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# Genres of Death and the Death of Genres: Eschatological Critiques of Science Fiction and Fantasy in Michael Swanwick's *A Geography of Unknown Lands*

Nicholas Gevers

## Summary

After a preliminary discussion of late-twentieth-century parodic science fiction and fantasy, and of this school's uneasy combination of technical imitation of mainstream literary fiction and promotion of popular fiction as a subversive alternative to the mainstream, this article, concentrating on the 1997 short story collection *A Geography of Unknown Lands* by Michael Swanwick, discusses how this American author exemplifies the strengths and contradictions of this self-conscious variety of speculative fiction. Swanwick uses his fictions to engage in ironic and revisionist deconstruction and reorientation of previous varieties of science fiction and fantasy. As introduction, Swanwick's novels are cited, indicating how they subvert and reinterpret traditional genre materials by bringing them into conflicting juxtaposition with more contemporary genre forms and trends. This technique is then explored in detail as applied in the six stories in *A Geography*. Two stories critique science fiction, one by arranging its historical phases as a symbolic architectural "folly", and the other by locating a folktale of death in the heart of American science fiction's assumptions of manifest destiny. Two further tales assail eschatological fantasy: one introduces contemporary considerations of political liberation into the Christian afterlife, and the other subverts the conventional ghost-story form by declaring the futility of any posthumous narrative. Finally, two stories deconstruct exotic "high fantasy", examining whether the works of Lord Dunsany and Tolkien answer to contemporary concerns, and finding in the negative. This article concludes that Swanwick's collection, in the larger context of parodic speculative fiction, is a significant revisionist geography of the unknown lands of fantastic fiction, one which slants them towards the present and the real.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bied eers 'n inleidende bespreking van die laat twintigste eeuse parodiese wetenskapsfiksie en fantasie. Voorts kyk dit na hierdie skool se ongemaklike kombinasie van tegniese nabootsing van die hoofstroom se literêre fiksie, en die bevordering van populêre fiksie as 'n ondergrawende alternatief tot die vermeldde

hoofdstroom. Daarna verskuif die klem na die kortverhaalbundel *A Geography of Unknown Lands* (1997) geskryf deur die Amerikaanse outeur, Michael Swanwick, om aan die lig te bring hoe laasgenoemde die krag in kontradiksies van hierdie selfbewuste verskeidenheid spekulatiewe fiksie verbeeld. Hy gebruik sy fiksies om dekonstruksie op ironiese en revisionistiese wyse aan te spreek, asook om vorige variasies van fiksie en fantasie te heroriënteer.

Ter inleiding word Swanwick se romans aangehaal om aan te toon hoedat hulle tradisionele genre-materiaal ondermyn en hervertolk deur hulle in botsende jukstaposisie met meer eietydse genrevorms en tendense te plaas. Genoemde tegniek word in detail ondersoek soos dit in die ses verhale in *A Geography* toegepas word. Twee van die verhale kritiseer wetenskapfiksie: een, deur die historiese fases as 'n simboliese argitektoniese gekkewerk te versinnebeeld, en die ander, deur 'n volksverhaal van dood, in die hart van die Amerikaanse wetenskapfiksie se aanname van die onteenseglike noodlot te plaas. Twee ander verhale val eskatologiese fantasie aan: een stel kontemporêre sienings oor politieke bevryding in die Christelike hiernamaals voor, en die ander een ondergrawe die konvensionele spookstorie deur te wys op die futiliteit van enige nadoodse vertelling.

Ten slotte, dekonstrueer twee van die verhale die eksotiese "hoë fantasie", deur te bevraagteken of die werke van Lord Dunsany en Tolkien wel aan kontemporêre aangeleenthede gehoor gee, en kom dan tot 'n negatiewe slotsom. Hierdie artikel maak die gevolgtrekking dat Swanwick se versameling, binne die groter konteks van parodiese spekulatiewe fiksie, 'n beduidende revisionistiese geografie van die onbekende bande van fantasiefiksie is; 'n versameling wat 'n appél tot die hede en die werklikheid rig.

In one sense, postmodernism in its aspect as critical pastiche has always been customary in genre science fiction (SF). Science fiction is a fund of tropes, conventions, and images held in common; the genre has been unified, more often than not, by ideologies, such as right-wing Libertarianism, which have further guaranteed a uniform usage of fundamental science-fictional materials. Any given subgenre of science fiction (for example, the time-travel and planetary-romance forms) is in this light a developing enterprise, its basic concepts borrowed, reappropriated, or revised by succeeding authors in overt or implicit homage to, or contradiction of, one another. Much the same applies to the other main speculative genres, fantasy and horror. Parody, critical or not, is essential to popular fiction, so that creatively exhausted matter can be revived or reoriented. But, as this article will make clear by means of reference to the short fiction of Michael Swanwick, the postmodern speculative fiction of the last two decades is remarkable in being highly deliberate and caustic in its parodic and visionary strategies, which constitute a fully conscious re-creation of itself.

