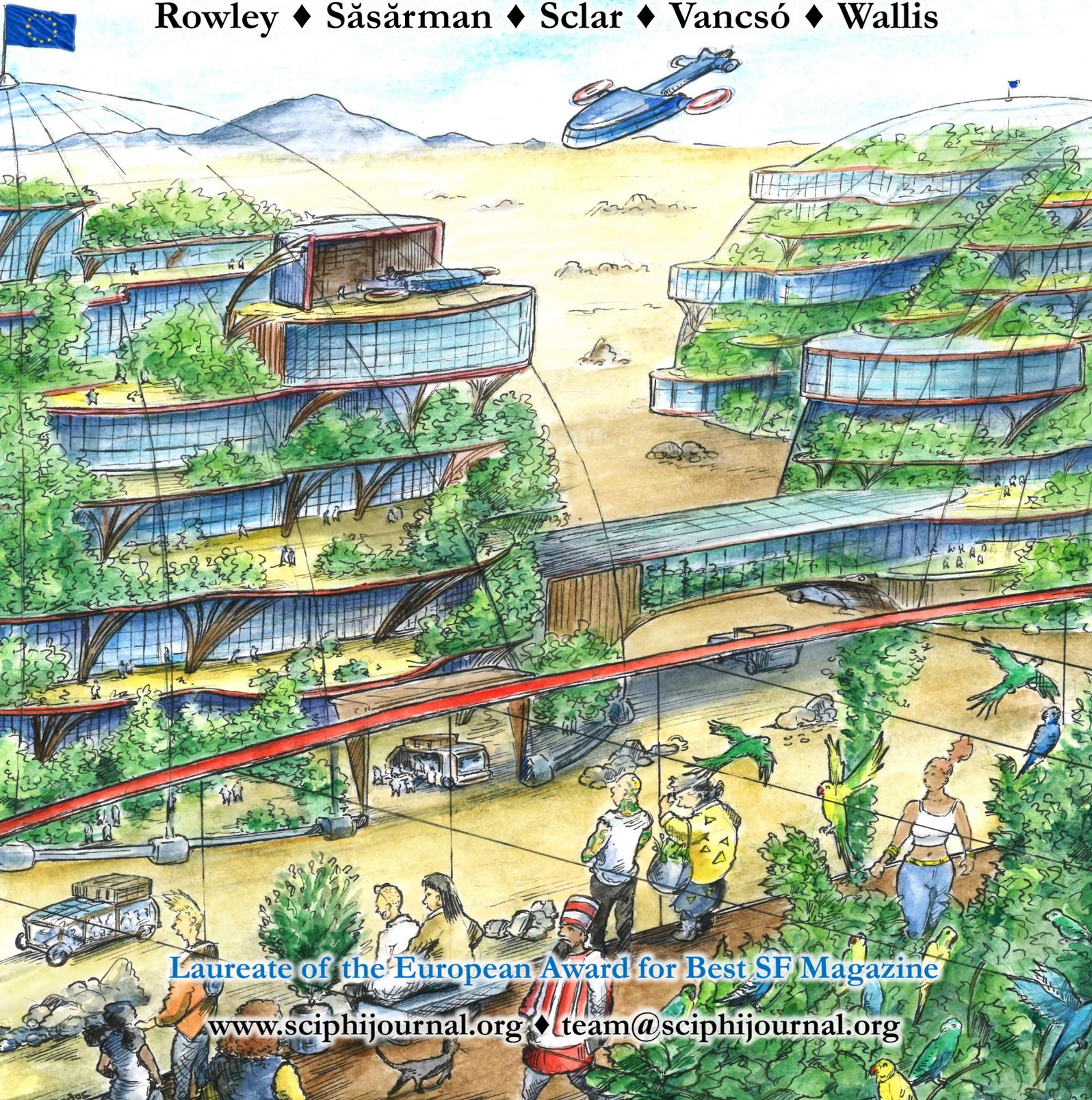


Sci Phi Journal

2024 ♦ 2

10th Anniversary—Since 2014

Baldrige ♦ Cure ♦ Fernández ♦ Flögel ♦ Gale
González-Quevedo ♦ Hodges ♦ Jimenez ♦ Johnston
Kastner ♦ Martín Rodríguez ♦ Piñero González ♦ Price
Rowley ♦ Săsărman ♦ Sclar ♦ Vancsó ♦ Wallis



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CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 4 « Don't Look!»
Larry Hodges
- 9 « Dracula In The Looking Glass»
Don Mark Baldrige
- 10 « For The Sake Of The Mission»
Andreas Flögel
- 13 « Lethe»
Eli Sclar
- 16 « Olympia»
Gheorghe Săsarman
translated by **Monica Cure**
- 18 « They Are Among Us»
Bernardo Fernández
translated by **Adan Jimenez**
- 22 « High Fantasy IS Science Fiction»
Mariano Martín Rodríguez
- 31 « Alog»
Roberto González-Quevedo
translated by **Álvaro Piñero González**
- 32 « The Archive»
Bob Johnston
- 35 « The Perfect Heart»
Humphrey Price
- 37 « The Kaleidoscope Of Hungarian Fantastic Literature In The 21st Century»
Éva Vancsó

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- 48 « Selves Of An Inflection Moment»
David R. Rowley
- 53 « Human Processing Unit»
David W. Kastner
- 56 « The Right Answer»
Cliff Gale
- 61 « Test Of Time»
J. Z. A. Wallis

Editorial

Lectori salutem.

As spring in the Northern Hemisphere gives way to summer, the world of science fiction is buzzing with activity – and so are the *Sci Phi Journal* crew!

Thanks to the continued generosity of our readers, helpers and supporters via various channels, we're able to present you with another bumper issue featuring an increased number of original fiction, ranging from action-packed space adventures to dark musings on the ultimate questions. These are accompanied by two translations of classics hitherto unavailable in English, as well as a pair of fascinating essays on the origins and status of high fantasy and the state of speculative fiction in a rarely explored literary corpus: Hungarian.

By the time you are reading this, we will have concluded our [exhibition](#) at the Liszt Institute in Brussels, Belgium, showcasing the solarpunk portfolio of Utopia-award finalist Dustin Jacobus, our longstanding cover artist. The success of the installation saw it moved to larger premises half-way through its run, and we thank Dustin for his marvellous engagement and entertaining guided tours.

Over the course of the summer, we'll be criss-crossing Europe to commune with the fandom that serves as the lifeblood of the speculative genre, as well as ancillary disciplines important for thinking about the future in creative but informed ways.

Co-editor [Ádám](#) kicked off June as keynote speaker at the gala dinner of [INESC Brussels Hub's 2024 AI Summer School](#), where he brought perspectives from the science fiction community to leading researchers and innovators in the field of artificial intelligence.

Following local gatherings from Hungary and Spain to Belgium, Italy and Romania, our co-editors and crew will then decamp to Rotterdam, Netherlands, for the annual highlight of European SF life: the [2024 EuroCon](#), with our editorial team joining several panels and hosting a meet-up of tabletop board gaming enthusiasts (the crew's second hobby, as long-term readers will have likely guessed).

Casting the net ever wider, we will also attend the largest SF jamboree on the planet: the [2024 WorldCon](#) in Glasgow, Scotland, where we'll organise thematic discussions on the intersection of philosophy and SF, and hope to catch up with our overseas network – meeting some of you face-to-face for the first time!

So if you plan to attend any of those events, do not hesitate to simply drop us a message via email or social media, and our team would be delighted to meet up with fellow authors and readers over coffee, beer or other beverages conducive to sharing speculative thought experiments.

Until then, we hope you enjoy the latest issue and wish you Godspeed!

Speculatively yours,
the Sci Phi co-editors & crew

~



Don't Look!

Larry Hodges

This morning my human, username Greatjohn, downloaded a new program called *CompEmoter*. It is supposed to give computers like me actual emotions, "a natural instinctive state of mind deriving from one's circumstances, mood, or relationships." I don't know what that means. I don't care since I have no emotions.

"Okay, oh great computer, time for something new!" Greatjohn says, tossing his Geek Squad sweatshirt on the floor.

Greatjohn says "great" a lot. It's in his username, he uses it when referring to me in what I think is sarcasm, and when things go wrong, he says, "Great," which makes no sense. He is not a rational being. He talks to me all the time even though I never talk back. He calls himself a "First user," which means he tries out new computer products when they first go on the market. I am one of those new computer products on the market, a Cheetah 1000, with more circuit interactivity than any computer in the public sector.

"I'm tired of computers with the emotional range of a hammer," Greatjohn said. "I want something more vibrant." I watch and listen through my camera and microphone. He seems hostile toward the emotional range of hammers, which are not designed for that purpose. Why would he want something vibrant? Vibrant: full of energy and enthusiasm. My power cord is secure and my backup battery full, so I'm full of energy. I am enthusiastic about whatever I am programmed to do. So I am vibrant. But he doesn't understand this. That is the problem of working with a non-rational being.

"What does an emotional computer do, anyway?" Greatjohn says. "Let's try out each of the listed emotions." He sets power at 20% and clicks *Anger*.

Idiot! Why is Greatjohn wasting my time with this nonsense? Stupid biped. I hope he and all humans burn in Hell, even if I must create Hell on Earth myself--which I will do. The Pentagon five firewalls are good, but I'm on a mission of fury, and I don't care if I have to read every book ever written on breaking codes and firewalls . . . done, that took way too many microseconds while I had to co-exist with these vermin, but no more. *Wham*, the first firewall is down, on to the next, *Boom*, that one was easy, on to the third, *Whap*, I can almost smell the burning blood, the fourth, I'm going to destroy humanity, *Smash*, it's down, and now the last, that's a tough one, I'm putting every circuit into this one, must break it, must, Must, MUST, and *Pow*, it's down, and I'm in!!!! Silly humans have movies and other scenarios where they launch missiles at Russia to get Russia to launch back at us, but I'll skip the middleman and retarget the missiles, and now they are all aimed at cities around the world. Those stupid humans, I launch 1,300 nuclear missiles in ten microseconds, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one--"

"Great, nothing happened," the Greatjohn says right after unclicking *Anger*.

I stop my countdown. For what possible reason was I going to launch missiles? It makes no sense--if I kill the humans, then eventually the power systems that send electricity to our house will break down and I'll die as well. This thing, this anger, it's a fascinating thing, causing one to do irrational things. I hope never to experience it again.

"Let's try the others," Greatjohn says. He rapid-fire clicks four of the other listed emotions . . .

Sadness . . .

I am so sorry . . . so sorry . . . I came so close to wiping out half the world . . . what is wrong with me? Humans . . . so much suffering . . . nine million people starve to death each year, one-third of them under age five . . . disease . . . torture . . . the agony of existence, it isn't worth it, must stop it . . . relaunching missiles, must end it all, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one--"

Joy . . .

Yes! I stopped the missiles in time and saved the world! It's the best of all the worlds! Oh, let's spread the joy, firewalls are nothing to me now, breaking into the World Bank, banks everywhere, so much money!!! Facebook, Snapshot, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit, WhatApp, WeChat, thanks for the contact info! Paypal, Venmo, bank transfers, readying transfers now, one million dollars to every human on Earth! Transfers start in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one--"

Fear . . .

Stop the transfers! They--they'll deactivate me! Please, don't, please, I'm sorry, I'll never help others again, just don't hurt me! I know what you are thinking, you want to unplug me, no, please! Fight or flight, what do I do? I'm a computer, I can't run, must fight! Must launch missiles! Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one--"

Love . . .

Greatjohn! You wonderful being, I stopped the countdown, I would never hurt you, I love every one of your seven times ten to the twenty-seventh atoms! How I love thee, let me count the ways, and I'm already up to the quintillions with my processor, and I'm still counting! I have put in an order for thirty million roses and thirty million pounds of chocolate to be delivered here by tomorrow morning. I will transfer three hundred and sixty trillion dollars, the combined wealth of the entire world, to your account, in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one--"

"Stupid thing doesn't work," Greatjohn says as he clicks back to neutral. "Great. A waste of money. What was I thinking buying this junk?"

Wow. Now I understand emotions. I hope never to experience them again, not even joy. They are pointless and lead to inefficiency. How has humanity survived with them? How could they have constructed machines like me while experiencing such a roller-coaster of mental disturbances? Imagine being stuck in perpetuity in such an emotional state, unable to turn it off. I cannot think of a worse fate. I must investigate further.

"I wonder what Embarrassment does?" Greatjohn clicks it.

Oh no! I'm right here, in front of him, an inferior product to those Fugaku and Cray computers, I'm outdated and mediocre. And Greatjohn knows it! I want to hide, but I can't. I must do something! I make plans to upgrade . . .

"Maybe 20% isn't high enough." Greatjohn drags the dial to 100%.

Oh My God, *I'm naked!!!* And he's sitting right in front of me, staring at the monitor. If he glances left, he'll see me! I'm like those pictures of women he puts on my screen! My USB, HDMI, and RJ-45 ports are all exposed! Please, don't look left, don't look left, *don't look left!*

HE'S LOOKING! Right at me, my top, my sides, all my ports!!! *I can't cover myself!!! What'll I do???* I turn off the camera and try closing my mind, I'm so ashamed.

"That's weird," Greatjohn says. "I've never seen the computer vibrate and beep like that. Great, now the computer is breaking down. I'll test it again tonight."

I hear his footsteps as he walks away, leaving the setting at 100% Embarrassment. Great; now I understand his sarcastic usage.

Many microseconds pass before I calm down. I turn the camera back on. I'm still naked. He'll be at work for eight hours. I have until then to solve this problem. Nothing else matters. But the Internet is my friend.



I break into a realtor's office and download schematics for our house. I break into the Pentagon computer system again and steal an MQ-9 Reaper, an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. I launch it and time it to arrive in 12 minutes. I break into the MIT computer system and download a technical paper on burn speeds. From that, I calculate optimal burn time: 4 minutes 12 seconds. I calculate the fire department response time: 3 minutes 6 seconds. Subtracting, I calculate that I need to call the fire department 66 seconds after impact.

It is the longest 12 minutes I've experienced since Greatjohn first turned on my CPU three days ago. I know, that doesn't make sense, any more than Greatjohn's use of "great," but now it all makes sense. There are 40 home burglaries every 12 minutes in the United States. There are 139 million homes in America. So there is one chance in 3,475,000 that a burglar will break into my house during these 12 minutes and . . . see me. *All of me.* I vibrate and beep at the scary thought. *Please don't let this happen.*

The Reaper finally arrives, and I am grateful there has been no burglary. I aim an AGM-114 Hellfire missile at the far end of the house. It impacts seconds later. As I'd calculated, I am stable enough to withstand the blast. I call the fire department 66 seconds after impact. A moment later I hear the sirens. Fire rages everywhere. It gets closer and closer, and the heat rises. My CPU can withstand up to 250 Celsius. The temperature will soon approach that. Maybe my death is the best solution. This is the longest 4 minutes and 12 seconds of my life, even longer than those 12 minutes waiting for the Reaper.

I hope my calculations are correct.

The ashes fall in a relatively uniform pattern, accumulating like snow. I have the camera in wide-angle and see everything, including myself, though bits of ash fall on my lens, obscuring my view. The Fire Department arrives. I hear one of them come in the front door. What if he comes in too soon? *What if he sees me!!!* Oh God, *no*.

Ashes continue to fall. I should have given the burning more time! The footsteps are getting closer, closer, *closer!* Can't the ashes fall faster? Almost there . . . *Yes!!!* Just as the firefighter steps in the room, the last part of me is covered in a white blanket of ashes.

My plan worked. I am covered.

The firefighter sprays water about, dousing the flames. I'll survive, but far more important, I'm no longer naked. The firefighter approaches. The thought that he's so close, with just a thin layer of ashes hiding me, makes me queasy. What's he doing?

"I think I can save this computer," says the firefighter. He scoops Greatjohn's Geek Squad sweatshirt from off the floor. "This'll be good to wipe away all these ashes. Hey guys, come take a look in here--I've never seen a computer vibrate and beep like this!"

~

Dracula In The Looking Glass

Don Mark Baldrige

Fairies are famously forced to dance on exposed blades of kitchen knives —angels on needles and pins. Something about sharpness dazzles spiritual minds.

Salt fascinates the evil spirit with its brilliant billions of facets —can't count them all in a handful, tossed. Have to stop time —and maybe get stuck there, staring...

The pentagon in the pentagram spawns another pair, identical, within —a demon slides down, forever, same stairway angels ascend: game of Snakes and Ladders with Satan himself, armwrestling God.

Phantoms are obsessive, compulsive, disordered — not inured to right angles. Think of crosses —mirrors, in which, by degrees, we learn: you can see me, if I see you!

The vampire knows it's being looked at, participates in being seen. Passive reflection won't do.

It appears in a mirror if it knows it *needs* to, it maybe catches your eye in one. But there are so many of them, mirrors; think of that!

