

## Fantasy and the Buffered Self

*Alan Jacobs*

When asked by the editors of the website *The Immanent Frame* to summarize the key concerns of his vastly ambitious book *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor wrote,

Almost everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of five hundred years ago is that they lived in an “enchanted” world, and we do not; at the very least, we live in a *much less* “enchanted” world. We might think of this as our having “lost” a number of beliefs and the practices which they made possible. But more, the enchanted world was one in which these forces could cross a porous boundary and shape our lives, psychic and physical. One of the big differences between us and them is that we live with a much firmer sense of the boundary between self and other. We are “buffered” selves. We have changed.

As Taylor makes clear, the shift from a porous to a buffered self involves a complex series of exchanges. But to put that shift in simple terms, a person accepts a buffered condition as a means of being protected from the demonic or otherwise ominous forces that in pre-modern times generated a quavering network of terrors. To be a pre-modern person, in Taylor’s account, is to be constantly in danger of being invaded or overcome by demons or fairies or nameless terrors of the dark—of being possessed and transformed, or spirited away and never returned to home and family. Keith Thomas’s magisterial *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) specifies many of these dangers, along with the whole panoply of prayers, rites, amulets, potions, chants, spells, and the like, by which a person might seek protection from the otherwise irresistible. It is easy, then, to imagine why a person—or a whole culture—might, if it could, exchange this model of a self with highly permeable boundaries for one in which the self feels better protected, defended—impermeable, or nearly so.

The problem with this apparently straightforward transaction is that the porous self is open to the divine as well as to the demonic, while

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the buffered self is closed to both alike. Those who must guard against capture by fairies are necessarily and by the same token receptive to mystical experiences. The “showings” manifested to Julian of Norwich depend upon exceptional sensitivity, which is to say porosity—vulnerability to incursions of the supernatural. The portals of the self cannot be closed on one side only. But the achievement of a safely buffered personhood—closed off from both the divine and the demonic—is soon enough accompanied by a deeply felt change in the very cosmos. As C. S. Lewis notes in *The Discarded Image* (1964), the medieval person who found himself “looking up at a world lighted, warmed, and resonant with music” gives way to the modern person who perceives only emptiness and silence. Safety is purchased at the high price of isolation, as we see as early as Pascal, who famously wrote of the night sky, “*Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie*” (“The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me”).

In these circumstances, one might expect people to ask whether so difficult and costly an exchange is in fact necessary. Might it not be possible to experience the benefits, while avoiding the costs, of both the porous and the buffered self? I want to argue here that it is precisely this desire that accounts for the rise to cultural prominence, in late modernity, of the artistic genre of *fantasy*. Fantasy—in books, films, television shows, and indeed in all imaginable media—is an instrument by which the late modern self strives to avail itself of the unpredictable excitements of the porous self while retaining its protective buffers. Fantasy, in most of its recent forms, may best be understood as a technologically enabled, and therefore *safe*, simulacrum of the pre-modern porous self.

Before pursuing my argument, I must make two clarifications. First, fantasy itself is not a recent development but rather an ancient form (though not under its current name). What we now call “fantasy” is something closer to “realism” in the pagan world, which is populated by many powers capable of acting upon “porous” human selves. In the pagan world, success in life is largely a matter of navigating safely among those powers, which are unpredictable, beyond good and evil, and often indifferent to human needs. (Such indifference means that they can help as well as hurt, but also that their assistance can never be relied upon.) In this environment, fantastic creatures are at the very least personifications or embodiments of powers genuinely believed to exist. The realism is not strict, in that the writers and readers of earlier times did not necessarily believe in the existence of precisely such creatures as were described in their stories—perhaps not Apollo or Artemis any more than Dante’s Geryon or Spenser’s Blatant Beast, though such questions are necessarily

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and notoriously vexed. But at the very least the pre-modern world is one in which powers *like* those hold sway and cannot be safely neglected; a world in which what we would call the fantastic is an intrinsic element of the real.

