

## Collage and Map

By Tom La Farge

What is the difference between fantasy and modernism?

These words name the antagonistic view that two communities take of each other.<sup>1</sup> The literary establishment dismisses fantasy writing as subliterary escapism. The fantasy community replies by lumping all serious literary writing under the heading of modernism, since classical modernist practice is esoteric and seems to exclude all not trained up in its mysteries. Pound, Eliot, Woolf, and Joyce head the list of authors whom the literary establishment reveres and the fantasy community reviles. James Joyce has become such a poster boy for hermetic, elitist writing that a group of Minneapolis-based writers have formed a Pre-Joycean Fellowship, on the model of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to revive a nineteenth-century tradition of narrative fiction.

What is the real difference between these kinds of writing?

The model for fantasy composition is the map. For modernists it is the collage. Both map and collage represent the world; they are different literary geographies.

The fantasy map, which accompanies most fantasy sagas written since Tolkien's, represents a continuous and safeguarded space that corrects a world seen as discontinuous and threatening. The fantasy map is a complete and strict semiotic system; that is, a system of signification that leaves no room for unresolvable ambiguity. It acts as a "polder,"<sup>2</sup> a term coined by John Clute, who borrows it from the Dutch word for land reclaimed from the sea and protected by dykes. As such it serves as the magical force field within which positive magic is

ringwalled, from which bad magic is excluded. It is genre as a strictly enforced set of rules. It is Fable, inscribing a world-limit in narrative, what can be told. It asserts an Author who as proprietor -- and adult -- permits a renewal of childlike exploratory wonder. The fantasy map locates the places where events are bound to happen, and on an epic scale; where other kinds are spawned, both noble and malignant; but it softens the shock of catastrophic events and of encounters with otherness by knowing about them in advance: they have their place on the map.

The value of the fantasy map and the fantasy story is as epitome, representing the story as a whole, a space that can be surveyed all at once not piecemeal in time. History is the enemy of Story. According to Clute, Fantasy narrative moves towards “the unveiling of an irreducible substratum of Story” to bring about a “Recognition,” the moment when “Story knows itself.”<sup>3</sup> Story is thus to be seen as an eternal, archetypal, essential reserve; the substratum even of narratives not formally identified as fantasy. “Storyability”<sup>4</sup> – the manifestation of this reserve, or polder in a narrative – is the hallmark of fantasy, and “Stories shape the way the world is understood.”

“Mappability,” the potential for a total representation of the terrain of Story, is an exactly analogous criterion. Fantasy proposes Magic as its alternative to the chaos of history; and magic is both what must be defended and what must mount the defense. Story is the magic that must be ringwalled, and the Map defends it by circumscribing and representing it.

The modernist map is the collage, the montage, the constellation of luminous details. It permits the light of reality to break through prejudicial habits; it patterns that light meaningfully. Or, as Woolf or Faulkner employed it, it is the composition that finally, in the midst of human swirl, locates its subject. Such a method acknowledges the fragmentation of the world and can

seem to represent no more than that. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is often taken as a picture of postwar chaos, "a heap of broken images, where the sun beats"; but "these fragments I have shored against my ruin": the reader must remember and "connect/ Nothing with nothing,"<sup>5</sup> and then the world will recompose.

Since connecting nothing with nothing is hard, we may say that modernism proposes an aesthetic of difficulty where fantasy makes itself available. Modernist texts demand active study to connect fragments with each other and so come to read the archaic whole of which the fragments were once part. Fantasy reading is permissive of self-insertion into a loose weave of Story. Modernism demands memorious reading, in Borges' sense: the retention of the shape of particular things.<sup>6</sup> Fantasy provides memorable images but licenses forgetful retroformations and recombinations. Its image of a whole, sane world, integrated by Story and Map, makes possible a healing wholeness of the reader as subject. Modernism threatens the subject. In its most radical forms, such as analytical cubism or the writing of Gertrude Stein, it calls the integral subject into doubt by multiplying edges and frames and beginnings and repetitions till one cannot see the object represented as having an interior or center. To see it, to enter into a perceptual relationship with it, requires one to cut loose from one's "oneness."

That demand can induce ego-despair. Losing ourselves at the threshold of the difficulty, we fail to pass on into the unmapped text, we lose courage, we retreat into a more comforting zone.