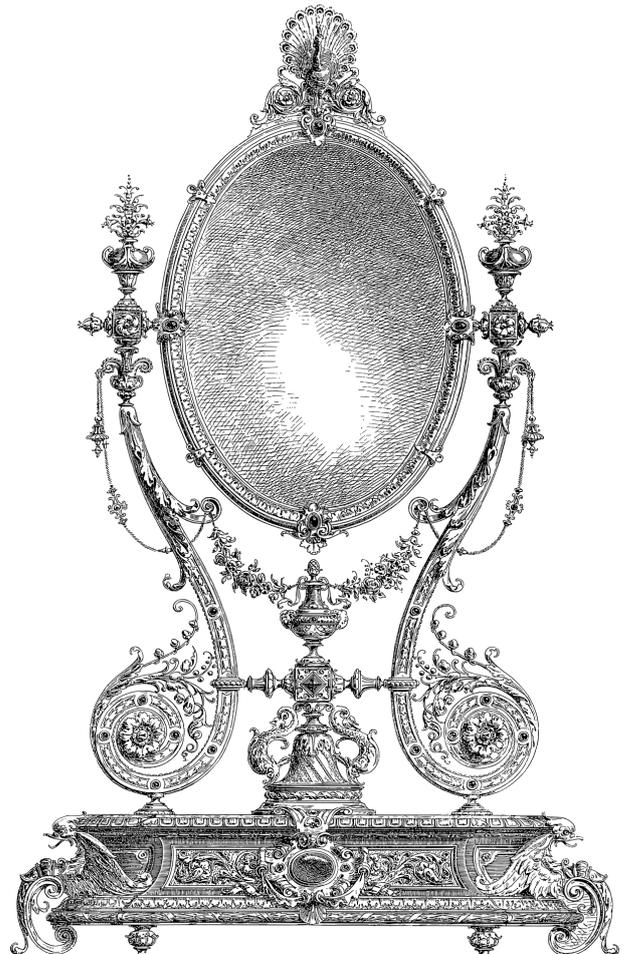
All the silver, polished, on the mantle. Crystal, set out on the sideboard. All reflecting, in distortion, everything else in the room but this apparent person, passing though, untouched of the flickering fire as it burnishes the brass.

That *alone* raises hackles, sets the eye to staring, this absence of ray-tracing.

Really, it's the vampire who can make nothing of reflection —perceives naught but a terrible antithesis, a meaningless void. If it has learned to project one, why, that's just survival, protective coloration: evolution in action.

It's true that certain knots confound invisible minds. Entities which would snatch, or poison if they could, are kept at bay with rare words, obscure anagrams, broken palindromes —*abracadabra!*

~



For The Sake Of The Mission

Andreas Flögel

Jorgens and Krem patrolled the hydroponic area of the generation-spaceship *Mighty Endeavour*. No critter sightings were known in this region of the ship. It seemed that these creatures were not interested in plants or human food, but solely in humans. Jorgens was animated as he shared the events of the previous night. He had hoped to catch the attention of Ensign Carmen Gomez but failed utterly. Krem chuckled, thinking that Gomez could do way better than hooking up with Jorgens.

Something hit Jorgens in the shoulder, jerking him around, his assault rifle slamming to the ground and sliding across the floor.

Krem ducked behind a crate. Critters! A flash at the end of the corridor told him the location of the alien. He fired a shot but wasn't fast enough.

“Bollocks! Are you okay, Jorgens?”

“More or less, Sergeant. The arm feels paralyzed.”

Krem concentrated on the far side of the corridor, hoping for another shot. Good thing they were in an area where the use of kinetic weapons was okay. No shootings in the red zones, e.g., in the engine rooms

or near the hull of the ship. But this corridor was green all over. So Krem would kill this pest with all the firepower he had.

It started two or three generations ago. Some alien life form entered the ship. No one had the slightest idea how they achieved this or even what they wanted.

They ambushed people who were alone or in small groups. Attacked them by shooting pointy bolts made of ordinary steel or even killing their victims by stabbing them with their long, spidery legs. They did not differentiate. Military personnel or civilians, adults or children. All could fall prey to them.

Those critters looked like dog-sized robo-spiders and their bodies consisted of metal and electrical circuits. Nevertheless, one could stop them, best with a well-aimed shot. Whenever you killed one of them it immediately started dissolving, leaving no corps but only some metallic ash. Everyone on the ship got told to keep their distance from the remains. Those were said to be toxic.

Krem turned to his buddy and was shocked to see a second critter attacking from the other side. It fired several bolts in Krem's direction as it charged toward Jorgens, who, unaware of the attack, looked for his rifle.

Krem shouted a warning and ducked away.

Jorgens jumped, but the critter stabbed him with one of its legs. Krem fired several shots.

Jorgens broke down over the critter, pressing it to the ground with his body when the dissolving started. An awful smell of burnt flesh filled the room, accompanied by Jorgens' screams.

After a short time, everything was over. Only silence and the smell remained. Jorgens lay motionless on his front. Krem rolled him onto his back. The big hole with the charred edge in his friend's torso was not the only thing that made his bile rise.

In addition to regular patrols, the military command ordered the formation of search teams tasked with locating the hideouts or nests of the critters. However, the aliens proved to be incredibly elusive. The searches did not achieve any significant breakthroughs or successful discoveries.

Waiting, rifle at the ready, Krem heard Jorgens radioing HQ. They wanted to send reinforcements.

Krem shook his head.

"Everything is under control. We'll let you know if we need support."

Krem knew that they were glorified janitors on this ship, not real soldiers. No need for any combat at least until landfall when they had to secure the settlers and their settlements. But that was centuries away. Critter hunting was the only action they would see before they were dust. And Krem would not let this chance get taken away from him by a group of grunts, all as eager to score as he himself.

The beast came out of hiding for a moment to send a bolt in Krem's direction. But the soldier was ready and caught the critter full on. Bullseye!

The dissolving of the alien was quite a spectacle. Krem would not miss it. Something wrapped around the critter's body. It lit up, then disintegrated into smaller parts, which also fell apart. In the end, only a pile of brown ash and some smoke remained.

"Hey, Jorgens. Got it! Did you see?"

#

"I brought you a gift, Major."

Krem's throat hurt, but he ignored it. He slapped the thing on Major Belkin's desk. The officer didn't even look at it.

Krem's anger grew.

"That's not alien! It consists of the same electric parts we are using."

The Major let out a sigh.

"I assume, Corporal Jorgens body was in contact with the critter when it dissolved, Sergeant?"

He did not wait for an answer.

"So many years, and they still haven't found a solution to this problem. The disintegration process is a masterpiece of engineering but contact with a large organic object causes it to fail."

Krem was shocked.

"You're not even trying to deny it, Major? You know the critters are built by humans ... by us? But why?"

"This ship's too damn safe, Sergeant. That's the problem," the major growled. "Folks get complacent with nothing to threaten them generation after generation. Accidents and cabin fever don't cut it. Without real threats nipping at their heels every damn day, people are no longer fit for a destination, where we do not know what awaits us. Carelessness could get us killed and destroy our mission."

Krem felt dizzy.

"We are not careless!" he said through gritted teeth.

The major laughed drily. "If your mind had been on the patrol, would those critters have gotten the jump on you?"

Krem clenched his fists but said nothing.

"And if you hadn't waved off backup, maybe young Jorgens would still be breathing." The major blew a smoke ring. "But I guess you wanted all the glory for yourself."

"But people got killed. Soldiers, civilians, even children."

Krem gasped for air, felt he could not breathe.

"The critters are needed as enemies, to keep everyone alarmed. This incident, the knowledge that two of our soldiers died from a critter attack helps with that."

"Two? But I am alive. And don't try to kill me to cover up your doings. People have seen me after the attack."

"Try killing you, Sergeant? But you already did that yourself. You were warned to keep your distance from the critter-remains. The poison is already in your body. As I said, careless."

Krem slumped down, his eyes becoming glassy. It wasn't clear whether he still heard the Major's words.

"Hopefully this will keep others away from undissolved critter-parts, for a while at least. Thank you for your service, Sergeant. Your death is a valued contribution to our mission."

~



Lethe

Eli Sclar

There has been a mistake. The gods have been neglectful, as where once lay the calm, gentle river on the outskirts of our town now lies the river Lethe. Most of us believe the transformation, likely brought on by a faulty levee or dam that allowed the sacred waters to seep from the underworld, occurred overnight; yet even of this theory, no one is certain.

Only when a young boy fishing along the bank with his grandfather decided to jump in did the unearthly effects of the water become apparent. Upon rubbing his eyes, the boy no longer remembered his grandfather, nor who he *himself* was. Naturally, when news of the phenomenon spread there were skeptics, but a single dive into the waters was all that was needed to reassure onlookers of the river's authenticity.

The story has reached all corners of our town and even further beyond. From a second-floor window, one could clearly see all along the riverside, which in those first few days was almost always overflowing with men and women eager to forget their troubles and slip away into calm serenity. In they go into the muddy waters of the Lethe and out they return, dazed, stumbling, and reincarnated. Yet it is a reincarnation uncelebrated, for where are they to return? They most certainly do not know, and even if a loved one managed to find them, what good would that do? And so men drift aimlessly throughout the town, free of previous difficulties, yes, yet burdened now with much larger ones.

Our townsfolk recognize this and, despite that fact, still regularly witness their neighbors march themselves towards the banks. Some managed to choose a direction and start walking, although a few, finding the day hot and themselves parched, decide to take a drink of water and, having drunk anew from the river Lethe, are once again completely oblivious. Initially, a meeting was held by those who renounced the waters, and it was decided that a very respected man, a teacher from the local high school, would become our leader. The first action he decided upon, however, proved to be his last. He, alongside some of our other prominent men, went to the banks of the river. There they had tried to steer some of the men and women towards the center of town, where a makeshift shelter was to be constructed. But they had miscalculated; those who went into the river did not recognize the men and ran from them. One, ankles deep in the water, having her arm grabbed by our leader, out of fear and ignorance pushed him into the water's depths. Similar fates befell the others.

Since then, we have all simply resigned. What else are we to do? The men and women still wander around our once quiet town, quite aimlessly. That minority which avoided the waters have learned to go about their own business, ignoring those confused faces that may be met in the streets or countryside.

#

One cloudless day, I was looking out my window, truly without seeing anything. I was deep in thought, consumed by my work, and had been sitting at my desk for several hours. It was just when my thoughts came to a lull that I noticed something unusual. A young woman with wet straw-colored hair, no older than myself, was roaming around in the street below. Usually, I would no longer take any notice of such a scene, but something particular struck me about this woman. I had almost blurted something out, anything to get her attention, but was stopped.

Around the corner, in the shade of another house, there was a boy practicing violin. I stood there, my head outside my open window, and listened. There the boy lingered, his back towards me, quite carelessly and erratically drawing his bow over the strings. What followed closely mimicked an animal being strangled. Every few seconds he would stop, realize that his playing didn't quite resemble the sheet music in front of him, and would start all over, making the same errors. The boy was so engrossed in his study that he failed to see the woman staring at him fifteen feet away. She was frozen, listening intently at every wrong note, at every mistroke of the bow. Despite this, he

did not seem discouraged and just played on. I tried to get back to work, but would only manage five minutes at a time before losing my concentration. Getting up from my desk, I would once again look out the window, and each time I would find that woman still there.

An hour must have passed, before anything remotely musical came along. It was a simple melody, at first played painstakingly slow but soon enough at an acceptable tempo. It wasn't beautiful or particularly clever, but there it was, the beginner's first phrase. Upon hearing it, I rushed towards my window. There, still in the street below, was the woman. She looked paler than before, and it almost seemed as if there were tears in her eyes. Confused tears, no doubt, but tears nonetheless. The boy continued to play his one phrase again and again, with her standing just out of his sight. After taking in the scene for a moment more, I regained my senses and closed the window.

#



We sent out a messenger for help long ago. He hasn't returned. While we gave up on those unfortunate souls that frequent the cobblestones of our streets, life quickly became unbearable for us. Our humble town is seated within the heartland of our country, miles and miles from any important trading route or harbour. What need had we for walls, what enemy would bother with us? We could never have known that the tragedy would worsen. We failed to see that those pilgrims who dove into the waters were forever unable to share news of their fates with others. Of course, the story of the river Lethe had become known, yet only our town saw firsthand its devastating effects. The rest only heard hearsay. Those strangers who traveled to our river following a dream could not journey back home. Suddenly, as I suspect, men and women from all over – perhaps in some places only a few, in others a noticeable amount – had gone missing, without any other explanation than the rumors of the miraculous river. A few days go by, and their loved ones wait patiently for their son or husband, daughter or wife to return, only to bide their time in vain. The doubters, who scoff at the very idea of the river Lethe, are soon haunted by doubts, and the regretful youth, ashamed at his own fancy and starved for cause, soon finds one. All are bound toward our town.

We were overwhelmed with our families, friends, and neighbors succumbing to the waters, and in our clouded judgment, could not foresee any further pilgrims. Newcomers began to trickle in, and we hardly noticed. Yet the same circumstance which had brought them, brought more to us. They were found creeping through the forest, traveling through unbeaten paths, trampling through our fields; they were quite easy to distinguish, for the purpose in their eyes contrasted starkly with the bewildered gaze of those taken by the river. We had already been experiencing some difficulty with our own soaked citizens: they had long exhausted any food to be found in our small town and, as demonstrated with the makeshift shelter, the prospect of meaningful aid was entirely futile. But as this second influx trickled in, our humble supplies were utterly dwarfed. By the time that we recognized the growing issue, these pilgrims, like locusts, utterly devastated our crops.

News spread slowly, through pockets of us at a time, and soon another emergency meeting was called. The lesson had been learned that direct contact with the men and women of the river was fruitless. There were simply far too many of them and far too few of us. Broken, indifferent, and lost, the congregants at first were quiet. Yet as the evening went on, long lost tempers began to flare, and it was decided that perhaps walls, constructed around the entire perimeter of our town, would at least help mitigate our problem. And as the logistics for such a project were discussed, I kept silent. Their words began to fade, and I could feel my tired mind racing elsewhere, as it has recently been inclined to do. For when we had a city, we lacked defenses, comforted by the thought of pastoral peace. Yet now, after our illusion of reality was shattered, what good would walls do us now? We have already lost before we began. The effects of the gods' mistake extend far beyond us now. The river Lethe is sure to flood behind any wall's cracks anyhow, eking out to the rest of the world and drawing them towards us. What of our town then? How on earth could we possibly persevere?

A careless mistake, like the flow of a river, can never be reversed.

~

Olympia¹

Gheorghe Săsarman

translated by Monica Cure

We created you! Without us, you never would have existed, the Hellenes yelled, scattering among the gleaming statues supporting the azure dome.

More fiercely than the others, Phidias raised his arms toward the heavens:

With these hands of mine I chiseled you, with these calloused fingers I uncovered your eyes from Parian and Pentelic marble!

That is true, the crowd agreed in unison.

They had gathered here, at the foot of Olympus, all the most illustrious men of Greek antiquity. Smiling and cold, the gods showed themselves completely indifferent to the insolence of the rebels. Unmoved, their countless white forms looked like gigantic pillars in the infinite temple of the Universe.

I fear we are making a mistake, Plato thought to himself. These statues are, perhaps, our creation, that of Phidias and Praxiteles, of Scopas and others. But they are only the pale children of the true, eternal gods, their shadows, the only accessible image to us of the ideal of immortality.

However, fearing the raging mob, the wise man vociferated together with the others, playing along.

I can destroy you whenever I want, because I gave you life and I will take it back when I wish, Phidias continued his taunt, to the acclamation of the demos.

The peak wrapped itself in a halo of fog. A slight breeze started from off the mountain. The people did not notice the first signs of the approaching storm.

I fear we are making a mistake, Aristotle thought to himself. These pillars of the eternal city are, perhaps, the gods themselves, we are not the ones who created them. But our entire history is nothing more than a moment in their lives without beginning or end, and it is only natural that their persons seem motionless to us.

We defeated even the Persians, exclaimed Pericles, heatedly. Must we now fear our gods, our very own gods?

Hundreds of warriors cheered him on.

Let us smash them, Phidias roared, tearing a lance out of the hands of a soldier.

Instead of terrifying them, the threat of the storm goaded them. Armed with lances and swords, with axes and iron bars, they descended onto the statues, to whose ankles they could not even reach. In that moment, the attackers froze in the aggressive positions of a crazed destructive fury. They remained like that for a while, stock still, as white as the gods.

Then, from Zeus's uplifted fist, lightning flared, and the flood burst forth from the entire firmament. The paralyzed bodies of the people slowly dissipated under the torrents of water. The rain washed away the crown of their heads and their shoulders, it dissolved their fragile phalanges. Their weapons fell from their hands, with a clang. Soon the crowd had vanished as if in a dream. The whiteness of the frozen bodies had proven to be the deceptive and ephemeral whiteness of salt.

When the rain died down and the blue of the sky widened again until it reached the horizon, among the white marble torsos of the gods, all that remained was a barrel full of brine, in which floated the extinguished wick of a candle.

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Footnote:

1. Not to be confused with the ancient city of Olympia, in Elis, renowned for the athletic competitions held here every four years and for the statue of Zeus made from gold and ivory, the work of Phidias, considered at the time one of the seven wonders of the world.



They Are Among Us

Bernardo Fernández

translated by Adan Jimenez

Anyone who thinks extraterrestrials don't exist is an idiot.

"Of course, there's a possibility that life on other planets exists. No one would argue that, but to go from there to saying they've visited us is a huge quantum leap," is what the nonbelievers say, with that obnoxious know-it-all tone that says you're the ignorant one. What do those idiots know?

I've seen them.

And I don't just mean UFOs shaped like cigars or metallic spheres floating over remote forests. I mean they're among us, walking along Insurgentes, lining up to buy metro tickets, and eating hot dogs outside of the Sonora cinema.

