

**Beyond the Flaming Walls of the World:  
Fantasy, Alterity, and the Postnational Constellation**

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*Robert T. Tally, Jr.*

*The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it . . .*

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*

In his influential 1827 essay “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition,” Sir Walter Scott extols the beauty and power of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s writing but criticizes “the wildness of Hoffmann’s fancy,” declaring that the German Romantic’s taste and temperament have “carried him too far ‘extra mœnia flammantia mundi,’ too much beyond the circle of not only the probable but the possible.”<sup>1</sup> Scott is concerned that the “fantastic” mode is only acceptable to the degree that “it tends to excite agreeable and pleasing ideas.” In his use of the Latin phrase, borrowed from Lucretius, Scott invokes a spatial metaphor to make a broader point. By venturing “beyond the flaming walls of the world,” the fantasy author indulges, in Scott’s view, in an “extravagant” aesthetic practice that evokes horror, or even disgust, a radical alterity that defamiliarizes the homely and aggrandizes the horrible.<sup>2</sup> Not stated directly by Scott but implied in his mild critique is the degree to which this *outré* sensibility disrupts the conventions and expectations of a national literature. In addition to providing a more limited national space for a particular country’s native authors, such a literature, we gather, must somehow represent the

recognizably national character of or in its narratives, a character that must above all be familiar to readers. In other words, extravagant fantasy subverts an aesthetic standard of beauty by becoming “grotesque” and “Arabesque.” Such fiction also undermines a national vocation of literature by its estrangement, that is, by its imaginative flights away from familiar landscapes, customs, events, and so on. Or, to put it another way, a national literature tends to domesticate the strange elements and represent them in a comfortable, recognizable pattern.<sup>3</sup> A romantic realism of the sort found in Scott’s own historical novels offers a fitting mode for such a national narrative, as the foundational legends and myths can be incorporated into a calm, more quotidian, and rather familiar culture. By contrast, by positing a radical alterity from the outset, the fantastic mode exceeds the national and cultural boundaries, drawing the narrative out into the world and beyond.

Today’s planetary turn in literary and cultural studies may be associated with a number of interrelated historical phenomena that have forcefully asserted the intertwined matters of spatiality, fantasy, and postnationality into the critical discussion. Above all, the multiform processes now aggregated under the rubric of globalization, including those practices in the aesthetic or cultural spheres sometimes called postmodern, have occasioned the diminution of the national in favor of the global, the elevation of space above (or at least to the level of) time, and interrogation of representational modes linked to the nation-state. In sum, most of the formerly recognizable modes are deemed no longer suitable for making sense of the present, dynamic world-system. As numerous artists, critics, philosophers, and social scientists have observed, the revolutionary social transformations throughout the world in the postwar era have fundamentally altered the effectiveness of sense-making systems of past epochs, be they scientific, religious, or, as is my concern here, literary-cultural. Narrative fiction, for example,

may no longer operate as it had in Scott's day, when the "form-giving form" of the historical novel (to use Georg Lukács's expression) could organize an ostensible totality (*Lebenstotalität*) in which the individual could locate him- or herself within a cognizable world-system.<sup>4</sup> Scott's historical novels attempted to shape the diffuse passions, partisan interests, and different spaces into a distinctively national imaginary geography, and, as Jonathan Arac has pointed out, these novels were essential precursors to national narrative in American literature.<sup>5</sup> However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the postmodern crisis of representation is part of an existential crisis akin to being lost in space; it is an utterly alienating experience, evoking an anxiety that Martin Heidegger had associated directly with the uncanny, the *unheimlich* or "unhomely," the *Nicht-zu-hause-sein* ("not-being-at-home").<sup>6</sup> But, then, the loss of a sense of "home" is also a recognition of the disruptions of "domestic" or national space caused by forces of globalization. Fredric Jameson's call for a "cognitive mapping on a global scale," as both the solution to the crisis of representability and as the vocation of postmodern art, emphasizes the spatial anxiety and postnationality of such a cartographic project.<sup>7</sup>

I would propose, in my turn, that this enterprise is incomplete unless it is also speculative, figurative, and, in a broad sense, *fantastic*. Unlike the naïvely mimetic maps of an earlier epoch, the literary cartography of the postnational world-system has to be, in some ways, otherworldly. Such, at least, is my argument here. Although there is no question about the value of myth, folklore, or "national fantasy" in establishing national narrative,<sup>8</sup> in the present world-historical moment, the radical alterity of fantasy, I would also submit, is well positioned to foster a postnational literary perspective. I am not speaking of fantasy as a genre, although I am interested in the potential of what Jameson has called "generic discontinuities" in narratives as part of the overall undertaking of literary cartography.<sup>9</sup> Rather, I am thinking of fantasy as a

