LOCES GENII: URBAN SETTINGS IN THE FANTASY OF PETER BEAGLE, MARTHA WELLS AND BARBARA HAMBLY

A longstanding attraction in fantasy fiction is its use of otherworld settings, from the purely invented and independent “secondary world,” to use Tolkien’s term, to the quasi-realist “primary world” that includes non-realist elements, such as the presence of magic. Until recently, the current fantasy genre, whether defined by critics or booksellers, has preferred the secondary world, and moreover, a medieval and/or pre-industrial world. This trend is present in the work of Tolkien’s predecessors, such as Morris, Dunsany and Edison, though The Lord of the Rings did most to establish it as the norm for current fantasy fiction. From Stephen Donaldson to David Eddings and George R. R. Martin, Tolkien’s best-selling successors have largely followed his example.

In the last few years, however, some fantasy has used not only urban settings, but industrial urban settings, and in a couple of cases, urban future settings. The quasi-primary world with fantasy elements has been around at least since C.S. Lewis’s The Magician’s Nephew (1955), and a sub-strand of more or less notable examples runs beneath the general post-Tolkien stream of fantasy, including John Crowley’s well-known Little, Big (1981). Parallels occur with “recursive SF” such as Tim Powers’ The Annubis Gates (1983) and Sterling and Gibson’s The Difference Engine. But rather than setting up a non-realist enclave in an apparently realist primary world, as Crowley does, or briefly importing non-realist figures from a secondary world, as Lewis does, the texts I want to discuss insist on presenting traditional non-real elements, particularly magic, as part of a general urban scene.

Why and how has this happened, and what conclusions might be drawn from it, within and without the genre? It appears to have become a trend, rather than isolated examples, around 1986, and particularly in the US. I will argue that these changes firstly indicate historically based differences between fantasy and its ancestor romance, and that ultimately, they trace fantasy’s version of, in Marxist terms, a current clash between modes of production. In this case the clash is between a mode not yet fully articulated, and forms of (post)industrial capitalism.

Rather than produce a diachronous history of fantasy in general, I want here to use a synchronous, “snap-shot” analysis. That is, I will set up a textual paradigm for modern fantasy, which I will compare to three texts from the “urban” sub-genre. Though all were published in 1986 or later, Peter Beagle’s The Folk of the Air (1986) appears as a transition from the original paradigm, while Martha Wells’ The Death of the Necromancer (1998) and Barbara Hambly’s Knight of the Demon Queen (2000) display the sub-genre’s later, more developed form.

Firstly, though, I need to set up parameters for that slippery and polysemous term “fantasy.” Rather than rely on a single critical definition, I will draw out consensual elements in definitions from two disciplinary perspectives, and relate these to genre elements that separate fantasy from its non-realist twin,
SF. The parameters will also include the equally important but less discussed factor of the fantasy audience’s expectations and desires.

In psychoanalysis, a field also concerned with fantasy, definitions begin, uncompromisingly, with Freud: “one thought-activity … was kept free from reality-testing… This activity is ‘fantasying’” (Qtd Laplanche and Pontalis, 6). That is, fantasy is a denial of Freud’s reality principle, or, echoing a common condemnation of fantasy literature, escapism. Fifty years later, Laplanche and Pontalis’ article “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” connected it more firmly with Freud’s silent third term, desire: “fantasy … is not the object of desire, but its setting” (26). Setting therefore becomes essential to any form of desire. Some thirty years on, in a well-known theoretical treatment, Rosemary Jackson translated Freud into Lacanian terms: fantasy is a “literature of desire” (3), and “of unreality” (4). But to Jackson “fantasies try to reverse or rupture the process of ego formation” (90); they “express an indomitable desire … for the unheard of, the unseen, the imaginary” (91). That is, fantasies desire a return to the Lacanian area of pre-Oedipal consciousness: this implies not merely denial of the reality principle, but a retreat from subjectivity.

Literary definitions offer a slightly different perspective on the same vista. To Tolkien, fantasy is “the desire for a living, realized sub-creative art … in this world for men unsatisfiable and so imperishable” (143). To Northrop Frye, fantasy, aka the quest-romance, is “the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but still contain that reality” (193). Fredric Jameson repeats Frye’s view of romance as “wish-fulfilment or Utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life” (“Magical,” 110). Picking up Frye’s point about the “dialectic” moral structure of romance (Frye, 195), Jameson goes on revive Nietzsche’s understanding that morality is a positional concept, which “coincides with categories of Otherness” (“Magical,” 115). Jameson adds that such “positional thinking,” which he also finds in the Western, is “intimately connected” with times when “central authority disappears” (118). Romance, aka fantasy, he considers, functions best in “a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist.” And since their contest is not yet articulated as a class struggle, “its resolution can be projected [as] a nostalgic… harmony” (148).

These definitions approach consensus on two particular elements. Whether it is regarded positively or negatively, fantasy is to do with the non-real. And it is to do with desire.

Connecting these terms lets us site the current fantasy genre next to its bookshop twin, science fiction. First of all, we have an outsider’s observation: a librarian divides readers into Type A, who can tolerate only realism, and Type B, who want “total departure from the known world” (Tyson, qtd. Bujold, 157). Clearly, Type B will fit readers of both SF and Fantasy. But the psychic mechanisms that drive SF are embodied in that central SF cliché – the sense of wonder. However satirized, “sensawunda” remains a staple of SF book blurbs, critical reviews, and book titles. That is, the genre’s own sense of itself matches
the outside observation. It is the desire to experience wonder that keeps the SF audience, and that wonder is found in constructions and visions of the non-real.

If the desire for wonder may be common to both genres, its expression separates them quite decisively. Critics from the ‘60s on have read SF as speaking a desire for transcendence, for the more than human, in itself a resonant SF title. To the sociologist Nachman Ben-Yehuda, SF does so by sacralizing technology (101-02): wonder lies in the scientifically shaped future. But here SF and bookshop fantasy divide, for, as everybody knows, fantasy’s concern is, or has been, with the past. The features satirized by Diana Wynne Jones’ Tough Guide to Fantasyland (1997) indicate that, as I have mentioned, the other worlds of bookshop fantasy are stereotypically seen as feudal, static, and/or pre-industrial.

