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Author(s): Daniel Baker

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Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy

Daniel Baker

We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold . . . sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves . . .

—J. R. R. Tolkien

WHATEVER THE MEDIUM, FANTASTIC NARRATIVES NOW DOMINATE VAST areas of the popular imagination. So entrenched that it has become “a default cultural vernacular” (Miéville, “Editorial” 40), fantasy cannot be overlooked. The popularity of Harry Potter, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *A Game of Thrones* indicates that the genre is a pervasive phenomenon, demanding critical evaluation of its emotional appeal and its political implications. Fantasy’s increasing presence in the marketplace, together with the genre’s potential for progressive socio-political representation, indicates the genre’s aesthetic power. Indeed, as a communicative method, fantasy’s ever-widening audience implies an increasing burden on the genre. We, as writers, readers, academics, must ask and continue to ask: what is fantasy communicating? What are its discursive objectives? Why should I read fantasy?

Kathryn Hume argues that realism “no longer imparts an adequate sense of meaning to our experience with reality” (39), that the realist strategy does not, and cannot, fully engage the reader. By going past reality, by plunging through and beyond it, fantasy can offer an interesting, at times disturbing, perspective. As Mark Bould suggests: “Marxist theories of fantasy and the fantastic offer an opportunity not only to engage with extremely popular areas of cultural production but also to better model the subject for political praxis” (53). Be that as it may, Bould is vague on how fantasy best shapes the individual subject for political praxis. Before continuing, this fundamental position must be unpacked; *political praxis* and *progressive potential* carry heavy, ideological baggage. Quite rightly: the concepts are linked. The progressive potential of fantasy can direct the subject (reader) towards a new, radical, (perhaps) emancipated subjectivity. Only after this process is complete will political

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praxis—action engendering changes to the dominant capitalist gestalt—be able to develop. By affirming fantasy as a site that can potentially (re)direct political praxis, Bould alerts readers to the exciting possibility of a social role for fantasy. However, certain epistemological biases must be made clear.

Brian Attebery sums up the problem succinctly in “The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy” when he discusses the nature of fantasy’s most obvious impossibility: anachronism. He says: “But the more important function—dare I say political function—of creative anachronism occurs when you take a little bit of the Middle Ages and plop it down in the midst of freeways and shopping malls. The contrast, the disjunction, transforms the present” (15–16). The basic instance of disjunction, the novum of dislocation (if this is possible) is neutral. Transforming the present does not suggest transformation for the better or for the worse. We can argue that any transformation is political but it is apolitical or, to put it another way, its political cloth has yet to be dyed. The transformative aspect of anachronistic disjunction is an aesthetic tool and its uses can be many. While Bould and Jameson may want the fantastic to deliver revolutionary or progressive responses, there is nothing intrinsic to fantasy or sf that forces them into Marxist representations. When this article explores fantasy’s progressive potential, it is with the full knowledge that the genre does not skew in that direction traditionally. Indeed, the writers later discussed are not to be taken as wholly progressive fantasists; indeed, Gene Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun*, with its reworked Christianity, carries distinctly conservative notions regarding the role of the state, the nature of sacrifice, and the function of suffering in society. The ability to write the strange, the impossible, and the unreal is a means to many ends.

Miéville asserts that to “claim that fantasy is in some systematic way resistant to ideology or rebellious against authority is, and anyone who knows the genre can attest, laugh-out-loud funny” (“Cognition” 242). The comment recalls a long tradition of reactionary fantasy. Tackling arguably the best-known fantasist, J. R. R. Tolkien, it is possible to see how fantasy can be seen as an “escape” from reality, thus affirming dominant ideology. Historically, the great majority of genre fantasy, those “sword-and-sorcery,” multi-volume series and mass-marketed franchise fiction, have been ciphers of Marcuse’s “affirmative culture” at best, blatantly nationalistic at worst.

Suvin asks, “why should Tolkien or the Conan stories or the frenziedly racist Lovecraft not be legitimately usable by neo-fascism” (“Considering” 236)? It is a valid and important question that should always be repeated by those exploring (and writing) fantasy. Fantasy (and sf) can be used, and used differently in different cultures: literature will always be contextually framed. In the West, the vast majority of fantasy, those multi-volume mega-series, have been reflections, if not products of conservative politics. This article argues the need for a progressive change and takes up the sentiment of Miéville’s

challenge: “No matter how commodified and domesticated the fantastic in its various forms might be, we need fantasy to think the world, and to change it” (“Editorial” 48).

Terms like “progressive” and “utopia” are fundamental markers of Marxist thought. This is not to suggest that they are exclusively Marxist (there are capitalist, fascist, even anarchic utopias), but that the basic idea of “bettering,” that we should progress towards an existence with as little repression possible, has historically been assigned to humanist-socialist positions. Hume would call this “vision,” a vision that “aims to disturb us by dislodging us from our settled sense of reality, and tries to engage our emotions on behalf of this new version of the real” (56). The point is valid. Not only is the engine used to drive praxis identified as (fundamentally) emotional, but the aesthetic goal is not to *leave* the subject “unsettled”: rather the goal is to create a “new version of the real.” By the simple act of constructing a “disturbing,” “weird,” “impossible” world, fantasy turns “real” into a category—a category that can be opened to radical, progressive change.

In *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Hume expends much thought not only on what Tolkien wrote but what he wrote about his genre. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien realized a vision of a world beyond (or behind) the mechanized, war-torn reality he knew. Though his stance is “much closer to ‘wouldn’t it be nice if this were true’ or ‘I would rather find this true than what I see everyday’” (Hume 47), his medieval, honor-bound, deathless Middle-earth is not therefore less utopian, but a specifically nostalgic, golden-age, and reactionary utopian form. It becomes dangerously naive. The impulse behind it becomes not so much a desire to create a “better” world but to escape into a pre-industrial landscape: it turns aside from the deep-rooted structural problems of post-global conflict modernity in favor of the perceived simplicity of pastoral Hobbiton, colonial Gondor, and immortal Valinor. This impulse is reactionary and therefore problematic. As the progenitor of “sword-and-sorcery,” Tolkien set the great majority of the genre on a seductive path, a path to the status quo. Hume says of Tolkien imitators:

Trashy though many adventures are, they encourage belief in the possibility of meaningful action. They deny that the individual is worthless, a negligible statistic. Even at the lowest valuation, this reassurance has psychological value, for people who cannot believe in themselves have trouble engaging themselves with life in any fashion. (68)

The problem in this case is that “meaningful action” in an affirmative fantasy invariably correlates with self-sacrifice, xenophobia, and some form of nationalism. The individual derives worth by “pulling his/her” weight, sublimating individuality in the name of liberty, freedom, or a nebulous “good.” The status

quo is maintained because the reader feels no need to change as “evil” has been vicariously defeated by the text’s hero and the need for social change effaced by nostalgic recollection. This is a tenet of affirmative literature; it “lulls and flatters the reader rather than challenging and contradicting them” (Hume 84), assuring that dominant ideology is reinforced. This is a form of stagnation and a function that fantasy needs to shed.