Second, some of the most celebrated practitioners of modern fantasy share with their pre-modern predecessors this belief that the fictional apparatus of fantasy is a relatively close approximation to the way things really are for human beings. J. R. R. Tolkien may not have believed in Sauron, but he surely believed that there are in human history people who sell themselves to the Enemy and find themselves as a result of that decision first empowered and then destroyed. And when, at the beginning of Lewis's *Perelandra* (1944), the protagonist Ransom's progress toward a friend's house is impeded by invisible forces who fill him with fear, Lewis was describing the work of spirits whom he truly believed to exist, though under a slightly different description, just as he probably believed that *some* forms of scientific rationalism are the product of demonic influence. In short, these writers sought to present their readers with an image of an enchanted world, of selves fully porous to supernatural forces. But because they did so in genres (fantasy, science fiction) known for the imaginative portrayal of the wholly nonexistent, readers confident in their buffered condition can be delighted by those stories without ever for a moment considering the possibility that the forces portrayed therein might correspond to something real. Indeed, the delight of the stories for such readers consists primarily in their perceived unreality.

### Concentrating Spiritual Power

The Judeo-Christian world is alien to the pagan one primarily in its concentration—in most of its versions—of all power in the hands of an omnipotent God, from whom everything else has only derivative strength, virtue, and indeed existence. People who do not accept this account of things commonly perceive it as comforting, though a reading of the first chapter of the book of Job—with its bland explanation that the Satanic torments of a righteous man occur at the explicit permission of the Almighty—should be enough to complicate that view. On the other hand, people fully shaped by this account of the world, with its emphasis on explaining why there is something rather than nothing, will necessarily find paganism insufficiently curious about where the powers that afflict human lives come from. After all, many pagan mythologies have no creation stories, or thin, minor ones. The powers of the pagan

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world just *are*: to reckon with them—to appease or evade them, to thwart them with some greater power, to swear fidelity to them—is a full-time job; there can be little energy left over to speculate about their origins.

So radical monotheism, though it does not alter the condition of porosity, and does not disenchant the world, forcefully concentrates charisma. As Leon R. Kass points out in his commentary on Genesis *The Beginning of Wisdom* (2003), the very description of “the heavens and the earth” as created by God constitutes a denial of what the pagans surrounding the Israelites most fully believed: that the sun, moon, and stars are sentient powers worthy of (or at least demanding) our worship. The cult of Yahweh would have looked to the surrounding nations like a kind of atheism. People seem to have a natural predisposition towards animism, or towards a pagan belief in multiple competitive powers. The rise of Christianity in pagan lands did not diminish this tendency. Discussing the early Christian era in the old but still useful book *Conversion* (1933), Arthur Darby Nock writes, “it is certain that the majority of converts regarded the old objects of their worship as existent, worsted indeed by Christ but still active and not wholly to be deprived of their activity till the coming of the kingdom of God.” For leaders of the early church like Tertullian, Christ is indeed a deliverer, but he delivers us less from sin than from the demonic powers we once worshipped.

The Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* provides a strong example of this state of mind. Though the poet wishes to commend the Christian God and repudiate paganism utterly, he struggles to conceive of a God in whom *all* power resides. Thus this passage (in Seamus Heaney’s translation):

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed  
offerings to idols, swore oaths  
that the killer of souls might come to their aid  
and save the people. That was their way,  
their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts  
they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge  
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,  
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,  
was unknown to them.

And yet again and again the poem presents God as merely the greatest power in a world that has many powers.

The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished  
and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth

had the strong links and locks of his war-gear  
not helped to save him: holy God  
decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,  
the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance  
once Beowulf got back up on his feet.

Similarly, Hrothgar says, “My household guard / are on the wane, fate sweeps them away / into Grendel’s clutches—but God can easily / halt these raids and harrowing attacks!” The poem and its characters make formal boasts on behalf of God much like the ones that the heroes make for themselves; God is portrayed not so much as the creator of the universe and all that dwells therein but rather as the mightiest of warriors. The implicit theology here is ontologically blurred, the nature of the distinction between God and creature unclear or perhaps unthought. The argument of the poem is Christian, its sensibilities largely pagan.

And much the same is true of the whole social order that Keith Thomas describes in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. One of the great tasks of the Reformation was to break up a richly various ecology of power, in which the duly-performed rites of the Church and its consecrated objects formed weapons against various hostile forces that manifested themselves in illness and death, bad luck and bad harvests. The leading Reformers certainly believed in the inevitability of “spiritual warfare”: Did not Paul the Apostle himself say, “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12)? But the Reformers insisted that those forces existed only by the permissive will of the Father, and that the *only* weapon God had provided to overcome those forces is the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross. “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). The Reformation, is, in Charles Taylor’s phrase, “an engine of disenchantment”; by concentrating all power in the being and acts of the Triune God it drains the world of spiritual energies.