This division between looking forward and looking backward has a further consequence. In producing the non-real, SF, looking to the future, can use “science” – however fictionally – as its major enabbling device. Like science, it can claim to proceed rationally. But this handy legitimacy has one big drawback. Like science itself, SF can have no truck with the supernatural. In contrast, fantasy’s turn to the past makes magic its central enabling device. This lets it access not only the overt supernatural, but the entire gallery of myth, legend and folklore, with its galaxy of non-real figures, objects and landscapes, from Nixies to Holy Grails to Forests of the Night, or of Broceliande.

The attraction of these forms goes beyond the wonder provided by other worlds in SF, for they can also become what is most easily described as numinous. Without going into great detail, or involving theories of the sublime, I will roughly define the numinous as a sense of spiritual resonance, such as inheres, for example, in images like the Holy Grail. It is this recuperation of the past’s mythic power that the modern fantasy audience apparently desires. As one young reader told me: “We don’t want machines, we want mythology.”

Tolkien also emphasizes this doubling of wonder with tradition. To him a powerful part of fairy stories’ effect was “that they are old” (128). This connects almost instantly with the consensual version of fantasy, for to Tolkien, fairy stories also succeeded if they “awakened desire.” And “the making or glimpsing of other worlds, was the heart of the desire for Faerie” (135). The dragon in the Volsungsaga wore its trade-mark., and, “I desired dragons with a profound desire” (135). Desire in fantasy fiction is then directed toward constructions of the past rather than the future.

This numinous quality inheres in legendary objects and landscapes as much as in the archetypal roles so often detected in fantasy characters. That landscapes can become legendary raises another important consideration of both non-real genres: that is, the importance and function of the setting. Frye sees romance as set in “our world” – neither heaven nor hell – with its moral dialectic expressed in natural binaries: evil equals cold, winter, desolation, etc (187). For Jameson, however, “world” in a phenomenologist’s sense means the ultimate perceptual horizon, which cannot itself be seen. But to Jameson, romance/
fantasy “is precisely the form in which the worldness of world reveals …. itself” (“Magical,” 112). And the romance world has “a strangely active and pulsating vitality” where “the category of Scene tends to capture and to appropriate the attributes of Agency and Act” (112). Thus to Jameson setting is an extremely important element in producing the philosophical “worldness” he describes. And this “worldness,” this impossible ability, in philosophical terms, to see the world from outside itself, is the most powerful aspect of romance.

In more pragmatic terms, Jameson is seconded by SF critics, reviews and readers who repeatedly assess SF in terms of its successful “world-building.” For serious hard SF, the criteria are often the fidelity to actual science. But beyond this, unexpressed, remains the audience desire for Tolkien’s aim, the satisfyingly realized other world. And fantasy and SF divide here also, for a fantasy novel must present not only a logical, complex and credible other world, but one whose landscapes, to revert to Tolkien, breathe the air of Faerie.

Given this understanding that “worldness” is central to the non-real genres, and that the landscape, or setting, is central to the achievement of “worldness,” we can modify a recent essay by Roger Schlobin, which claims that setting is irrelevant to fantasy. He bases this argument on a Michael Swanwick novel that uses a modern urban setting for what Schlobin considers successful fantasy (158-61). This argument appears to work, however, on a confusion of type and category. It equates “fantasy setting” with “pre-industrial fantasy setting,” and quite rightly argues that the presence or absence of this latter is irrelevant. But the presence of setting qua setting – that is, the need for some setting both credible and numinous – remains crucial to fantasy as a whole.

This returns us to my original topic, and raises some thorny questions in the process. If fantasy achieves other-worldness by using numinous elements drawn from the past, how can urban settings be numinous? If they are numinous, are they not made so by recycling traditionally resonant elements – the wood, the mountain, the cave?

Let me approach this by another critical circuit, again drawn from Jameson. He looks at romance from the medieval onward, not simply to trace ongoing influences or make aesthetic judgements, but because the differences indicate where and how “the historical moment is… understood to block off or shut down a certain number of formal possibilities… and to open up determinate new ones” (“Magical,” 148). That is, different versions of a genre will give us some idea what history has forced them to leave out, or allowed them to put in.

If we accept Brian Attebery’s unofficial quiz results (13-14), then most people’s candidate for the “core text” of modern fantasy fiction is The Lord of the Rings. That is, we can consider this text the modern fantasy paradigm. And if we apply Jameson’s method, putting it next to medieval romances like Gawain and the Green Knight or the original Morte d’Arthur brings out two obvious formal differences:
modern fantasy is nearly always prose, and its basic structure is the trilogy. These can be related directly to economic modes of production and consumption, with work written to be read, rather than heard, and work published in print.

Beyond this formal change appear two striking content variants. What modern fantasy puts in is The Land – in the sense not merely of numinous settings but an active plot and thematic pre-occupation – and what it leaves out is God, in the sense that Tolkien inferentially calls primary belief (141). That is, the belief that hearers of The Romance of the Holy Grail, for example, might have accorded the divine nature of the Grail itself. And with this belief goes the apparatus of religion, from hermits to miracles, that blends with the narrative trappings of the Grail Romance. Tolkien was a practicing Catholic, but the apparatus of his faith is conspicuously absent from The Lord of the Rings.