Opposed to Tolkien’s conservative use of the past, progressive fantasy can use the genre’s ubiquitous temporal dislocations to expose how history informs the present and the future, rupturing reality to re-imagine the then for the benefit of the now and the nows yet to pass. In this light, the concept of “progressive potential” suggests a direction the genre can and should take. Using China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*, Gene Wolfe’s *Shadow of the Torturer*, and Samuel Delany’s *Tales of Nevèrÿon* as examples, this article will argue how fantasy can take up that direction. Importantly, these three texts, from the wide range of fantasy in the market, are framed by an intrinsic political concern: the ways in which fantasy can represent, interrogate, and alter reality. Taking up the past and the future, this article will highlight how these two categories are intertwined, how one influences the other, and how a fantastic interruption of history can radically alter the reader’s understanding of the then, the now, and after.

Recalling Attebery’s understanding of the power of creative anachronism, fantasy’s access to the past, its creation of secondary worlds bubbling with a melange of past culture, practice, peoples, and ideas is extremely important. Of course, we must remember that anachronism is not in itself progressive: it is a single tool in fantasy’s aesthetic arsenal. However, the ability to re-write and re-cover history is something fantasy can and should attempt, though it must be done with care. We see and hear history’s traces, its echoes, but as it speaks to us, we cannot truly understand its voice or comprehend its face, nor can we completely reach back to grasp the past. Tolkien’s escape to the Middle Ages becomes not so much a reach to bring back some truth but a retreat from the true struggles of his extra-textual world. Attebery speaks to the challenge of unearthing what must not be lost: “Texts from the past no longer speak to us as they spoke to their original audiences, but they still lurk in our libraries, challenging us to provide them with new voices and new meanings” (“Politics” 16). New voices and meanings seem to be, regardless of political frames, something intrinsic to a genre bulging with the impossible. Attebery suggests taking the past and inscribing old and forgotten voices with a fresh perspective. Considering that the present (and future) are inexorably dictated to by the past, should we not return there if we find fault with present reality? In Attebery’s idea is a revolutionary desire to reclaim history and give it the ability to speak to us, here and now. What might it say? What might it think of historical progress? Perhaps there has been no progress—and what is more

frightening and dissatisfying than that?

Dissatisfaction is a perfect starting point for fantastic incisions into reality. Fredric Jameson's introduction to *Archaeologies of the Future* is encased by dissatisfaction with the modern, hegemonic, capitalist state. Conceivably, the "fantastic narrative," a narrative defined (no matter its science fiction or fantasy label) by its impossibility, is best suited to "open up," "uncover," or "reimagine" the places of desire that are often ignored and/or repressed. Furthermore, the fantastic's representation of the impossible or unreal logically brings the discussion to utopia as a site of ideological interrogation. The fantastic's preoccupation with the impossible, with expressing the "dark areas" of reality, can be defined as that which is impossible within the author's social totality. In other words, socialist utopia is *impossible*, is unnecessary and ideologically repulsive, because capitalism has already provided its own gratifying ideal, its own utopian consumerism: you can buy whatever you want, whatever it is you need.

In *Marxist Aesthetics*, Pauline Johnson states that the fundamental function of Marxist aesthetic theories is to "give an enlightening capacity to art" (1). This Lukácsian position suggests that an artwork should not only map the "daily life" of capitalist reality, but emancipate the individual's consciousness from that daily life. Johnson's reading provides a perspective from which to judge Jameson's utopian aesthetic, which consists of recognition, demystification, exhaustion, and (possibly) re-creation.¹ At a basic level, Jameson builds on the model of cognition used by Lukács: the artistic text (in Lukács's case, realism) is a complete map of society that necessarily includes that society's dominant subjectivity *and* the "gaps" this subjectivity creates. This utopian aesthetic is concerned with the illumination, then exhaustion of dominant ideology.² In other words, literature does not simply illustrate the subject's everyday social existence as "bad" or "corrupt," but enters into dialogue with the subject's "everyday thinking." This dialectic demonstrates the falsity of such thinking or, more to the point, demonstrates how such thinking is a product of capitalism's fetishization of daily life.

We should note that this "cognitive" function, as the basis for his utopian aesthetic, is the basis for Jameson's selection of sf as the exemplary fantastic medium. The determinant in this case, the factor that separates sf from fantasy, can loosely be called extrapolation. Sf is sympathetic with realism (Lukács's seminal aesthetic) because it *projects* the ideological content of a "now" into a "future"; it cognitively maps the social totality, extrapolating it to a logical end.

Are we, as Hume suggests, "only dully aware of everyday life" (84)? Jameson follows Althusser's claim that by making visible the architecture of ideological superstructures, by tracing the social totality they construct, the actualities they deny, repress, or efface, literary portrayal can demystify and

deconstruct. Necessarily, the underlying focus of the utopian aesthetic is predicated on the idea of making visible dominant subjectivity, “making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment” (*Archaeologies* xiii). Inherently then, the extrapolation of ideology to its logical terminus is directed toward the de-alienation or “freeing” of the individual subject. Utopian representation, predominantly dystopian in Jameson’s sf canon,³ illustrates the depredations and deprivations of Western modernity, illuminating their “invisible” workings. This is the source of sf’s connotation with a warning: do something about *your* present to avoid *this* future. This is the goal of the Marxist aesthetic: to represent reality as it truly is, cutting through the perception of “daily life” to shock the subject, and open them up to the potential of a new subjectivity. For it is only by defamiliarizing readers from their preconceptions of what is real and possible that new realities and possibilities can deck their thoughts.

Logically, Jameson’s image of the utopian aesthetic is colored by his insistence that it is best expressed within (Western) sf. Considering that the genre (through Heinlein, Huxley, Pohl, Dick, Gibson, Bacigalupi, to name a few) possesses a strong strikingly dystopian tradition, the utopian aesthetic, what Jameson refers to as a “remedy,” must “first be a fundamentally negative one, and stand as a clarion call to remove and extirpate” (*Archaeologies* 12) the repressive ideologies of the capitalist state.

