexity of the modern genre fantasy and its relevance to contemporary society. My arguments are articulated within an overarching philosophical framework that highlights the dominance of the Reason/Nature dualism in western thinking, which shapes the very nature and structure of the critical and methodological tools (our consciousness) with which we view the world.
Chapters 5 and 6 present an explanation for the currently dominant form of commercial genre fantasy by examining its literary antecedents in the eighteenth and nineteenth century revival of medieval romance literature, particularly from the “Gothic” North; addressing the neglected historical and cultural background of modern fantasy and demonstrating its strong association with medievalism and Romanticism. I argue that a renewed interest in the “primitive” medieval roots of newly industrialized western society was of crucial importance to the formation of Romanticism, as the conjunction of primitivist discourses of medievalism and the new Romantic aesthetic theory of “the sublime” form a strong ideological current which was utilized as a cultural criticism of emergent modernity.

Enlightenment Reason constructed medieval romances as the irrational, superstitious Other to literatures that followed classical models; and the term “romantic” thus became aligned with elements associated with the excluded sphere of Nature, such as femininity, emotion, spirituality, and the medieval past. The Romantic fascination with the “fantastic” romances of the “Gothic” Middle Ages can thus be attributed to the association of romance with religion, superstition, and “authentic” unmediated perceptions of the natural world, which was transformed by the theory of the sublime into an aestheticized, literary version of religious experience. Romantic primitivism and medievalism constitutes a search for otherness in the pre-modern past for examples and models of a different, more “authentic”, and emotionally and spiritually satisfying mode of life, distinct from and an improvement on, modern capitalist modernity. Löwy and Sayre for example, emphasise the positive, utopian qualities of Romantic anti-modernism, asserting that “Without nostalgia for the past there can be no dream of an authentic future”.¹ These connections between fantasy literature, medievalism and Romantic anti-modernism are made explicit by nineteenth century

writers and social critics such as William Morris, whose prose romances of the 1880s-90s are regarded as the first instances of the contemporary "Secondary World" fantasies made popular by Tolkien in the mid-twentieth century. I thus conclude that fantasy represents a discursive space that nurtures explorations of the Romantic paradigm, constituted as a cultural protest that challenged the seemingly inevitable outcomes of the industrial and intellectual revolutions.

I also note however, that the relationship between Romanticism and Enlightenment values (which are paradigmatic to modernist Reason) is not a simple diametric opposition of incompatible worldviews, but rather a complex dialectic conceived of in terms of dualistic structures informed by real interests and power groups competing for authority in society. Romanticism is not a simple opposition of Enlightenment values, nor merely a reassertion of traditional religion and superstition in a whole-hearted embrace of the "irrational". Such polarizations are a product of rhetorical dualistic structures that attempt to hyper-separate and devalue competing spheres of ideology, particularly through the over-valuation of the political and philosophical sphere of Reason in Western culture. Romanticism's positive appreciation of the non- or supra-natural is an attempt to overcome the "dissecting" mentality of Enlightenment rationality with its emphasis on positivism and mechanism.

The elevation of the "sublime", and poetic "genius" were a way of validating the emotional, intuitive aspects of human intellect and perception, and Coleridge's assertion of the "Primary Imagination" as a creative, spiritual faculty of Reason should be viewed in the light of Romanticism's own adherence to a rational-secular worldview, which nevertheless sought to differentiate the "higher" spiritual and ethical properties of the "reasoning" imagination from "mere" analytical, critical
intellectualization valorised by "men of cold fancies, and philosophical dispositions".² It is notable that Tolkien, like the Romantics, does not consider the imagination or fantasy to be incompatible with "reason", when he states,

Fantasy is a rational not an irrational activity. ...It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity.³

In this thesis I regard Romanticism as a "complex blend of protest and accommodation"⁴ that both reacts to the dualistic ideologies of Reason and modernity but nevertheless remains deeply influenced by them.⁵ I furthermore regard Romanticism not as a discrete historical period, but as a multifarious sub-current of at times diametrically opposed political discourses that are united by their oppositional stance towards the values and conditions of modernity. I therefore maintain that Romantic ideologies must be seen in an intimate and ultimately inseparable relation to Enlightenment Reason, conceived of in dualistic oppositions between mechanism/organicism, reason/imagination, intellect/emotion, present/past, reductionism/holism, which are all linked within the overarching politico-philosophical opposition of Reason/Nature.