Though Rosemary Jackson excludes both Tolkien and Lewis from the field of fantasy (9), she spends some time arguing that modern fantasy has been secularized (78-91). It can be argued, however, that the impulse to sacralize technology in SF becomes in fantasy a recuperative but equally sacralizing impulse: that is, a turn to spirituality, either in the form of past mythologies, or as spirituality proper. This has been quite comfortably historicized in the New Age with the rise of alternate religions, from Wiccan up or down (Selling, “Imagining”). And many of these religions, as might be expected from a time and an “oppositional bloc” as Tom Moylan calls it (11), deeply implicated with the green movement, have a strong ecological bent. The ecological emphasis of The Lord of the Rings, then, is what history allows the new version of romance/fantasy to put in, and it goes some way toward replacing the overt institutionalized religion that history has pushed out.

This conflation relates very clearly to the emphasis on setting’s importance for fantasy as a whole. Tolkien’s Middle Earth, indeed, is the pattern of a numinous traditional landscape. Hardly an element does not have its roots deep in numerous folklores, does not resonate with settings in legend and myth, does not offer, atop the new vision of the threatened “green earth” – a significant term in itself – not merely the wonder of another world, but the charge of one traditionally numinous.

It has become another common gambit to derive this passionate protectiveness for the earth, and the vivid polarizing of Middle Earth between the pre-industrial beauties of Lorien and the industrial waste of Mordor, from Tolkien’s personal experience: his childhood in the dwindling rural environs of Birmingham, his experience of trench warfare in World War I, production of The Lord of the Rings under the shadow of World War II. But the theme continues strongly in his ’70s successors, for example, Patricia McKillip’s Riddlemaster trilogy, or Stephen Donaldson’s Thomas Covenant cycle. Donaldson in particular focuses on the ecological binary oppositions, as with his title The Illearth War.

How do these configurations relate to Jameson’s other hypothesis, that the generative trigger for romance/fantasy is a time of social instability, for which fantasy offers an ethical map? That it offers a
narrative solution for the clash between differing (old and new) modes of economic production? What modes of production might they be in this case, and what sort of a solution does fantasy offer?

Here the obvious older mode is industrial and post-industrial or global capitalism. The newer mode, I would suggest, is still in the process of development, but its articulation can be traced through the change in fantasy settings. That is, the way fantasy texts present The Land, and the narrative solutions fantasy texts propose, for a clash with symbolic or actual forms of industrial capitalism.

For Tolkien’s paradigmatic text, the process partially bears out Jackson’s dictum of escapism. The Land is primarily a pre-industrial Elsewhere, an outright escape from Here and Now. The narrative solution is to erase Mordor, reinstate the King, and restore the Shire’s rural tranquility. It is easy to point out that saving the Shire actually means losing Lorien and sending Frodo out of the Shire, but overall, the harmonizing solution is retrogressive. It demands the defeat and banishment of industrialism. The Land is overwhelmingly Not Here.

How is the Land treated in Beagle, Hambly and Wells, that is, in the later sub-genre? The Lord of the Rings was properly begun in 1937 (Christopher Tolkien, 12), but published in the ‘50s, so, given the rate of change in the cultural matrix, let alone the pressure to innovate in a new and popular genre, variations are certainly to be expected. This question makes them very clear.

To start with Peter Beagle, for more than alphabetical or chronological reasons, The Folk of the Air was published in 1986, though begun in the mid ’70s. It takes place in a proto-San Francisco, complete with freeways, where an SCA chapter is seriously disconcerted when a tyro witch works real magic, which includes raising a demon and some medieval mercenaries. The plot centers on combating the nasty consequences.

Hardly anything in this sketch appears to fit the Tolkien paradigm. Most obviously, this is not a secondary world, let alone a pre-industrial one. This is a contemporary, urban, specifically regional and patently American setting. Further, there is no overt pre-occupation with The Land or clear ecological message, and the global theatre has shrunk to a local sub-culture. We do, however, have a pre-occupation with the past, a world that entertains excursions of the non-real from “above and below,” and various appearances of the numinous.

First are the traditional supernatural figures, such as Sia, the Mother Goddess in mufti, who transmogrifies from a dumpy old woman to a figure whose kiss the protagonist Farrell finds “as shocking and undoing a revelation as the first chocolate he ever tasted.” When “she smiled straight into his head… all his bones went up in sunlight” (Beagle, 273). Her son, the raised demon Nicholas Bonner, appears as a “slender boy” who carries himself with a “bold lilt” and has hair “impossibly yellow – dandelion-thick, so ridiculously, insultingly rich and molten as to make the moon look like pale margarine” (114). But while these figures create desire for their beauty, and in the mercenaries’ case their surpassing “Other” worldness,
none of them are native to the setting. And while Sia is qualifiedly good, her son includes torturing cats in his current amusements, and when the mercenaries enter an SCA battle they actually kill someone. The novel makes it clear that to call the non-real between worlds is unequivocally bad: especially so when it is done by humans aspiring to the properly supernatural power of “magic.” The SCA member who does manage to enter his Viking persona’s world destroys his double. The witch’s hubris kills or damages several people. It also forces Sia to destroy her demon son, and become lost in turn.

While the novel thus simultaneously furthers and critiques desire for the numinous, the Not Here, it repeats Tolkien’s longing for the “old” in its passionate evocations of the past where these figures rightfully belong. Farrell says of his lute-music:

they ought to stop playing a composer’s music as soon as the last one who knows what it means is gone. The stuff I play has hawkbells in it and mill wheels and pikes all grounding at once. Chamber pots being emptied out of the window, banks of oars rattling into the water... I can’t hear the noises, I just play the notes. Shouldn’t be allowed. (78)

This articulates the same nostalgia that Jameson has elsewhere made a benchmark of post-modernism (“Postmodernism,” 66). The novel charts it in greater complexity as it enters the world of the SCA chapter, with its insistence on meticulous historical accuracy in clothing, weapons, food, and fighting techniques, and its desperate need for a Somewhere beyond the Here and Now.