Nevertheless, this is only a part (albeit an important one) of the progressive character of a utopian aesthetic. While it is pivotal that dominant ideology be “frozen” through a cognitive map and its “gaps” pried open, this primarily deconstructive approach is not progressive per se: it demystifies with the intent to remove, but does not instill a new subjectivity in the individual. It is primarily deconstructive rather than creative. It exhausts the ideological space via extrapolated “future” landscapes without implementing new, radical subjectivities. Rupturing dominant ideology’s organic totality is not enough. While it is an important *step*, if we consider Althusser’s position that ideology mediates between reality and the individual subject, then demystification or deconstruction is somewhat sterile: a new subjectivity requires a degree of replacement, a form of re-imagining. Indeed, Johnson suggests that any emancipatory success relies on a correlation between artistic expression and the “recipient’s own felt dissatisfaction” (5).

Jameson’s rhetoric here is florid and active: utopia is a “clarion call” to “remove,” “extirpate,” and “remedy.” Implied is a new perspective beyond critical negativity: it denotes activism. In this regard, the merit of any utopian text should be found in its generative potential: utopian representation should ultimately be transformative, seeking to modify, correct, and/or replace fundamentally oppressive systems (*Archaeologies* xv). Simply, there exist in Jameson’s utopian aesthetic the tools needed to dissect ideology, combined

with a forward-looking vision. At the moment of anticipation—the creation and appropriation of a militantly progressive subjectivity—literary representation can lead to political praxis. As Johnson summarizes, this is the point of a progressive literature: a site that “presents not merely an alternative standpoint but specifically acts to effect a change in the recipient’s consciousness” (1). *Effect a change* is the key, for, as Andrew Milner suggests, “the whole point of utopia or dystopia is to acquire some positive or negative leverage on the present” (“Utopia” 221). It is an active program geared towards some form of praxis.

In an interview for *Gothic Studies*, China Miéville suggested that Jameson had been blinded by “the overwhelming tsunami of post-Tolkien fantasy—what’s sometimes called EFP: Extruded Fantasy Product—and taken it as a definitional to form” (63). Of course, the same argument (an argument Jameson himself acknowledges) can be thrown at mass-market sf. The problem then, is one of quality. Be that as it may, the most strident criticism of fantasy, outlined in Darko Suvin’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, is based on cognition: fantasy does not map material and historical realities, it ignores them.

For Suvin and Jameson, sf cognitively maps social totality. They argue that, via extrapolation (including not only advanced technology and shadowy organizations bent on world domination but also intergalactic conflict and post-apocalyptic landscapes), sf maps the present and estranges it, making visible the repressive, destructive nature of dominant ideology. Where sf is generally argued to be a representation of the socio-historical totality, fantasy, with its ubiquitous secondary worlds, magic, and archaic temporal settings, appears as a denial, at the very least a dodge, of that same totality: hence fantasy is non-cognitive. The inference is that sf holds a monopoly on cognitive representation and is therefore the only site for utopian expression. Put another way, for Suvin and Jameson, only sf operates with “a totalizing perspective . . . able to recognize the falsity of the representation of reality which appears at the surface of society” (Johnson 26). What then, according to this logic, does fantasy actually do? Suvin readily denigrates fantasy as a “tool of the reigning ideology” (“Sense” 234). Fantasy becomes just another “surface” to be overcome, seen through, and shattered: it is false consciousness masking the true, repressive nature of reality.

Brian Attebery suggests that all fantasy “begins with a problem and ends with resolution. Death, despair, horror and betrayal may enter into fantasy, but they must not be the final word” (*Strategies* 15). This inherently “happily ever after” understanding underscores Suvin’s pejorative reading where fantasy is considered affirmative in a Marcusean sense: an obfuscatory vessel of and for ruling ideology. However, paraphrasing José Monleón, Miéville puts forward the idea that fantasy should be “understood as a genre of modernity that is formed at the same point that (indeed as part of the process by which)

(proto-) sf is formed” (“Gothic” 62). Here, as both writer and theoretician, Miéville is able, historically, to place fantasy and sf, not in opposition, but alignment. Nevertheless, the initial insertion of the “fantastic moment” where the impossible is possible, is the “starting point of radical alienation from actuality . . . that both ‘sf’ and ‘fantasy’ share” (“Gothic” 64). Whatever connotative qualifications are attached to the impossible are irrelevant: the impossible is always culturally illuminating.

Manipulation, propaganda, persuasion, argument—call it what you will, fantasy and sf, like any literature, is always “*something done with language by someone to someone*” (Miéville, “Cognition” 235). That fantasy and sf make use of the unreal and impossible should not undermine the integrity or urgency of the images they produce. Most importantly, they treat their impossibilities, strangeness, and dislocation with the utmost seriousness: what the text encounters, intersects, interprets, and desires to alter is reality. It is only by contemplating the impossible, by journeying into utopian/dystopian alterity, that the limits of our imagination can be found and the impossible enter dialogue with possible. By juxtaposing the unreal with the real fantasy can familiarize former and defamiliarize the latter, changing both categories and offering new perspectives on what is possible that can ferment in the reader and lead to alternate subjectivities. Attebery talks about a kind of “resistance” in fantasy that allows it to shrug off attempts at orthodoxy. He claims that it “denies what everybody knows to be the truth. And, if you’re lucky, the untruth shall make you free” (“Politics” 25).

Reflections of Reality

How could we not see this approaching? What trick of topography is this, that lets the sprawling monster hide behind corners to leap out at the traveller?

It is too late to flee.

—China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*

For Miéville, *fantasy* begins with reality—a subjective reality predicated upon fetishized relationships to commodities and the reification of daily life. This is, understandably, a mode readily able to critique *capitalist* reality where real life “*is a fantasy*” (“Editorial” 42). If “reality” is an irrational, social, subjective construct, then realism can only be a depiction of this absurdity. What, then, is fantasy? Is it better able to depict and resonate with real relations? Miéville posits that the fantasy is a viable alternative to realism for the modern world: “Fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality—constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true*—mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity” (“Editorial” 42). This act of reflection is vital for framing the fantasy’s critical importance. As a form intrinsically linked to world-creation, fantasy will inevitably—to varying

degrees—demonstrate the ways reality is constructed and related to through subjectivity. In other words, by mimicking the absurdity of capitalist modernity, fantasy transposes reality as category; if the reality of capitalist modernity is subjective, then fantasy's representation of the impossible can be something of critical value. Fantasy does not escape reality but exposes, subverts, and creates it.

