Urania: Science Fiction, Fantasy and Me

As soon as I could read, I was under the spell of Fantasy. Enid Blyton first, whose adventures in *The Enchanted Wood* and *The Wishing Chair* impressed on me a basic narrative of magical transformations; and a mythology of authorship itself. Then I found P. L. Travers' *Mary Poppins*; and Mary Stewart, whose school for young witches pre-dated Harry Potter, in *The Little Broomstick* (1971); both charging the power of childhood imagination. My early teachers of storytelling included Norman Juster, whose *The Phantom Tollbooth* bordered clashing cities of Dictionopolis and Digitopolis; less famous but nonetheless named too, in Mendlesohn and James' seminal *The Short History of Fantasy* (2009).

This required reading for geeks gives a groovy definition: 'The most obvious construction of fantasy in literature and art is the presence of the impossible and the unexplainable. This helps to cut out most science fiction (sf) which, while it may deal with the impossible, regards everything as explicable...' (p.3) Thus it defines a fantasy canon, perhaps for the first time; though the players lined up on these pages are familiar favourites, from Greek and Roman myth, Celtic and Arthurian legend, French fairytales and English ghost stories; from gothic horror to blockbusting children's fiction.

I never set out to write fantasy, as such, but it is culture's central narrative. Not just for questing youths cloaked in anoraks, not all sword-and-sorcery; writers in its 'short history' range from Bram Stoker to Beatrix Potter. Indeed, on the bookshelves at the start of my personal literary timeline, the whole series of Armada *Ghost Books* (1970-1982), many volumes edited by Mary Danby are prominent, before this childhood crush on the uncanny became a teenage craze for Stephen King and even James Herbert.

As one of the *Magic Roundabout* generation, born into a psychedelic society, I took stories like trips. I read to be mystified, amazed, even frightened; so when I eventually started creative writing it was to weave the same shamanic spells.

Dreamhouse, my first novel, was a revisiting of *Alice in Wonderland* in a 'postmodern' style. Written in the early 1990s, the coming-of-age plot is heavily themed with transformation, illusion and the ultimately inexplicable; while also rejoicing in the literary heritage of Lewis Carroll set against a feminist, drug-taking backdrop. Of my three published novels, this is the one most befitting the term fantasy; but it was written and marketed rather as literary fiction.

The category of magical realism, which was prolific when I started my writing career, kind of describes my third novel, *Lifestory* (2003). While this depended on a supernatural theme

(reincarnation), it was otherwise written with an imperative of historical accuracy and cultural specificity for each of the diverse contexts of the narrative.

Although my earlier books were on the borderline of magical realism, also falling into the broader band of literary fiction, it must show how strongly the fantasy genre has reconfigured itself in the marketplace of this new millennium, if a work I've written just a decade or so later, *Translating the Muses Tale,* should fit so firmly in. (Click on main Muse Calliope to find this.)

Farah Mendlesohn says, 'Fantasy and not realism has been a normal mode for much of the history of Western fiction... Arguably however, fantasy *as a genre* only emerges in response (and contemporaneous to) the emergence of mimesis (or realism) *as a genre*: only once there is a notion of intentional realism, so the argument goes, can there be a notion of intentional fantasy.' (2009, P.7) So it was back to the innocent beginning, she suggests, when Philip Pullman won the Whitbread Prize in 2001: 'British readers were rejecting "literary fiction" with its emphasis on psychological complexity, style and a mode of "adulthood" which was often encapsulated in a narrative of acceptance and suffering, and turning instead to texts which offered plot and story, or a rattling good adventure' (2009, p.171).

Once, all storytelling was fantasy. The history of English literature, at least, is a catalogue of dreams and visions. '...The Pilgrim's Progress can be understood as a 'taproot' text for modern fantasy but was for its author the relaying of a divinely inspired vision and not in the least bit fantastical' (2009, p.3).

For Bunyan, the story was an honest attempt to convey a truth, perceived to have come from a higher source. In my Muses essays (see Calliope, Clio and Polyhymnia) I aim to show more instances of 'divine inspiration'; and, if my demonstration is successful, the novel which seems fantastic may fall instead into a category of science-fiction because its premise is not impossible. But it isn't all pilgrims with bunions in this bookcase. Three female novelists, in particular, have influenced me. They are internationally famous figures in fantasy. Classified by my local library, though, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Diana Wynne Jones are listed under fantasy, and Ursula K. Le Guin categorised as science fiction.