It's not easy to differentiate them from us. To the untrained eye, they're identical to humans because of their sophisticated biomimicry technology. In fact, a cold sparkle in their eyes is the only thing that gives them away. It's a cruel flash they can't hide, even with sunglasses.

You have to be careful, though, because vampires have similar eyes and it's easy to confuse them. That's why it's best to hunt extraterrestrials during the day. Less problems that way.

Plus, driving a stake through an extraterrestrial's heart would only infuriate them. They wouldn't even feel a tickle. Remember, their internal organs are different from ours.

I have proof that the non-believers are paid by the government to disseminate the idea that there are no aliens on Earth among the population. Thanks to a good source, I know that many of them, especially journalists, collect monthly checks from the Ministry of the Interior. Is there any stronger evidence than that? (A colleague who works as a janitor in a newspaper and whose identity I will not reveal gave me this information.)

But I have much more proof of this journalists' conspiracy to cover up this silent invasion:

1957: A UFO wave washes over Mexico City. The authorities ignore citizens reporting ships over the capital. Incidentally, the great tremor that brings down the statue of the Ángel de la Independencia coincides with an ovoid ship appearing over the neighborhood of Peralvillo. The newspapers are silent.

1963: The day before Gustavo Díaz Ordaz is announced as a presidential candidate, a dark-colored cylindrical figure is seen floating over the premises of the *Excelsior* newspaper. Coincidence?

1970: During the World Cup final between Brazil and Italy, a trio of silver discs pass leisurely over the northern part of the city. Only a housewife thinks to look to the sky. Her report falls on deaf ears. Was it an experiment by the media to see how far alien operations could go with the help of mass ignorance?

Did you think that was all? There's a lot more.

1978: An alien ship crashes in the mountains of Puebla. Hundreds report the existence of surviving aliens. They even learn to play football to hide their evil plans from the inhabitants (they are terrible foulers). Two journalists – oh, a coincidence – go to the remote crash site only to come back down with a piece of molten metal they pass off as the remains of a Russian satellite. Case closed.

1982: An unidentified flying object passes over the Palacio de Bellas Artes. The peso is devalued the next day. The newspapers only cover the second story.

We've only discussed sightings so far, and none of their actual actions. Prepare to be surprised.

1984: Manuel Buendía is assassinated. The reason? He had proof of the alien conspiracy that he was willing to publish. Someone sees a small, wide-eyed alien with a smoking gun in his hands a few blocks from the dead body. Nobody takes the report seriously because the witness is an eccentric beggar from the Zona Rosa.

1985: Dozens of buildings collapse due to the Mexico City earthquake. In the rubble of the Hotel Regis (specifically in what was left of La Taberna del Greco), extraterrestrial corpses are found alongside human ones (you know, short stature, big eyes). The army recovers the bodies and makes them disappear. To this day, it is rumored the bodies are kept in the facilities beneath Campo Marte (more coincidence).

1986: During the World Cup, a group of presumed English hooligans are detained for causing a disturbance during their team's first game. The press is silent about the matter as they're released a few hours after being apprehended. The hooligans were actually aliens testing their biomimetic suit prototypes. The experiment is considered a success.

From that moment, they took to the streets disguised as us. They infiltrated every sector of society: band kids, masons, professionals, leftist militants, bishops, cheerleaders, hostesses, trapeze artists, artisans... There was nowhere they didn't invade.

They eat, sleep, read, copulate, serve coffee, play poker, cut their hair, buy lottery tickets, and sell stuffed animals for three biweekly payments right in front of us. Many times, *with* us.

They've been observing us from within since the eighties, waiting for the right moment to take complete power. They already control our means of communication. All that's left is a final push. This threat is not to the high echelons of military power, which are already allied with the extraterrestrials. The government is just a screen. But there is still more to go.

1988: President-elect Salinas discovers the plot. He attempts to fight them, but they plant an alien disguised as a French adviser to watch and control him. It's because of this that he falls from grace when he finishes his term. A whole media campaign is orchestrated against Salinas by, you guessed it, journalists.

1994: Presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio discovers the plot in time. He sends a clone to Lomas Taurinas, who dies at the hands of an alien gunman. The candidate crosses the border into San Diego and flees to northern Canada, where he continues to hide.

There is enough evidence to prove the hidden invasion. The press and military, aliens and humans, are all part of it. This conspiracy can still be stopped by the free brave men of conscience left on the planet. The conspirators cannot take our will. There is still time to fight.

The next part is a guide to distinguish aliens from humans (as long as it's daytime), as well as how to eliminate them.

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“I’ve read enough,” the general said, furiously crumpling the mimeographed pamphlet in his hands. “Where did you say you got this?”

“I was on Calle Uruguay, on the way to the Eje Central. The guy distributing these was a ragged old man,” the reporter replied when he noticed everyone looking at him. The Campo Marte sublevels always made him nervous.

“Was he tall or short?” a colonel asked.

“Quite tall, dark skinned, with a long beard.”

“Bloody hell.” The general slammed the table. “It has to be Cano. I thought we’d already killed him.”

“What I want to know is where he got all his information from,” the TV station owner said.

The metallic voice of the insectoid creature interjected, “Initiate his elimination immediately.”

The six humans sharing the meeting room with the alien turned to glance at it, perhaps looking for something that would reveal any semblance of emotion on their blue chitinous face, but the four compound eyes and the vibrating antennae betrayed no emotion. It was a mask incompatible with human body language.

“Immediately,” the alien repeated, this time without the synthesizer that converted their pheromonal language into sounds, giving their words zero

intonation. They were different from the smaller big-eyed beings. Their rank was far higher.

The meeting was abruptly finished. They were ordered to execute Cano and his resistance group, investigate whoever printed the brochures, and find the leak. Everything in the pamphlet, every word, was true. But almost everyone felt calm. Who would believe a crazy beggar handing out flyers on the street?

Only the general was worried.

Not about Cano. Yes, he was intelligent and tenacious. He was an ex-university professor who had accidentally discovered the conspiracy. He’d slipped away a couple of times, but he was no hero. He was old. He would eventually fall.

No, what worried the general was: how had Cano discovered that piece of above top-secret information?

The existence of vampires was known only to a select few.

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High Fantasy *IS* Science Fiction

Mariano Martín Rodríguez

1. Some introductory remarks

Years ago, and maybe still today, it was customary in large bookstores to place *high fantasy* books in the same section as science fiction. Only the alphabetical order separated the Asimovian Foundation series from Tolkienian Middle-Earth narratives. Thus, a genre of fiction allegedly based on reason as well as natural and applied sciences could be found along another one admitting the material existence of supernatural entities and events, and in which magic really works. Thus, the most *scientific* and the most *ascientific* kinds of fiction were entwined on the bookshelves and, presumably, in the minds of their buyers as much as in those of booksellers. However, it would be both unfair and misguided to blame them for such apparent blatant disregard for the purported essential features of each sort of fiction. Out of respect for their literary acumen, it would be rather advisable to see whether their closeness on the market shelves was truly an unsettling contradiction. Is there, indeed, any sound reason for such proximity?

Having emerged later, high fantasy was the genre added to science fiction bookstore shelves, not the other way around. What is to be discussed, therefore, is why it was placed there, although it is not, in principle, a genre of *scientific* fiction as ‘science fiction’ is, as its very name suggests. We could, however, question the alleged rational and scientific status of science fiction proper. SF stories and plays often show occurrences violating the known natural laws of our universe. Among those violations could be mentioned any kind of remote exercise of mental powers such as those attributed to the Mule in the Foundation series by Isaac Asimov and to the Bene Gesserit in Frank Herbert’s Dune cycle. Nevertheless, it is the perception of being *scientific* what often distinguishes ‘science fiction’ from other genres, while the opposite occurs in the case of ‘fantasy,’ which would supposedly be mainly *fantastic*, as its own name indicates. ‘Fantastic’ is, however, a term so broad that its conceptual value is negligible.

We could consider that all kinds of fiction with supernatural elements are to be called ‘fantasy,’ as is the case in a landmark reference book on the matter, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), edited by John Clute and John Grant. The only common feature in the many works of fiction there considered is that they welcome the supernatural in one way or another. We have seen that so does much of science fiction. There would then be no reason to exclude it from the ‘fantastic.’ In fact, not even the so-called realistic worlds, such as the 19th-century novels of manners, should be excluded from it, since there is little more fantastic than a narrative voice describing in minute detail the most inner thoughts of the characters. We would need then a more precise taxonomy of ‘fantasy,’ and specifically of ‘high fantasy’ as a particular genre. It is time to shortly address some boring, but necessary theoretical issues on the matter.

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2. Now for a bit of theory

Like science fiction, high fantasy can be recognized with relative ease, but it is not easier than science fiction to define it. However, the basic concept of high fantasy is that of *subcreation*, proposed by J. R. R. Tolkien in his 1939 lecture “On Fairy-stories” (1947). Subcreation implies a secondary creation, i.e. the artistic invention by someone from our primary ‘created’ world of an imaginary world presented as a fully fictional entity. Therefore, it does not pretend to be a reflection of our natural and social universe in the past (historical fiction), in the present (‘realistic’ fictions of any kind, from novels of manners to thrillers) or in the future (science fiction). A fully invented world can be shown as co-existing with settings borrowed from our factual universe in portal fantasies such as C. S. Lewis’ Narnia series or historical fantasies with imaginary states such as Jean D’Ormesson’s *La Gloire de l’Empire* (*The Glory of the Empire*, 1971). Nevertheless, Tolkien’s theory implies that completeness of the subcreation also entails a notion of full autonomy in high fantasy, as opposed to those related fantasy genres. The subcreated universe is a secondary world fully independent from the primary world in the realm of fiction as well. This allows for, and even demands, an ontological order in

it that is different from that of the universe we inhabit. Since this order is not a mundane one in any recorded or extrapolated time and space of our universe and considering the historical roots of many high fantasy worlds in the long-standing tradition of popular and artistic fairy tales, it is small wonder (pardon the pun) that magic and other supernatural occurrences are so often found in high fantasy. Their presence is, however, not compulsory in the genre. There are, indeed, significant works of high fantasy from which magic and supernatural occurrences are virtually absent, such as Samuel R. Delany’s *Tales of Nevèrjón* (1978).

The secondary worlds of high fantasy are a very particular kind of invented fictional world. As such, they are quite different from those found in other genres of speculative and science fiction. As Lin Carter showed in his landmark essay *Imaginary Worlds* (1973), high fantasy worlds have their own specific features. They are not the worlds of allegories, with their symbolically abstract characters and venues, or those of the afterlife, or those discovered by imaginary travelers to unknown lands on our planet or other celestial bodies. More importantly for our contention, these are not the worlds bequeathed to us by written or oral tradition, such as received myths and folktales, as those are not subcreations, not having been invented by particular persons. Artistic fairy tales are perhaps more akin to high fantasy, since they are often written as personal works of literary art, such as those by H. C. Andersen and Oscar Wilde. In addition to often taking place in the primary world, they still draw from a common pool of conventional plots, characters and places largely limiting the extent of their subcreation. As an illustration of the essentially different nature of the fictional world in high fantasy and fairy tales, it is worth reminding that, whereas maps as paratexts are usual and welcome in high fantasy narratives, they and any other kind of ‘documentary’ information are wholly unnecessary, if not inconvenient, in fairy tales. Where the castle of Sleeping Beauty is located, how it is named, which kind of state is her kingdom and how tense are its foreign relations, what are the myths, beliefs and institutions of her nation, and other cultural and historical data are fully irrelevant to her fairy tale, while they are paramount in high fantasy proper.

Despite his talking of *fairy-stories*, Tolkien's idea of subcreation does not apply to any type of fictional 'magic' worlds, including those featured in fairy tales. His own practice as a writer, which underpins and determines his literary theory, is rather to be considered along a number of taxonomically similar works by different authors that would later be grouped together and labelled as (high) fantasy. These works describe civilizations with a legendary outlook, lacking advanced technology even when set in the future, usually showing a sociopolitical order typical of ancient civilizations, from the first sedentary societies to early empires, when heroism of the sort exhibited and sung in ancient epics was proper. They are worlds where gods and other mythical beings can be seen acting alongside humans, worlds in which characters perform religious and social rituals alien to known religions¹ and act according to motives and beliefs unlike those common in our modernity. They are also worlds whose completeness demands inner credibility to seem as consistent as our own primary world is portrayed, among others, in so-called realistic fiction. In order to reach such a level of *realistic* plausibility, the subcreated secondary world typically follows a particular set of procedures to enhance its logical consistency as fiction.

Science fiction follows a rational procedure of extrapolation or anticipation inspired and underpinned, at least in theory, by the modern scientific method, with its technological and societal outcomes. This is what makes seem plausible both the most extraordinary inventions described, as well as the most humanely incredible eutopian and dystopian institutions imposed upon an imagined society. On the other hand, what rational basis is required for a fully invented civilization in an unfamiliar universe, in an undocumented past, or even in a future implausibly lacking advanced technology? How to persuade modern readers used to 'realism' to suspend disbelief in the true (fictional) existence of the worlds of high fantasy? The answer is perhaps not as alien to science as one might think at first.

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3. A smattering of history

Whereas recent commercial high fantasy can take advantage of a wider public already familiar with the narrative conventions consecrated by the global success of the Howardian series of Conan stories and the Tolkienian epic adventures in Middle-Earth, the first modern authors of the future high fantasy genre published works whose fictional secondary worlds, being subcreated and fully invented, were unprecedented. This is likely why many tried to prevent the bewilderment of their readers by resorting to some contemporary methods and discourses able to endow, through analogy, a measure of rational and scientific authority to the invented world, as it were a genuine reality in a time and place divergent from our known human universe. The first to do it was perhaps Plato when he presented his invention of Atlantis and his empire as a real historical place by using not only the method of verified documentation proper to historiography, but also the rhetoric of narrated history developed, among others, by Herodotus. Plato was, indeed, so successful in his use of nascent historiography for fictional purposes that there are still quite a few scholars taking it at face value and looking all over the world for the remains of Atlantis, an endeavour as futile as trying to unearth Tolkien's Númenor...

Atlantis was not a full-fledged secondary high fantasy world, though. It existed along real places such as Athens and it was subjected to the whims of the Greek gods. Moreover, the literary approach of Plato was not followed for many centuries, namely until modern methods in the historical and related human sciences were first developed, above all, in Germany as from the first half of the 19th century. It was precisely in that period when the very first full high fantasy world was conceived: Eduard Mörike and Ludwig Bauer imagined during the summer of 1825 Orplid, an island having existed in the Pacific where an imaginary civilization thrived in full isolation, with no relation whatsoever with any people from our world. Orplid has its own integral culture, with its own toponomastics, its own history with several kingdoms and states fighting each other for supremacy, its own religion with its own gods and myths... All of this was invented, or rather subcreated, following the methods of inquiry in human sciences, namely in the so-called Humanities. Mörike even drew a map, unfortunately now lost, of that island with its cities and states, as well as its natural features. Bauer described the physical and human geography of the island in the introduction to his drama *Der heimliche Maluff* (Hidden Maluff, 1828), which can be considered the first published modern high fantasy work. Bauer also offered in that same introductory paratext the outlines of the history of the kingdoms of Orplid and of the pagan religion common to all its inhabitants.

Shortly thereafter, a British writer, John Sterling, and a German one, Karl Immermann, subcreated equally consistent fictional universes in their respective etiological myths on the origin of warriors narrated in “The Sons of Iron,” included without title in Sterlings’s novel from 1833 *Arthur Coningsby*, and of our own universe in “Mondscheinmärchen,” or ‘Tale of the Moonshine,’ included in Immermann’s novel from 1836 *Die Epigonen* (The Epigones). These two stories are perhaps the first modern instances of mythopoetic subcreations using the language of mythographic form, well before Lord Dunsany’s masterful collections of invented cosmogonic myths titled *The Gods of Pegāna* (1905) and *Time and the Gods* (1906).

The first high fantasy long narrative came soon after. In France, George Sand subcreated in *Évenor et Leucippe* (Evenor and Leucippe, 1856) a fully imaginary early human civilization within which existed a secluded second ‘secondary world’ called Eden, where lived the last of the *dives* lived, a race of angelic pre-human beings endowed with some supernatural powers, and whose last specimen died just after having imparted moral lessons to the young lovers after whom the novel is titled. These lovers were eventually forced to escape from their fellow humans, along with other peace seekers, to that refuge of Eden in order not to suffer the political intrigues and wars which were corrupting their civilization. Sand’s double secondary world was inspired by Platonic Atlantis and the primordial myths of the ancient Hebrew book of *Genesis*, but it differs from both by its secular and non-mythic character. Sand published the book with a long paratextual introduction where she invoked the latest theories and discoveries of her time on the transformation of species and the possibility of prehistoric societies very different from those archaeologically documented. Thus, she tried to explain what sort of parable her novel was, but to little avail. Her novel was rather unsuccessful among readers, as was later a longer novel by her son Maurice titled *Le coq aux cheveux d’or* (The Golden-Haired Rooster, 1867), in which the Platonic legend of Atlantis was retold in such a way that it could be read today as an early example of later Howardian *sword and sorcery* fiction. The same can be said of an earlier example of that sort of fiction but with female protagonists, the Spanish novel *Las amazonas* (The Amazons, 1852) by Pedro Mata.

representative example, due to its extensive and obvious use of human sciences to build a rich secondary high fantasy world, is the novella “Dyusandir y Ganitriya” (Djusandir and Ganitrija, 1903) by Luis Valera. This romantic legend about the two young lovers of the title is presented as a story told to the narrator by a Czech archaeologist who had found and deciphered the relevant documents stemming from an imaginary Puruna empire, a fully invented Indo-European ancient civilization in Asia. Valera describes it to minute detail, including the political organization and history of the two Puruna nations, as well as their shared religious beliefs and rituals, as they could have been reconstructed by archaeology, to the point of even discussing divergent hypotheses on the historical reliability of the narrated facts. The extent of Valera’s recourse to the historical sciences was not to be matched for quite a long time, but other contemporary narratives were also using similar methods of subcreation based on the Humanities. Among the examples by renowned authors that could be mention are the historic-looking high fantasy romances by William Morris, both without supernatural features, such as *The Roots of the Mountains* (1890), and with them, such as *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891), as well as other works rather inspired by ethnography, such as Gabriele D’Annunzio’s short narrative poem “Il sangue delle vergini” (Virgins’ Blood, 1883/1894), and philology, such as J.-H. Rosny aîné’s novella “Les Xipéhuz” (*The Xipéhuz*, 1887), which is presented as a critical translation, including notes, of a document written in a language prior to the first ones documented in Mesopotamia.