Attebery, sharing a similar sentiment, feels that without a mimetic element fantasy “would be a purely artificial invention, without recognizable objects or actions” (*Strategies* 3). Like all literature, fantasy is a *response* to context: the material, historical, social, political reality of the author. There is no creative vacuum. Attebery's assertion dispels any notion of regressive escapism. But escapism is not the problem, not really, not anymore.

Moving away from such divisive arguments, the issue is function. If fantasy is purely, even predominantly, mimetic it faces great obstacles in expressing any progressive content. As this article will discuss, mimesis (mapping) is not enough to effect the creation of an opposing subjectivity. It shows what is there, not what can or should be there. Be that as it may, Miéville (as a theorist) makes an argument (both critically and creatively) that fantasy (especially his own) is a cognitive literature. Consequently, Miéville fulfills his own prophecy: “At the same sociological level at which SF and fantasy continue to be distinguished, the boundaries between them also—if anything at an accelerating rate—continue to erode” (“Cognition” 245).

Perdido Street Station may be read as an insertion of Lukács into fantasy: a disturbing, totalized reflection of the capitalist society. A fully realized secondary world, *Perdido Street Station* is also, arguably, allegorically symbolic; that is, while not an explicit allegory, the text is permeated by several artistic representations that are explicitly political symbols.⁴ Miéville's aim is the complete construction of a “bad” reality, a distilled expression of false consciousness. Reflecting the commodity fetishism, vampiric capitalism, authoritarian legality, and social alienation of Western civilization, the city of New Crobuzon appears dark, oppressive, and monstrous. Johnson spells out this strategy: “Lukács' core thesis is that only a totalizing perspective which draws essence and appearance into a unity is able to recognize the falsity of the representation of reality which appears at the surface of society” (26). As the narrative progresses it becomes increasingly apparent that the “story” is an explicit, political, “warning.” The distinction is subtle but vital: the theoretical design is clear. This is not to suggest that such engineering detracts from the narrative, only that it directs the reader into very specific conceptual space. What becomes starkly evident through this methodological focus is that *Perdido Street Station*, regardless of what else it achieves, highlights fantasy's ability to represent ideological content in visible, meaningful, and critical ways. In slightly different terms, the city (New Crobuzon) and its denizens are rendered

in such a way as to appear singularly complete: a symbolic allegory of a capitalist metropolis.

New Crobuzon is “this great wen . . . a conspiracy of industry and violence, steeped in history and battened-down power, this badland beyond my ken” (*Perdido* 5). This imagery is constantly repeated. Dankness, darkness, erosion, effluence, and grime are continuously used to convey a particular, disquieting “mood” that pervades the entire text. Jameson rightly contends that “the aesthetic is no longer a secondary hobby but rather goes behind creation to identify the very sources of reality as such” (*Archaeologies* 44). Miéville’s “mood” speaks very strongly of an underlying discontent, an implicit decay, within the capitalist system; New Crobuzon is virtually anthropomorphized, alienating it from the characters, making it strange, and alien. By using a specific conceptual vocabulary the author’s perceived reality is “reflected” into the fantasy text as reality actualized.

Language dictates emotional reception and guides the reader’s contemplation of the dark, twisting alleys and filthy ghettos, the city’s toxic river, crumbling masonry, rampant crime, suborned justice, and brutally ruthless authority. The city is made the most visceral of monsters, nothing less than a malignant edifice, explicitly dangerous and alien to the individual. In “The Conspiracy of Architecture,” Miéville discusses the ways in which capitalism has produced an “aesthetic response to the peculiar alienated relation between humanity and architecture” (2). Most notably this response has been rendered in works of Gothic horror: tales of architecture with apparent life and, if not consciousness, then some form of affecting presence. Miéville’s own work echoes the idea, albeit with an exaggerated, fantastical sensibility: “Five enormous brick mouths gaped to swallow each of the city’s tramlines. The tracks unrolled on the arches like huge tongues. Shops and torture chambers and workshops and offices and empty spaces all stuffed the fat belly of the building . . .” (*Perdido* 79). This description of the titular station is indicative of Miéville’s portrayal of the city as a whole. There is something gluttonous and ravenous, animal and foreboding, about the buildings. They devour and disgorge, and, through this juxtaposition of the monstrous and metropolitan, Miéville creates an image opposing a mass-cultural norm. The city is not security, not opportunity: it alienates and is alienated from its populace. It is oppressive and disgusting, continually likened to a rapacious beast, filled with beings that do not, and cannot, understand one another; Miéville constructs a viciously grim, aggressively violent portrait of capitalist society. Using this reflective practice, the author’s reality is fantastically distorted to effect a startling response: modern capitalism becomes an all-encompassing monster where everything, as Lukács supposed, is “distorted by its commodity character” (93).

Creatures like the Construct Council and the slake-moths, though poten-

tially wonderful things in their own right, are intrinsically linked to the corruption of humanity, the apathy of society, and the barbarism of civilization. They are society's avatars; a direct commentary on decadence, highlighting and enforcing the overarching mood. The Construct Council, a sprawling artificial intelligence built from discarded machines, is a novum expressing mechanization and rampant, technological consumerism. Furthermore, the Council's relation to humanity is shockingly and casually violent. It is calculating and parasitic, using a human "mouthpiece" that recalls a gory zombie tradition: "His skull had been sheered cleanly in two just above the eyes. The top was completely gone. There was a little fringe of congealed blood below the cut. From the wet hollow inside the man's head snaked a twisting cable, two fingers thick" (*Perdido* 549). The Council has invaded *and* supplanted the man's mind, transforming all that was conscious and alive into a mechanical function. Dredging up images of lobotomy and rape, the man is an unthinking object used by the Council to further its own ends.

Worshipped, the Council manifests as a deity and its senses, its power, and its consciousness spread into the city as its "cables grow longer and reach further" (*Perdido* 761). There is something cancerous here; a systemic growth inveigling its way into the city like a tumor. Irrevocably tethered to New Crobuzon, the Council's willingness to objectify individuals, its callous, cold logic, and its easy violence are synonymous with both the criminal element and the governing body controlling the city.