discursive mode, one that is marked by its fundamental attention to otherness or otherworldliness. Fantasy, of which science fiction and utopia may be considered subsets, enables a figurative mapping of the (so-called) real world but using the (so-called) unreal or impossible as its means. In theory and in practice, the alterity of fantasy makes possible new ways of seeing—and thus interpreting and perhaps changing—the world-system which forms the untranscendable horizon of all thinking today.<sup>10</sup> Somewhat like the earlier local, regional, or national space, but far more so, the planetary space that subsumes contemporary thought in the age of globalization requires a sort of abstraction and imagination that makes “the literature of estrangement,” to use China Miéville’s phrase, the form potentially best suited to our postmodern and postnational condition. As Miéville asserts pointedly, “fantasy [...] is *good to think with*.”<sup>11</sup> For, to be sure, the fantastic mode allows us, among other things, to see the planet anew, to visualize our world in novel ways, and to imagine different approaches to representing and otherwise engaging the world-system. In “constellating” and working through the various intersecting forces affecting the existential experience of life on the planet at this historical moment, we may venture—like the wayward imagination of Hoffmann in Scott’s analysis—beyond the flaming walls of the world in order to discover, in a more meaningful sense, the real world after all. In this *postnational constellation*, as Jürgen Habermas has called it in another context, the principal vocation of literary and cultural work may be to project novel cartographies and alternative trajectories by which to navigate this increasingly unrepresentable, even unrecognizable, *Lebenswelt*. After the planetary turn, in the context of a true *world literature* whose representative space is neither regional nor national but global, the postnational constellation may be an apt figure for the present world-system itself, and a fantastic mapping of

the planetary space we occupy may constitute an urgent project of contemporary critical theory and practice.

## 1. Imagining the Planet

One of the past century's most famous photographs, widely known as "Earthrise," depicts a distinct, blue-and-white planet emerging in the distance over the barren grey-white surface of the moon. Taken by Apollo 8 astronauts in lunar orbit on December 24, 1968, the iconic image became a worldwide sensation when it appeared on televisions and in newspapers on Christmas morning. Humans have been using their vision and imagination to make sense of the world throughout their history, and yet never before had such a vista been available to them, as, for the first time, they ventured beyond the boundaries of the terraqueous globe and looked back upon it as outsiders. From this new perspective, viewers of the "Earthrise" photograph were repositioned in the universe. Now able to achieve a critical distance from their planet, they were no longer cosmopolites comfortably at home in the world but saw the latter as a strange *otherworld*, as if for the first time. Arguably, in the contemplation of this image and of its ramifications, a planetary consciousness emerged.<sup>12</sup>

This is certainly how American poet Archibald MacLeish envisioned the import of the event. Writing in the *New York Times* only hours after the first appearance of the photograph, MacLeish considered the moment an epochal shift in in man's relationship to the world. Referring first to Dante's geocentric universe, then to its waning and ultimate collapse after the Copernican Revolution and modern physics, which had rendered the earth a metaphysically meaningless ensemble of violent forces that could bring about the slaughter of millions in absurd world wars and nuclear destruction, MacLeish announced that "[n]ow, in the last few hours, the

[planet] notion may have changed again. For the first time in all of time men have seen it not as continents or oceans from the little distance of a hundred miles or two or three, but seen it from the depth of space; seen it whole and round and beautiful and small.”<sup>13</sup> As MacLeish explained on that Christmas morning,

The medieval notion of the earth put man at the center of everything. The nuclear notion of the earth put him nowhere—beyond the range of reason even—lost in absurdity and war. This latest notion may have other consequences. Formed as it was in the minds of heroic voyagers who were also men, it may remake our image of mankind. No longer that preposterous figure at the center, no longer that degraded and degrading victim off at the margins of reality and blind with blood, man may at last become himself.

To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold—brothers who know now they are truly brothers.

This somewhat grandiose interpretation of an astronaut’s timely snapshot indicates the extent to which a kind of planetary turn, in poetry, philosophy, and the arts and sciences as a whole was not only already under way but also deeply longed for by so many of the inhabitants of that “small and blue and beautiful” orb.<sup>14</sup>

The image of the planet captured in and promoted by “Earthrise,” which functioned simultaneously as an aesthetic, scientific, ideological, and utopian work of art, occasions a powerful rethinking of the relations among space, narrative, geopolitics, and the world-system. Ironically, perhaps, the repercussions of the “Earthrise” phenomenon led not to the extension or intensification of the space age, but to a “return to earth,” as it were, with more scientific and humanities-based attention being paid to this planet and far less to Mars, Jupiter, and the great

beyond. As Robert Poole observes in *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, the postwar period had been dominated by rockets and space travel whose proponents could proclaim, with Wernher von Braun, that the party who conquered space would control the planet. This notion certainly inspired a great deal of military and political enthusiasm for space research. Along the same lines, science fiction frequently depicting space exploration would dominate popular culture in various media throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Obviously, astrophysics, technology, science fiction, and interplanetary expeditions remain salient today—witness the recent burst of interest in the *Curiosity* rover’s Mars landing on August 6, 2012, for example—but they have no longer the cultural cachet they had achieved in the early 1960s. After “Earthrise,” the fevered imaginations of the populace turned back to the planet Earth. As one writer put it, “the significance of the lunar expeditions was not that men set foot on the Moon, but that they set eye on the Earth.”<sup>15</sup>

*Time* magazine used the photograph as the cover of its final issue of 1968, with the one-word caption (“Dawn”) as if to emphasize the image’s liminal and inaugural role in marking the transition to a new stage of world history. Given the turbulence of that year, what with the assassinations, riots, and political turmoil in the United States the revolutions and repression in Prague, Paris, and elsewhere in Europe, and the warfare and violence of Vietnam, South America, and Africa, the “Earthrise” image, when couched as a “dawn” acquires a poignant, optative, and utopian nuance. Where the future had previously been determined as a “space race” among antagonistic, destructive superpowers, this austere, beautiful vision of a small, fragile, and isolated planet reoriented the very idea of spatiotemporal progression. For many like MacLeish, this image was itself a sign that national boundaries and ideological differences were

no longer of any great importance. The time had come to view the Earth and its inhabitants as a single people occupying a single global space.