Here are the tips, tricks and techniques of these human Uranias, and some of the ways I've tried them. (I wouldn't usually compare and contrast my own work with that of living muses: but this was partly written for my PhD and therefore is a bit silly.)

Zimmer Bradley is to fantasy what Jean Plaidy is to historical fiction. Prolifically researched, immaculately detailed, the world of her books is hermetically-sealed. Huge sagas set in other realities without any acknowledgement of their pure construction. Simply written, with

characters who, no matter how alien to the reader in time or space, are always simply human. The dialogue is done in a careful idiom which conveys a foreign or obsolete language without confusing or losing the reader at all.

The virtual world of Marion Zimmer Bradley is so well run by its own rules that online forums allow her fans to create plotlines and play with characters in its fantastic setting. What other writer wouldn't aspire to this? I am strongly influenced by her storytelling techniques in the creation of my own 'real world'. Her celebration of the supernatural is my agenda too; but my style requires a slightly different relationship to the narration. Aiming for more self-reflexivity, I use comedy to critique the constructions of my own tale.

Diana Wynne Jones also reaches deep into the resources of mythology for her plots and characters. She digs in the jewel caves of fairytale for her imagery and her morality. Her stories work as a magic spell on the reader, wrapping the fantasy world around them. However, her tone is not so hushed or reverent as Zimmer Bradley's on the rules of the book. She doesn't break, or even bend, the laws of her own creation; but she certainly looks at them critically and sometimes laughs at them. There is an ironic tone to the scene setting and stage directing in Wynne Jones; occasionally the reader can see the arch of an authorial eyebrow. My muse novel has more in common with the alternate modern-day of this oevre than the virtual past of Zimmer Bradley; both of which are in contrast, though, to the futuristic feel of Ursula K. Le Guin.

Of her Hainish cycle, she says; 'The Future, in fiction, is usually just a way of looking at Now' (2000, P.i). Taking real possibilities, from space travel to the loss of literacy, she predicts a dystopia that seems beautiful and beguiling because it is a projection of what the reader knows and loves in the present. I could formulate my own plan in an identical fashion; the aliens I offer as my novel's 'proper people' are a way of showing humanity to itself. All the facets of otherness given my central characters could be claimed by readers for their own, as I try to allegorise their social and spiritual connection.

Translating the Muse's Tale has a scenario supported not so much by physics as metaphysics. Some of the reading done in preparation was neither fantasy nor science fiction, but a body of esoteric writing and a statement of arcane fact. My central characters' ability to control colour, for example, was based on this; 'When the Logos uttered the great cosmic Word for this solar system, three major streams of colour issued forth, breaking almost simultaneously into another four, so giving us the seven streams of colour by which manifestation becomes possible...The logos meditated, brooded, conceived mentally, formed an ideal world and built it up in thought matter. Then our objective universe flashed into being, radiant with the seven colours, with the deep blue or indigo for synthetic undertone' (Bailey, 1985, pp. 205 – 206).

Although this sounds like the sort of creation myth many authors make up in the establishment of their own fantasy worlds, it is from a non-fiction text; ascribed to A.A.Bailey, but said by her to have been dictated by a Tibetan monk. Produced in New York during the 1920s, her work brings the term 'channelled writing' into the discussion; it, along with 'divine inspiration', will be defined in this piece.

Mendlesohn and James show fantasy as a literary braid (2009, p.117) with neat sub-genres: 'Immersive fantasy is where we are in a complete other world to which the protagonist belongs; in intrusion fantasy, the fantastic *intrudes* or invades our world' (p.153). *Translating the Muse's Tale* is conceived as an immersive fantasy, set in another world, which gradually seems closer to our own as the 'otherworldly' narrative voice intrudes, in the form of a story which claims to be true. But even within such parameters, the critics concur that 'fantasy leaks, and can be found under "literature"' (p.5), reminding us of their common origin at the beginning of the braid.

At the other end, the meanings get frayed. Postmodern fantasy formats are identified by Mendlesohn and James: 'Whimsy' uses punning, word play or puzzles in its yarn, while the 'New Weird' is 'a Marxist subversion of classic fantasy tropes' (p.186). My novels share some of these features, particularly those attributed to the former category; '...the odd and the fanciful', in which 'there need be no coherence and no sense that the world has a moral order. In whimsy, the world and many of its inhabitants may act apparently out of caprice. Whimsy can be, but does not have to be, a fiction of sentiment. It tends to arouse pleasant emotions of amusement, delight, and sometimes sweet heartbreak. However, whimsy can also be sinister' (p.61).