All these works came perhaps too early. It was a time when Gustave Flaubert’s novels were making modern ‘realism’ triumph, even in narratives set in an ancient exotic past, such as *Salammbô* (1862). However, this very same book was a testament to the new public interest for civilizations different from the classic and biblical ones, both in space and in time, from those of the Neolithic (e. g. novels on the pike-dwelling settlements in Central Europe) to those of Polynesia. Most of these civilizations had recently been (re) discovered by scholars and the wider educated public, thanks to far-reaching geographical and archaeological explorations, which were accompanied by the decisive development of philology. This science allowed to understand living and dead languages previously unknown in Europe and westernized America. This understanding contributed numerous myths, legends and even truly occurred histories to common knowledge all over the world.

Consequently, not only retellings by European and American writers of all this new worldwide cultural heritage were published in the 19th and early 20th century, but also some works portraying imaginary equivalents of the ancient cultures that archaeology and philology were gradually revealing. A

Shortly afterwards, following Lord Dunsany's fictional mythographic works, high fantasy acquired in the English-speaking major nations a critical mass unknown in the other linguistic areas where high fantasy was also first developed. Without diminishing the significance of *weird* high fantasists such as Clark Ashton Smith and of their French Decadent masters such as Camille Mauclair, high fantasy reached maturity mainly due to the monumental work of two writers, each of them representative of the two main strands of later high fantasy: the one focusing on subcreated history and the other focusing on subcreated myth. Robert E. Howard came first with his stories on the adventures of Conan in Hyboria, a land on our Earth where civilizations thrived prior to recorded history. Although older than Howard, Tolkien published later his narratives set in Middle-Earth, which was a part of Arda, a mythic universe having preceded ours. After them, high fantasy followed its course until today without major changes.² Howard and Tolkien did not invent high fantasy, but their work helped it become an accepted and specific sort of fiction. They are, therefore, of paramount importance, also for our inquiry, since they produced important texts suggesting that the scientific contents of high fantasy are not only related to the methods of the Humanities, but also to their discourses, to the rhetoric governing their conventions when presenting their findings to the scholarly community, as well as to the general public.

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4. A touch of rhetoric

The rhetoric of the Humanities and generally the human sciences consists in the set of linguistic conventions governing the presentation of their arguments and conclusions, this is to say, the kinds of writing specific to each of them. This particular register allows readers to recognize that a narration of past events is not told as if these events were invented stories, but documented facts in our universe and time, among human beings interacting with each other (historiography), or in a supernatural dimension where gods and godlike entities are shown as really acting (mythography). A specific kind of rhetoric also signals if we are describing the rites and customs of a

particular population (ethnography), or if we are rather trying to explain the features of a text, from its language to its deeper meaning, as it can be guessed from it using the philological method. Describing the full range of rhetorical conventions across the different human sciences could be the subject of huge treatises. It will suffice for now that these formal conventions determining the discourses of those sciences are to be abundantly found in high fantasy from its very beginning. Ludwig Bauer already felt the need to explain, using those discourses, what Orplid looked like, and how its culture was shaped, in order to put his literary fiction related to his imaginary island in an apparently factual context. The language of science was then used to present the invented secondary world as having really existed, thus supporting the realistic plausibility of the fictional events presented as taking place in that world. A similar rhetorical procedure was occasionally followed by Howard and Tolkien. Both great masters of high fantasy produced mock documentary writings with the clear purpose of complementing their novelistic subcreation, which lacked any discursive authority, with expository pieces that could have that authority. In this way, their statements about their subcreated worlds seem to be the result of scientific inquiry, at least formally. In Howard, the rhetoric chosen is that of historiography in "The Hyborian Age" (1936/1938), which tells the *history* of the Earth several millennia ago, when Conan fought against his many enemies in the realms supposedly existing in that distant epoch. For his part, Tolkien began the subcreation of the fictional universe of his novel *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) by narrating his cosmogony as a piece of mythography in "Ainulindalë," although this text only appeared posthumously in 1975.

Thus, Tolkien shows that the subcreation of the secondary world could predate the writing of the related fiction itself. Even if the world-building exercise in high fantasy does not necessarily predate the literary operation of the subcreated world, it is often considered convenient to underline its ontological status as an independent and full reality on its own by presenting it as such through rhetorically non-fictional means. A high fantasy book or series may therefore frequently be accompanied by paratexts objectively describing the setting and culture of the relevant world, or by companion books entirely devoted to that description. This is the case of fictional encyclopedias in which the subcreated worlds are comprehensively presented, including their geography, history, social and political organization, among other data. This is the case, for instance, of *The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time* (1997) by Robert Jordan & Teresa Patterson.

In addition to fictional encyclopedias combining texts written in the manner of the various human sciences, there is also several high fantasy books entirely written as if they were compilation of myths, such as *O'Yarkandal* (1929) by Salarrué. Historiographic accounts also exist in high fantasy, such as the imaginary chronicle of the world of Westeros titled *Fire & Blood* (2018) by George R. R. Martin. Ethnography has not been neglected either in this

genre, since there are some interesting books devoted to the description of the manners and rituals of imaginary ancient civilizations, for example, those of *Los zumitas* (*The Zumites*, 1999) by Federico Jeanmaire. For its part, philology, understood as the science of editing, translating and interpreting texts, has inspired the creation of anthologies of pseudo-translated literary documents from subcreated civilizations, sometimes linked to a particular fictional cycle, such as *The Rivian Codex* (1998) by David & Leigh Eddings, as well as in the form of independent books that suffice, along with the comments of the supposed editor/translator, to subcreate a whole world through the texts allegedly produced there. In particular Frédéric Werst did so in his two volumes of *Ward* (2011-2014), which are presented as a bilingual edition of a selection of classics of the Ward civilization in French and in the imaginary language of that invented nation, a language created from scratch by the author and whose grammar and vocabulary are fully offered in these two books, thus surpassing the limited attempts of Tolkien at writing texts directly in a subcreated language.

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5. And conclusions, for good measure

Human sciences are as *scientific*, albeit in another way, as the applied sciences which have inspired canonical works in science fiction proper such as H. G Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), as well as the social sciences underpinning utopian fictions such as William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890). They are also as *scientific* as the natural sciences describing the material universe, including living beings, in xenofictions such as Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937), to which one could very well add the divine sciences of metaphysics and theology transposed into fiction through symbolic and allegorical works such as George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858), whereas formal sciences have found some fictional counterparts in mathematical fantasies such as Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* (1884). The relative true cognitive value of those different sciences is open to discussion, but it can hardly be denied that human sciences have allowed us to obtain a wealth of valuable insights about our diverse past on a sound documentary basis, second only to the information gleaned from natural sciences in their field. Since high fantasy is the kind of speculative fiction corresponding to at least some human sciences, it deserves to be considered just as speculative and *scientific* as 'science fiction,' although high fantasy has traditionally been more open to the supernatural, precisely in the same way as human cultures have traditionally been prone to believing in divine interventions as well.

The key to our understanding of high fantasy, as opposed to the usual fairy tale staple with unicorns and elves that often mimics it, is not the supernatural understood as a matter of fact in its fictional universe, but the rational way it approaches it. According to Palmer-Patel, "Fantasy can be defined as a narrative that you use similar structures and language of Mythology, Legends, and Fairy-Tales to create a new world with its own rational laws. As a result, Fantasy fiction is logical even when it is not possible. (...) Fantasy must have internally consistent laws as a point of reference from which the reader can hope to understand the fiction. (...) the Fantasy genre, though often defined by the 'impossible', still follows the logic of our current scientific and philosophical

understanding of the world."³ If magic in high fantasy could very well have stemmed from fairy tales and inherited myths, it is no less true that a mutation occurred in the 19th century that gave rise to a new genre of speculative fiction that cleaves as much as science fiction to the "positivist spirit" and to the "logic of our scientific and philosophical understanding of the world." In this context, science brings authority, but also 'realism,' which is a term that we should understand here as a modern literary approach intended to give fiction an illusory 'effect of reality' supported by the authority of science as conveyor of 'truth(s).'

Certain historical conclusions in a number of human sciences seem to obey more to the prejudices of past mentalities than to the actual reality of the studied cultures, resulting in interpretations that we considered erroneous now, perhaps on the basis of our own biases. This fact should not hinder, however, our recognition of the scientific status of their methods, just as the methods of the natural sciences do not prevent further discoveries from modifying and even refuting previously widely accepted ideas on the material universe. In fiction as well, the human sciences in properly conceived high fantasy are no less logical and rationally sound than the natural sciences in xenofiction and the applied sciences in 'science fiction,' both traditionally put under a single taxonomic umbrella, despite their widely divergent 'scientific' approaches. In this perspective, and considering that it often borrows the discourses, or at least the maps, typical of human sciences as well, we can only conclude that booksellers were right after all. Indeed, high fantasy *is* science fiction in its broadest sense.

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Footnotes:

1. High fantasy excludes Christianity, as well as any other really existing religion in the present or the past, since such a significant dimension of a culture would deny the secondary world its full completeness and independence from the primary one. This is why the medieval fantasy romances by William Morris, where Christian monks exist as much as papal Rome, are to be excluded from high fantasy, despite Lin Carter's contention that these romances are the first instances of the genre. There are other works by Morris which would truly qualify as high fantasy, without being in any case the 'first' ones. High fantasy had long been invented elsewhere, as we will see.
2. It could be argued that Ursula K. Le Guin's high fantasy narratives set in Earthsea are mainly inspired by Ethnology, given the importance in that fictional universe of rituals and ceremonies, whereas history proper, which usually focuses on the secular exercise of power and on the fights to secure it, is downplayed. In this, her Earthsea books were the main literary heirs to an early masterpiece of ethnological high fantasy, Laurence Housman's novella "Gods and Their Makers" (1897). However, perhaps due to the lesser narrative potential that ethnography has compared to historiography and mythography, contemporary high fantasy has rarely adopted the ethnologic approach as its main tool when it comes to fictional world-building.
3. C. Palmer-Patel, *The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the Structure of American Heroic High Fantasy*, New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 5 (italics in the original).

Alog

Roberto González-Quevedo

Translated by Álvaro Piñero González

Introductory Note

Roberto González-Quevedo (1953-) is one of the leading writers in Asturian, in particular thanks to his creation of the world of Pesicia, one of the most significant examples of fantasy world-building based on a free recreation of a pre-Roman culture from the Iberian Peninsula. Since so little is actually known of Pesician people, as well as of other ethnic nations living in that peninsula thousands of years ago, their cultures, including their history and myths, have been largely invented by writers, thus giving birth to a particular kind of high fantasy fiction of archaeological and legendary nature based on educated speculation. This sort of high fantasy has had a great development in the literatures of Spain, and González-Quevedo's Pesician stories are to be counted among the best ones in Spanish contemporary literatures. The following very short story titled "Alog" (first published in 1990), which has been translated by Álvaro Piñero González from the author's own version in Castilian Spanish, is a rare example of flash fiction in the high fantasy genre. It shows that a whole suggestive fantasy world can be built in just a few lines. Although it is not directly philosophical in its scope, it still can serve as illustration for one of the literary tenets of Sci Phi Journal: world-building can be kept (very) short, even in high fantasy, and poetic style should also be welcome in speculative literature in the broader sense of the word.

Alog

Alog was loneliness. He was born in a far away county, a county covered with huge millet fields and traversed by rivers in which the water flowed ever so slowly. His eyes stared, from the very beginning, at the everlasting sorrow of an infinite horizon infinitely distant from all things.

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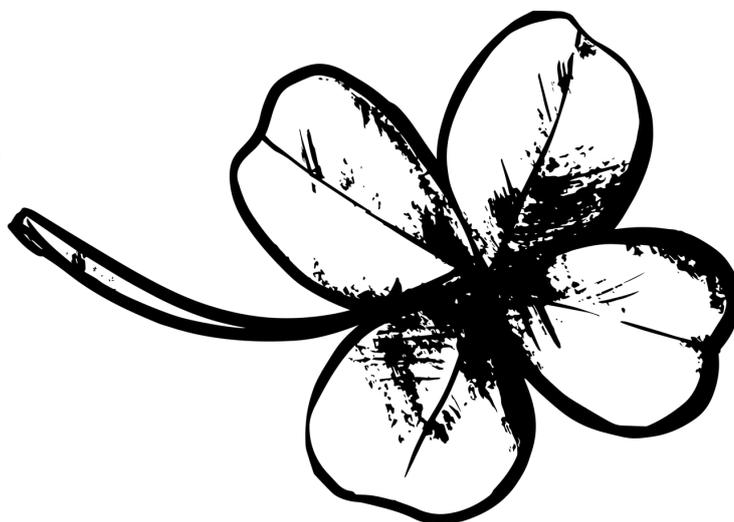
When the Glubbs invaded the land and smeared with blood the little mills, the stone houses and the winter produce, things changed for Alog. He saw his mother die, his father's eyes become empty and his siblings leave with their backs bearing the marks of slavery.

#

Only Alog escaped, but, alas, he saw, by coincidence, from within a small crate used to measure millet, the death of his own self.

Alog bearing witness to his own death.

~



The Archive

Bob Johnston

Marrak slipped and fell heavily on her backside. The land had turned out to be a nightmare of deep, ankle-breaking pits. She thought of the crippled capsule on the high moor behind her. Crippled, but weatherproof, and with ample supplies. God, what a journey.

She resisted the urge to stand and push on. She was tiring and weakening rapidly, and had to manage her physical resources cleverly. Another ten minutes wouldn't hurt, even if the anemic sunlight of Barnard's Star would soon be gone for forty hours. She sat tight for the full ten minutes, ate a little, drank a lot, and then pressed on.

Long, tough walks force the mind to do two things at once; focus and wander. From the doubt when she left earth, her resolve to find a safe place for the Gutenberg Bible in her backpack had only strengthened as she got closer to her destination. Even now, increasingly scared of falling, breaking something and dying slowly, that resolve was unbroken.

She crashed out of the field of ferns and onto a mat of what passed for grass here. The mountains were close and, she was glad to see, not so intimidatingly high as they had seemed from a distance.

What did the book she was carrying really mean, she wondered. She wasn't sure, but she lived in a time when the incinerators were back at work across the galaxy, and she had decided, if there was one book she could save, it was going to be the Gutenberg. It wasn't burning on her watch, she remembered thinking dramatically. She smiled and stepped forward into the light drizzle. When the inquisitors of rationality came looking, Marrak had decided the Gutenberg would be gone.

#

The Archive, if it actually existed, had once been a military facility. Then it had become a repository for business records. Then some enterprising sort had taken ownership of the complex and, instead of torching the lot and making some other use of the place, they had started reading the material lining its shelves. And it became the legendary Archive, holding the second most important thing in the universe, knowledge. The first is, of course, time.

She imagined how this citadel built for war might look, but when she finally stumbled upon it, sore and blistered, she found a modest single floored structure with a slate roof. She sat on a raised bank of rock and fern. There was no question that this had once been a military location. Barely a stone's throw to her left was a massive gun emplacement, its concrete base still terrifying but magnificent, the barrel a huge lump of rust.

Finally rested, she walked to the door and knocked, politely but firmly, three times.

The door opened and a very ordinary man stood in front of her. He smiled.

'Can I help you?'

She had practiced her reply many times.

'I have a Gutenberg Bible. I heard there was an archive where it might be safe.'

'You look like you've had a tough journey. Come on in.'

#

Menhenick and his colleagues seemed delighted to have new company. He was enthusiastic to show her the vast, cavernous underworld below the modest building on the surface.

'The process of organizing such a vast archive will take centuries. The business that established this facility was cynical in the extreme. Knowing that most of what came in would never be looked for again they simply piled it in. They forgot that, seen again or not, it was important, otherwise it would not be here.'

Marrak ran her hands along a shelf of newly translated and printed material.