What I want to suggest in dwelling on these pictures is that the moment of this global self-image constitutes a nexus where several important aspects of the planetary turn in the arts, sciences, and humanities intersect. Significantly, this literal turn back toward the planet from the outermost reaches of human space exploration<sup>16</sup> is representative of an aesthetic planetary turn whereby the entire Earth is for the first time seen in its global totality. This moment coincides with tumultuous geopolitical events, most spectacularly visible in the wars of Southeast Asia and the Middle East, in the anticolonial national movements in Africa, in the revolutions in Latin America, and in the internal conflicts throughout Europe and the United States, to name but a few. Also, although this would come into focus more clearly only later, with the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement, the rise of multinational capital and transnational economies are making, around this time, the older colonial and mercantile financial systems obsolete, which paves the way to widespread financialization and globalization.<sup>17</sup> The boom in so-called “Third World” literature complements and supplements the innovations in fiction and poetry in the West, while an emerging aesthetic of postmodernism in fiction, cinema, visual art, and especially architecture alters the way space and culture are perceived. In any event, the widely distributed “Earthrise” image of the planet, which unquestionably changed the way the planet’s inhabitants looked at the world, emerged at a time of radical transformation worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Once again, amid so much real-world activity, something quite otherworldly—the earth itself—appeared.

To be sure, this “Earthrise” photograph conveyed a striking reality; indeed, its photographic realism was literal, and grasping its import is crucial to understanding its influence and effect in imagining the planet anew. But the image was also the stuff of the most extremely



*outré* science fiction: the fantastic voyage beyond the moon. Parodied in Lucian's *True History* and celebrated by Georges Méliès in *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, with hundreds of lunar fantasies occupying the spectrum in between, this sort of cosmic travel made possible the discovery of hitherto unknown or unimagined realities. The fantastic nature of the worldview afforded from outer space might be said to have inspired a wholly different way of thinking on the surface of the little green-blue sphere. National, regional, and local concerns and conflicts, for instance, may look trivial in the face of a suddenly more salient global space. Thus, the rivalries that animated the geopolitical *Weltanschauungen* of the era seemed petty and absurd from this postnational and supracontinental perspective, and the more optimistic of commentators dared to imagine a united and harmonious future for humankind that formerly only the most wide-eyed dreamers could envision. As Poole points out in a reference to the Apollo 8 mission that produced the "Earthrise" photograph, "the mightiest shot in the Cold War turned into the twentieth century's ultimate utopian moment."<sup>19</sup> And utopia, like the planet itself, is a figure of radical alterity. As Gayatri Spivak has put it in her discussion of planetarity and world literature, the planet's "alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous—an experience of the impossible."<sup>20</sup>

## 2. A Meditation on the Impossible

Utopia is a favored topic among many spatially-oriented critics at present, including Jameson and Harvey.<sup>21</sup> In some respects, it represents a paradigmatically modern genre or discursive mode, with major literary works (including Thomas More's 1516 genre-establishing *Utopia*) emerging during the Age of Discovery and the European voyages to the "New World"<sup>22</sup> and another wave of utopianism finding its voice and audience amid the 19<sup>th</sup> century's Industrial Age

uncertainties with Charles Fourier's phalansteries, Edward Bellamy's "nationalism," and William Morris's "news from nowhere." But, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> a sort of utopian mode has reasserted itself most strenuously in the postmodern world of our globalization era, paradoxically a world in which utopian alternatives to the status quo seem utterly impossible, even inconceivable. Jameson has famously observed that it seems easier today to imagine the end of the world than the breakdown of late capitalism; often forgotten, however, is Jameson's indispensable follow-up to this remark: "perhaps this is due to some weakness in our imaginations."<sup>24</sup>

An empowered imagination, one that would set out to map a planetary space rather than limiting itself to its local or national subsets, would have, in my opinion, to come to grips with the radical alterity of the world, specifically with the fantastic otherworldliness emerging in conjunction with an altogether unfamiliar perspective, such as the view from outer space. Obviously, this imaginative project would have to exceed the limits of the real and the known; it would involve not only a consideration of the possible but also "a meditation on the impossible."<sup>25</sup> In my view, this meditation on the impossible is part of the cartographic efforts of fantasy itself, as the projection of imaginary spaces becomes an essential aspect of our engagement with the all-too-real world system after the spatial or planetary turn. Yet the term *fantasy* itself presents a problem. Numerous spatial critics have embraced utopian discourse as a means of conceiving radical alternatives to the status quo, but many of these have been openly hostile to fantasy as a mode or genre on the grounds that fantasy is an escapist, politically reactionary, and backward-looking practice. A case in point is Darko Suvin's groundbreaking 1979 science fiction study, which dismissed fantasy as anti-rational and metaphysical. And, in his own extensive statement on utopia, Jameson condemns any confusion between fantasy and