Fantasy writing occupies a sector of that zone. It concentrates its energies upon the mappable ground where readers can insert themselves as figures. Here the passage of ordeals is accomplished by a surrogate who follows a road already mapped up to charted points of view. The fantasy map places its objects in the center of our attention, in a way that affirms our

coherence and fullness and engages it pleurably. Fantasy serves us as a refuge from a world in which we feel “thinned.” It gives us ourselves in giving us a mappable, storyable world and thereby corrects alienation.

In this way fantasy writing is nutrition for freedom. It is continuous with what we usually call fantasizing, which serves the needs of a mind set loose from distasteful tasks in a life too strictly zoned into work and leisure, a mind needing to pacify anxiety or escape depression. It occupies the mind in privacy, waiting to fall asleep or coming out of sleep, as the ego disengages from or resists reengagement with a world in which history is experienced as a wounding chaos. Fantasy affords it escape from ego-despair by allowing the ego to regroup in a story always centered on it, one so slightly authored as to be easily rewritten. Fantasy literature offers this same solace, the freedom to misremember or simply to invent one’s own self-affirming narrative. It does propose an author, but the author’s presence is consoling. The voice of most Fantasy writers is warm and familiar. It makes us feel the presence of a storyteller to whom the end is known and before whom the map is spread; we will not get lost. The map both contains a world of strangeness-in-bounds and generates the exciting situations that can serve the reader as materials for fantasy.

The fantasy world is the arena of desire. Tolkien has fairy-stories “not primarily concerned with possibility but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded.”<sup>7</sup> These moments of gratified desire (desire gratified by being whetted so that the whetting is the gratification because intensity is produced) correspond to the moments Clute speaks of when “Story knows itself” within the superstructure of fantasy.

Fantasy maps connect these peaks of excitement within narrative. The peaks of excitement are located as far as they can be from possibility; from, in Clute's terms, the mimetic, the place where a familiar reality shows through. These counterparts of modernist "Luminous Detail" are places on the map and moments in the story, nodes charged by genre-derived energies ("enchantment"). The places on the map where the "irreducible substratum of Story" reveals itself as "an essence" are precisely those where the narrative is thickest and most reworked, furthest from the mundane world, familiar and therefore listless. These are the haunted spots that spawn other kinds: volcanoes, marshes, tunnels, virgin forests.

In fantasy writing the map thus guarantees the reader and mandates the whetting/fulfillment of desire, while in modernist practice the author maps nothing and is nowhere evident. In modernist fictions voice is assigned to characters, none of whom possess a total view; in poetry it is even more dispersed in a syntax too fragmented and ambiguous to allay anxiety. Fantasy centers on the needs of the individual for whom experience has been foreclosed; modernism creates a process of virtual experience to put individuals back in touch with the world. Modernist texts are about waking up in strangeness, as Gregor Samsa does at the opening of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Modernism deplores not a fractured world but a fractured tradition. Against a world overdetermined by the massive syntax of power it sets the images of a lost, archaic energy, images drawn from the cave-paintings at Lascaux or Dogon masks or Minoan clay figures.<sup>8</sup> It does not try to put the world back together but to punctuate the actual one, inserting nodes and turns, creating language objects as dreams. Modernist "experience" is an "impossible witnessing." Modernism is not disintegrative. Collage is a method of composition. It attacks not the polder but the dykes, to let the polder breathe. The modernist esthetic is a method of

“rhyming,” “juncture,” “ensheaving.”<sup>9</sup> It makes “diverse planes overlie in a certain manner”: this phrase, which is Pound’s, exactly describes the meticulous collages of Kurt Schwitters. It sets up a tension between awareness of disjunctive discreteness and this sense of “rhyme,” congruence. It is an esthetic of dialogue where the fantasy Story has only one voice, the storyteller’s. Where modernism is paratactic, letting meaning develop among terms listed and juxtaposed, Story is hypotactic, blending everything into a unitary composition, all strangeness presumptive, all narration familiar. Modernist style is dense and disjunctive, omitting narrative connective tissue, opening gaps to bring forward the jagged image in which experience is (virtually) felt. The style of Fantasy narration is dilatory, spreading out from the story into world-creation, in other words mapping. Nor is this to be taken as a mark of slack writing: the weave is both loose and total so that readers are sustained within the bounds of a fully imagined world that still lets them adapt situations to their own personal fantasizing. So fantasy centers on the needs of the individual for whom authentic experience and satisfying self-identification have been foreclosed by an overly owned and zoned world, while Modernism, taking that world as its subject, works to open it up.