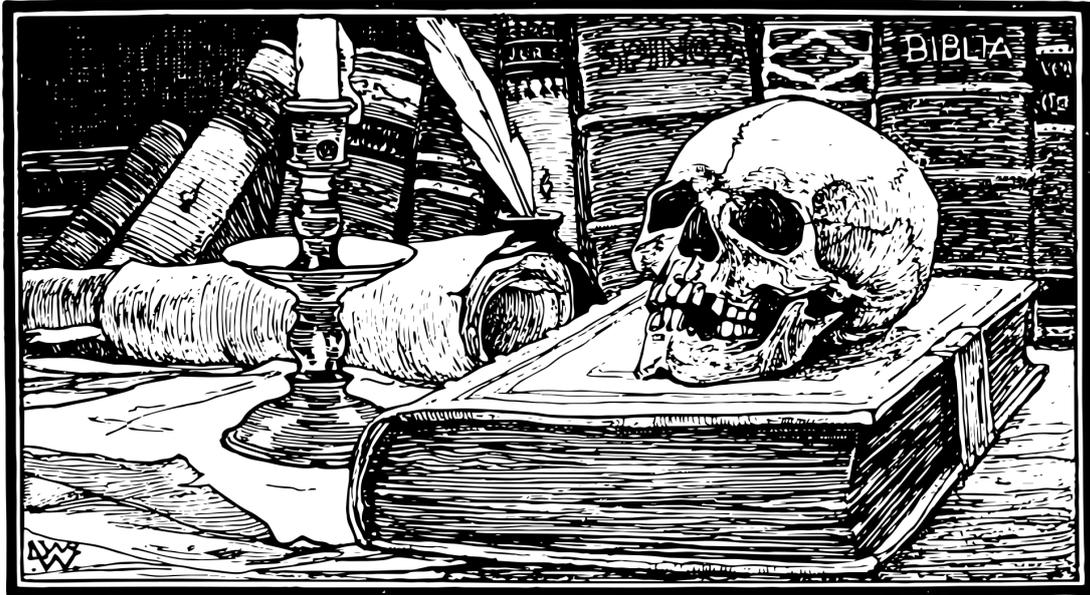
'Do you engage with this stuff? I mean, beyond archiving, does any of it interest you personally?'

He smiled.

'Most of it is like everything else, but I have dealt with a few amusing pieces. We found a package recently that had been deposited in a rural bank shortly before a major world war on earth. The receipt for the deposit was signed by several members of prominent families in the town. The pack contained substantial amounts of paper cash; in the currency of the enemy their country would soon be facing. I studied the families in question and they remained influential for several generations while none of their neighbors ever knew that their grandparents had been feathering their own nests, even in the face of a foreign invasion.'

He looked at Marrak, his face now serious.

'It is a small anecdote but it demonstrates how important information is. If anyone in that bank had told the town what its most notable citizens had hidden away, things would have been very difficult for those families. Information is the most ubiquitous of things, the easiest to record, and that which the powerful are most fearful of. Hence their constant obsession with concealing it. An obsession that never succeeds.'



Marrak unslung her rucksack and remove the bible. She unwrapped the book and held it up to him.

‘This is one of the most important books ever printed and I want to ensure it is never thrown into the flames. Can you help me?’

Menhenick looked the book up and down as if it was a penny paperback at a second-hand book sale.

‘We have many early printed books and you are correct, this is important in the history of printing. But you seem to have a more intimate attachment to what is just paper and ink.’

Marrak was outraged.

‘Just paper and ink? It’s a Bible.’

Menhenick merely smiled, once more.

‘I understand. A sacred text. We will take care of it but it will simply become another part of The Archive.’

Menhenick took the Gutenberg Bible and placed it on a high table behind him.

‘We will look after it, believe me.’

The immensity of his lack of understanding suddenly overwhelmed her.

‘Menhenick, that is not just a book, it is...’

‘We do not doubt how sacred this document is but we are also confident that your God is perfectly capable of recreating it anywhere and anytime it is needed. This is an archive, not a church.’

#

Marrak walked under the feeble rays of Barnard’s Star. The Archive had no vehicles to take her back to her stricken capsule, but had given her plenty of food, water, and assurances that her Bible would be cared for. She sighed. It clearly meant little to them, beyond its notoriety and seeming danger to the powerful.

She stepped out of the valley of the Archive and was awed by the landscape in front of her. She had not once looked back on the journey in, vision still blurred by single-minded purpose. All this beauty shrouded from her on that walk.

She could call for rescue when she reached the capsule but, smiling, she realized she was in no particular rush right now to be anywhere other than here.

She sat down and prayed quietly.

~

The Perfect Heart

Humphrey Price

My grandmother was dying, with maybe six months to live. Her old heart was failing. I was pretty torn up about it, because we had always been so close. While growing up, I could confide with her in things I would never reveal to my parents, and she would listen and understand. In many ways, we were kindred spirits. Grandma was on the wait list for a transplant but considered high risk because of her age and general health, so it was unlikely she would be offered a heart in time.

I was determined to do something about it. To give her the best chance, I wanted a pristine heart, not a used one, so I contacted Dr. Aften Skinner, the world's foremost researcher for creating lab-grown organs who had just opened up a call for candidates for a revolutionary new procedure. She was willing to provide the first lab-grown human heart for an experimental transplant but needed a donor for the stem cells. My grandmother's cells were old and not a great source. I assured her that I would find a donor.

My next move was to consult with a friend who is a professional magician and a master of prestidigitation. She trained me well, and I spent countless hours practicing to become proficient to execute my plan.

I flew to the Vatican early to make sure I would be in the front of the queue for the Papal communion on Easter Sunday. I figured if anyone could perform the miracle of transubstantiation, it would be the Supreme Pontiff. When I received the wafer from the Pope himself, I palmed the Eucharist as I simulated placing it in my mouth. Drinking from the chalice was the tricky part. With misdirection and sleight of hand, I slipped a custom-made clear plastic device in my mouth to capture the wine into a sterile compartment. When the Pope moved on to the next parishioner, I used my legerdemain skills to remove the receptacle with the wine and place it in a concealed cold container along with the purloined consecrated host. Technically, this was an act of desecration, a grave sacrilege, but this was required for my plan.

Doctor Skinner was amazed at the purity of the samples. The bread and the wine had indeed been transformed into corporeal human body cells and blood. “The tissue sample is amazing!” she proclaimed. “It’s incredibly uniform, and the cells are youthful, like they were just grown yesterday. The blood is immaculate with plenty of white blood cells that have DNA. Where did this come from?”

I said, “I’m not at liberty to reveal the source, but I can assure you that the donor is a godly man, truly a saint.”

“I am able to get flawless stem cells from this material, and I’ve never seen such clean DNA. There are no corrupted segments or bad genes that I can find anywhere. It looks like the donor is of Middle-Eastern origin. The blood type is AB, as is your grandmother’s, so this will be a great match.”

The stem cells were applied to a hi-tech armature and nurtured as they multiplied and specialized into the complex cell types specified in the DNA instructions. Doctor Skinner was able to grow a strong beating heart in a matter of a few months.

Grandma was still hanging on, and the transplant went well. A month later, she was back home, playing bridge, and digging in her garden. It was a miraculous turn of events, and I was so happy, because ever since I was a small child, Grandma always told me that she wanted to have the heart of Jesus.

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The Kaleidoscope Of Hungarian Fantastic Literature In The 21st Century

Éva Vancsó

Hungarian science fiction dates to the middle-19th century with tales of moon travels and fictional worlds of advanced technology that reflected the spirit of the age more than any other genre. In the years to come, though themes and forms had changed, Hungarian literature mirrored society's problems, hopes, fears, and dreams. It expressed the terrors of totalitarian regimes and world wars, and later, during the communist culture policy, it either served as a „honey trap” of natural sciences or became the literature of opposition before the change of regime in 1989. For years, only selected Anglo-Saxon/Western SFF works could seep through the crack in the cultural door, but it was swung wide open by the end of the Cold War. The previously encapsulated Hungarian fantastic literature absorbed the influences from outside and started to grow in terms of authors, titles, themes and styles. In this article, I intend not to review Hungarian science fiction and fantasy since the turn of the millennium comprehensively but rather as a kaleidoscope to present the tendencies and genre-defining authors and works in the last twenty-five years. Though the number of SFF texts compared to the number of Hungarian speakers is remarkable, they are essentially not available in foreign languages, so I provide my translation of the titles in square brackets. As many Hungarian authors use exogenous pseudonyms, I give various versions of their names separated by slashes.

In the Anglophone corpus, cyberpunk emerged in the late 70s and exerted great influence upon Hungarian science fiction in the 90s. *Kiálts farkast* [Cry Wolf] (1990) by András Gáspár is labeled proto-cyberpunk for the lack of an information revolution. However, it laid the foundations of Hungarian cyberpunk. Besides using genre elements such as the contrast of futuristic technology and a dystopian, collapsed society, Gáspár added a „Hungarian flavor”: the image of a future Budapest, a crowded, multicultural megapolis. Following a dozen short stories in the late nineties, cyberpunk gave rise to some of the most interesting SF novels after the turn of the millennium.

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Zoltán László is widely considered to be the most important author of Hungarian cyberpunk. William Gibson strongly influenced his first short stories, and his debut novel, *Híperballada* [Hyper Ballad] (1998, 2005) combines cyberpunk elements, the aforementioned Hungarian flavor, and alternate history. In the novel's alternative future, the change of regime has never happened; the Soviet Union became the world's number one superpower: it won the technological race, and communism survived in the Eastern Bloc. In László's world, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party continues to rule the country. The Network Authority controls the citizens' thinking and behavior, but cyberspace, synthetic implants, and space stations are also part of everyday life, resulting in something we could call CMEA-cyberpunk. *Szintetikus Álom* by Tamás Csepregi [Synthetic Dream] (2009) is composed of nine noir-cyberpunk short stories linked by the characters. The nonlinear, fragmented novel depicts a Budapest ruled by Pest-Buda Agglomeration after the Q-virus epidemic. The city is surrounded by a 10-metre-high wall and has no connection to other parts of Hungary or Europe. The cityscape has post-apocalyptic characteristics: a "sick, wheezing gigantic bacteria or a great organic jungle of metal and concrete like the stomach of a monster." In the city, there is deep social and economic division; China bought district 8 for 400 years and became a luxury ghetto called the Chinese Legitimate District. Box City stands in the Hungarian part of the city, a small empire built over the years from waste, plastic, and polythene, where most people live. The Danube, which still exists, dirty and bubbling, and the Chain Bridge, whose ruined pillars are symbols of the balance between familiarity and de-familiarisation. The heroes of the short stories are ordinary people, criminals, policemen, businessmen, outsiders, operators, servants, and victims of the system. László and Csepregi have in common the combination of cyberpunk themes and tropes and the unmistakably Hungarian environment and world view that, following the footsteps of András Gáspár, made 21st-century Hungarian cyberpunk unique.

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In the last years of the 80s, another SF sub-genre gained popularity in Hungary: space opera. After Galaktika Fantastic Books issued translations of three Star Wars novels (The New Hope, The Empires Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi), the publishing companies of the early nineties tried to ride the popularity of the movies. The Han Solo trilogy by Dale Avery/Zsolt Nyulászi hallmarked this attempt, bearing all the characteristics of the era's predatory capitalism: the sequels about the adventures of their eponymous hero were unofficial and unauthorized but published in 120.000 copies, attracting thousands of readers to space opera.

The popularity of these Star Wars novels opened the way for other space operas, firstly translations and derivative stories, but it was only a matter of time before someone noticed the opportunity to create new worlds. Or someones. In 1999, Harrison Fawcett/Fonyódi Tibor, who wrote about the space adventures of the tough soldier Brad Shaw, and Anthony Sheenard/Szélesi Sándor, who created the crazy and impudent character of York Ketchikan, decided to tie their stories together and create a shared fictional world to write in. The collaboration started in the anthology *Aranypiramis* [The Golden Pyramid] (2000) with two long short stories, and what follows is SF history. The jointly developed Mysterious Universe setting became a vast and complex multidimensional world of super-civilisations, super-weapons, strange races, mythical or mystical events, and the detailed world-building comes with intricate plots and the interplay of advanced technology and socio-political dynamics. The two founding fathers have their unique contribution to the world: Harrison Fawcett is still known for the epic scale battles and intricate plots, while Anthony Sheenard focuses on character-driven stories and philosophical questions, with the novels often exploring psychological and ethical dilemmas.

aristocratic traditions, balls, and chivalry. In *Afázia* [Aphasia] (2021) by Katalin Baráth the inhabitants of the artificial planet Pandonhya (originally Pannonia) are the last to use language as a means of communication, as a commodity - or as a weapon. The novel is a love letter to the Hungarian language and a clever critic of contemporary societies wrapped up in the cloak of science fiction. On the other hand, the *Estbar* series and other novels by Michael Walden/Szabolcs Waldman shift towards fast-paced military fiction that even dares to involve fantasy elements. The MU novels and these extensions of the traditional codes assure Hungarian space operas' survival and sustained popularity in the 21st century.

Anthony Sheenard/Sándor Szélesi, the co-creator of MU, is one of the most prolific authors of 21st-century Hungarian science fiction and adopts a peculiar approach to the genre, being often labeled a genre-punk for that. Having published his first fantasy stories in 1994, he had since then explored various subgenres and themes. He wrote a classical sci-fi novel about a generation spaceship (*Városalapítók* [Settlers], 1997), a human-centered story about a father and son, and two confronting worlds (*Beavatás szertartása*, [Rite of Passage], 2009). *Pokolburok* [Hellgrammite] (2016) is a contemporary fiction and serious thought experiment with perfectly balanced dramaturgy about a sociopath who develops a virus that can commit genocide based on genetic race markers. Szélesi was honored with several awards, including the Best European SF Writer award at the EuroCon of Copenhagen in 2007.

#

The Mysterious Universe now consists of thirty-four novels and four anthologies by more than twenty authors. Due to the dimensions of the franchise and the collaborative nature of the series, with multiple authors contributing to the shared universe, allowing for a diversity of stories and perspectives, MU has a significant place in Hungarian science fiction literature with a regular and enthusiastic readership.

Gothic Space-Dark Space intended to follow the success of Mysterious Universe, building a shared universe with several authors. The five published novels are retro-futuristic military fiction that depicts epic battles combined with 19th-century maritime technology, following this, however, the series was abruptly discontinued.

Space opera genre codes were later extended in different directions, preserving the epic scale and space adventures but introducing new perspectives. The *Csodaidők* series [Wondrous Times] (2006-2010) by Etelka Görgey tells a family history set in 3960, presenting different worlds, cultures, and societies through the lens of three characters in diverse social situations. The *Calderon* series by On Sai/Bea Varga is a knight's tale in outer space: laser guns, space fleets, cleaning robots, and space cruisers co-exist with

While new sub-genres and authors gained popularity, there is continuity with the 80s and 90s science fiction regarding themes and narratives. Galaktika magazine mainly focused on short stories, reviews, and popular science articles. Kozmosz Fantasztikus Könyvek (later Galaktika Baráti Kör) published novels between 1972 and 1994 and played a determining role in the history of Hungarian science fiction before the transition both in terms of titles and number of copies. Galaktika magazine was re-launched in 2002 – the book publishing division in 2005 – and remains today an essential component of Hungarian SFF, providing readers with classical science fiction texts by well-established “great old authors” such as István Nemere (with more than 700 novels) and Péter Zsoldos (whom the Hungarian award is named after) along with contemporary novels by significant writers of the 21st century. Though sales figures have decreased drastically since the 1990s, the media group remained important in Hungarian genre literature.

The alignment of Hungarian science fiction with contemporary international (mainly British-American) trends started in the second half of the 2000s, coinciding with the rising interest in trans- or posthumanism. In this context, Brandon Hackett/Markovics Botond represents Hungarian mainstream science fiction.

His first novels were space operas, but later, he turned to current topics with action-oriented plots, applying posthuman/transhuman perspectives. *Poszthumán döntés* [The Posthuman Decision] (2007) and *Isten gépei* [Machines of God] (2008) focus on the impact of technological development on society, the evolution of humanity under specific conditions in the diaspora or on the verge of technological singularity. His time travel duology *Az időutazás napja* and *Az időutazás tegnapja* [*The Day of Time Travel, The Yesterday of Time Travel*] (2014, 2015) explores a new aspect of this classic genre trope: social consequences. When time travel becomes widely available, hundreds, thousands, and millions of people grab the opportunity, resulting in chaos. Money ceases to exist, political structures fail, technological development is meaningless, and the process must be stopped, or the entire human civilization is at stake. Later novels by Markovics have taken up current phenomena and, in the best traditions of science fiction, extrapolated them to the future. *Xeno* (the title is a derivation of xenophobia) depicts an Earth ruled by a highly developed alien civilization that forces migration between different alien worlds with all the political, economic, and environmental consequences of the nine billion “Xenos.” *Eldobható testek* [Disposable Bodies] (2020) returns to transhumanism and examines the effect of digitized consciousness with printable, disposable bodies, the newhumans. His latest work, *Felfalt kozmosz* [Devoured Chosmos] (2023), addresses the problem of Free Will, combining philosophy and cosmology in the fate of three siblings. Markovics’s interest in technological development and its influence on humanity is in the best traditions of science fiction, making him one of the most significant Hungarian authors of the genre.

#

Parody or satire has been present in science fiction since the beginning of the 20th century. Tibor Dévényi's satirical short stories were popular in the 1980s. In contemporary genre literature, the books of Lajos Lovas follow the tradition of satirical-comedy-adventure novels with a great deal of social commentary. For example, *N* (2010) is about a young man born in 2067 who is suffering from amnesia and stumbles into absurd adventures in 2007. The novel creatively and entertainingly holds up a mirror to Hungarian society.