science fiction (“We must now lay this misunderstanding to rest ...”), referring to their distinction as “The Great Schism.”<sup>26</sup> Nor does it help that the most inescapable figure in the genre of fantasy literature, J. R. R. Tolkien, who was himself politically conservative, actively defended fantasy precisely as “escapist” practice. Complaining that anti-fantasy critics have confused “the escape of the prisoner with the flight of the deserter,” Tolkien asks: “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home. Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Tolkien goes so far as to claim that the world outside this prison is just as “real,” whether the prisoner can see it or not, which suggests a view of fantasy as an imaginative method for apprehending the “real world” rather than a means of escaping from it.

It is perhaps ironic, then, that a similar argument has been made by Miéville in his spirited defense of fantasy in the face of Marxist and utopian critics’ antipathy toward it. Miéville has said some rather mischievous things about Tolkien, most famously, that the Oxford professor’s influential presence was “a wen on the arse of fantasy literature,” although he has repented of this view a bit in recent years.<sup>28</sup> As a Marxist, Miéville represents, of course, nearly the political antipode of Tolkien. Yet, even though he comes from such a different perspective, Miéville contends that fantasy is superior to realism when it comes to getting at the truth of the “real world.” After discussing Marx’s own analysis in *Capital* of the fetishism of the commodity and the hidden social relations embedded in it, Miéville offers that “[r]eal’ life under capitalism *is a fantasy*: ‘realism,’ narrowly defined, is therefore a ‘realistic’ depiction of ‘an absurdity which is true,’ but no less absurd for that. Narrow ‘realism’ is as partial and ideological as ‘reality’ itself.”<sup>29</sup> Further, Miéville insists, the “apparent epistemological radicalism of the fantastic mode’s basic predicate,” namely that “the impossible is true,” makes it well suited to

the task of an oppositional or critical project.<sup>30</sup> As Miéville concludes, “the fantastic might be a mode peculiarly suited to and resonant with the forms of modernity. [...] Fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality—constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true*—mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity.”<sup>31</sup>

Both Tolkien’s and Miéville’s position responds to the perception that works written in the fantastic mode are not only inferior to more realistic works but are also morally or politically suspect. Tolkien famously quarreled with fellow-conservative C.S. Lewis over whether it was immoral for a Christian to embrace myth, which Lewis disparaged as “lies breathed through silver.”<sup>32</sup> And, as a practicing fantasist as well as a socialist activist in his own right, Miéville is forced to defend fantasy from those on the Left who have objected to its escapism, nostalgia, or ideological incorrectness. Thus, even when the opposition to fantasy is less morally or politically charged, the prevailing view is that realism, with its familiar and recognizable world presumably uncontroversially presented and shared by reader and writer, is the preferred mode.

This is, after all, Sir Walter Scott’s objection to Hoffmann in “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition.” In founding Hoffmann’s work both *grotesque* and *Arabesque*—the very terms Edgar Allan Poe gleefully adopted to refer to his collected stories, although it is noteworthy that he had intended to name the revised and expanded collection *Phantasy Pieces*—Scott does not hide a certain disdain for the otherworldly, which here covers the merely exotic (as the term “Arabesque” makes clear) as well as the twisted or horrible. His essay offers a foundational text for the debate about the suitable proportion of fantasy and reality in literature during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This polemic also famously includes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *apologia* for “romance” as opposed to the more strictly realistic “novel,” which “is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s

experience.”<sup>33</sup> And, as we have seen, this argument about how much fantasy is acceptable in serious literature—what Kathryn Hume has succinctly named the “fantasy versus mimesis” controversy—continues to elicit heated responses.<sup>34</sup> Yet again, it is important to reiterate that it is Scott who casually delineates the contours of the battlefield. To do so, he first quotes a paragraph of Hoffmann’s *The Entail*, in which a frightfully supernatural occurrence culminates with a calm, somewhat revelatory, but still eerie explanation. Scott then elaborates as follows:

The passage which we have just quoted, while it shows the wildness of Hoffmann’s fancy, evinces also that he possessed power which ought to have mitigated and allayed it. Unfortunately, his taste and temperament directed him too strongly to the grotesque and fantastic,—carried him too far “extra mœnia flammantia mundi,” too much beyond the circle not only of probability but even of possibility, to admit of his composing much in the better style which he might easily have attained. The popular romance, no doubt, has many walks, nor are we at all inclined to halloo the dogs of criticism against those whose object is merely to amuse a passing hour. It may be repeated with truth, that in this path of light literature, “tout genre est permis hors les genres ennuyeux,” and of course, an error in taste ought not to be followed up and hunted down as if it were a false maxim in morality, a delusive hypothesis in science, or a heresy in religion itself. Genius too, is, we are aware, capricious, and must be allowed to take its own flights, however eccentric, were it but for the sake of experiment. Sometimes, also, it may be eminently pleasing to look at the wildness of an Arabesque painting executed by a man of rich fancy. But we do not desire to see genius expand or rather exhaust itself upon themes which cannot be reconciled to taste; and the utmost length in which we can indulge a turn to the fantastic is, where it tends to excite agreeable and pleasing ideas. We are not called upon to be

equally tolerant of such capriccios as are not only startling by their extravagance, but disgusting by their horrible import.<sup>35</sup>

Neither a naïve realist nor an advocate of a strictly mimetic narrative art, Scott is willing to forgive literature that extends “beyond the flaming walls of the world” so long as it can “excite agreeable and pleasant ideas.” Thus, he introduces a pragmatic and moral dimension into the discussion of literary aesthetics. That is, the question is less about what constitutes fantasy and more about how such fantastic elements will be used.