The Romantic reassertion of Nature articulated in modern fantasy, contemporary spirituality and environmentalism, I view as a turn to discourses of the Other ("the natural", the primitive, the medieval past) in the quest for a conceptual language in which to express intellectual and emotional concepts that are perceived as lost or

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marginalized by the rationalization and mechanization of thought and everyday life. Fantasy intersects with two major facets of the contemporary Romantic protest against modernity: the rise of the modern environmentalist movement, and the changing face of religious belief in the modern West. My research into the ideological and functional underpinnings of genre fantasy expands existing studies on fantasy's Romantic elements, suggesting that fantasy has not only developed out of and been informed by the historical Romantic movement, but that it exerts an ongoing transformative influence upon the world today as a neo-Romantic discourse engaged in a cultural critique of modernity. I argue that fantasy literature can be viewed ideologically as part of a broader societal reaction against the rationalistic, anti-heroic, materialist and empiricist discourses upon which modern Western culture and society are founded – in other words, it perpetuates and revitalizes the Romantic worldview in the contemporary world.

In Chapter 7 I highlighted the fact that the diverse “New Age” spirituality groups of the late twentieth-century share in common dissatisfaction with the two main institutions of knowledge and morality in the modern West, namely science and institutional religion, and that they can be identified collectively as a cultural group (the “cultic milieu”) seeking alternative values and beliefs. Fantasy literature forms part of the creative substratum of this “cultic milieu” or social movement, which constitutes a powerful critique of the dominant worldview in contemporary industrialized societies. Many social commentators since the 1960s have spoken of the “crisis of science” in relation to the rise of the counterculture and alternative religious movements. Fantasy can thus be understood as participating in or intersecting with the broader social movement of the “New Age” which is indicative of broad shifts
cultural in religious ideas and sensibilities, relating directly to the massive social changes in Western society after the Second World War.⁶

Some signs indicating that there is a connection between fantasy literature and “New Age” or alternative religiosity movements, have been noted in media accounts of the “cultic” element of fantasy, as well as in the hostility of many traditional Christian churches towards a perceived “occult” element present in some fantasy literature. I briefly examined the close connections between fantastic art and literature in the nineteenth century and fin de siècle Symbolism and occultist movements in chapters 6 and 7. These developments took place in the context of the increasing prestige of modern science and the corresponding perception of the world as “disenchanted” of magic and mystery with the social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution:

Along with the smoking factory chimneys came both the literature of the fantastic and the new phenomenon of spiritualism. These two possess a common characteristic: each takes the real world in its most concrete form as its point of departure, and then postulates the existence of another, supernatural world, separated from the first by a more or less impermeable partition.⁷

The Romantic perception of Entzauberung, the disenchantment of modernity, posits barrier between the supernatural and everyday reality, so that magic and “the sacred” become located in a numinous “other world”. Fantasy represents an attempt by Romanticism to re-enchant and resacralise the world, and imbue everyday life with a sense of the numinous and mysterious. The fundamentally “modern” nature of Romanticism expressed in both fantastic literature and alternative spiritualities, is evident in their adherence to the “real world” as point of departure from which to postulate existence of supernatural. As Tolkien put it, “creative Fantasy is founded

⁷ Anton Faivre, “What is Occultism”, 7, and “Genese d’un genre narrative”, in Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture 421.
upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it”. 8

A particularly good example of a modern fantasy novel that brings together the elements of Romantic anti-modernism, the resacralization of the everyday world and a sense of the numinous in nature, is John Crowley’s Little, Big (whose epigraph on “bubbles of earth” I refer to at the beginning of this thesis). Little, Big is bursting with references to Western esoteric traditions such as astrology, the Hermetic tradition, alchemy, Gnosticism, Renaissance magic, Rosicrucians and the works of sixteenth century heretic monk Giordano Bruno; as well as alluding to folk and fairy lore, and literary sources such as Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland. Crowley draws on Renaissance magic and neo-Platonic concepts, such as “The sense of an earthly world surrounded by sphere upon sphere of powers, not friends to man, reaching out to a divine sphere which is our souls’ origin; the idea of a tragic fall”. 9

The following quotation clearly articulates the esoteric doctrine of Correspondences (“as above, so below” that I mention in Chapter 7), through organic, holistic imagery that highlights Romanticism’s belief in the interconnections between humanity, the spiritual, and the natural realm:

Daily Alice couldn’t tell if she felt huge or small. she wondered whether her head were so big as to be able to contain all this starry universe, or whether the universe were so little that it would fit within the compass of her human head. She alternated between these feelings, expanding and diminishing. The stars wandered in and out of the vast portals of her eyes, and the immense empty dome of her brow; and the Smoky took her hand and she vanished to a speck, still holding the stars as in a tiny jewel box within her. 10

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The links to Romantic esoteric currents of the New Age are also made clear by Crowley himself, who states in an interview that the 1960s and 1970s were “a crux time”, when “a lot of people did think they were creating new worlds to chose among.”