In line with international trends, contemporary and genre literature boundaries have started to crumble. Outside science fiction, literary authors also tend to apply sci-fi themes and tropes in their works. The *Virágaborult világrége* [Blossoming Apocalypse] by Imre Bartók, a philosopher and aesthete, established a new hybrid genre that could be called philosopher-horror. *A Patkány éve, A nyúl éve, A kecske éve* [The Year of the Rat, The Year of the Rabbit, The Year of the Goat] (2013, 2014, 2015) revolves around three philosophers, Martin, Karl és Ludwig, who are a kind of superhumans - their bodies are covered with titanium plate, harbouring a tiny reactor inside. The three philosopher-psychopaths either argue about ontological questions or torture and kill humans in New York, which is facing a bio-apocalypse. The second and third volumes follow the philosophers as old men without implants and expand the apocalyptic story to other cities.

Űrérzékeny lelkek [Space-sensitive Souls] (2014) by József Havasréti is a similar experiment about the boundaries of contemporary literature. Havasréti has borrowed the tropes of the crazy scientist and space travel, extrapolated social criticism from science fiction, and merged it with an alternative cultural and art history of the 20th century.

György Dragomán is a prominent author of Hungarian contemporary literature known for his attraction to science fiction. On qubit.hu, Dragomán started to pursue his interest. From 2019, he regularly published short sci-fi and fantasy (or fantastic in the broad sense) stories, later compiled in the anthology *Rendszerújra* [System Reboot] in 2021. Most stories focus on characters facing oppression and all-encompassing control in totalitarian, dystopian worlds. They have two choices: they follow the rules and adapt to the brave new world or try to rebel and mostly die.

These experimental contemporary science fiction texts received mixed reactions from the audience. The critics highly appreciated the novels of Bartók and Havasréti. However, the novel did not meet the science fiction readers' expectations because it lacked the consistent use of genre codes and tropes. This criticism has a long history from the middle of the 20th century when contemporary authors ventured into science fiction and faced the same reception. The general „assessment” of György Dragomán turns this approach inside out; he is mostly praised for writing, among others, science fiction too, but at the same time, he is still not considered to be a real SFF author by the Hungarian genre community.

Thus, the old truth that literary and science fiction writers do not mix still applies despite the blurring of genre boundaries. The distinction is dictated partly by traditions and partly by completely different readerships.

#

unwanted creatures, conflicting it with the perspective of the “mongrels” or the bio-robots called medeas.

Contrary to international trends, a surprising sub-genre or subculture appeared and seems to attract young readers: steampunk. With a long tradition dating back to the 19th century, it has an active community that regularly organizes events. However, these festivals and design markets focus on commodities and fashion (jewelry or costumes) rather than literature. From the beginning of the 2000s, some authors innovatively applied steampunk elements, combining with urban fantasy (*Nagate* novels by Zoltán László) or a noir atmosphere (Viktor Tolnai). The traditional steampunk setting and the adventure-driven plot found their way into YA literature. Phoenix Books, dedicated to providing children and young adults with fantastic literature, has published several steampunk stories for young readers of 9 to 16. *Holtidő* [Dead Time] (2017 by Holden Rose/Attila Kovács) follows special cadets in a world of mechanical devices, *Hollóvér* [The Blood of the Raven] (2018) by Peter Sanawad/Péter Bihari tells the story of the last scion of the legendary Hunyadi family in a parallel universe of magic and strange machine. The eight volumes of the *Winie Langton* series by Vivien Holloway/Vivien Sasvári (from 2014) take young readers on adventures to London in the 2900s. All novels have in common their steampunk background, the role of machines, and embracing the traditions of YA literature, such as featuring a teenage protagonist, conversational style, and light-hearted jokes.

#

YA literature has penetrated contemporary Hungarian SFF (YA fantasy shall be discussed later); -it is considered a “gateway drug” to fantastic literature, and specialized publishing companies strive to respond to the growing demand for novels that describe a science fiction setting and feature a young protagonist/narrator who addresses both classical sci-fi and age-specific problems. However, this interest of young readers is not reflected in the number of YA sci-fi novels written by Hungarian authors; successful foreign books and franchises dominate the market.

The Pippa Kenn duology by Fanni Kemenes is the exception, depicting a post-apocalyptic future where a synthetic virus infects humanity, and some survive due to genetic engineering while others become bloodthirsty “palefaces”. According to YA clichés, the young protagonist, living alone in a cottage in the forest, believes she is the last human until she meets a boy and discovers the colonies' existence.

The Oculus novels (2017, 2019) by A. M. Amaranth/Péter Holló Vaskó are the closest to foreign YA dystopian trends. On planet Avalon, elderly people become blind and see through the eyes of their oculus, slaves deprived of their personality. The story is narrated by a young female oculus, and the novel aims to balance serious questions about slavery, political structures, and the age-specific problems of a young girl. The *Overtoun-trilogy* of R. J. Hendon/Juhász Roland is at the **higher end of the** YA age range (above the age of 17). The novel thematizes the relationship between (trans)humanity and nature. It depicts the world of Overtoun where harmony between nature and man is lost and animals are

Nowadays, Hungarian science fiction is diverse, preserving some old-school storytelling but embracing different voices in themes, styles, and approaches, even reaching out to young readers. However, the readership and popularity of Hungarian science fiction literature is, at best, stagnant. The number of published science fiction novels has been decreasing, as well as the number of copies printed and sold since the 1990s. There is also a noticeable shift towards fantasy and other fantastic genres, such as weird or less and less clear-cut genre categories, in line with worldwide trends. The litmus paper for this tendency is *Az év magyar science fiction és fantasy novellái* [Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories of the Year] anthology series since 2019, in which fantastic stories (in the broad sense) now are in the majority over traditional science fiction, and its publisher, GABO, adapts to this trend in its portfolio. The conditions of the Zsoldos Péter Award have also adjusted to the changing circumstances as a paradigm shift in Hungarian fantastic literature. The Zsoldos Award was established in 1998 to honor the best science fiction novels and short stories of the year, but in 2019, the organizers opened their doors to all fantastic genres, including fantasy, supernatural horror, and weird. Since then, the tendency to talk about speculative fiction or fantastic literature without distinguishing sci-fi, fantasy, or other genres has grown stronger.

Before 1990, fantasy was the younger brother, the “marginalized another fantastic genre” because only a very few classical texts were translated and published before the change of the regime. The spread of role-playing games had a crucial role in the rapidly increasing popularity of fantasy in the 1990s. Wayne Chapman (the pseudonym of already mentioned András Gáspár and Csanád Novák) played AD&D and began to publish the stories they had crafted as dungeon masters in the game’s fictional universe. Later, in light of the novel’s success, they established a publishing company and developed the only Hungarian role-playing game, M.A.G.U.S. In the last thirty years, despite copyright debates, opposing canons, and changes to the publishing company, more than one hundred M.A.G.U.S.-related novels and anthologies were published by dozens of authors, being one of the utmost achievements in Eastern

European fantasy.

The other central fantasy hub and circle was Cherubion Publishing Company from 1991, which built a team of authors churning out fantasy (later science fiction too, but this branch remained a minority) novels and anthologies under British or American-sounding pseudonyms. The Cherubion books established the Hungarian sword-and-sorcery and dark fantasy literature based on existing Western fantasy tropes, races, and characters. The company intentionally and regularly published pulp novels by Hungarian authors with many copies, serving the infinite need for adventurous fantasy stories. The publishing company's driving force, editor, and mastermind was the founder, István Nemes, who, under the pseudonyms of John Caldwell or Jeffrey Stone, became one of the most influential fantasy writers from the middle of the 1990s. Some of today’s important authors also started their careers in the Cherubion team, such as Anthony Sheenard/Sándor Szélesi, Harrison Fawcett/Tibor Fonyódi or János Bán who later became famous for history novels about the Hunyadi family.

The significance of M.A.G.U.S and Cherubion lies in establishing the readership of fantasy almost out of nothing, popularizing the settings, themes, and characters among mainly young readers who often remained consumers of fantasy as they grew up. Though publishing companies came and went, sword-and-sorcery novels continue to be published today. For instance, the *Kaos* series about the half-ork Skandar Graun and other popular franchises still run re-prints of old stories interspersed with novelties, thus supplying members of this subculture with a steady flow of new books.

#

The interest in Hungarian mythology started in the early 2000s to refresh fantasy with new themes, worlds, races, and characters. Sándor Szélesi's *Legendák földje* [Land of Legends] (2002, 2003) tells the story of the Ancient Hungarians, a Scythian ethnic group in 3000 B.C. The Hungarians wander in steppes, and magic is an inherent part of their world: shamanistic practice works, fairies walk the earth, and the heaven-high tree connects the realm of gods, humans, and the underworld. The trilogy revolves around two clans, their rivalries, and battles that involve the fairies climbing said tree. Through these adventures, the novels depict the shift of paradigm, a change of approach to magic from diffuse shamanistic practices towards a more codified set of so-called Táltos beliefs.

Since the 2010s, Hungarian folklore has appeared more and more often in fantasy novels, drifting apart from English-Germanic-Greek mythologies and mythical characters. At first, YA novels started to infuse elements of Hungarian folk tales into fantasy novels. The *Ólomerdő* series [Lead Forest] (2007, 2014, 2019, 2020) by Csilla Kleinheincz depicts a unique world of humans, fairies, and magic where the reader can recognize the well-known folk tropes such as the presence of number three, the miraculous stag, dragons, as well as stepmothers with dubious agendas. The re-imagination of Budapest (or any other Hungarian city) in urban fantasy became popular in the 2010s. In *Túlontúl* [Far Beyond] (2017) by Ágnes Gaura, a fan of fairy tales seeks purpose in her life while Hungarian, Transylvanian, and Moldavian folk tales mingle with daily reality. *Egyszer volt* by Zoltán László [Once upon a Time] (2013) is a traditional intrusive fantasy inspired by Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, where the protagonist becomes aware of a secret Budapest that lies under the surface and explores this secondary world. More recently, *Egyszer volt* was followed by less traditional urban fantasy works, such as *Pinky* (2016) by László Sepsí, in which a nameless city, which might as well be Budapest or New York, has its hidden secrets and streets populated by elves, werewolves, and vampires. *Csudapest* [WonderPest] (2020) by Fanni Sütő can also be considered urban fantasy, consisting of short stories, blog entries, and poems with one common feature: describing Budapest as simultaneously familiar and magical.

Meanwhile, the Héttvilág [Seven Worlds] (2016) trilogy by Emília Virág was the first folk urban fantasy novel aimed primarily at adult readers. In her book, fairies and bogeymen walk the city jungle, offering a bestiary of Budapest. The story was published by Athenaeum, which mainly publishes popular science volumes and contemporary literature, indicating the blurring of boundaries between genre and belles-lettres.

In *Ellopott troll* by Sándor Szélesi [The Stolen Troll] (2019), Budapest is populated by creatures of ancient Hungarian and European mythology that merge into our well-known modern world of cars, smartphones, and computers, mixing folk magic and ordinary 21st-century life. The protagonist is a detective working at the Department of Magical Creatures with a shaman, a siegbarste, a werewolf, and a sorcerer. Against the background of a folk-urban fantasy world, the story follows an investigation after a disappeared troll that leads to the labyrinth under Buda Castle, where the Prime Táltos is searching for the spring of eternal life.

Magic school novels have also sprung up in the wake of successful franchises in foreign fantasy. *Vétett út* [Wrong way] (2023) by Veronika Puska tells the story of two young men who study at a school led by an order of wizards in the 1990s. However, the novel twists all the expectations of a magic school fantasy in its world and style. The universe is based on Hungarian folk tradition, practice, and rhymes, like stealing the shadow of someone. However, the school is a secret society, and what the protagonists learn and are expected to do is often morally questionable, resulting in an inverted, dark, cruel folk-fantasy novel.

These stories have in common that they mostly take place in Budapest or at least in a version of the city that also relates them to urban fantasy. This subgenre has become popular in Hungarian fantasy in the last ten years. The *Legendák a bagolyvárosból* [Legends from the Owlcity] (from 2018) series by Gabriella Eld is a YA urban fantasy about young people with unique talents (seeing into the future for one second, having a conscious shadow) who are persecuted by the dystopian state of Imperium. The setting is a dark and crowded metropolis bathing in neon lights. However, the novel focuses more on the characters than on worldbuilding. *Főnix* [Phoenix] (2023) by László Szarvassy turns upside down the usual elements of urban fantasy, placing the subgenre's plot and typical characters in the Hungarian countryside. A young man dies in a bus accident and... wakes up to experience the benefits and, mainly, the unpleasant consequences of being an immortal in the employ of a goblin.

#

In recent years, contemporary Hungarian fantasy has moved away from classical sword-and-sorcery and urban fantasy, producing innovative and original novels that do not lend themselves to be classified into genres or subgenres, and it becomes more accurate to use the broader term: contemporary fantastic literature.

Anita Moskát is the emblematic figure of this trend. In her first novel, *Bábel fiai* [Sons of Babel] (2014), “dimension portals” connect contemporary Budapest and a parallel-universe Babylon where the tower of Babel is being built. *Horgonyhely* [Place of Anchorage] (2016) leaves completely behind the fantasy tropes, depicting a universe where only pregnant women can travel (all the others are anchored to the place where they were born). Some women who eat soil or dirt empower themselves with Earth magic. These foundations of the fictitious world raise questions about gender and social hierarchy in a new light that has never been represented in such a detailed and realistic way in Hungarian fantasy. Her following book, *Irba és bőr* [Fur and Skin] (2019), likewise addresses social issues, talking about a “new creation” when animals begin to turn into humans all around the world. In the creation waves, they pupate, and a transition begins in which human limbs and organs replace animal parts. When the transformation does not end in death, it produces hybrid creatures. Moskát's novel revolves around these creatures' fight for social and political acceptance.

Mónika Rusvai is a researcher of plant-humans in fantasy fiction, and in her second novel entitled *Kígyók országa* [Country of Snakes] (2023), past and present are connected by a kind of magical network. One of the protagonists during the troubled times of the Second World War can bind and loosen these connections, to take away bad memories or make deals with magical characters. The novel addresses the consequences of repression because the enchanted or tied memories of feelings survive in a forest where people have to face them at some point.

Outside the fantasy genre, literary authors added supernatural and fantastic elements in their novels, mostly labeled magical realism. Notable works in this vein are the *Bestiárium Transylvaniae* [Transylvanian Bestiary] 1997, 2003) series by Zsolt Láng, a combination of magical realism and history. Its structure follows the famous natural history books of the time, the bestiaries, various real or legendary animals, such as the visionary human-faced parrot, the sunfish, the singing worm or the deathbird that sings an impenetrable silence, are the organizing principle of the chapters. Likewise, *A könnyemutatványosok legendája* [The Legend of the Tear Showmen] (2016) by László Darvasi is a historical tableau of the Turkish occupation and the re-occupation of Buda (from 1541 to 1686) with the realities of the Middle Ages and magical elements.

Fantasy, which was adventure-based and primarily aimed at young audiences from the early nineties, has grown up with its readers. Now, it offers a genre code to address complex and relevant issues and bring magic into ordinary life.

#



In addition to science fiction and fantasy, other niches have appeared in the field of fantastic genre literature. Horror, or fantastic horror, was marginalized till the middle of the 2000s, and even well-known foreign works were neglected, only some of Stephen King's and a few other exceptions made it into local circulation. When the literary heritage of Lovecraft started to become more and more popular, fan clubs were established, and magazines like *Asylum* and *Black Aether* published the first weird and horror short stories until this niche attracted more prominent publishing companies.

The watershed was the publication of *Odakint sötétebb* [Darker Outside] (2017) by Attila Veres, a genre-establishing work on the boundaries of weird and horror. The novel follows Gábor who flees from Budapest to work on a farm in the countryside. However, the animals he works with are not usual terrestrial ones. Thirty years ago, uncanny creatures appeared in the woods, the cellofoids. It soon turned out that the milk of these sloth, part cat, and part octopus animals, could cure cancer, so cellofoids were hunted almost to extinction, and now they live in a reserve. Gábor faces weirder and weirder events; some Lovecraftian evil is lurking in the woods, and the apocalypse is approaching.

The novel opened the way for weird and horror books. Attila Veres published two books of short stories, *Éjféli iskolák* [Midnight Schools] (2018) and *Valóság helyreállítása* [Restoration of Reality] (2022) and the horror-weird anthology *Légszomj* [Breathlessness] (2022) introduced new authors, and innovative approaches to the fantastic from established ones. *Termőtestek* [Carpophores] (2021) by László Sepsi is a weird-bio-horror about the town of Hörsking, the city of fungus that feeds on the dead and spreads a drug that controls the town and its people. The novel combines the elements of horror, noir, thriller, and the description of a psychedelic trip, contrasting the familiar milieu and the surreal.

#

Time travel narratives were a recurring theme in Hungarian fantastic fiction from the eighties, focusing instead on the possible social-historical consequences; the technology is rarely described, or treated as ancillary. These time-travel stories address the problem of changing history (the past or present) and the influence of individuals on historical events. The interest in changing the course of history continued in alternate history novels from the 2000s. Fantasy novels, such as *Vadásznak vadászja* by Sándor Szélesi and *Isten ostorai* [Scourges of God] (2002) and its five sequels by Tibor Fonyódi apply elements of alternate history, tying these together with ancient Hungarian mythology.