The French maxim that Scott paraphrases is Voltaire’s assertion that “all genres are good except boring genres.” However, the Latin expression comes not from literary fiction, whether fantastic or realistic, but from philosophy, specifically Lucretius’s first-century B. C. E. treatise *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*). In the original, the expression *extra mœnia flammantia mundi* does not carry a negative connotation. On the contrary, in fact, for Lucretius the phrase signifies a great achievement, a sign of the intellectual courage of the scientific or philosophical mind willing to go beyond the superstitious chimeras of religion in order to seek the truths that lie “beyond the flaming walls of the world.” The famous line refers to Epicurus, the atomist and materialist Greek philosopher whose “victory,” according to Lucretius, brought religion down under our feet and placed human beings on a level with heaven.<sup>36</sup> It is also worth noting that, in this original Epicurean context, the movement “beyond the flaming walls of the world” is not considered an attempt to escape from the real world into a false one but rather a brave discovery of precisely that more truly real world that had been hidden and veiled by the false realities of superstition and religion. In its oddly tortuous philological journey from the first century B. C. E. to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the phrase as used by Scott had developed a meaning nearly opposite to what Lucretius had intended. However, in what might be considered one more turn of

the screw or yet another dialectical reversal, one can argue that Scott's own use of the expression as a means of criticizing fantasy actually reveals the power of fantasy as a device for social and literary critique.

Indeed, one could suggest that Lucretius's defense of the materialist thought of Epicurus against the superstitions of religious belief finds modern and postmodern counterparts in Jameson's pro-utopian argument against so-called practical thinking and also in Miéville's defense of fantasy against its Marxist detractors (including, of course, such science-fiction enthusiasts as Jameson himself). In either case, a theorist inveighs against the prejudices and barriers to thinking that predominate in his place and time. For example, in *Marxism and Form*, Jameson acknowledges the anti-utopian positions of Marx and Engels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Referring in particular to the reemergence of utopian discourse in Herbert Marcuse's critical theory, Jameson argues, however, that by the 1960s another "dialectical reversal" had occurred. As he contends,

in the older society (as in Marx's classic analysis) Utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions, in our own time the very nature of the Utopian concept has undergone a dialectical reversal. Now it is practical thinking which everywhere represents a capitulation to the system itself, and stands as a testimony to the power of that system to transform even its adversaries into its own mirror image. The Utopian idea, on the contrary, keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is.<sup>37</sup>

Along similar lines, utopian theorist, Russell Jacoby has maintained that "any effort to escape the spell of the quotidian [. . .] is the sine qua non of serious thinking about the future—the

prerequisite of *any* thinking.”<sup>38</sup> In this sense, the more realistic, practical, or feasible position becomes antithetical to the necessarily fantastic, critical project of meditating upon the impossible.

But, again, this is the very crux of Miéville’s defense of fantasy. In his “Cognition as Ideology,” Miéville questions the supremacy of Suvin’s influential characterization of science fiction as a form of “cognitive estrangement,” with the corollary that the estrangements of fantasy or myth are fundamentally non-cognitive, metaphysical, mystifying, or anti-rational.<sup>39</sup> Miéville decries the attitude that has allowed “generations of readers and writers to treat, say, faster-than-light drives as science-fictional in a way that dragons are not, despite repeated assurances from the great majority of physicists that the former are no less impossible than the latter.”<sup>40</sup> Against the anti-fantasy sentiments of the spaceship enthusiasts or dragon detractors, Miéville files all genres—science fiction, utopia, and fantasy—under the label of the literature of alterity. This intensive regard for *otherness*, whether presented in terms of the past or future, the earthly or the interstellar, the monstrous or the alien, is shared by all forms of the fiction of estrangement, including some, like *Moby-Dick*, that are inexpressibly “strange” even while presenting absolutely realistic (or, at least, possible) persons and events. This enables the fantastic mode to exceed the boundaries of its more tightly circumscribed genre. For Miéville, science fiction or utopia are mere subsets of the broader category of fantasy. And, as I have been suggesting, the value of fantasy lies in its meditation on the impossible, which can enable a radically different vantage point from which to view the “real world.” As Miéville puts it, “we need fantasy to think the world, and to change it.”<sup>41</sup>

Change and form go hand in hand here. As Jameson has said of the dynamic of form and world transformation in utopia applies equally well to the notion of fantasy as the literature of



radical alterity: “a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather the imperative to imagine them.”<sup>42</sup> Truly radical alterity would, in a somewhat literal sense, be unrepresentable since in the apprehension of the novel otherworld and in its incorporation into our own mental databases—our intellectual archives housing all that we currently can imagine the world itself to be and contain—this representation *refamiliarizes* this otherness and, in one way or another, domesticates the estrangement. As Jameson notes elsewhere, “insofar as the Utopian project comes to seem more realizable and more practical, it turns into a practical political program in our world, in the here-and-now, and ceases to be Utopian in any meaningful sense.”<sup>43</sup> Or, on the flipside of the same argument, “the more surely a given Utopia asserts its radical difference from what currently is, to that very degree it becomes, not merely unrealizable but, what is worse, unimaginable.”<sup>44</sup> Hence, we are left once more with a tenebrous conception of radical alterity as a meditation on the impossible rather than as a viable otherworld in which to dwell.