And yet even in Milton, *the* poet of Reformed theology, we see how the fallen angels, the soldiers of Lucifer, came to be (wrongly) worshipped on earth as gods. Their power is wholly derivative, enabled only by Divine sufferance, but very real, and very dangerous. So we might say that,

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however powerful the Reformation is as an “engine of disenchantment,” the world does not want to *stay* disenchanted. From the repudiation of animism in the first verses of Genesis to the anathemas pronounced by today’s New Atheists, the forces of disenchantment find that their work is never done, that belief in a world saturated with sentience is like the Hydra’s head, unkillable and endlessly prolific. One example may stand in for many. When Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII and his son Edward VI, sought to replace the roster of sacred objects in medieval Catholicism with a focus on the Word, as exemplified in English Bibles and Scripture-filled prayer books, immediately the printers of England began to make tiny Bibles and tiny prayer books—too small to read, but large enough to serve as a new kind of sacred object, the protective amulet in codex form.

But the disenchanters persisted, and their persistence proved immensely consequential. Taylor writes:

Not just on a level of popular belief, as a world of spirits, do we have to disenchant the universe; we have also to bring about the analogous shift on the high cultural level of science, and trade in a universe of ordered signs, in which everything has a meaning, for a silent but beneficent machine.

“It is not an accident,” he continues, “that this kind of science flourished in England and Holland,” where Protestantism was particularly strong. The emphasis on the Godhead as bearing all spiritual power unwittingly and reluctantly paved the way for Deism—a view of God as engineer, now absent from his design, and of the world as pocket-watch running on its own—which in turn paved the way for atheism.

It is vital to realize that this is not a draining of power as such from the world; only the radical concentrating (and therefore in a sense limiting) of *spiritual* power. Keith Thomas demonstrates that the Reformers’ undermining of the sacramental system of the medieval church, and its allied emphasis on the communion of saints, cleared the ground for the emergence of two rival, compensatory forces explaining the physical world: magic and science. These two became competing candidates to replace the enchanted world of the medieval church. As C. S. Lewis puts it in *The Abolition of Man* (1944),

The fact that the scientist has succeeded where the magician failed has put such a wide contrast between them in popular thought that the real story of the birth of Science is misunderstood. You will even find

people who write about the sixteenth century as if Magic were a medieval survival and Science the new thing that came in to sweep it away. Those who have studied the period know better. There was very little magic in the Middle Ages: the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the high noon of magic. The serious magical endeavour and the serious scientific endeavour are twins: one was sickly and died, the other strong and thrived. But they were twins. They were born of the same impulse.

Similarly, Lewis writes elsewhere that the modern scientific “endeavor is no doubt contrasted in our minds with that of the magicians: but contrasted only in the light of the event, only because we know that science succeeded and magic failed. That event was then still uncertain. Stripping off our knowledge of it, we see at once that [Francis] Bacon and the magicians have the closest possible affinity. Both seek knowledge for the sake of power. . . . Nor would Bacon himself deny the affinity: he thought the aim of the magicians was ‘noble.’” Just as Christianity relocates spiritual power from dispersed, competitive sources to the One source of God Himself, so too the technological achievements that arise from modern science locate physical power in the material realm. Restraint of spirits by magic yields to control of a disenchanted “environment” by technology.

But again, the desire for a world resonant with spiritual meaning, of one kind or another, does not easily die—perhaps *cannot* die until humanity itself does. Technology is power, but disenchanted power. And so the more dominant mechanical and then electronic technologies become as shapers of the social order, the more ingenious grow the strategies of resistance to their disenchanting force—the strategies by which we deny the necessary materiality of power. In the literary realm, the chief such strategy is the emergence of fantasy genre.

### Loss, But Relief as Well

Richard Holmes’s fascinating book *The Age of Wonder* (2008) features the kind of pedantically explanatory subtitle so beloved in American publishing today: *How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*. The great chemist and general experimenter Humphry Davy, we are told, also wrote verse, and saw no conflict among his various intellectual pursuits. Neither did his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was moved by his correspondence with Davy to make his own scientific observations. In Germany, Goethe was the greatest poet of his era but also a lifelong student of the natural world: he wrote major works on plants and was fascinated by optics and by the theory of color.