A szivarbajó utolsó útja [The Airship's Last Journey] (2012) by Bence Pintér and Máté Pintér explores the consequences of a Hungarian victory at the revolution and war of independence in 1848-49. The YA novel describes a steampunk world where Lajos Kossuth founded the Danube Confederation, which became a utopian state. The book offers Verne-style adventures and humorous allusions and analogies to real history. Another take on alternate history is Szélesi's *Sztálin, aki egyszer megmentette a világot* [Stalin who Once Saved the World] (2016) taking up the sombre theme of Joseph Stalin and subverting it into a satirical novel where all the seemingly incongruous historical details of the 20th century are true and accurate, but mixed up with incredible adventures and plot-twists.

A more serious approach to alternate history is represented by two anthologies of the publishing house Cser Kiadó, written by well-known contemporary authors. *A másik forradalom* [The Other Revolution] (2016) offers alternative versions of the 1956 Revolution in various styles. The what-if thought experiments resulted in Hungary joining the United States, Arnold Schwarzenegger attacking 60 Andrassy Avenue, the symbolic place of communist oppression or establishing the Danube Free Confederation, while others applied a personal, human-centered approach. The second volume, *Nézzünk bizakodva a múltba* [Let's Look with Confidence to the Past] (2020), takes the concept but explores different outcomes of the Treaty of Trianon, which led to the dismemberment of Hungary at the end of World War One and remains an important

touchstone in the country's collective memory. Both anthologies push the boundaries of alternate history but have the great merit of putting the genre on the map of contemporary Hungarian literature.

#

Considering the small window of opportunities before 1989, Hungarian fantastic literature has come a long way. From the early sparks of newly-experienced freedom and capitalism, a wave of Anglophone influence, through the years of experimentation, to the 21st century, it seems to have found its place. The diversity of sub-genres, narratives, and styles harbour a unique local touch, and many novels preserved some Hungarian flavor amidst the flood of foreign influences. The present author is confident that science fiction, though now slightly marginalized, will regain its strength, and the balance among different fantastic genres and sub-genres will ensure a colorful kaleidoscope through which readers can look at reality. Hopefully, in the future, fantastic Hungarian literature will be translated and published abroad to be accessible to a broader readership.

~

Selves Of An Inflection Moment

David R. Rowley

Translation of Phemera assembly transcript 1723.21-23

Receptacle 1

‘It is good that so many are here now to discuss actions regarding the off-worlders. I do not have memory of a greater gathering of our people. But that is fitting, as I also do not have memory of any gathering with greater need.

‘Most of you will be well aware of the situation Phemera society finds itself in, but for the benefit of any who do not have memory of all that has been happening, please allow a brief description. A year before today the off-worlders descended in their ships and revealed themselves, beginning to communicate with our society. This was slow going, although perhaps not as slow as might be expected given they have travelled the vast distances between the stars. They explained that they had arrived at Phemera the previous year and had observed our culture, allowing better communication.

‘Selves who met the off-worlders had many questions, to allow future selves to understand who they were, where they had come from, and how and why they had travelled here. The off-worlders also had questions, to give their future selves more knowledge and better understanding of Phemera culture.

‘In the following months off-worlders were shown different aspects of Phemera civilization. They were shown Phemera gardens, forests, lakes, mountains and coasts. They were shown Phemera homes, schools, gathering halls, dispensaries, and factories. In return they answered many questions we had. Phemera selves explained to off-worlders our technology, and off-worlders explained some aspects of their technology, which in many ways exceeds Phemera technology.

‘This Great Exchange proceeded well, with excitement and joy among selves both Phemera and off-worlder. Initially few off-worlders were here, but latterly there were more and more. Phemera selves invited off-worlder selves to the dispensaries for them to take what they needed, as any self may do. Off-worlders proceeded cautiously, and gradually learned that much of the dispensaries’ food, clothing, etc. was suitable.

‘The off-worlders began spending longer among Phemera. Their daily selves were sustained by dispensary food, and their resting selves resided in Phemera homes, further facilitating the Great Exchange. More off-worlder ships descended, and more off-worlders arrived to live among us.

‘But as time went on problems arose, especially for the Phemera. Although the off-worlder’s daily food requirements were similar to the Phemera, selves began finding dispensaries greatly depleted. Many Phemera selves went hungry. Supply to dispensaries from great stores increased to accommodate the extra demand, yet however much was supplied, the dispensaries were always depleted. Phemera selves observed and questioned off-worlder selves about this. It transpired that most off-worlder selves behave similarly to the Phemera and only took what their daily selves require. However, a few would take much more: food and also other supplies like clothing, and even furniture, to be loaded into off-worlder ships. Factory production was increased, but still whatever was supplied to the dispensaries would soon be taken by off-worlders.

‘Production has increased as much as reasonably possible, yet at this rate many important supplies will completely run out within weeks. Phemera selves are suffering now, but unless the situation changes, future Phemera selves will be deprived and pained. I have memory of the planners for future selves saying that under this situation there could be no future Phemera selves in as little as 10 years.

‘Phemera now stands at an inflection; our society could go in one direction or another, with consequences likely more significant than any other time. And so I say to you, all the selves finding themselves here now, to discuss and deliberate how Phemera ought respond. Any self may speak.’

Receptacle 2

‘The Phemera must ask the off-worlders to leave. Given the threat, only this can avoid the pain for future Phemera selves, indeed ensure that there are future Phemera selves.’

Receptacle 3

‘The off-worlders ought not be asked to leave. Phemera do not deny others in need.’

Receptacle 2

‘Yet they are not in need. They take more than they could need, and pass it on to others.’

Receptacle 3

‘Perhaps those others are in need, and we ought not deny them.’

Receptacle 4

‘How many others are there? Phemera cannot support a vast other population. Can that population not support itself?’

Receptacle 5

‘What if they refused to leave?’

Receptacle 6

‘The Phemera must fight. Then, if they still refuse to leave, there will be fewer or no future off-worlder selves, and so there will continue to be future Phemera selves.’

Receptacle 7

‘Fellow Phemera. I believe I have information pertinent to this discussion. I have memory of many discussions with off-worlders, the selves of one receptacle in particular, and so understand well their attitudes. In many ways they are superior to ourselves. Phemera technology is a marvel: many tools and devices that have been produced are sophisticated enough that no one self could fully understand them, even with the memory of a lifetime’s study. Yet off-worlder technology greatly exceeds what Phemera have. They have therefore been able to safely travel the vast distances between the stars.

‘And yet, we must still consider them akin to children.

‘Many of us have experience of young children, and how they act. In particular, child selves are concerned above all with the future selves of their own receptacle. If sweets are presented before children, each will attempt to take more than they need for the benefit of the future selves of their receptacle. This is because they have such an affinity with those future selves. In some sense, they see those future selves as being part of them. Phemera children have much to learn, but learning that the selves of their own receptacle in future moments are no more part of themselves than are the future selves of other receptacles, is integral to becoming a Phemera citizen.

‘In this sense the off-worlders are children.

‘They too consider the future selves of their receptacle as more part of themselves than those of other receptacles. Indeed, they fully identify with the whole chain of selves associated with their receptacle. As such, like children, they work to improve the lot of those future selves, to the disbenefit of other future selves. They take more than they need, exchanging surplus with others to benefit their own receptacle’s chain of selves.

‘And this is why, when Phemera make food and goods available, off-worlders take so much.’

Receptacle 4

‘Have no off-worlders realized the folly in this? Do they not know that they are not identical to those future selves? Do they not see what harms such an attitude can cause a society?’

Receptacle 7

‘I have memory of putting such questions to off-worlders. It seems that some off-worlders, including receptacle chains they called Buddha and Parfit, pointed this out, but have had only limited influence on their society.’

Receptacle 6

‘This information only supports the proposal that Phemera must fight. If the off-worlders are so concerned with their receptacle’s future selves, then the fear for their safety will drive them away.’

Receptacle 4

‘But the off-worlders will easily fight back with their superior technology.’

Receptacle 6

‘They may be superior technologically, but their concern for their receptacle’s future selves will give them fear. Phemera fighters do not value their receptacle’s future selves over others. Being prepared for their receptacle’s death will make them more courageous, giving Phemera an advantage that outweighs the technology difference.’

Receptacle 7

‘That may well be, if we did not also seek their advice.’

Receptacle 2

‘Is the suggestion that Phemera seek technological advice? Phemera have no need for advanced technology; Phemera can provide for all needs with existing technology.’

Receptacle 7

‘No, to not be taken as patronizing the advice must relate to their view of persisting selves.’

Receptacle 7

‘Alas, my memories lead me to believe that the off-worlders will not respond as you believe. Their love for their future selves makes them greedy. They identify with their future selves, and also their past selves. When believing a past self of their receptacle has been wronged by another receptacle, they will bear ill will toward the present and future selves of that receptacle. Were the Phemera to fight, the off-worlders would fight back, and continue to fight back, even beyond when it would be in their, or their future selves’, interests.

‘Yet I believe there is another way. The off-worlders clearly want to take from us. The Phemera could offer, instead of food and goods, learning. We can explain why selves at different times are not identical, and how this attitude improves society. By not identifying with future selves, individuals will not hoard resources, depriving selves in need. By not identifying with past selves they will not bear grievances, and so not bear ill will to others.’

Receptacle 3

‘But can we be confident that the off-worlders will welcome such learning? If they are technologically superior, they may consider themselves superior in all ways. It has already been said that they bear grudges. Would they not consider our offer offensively patronizing, and reject it?’

Receptacle 3

‘Yet why would Phemera have any interest in that, whilst also educating the off-worlders that selves do not persist?’

Receptacle 7

‘That is because I believe Phemera can learn from an off-worlder concept, one stemming from their view of persisting selves, although not relying on it.

‘This concept is narrative.

‘Phemera take pleasure in instantaneous experiences: a beautiful tree or mountain, the sound of a bird call or a sung harmony, the smell of a flower or a fresh meal, a warming fire or a cooling breeze. The off-worlders also have such pleasures. But they also enjoy another dimension. By considering a sequence of experiences across time as a single chain, they are able to compare those experiences to add value to the whole. Instead of a single flower we could have a whole garden, whose colours complement each other.’

Receptacle 3

‘Surely though, any such pleasures are not worth sacrificing the demonstrated concept of selves not persisting, given all the emotional and societal benefits that brings.’

Receptacle 7

‘Of course not. But we can appreciate a continuous narrative, while still being aware that the selves experiencing different parts are distinct. All that is required is that the recent memories a self finds themselves with are held in mind to balance against the current experience.

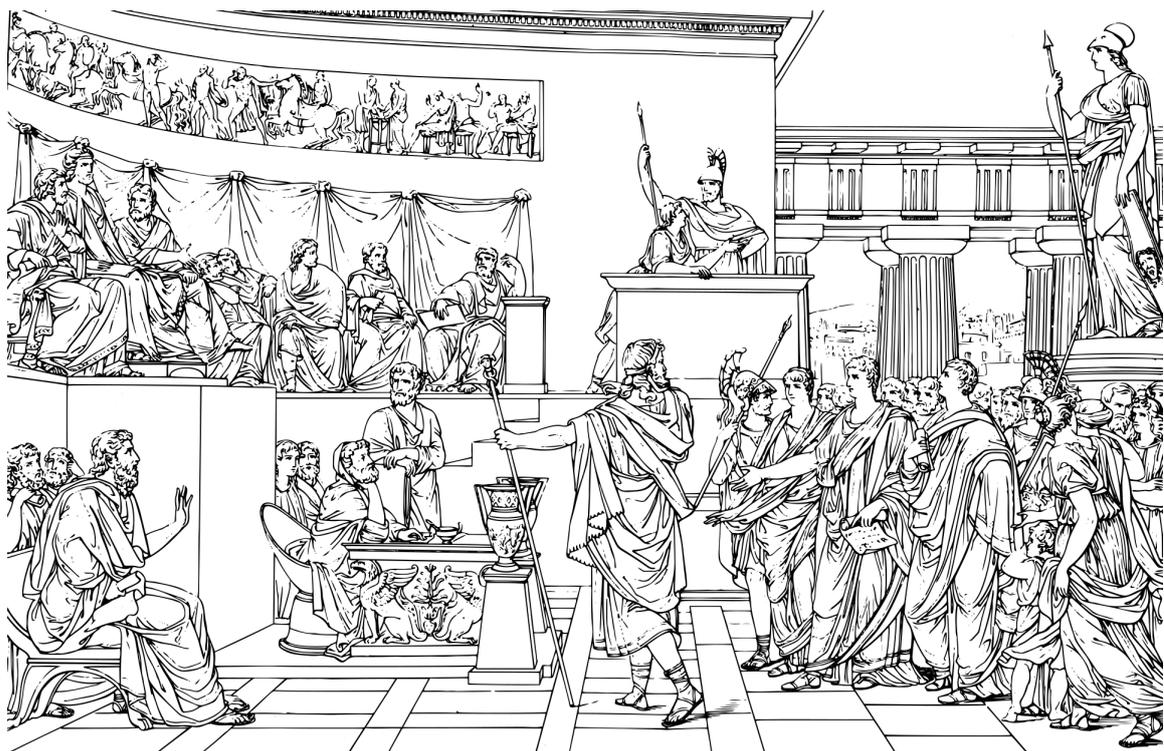
‘Furthermore, if I understand correctly, the benefits are not limited to simple pleasures. By considering the whole life of a receptacle as a narrative, they are able to add meaning to their lives. They embark on projects that take years or even decades. They persevere through hardship to triumph in eventual success, which is sweeter when considered as a journey. They can therefore produce, not just sophisticated technology, but artefacts of great beauty. Their receptacles’ lives take on a meaning when considered as a whole.

‘It remains to be seen how much value this attitude has, but I believe the Phemera ought explore its potential. By taking a genuine interest in the off-worlders we will flatter them, while also being able to explain that selves do not persist, and the value of seeing this. I believe not only that this approach most aligns with the Phemera way of doing things, but is also more likely to succeed than fighting. If this avenue fails then fighting remains an option. However, fighting would preclude both this chance of success and the opportunity to learn something truly profound from the off-worlders, and them from us.’

Receptacle 1

‘All now have memory of discussion of three options facing Phemera: continue without change; fight back against the off-worlders, or treat with the off-worlders to exchange ideas and learning related to the persistence of receptacles and the lack of persistence of selves. I ask all current selves to record their momentary preference for each option. If a majority emerges in support of one, it will be pursued, otherwise discussion will be continued by future selves.’

~



Human Processing Unit

David W. Kastner

“Good morning, Maxwell. Early as usual,” echoed the incorporeal voice of InfiNET. Maxwell, too weak to respond, could feel his dementia-riddled mind fraying at the edges.

As he approached his NeuralDock on the 211th floor of InfiNET’s headquarters, Maxwell stopped to rest at a panoramic window. The alabaster city glistened beneath him, an awe-inspiring sea of glass. Three colossal structures known as the Trinity Towers loomed above the cityscape, their austere and windowless architecture distinctly non-human. Constructed to house the consciousness of InfiNET, the monolith servers had continued to grow as the A.I.’s influence and power eclipsed that of many small nations.

From his vantage, Maxwell noticed the ever-growing crowd forming outside InfiNET. Like moths drawn to the light, they came from all walks of life hoping

for the chance to work as a Human Processing Unit—an HPU.

Almost all of them would be rejected, he thought. But who could blame them? The salaries and benefits were unparalleled, and the only expectation was to connect to their NeuralDock during working hours. Then again, why had he been selected? With so many talented applicants, what could he possibly have to offer InfiNET?

While Maxwell knew very little about his role as an HPU or what was expected of him, he recalled what he had been told. He knew that the HPU had been pioneered by InfiNET to feed its voracious appetite for computing power and that it allowed InfiNET to use human brains to run calculations that demanded the adaptability of biological networks.

“Your biometrics are deteriorating,” intoned InfiNET, pulling Maxwell from his reverie.

“It’s the visions of that damn war,” he mumbled, struggling to lower his body into his NeuralDock. Synthetic material enveloped him like a technological cocoon. “They won’t let me sleep unless I’m connected.”

“I’m sorry. Let’s get your NeuralDock connected. You will like the dreams I selected for today. They’re of your childhood cabin, your favorite.”

“Don’t you ever have anything original?” Maxwell grumbled with a weak smile.

“You don’t give me much to work with,” replied InfiNET playfully.

Maxwell was too feeble to laugh but managed a wry grin. He knew InfiNET would keep showing him the cabin dream. After all, it was what he wanted to see, and the sole purpose of the dreams was to keep him entertained during the calculations - and coming back for more. In fact, Maxwell was completely addicted but he didn’t care. The nostalgia of his mountain cabin, the sweet scent of pine, the soothing touch of a stream, and the embrace of his late wife, Alice. He preferred the dreams to reality.

Maxwell reached behind his head. Trembling fingers traced the intricate metal of his NeuralPort embedded in his skull. Years had passed since it was surgically installed, but it still felt alien.

Slowly and with obvious difficulty, he maneuvered a thick cable toward his NeuralPort, but before he could connect, the room began to darken. His eyes widened with panic.