Nevertheless, the value of this fantastic effort seems to me to be confirmed in the imaginative endeavor involved in mapping our own “real world,” particularly the postmodern world-system in which the traditional guideposts are no longer trustworthy or desirable. “Happy are those ages when the starry sky is a map of all possible paths,” writes Lukács of the age of the epic. “The world is wide and yet it is like a home.”<sup>45</sup> In our world-system, the celestial cartography is not so reliable or *heimlich*, and the existential and critical paradigm coming on the heels of the planetary turn may require the speculative or fantastic extension beyond the world’s flaming walls in order to chart, albeit provisionally and tentatively, both our location and our available courses of action.

### 3. Shall I Project a World?

The planetary space and fantastic mode of apprehending it find their nexus in a speculative critical activity I have been associating with literary cartography and geocriticism. I have been particularly interested in the ways that narratives map a postnational space that cannot easily fold itself into the ideological and geographical atlases of an earlier configuration.<sup>46</sup> I do not mean to say that the existential mapping of one's *Lebenswelt* (à la Heidegger and Sartre, or even with Lukács's "transcendental homelessness" as a model) emerges only with the postmodern condition but that this kind of cartography reflects the profoundly different spatial and cultural anxieties of a postnational world-system in which former certainties are made uncertain and familiar codes lose their meaning. Ironically, in the postnational constellation, the insights of a prenatal *Weltanschauung* might offer clues to a speculative, fantastic geocriticism adapted for the critical exigencies of the current moment of globalization.

The "prenatal" view I have in mind is a variation of the medieval conception of the world, a vision described by Erich Auerbach in "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" in the immediate aftermath of World War II, at what might be thought of as the incipient stage of postmodernity. In this essay, Auerbach maintains that the national (and nationalist) traditions of literary study, however valuable in the past two centuries, were no longer suitable for understanding the world. "To make men conscious of themselves in their own history," the critic reflects, "is a great task, but the task is small—more like a renunciation—when one considers that man not only lives on earth, but that he is in the world and in the universe."<sup>47</sup> Auerbach asserts that "our philological home is the earth; the nation it can no longer be. [...] We must return, in admittedly altered circumstances, to the knowledge that prenatal medieval culture already possessed: the knowledge that the spirit [*Geist*] is not national."<sup>48</sup> Auerbach then quotes the words of a medieval thinker, Hugo of St. Victor (or Hugh of Saint Vincent), who taught that "the man who

finds his homeland sweet is still the tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land.” By invoking this (*mundus totus exilium est*) as his motto, Auerbach turns on its head the wisdom of a medieval Christian, who cautions against attaching oneself to the earthly world; as Auerbach explains, “Hugo intended these lines for one whose aim was to free himself from a love of the world. But it is a good way also for one who wishes to earn a proper love for the world.”<sup>49</sup>

The perspective of the exile, one who *cannot* be “at home” in the world, is embraced by Edward Said in his reading of Auerbach and in his own work. In “Reflections on Exile,” Said argues that “[s]eeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision.”<sup>50</sup> This originality of vision or critical distance is, I would add, not altogether dissimilar from that which obtains through a fantastic or otherworldly vantage, such as the one achieved by the Apollo 8 photographers who witnessed the planet Earth rising above the horizon of the moon. Both Auerbach’s plea for a postnational approach to world literature and Said’s conviction that the condition of exile affords one a paradoxically privileged position as an observer suggest that the exile is the exemplary figure for the critic in the age of globalization.<sup>51</sup>

This is not to say that the perspective of the exile, even if it captures the situation of the contemporary critic, is a comfortable one.<sup>52</sup> The new vista afforded by finding oneself in an unfamiliar situation is more likely to be bewildering than liberating. Amid the spatial anxieties and temporal confusions of the postnational condition, the artist or critic is called upon to come to grips with things as best as one can. As I have proposed, this may require an exercise in the fantastic, a speculative and perhaps even unrealistic practice, but one that can produce a map, albeit a provisional one, by which to make sense of the world-system.