But these figures came from the first generation of Romanticism; as the years wore on, doubts arose that the sciences and arts could be fully reconciled. John Keats, twenty-three years younger than Coleridge, studied to become a physician, and early in his career as a poet, in his sonnet on Chapman's translation of Homer, could speak warmly of "some watcher of the skies"—probably the astronomer William Herschel. But only four years later, in the narrative poem "Lamia," he would write skeptically and even scathingly of science, or what he would have called "natural philosophy": "Do not all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy?" Philosophical study must, it seems, "unweave the rainbow." By the end of his short life Keats had rejected such forms of knowledge and turned his attention instead to a poetic reinvigoration of Greek mythology.

Let Keats's experience stand as exemplary of the general tendency, increasingly dominant as the nineteenth century progressed, of the paths of knowledge to diverge from each other. The nineteenth century is when the sciences (especially new technologies of communication and transportation) and humanities (especially religion) truly become, in C. P. Snow's notorious formulation, "the two cultures." Dickens's contrast between Coketown and the circus, head and heart, in *Hard Times* might be an image of the whole century, at least as it appeared to one who had taken the path of the heart. An adherent of the other side might call up an (equally fictional) image of Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's "bulldog," crushing Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, "Soapy Sam," in their 1860 Oxford debate about the theory of evolution. This story of divergence has in general terms been told often enough, or too often, and the emergence of fantasy—as exemplified by the stories of George MacDonald and Lewis Carroll and by the fairy tales retold by Andrew Lang—has often played a part in it. But it seems to me that fantasy plays a distinctive role that has not been fully understood, a role that centers on the problem of a thoroughly buffered self under an increasingly omnipotent technopoly.

We have seen from Pascal's comment about the silence of the Copernican universe that discomfort with a disenchanted world is coterminous with disenchantment itself. Relief and loss commingle in the experience of disenchantment. "It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist," Emerson wrote in his essay "Experience." "That discovery is called the Fall of Man." The problem is that *we* exist but the world around does not, or does not in the same way that we do. It is either dead or a fictional projection of our

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perceptions. But a disenchanting world then spreads its disenchantment to us. Emerson immediately continues, “Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments”—our *instruments*, our sensorium reduced to a set of mechanical operations. Technological advancement intensifies this self-suspicion: at the very moment that the Western technocracy seems to achieve its apotheosis—in the immediate aftermath of World War II, with the Axis powers defeated by the powers of American engineering (with a little help from its friends)—the poet W. H. Auden calls his time “the age of anxiety.” Shortly thereafter, the sociologist David Riesman would write of *The Lonely Crowd* (1961). Existentialism is the dominant philosophy, its lingo always on the lips of the intelligentsia; the unhappy discovery that we exist is our only sure discovery.

Not all people, of course, suspect their instruments. Consider as an emblem of a more confident species Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose creation of that perfectly rational machine Sherlock Holmes gives him a platform from which to announce his belief in the reality of the Cottingley Fairies—a simple hoax created by two girls using images scissored from books and double-exposed photographs—which Doyle took as irrefutable evidence that fairies dwell among us and that we are merely too dull-witted to discern them. It is a conceit that Tolkien later picks up on, in the prologue “Concerning Hobbits” to *The Lord of the Rings*, in which he insists that hobbits are still around but have sufficient skill to avoid being seen “when large folk whom they do not wish to meet come blundering by.” But Tolkien knows that this is but a conceit, and one he dare not hang a whole tale on; Doyle did not.

Such confidence as Doyle exhibited in “our instruments”—the instruments of modern technology—is rare. The general literary conventions concerning fairies, or more accurately the enchanted land of Faerie, identify it as a place that we must cross over into. It lies somehow crosswise to our time and space and most assuredly cannot be discerned by technological instruments, nor by natural ones except in special cases. Some people cannot see Faerie at all; others can, but only in certain conditions. (The same variability may be noted in whole cultures.) Doors appear for a time, or paths into the woods; if they are not then entered, they may disappear, to be searched for passionately but never again found. Likewise, if entered they tend to close forever or disappear; the Way In is unlikely to be a Way Out. And those who return are always changed by the experience.