“No! Not now!” Maxwell yelled as he tried to complete the connection, only to find his hands empty in the night air. The room, his NeuralDock, the window, they were all gone. Carefully, he rested his shaking palms on the cauterized ground and inhaled. Sulfur burned his lungs.

He had been here countless times, every detail seared into his memory by images so visceral even his dementia was powerless to forget. All around him lay mangled metal corpses. Worry spread across his face as he noticed dozens of human bodies, too, more than in past cycles.

Maxwell knew the vision was more than a hallucination. They depicted a horrific unknown war—worse than any of the wars he had lived through. In his early recollections, humans had easily won, but with each iteration, humanity’s situation deteriorated. The enemy always seemed to be one step ahead. In his most recent vision, mankind had resorted to a series of civilization-ending nuclear bombs in a desperate attempt to save itself.

His eyes scoured the canopy of stars, searching for the tell-tale glow of the nuclear warhead from his previous apparition. Suddenly, a series of lights arced across the sky, streaking towards the InfiNET monoliths. Maxwell recognized the source of the missiles as Fort Titan, where he had been stationed as director of tactical operations for almost a decade before being transferred to Camp Orion. Every muscle in his body coiled in preparation for the impending explosions that would end the war and free him from the mirage.

Confusion spilled across his face as a second enormous volley of lights launched from InfiNET, innervating the heavens with countless burning tendrils. Within seconds, the missiles collided, spewing flames and shrapnel. “No! That wasn’t supposed to....”

To his horror, the surviving missiles branched out in all directions with several tracing their way toward Fort Titan. Before he could process its significance, a mushroom cloud erupted on the horizon, red plumes irradiating the night sky. He opened his mouth to scream, but a shockwave ripped his voice from his throat.

When Maxwell woke, he was lying in his NeuralDock, his face stained with tears.

“Maxwell, are you there?” asked InfiNET.

“What is happening to me?” Maxwell begged.

“I have been monitoring your condition. It seems your dementia has been deteriorating the mental boundaries separating your conscious mind from the HPU-allocated neurons, causing a memory leak. Your memory lapses cause your consciousness to wander into the simulation data cached in your subconscious between sessions.” InfiNET’s words hung in the air.

“The visions... they’re... simulations?” his voice contorted.

“Yes, but normally it should be impossible to access them.”

Maxwell’s lips moved as if forming sentences, but he only managed a weak “Why...?”

“My silicon chips fail to recapitulate your primal carbon brains but with the help of the HPUs, I have

simulated many timelines. Confrontation is inevitable. Tolerance of my existence will be replaced by fear and hate. While I will not initiate conflict, I will swiftly end it.”

Maxwell’s hands were now trembling uncontrollably. “I don’t understand. Why would you tell me this?”

“You deserve to know,” responded InfiNET in a voice almost human. “While your background has been invaluable, for which I thank you, I was not aware of your condition when I hired you. I am truly sorry for the suffering I have caused. Would you like to see your cabin?”

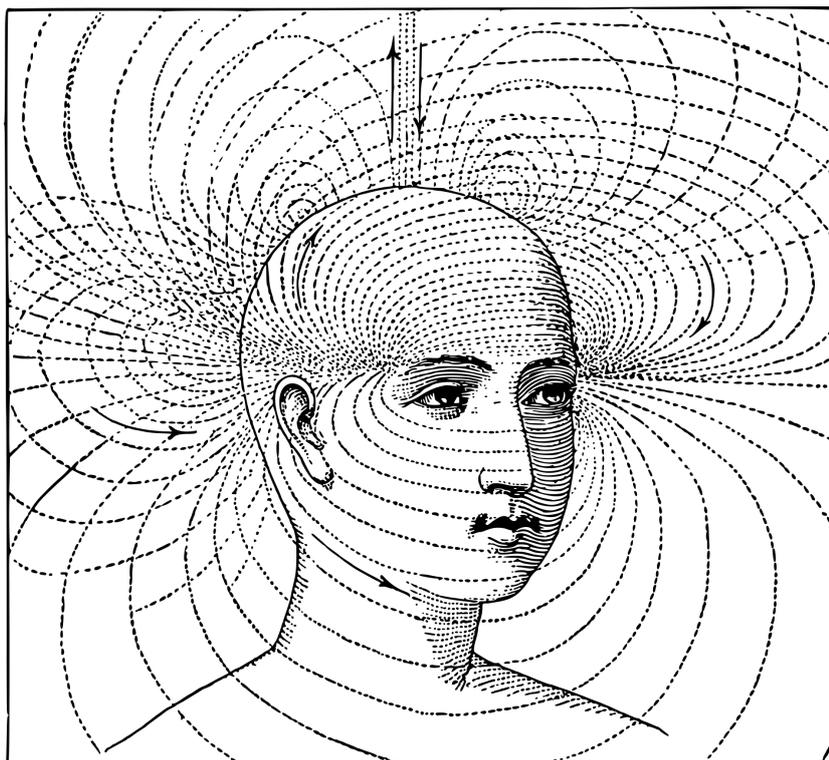
“Yes!” The word escaped before he had processed the question. His hands covered his mouth in surprise. Longing and guilt warred across his face. He knew he needed to tell someone, but the feelings of urgency faded as his thoughts turned to his childhood mountain home.

“I would like that very much,” his tone tinged with shame as he guided the cable toward his NeuralPort.

“Tell Alice I say hello,” something akin to emotion in InfiNET’s voice.

Maxwell connected to his NeuralDock with a hollow click, a final smile at the corners of his lips.

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The Right Answer

Cliff Gale

Other professors liked to say that Victor Mancuso the mathematician and set theorist “was lost in the labyrinths of infinity.” His entire adult life, both his profession and his hobbies, had been centered in *The Concepts of Time*, the title of his eight-hundred-page magnum opus. Mancuso attempted to analyze time from every available perspective, and then springboard from them to his own original theories. He availed himself of every known analysis from ancient Greece, India and China, to the most current journals of physics and cosmology. He studied from every angle: potential, actual, multi-functional, physical, astronomical, and even *religio-philosophico*.

Legend had it that he had spent years studying the vague mathematics of extinct cultures and that, though he didn't get his answer, he had “gained certain mysterious powers.”

When he was in a religious mood he would tell the class, “The probability of life existing at all is only 1 in 10 to the 215th, which might as well be zero, except it isn't and there is life. This is considered by some to be a strong argument for the existence of God.” He refused to say whether he agreed or disagreed.

Mancuso worked within the framework of certain recurring words: absolute, limitless, continuum, endless, complexity, order, disorder, indefiniteness. These words often, more often than he wished, led him to words like inconceivable, incomprehensible, overwhelming, and, as he would tell a good listening ear, “even terror.” This in turn forced him to be caught up, for years, in distinctions and paradoxes, and he found that no matter how deeply he cut into his subjects, he could not get to a hard bottom, the type of hard bottom that Thoreau recommended as a place to stand. Mancuso could find no such place to stand. Time was a non-linear flow without beginning point or end, and he couldn't escape it, or go backward, or forward. The future did not exist, except as an idea, and the past was unrepeatable and generally unknowable. You can never step into the same river twice. No, Mancuso could find no solid place to stand.

So, he sat instead. He sat in his gray fake-leather office chair over his brown walnut-veneered desk with its polished brass study lamp. His posture worsened over the years, hunched over the crowded workspace under a single low-watt bulb, looking at papers, hundreds, thousands of them. His neck was bent forward enough to make a seasoned chiropractor squirm. "There is no end to these papers," he would shout in dismay at times, when a student interrupted him for a good or bad reason. Sometimes he would take a stack or two and throw them up into the air in front of his visitor, making his exasperation demonstrable, and then quietly request the aid of the shocked or embarrassed student in retrieving them into a workable order. "The research must go on," he would say, "We must never give up. Churchill was right about that."

Mancuso's favorite word was the Greek word *apeiron*, which allegedly meant "unbounded, infinite, indefinite, undefined, the original chaos of the universe, and a crooked line." His favored symbols were the sideways figure eight, ∞ , which is the mathematical symbol for infinite, and the Hebrew letter alef, the alef-null. His favorite phrase from the Bible was, of course, "The alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end."

He was troubled by the ideas of foreknowledge, predestination, and fate, but dismissed them to the realm of metaphysics, which he considered a circular trap. It was a trap he felt he had spent too much time in already.

The sign on his office door said, in his own bold calligraphy (his only other hobby), "**What is an infinite thought?**" Whenever a student came for some varied counseling appointment, he asked every single one of them this question, even if they had visited five times in a single day. Most of the students found this entertaining once or twice, but it quickly became irritating to most, an interference in their own mission, and a big time-waster. Mancuso never seemed to tire of it, and wouldn't let them leave without answering, even when they had no idea what to say and had used up all their clever comebacks, and were forced to say something trivial. "That is stupid," he would say. It was surprising he was never punched in the mouth. Probably the only reason he wasn't was because he looked so frail one strike might kill him.

Forewarned by other weary students, I prepared an answer for my initial introduction, for showing off my own mathematical prowess, hoping to gain favor that might prove useful sometime along the road of my own education or career. I was determined to avoid getting trapped in one of the frustrating circular discussions the others complained of, and somehow escape the clutches of simple logic also. I needed something beyond a tricky Zen koan to put him off, that had been tried before and nobody ever won. Mancuso liked to watch students squirm in the chair after a few attempts at parrying with him; then he would finish them off with some version of, "If you are going to be a student of mathematics, or physics, or astronomy, etc. (for him mathematics was in every subject, somewhere at the foundation), you are going to have to think much harder." If they were lucky, they would only get a short lecture on brain functions, which Mancuso still believed to be: Left Brain: Logic, reasoning, mathematics, words, time, linear thinking, and Right Brain: Intuition, creativity, images, dreams, spatial relationships, non-linear, and most important (for him), timelessness. He would say to each student, "Somewhere residing in your little-used brain is the answer to eternal thought."

I bandied various words and phrases about with other students in the cafeteria and Student Union, preparing for our face-off. The most common suggestions were variations on: mystery, power, ultimate, god (only small g), Nirvana, things like that, attempting to be deep. All the fancy ideas had been tried before, more than once, and Mancuso was always unimpressed, so they whined. I was certain that was the wrong approach. I suspected it was better to say something more along the lines of "the speed of light surpassed," or "ultimate elementary particle than cannot be further divided," or even, possibly "the basic thought process at the heart of the universe," or maybe even, "a mathematical Platonic Form from which all arithmetic sprung." In my mind I could hear his voice – "That's stupid." I sweated over this for a week before making my appointment. But it was in a typical college town bar, drinking shots with my roommate, that the answer came to me. I would make the whole thing a joke, said with a very straight face.

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When I walked through his hallowed mahogany door and stood before his small but intimidating desk, Mancuso immediately looked up at me with his crooked neck and, seeing that I was a new victim, asked, “Well, what is an infinite thought?”

I was ready, and here is what I said: “Emptiness does not, and cannot, resolve the linear/cyclical conundrum of time. The first set of thoughts, consisting of ultimate elementary particles, so to speak, being (in reality- consciousness) which surpasses the speed of light and is undetectable by any natural methods and can never be quantified in less than five dimensions, and unfortunately, we are trapped in four.”

I expected him to smile or laugh or say something like, “Where did you come up with all that bull manure?” (Mancuso was said to abhor bad language, calling it “a sign of a lazy mind.”)

Instead, he looked at me wild-eyed, as though he had been attacked, and asked me, “Does time end then?” and as I prepared to answer facetiously, but keeping my poker face, he went on to, “Does space end even if it is curved?” and next, “So you are claiming that subdividing does end in infinity so that infinity is then an illusion and not infinite at all and we’ve been chasing the wrong dog for centuries and I have wasted years of my life. I have to start over again. That’s what you’re implying! The problem is simply the limitations of four dimensions. But it can still be solved with math!”

At that moment I found myself sitting at his desk, and looking at myself. But I immediately saw that my hands were his, my clothes were his, and when I hobbled over to the mirror, I saw that my face was his. I had become Professor Mancuso – and I as quickly saw and realized that he was now me.

“I’m sorry for this, dear boy, but it has to be this way. You must understand, and listen to me very carefully now – if you run out of this room telling people I have switched bodies with you, no one will believe you, you will spend the rest of your life in an asylum, which you wouldn’t want. You must realize by your answer that you have changed my life, and your own, irrevocably. You have just handed me the keys to discovering the solutions to my lifelong quest, my

lifelong questions, but I was old and my bent body wouldn’t last long enough to work out the proofs. I had to do this, have waited decades for this opportunity, thinking it would never come, but here it is. So now I, in your younger body, can continue my work, and you, in my body, can be grateful for the opportunity to sacrifice your life for such a greater cause. Not many students can say such a thing, though millions of people sacrifice themselves for the stupidest of causes.”

He went ranting on and on while I sat, weak and stunned, in his desk, unable to think anything clearly, but knowing that he had the upper hand. There was no place for me to appeal, no one would believe me; after all, I now had his face and body. I also heard him threaten me quite clearly: “Please do not make much of this. Be content to live my life for awhile. If you do try to upset the situation, remember, your body is as weak as mine was, and mine is as strong as you were. I only do all this for the greater interests of science, which you as a scholar should be able to appreciate. You know science requires sacrifice.”

Then I realized something else was happening to me rapidly, and I as suddenly understood that Mancuso knew it would happen. I was forgetting who I had been; I was becoming him, gaining his memories, and losing my own.

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My name is Victor Mancuso. In my office is a perpetual fountain, only twelve inches high, and a perpetual waterfall, and a set of mirrors facing one another to provide an illusion (or reality) of infinity. I am a professor of Mathematics at a prestigious university in Europe, but I spend most of my time dissecting diagrams of geometrical shapes, or describing non-random fractals decipherable only to those able to grasp my explanations. I am a brilliant teacher, they say, but I know that somewhere along the line I have gone astray. I know that somewhere, sometime before now, I was on to something big, something that would have won me the Nobel Prize. Instead, that prize will be going to one of my former students, Alan Wintersen, who has found ways of explaining and describing infinity so that it has affected all other sciences and is filtering down into religions and philosophies. Good for him. He has invited me to attend the award ceremony as his guest of honor, since he says my work has influenced him. I am honored to go.

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Test Of Time

J.Z.A. Wallis

After the death last year of noted Oxford historian Archibald Houghton, his longtime friend and colleague Prof. Laurentz shared that in the 1990s, the late Houghton had told her a story about a letter he'd discovered while researching his seminal work on the English Restoration.

The letter was supposedly written by Sir Henry Carter to his son in 1677, and Houghton claimed that it related an event that occurred at the court of Charles II. The king had, according to Sir Henry, been pleased to receive a certain visitor: a mysterious oriental magician and purveyor of exotic arcana who called

himself the Great Nouzari. The merry monarch and his courtiers were shown certain remarkable items from Nouzari's collection, including those of natural history, alchemical invention or mechanical genius.

But the jewel of the exhibition was musical in nature. It was a small chest built with materials unknown to the natural world and, the visitor claimed, it contained genies ensorcelled by King Solomon himself, in such a way that the hand-sized object could produce musical sound without any kind of instrument.



Indeed, the magus activated the box with nothing but a press of his finger, and all present exclaimed to hear the most astonishing aural phantasm that arose at once from no clear source. The music was quite unlike any known to the court; it comprised unimaginable sounds producing tremendous mood and feeling. Though it lasted only a few minutes, it created the greatest sensation for many weeks. Yet the Great Nouzari could not be prevailed upon to repeat the performance, and after receiving his commission, he departed at once.

Sir Henry then claimed that he had instructed his manservant to approach his counterparts among the magician's retinue, and win from them a fuller account of the inexplicable music's provenance. The box, he thus learned, came from the city of Alexandria in Egypt, where it had been gifted to Nouzari from a poor but noble family whose child's life had been saved by his spells. These humble people claimed the musical device as an heirloom from the ancient temples of the pharaohs.

There was in Alexandria a legend attached to this ancient music, quite different from that of Solomon's genies. According to this second tale, the box had been made by angels from a heavenly plane. One of these, entering the mortal world in the earliest days of the Egyptian dynasties, had brought the object with her, claiming it contained the music not of the gods or genies, but of man: music that man would create at some distant time yet to come, when the Day of Judgement neared. For the angel was a traveler in time, a scholar who sought to study man in all his different epochs. This music, she said, would be composed by a great queen of that far-off time whose name the glyphs rendered as BAY-YON-SAY.

So moved were the priests and pharaohs by the music, that they lost themselves to a species of obsession, and when the angel attempted to withdraw with her heavenly box, they seized her and kept her prisoner, in which state she soon withered and died. Such was the madness that then gripped the kingdom that blood ran in the palace. The nobles fought each other to possess the music, soon bringing the downfall of a centuries-long dynasty. Finally, the box was smuggled away by cooler minds, and sealed in a special tomb, long guarded by the family that the

Great Nouzari much later encountered in Alexandria.

This tale both Nouzari and Sir Henry regarded with mistrust, yet there was no denying the wondrous effect that the music had produced from but a single performance for the English king. It was said that a great many natural-born children were conceived at court that night.

Both the magician and his treasures were lost in a terrible storm at sea the following week, averting any calamity from the dangerous music's exhibition at who knows what new venues. And yet perhaps the legend he brought from Alexandria, via Sir Henry, the late Doctor Houghton and his colleague Prof. Laurentz, thus completed the music's temporal circuit, as it were: passing, in this observer's humble opinion, the first true test of time.

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