The Fantasy composition places its subject (both the thing represented and its implied viewer) in the center of the picture. It is what the narrative focuses on. Modernist practice disperses its subject into an assemblage of bits, leaving at the center of the composition an absence. If fantasy writing grows out of the sort of free fantasizing one does on either edge of sleep, modernism resembles, precisely in being overauthored, the dream that seizes and disturbs the mind in between. In the dream the center from which power and meaning radiate is elsewhere, owned by another (who may be one’s own other self). One’s own dream is intractable, and in it one is merely a figure; as for someone else’s dream, there is nothing at all to

be done with that. Other people's dreams are hard to listen to, opaque just because they are so totally centered upon some unfamiliar dimension of the dreamer. They are not allegories that one can understand simply by referring them to a different center. Like surrealist work, modeled on dream, they propose a pleasure inextricable from the resistance they excite, the delight of seeing strangeness without one's self's getting in the way of it. Modernist fictions excite a similar resistance and afford a similar delight, by implicating the reader in a laborious act of looking while refusing to guarantee the sort of final meaning that will in turn affirm the reader's integrity. The reader must fan out into an awareness within which what had been dispersed now constellates in a meaningful way against a field of culture restored to visibility.

But here we come up against the question of ownership: Whose culture? To dispossess "Bleistein with a cigar" and "ape-necked Sweeney," the vulgar, world-purchasing Jew and the subhuman Irish laborer, T.S. Eliot invoked a tradition of churchy refinement within which his genius could release an entirely original and inexhaustibly refreshing prosody. Density of allusion, the fragments shored against ruin, implicates the reader in a kind of reading that leads back to the wholes from which the fragments were broken off, and suddenly one is reading Dante and Spenser, Webster and Kyd, Cavalcanti, Arnaut Daniel, and Li Po, guided by our teachers who are guided by their professors, mainly men who hold endowed chairs at selective universities; and the complaint from the fantasy community against the elitism of modernists feels as if it might have some weight.

I want to fantasize Ezra Pound, working through the *Cantos*, into an analog to the Gandalf who gallops everywhere on the swiftest of horses, a tireless busybody who, by interesting himself in the matters that seem trivial but turn out to be central, weaves together a world of divided kinds threatened with further loss and fragmentation by a dark lord: Usura.

Pound/Gandalf's power to see and contest the enemy are associated with summits. Those summits are the locus of an author's total view, formed by the author's learning in such marginalized languages as Provençal or Anglo-Saxon, and the reader must stand in a place the author (or his interpreters) have chosen, in order to see significant forms.

But what is to be done when Gandalf goes mad and, surrendering to a fantasy of omnipotence, allies with the powers who truly author our reality? In Tolkien's fantasy this is the story of Saruman, Gandalf's foil. In Modernist history Ezra Pound, after a career spent "making it new" by inventing forms and bringing writers forward, tried to attach Mussolini's power in order to dictate an economic program and a poetic discipline. Then the standpoint he offered for restoring the world became another totalitarian program. He was locked in a cage outside Pisa, and his stronghold was reduced to the mournful beauty of ruined Isengard.

Ruins are natural sites for revery. What fictive mode could combine or anyhow draw upon the different aesthetics of Fantasy and of Modernism? If I have described them accurately, each provides a different pleasure through a different kind of reading. Modernism places experience at its core; Fantasy centers on belief. These values ought not to be irreconcilable, since both reflect a desire for reconnection to the real and a retrieval of meaning, even for the revival of the archaic. Both propose a revitalized world in which desire is clarified. Both take a stand against money, "the brokers ... roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse"<sup>10</sup>: money as a value, a measure of self-actualization. Finally, although they may structure imagination differently and although they may ask for a different kind of reading – Modernism a laborious connection of the disjunct images of collage into a meaningful composition, Fantasy a self-insertion into a totally mapped and framed world – both insist upon the importance of an imaginative, active reading. In this they differ from and stand as a critique of the normal fiction



of our day, designed, I more and more feel, for passive consumption by exhausted, distracted readers. There is a “pre-read” feel to the formulaic fictions from the mainstream houses, whose familiar characters undergo predictable “epiphanies.”