Interestingly, Lukács describes the fundamental capitalist drive as one of continuous, economic reproduction where "the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man" (93). Symbolically, the Council is the calculating, inhuman face of capitalist ideology that permeates society and transforms individuals into mindless objects to be used, destroyed, and discarded.

Where the Council is dehumanized computation, the slake-moths, unleashed by bureaucratic greed, are the predatory nature of self-interest. Steve Shaviro summarizes that the moths are "capitalism with an (appropriately) inhuman face. They are literally unthinkable; yet at the same time, they are immanent to the society that they ravage" (288). Conglomerates of insect, human, and cephalopod, the slake-moths, while "unthinkable," are always in a process of representation.

He could not see its shape. Only its dark, glistening skin and hands that clutched like a child's. Cold shadows. Eyes that were not eyes. Organic folds and jags and twists like rats' tails that shuddered and twitched as if newly dead. (*Perdido* 308)

The slake-moths are quintessential Lovecraftian horrors that portray the

terrifying aspect of the capitalism's unreal yet true nature. Indeed, the portrayal of the strange, dark, twisted, and invisible forces of the unseen, is an example of how fantasy is able to bring to light "all that is hidden, secreted, obscured . . . [and] to dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight" (Jackson 65). By allowing for the impossible, by exposing the invisible and obscured, fantasy (in Miéville's example) takes repressed material and re-inscribes it as weird, nightmarish, and distorted: it transforms the "everyday" familiar into the disturbing unfamiliar (Jackson 65).

Drinking dreams, the "slake-moths are alien beings, creatures of sheer excess" embodying "the depredations of an inhuman vampire-capital" (Shaviro 287). Effectively, Miéville is suggesting that New Crobuzon's unconscious content is unnecessary—symbolically, "vampire-capital" feeds on a very important part of what makes us human. Not surprisingly, those who have been fed upon are literally drained of humanity: they become mindless zombies. While Shaviro's descriptions are apt they are a little one-dimensional. Granted, the slake-moths (and the Construct Council) embody "inhuman vampire-capital," but they are only exaggerated ciphers, focused analogues of New Crobuzon's social conscience. They are extrapolations of the city's avarice, fear, and greed. Completely misunderstood by the state, the slake-moths are smuggled into gangland and used to create narcotics from digested dream material (literally stolen, imbibed dreams that are digested and defecated). Inevitably they break loose in a storm of terror and death. Becoming the locus of the narrative's "evil," it is easy to read these allegorical creations as Miéville's sole, theoretical concern. However, it is the transformative powers of the city itself that are truly disturbing.

In many ways, the true indictment expressed in *Perdido Street Station* is the extent to which individual characters are molded to echo the twisted subjectivity of the Council and the moths, becoming microcosms of the city itself. While monsters and aliens can be read as representations of animalistic greed or mechanistic logic, the text's protagonists *see themselves becoming* monstrous as they are forced into terrible choices. To defeat the slake-moths, they abduct an old, sick man with the intention of killing him: "He had begun to cry halfway up. Derkhan had watched him and nudged him with the pistol, had felt her emotions from very far away. She kept distant from her own horror" (*Perdido* 720). In effect, Derkhan is alienated from herself, distancing action from emotion, by the city's external influence: when everything is measured in terms of objects and cost, you must destroy a life in order to save others. As such a sacrifice, the old man is strapped to a jury-rigged, electrical generator, turned into a conduit to attract the moths, and has his brain burnt out. Objectively, this action is monstrous even though it saves the greater population. However, this sequence demonstrates that, within the text's capitalist logic, the ends justify the means. That the characters recognize the "evil" of their

actions yet remain unable to act differently illustrates how the city's ideology configures their relationship to society: lives are expendable.

Lukács might suggest that individual's fate "is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity relation" (92). Interestingly, the characters fight the avatars of their own predatory society to *save* New Crobuzon, returning it to the status quo. Miéville voices disquieting insight and blatant dissatisfaction, but offers no alternative. A new subjectivity is not achieved.

I turn away from him and step into the vastness of New Crobuzon, this towering edifice of architecture and history, this complexity of money and slum, this profane steam-powered god. I turn and walk into the city my home, not bird or garuda, not miserable crossbreed. I turn and walk into my home, the city, a man.
(*Perdido* 867)

Johnson states that cognitively mapping social totality to create a literary reflection that brings together essence and appearance "allows the recipient to recognize his/her own species character" (75). New Crobuzon transforms individuals, alienates them from their fellow citizens, and shapes them into reflections of its own dark, rotting, gruesome, distorted, yet shockingly recognizable metropolis. This is, perhaps, the first step in producing a progressive subjectivity in the reader. Transposing capitalist reality onto the dark, oppressive streets of New Crobuzon reveals how monstrous the urban everyday has become or is becoming. Recognition sparks shock, then dissatisfaction, and from dissatisfaction the desire to change, to build a better, progressive reality. But in the end, *Perdido Street Station* seems to stop at dissatisfaction, offering no alternatives, suggesting acceptance, not action.⁵ If it instills a revolutionary subjectivity, it is blind, lashing out in anger to tear down and destroy. A progressive literature is capable of more.

When Fantasy Goes Through the Looking Glass

Suvin asks: "Is Fantasy as a tradition and present institution a tool of the reigning ideology of wars for profit, locking out cognition . . . or is it an induction of cognition, however partial and metaphoric?" ("Sense" 234). But we must ask ourselves: is cognition the only measure for a progressive literature? Jameson and Suvin hypothesize that cognition is the fundamental tool required to build critical sf and is, therefore, the aesthetic basis to judge fantasy.

For the most part, Miéville's fiction and theory trend towards a normative function; the artwork protests contemporary society, expressing a desire for a "better" reality. *Perdido Street Station* is directed towards an enlightening function wherein "the artwork provides a better and more convincing repre-

sensation of reality than the perspective he/she has acquired from daily life" (Johnson 1–2). It shows a truth, a dark, disturbing truth, in totality. Using fantasy's inherent dislocation, Miéville translates his extra-textual reality into the rot and slime of New Crobuzon; he takes the everyday and demonstrates how strange, how dangerous it actually is. That *Perdido Street Station* fails to produce an *alternative* subjectivity opposed to hegemonic ideology hints at the difficulty of creating progressive literature in a fetishized reality. Furthermore, it suggests an inability of totalizing reflections to engender political praxis beyond general discontent.

The secondary worlds of fantasy (and sf) portray radical extensions, extrapolations, dislocations and breaks from the real, implying dissatisfaction with realistic representations of daily life. However, while fantasy may meditate on radical difference (social, historical, political, economic, sexual), it remains to be argued whether this difference (understood in a Lukácsian perspective) posits a "better" representation of reality.