In this thesis I have drawn attention to the historical and cultural connections between the emergence of fantasy as a genre, the development of New Age alternative religiosity and the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s. I argue that these cultural movements should be seen in relation to the social and environmental impact of the processes of widespread modernization, including urbanization, the increasing bureaucratized nature of modern living, rapid technological change and scientific development, increased social mobility, alienation and the growth of global consumer-capitalism. In their structural and ideational opposition to the conditions of modernity, fantasy literature, alternative spirituality and environmentalism display many of the central tenets of Romantic thought, and can be regarded as the Other, a “mirror” to Western modernist ideologies and values.

This shared Romantic ideology and attitude towards Nature forms a nexus between fantasy, alternative religiosity and environmentalism that I explore in Chapter 8. Organicist and holistic views of nature are important components of contemporary ecological/environmentalist thought, which often displays a “religious” element in its desire to imbue nature with a sense of “the sacred”. The quasi-religious holism of the Romantic sublime has been recognized by some contemporary environmental philosophers as a means of recognizing human continuity with nature. American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson famously gave voice to this notion:

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In the woods, we return to reason and faith... all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.\textsuperscript{12}

The holistic discourses of Romanticism that view the world as a living organism are thus regarded by fantasy, New Age and environmentalist discourses and offering the possibility of overcoming the mind/body, culture/nature, self/other dichotomies posed by the Reason/Nature dualism, by emphasising continuity of humanity with natural, non-human world, and acknowledging the validity life forms and experiences other than our own. Fantasy as a form has proven eminently able to express the “new” modes of understanding human–nature relationships and forms of interdependency conceptualised by both alternative spiritualities and ecological science.

A real part of the contemporary appeal of genre fantasy since the 1960s has thus lain in its ability to critique the western dualisms that conceive of Reason (a quality reserved purely to humans) as a separate and superior sphere to Nature. As Kroeber clarifies, Romantic fantasy expresses resistance “not to some particular ideology but to underlying cultural attitudes” (my italics).\textsuperscript{13} Divorcing fantasy from its social and cultural contexts thus obscures the countercultural thrust of the Romantic fantastic, and effaces its very real appeal and relevance to other contemporary anti-modernist discourses such as environmentalism. The growing number of critical studies highlighting fantasy’s ties to environmentalist thought attests to the importance of this contemporary refashioning and revitalization of Romantic ideologies. It is only when fantasy is cut adrift from the social and ideological currents that anchor its meaning and function to a comprehensible cultural matrix, that fantasy can be accused of being “nostalgic” or socially irrelevant.


Romanticism attempts to provide a "third alternative" to the binary logic of Reason/Nature entrenched in western thought, attempting to escape from and critique in various ways the positivist, utilitarian, reductionist attitude towards the natural world and other human beings that the ideology of rationalist progress appears to entail. I have argued that fantasy forms a vital part of contemporary discourses of Romanticism that confront the "blindness of the ideologies of progress":

reification, quantification, the loss of qualitative human and cultural values, the solitude of individuals, uprootedness, alienation through merchandise, the uncontrollable dynamic of machines and technology, temporality reduced to the instantaneous, the degradation of nature.\(^{14}\)

The alternative worlds of fantasy form part of the complex of contemporary Romanticism by envisaging different mode of life, looking to "other worlds" or to the past in the quest for patterns for a more holistic, organic and interconnected human relationship with nature, ultimately seeking not a negation, but a transformation of modernity and modern experience. Fantasy literature's aesthetic expression of an irruption of otherness, a supernatural order understood as originating from outside or other to human conceptions of the universe, reveals the presence of conflicting modes of understanding reality that are present simultaneously in the modern consciousness. Genre fantasy proposes a radically different reading of the culture/nature, Reason/Nature divide, reflecting the relativistic, pluralistic outlook of the post-industrial, post-modern age. It indicates that modernity, like any field of cultural production, is not uniform or static, but is characterised by conflict, struggle and negotiation between different worldviews and experiences, highlighting the rich, multifaceted complexity of modern experience.