In these senses, Faerie may be identified as a spatially realized and materially detailed embodiment of all numinous or mystical experiences.

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Wordsworth did not write about Faerie but he wrote often about the loss of a mystical light typically perceived by children: “At length the Man perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day.” Occasionally, as in “Tintern Abbey,” he tries to convince himself, and us, that “for such loss” there can be “abundant recompense,” but his heart does not seem to be in the claim. And so the closing of Faerie’s doors to the adult is a common theme in our tales. For Lord Dunsany, the Irish fantasist who was Doyle’s younger contemporary, those doors close because that is what we desire, as a character in *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* (1924) says,

And you that sought for magic in your youth but desire it not in your age, know that there is a blindness of spirit which comes from age, more black than the blindness of eye, making a darkness about you across which nothing may be seen, or felt, or known, or in any way apprehended.

But of course, one reason why adults “desire it not” is that they have learned how dangerous it is. Children do not realize the danger, which is why there are so many tales of their being lured into Faerie by various promises. (In *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* itself, one small child declines an invitation to enter Elfland only because she knows her mother has baked a jam tart for her back home.) Tolkien, in his great essay “On Fairy-Stories,” refers to Faerie as “that fair and perilous land,” a description repeated by Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* in reference to Lothlórien.

Now, Aragorn immediately adds, “but only evil need fear it, or those who bring some evil with them.” But who can be sure that she brings no evil into that other realm? This is one of the chief causes of its peril. When the boundaries between our world and Faerie grow porous, and we choose to pass through the membrane, then we open the whole of our self to perception and judgment by the powerful beings who dwell there. No wonder the elderly come to “desire it not.” We may be self-exiled from Faerie through fear.

For Lord Dunsany, Elfland mirrors our world. The enchanted sword his hero Alveric brings into Elfland works there to disempower and disenchant. Dunsany’s narrator even comments that there is less mystery in Elfland than in our world, because there the nature of things is shown openly. We experience, therefore, a delight in contemplating Faerie from a distance, as it were—almost like Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” experiencing the power of Nature not directly but through observation of his younger sister’s delight. Insofar as there is “recompense” for Wordsworth’s own loss of mys-

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tical experience it is this: that he can *discern* the numinous without being *porous* to it. This point may contain in a phrase the appeal of fantasy.

### New Gods for Old

The story so far covers the Romantic response to the powers and claims of the Industrial Revolution—the re-creation of Faerie, not as a real threat to the children of the village, but as a realm that an urban society might well delight in as unreachable by steam engine and locomotive. But two hundred years later the situation looks rather different, though the difference is one of dramatic intensification rather than a turning. The delights of a written land of Faerie have scarcely diminished, to judge by the sales of fantasy novels and comics, but the increasing power of electronic simulacra—especially through television, film, and the various sensorial appeals of the Internet—now offer an unprecedentedly wide range of media by which the frisson of porosity might be experienced.

The key question about this development is whether it constitutes a mere extension of typographical encounters with the numinous to visual and digital realms, or whether the visual and digital realms offer an alternative to the typographical, a kind of critique of its limitations. This is among the key themes of Neil Gaiman's remarkable novel *American Gods* (2001), in which the ancient gods of the Old World—the kind that underlie, in various disguises, our older poems and today's written fantasy—engage in ceaseless but apparently also hopeless war with the New World's deities of technology. One of those Old Gods, called here Wednesday but Woden or Odin in Anglo-Saxon and Old Germanic mythologies, speaks of how in a disenchanted America, in a country that grew to its great power by embracing the Industrial Revolution and all its works, the pull of the numinous often comes to people subtly and indirectly:

No, in the USA, people still get the call, or some of them, and they feel themselves being called to from the transcendent void, and they respond to it by building a model out of beer bottles of somewhere they've never visited, or by erecting a gigantic bat-house in some part of the country that bats have traditionally declined to visit. Roadside attractions: people feel themselves being pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around, feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath that.

Shadow, the novel's protagonist, absorbs this little lecture and has cause to think about it later when he's watching TV in a hotel room and

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Lucy (the truly archetypal figures are always mononymic) begins to speak directly to him:

“I’m the idiot box. I’m the TV. I’m the all-seeing eye and the world of the cathode ray. I’m the boob tube. I’m the little shrine the family gathers to adore.”...