“Simon Widefarer’s ... a lawyer... Hates it. Hates himself for being scared to tell his parents ... But here – here he’s a condottiere, a free captain ... and he’s not afraid of anything.” (Beagle, 111)

But in the search for this unattainable present-past, the desiring self does fleetingly transfigure its contemporary setting, as at the night-dance when Farrell meets the assembled “Folk of the Air”:

The last flourish of the pavanne had set their hands free to balance above them in the night, and the torchlight – Coleman lanterns hung from branches – made their rings and their jeweled gloves splash fire, scattering tiny green and violet and silver flames like largesse to the musicians. Farrell could not find any faces in that first wonder of brightness and velvet, cloaks and gold and brocade – only the beautiful clothes glittering … (87)

Equally powerful are evocations of the city itself, firstly as a habitation and a name based fairly clearly on the mythos of San Francisco, America’s alternate capital. This is the Otherworld of gloriously unlikely
anomaly that crowns Farrell’s arrival, and his duel with the knife-wielding hitch-hiker, when he nearly 
hits a carload of SCA members in heavy traffic:

the driver’s face, rippling and folding silently with terror underneath his great oil-drum helmet. . .
the rosette of rust round the door handle and the broadsword in the hand of the young black man in
the back seat. (8)

But there are also numinous moments sprung from the city proper. For example, when Farrell first regains
his old love, Julie, who at the time is riding a large motorbike:

Julie started the engine, and the air round them danced to life … enclosing them within a roaring privacy … Outside, beyond their borders, the honey-slow twilight was thinning and quickening to a
cold, dusty lavender. Skateboarders hurried past like moths, urgently contorted, one-dimensional in
the pale headlights rushing up the hill … (57)

Or the moonlit park where the dance is held:

The main road spiraled upward around a shaggy, bulging foothill, widening occasionally into
shaved areas where redwood tables, benches, washrooms, and seesaws flourished under the red-
woods. Beneath a tarnished silver sky, the picnic structures all stood up like great slabs of granite,
appointed to guide an extinct mathematics and uphold a faith, with thin, shallow rills to lead the
blood away. (83-4)

In both cases, the numinous springs from the most prosaic urban details: skate-boarders, headlights, picnic
tables. But here, as Ursula Le Guin understood when she wrote about the importance of language in reaching “Elfland” rather than Poughkeepsie (“Elfland,” 85-89), Faerie’s presence depends heavily on one of fantasy’s best stylists. Though Beagle himself has said that setting in fantasy is unimportant (qtd. Schlobin, 158), his language strikes the urban environment into startlingly varied moments of numinous vividness.

These settings, it seems, do avoid up-dated tradition, which in the second case would be the whole park, the equivalent of the wood. But the language does more for this effect than the splendidly simple switch of “tarnished silver sky” for “tarnished silver moon.” In particular, it subtly re-introduces two of the central oppositions in The Lord of the Rings.

First is the binary of the industrial versus “natural” or pre-industrial landscape. This very important pair figures outside fantasy in such critical cognitive and cultural divisions as Artificial/ Natural, ur-
The changing but always crucial form of the Man/Nature opposition, in particular, is mapped by the science historiographer Donna Haraway, among others. One of Tolkien’s founding fantasy achievements was to align this binary with the natural oppositions Frye finds in romance: cold/ warm, winter/summer, desolation/ fertility. With it, however, goes an equally widespread and longstanding opposition, that of the present/future to the past.

Unlike such oppositions as light/dark or good/evil itself, these two are relatively unstable hierarchies. The contest of past and future has intensified since the Enlightenment, as the rate of social change accelerated and the industrial future increasingly threatened, and thus romanticized, Europe’s rural past. Though the struggle is recorded in such canonical writers as Wordsworth and Hardy, we may also read SF and fantasy as the fictional counter-forces of the industrial world. While the future may be good or bad in SF, it is unquestionably better than the past. In contrast, with Victorian romances and most modern fantasy, the past may be problematic but is unquestionably more attractive than Here and Now. This of course runs counter to the entire paradigm of progress, and a good-past alignment distinguishes many alternate cultures and ideologies.

In these two citations, however, Beagle’s language shifts the city to the positive side of the old binaries. In the first case, the metaphor “honey-slow” and the simile for the skateboarders “like moths,” make the scene “natural.” In the second, the bravura image of the picnic tables as an urban Stonehenge cartwheels the past/present binary. Something overwhelmingly present is instantly identified with one of the most numinous images from the past. And, moreover, it is specifically identified with the “faith” of that past, while the adjective “extinct” equates mathematics with other glamorous dead creatures like dinosaurs.

The novel closes with the demon suppressed and the tyro witch relieved of her powers, but also with Farrell setting out to find the lost or exiled Sia. In a number of ways, most notably its desire for the past, the novel retains the turn from the Here and Now evident in The Lord of the Rings. At the same time, it does numenize its urban setting, however fleetingly, and it does transfigure the everyday world to bring magic, again however briefly, into that setting. These aspects become more important when we consider Folk against other fantasy texts of the ensuing period.

In the same year as Folk, Megan Lindholm produced a specifically American regional setting with a city numenized by magic, in The Wizard of the Pigeons (1986). In this case, however, the figures of witch and wizard are marginal city-dwellers, and their magic is never more than half affirmed. There is always a possibility that the protagonist is simply hallucinating as an after-effect of trauma in Vietnam. But in 1986 Terri Windling published the first Borderland anthology, and here a shared world presents elves and other traditional supernatural forms in a contemporary American setting. This may well be considered the initiating text for the urban sub-genre in its developed form.

In 1987, developing this approach, Emma Bull’s War for the Oaks offered a named, contemporary
Minneapolis, fought over by European supernatural figures. In 1994 eluki bes shahar’s *The Sword of Maiden’s Tears* sited the struggle in New York, with a monster, produced by an artefact from another world, lurking in the Underground to threaten the citizens, and opposed by an elf from the same Elsewhere. In 1997 Terri Windling’s *The Wood Wife* brought out the original ecological binary, as developers threaten the desert outside Tucson. Here the economic struggle is backgrounded as American and European supernatural figures fight out the struggle for individual lives and happiness. In *War for the Oaks*, however, the struggle is for the City itself. Bull spells it out. “This city is alive with the best magic of mortal folk. The very light off the skyscrapers and the lakes vibrates with it.” But if evil wins, it will become, “A city whose new buildings looked tawdry, whose old ones were ramshackle, where the streets were grimy and the wind was never fresh” (59-60).