In my work, the punning and wordplay are part of the translation from one world to another, the transliteration from muse's to human tale. It can be open to 'mythunderstanding'![1] But a particular technique, learned from Terry Pratchett, is to arrive at the same language by an accidental etymological route. Showing how his Discworld is created, in the series' mythical prologue, he describes giant turtles converging to mate on a cosmic plane, as the Big Bang theory (1983, p.12). The opposite of satire, perhaps, this humour is affirming; it makes essential what may be social, like my 'Mating Game'.

For *Translating the Muse's Tale*, (click on Clio to read it) the idiom is self-conscious in some places, as the central romance requires communication between foreign species. The story

[1] See Robert Lynn Asprin's Myth Adventures: 'Each of the books contains the word Myth in its title, usually as a mispronunciation for another word, creating a pun, as in Myth Conceptions (1980)' (Mendlesohn and James, 2009, p. 107.)

may also be sentimental, turning sinister as the arrogant narrator overreaches her angelic self and literally falls to earth. However, it is not the case that I planned a plot with 'no coherence' and characters acting 'out of caprice.'

Despite his iconic status in Fantasy, C.S. Lewis has been slated for his 'inconsistency of world-building... Tolkien, when asked his opinion of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, said that it was "as bad as it could possibly be". He didn't elaborate, but it is fairly clear that he was referring to the mish-mash of mythological allusions in Narnia' (Mendelsohn and James, 2009. P.56). My novel, too, mixes pagan and Christian ideology; the Muses and other Graeco-Roman deities co-existing with my own invented pantheon of 'Lee, Sheela and the third god whose name is not yet known'. I also use imagery from the Bethlehem nativity scene in the translation of my heroine Angela's 'Maternity Message'.

Here, my novel evokes another 'taproot text'; David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). This starts at a séance where the hero is persuaded to take a rocket trip; then, 'a tale of planetary exploration is combined with a version of Norse mythology and Christian mysticism to produce a blinding headache of a book in which the tone shifts constantly from 1920s colloquialisms to William Morris high fantasy...' (Mendlesohn and James, 2009, p.31) In Morris' works of 'full fantasy'[2], the visual landscape has a significant role; and my setting of astral and ethereal planes, with their shifting degrees of solidity underpinning my stories' premise, suggest the same feeling of a 'quest with landscape'. But for the all the importance of the physical dimensions, this kind of writing depends on its philosophical depth.

Eucatastrophe is Tolkein's term for 'the uplifting and joyful moment when the story resolves into its happy ending' (Mendlesohn and James, 2009, p.253) and *Translating the Muse's Tale* embraces this structural possibility. With a sudden second person address, 'It's you', I name the third member of the trinity, whose identity has been promised all along by the character who translates as Euterpe, Eumalia, Eugenie, Europa, etc. Some of the punning is rooted deep in the plotting, and as such would be difficult to prune.

Further names from my reading childhood, Joan Aiken and Roald Dahl, consist in what *The Short History of Fantasy* lists as; 'reconfigured whimsy, taking out its more nauseating traits and adding a wry and wicked spin' (2009, p. 86). This is a key influence on my literary style, as I aim for moments of irrelevance and the well-timed use of bathos to bring my own reader down to earth along with the fictional heroine. The supernatural setting of my storyline is, after all, an analogy for real life; a parallel world that aims to show the highs and lows of humanity.

[2] This is the terminology of John Clute, whose work on fantasy informs the thinking of Farah Mendlesohn.

However much Angela sets herself up as 'other' I hope she's telling a story about the 'self' in society. The alienation effect of her sometimes mocking commentary, the illusions shattered by some of her reflections, should go a little way to achieving the realisation, at the end of the story, that she is only human.

Beyond whimsy, then, *The Muses Tale,* also bears comparison with the 'New Weird', where Lovecraft is the taproot text for its 'highly intellectual' writers (Mendlesohn and James, 2009, p.35) and China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000) remains the seminal example. My fourth novel aspires to the new weirdness of K.J. Bishop's first novel *The Etched City* (2003), which erects a civilization part-ancient part-futuristic, part-orient part-occident, in which to set a plot part-fairy tale part-horror story. This ultimate eclecticism is utterly seamless, not a single wink or nod from the creator to say how clever she is, or how constructed her work. If I were to draft my long-time project anew, the etched landscape of her craft would be its inspiration.

And finally, my novel breathes in Mary Gentle's *ASH* (2000). 'If this book belongs in the New Weird, it is because of the tone and the polysemy of the structure, in which, rather than requiring the reader to seek out truth, the reader must accept that there are many truths, and all of them may be lies' (Mendlesohn and James, 2009, p. 187).