“You’re a god?” said Shadow.

Lucy smirked, and took a lady-like puff of her cigarette. “You could say that,” she said.

And Lucy seeks to win Shadow over, to bring him into the fold of her worshippers:

“We’re shopping malls—your friends are crappy roadside attractions. Hell, we’re online malls, while your friends are sitting by the side of the highway selling homegrown produce from a garden cart. No—they aren’t even fruit sellers. Buggy-whip vendors. Whalebone-corset repairers. We are now and tomorrow. Your friends aren’t even yesterday any more.”

But Shadow has heard this kind of rhetoric before, from a rather different figure of modern power, a pudgy young man in a black coat who had said to him, “You—you’re a f—ing illuminated gothic black-letter manuscript. You couldn’t be hypertext if you tried. I’m...I’m synaptic, while, while you’re synoptic.” Shadow, remembering, asks Lucy, “Did you ever meet a fat kid in a limo?”

She spread her hands and rolled her eyes comically, funny Lucy Ricardo washing her hands of a disaster. “The technical boy? You met the technical boy? Look, he’s a good kid. He’s one of us. He’s just not good with people he doesn’t know. When you’re working for us, you’ll see how amazing he is.”

Lucy’s words are confident, assured, but the existence of “the technical boy,” a personification of Internet technology, serves to remind us that, among the New Gods, television is pretty old. Later we see the technical boy again. To the claim that a “mighty battle” between the Old and New Gods is coming he sneers, “It’s not going to be a battle....All we’re facing here is a f—ing paradigm shift. It’s a shakedown. Modalities like *battle* are so f—ing Lao Tzu.” Lucy thinks the technical boy is on her side; it’s not clear that the respect is mutual.

More important, though, is a key difference between Lucy’s language and that of the technical boy. Lucy seeks to *persuade*, to *win over*; the technical boy has nothing but contempt for Shadow or indeed for anyone else

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who's not already on board with the inevitable "paradigm shift." The technical boy is a god who doesn't need worshippers, because he's confident that he can make all the puppets he needs.

But after encountering Lucy, Shadow reconsiders the Old Gods:

It occurred to him that the reason he liked Wednesday and Mr. Nancy [i.e., Anansi, the West African trickster god] and the rest of them better than their opposition was pretty straightforward: they might be dirty, and cheap, and their food might taste like s—, but at least they didn't speak in clichés.

And he would take a roadside attraction, no matter how cheap, how crooked, or how sad, over a shopping mall, any day.

So Shadow makes his choice—insofar as he *has* a choice. But if the technical boy is right, then neither Shadow nor anyone else can opt out of submission to the gods of technology. But one of the wonderful things about *American Gods* is that it sides not just morally but also narratively with the Old Gods, the dirty and cheap ones who have fallen on hard times—the gods of poem and story and codex rather than of screens and bits; that is, the novel says that resistance is not futile after all but can really work—at least for now. And the testimony of the written word speaks on its own behalf.

### **The Two Faces of Technocracy**

Walter Ong, in his classic work *Orality and Literacy* (1982), wrote of a historical movement from "primary orality"—in cultures that have never possessed the written word—to literacy and then from literacy to the "secondary orality" of movies, radio, television, and the new electronic media. It is intrinsic to Ong's model, as it was to Walter Benjamin's in some of his most famous essays—especially "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction" and "The Storyteller"—to place a thick solid line of demarcation between stories of the gods (or of almost anything else) told orally to members of the local community and those written in books. But Neil Gaiman's story suggests that technological developments are drawing the line elsewhere: the old orality *and* literacy now appear as allies against the antiseptic shopping-mall regularities of secondary orality's media.

Two further illustrations will help make clear why *American Gods* is an especially important book for the story I am telling here. First, in Thomas Pynchon's recent novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013), we see the

creation of a digital world clearly modeled on the online virtual reality of Second Life but called DeepArcher—pronounced “departure.” The phrase “Second Life” suggests that what you’re doing in its digital world is living, even though it is secondary to (following after, derivative of) your original and primary life. In DeepArcher, by contrast, you fire yourself, like an arrow, deep into a digital world, and in so doing you depart your first life, you leave it behind. It is not an accompaniment but an alternative to everyday life. People don’t necessarily regret this. The novel’s protagonist, Maxine, meets a man in DeepArcher she believes to be dead in real life and tells him she wants to bring him back. “Why?” he asks.