\(^{14}\) Löwy and Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, 251.
# Appendix 1

## Chronology of Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Work(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1729</td>
<td>Charles Perrault</td>
<td>Fairy tale collection (incl. <em>Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood, Puss in Boots, Cinderella</em> etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1748</td>
<td>Baron de Montesquieu</td>
<td><em>L'Esprit des Lois</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1755-6</td>
<td>Paul-Henri Mallet</td>
<td><em>Introduction a l'histoire de Dannemarc</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1757</td>
<td>Edmund Burke</td>
<td><em>A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1762</td>
<td>James Macpherson</td>
<td><em>The Works of Ossian, the Son of Fingal, Translated from the Gaelic by James Macpherson</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1762</td>
<td>Richard Hurd</td>
<td><em>Letters on Chivalry and Romance</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1763</td>
<td>Thomas Percy</td>
<td><em>Five Pieces of Runic Poetry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1763</td>
<td>Hugh Blair</td>
<td><em>A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, son of Fingal</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1764</td>
<td>Horace Walpole</td>
<td><em>The Castle of Otranto</em> (1st Gothic novel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1765</td>
<td>Thomas Percy</td>
<td><em>Reliques of Ancient English Poetry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td>Thomas Gray</td>
<td><em>The Descent of Odin</em> (composed 1761) <em>The Fatal Sisters</em> (composed 1761)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>Thomas Percy</td>
<td><em>Northern Antiquities</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1774-81</td>
<td>Thomas Warton</td>
<td><em>History of English Poetry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1790</td>
<td>Immanuel Kant</td>
<td><em>Critique of Judgment</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>Samuel Taylor Coleridge &amp; William Wordsworth</td>
<td><em>Lyrical Ballads</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1802-3</td>
<td>Sir Walter Scott</td>
<td><em>Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1804</td>
<td>&quot; &quot;</td>
<td><em>Sir Tristrem</em> (Edition &amp; Translation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1805</td>
<td>&quot; &quot;</td>
<td><em>The Lay of the Last Minstrel</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1812-7</td>
<td>Ludwig Tieck</td>
<td><em>Phantasus</em> (Germany)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1812-3</td>
<td>Jakob &amp; Wilhelm Grimm</td>
<td><em>Kinder- und Hausmärchen, Germany</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1817    Samuel Taylor Coleridge    Biographia Literaria
1818    Mary Shelley    Frankenstein
1819    Sir Walter Scott    Ivanhoe
1820    Charles Maturin    Melmoth the Wanderer
1823    Brothers Grimm    1st English publ. of Grimm's Fairytales
1823    Sir Walter Scott    Essay on Romance
1843    Thomas Carlyle    Past and Present
1858    George MacDonald    Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women
1868-70    William Morris    The Earthly Paradise
1876    "    Sigurd the Volsung (translation from Old Icelandic)
1883    Robert Louis Stevenson    Treasure Island
1885    H. Rider Haggard    King Solomon's Mines
1887    H. Rider Haggard    She
1888    Andrew Lang    Realism and Romance
1888    William Morris    The House of the Wolfings
1890    L. Frank Baum    The Wonderful Wizard of Oz
1912    Lord Dunsany    The King of Elfland's Daughter
1919    Sigmund Freud    Essay on The Uncanny
1920    David Lindsay    A Voyage to Arcturus
1922    E. R. Eddison    The Worm Ouroboros: A Romance
1930-6    Robert E. Howard    Conan the Barbarian (from Weird Tales magazine)
1936    J. R. R. Tolkien    Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics
1937    "    The Hobbit
1937-49    "    Tolkien writes The Lord of the Rings
1938    C. S. Lewis    Out of the Silent Planet
1938    T. H. White    The Sword in the Stone
1950    C. S. Lewis    The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe
1953    Mervyn Peake    Gormenghast
1954    J. R. R. Tolkien    The Fellowship of the Ring (first publ. in Britain)
1954    "    The Two Towers
1955    "    The Return of the King
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Fritz Lieber</td>
<td><em>Two Sought Adventure: Exploits of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Ursula K. Le Guin</td>
<td><em>A Wizard of Earthsea</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Patricia A. McKillip</td>
<td><em>The Riddlemaster of Hed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>John Crowley</td>
<td><em>Little, Big</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Robert Holdstock</td>
<td><em>Mythago Wood</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984-6</td>
<td>Guy Gavriel Kay</td>
<td><em>The Fionavar Tapestry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Sheri S. Tepper</td>
<td><em>The True Game</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Ursula K. Le Guin</td>
<td><em>Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Sheri S. Tepper</td>
<td><em>Beauty</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Phillip Pullman</td>
<td><em>His Dark Materials</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Kate Elliott</td>
<td><em>Crown of Stars</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Mary Gentle</td>
<td><em>Ash: A Secret History</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Ursula K. Le Guin</td>
<td><em>The Other Wind</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>China Miéville</td>
<td><em>The Scar</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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