These texts are properly regional fantasy: the setting is a specific place whose concrete reality is clearly evoked, and which is rendered numinous in that reality. In *Sword*, the numinous comes with the arrival of otherworldly magic: one of the commonest tropes in fantasy, but itself a variant on the older form, typified by Lewis’s Narnia, where the door in the wardrobe leads to, not from, more numinous worlds. In *Wife* and *Oaks*, as in *Folk*, European traditional figures are imposed on a modern and urban but American setting. The New World becomes numinous. And in *Oaks*, the biggest step beyond Tolkien, the city is not merely the site of squalor and evil that it appears in *Sword*, but a place numinous in its own right.

Combined with the move to shrink the struggle’s global theatre to the local level, this shift explains the blurring or backgrounding of Tolkien’s ecological message. Centre the struggle in a setting now numinously urban, and we collapse the industrial/pre-industrial opposition. The city is The Land. The ecological message will have to go underground with the old natural binaries. But as the Beagle citations make clear, this does not mean they disappear, or even change hierarchy. Nature and the past are still aligned with good.

The next snapshot takes us to *The Death of the Necromancer*, published in 1998, thirteen years after *Folk*. This is Wells’ third fantasy. She may be called an urban fantasy writer proper, since they all use urban secondary world settings. *Necromancer* is set a hundred years after *The Element of Fire* (1993), but in the same country of Ile-Rien – Island of Nowhere? A scion of disgraced nobility, now a “Master Criminal” hunting revenge for his executed foster-father, finds himself fighting a long-dead Necromancer who wants to reclaim his corpse and wreak general havoc. In this fantasy version of Monte Cristo, we find again the smaller stage, with the city as synecdoche for The Land, and the ecological pre-occupation suppressed. Here the moral binary is also reduced. Though the Necromancer threatens everyone, there is only one oblique suggestion that Nicholas Valiarde cares for Ile-Rien as a whole (303), let alone its world. He himself has only “intellectual knowledge of right and wrong” (115), and though he must shed his criminal persona to do
it, the novel ends with his revenge achieved.

Nor does the language invoke the numinous. Wells’ writing is normally utilitarian, and very seldom figurative, relying rather on detail. “Tattered clothes, shroud-like in the wind, a skeletal head, teeth, clawlike hands grinding into the stone” (123). Since this is a ghoul, it is also somewhat stereotypic detail. Further, there are no “good” numinous figures, like Sia in Folk. But there are also no passionate evocations of a lost medieval past. Indeed, the novel ostensibly offers no hint of escapism at all. In Folk, despite those glimpses of a transfigured city, the SCA sequences in particular retain a strong sense of escape. In Necromancer, there is only one world, and it is mostly somber. Valiarde and his allies, including an actress, a cashiered army officer, an opium-addicted wizard and a rescued convict, move through a city that ranges from a dour royal palace down through fog, cold and smog to slums, sewers, and, in both senses, the underworld. Bull’s Minneapolis is much closer to the idealized urbanity of Tolkien’s Minas Tirith, and proto-San Francisco, in Beagle’s hands, is closer still. Nevertheless, Wells achieves the numinous, firstly because, though the city is both industrial and gloomy, it is not contemporary. This time, its closest regional analogue is a Paris of the 19th Century.

This places the novel in a another new sub-genre that I might term recent-history fantasy. We can trace it to the same “well-nigh libidinous historicism,” to use Jameson’s often-quoted phrase (“Postmodernism,” 66), of post-modern nostalgia that has produced historical detective fiction like the work of Anne Perry or Laurie King. Here the fantasy pioneer is probably Ellen Kushner’s Swordspoint. Published in 1987, the same year as Oaks, it used an eponymous urban setting which included slums and the underworld. Its successors tend to favour the Parisian version, as with the analogue Revolutionary Paris of Paula Volsky’s Illusion (1991), and her later The Gates of Twilight (1996), set in a colonial possession. Vonda McIntyre set The Moon and the Sun (1997) in an analogue Versailles, and Barbara Hambly offers a Regency version with the early-industrial imperial capital of Angelshand, in the Windrose trilogy. In all these texts, except perhaps the McIntyre, there is a strong impulse to provide credibility for both setting and numinous non-reality by stringent attention to the dirty side of historical accuracy.

At the same time, the near past is still the past, and hence already aligned with the good side of the past/present binary. And when the analogue original is Paris, its regional mythos far outdoes that of alternate San Francisco. The romantic side, however commodified by Hollywood, operates unabashedly in Le Guin’s first published story, “April in Paris” (1962). But there is also the historical tradition that has lifted Paris into what we may call the urban megatext; the fuzzy but consensual image of the urban historical centre – Paris/London – that accretes from Dumas and Hugo on through Dickens, Poe, Conan Doyle, Orczy, and dozens of other historical novelists, to Volsky, Hambly, Perry and the numerous new Sherlock Holmes novels. Wells actually makes Valiarde’s police opponent an Inspector Ronsarde, famed for his disguises, with a doctor ally. There are also historical echoes such as the glass-roofed railway station (191) and the pair of
spiritualists who parallel the notorious Fox sisters of the late 19th Century (146-47). But primarily this is the low Paris of Poe’s Rue Morgue, the guillotine, Apaches, and the legendary subterranean structures of sewers and catacombs like Les Innocentes. However gritty it appears, and however accurate its verisimilitude, it is already a mythic site, numinous with the air of fictional history.

