

Introduction

In Robert Sheckley's short story "Cordle to Onion to Carrot," the god Thoth-Hermes advises the hallucinating Albert Cordle, "Don't pick at the metaphor, it leaves a nasty scab." With all due apologies to Robert Sheckley, we are going for a walk into the woods, and we will see how resilient this metaphor proves.

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When you go for a walk into the woods, how far in do you stroll before you sense that you are in the woods? Is it a change in the light, the sudden rustling noise off just out of sight, or a change in humidity and the rising odor of forest wrack and decay? Are you walking on a well-trodden path, an overgrown by-way, or a faint trail with occasional blazes or daubs of paint to suggest where the next steps lead? Or are you pushing your way through bramble and dog rose and dense undergrowth? Each of these questions has a series of answers contingent upon where these woods are, who you are, and why you are walking into the woods.

My friend Mark Valentine has observed customs among walkers in Yorkshire, and writes,

There is a delicate piece of social nicety that tells you how far you are in the woods (or the country). If you meet people near the car park or houses, you ignore them or at most give a brief nod. Further in, when there is only you and them, a verbal greeting is required. "Good Morning/Afternoon/Evening." Jo and I have noticed this almost infallibly, and it's even possible to pinpoint the exact place at which "near the car park" gives way to "in the woods."

So: are you a flâneur in the Bois de Boulogne? a woodcutter felling a forest giant? Are you clearing away brush to give a sapling room to grow? walking the dog? a survivalist foraging for acorns or seeking to disappear into the woods? a dendrochronologist? or someone looking at leaves and the play of light and shadow?

from *A Conversation larger than the Universe*
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A Conversation larger than the Universe charts a history of science fiction and the literature of the fantastic. These essays take their shape from my reading and thinking about science fiction during the past twenty-five years. Sometimes I am looking afresh at books read in childhood and early youth; at other times I am thinking about writers and ideas that are new lines of interest, or reading books suggested to me by friends. The chronology, from 1762 to 2017, proceeds from the Gothic origins of science fiction to works by contemporary writers (sometimes friends) whose books and ideas shape the ongoing conversation that is the field of science fiction.

In 1952, Damon Knight wrote that the “science fiction” label is a misnomer, but that “it will do us no particular harm if we remember that, like ‘The Saturday Evening Post,’ it means what we point to when we say it.” *The Saturday Evening Post* no longer means the same thing it did in 1952 (if it even retains any meaning), and science fiction, too, has evolved in the succeeding decades. The brilliant critic John Clute employs the term “fantastika” to describe “that wide range of fictional works whose contents are understood to be fantastic.” In his view, in the late eighteenth century, “the creation of geological time and evolutionary change began to carve holes in reality, which became suddenly malleable.”

Any descriptive label is inherently retrospective; that is why it is so fruitful to look at origins. Writers are doing things, and it is readers (and, eventually, writers) who discern connections and filiation in modes of writing, aims, and forms.

I use the terms “science fiction” and “the literature of the fantastic” more or less interchangeably to refer to a mode of writing (and reading). Science fiction, fantasy, and horror are often viewed as distinct forms (largely for marketing purposes), but all three have their roots in the Gothic and share a common approach: to make the reader experience realities other than our ordinary reality.

These essays are published in celebration of the bicentennial of the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Her novel of the implications of technological change marks the point at which science fiction emerges from the Gothic. Brian Aldiss has long been a champion of this view. (We are still in the car park, so I will simply nod here at Mr. Aldiss and will discuss his work in a later chapter.)

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How does an artist think about philosophical issues, except by making art? And by observing the present, exaggerating or extrapolating from an idea, asking, "What if?" *Swastika Night*, Katharine Burdekin's 1937 novel of a nightmare Nazi-dominated future, is evidence that some people fully grasped the nature of the Nazi menace. That science fiction writers are only occasionally activists or politicians does not diminish the clarity of their observations.

The 1920s are another period of note in the chronology of science fiction, when Hugo Gernsback began publishing "scientific fiction" in *Amazing Stories* and other pulp magazines. This was also the decade that saw publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. The quality of the writing in the genre magazines varied widely, but in many ways the pulps operated in defiance of modernism, initiating a learned or self-imposed isolation that lasted until the 1960s, when the New Wave writers such as J. G. Ballard and Tom Disch and Joanna Russ asserted literary excellence as inseparable from the aims of science fiction. Science fiction was never at a distance from literary activity. Look at Shelley or Wells. Literature never excluded science fiction until it excluded itself. That said, science fiction is an identifiable literary mode, with histories and traditions, and so now, when writers explore science fiction ideas in their work, one may reasonably ask, What have they read? Or to phrase the question in another form, How does the new book or story fit into, or work against, earlier works in the tradition?

William S. Wilson wrote, "Writing within conventions of language, and of genre, is like swimming in society rather than in a pond under a waterfall." My interests as a reader have often led me away from the ca-

nonical texts of science fiction to the edges of the fantastic. Russell Hoban, author of *Riddley Walker*, wrote a series of novels in later years that are a good example of this process: concise, nimble, and lucid prose narratives, mostly set in a London we can recognize, and yet — call it magic, call it dislocation — something happens. Along the boundaries is where such distinctions are sharpest, where the fantastic is not so much a place you get to as it is the way you went.

These essays are rooted in my own bookshelves. I collect by synecdoche, meiosis, and metonymy, as well as by inclination, and by ties of friendship. One book will represent a decade or a movement for me; a small pamphlet opens a vista into the work of an author; and as a reader sometimes I find notions and ideas of interest in a book that has been neglected or overshadowed.

There are, of course, omissions in my collection: no Poe, no Tolkien, Asimov, or Heinlein, for matters of inclination and means; Lewis Carroll's *Alice* is represented by evocation in *Little, Big* and in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; if there had been a Doves Press edition of *The Tempest*, I would as gladly own that as the *Hamlet*.

It is the authors and their words that interest me. In the essays that follow, you will see why I have found these books worth reading: science fiction as a way of looking at the world.

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