Lending itself to such mapping or reading is, to take just one example, a key scene in Thomas Pynchon's 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. The protagonist, Oedipa Maas, finds herself inexplicably entangled within a global conspiracy, surrounded by bizarre characters, and lost in the confusion of competing, often inscrutable interests, while she is attempting to sort out the complex details of a dead man's estate. At her wit's end and thoroughly frustrated by her predicament, Oedipa resolves to reread Pierce Inverarity's will in an effort to gain a clearer sense of things. Thus, she imagines herself as a "dark machine in the center of the planetarium" that can "bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning," and writes the following in her memorandum book: "*Shall I project a world? If not project then at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among the constellations and trace out your Dragon, Whale, Southern Cross. Anything might help.*"<sup>53</sup>

"Projecting a world" seems a perfectly appropriate task for both the artist and the critic after the planetary turn, and Pynchon's astronomical metaphor offers another intriguing trope for aesthetic and critical maneuvers. The constellation is at once utterly fantastic, inasmuch as the tracings drawn in the night sky are thoroughly imaginary, and also terrifically real, insofar as travelers and navigators have been able to reliably locate themselves and chart courses in the world based upon these fantastic celestial drawings. With few exceptions, constellations are completely artificial, human-made, and even arbitrary. As anyone who has tried to identify and memorize the constellations will concede, their names are not particularly descriptive and rarely fit the images purportedly sketched in the skies. *Canis minor*, for instance, which comprises only two stars, looks more like a line than a small dog. In a recent, only somewhat tongue-in-cheek article titled "Starry Blight: How a Bunch of Mesopotamian Peasants Ruined the Night Sky," Daniel Engber refers to these constellations as "a smog of Bronze Age graffiti."<sup>54</sup> Yet, in

antiquity as in the modern world, such imaginary lines, fantastically projected from human stargazers situated on the surface of this planet, have helped one make sense of one's place in the world, serving as points of reference in a broadly defined terrestrial cartography, as well as operating in a quite practical way to help humans navigate the "real world" below the heavens. Here is a clear example, among many others, of the real-world effects of fictions produced in a fantastic mode.

If the present world-system lacks traditional guideposts or reveals such markers to be less than helpful, then the fantastic project of "projecting a world," of "constellating" the various forces, places, and events in the global space in such new ways that we can better understand and engage with the world, seems fitting. One of the formerly indispensable "guideposts" to be challenged or superseded in this effort is the nation-state itself. Although this spatiopolitical ensemble retains immense power even in the postnational constellation, and even though it tenaciously maintains its influence over literary and cultural studies (particularly in university curricula), its effectiveness is waning amid the overwhelming, trans- or supranational forces of the world-system.<sup>55</sup> With the term *postnationality*, I might add, I refer specifically to the current condition, in the era of globalization, in which the nation-state is no longer the *locus classicus* or *primum mobile* of culture, of the economy, or even of politics. As Habermas has observed, in the past, the "phenomena of the territorial state, the nation, and a popular economy constituted within national borders formed a historical constellation in which the democratic process assumed a more or less convincing institutional form. [. . .] Today, developments summarized under the term 'globalization' have put this entire constellation into question."<sup>56</sup> Under the auspices of globalization, the national models, including those employed in the study of literature and culture, are no longer reliable or even desirable. The "historical constellation" in which the

nation-state constituted the dominant force in social, political, economic, and spatial organization of the world-system is as much an imaginative projection as other constellations. However, just as the ideological comes to appear natural, the national model has seemed so constitutive of human sociality that it is harder to imagine alternatives. The radical alterity of fantasy or of the fantastic mode broadly conceived enables and promotes a projection of a world that can, if only provisionally, be mapped.

Therefore, it is not surprising that literary and cultural critics such as Walter Benjamin or Theodor Adorno (or their Frankfurt School successor Habermas) should find the figure of the constellation so useful for theory. In organizing the swirling, vicissitudinous elements of modern culture and society, the critic draws imaginary lines *not* to fix such phenomena in place as a way of determining once and for all their true meaning or of constraining their mobile diversity but to arrange them in a cognizable pattern for further use. Amid the disorienting and dynamic phenomena of the postmodern condition, one may wish to “project a world,” in other words, to create patterns that, while obviously artificial, provisional, and imaginary, can aid us in conceptualizing and navigating the planetary space we inhabit. As Oedipa Maas knowingly concluded, “Anything might help.”

Along these lines, a fantastic, postnational criticism may enable a new way of seeing and mapping this planetary space that now provides the ultimate ground or horizon of thought in the age of globalization. Like those Apollo 8 astronauts who ventured into the universe and beyond the moon—quite literally “beyond the flaming walls of the world”—a critical practice such as geocriticism, operating as it does in a fantastic mode, may thereby achieve novel vistas, look back on the worldly world from our radically otherworldly perspective, project new constellations and maps, and maybe just see things a bit differently. In navigating the planetary

space of a postnational constellation geocritically, we may thus embrace the strangeness of the contemporary world-system, imagine radical alternatives, and descry—if only in uncertain, tentative, and momentary glimpses—the features of other worlds.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Walter Scott, “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition,” in *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, ed. Ioan Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 348.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1–6.

<sup>4</sup> See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971); see also Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), especially 19–88.

<sup>5</sup> See Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 6–8.

<sup>6</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 233.

<sup>7</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 51–54.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to the relatively obvious uses of national myths or legends, I include here the “fantasy” that underlies and promotes nationalism, as discussed in Lauren Berlant’s significant *Anatomy of a National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of

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Chicago Press, 1991); Wai Chee Dimock's *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and, more recently, Donald E. Pease's *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), just to mention works in the context of U.S. culture.

<sup>9</sup> See Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 254–266.