The combination of sleazy verisimilitude and historical glamour also allows Wells to reclaim a dimension that Beagle and Bull go very near losing: that is, the “dark side” of the numinous. It hardly needs mentioning that the numinous never has been wholly co-opted by the good. As Frye notes, the romance world is open to the supernatural powers both above and below: if it can admit elves or angels, with them must come Sauron and Satan. In Tolkien, of course, numinous evil runs from the mythic absence of Sauron to the “gross-out,” to use Stephen King’s term (40), of Shelob’s dirty, venomous bestiality.

With the scaled down struggle, however, evil also shrinks, and in Beagle and Bull, its cruder aspects are phased out. But in Wells, the older industrial setting regains ample room for the gross and the grotesque. Sewer filth, phosphoric mosses, nasty liquids and gruesome deaths proliferate. Beyond the Necromancer’s disemboweling sacrifices (110-11) are the figures of the Fay, the evil supernatural. This now includes a fair selection from the horror megatext, including ghouls, lichs, or revived corpses, and animated gargoyles, mostly encountered in the major area of action, the sewers.

Clearly we also have here a recycled traditional setting: the cave, the traditional place of testing, ordeal, death, and a tragic or dangerous past, as epitomized by the Rings version of Moria. But sewers are also a site of urban contemporary myth, down to the alligators supposedly flourishing under New York. There are other such settings in Wells, such as the witch Madele’s country house, a blatant recycle of the forest huts of Baba Yaga and Hansel and Gretel’s keeper. In a typically ambiguous manner, Wells makes it both a refuge for the hunted lead characters, and a real Baba Yaga house for their supernatural pursuer, which is eaten by the witch’s Great Spell, the protecting oak (201-13).

Such up-dates function with a new appeal when the hunted prince who seeks the witch’s help arrives by train from the capital (190). But the most important change in Necromancer is also the most significant in the about-turn from There to Here. In Necromancer, in an industrial urban setting, human magic has been naturalized.

It is difficult to over-emphasise the import of this shift. Even in Tolkien, magic is not always natural. In the Shire, Gandalf has to masquerade as a firework-maker. In Beagle, magic is a matter of invasion, misuse, mistake, the illusion of longing for the past, or the momentary transfiguration of the present, and human magic leads to evil. In Bull, the supernatural is native – if European figures can be called so in an American setting – but it is not naturalized, because it is seen through the incredulous eyes of the contemporary protagonist. Hambly’s protagonist performs the same function in the Windrose trilogy, the first time the wizard Antryg makes a magelight in the palm of his hand and she realizes “she had just seen magic”
(Tower, 142). The difference, the non-real, the numinous quality of that unreality, is underlined. It is histor-
ised, but it is very clearly Not Here.

In Wells, however, both the supernatural and human magic operate at something like what Roland
Barthes called the degree zero style in writing (64): that is, they are a matter for neither bad nor good re-
mark. There is no imported real-world observer. In the opening sequence, when Valiarde’s actress ally
Madeline infiltrates a duchess’s ball, the obstacle of sorcerous wards is treated as matter-of-factly as the
human security (Wells, 2). Moreover, while the Fay are spectacularly monstrous, human magic is not
merely native, but legitimate. In Hambly’s trilogy as in Lindholm’s Wizard of the Pigeons, magic is native,
but its practitioners are Othered, as street-people, or as exiles forbidden to use their craft, or to marry. In Ile-
Rien, however, sorcerers may go bad, and certain forms are both evil and illegal, but there is a Court Sor-
cerer, and sorcery is an academic discipline, with its own city, Lodun. This analogue of Oxford is a “lovely
town” (197), replete with houses of a “warm honey colour” (197), gardens – with fairies at the bottom (198)
– and a general air of light and numinous good.

The numinous in this novel then, relies for its distancing less on Faerie than on history, and most
powerfully, it manages to naturalize magic in a world that is not pre-industrial. Set in the period of high in-
dustrialism, it is handicapped in articulating a counter-mode of production, but it faces uncompromisingly
onto that world. In this case, the harmonising solution leaves the Necromancer defeated, with Valiarde and
Madeline forced into temporary exile. The major structures of justice and economics appear unchanged, but
she can resume her proper career, and he has escaped his criminal persona as well as destroying his enemies.
This looks more like a noir or detective novel solution, accepting the system’s endurance but insisting on the
triumph of the individual. Even so, in Ile-Rien, magic has become part of a life that a dispossessed Master
Criminal still finds worth fighting for.

The thirteen years publishing time between Folk and Necromancer thus show further shifts in fan-
tasy’s ability to confront the Here and Now. This is not to say that all fantasy fiction has done so. There is
naturally no uniformity in what has become a fairly large field, and many texts and many readers are still
firmly ensconced in medievalism. Indeed, one reader told me she disliked Folk because it had too much “re-
alism” and not enough fantasy (Selling, e-mail, 1). There is, however, much closer resemblance between
Wells’ novel and Hambly’s Knight of the Demon Queen (2000).

This is the third book in a loose series beginning with Dragonsbane in 1986. While the first was a
singleton, the second and third continue a story that is clearly to close in the fourth, the as yet unreleased
Dragonstar. All use a secondary world where magic is native, as in Ferryth, but whose closest analogue
might be the wane of the Roman Empire. Hambly’s central characters, the witch Jenny Waynest and her
lover, the border lord John Aversin, live in the Winterlands, a province whose weather is as harsh as its life-
style. Knight of the Demon Queen and its predecessor Dragonshadow turn on the attempt of demons to in-
vade this world. The conflict is again global, although it carries a persistent local inflection, as Aversin struggles to protect his own tiny bailiwick, fighting bandits, bargaining for help from the distant king, and salvaging the literal remnants of books to keep learning alive.

In this case, the pre-industrial There is a very far cry even from Tolkien’s Shire. It is harsh, cruel, populated with corrupt nobles, weak rulers, and a definitely peasant lower class. Human magic, as often in Hambly, is also limited. Jenny Waynest is a mediocre witch. Her climb to the usual excessive power of the fantasy protagonist comes through traffic with the dragons that, although natural to the world, are also its clearest form of the desired Elsewhere, the true shapes of Faerie. This does not, however, make them automatically good.