Fantasy is very deliberate in its use of space: the secondary world. Generally, this is a place (world, country, city) divorced temporally, historically, materially, and/or metaphysically from the extratextual world. Such displacement is disarmingly simple yet allows for complex ramifications. Boulton suggests:

Fantasy fiction, in both its broad and narrow senses, draws upon this force, this continual location and dislocation. Where fantasy differs from the other forms of fiction is in the particular nature of its world-building. All fiction builds worlds which are not true to the extratextual world (itself an ideological—and, arguably, therefore a fantastic—construct), but fantasy worlds are constructed upon a mere elaborate predicate: they are not only not true to the extratextual world but, by definition, do not seek or pretend to be. (81)

Superficially, creating secondary worlds merits the escapist label. The term has been used pejoratively: escaping is ignoring; impossibility equals impracticably. However, it is only through discussions of impossibility that fantasy can investigate limits (of reality, of language, etc.) and undermine dominant ideological structures. By breaking with the real, the possible, fantasy can go *beyond* and address subjectivity from differing perspectives.

Particularly interesting are those metafictional texts concerned with how stories are told and read. In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson states: "By foregrounding its own signifying practice, the fantastic begins to betray its version of the 'real' as a relative one, which can only deform and transform experience, so the 'real' is exposed as a category, as something articulated by and constructed through the literary or artistic text" (84).

Gene Wolfe's *Shadow of the Torturer* attacks the unity of character and the objectivity of reality. Wolfe's use of the first-person is deliberate, creating not only a powerful voice, but forcing the reader to question all representation. Severian (the narrator) mentions that it is "my nature, my joy and my curse, to forget nothing" (11); that he believes himself insane; and that there is a distinct possibility that "those memories were no more than my own dreams" (27). Consider further that Severian, when "writing" his tale, is the ruler of the Earth. The reader is being manipulated. Is Severian's reality a lie? A false consciousness? The text is implicitly unreliable. As Attebery rightly states, this "conditional" understanding is something inherent to fantasy at its best where "reality is a social contract, easily voided; that the individual character is a conditional thing, subject to unnerving transformations into trees and axolotls and cockroaches and disembodied discourses" ("Politics" 24).

Inherently post-structural, *Shadow of the Torturer* opens up, fragments, and ruptures unity. Directly addressing the reader, Wolfe assures that the text is a translation—many of its words are "twentieth-century equivalents," are "suggestive rather than definitive" or "not strictly correct" (211). What is read is not what was written, and genre fantasy's traditionally realistic, objectively presented representation (of solid, secondary worlds) is made subjective, shifting, and unreachable. Jackson might argue that this is the first step in undoing "those unifying structures and significations upon which social order depends, [that] fantasy functions to subvert and undermine cultural stability" (70).

There is no reality beyond Severian's perceptions and manipulations; what readers witness, what they know, is only what Severian knows or has *chosen to tell*. Combined with the claims of the appendix, itself a part of the narrative's metafictional apparatus, that the narrative is Wolfe's translation of a text that our language cannot truly comprehend, there is a distinct flavor of unending signifying chains—an inability to completely access the world of *The Shadow of the Torture*. Wolfe seems driven to express fantasy's "attempt to remain 'open', dissatisfied, endlessly desiring . . . [where it is] most uncompromising in its interrogation of the 'nature' of the 'real'" (Jackson 9).

Ultimately, what is real is what we perceive, and what we perceive is filtered by subjectivity. Wolfe plays games. The reader's perception of *Shadow of the Torturer* is Severian's: there are gaps, suspicions, paranoia, misunderstandings, and omissions. Reality is textual, reality is relative. Furthermore, Severian (and therefore the reader) continuously encounter obstacles, characters, actions, that are seldom (at least immediately) understood.

How are we to approach a text with hidden or held-back meanings? One way is to fill in the blanks with our knowledge of the conventions and tropes of genre fantasy. Severian is the orphan become king, the quintessential fantasy hero: on the surface the reader is confronted with heroic fantasy. However, this generic frame is positioned only to be eroded. Initially the reader fills out

the text as a *bildungsroman* because of Severian's trajectory of learning a world of swords, guilds, and strange creatures. The text is shaped by expectations of how a fantasy traditionally works. This is the danger of unquestioned adherence to the genre tag—the reader sees what they have been taught (by literary osmosis) to see. In other words, ideology works unconsciously on the subject, unrecognized and beyond conscious control. Wolfe acknowledges this (in the words of his narrator): “We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges” (14). We are shaped by ideology. Wolfe's metafictional strategy of departing from fantasy's historical conventions inverts this relationship: it forces us to recognize what, as readers of fantasy, we have been taught to see. It is another instance of defamiliarization: a point of recognition that opens the way to effect changes in the social subject. If nothing is stable, solid, objective, or above suspicion then the individual must draw their own conclusions about reality.

Samuel Delany's *Tales of Nevèrÿon* is similarly interested in the telling of tales. One of his narrators says: “And slowly, remembering all my listeners' reactions, I began to pick pieces from my own ramblings that they seemed to recognize as true or accurate” (90). Literature always has a target, always has intent; language is always active, never passive. Johnson states that “ideological conceptions have the general function of adapting people to their real conditions of existence” (117). Ideology is not negative, but necessary. It becomes problematic when dominant ideology represses, oppresses, and dehumanizes individuals while simultaneously obscuring this very fact. The first step of a progressive fantasy should be to “dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight” (Jackson 65). This is the idea that Delany contemplates in *Tales of Nevèrÿon*.

Ostensibly, the narrative follows two paths: Gorgik's rise from slave to freeman to revolutionary and the childhood and trading life of Norema. These two strands, running in parallel and at times intersecting form the simple frame that allows Delany to expound on its political interests. Broken up into five sections, *Tales of Nevèrÿon* places at its heart the idea of story-telling. Indeed, the narrative seems *aware* that it is a careful fabrication, that it uses a secondary world for the purpose of understanding, criticizing, and re-imagining extra-textual reality. Gorgik's time as a slave is rendered as a traditional tale of boy introduced to the world and becoming a man, while Norema's upbringing is marked by the stories of her wise-woman teacher Venn. Indeed, the text is bursting with stories being told, with lectures and parables and myths that sit one atop the other like a layer cake of subtle and self-reflexive uses of language.