“I don’t know.” She doesn’t. “If it’s really you, Lester, I hate to think of you being lost down here.”

“Lost down here is the whole point. Take a good look at the surface Web sometime, tell me it isn’t a sorry picture. Big favor you’d be doing me, Maxine.”

Second, in light of this statement—“lost down here is the whole point”—consider also the response of many fans to the 2009 film *Avatar*—or rather, to the need to return to James Cameron’s imaginary world Pandora after spending three hours in it. A Facebook page was set up so that people suffering from P.A.D. (post-*Avatar* depression) could console one another. Elsewhere online, a seventeen-year-old wrote, “When I woke up this morning after watching *Avatar* for the first time yesterday, the world seemed gray. It was like my whole life, everything I’ve done and worked for, lost its meaning... It just seems so meaningless. I still don’t really see any reason to keep doing things at all. I live in a dying world.”

DeepArcher and P.A.D. teach us something very important about what is happening as the media of secondary orality move towards their maturity. It is not just the shifting of fantasy into new media but a fundamental reconfiguring of the relation between the fantastic and everyday life—a reconfiguring that abrogates the old and familiar tradeoffs of the porous and the buffered conditions. The rise of the buffered self occurred because people were willing to endure disenchantment in preference to living in fear of invisible and irrational powers; and fantasy has become a more and more central artistic genre insofar as it appears to offer temporary and partial respite from disenchantment. But now the very social, political, and economic forces that have ruled modernity—the Age of the Buffered Self—are happy to sell us the means by which we

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may forget that the buffered condition can feel like solitary confinement. Technocracy is Janus-faced. It speaks dark words of disenchantment with one mouth, and the bright promise of re-enchantment with the other. This is why when the engineers at Apple released the iPad they kept saying over and over that it is a “magical device.” If, as Arthur C. Clarke said, any smoothly functioning technology gives the appearance of magic, it may well be because a very large industrial system needs it to be so.

So fantasy itself has also become Janus-faced. With one mouth it speaks to us of escaping our workaday world—what Auden called “the moderate Aristotelian city / Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen”—but with the other it utters words of command: *Make your departure, leave that moderate Aristotelian city for the one we have created for you. You will find our rates very reasonable.* If fantasy rose to centrality as a form of nostalgia for a day when the porous self was at least surrounded by other sentient beings rather than a dark and silent cosmos, it may now have become something else altogether, a kind of *ultimate* disenchantment where even our own selves are vacated in favor of a world prefabricated for us by others. This raises again that key question from *American Gods*: Is resistance futile? Is it simply the case that “all we’re facing here is a f—ing paradigm shift”? Or might there be forces of resistance capable of waging a “mighty battle” on behalf of human freedom?

If the technical boy is wrong, if resistance can happen, we might take comfort from what seems to me the authentic core of the fantastic as a genre, as we see it from the standpoint of late modernity: fantasy may best be taken as an acknowledgment that the great problem of the pagan world—how to navigate as safely as possible through an ever-shifting landscape of independent and unpredictable powers who are indifferent to human needs—is our problem once more. The powers now may have different names than the ones Homer or Ovid knew, but they are powers all the same. *American Gods* is an especially important text for this moment, because it rightly identifies technologies as gods and simultaneously sides with the older gods as being intrinsically closer to the proper human lifeworld. Imaginatively, if not in substantive belief, we are pagans once more.

### What We Don't See

But a coda is required. All that I have written so far about porous and buffered selves has followed Charles Taylor in bracketing the question of what our *actual* condition is. We may choose to believe that we can buffer

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ourselves, protect ourselves against unknown powers. But that's a kind of wager: if the powers are real, our disbelief won't deter them. And it may be that certain powers profit from being disregarded or treated as mere fancies. In a sonnet he wrote in the late 1930s, Auden portrayed a world from which magic had passed: "The sudden shadow of a giant's enormous calf/ Would fall no more at dusk across their lawns outside"; the last dragons and kobolds died off. The people "slept in peace." But:

... The vanquished powers were glad

To be invisible and free: without remorse  
Struck down the sons who strayed into their course,  
And ravished the daughters, and drove the fathers mad.