Nevertheless, like Beagle, Hambly is a considerable stylist, and while she is capable of thoroughly gross monsters, her use of light and dark imagery is memorable, especially with the most important dragon, Morkeleb. In the first book a traditional invading monster, by the third he can take human shape, and is trying to understand transitory human life, “a thing not of dragons” to use the series’ catch-phrase. In his own form, Morkeleb is now transparent so “the full moon’s light blazed through him as if he were smoke and dreams,” and his “shadow … was a mottle of silver and ash” (181). But Hambly’s writing transfigures the barest details of her de-mythicized world. When Aversin visits a plague victim, “the light had sickened, and a harsh wind yanked at [his] hair and plaids” (19). Scouting a raided homestead, Jenny moves through “the zebra-striped silence of the woods” (51) and the first image of a demon shows “a bloated soft thing of quicksilver and green fire in which the half-digested glowing remains of other Hellspawn fitfully moved. His eyes were like fire seen through coloured glass” (8).

Although this sounds closer to Beagle than Wells, the unromantic far past is not the book’s real innovation. This comes when Aversin, repaying a debt to the demon queen, is forced to enter another, urban world of “jostling crowds,” where “the noise was dizzying, the sides of the buildings plastered and patched with garish lights “ (120), and “Monstrous buildings; blocks of darkness … defin[ed] street upon half-drowned street; …iron-hued streets disappearing into infinity with the glare of neon and ad screens and ether light illuminating ash-coloured clouds” (172).

This is clearly a future dystopia extrapolated from our own world, with its nets of underground railways and computer links, its number-hearted people, its out-of-control gangs and everyday happy-drugs and adscreens in every apartment, that cost money not to run, but to turn down. In this “Hell of Walls” as Aversin calls it (126), wizards are reduced to echoes of New Age occultists, urban contemporary losers who form leagues of misfits and read books about the magic they “just want… to be real” (149). In its verisimilitude as well as its self-reflexiveness, this aspect of the novel is closer to Galaxy Quest, though harsher than the view of an SCA that Beagle does manage to make numinous, despite its escapism.

Nevertheless, this world entertains the supernatural, if only its evil forms. More importantly, human
magic is native too. At first it is only a rumour from the past. The wannabe wizard Shamble tells Aversin that it does not work because the pure metal and jewels required for power have all been replaced by synthetics (164-65), but in the end, among the losers thumbing through occult encyclopedias and re-inscribing sigils and pentagrams, Aversin thinks that at least one true mage remains (251).

The closest parallel to this text appears to be Sheri S. Tepper’s Beauty (1992), the only other fantasy text to confront the future as well as Here and Now. It is also one of the most powerful as well as one of the most explicit treatments of the ecological message. Industrialism, manifesting as development, is attacked overtly, but there is no escape to an Other World. Westfaire is a past subject to irremediable time and destruction. The glorious vision of Chinanga is the exploding product of a wizard’s mind. Fiddipur is a truly dystopic future for the industrialized Here and Now. And in complete contrast to Tolkien, down to the very last there is no certainty of the Dark Power’s defeat. It is only a hope that The Land, the natural world represented by the seeds of life that Beauty tucks away in her ark, will actually survive.

Like Tepper, Hambly erodes the past/future binary by de-mythicizing the past, while presenting a future urban dystopia apparently shorn of magic, and far uglier than either the grindingly mundane reality glimpsed through Beagle’s numinous transformations, or the half-mythic squalor of Wells’ urban past. Again, both texts return to Tolkien’s global theatre, and the struggle of good and evil is overt. If there is no plain ecological message in Hambly, The Land is clearly of the highest importance. But in Hambly’s future, however helpless and marginalized and far from imposing a new mode of production they may be, human mages do exist. Magic has become native. The desiring self has transfigured the everyday world, and the fantasy text has been able to confront, not merely the present, but the future beyond.

It is difficult to tell if Hambly will reach a closure as harshly unharmonised as Tepper’s, but Demon Queen leaves Jenny shorn of magic and apparently dying of poison, while Aversin is about to be burned for demon traffic, after betrayal by the very institutions of royalty and justice for which he has fought most of his life. That is, the past is marginally better than the future, but it is no kind of escape. In this Hambly also appears to be moving with the recent trends in fantasy epitomized by George R. R. Martin’s Tale of Fire and Ice series. Here the past looks more like The Wars of the Roses than “The Idylls of the King.”

Overall, these variations suggest ongoing attempts, if not success, in articulating a counter-mode of production to industrialism and/or global capitalism. In Beagle, Wells and Hambly’s texts, finding the numinous is not a matter of leaving the “real” world, but of forcing the real world to become non-real. For the genre, it implies both an expansion of imaginative boundaries, and an attempt to figure competing modes of production in a far more immediate manner. More importantly, it is a major shift in perspective. With these texts, fantasy fiction turns from denying industrial reality toward a determined initiative to make that industrial world not only numinous, but worth fighting for.

These texts also fit a time when global capitalism seems to have reached its apogee. When its
slash and burn exploitation of natural resources is about to enforce its own restraints. Where there simply IS no more world to exploit, and if humanity wants to survive, it will have to change its thinking along with its economics, and either become ecologically responsible, or destroy its habitat. The signs that this mode of production has passed its use-by date are growing steadily more obvious. Global warming, acid rain, rainforest destruction, pollution… the litany is becoming a cliché too.

The counter-mode is not yet clear, but it appears, from these texts, that we may also have to give up that old, seductive paradigm of progress, and consider something less one-way, and less linear. In fact, to go forward we may have to take a few steps back, and start rethinking our concept of Nature. Learning lessons from less “advanced” cultures, and treating the earth – the setting, the landscape – as something less of an expendable resource, and more a numinous presence that demands respect.