What fiction could draw upon both of the esthetics I have tried to describe?

#### Endnotes

1. We can mention Edmund Wilson’s 1956 attack on Tolkien in *The Nation* (“Ooh, Those Awful Orcs!”) or Harold Bloom’s dismissal last year of Steven King as “an immensely inadequate writer” ([www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing\\_down\\_american\\_readers/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers/)). See, for the opposite side, Darrel Schweitzer, “The Uses of Fantasy,” *New York Review of Science Fiction* 15:7, March 2003, p. 14, col. 1. This essay was originally a speech delivered at The Write Stuff, the Greater Lehigh Valley Writers Conference, April 28, 2001. Schweitzer claims that

We have, particularly in this country, what I call the Protestant Work Ethic of Literature, which holds that only Realism of the grimmest sort may [be] considered Real, Serious Literature, and everything else is frivolous, for children, or, worse yet, *genre*, which means ‘escapism’....

You were taught this by your English teacher in school....

As C. S. Lewis once said, the only people opposed to escapism are jailers. So, cast wide the prison doors. Escape. Don’t be afraid. Throw off the official ideology of Henry James and the mainstream establishment and your high-school English teacher.

Orson Scott Card has even harsher things to say about the “modernist” critical establishment. See his “How Tolkien Means” in *Meditations on Middle-Earth*, ed. Karen Haber (New York: St. Martin’s, 2001), 153-73 or his earlier essay in the *Science Fiction Review* (Fall 1982) entitled “Fantasy and The Believing Reader,” available on Card’s website at <http://www.hatrack.com/osc/articles/fall82/shtml>.

2. "Polder," *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, eds. John Clute and John Grant (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 772, col. 2:

...[P]olders are defined as enclaves of toughened reality, demarcated by boundaries...from the surrounding world.... [T]hese boundaries are *maintained*;.... A polder...is an *active* MICROCOSM, armed against the potential WRONGNESS of that which surrounds it, an anachronism *consciously* opposed to wrong time.

3. "Story," *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p. 900, col.1.
4. Clute coins this term in his essay "Beyond the Pale," *CONJUNCTIONS* 39 (Annandale-on-Hudson: Bard College, Fall 2002. 42-28.
5. T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, lines 22, 431, 301-2.
6. Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes the Memorious" in *Artifices* (1944), reprinted in 1956 as Part Two of *Ficciones*, ed. and trans. Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962), pp. 112-13.

We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table;  
Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine.  
He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at  
dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare  
them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the  
design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only  
once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised  
in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho.

It is in the comparison of patterns that Funes is particularly modernist.

7. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 40.
8. On the modernist turn to the archaic, see Guy Davenport, "The Symbol of the Archaic," a lecture read at the University of Louisville as part of the conference on Twentieth-Century Literature, 1974; rpt. in *The Geography of the Imagination* (Boston: Godine, 1997), 16-28.

...[I]n any characterization of the arts of our time we shall always want to say that if we have had a renaissance in the twentieth century, it has been a renaissance of the archaic....

What is most modern in our time frequently turns out to be the most archaic.... Picasso liked to say that modern art is what we have kept.... Archaic art...was springtime art in any culture....

Behind all this passion for the archaic, which is far more pervasive in the arts of our time than can be suggested here, is a longing for something lost, for energies, values, and certainties unwisely abandoned by an industrial age....

9. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 92-3.

There are subject-rhymes, two sensibilities may rhyme, there are culture-rhymes. The ceremony of Yeatsian rhymed stanzas renders rhymes audible or inconspicuous according as congruences are being ensheaved or simply iterated, and a Japanese poet without rhyming his sounds may rhyme a crow with the night.

Kenner quotes Pound (from *Gaudier-Brzeska*):

The pine tree in mist upon the far hill looks like a fragment of Japanese armour. ...The tree and the armour are beautiful because their diverse panes overlie in a certain manner.

10. W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939). Auden, a modernist poet, was a great champion of Tolkien's work. See his reviews of two volumes of *Lord of the Rings* at <http://www.nytimes.com/1956/01/22/books/tolkien-king.html> and [/1954/10/31/books/tolkien-fellowship.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1954/10/31/books/tolkien-fellowship.html).