Since the publication of his first short story in 1980, Michael Swanwick has been an important member of what might be termed a loose school of comprehensive speculative genre parodists. The central figure here is Gene Wolfe, whose stylistic gift of tongues remains unparalleled. Arguably dependent on his

example are the Americans John Crowley, Connie Willis, Lucius Shepard, Elizabeth Hand, Dan Simmons, Patrick O'Leary, and Swanwick, among others; in Britain, Stephen Baxter, Ian McDonald, Colin Greenland, Mary Gentle, and Paul J. McAuley; and, in Australia, Damien Broderick, and Terry Dowling. While the ideological and conceptual agendas of these authors are various, all can be said to regard science fiction, fantasy, and horror as deeply imperfect works-in-progress, engagement with which must occur on the level of critical interrogation. The stylistic voices of genre fiction are employed by the parodic writers as self-contradictory discourses, their overt (and simple) overtones acquiring in these new mouths distorting echoes of complexity, which coerce them into new paths of generally radical and subversive signification. This is problematic in respect of the cultural placement of this category of authors.

The position of the parodic school in relation to popular fiction, and popular culture generally, is one of aspiration and unease. Like the "New Wave" science fiction writers of the 1960s, Wolfe, Swanwick, and the others derive much inspiration from outside genre fiction: mainstream modernism and post-modernism are their primary reference points of technique. In this, and in their belief that genre fiction must constantly be driven into more intelligent and self-conscious avenues of enquiry, they aspire to the "standards" - the "respectability" or "legitimacy" - of establishment or mainstream literary fiction. But their missionary impulse is simultaneously an act of rebellion against elite culture, in that they insist on the redemptibility of genre fiction as a set of creative and significant forms existing in competition with the cultural mainstream. It is in this light that their work should be read: a contradictory appeal both to the technical standards of canonical literature and to the function of popular fiction as a philosophical alternative to the cultural canon. Writers like Swanwick are caught in an anxious limbo, where genre materials must be tortured into a "higher" degree of symbolism and self-awareness. This is an adversity that bears rich fruits, however; science fiction and fantasy are thoroughly revised, with a fascinatingly uneasy mixture of savagery and affection.

Swanwick has for nearly twenty years been one of speculative fiction's most idiosyncratic and subversive voices, producing carefully crafted novels and stories that simultaneously celebrate and deconstruct the conventions and ideological materials of science fiction and fantasy. The publication in 1997 of Swanwick's second story collection, *A Geography of Unknown Lands* (1997a), affords an opportunity to assess the remarkable techniques by which he renders his critique of speculative subgenres as disparate as Tolkienian high fantasy and Libertarian space opera. This paper accordingly discusses the six stories in Swanwick's new anthology, indicating how they in various ways present confrontation with or acceptance of death, and how death in these tales threatens

not only their protagonists but their genres and subgenres as well.

As Swanwick's work as a whole has rarely been a subject of critical dissection, some introductory commentary on his earlier work is necessary as context. Since early in his career, Swanwick's consistent deconstructive technique has entailed locating a narrative characteristic of a well-defined variety of traditional fantasy or science fiction in a contradictory or dissonant envelope, an envelope typical of a different subgenre or a later period in the development of speculative fiction. The consequent effect of anachronism allows the narrative's conventional forms and assumptions to be systematically and rather sardonically interrogated. Thus, Swanwick's second novel, *Vacuum Flowers* (1987), transports a storyline belonging to science fiction's old-fashioned subgenre of space opera, complete with interplanetary colonisation and intrigue, into a more contemporary context of cyberpunk, in which battles over information and conflicts of identity replace the space-operatic imperatives of territorial acquisition and heroic vindication. Space opera emerges as dated and in need of drastic revision. *Stations of the Tide* (1991), Swanwick's third novel, places another traditional form of science fiction, on this occasion the planetary romance tale of exotic exploration and espionage, in a context of cyberpunk and postcolonial narrative, so that the planet investigated is a Third-World venue of poverty, its primary deprivation is one of enabling technology and information, and the offworld (or First World) protagonist is a bureaucrat of the powers-that-be. This transformation of genre material finds resonance in copious allusions to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and to science fiction's most scathing indictment of colonialism, Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972). Swanwick's fourth novel, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1993), shifts its attention to the high fantasy of Tolkien and his many often overly derivative imitators, depicting a deeply anachronistic industrial revolution in Celtic Faerie. The hierarchical assumptions of traditional fantasy are seen in critical perspective as elves become ruthless capitalist bosses; the changeling child who is the text's heroine grows up in a faerie whose successive popular cultural phases mirror those of twentieth-century America, a correlation by Swanwick of genre fantasy with much other matter. Finally, in his most recent novel, *Jack Faust* (1997), Swanwick makes an intensely contemporary narrative out of the Marlowe and Goethe versions of the Faust legend, as Faust receives from his alien mentor all the technologies of centuries later than the sixteenth, with all their potentials for holocaust imminent; science fiction's conviction of inevitable scientific progress comes under a lambent scrutiny.