Furthermore, the text's temporality (in a pre-historical, quasi-African/Persian land), further displaced and vaguer than the standard, medieval backdrop, allows Delany to delve into the representation of language, empire, slav-

ery, sexuality at a moment these are being naturalized through ideology. This temporal gulf becomes the text's primary fantastic, dislocation. There remains, however, a conduit between past and present whereby identified "patterns" of society (the use of slave labor, colonization, the transformative introduction of money, and the repression of sexual desire for social security) are portrayed and explored, affirming that "there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present" (Said 2).

This is where the progressive nature of *Tales of Nevèrjōn* is manifest. The text becomes a site where the deconstruction of dominant ideological structures through their pre-historical relocation is *aligned* with counter-hegemonic representations of homosexuality, matriarchal societies, and revolution aimed at liberation. It is at this nexus that fantasy (in this mode) can become a bridge where "the orientation of the past tends toward an orientation on the future" (Marcuse 19).

In "The Tale of Old Venn," Venn relates a story addressing how language has become a thing of difference, not inclusion in civilization. Detailing a primitive society's (the Rulvyn) adoption of money, Venn expounds on the differences between the empire's colonial capitalism and the Rulvyn's primal commune. One of the most obvious differences appears in the treatment of gender. Venn claims: "We say 'vagina' or 'penis' for a man's and woman's genitals, while the Rulvyn say 'gorgi' for both, for which 'male' and 'female' are just two different properties that a gorgi can exhibit—and believe me it makes all the difference!" (124). Here, the rational, scientific terms create a dualism that—throughout the narrative—forces value judgments (in this case, man over woman). Consequently, Delany's "civilized people" have built their economic base upon slavery⁶ and their ideology on colonization: the ruling empire brings civilization and freedom to the barbarians via economic structures. This freedom does not correspond with slavery's dehumanization, and the reality of *Tales of Nevèrjōn* is one predicated on creating and enforcing difference which breeds anguish, violence, and dissent.

At the text's conclusion, Gorgik and his homosexual lover, Small Sarg, are leading a revolution. Informed by his slavery in the empire's mines, Gorgik is transformed into an emancipatory figure and his slave revolt steeps the narrative in blood. We may suggest that this visceral un-covering of violence is, in itself, a transgressive act. The direct and concrete violence in this (in any) fantasy can draw focus to the invisible, ideological violence perpetrated on the individual by society. Storming a castle, Small Sarg massacres a series of guards in order to free slaves and a self-imprisoned, tortured Gorgik. What fantasy accomplishes, via the immediacy of its (predominantly) hand-to-hand conflict, is the exposure of the barbarism that simmers just under the surface of what a matriarchal outsider (the warrior Raven) understands as that "rough, brutal, inhuman place they called civilization" (Delany 143). Raven's worldview is indicative of the text's series of reflective strategies. *Tales of Nevèrjōn* typically

expresses the desire for something excluded—an “opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in Western society over the last two centuries” (Jackson 176)—by bringing in its complete opposite. Aboard a ship whose crew is dominated by men, Raven is the outsider looking in. “You people, here in the land of death, you really are crazy, yes?” (Delany 154), she remarks, and her comment is more than idle rhetoric. What follows is her account of a radically different creation myth that sees humanity categorically unified as Woman: Man is just a tortured, mutilated Woman punished for a misdeed. Besides pitting matriarchy against patriarchy, the woman’s revelations point at fantasy’s inherent ability to imagine extreme, new realities. What her comment about the “land of death” suggests (at least in her mind) is a diametrically opposed social existence: she is from a land ruled by women, a land of life, where men serve women and the female population serve in traditionally male roles (warriors, leaders, etc.).

Unsurprisingly, Raven’s myth is met with derision and unease by the ship’s male crew. Her own subjectivity seems too far removed from her colonial male listeners, too strange and uncomfortable. The same ideological violence Delany presumably protests in the extra-textual world is reversed and actualized in the text: man is a beaten, destroyed woman forced into servitude by the matriarchy. Here *Tales of Nevèrÿon* is subtle. The point is not that the world of Man is wrong and the world of Woman right, but that ideological forces used to subjugate any individual are barbaric and disturbing.

It is only after this alternative worldview is expressed that the final story of the text appears and the central protagonists of the slave revolt re-inserted into narrative. Explaining their existence, Gorgik and his lover Small Sarg equate their sexuality to revolution.

“We are lovers,” said Gorgik, “and for one of us the symbolic distinction between slave and master is necessary to desire’s consummation.”

“We are avengers who fight the institution of slavery wherever we find it,” said Small Sarg, “in whatever way we can, and for the both of us it is symbolic of our time in servitude and our bond to all men and women still so bound.” (Delany 239)

Appropriating the symbol of their servitude, they identify themselves with their group and their class and so begin their emancipation. Gorgik acknowledges that he is entrenched in dominant ideology; however, in the very next sentence, Small Sarg announces that that very acknowledgement—the consciousness of their oppression—enables them to combat the forces that breed it.

Using its secondary world, the narrative lays a thin veneer over extra-textual reality, retaining all its gaps and ridges while giving it new, shocking

clothes. Where generic, post-Tolkienian “sword-and-sorcery” escapes, *Tales of Nevèrjôn* refuses all escape; it makes its world strange and disturbing to reorient the mind and demystify civilization. Delany displaces the present in a pre-historical past, juxtaposing the effects of contemporary ideology with capitalism’s revolutionary counter. By confronting the alienating effects of hegemonic ideology, by investigating how such ideology works, *Tales of Nevèrjôn* opens up the reader to questioning daily life and how it is mediated. This is the transgressive, subversive, and eventually progressive power of fantasy; as a serious space that considers its reality seriously, it fully understands that “the less people take thought seriously, the more they think in conformity with what the State wants” (Deleuze and Guattari 44). Unsurprisingly, the *Tales of Nevèrjôn*, a narrative replete with the various ways humanity is enslaved (by money, by power, by language) concludes with the image of a dragon freed from its captivity as it soars into the night. This is the image of fantasy emancipated from the constrictions of convention and a fitting illustration of Delany’s revolutionary subject.

Where Dragons Fly

I see our global horizons as at best a struggle lasting for several generations against the amok runs of global capitalism with a bestial face that rapidly spreads hunger, wars, drugging, brainwashing, and prostitution, and at worst a descent into full super-technoscientific barbarism.