This phrase echoes what the Muses say, at the very start of storytelling, in the opening lines of Hesiod's *Theogony*: 'we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things' (2009, lines 27-29). My creative writing is built on such background reading; this 'knowingness' may be part-strength part-weakness of the tale. So I only half believe it myself, the lies of the truth, the truth of the lies: despite my novel's celebration of the nine pagan muses, its own comic trinity, its crazy plurality of references and resonances, my personal faith is Christianity. What may be seen as a wilful undermining of my fictional world, is a bid to secure some spiritual facts.

My website follows this same trajectory from pagan to Christian thought, in its quest for the source of inspiration. It explores where other authors have got their ideas from; and how they have expressed the moment of inspiration in their poetry, or discussed the experience of inspiration in their philosophy. In shorthand, I seek 'the muse' that writers say is with them, at those moments when the words flow, willingly and sometimes unwittingly onto the page.

There is a key distinction to be made, here, between purposing poets, whose writing process is sometimes a sweaty struggle, and occasionally a sublime act of unsolicited grace; and other people, not primarily writers, who find themselves taking a lengthy dictation, from a voice or

voices seemingly not their own, from a source of information previously unknown to them. When this happens, in flashes, to great poets and novelists, it is generally known as 'divine inspiration'. When it happens for sustained periods to people who aren't professional writers, in a repeatable manner, with reputable witnesses it is known as 'channelled writing.' My argument uses examples of both these literary phenomena, to find a spectrum of inspiration provable.

Click 'Polyhymnia' to follow the flow, through pagan to Christian instances of divine inspiration, with its special feature 'channelled writing'; something that non-writers might do, without conscious control of keyboard or pen. This section introduces the most extraordinary authors; not the professional poets and philosophers of the literary canon, nor the mythologised seeresses of the oral tradition, but the unsuspecting mouthpieces of the voice(s) of god.

Then, the 'Terpsichore' button gives some empirical evidence from my own career; showing an aspect of the creative process, 'superconscious' perhaps or 'supernatural', that I have observed repeatedly in my own fantasy writing, specifically my novel *Translating the Muse's Tale* (click on Erato to partake now) but also to my previous unpublished novel, *Pencilwood* (click on Urania) and *Lifestory*, too (link on homepage).

They may well be classed as science fiction rather than fantasy, insofar as my intention is to tell something explicable and true. Still, the distinction is academic if my writing is really like the 'ecriture feminine' of Helene Cixous, who also plays on the line between critical/creative. I share her project of 'writing a book with another book growing inside' (Sellers, 1994, p.127)

The Book of Promethea is an inspirational dialogue akin to my Angela/Alleysun/Alison's. It has similar issues of dictation and translation. Helene's heroine, H, is subject to another character's narrative; with more authority than the author.

> 'So what am I to do? I can take down Promethea's words under dictation. That is a possibility... But I have my doubts about myself and about words as well: I am not sure my written language can faithfully translate all the many living, original cosmic, personal languages.
>
> All can I can promise is to take down faithfully the words Promethea says out loud in French. As for all the rest, I make no guarantees' (p.128).

In terms of genre, mine might sit best next to this novel that is also a thesis, a story that is also a critical theory. One book has grown inside another during the long period of my writing. When I

first conceived the novel, Angela's baby was described as a 'floppy disk'; by the third re-writing I conceded it must be a USB stick, to retain technological currency. (For more on how my novels have slightly seemed to foretell the future see the essay on 'Terpsichore'.)

If this is good science fiction writing, it shouldn't 'date'. Rudyard Kipling's short story, 'Wireless', interweaves an episode of automatic writing with an early Marconi experiment going on in the back room of a sea-side pharmacy at midnight. In Kipling's crafted piece, a drugged consumptive starts channelling 'The Eve of St. Agnes', drafting the lines till they come out exactly like Keats' poem, though he'd never read it or heard it (Somerset Maugham (Ed.), 1952, pp. 88-104).

The connection of telegraphy and telepathy posited here is still nowhere near being proved, but hasn't been disproved either, so Kipling's plot still feels futuristic. My claim for divine inspiration, as ideas springing from a higher source, is expressed in the novel through imagery of a 'world wide web', a heightened computer network that links to heaven too. Like Cixous I can make no guarantees that the story I tell is true; but like some of the other writers cited here, I continue to wait for the technical details to catch up with an imagined scenario. Meanwhile, Urania, muse of astrology and astronomy; from the borderlines between science fiction and fantasy, all who sip from the cyber cup salute you.

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