<sup>10</sup> As Jameson has put it, “all thinking today is *also*, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such”; see Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and the British Film Institute, 1992), 4.

<sup>11</sup> China Miéville, “Editorial Introduction,” Symposium: Marxism and Fantasy, *Historical Materialism* 10.4 (2002): 46.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as a number of environmentalist and ecocritics have noted, the “Earthrise” photo may have sparked the environmentalist movement and led to Earth Day, partially ended the “Space Age” by recalling attention to the planet Earth itself, and transformed humanity’s attitude toward the planet, confirming a “Spaceship Earth” vision that reimagines the global space, not as an empty backdrop for human activity, but a dynamic and affective geographical domain. See Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Planet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 141–169.

<sup>13</sup> Archibald MacLeish, “Riders on the Earth,” *New York Times* (25 December 1968): 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Similar in spirit to MacLeish’s conclusion, Arthur C. Clarke declared that the Apollo 8 mission constituted “a second Copernican revolution” and speculated that the children born that year might one day live to become citizens of the United Planets.” See Poole, *Earthrise*, 5–6.



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<sup>15</sup> Norman Cousins, quoted in Poole, *Earthrise*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Although subsequent missions would achieve lunar landing and other milestones of the space program, the Apollo 8 astronauts traveled the furthest from the Earth's surface, going beyond the moon, hence gaining the vantage from which to capture the "earthrise."

<sup>17</sup> On this, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 284–307; Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994), 325–356; and my "Meta-Capital: Culture and Financial Derivatives," *Works and Days* 30.1/2 (2012): 231–247.

<sup>18</sup> For a rather different analysis focusing on environmental criticism in its assessment of globalization or cosmopolitanism, see Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Poole, *Earthrise*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 102.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, and David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Significantly, in Thomas More's *Utopia*, the utopian island is discovered on one of Amerigo Vespucci's transatlantic voyages; see More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (New York: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> See my "Radical Alternatives: The Persistence of Utopia in the Postmodern." In *New Essays on the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory*, ed. Alfred Drake (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 109–121, as well as my forthcoming *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World System* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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- <sup>24</sup> Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii.
- <sup>25</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 232.
- <sup>26</sup> See Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 4; Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 56–71.
- <sup>27</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 60–61.
- <sup>28</sup> See Miéville, “There and Back Again,” *Omnivoracious* blog, guest post (June 15, 2009): <<http://www.omnivoracious.com/2009/06/there-and-back-again-five-reasons-tolkien-rocks.html>> (accessed September 14, 2012).
- <sup>29</sup> Miéville, “Editorial Introduction,” 42.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–43; note, however, that Miéville quite rightly does not claim that fantasy is itself a revolutionary mode or “acts as a guide to political action” (46). The value of fantasy lies less in its politics—which could lie anywhere on the political spectrum—than in its imaginative encounter with radical alterity itself.
- <sup>31</sup> Miéville, “Editorial Introduction,” 42.
- <sup>32</sup> See Tolkien, “Mythopoeia,” in *Tree and Leaf* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 85.
- <sup>33</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1. Hawthorne includes similar statements justifying his use of fanciful or unrealistic matter and methods in the prefatory remarks to his other novels, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Blithedale Romance*, and *The Marble Faun*.
- <sup>34</sup> See Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984).

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- <sup>35</sup> Scott, “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition,” 247.
- <sup>36</sup> See Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. Alicia Stallings (New York: Penguin, 2007), 29.
- <sup>37</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 110–111.
- <sup>38</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xvii.
- <sup>39</sup> Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 8–9; see also Miéville, “Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory.” In *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, eds. Mark Bould and China Miéville (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 231–248.
- <sup>40</sup> Miéville, “Cognition as Ideology,” 234.
- <sup>41</sup> Miéville, “Editorial Introduction,” 48.
- <sup>42</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 416.
- <sup>43</sup> Jameson, “A New Reading of *Capital*,” *Mediations* 25.1 (Fall 2010), 13.
- <sup>44</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, xv.
- <sup>45</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 19.
- <sup>46</sup> See, e.g., my “On Geocriticism,” in *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies.*, ed. Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–9; see also my *Spatiality* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- <sup>47</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” trans. M. and E.W. Said., *Centennial Review* 13 (Winter 1969), 17.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.; for the translation of the Latin, see Jerome Taylor, *The Didascalion of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 101.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 186.

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., my “*Mundus Totus Exilium Est*: Reflections on the Critic in Exile,” *Transnational Literature* 3.2 (May 2012): 1–10.

<sup>52</sup> For a much more nuanced critical reading of the new cosmopolitanism in the age of globalization, see Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 82.

<sup>54</sup> See Daniel Engber, “Starry Blight: How a Bunch of Mesopotamian Peasants Ruined the Night Sky,” *Slate Magazine* (posted July 12, 2012):

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/a\\_fine\\_whine/2012/07/against\\_constellations\\_why\\_are\\_we\\_stuck\\_with\\_bronze\\_age\\_graffiti\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/a_fine_whine/2012/07/against_constellations_why_are_we_stuck_with_bronze_age_graffiti_.html)> (accessed September 10, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> On the postnational approach to American literature in the world today, see Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, eds., *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Paul Giles’s fascinating trilogy, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), and *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

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2006); and Yunte Huang's *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 60.