—Darko Suvin, “Considering the Sense of ‘Fantasy’”

Suvin’s view may very well spark an artistic rupture, a backlash, the warning that rings alarm bells. Conversely, such a harsh reality could easily provoke the most idealistic or conservative escapism; the place where orphans become kings, war is glorious, and morality loses all shades of grey. In either case fantasy is important as a symptom diagnosing affliction and as an imagining of potential curatives.

This thought should not be taken up as a banner for the disempowered. By its very nature, fantasy has been marginalized, its ruptures ignored and largely contained. Nevertheless, fantasy’s increasing popularity invites us to consider the potential for progressive (and an awareness of the conservative) content native to the genre. No longer providing only contemplation or interrogation, a truly progressive literature should seek to express its own impossible borders, model its own reality in its characters, and effect change in the reader’s subjectivity. This change must take the form of emancipation of the individual from surplus repression, leading to a point where work becomes play and the individual is no longer alienated from the natural world and its inhabitants; a place where sexual desire can be expressed and gratified without the need for continuous sublimation. These are the radical human needs—true liberty,

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equality, cooperation, gratification—that must be recalled and portrayed through utopian content.

Jameson comments that “consumerism which, having become an end in itself, is transforming the daily life of the advanced countries in such a way as to suggest that the Utopianism of multiple desires and consumption is here already and needs no further supplement” (*Valences* 413). This psychological imprinting, insidious as it may sound, only highlights the *need* to demystify and replace fetishized consciousness. We must recognize that utopia is deeply ideological and understand the necessity of ideology itself. Only then can we argue for the necessity of a serious, progressive utopian literature, a utopian politics that transforms “ideology into an instrument of deliberate action on history” (Althusser, “Marxism” 232).

Jameson’s utopian aesthetic focuses not on the future but on the present. It is an indictment of how far dominant ideology has shaped the individual and social consciousness. That sf does not portray the future but displaces the now raises a very interesting problem that speaks to the necessity for a militant subjectivity. Sf, perhaps conscious of its own discursive limitations, is a self-referential literature that brings the recipient to his/her imaginative limitations.

[I]ts deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished, the atrophy of our time of what Marcuse has called the *utopian imagination*, the imagination of otherness and radical difference: to succeed by failure, and to serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for meditation, which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits. (*Archaeologies* 288–89)

If this is the case, if utopia is method rather than goal, its function becomes the rallying cry. Once the limits of the fettered imagination are reached, once they have been recognized as constructions of ruling ideology, utopia becomes something that “can only be applied” (*Metamorphoses* 52) to the present, extrapolating from reality to portray *dystopia*. Such sf futures are seldom bright: they are warnings and acknowledgements of necessary change. Such change will be affective—a need to reclaim the full expression of human desire. Such Socialist Humanist subjectivity can only be realized by first understanding, deconstructing, and demystifying social totality and its constitutive ideological structures.

By making visible reality’s dehumanizing aspects, its gaps and obstacles, sf becomes a locus for dissatisfaction. Society *must* change, and change for the better, because it is under the control of shadowy forces, in a constant state of

war, approaching a fully mechanized, exploitative existence, where individuals are alienated from the world and from one another. Acknowledging this problem is the first step towards recovery.

When dystopian sf projects reality as a totality completely known, it removes the impossibilities and contradictions of existence and makes it bland. In contrast, according to Hume, fantasy “is not bodiless; like a living creature, it is affected by the limitations of the particular body it inhabits” (150). By opening itself up to utopian content, to progressive rather than reactionary visions, fantasy can do more than grow, it can *evolve*. Acknowledging its own impossibility—the very “*fantasy of fantasy*” (Bould 84)—fantasy becomes not un-real but, as Le Guin says, “surrealistic, superrealistic, a heightening of reality” (84). It is dislocated, strange, improbable, fictional, shocking, intoxicating, laughable, impossible, alien, terrifying, but at all times true. Now more than ever this identifies fantasy’s importance. The impossible must appear before us magnificent and other, frightening and impossibly true. It must ask those questions that may never have answers but whose purpose is to make us stop, to make us think. That is why we have always needed and will always need dragons: sometimes to breathe their flames and burn us, sometimes to carry us on their wings so we can see our world anew.

Notes

1. Echoing Darko Suvin, Jameson limits his utopian aesthetics to dystopian sf which he understands as the combination of a cognitive map of the author’s social reality extrapolated into the alterity of possible, if not plausible, future settings.

2. Throughout, the term “ideology” refers to a series of representations geared towards mediating individuals with their social and material reality, and “subjectivity” to what is mediated through ideology.

3. Most notably, this canon includes the works by Philip K. Dick (seventeen of which are referenced throughout *Archaeologies*), Swanwick, Le Guin, and Arkady and Boris Strugatsky.

4. In this respect, *Perdido Street Station* is not alone; Miéville’s fantastic oeuvre follows similar patterns. From *The Scar* to *The City and the City* and *Embassytown*, the repeated concern is one of taking a concept of reality and reflecting it in a fantastic mirror. Although both *The City and the City* and *Embassytown* do this with an imaginative scope seldom seen, only in *Iron Council* is this pattern skewed (but not broken) towards the realization of progressive, utopian content; but like the titular train, the goal remains ever visible, ever out of reach.

5. This is true when *Perdido Street Station* is read on its own. However, when the milieu is expanded to include *The Scar* and *Iron Council*, a revolutionary air is noticeably generated. Indeed, this trilogy’s thematic trajectory, something beyond the

confines of this article, may very well be a powerful revolutionary aesthetic.

6. The fact that slavery begins giving way to a more advanced monetary, market system only emphasizes the way the past lives in the present, breathes into the future. However, the intricate relationship between the rise of a capitalist system and Gorgik's slave revolt should not be overlooked. For an introduction to this discussion, see Freedman.

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Abstract

This article argues that fantasy can be a progressive, discursively important, transgressive literature. To an extent, science fiction has historically been given greater theoretical validity over fantasy; however, writers like China Miéville, Samuel Delany, and Gene Wolfe offer compelling fantasy texts to counter this trend. Using Jameson as an anchor, this article navigates between Darko Suvin and Miéville, using Lukács to illustrate fantasy's cognitive nature, before synthesizing an argument with Althusser, Rosemary Jackson, and Pauline Johnson suggesting the other ways (demystifying/deconstructive) fantastic fiction can be read. Significantly, this article navigates and begins to close the historical, theoretical disparity between sf and fantasy, while suggesting that the cognitive evaluation of fantastic literature may be passing over much of what makes the tradition progressive.