As Pam Rosenthal remarks, popular culture “promises at best, to give narrative and symbolic coherence to popular questions and anxieties. It does not promise structural solutions” (100). But Frye has long seen romance as not merely older than the novel (306) but “naturally a more revolutionary form” (305), so that “however conservative” its writer, “something nihilistic and untamable is likely to keep breaking out of his pages” (305). If these texts do not preach revolution, if they cannot articulate a whole new mode of production, if they are only a minor voice in a genre still determinedly focused away from Here and Now, nevertheless, they suggest a more determined attempt to transfigure, and to fight for, the Here and Now they so dourly confront.

One final difference divides all the texts, including Tolkien, from medieval romance. They have no noble protagonists. As we all know, it is another of Tolkien’s founding innovations that those who carry the brunt of the Ring quest are the lowliest members of the cast. The same is true of Folk, where, if Sia defeats her son, it is up to Farrell, the lute-playing drifter, to recover Sia – to bring good magic back into the world? In Wells, the protagonist is a dispossessed nobleman, but more importantly, an orphaned criminal. In Hambly, the lead characters are not even minor nobility.

We may well argue that this figures one aspect of a genuine counter-mode of production, however much its narrative solutions compromise. This is firstly because, however happy the ending, all the texts insist, firstly, that the world can only be saved by fighting for it, and secondly, that the fight can no longer be left to wizards and kings. This trope is, of course, a fantasy in the truest sense, parallel to the children’s consolatory fiction of being adopted, born of far more glamorous origins. The ordinary or even outcast protagonist who proves to be an outstanding wizard, amazingly gifted, the world’s saviour, is indeed a major avenue for readerly escapism. But when fantasy moves into settings so close to Here and Now, the other side of the message becomes far clearer. And if we do pay attention, it affirms Tolkien’s statement that, “Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun” (144). In this case the hard recognition is not the loss of magic, or the certainty of death, but the realization that if
we don’t fight for these things, no-one will. The social order is not stable – if it ever was – and the noblesse will no longer oblige, or disoblige. If we want to save anything we value, from the green earth up or down, we will have to act for it. We will have to accept something that has always been more frightening than the reality principle: personal responsibility.

Does this argue, as a reviewer of this article suggested, that these urban settings indicate a “re-engagement of fantasy with history?” My first response would be to ask, Was it ever a function of fantasy, in any sense, to engage with history? Certainly not from the psychoanalytic view, perhaps not from Rosemary Jackson’s. And maybe not from the sense Frye adumbrates, of the revolutionary, perhaps nihilistic force of imagination that is never ultimately predictable: “it’s not like he’s a tame lion,” after all.

More pragmatically, such settings may indicate simple generic innovation, compelled by the need to provide more of the different same: that is, the pre-industrial past is imaginatively exhausted, but the audience still desires a past with numinous resonance. A fairly clear parallel emerges with the increasingly farflung historical settings in the even more popular genre of detective fiction. A detective Alexander the Great makes Sherlock Holmes appear positively contemporary, but I am not sure it indicates any kind of engagement with history itself.

The second consideration is, does the “re-engagement with history” apply to the fantasy texts alone, or to the genre as a whole, and if so, does it include the writers, and further, the audience? To say that “fantasy is re-engaging with history” seems a somewhat overlarge claim to base on a handful of texts that are by no means fantasy best-sellers, without any evidence of their effect on the audience. My own reading restricts itself to the message of the texts. I would by no means extend it either to the author’s intention or the reception of the text.

Overall, however, I would want to rephrase the question, since I consider all fantasy fiction, that is, the text proper, always engages with history, because it uses the past as a narrative convention, just as Samuel Delany argues SF uses the future (47). That is, history, of whatever sort and however distorted, is fantasy’s necessary medium. To paraphrase Fredric Jameson on popular fiction in general, it reasons in fiction by using the past, just as SF does with the future.

This leads to the less obvious corollary: however far the fantasy text turns from Here and Now, the past it creates is moulded by that present. As The Lord of the Rings indicates, creating a pre-industrial secondary world is only another way of thinking about the questions important in that Here and Now. So every use of the past in fantasy fiction, pre-industrial or urban, reveals less of a successful or unsuccessful engagement with history, than the inescapable nature of the present from which the fiction springs.

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WORKS CITED

--- E-mail to the Author, 2001.


Peter S. Beagle. Paranormal Romance. Introduction: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Urban Fantasy. In the same way, my main notion of urban fantasy is fantasy that takes place in an urban. Which to my mind—conditioned by years of Pogo and Dr. Seuss—is what's left when your favorite Sunday turban has gone one too many times through the wash. But more seriously… I was also intrigued by world religions, as well as by divination systems such as the I Ching, runes, etc. There wasn't a great deal of fantasy fiction available but fortunately my appetite for fiction went beyond fantastic literature. Mainstream, westerns, mysteries, detective novels; anything with strong characters and a good story appealed to me. Peter S. Beagle burst upon the literary scene in 1960 with the publication of his first novel, A Fine and Private Place, written before he was twenty years old. After that auspicious beginning he slowed down a bit but still produced a significant and well-received body of work, including ‘Come Lady Death,’ 1963, a novella; I See By My Outfit, 1979, a memoir of a cross-country motorscooter trip; The Last Unicorn, 1968, his comic masterpiece and best-known novel; ‘Lila the Werewolf,’ 1971, another novella; The Folk of the Air. Beagle harbors some hopes of a live-action film at some point in the future, given the successes of the Tolkien and C. S. Lewis fantasy films. She sees terror as an important element of the Urban Gothic, as well as an explicitly modern urban setting. Fantasy-Related Subreddits. For Fantasy Writers. Signup: The Fantasy Writer of the Day. Visit r/fantasywriters for help with your novel. Visit r/selfpublish for help with self-publishing. I know the behavior of Beagle via Conlan Press has been discussed previously in this subreddit, so I thought that the members here might be interested in knowing about this. Filed Nov. 24th, 2015 in Alameda County Court. Whatever happens, I hope Mr. Beagle finds financial security and stability, as well as some well-deserved peace.