The consistency of technique indicated above - Swanwick's sardonic interrogation of genres through their incongruous transformation - can be found in equal measure in his short stories. Six of these - all amongst his most accom-

plished works - are reprinted in *A Geography of Unknown Lands*. Necessarily, an article of this length, dealing with a number of separate narratives, can only make general reference to the many literary models Swanwick dissects; but his range of allusion, coupled with the revisionary havoc he is able to wreak across so wide a field, is suggested as fully as possible here. At the same time, an effort is made to resolve the specific mechanics of Swanwick's stories, whose darkly bland surfaces conceal profundities of implication that Swanwick, like Gene Wolfe, insists must be teased out by the reader.

The collection's opening story, "The Wireless Folly", is intended as an Introduction, and at once sets out the pattern followed by the rest of the volume: science fiction, fantasy, or one of their subgenres is evoked or parodied, set up for inspection; the subject or protagonist of the story is cheated of life, or led into death, or becomes emblematic of mortality; against this presentation of death the viability of the genre or subgenre concerned is assessed, and its death (or perhaps critical transformation) is mooted. "The Wireless Folly" is a Gothic vignette which encapsulates the entire history of science fiction as a genre: the development of science fiction since the 1920s is pictured as the gradual accretive extension and modification of an old Victorian building. This building, an impractical exercise in architectural vanity, a "folly" in that older sense, is inhabited successively by groups representing the various generations of science fiction writers and perhaps fans, beginning with Hugo Gernsback's early group of the 1920s and 1930s, who were preoccupied with "wireless" radio technology; they are joined by the "Weird Tales" school of occult-influenced writers, by postwar Libertarians, by the avante-garde New Wavers, by postmodernists, all adding to the structure's architectural and social variety. Science fiction itself is the protagonist here; the phases of its life live cheek by jowl, in some disharmony. The tone of the story is more amiable than that of the succeeding tales, but Swanwick's judgement on science fiction, that it has aged, that it is rather confused in its present complexity, that it is prone to militaristic fantasies and to slavish imitations of old models (Swanwick 1997: 4-5)<sup>1</sup>, that "[g]rotesque and sprawling, it slowly humps its way across the surrounding fens" (p. 5), is only partly tempered by the encomium that "it remains an undisputed work of genius, and one of the great eccentricities of our age" (p. 5). The whole of science fiction is a folly, and requires much reconstruction (or perhaps demolition).

Swanwick's examination of science fiction continues in "Mother Grasshopper". The symbolism of this story is again surreal and artifactual: human colonists, in a time of interstellar diaspora, have settled on a "giant grasshopper" floating through space (p. 7). The settlement is of the kind traditional in traditional American science fiction, which has tended towards a cultural solip-

sism, a vision of the universe as an infinite mirror to itself and vehicle for its desires: the new-found land, the insect's eyes or "eyelands", is chosen for infinite reflectivity, and for its resemblance to America; it is flat, "a shimmering Iowa, the architecture of home" (p. 7), which can soon be made into a substitute for Ray Bradbury country, the pastoral Midwest. This done, the settlers hold "hoe-downs in a thousand county seats" (p. 8). They see themselves as "a young and vigorous race", for whom possibility is boundless (p. 7), the old insouciant self-confidence of American science fiction. The fact that they have settled the grasshopper's eyes perhaps represents their usurpation of all vision and all rights to vision. The wilderness becomes a tame repetition of home, scattered with familiar names: Tylersburg, Rutledge, Uniontown, Shoemakersville, and many others similar (p. 10). Swanwick's satire on the complacency of American genre science fiction he quickly sketches in.

But the bulk of "Mother Grasshopper" is a narrative of Death, representing a grimmer and more sustained assault on science fiction. Just as the colonists have sought to render Old America immortal in replica, they have granted themselves personal immortality - "they've made death illegal" (p. 29). But the narrator of the text, who began as a speaker for the colonists, describing their early achievements as the work of "we" (pp. 7-8), is increasingly identifiable as a Grim Reaper, who retrospectively declares, in the text's appropriately terminal final paragraph, that "I am Death and this is my story" (p. 32). Within science fiction's traditional narrative lurks a nemesis, an admonitory cancer. Swanwick, in an inversion of his normal practice, has modified a later story (twentieth-century interplanetary science fiction) by means of an earlier one (that of the Reaper or of Father Time), however to his customary deconstructive effect. Science fiction's hubristic notions of immortality and nostalgic utopia are shattered. The narrator, apprenticed early to a previous incarnation of Death, joins his master in carrying traditional diseases like plague and cholera across the eyelands; when the elder Death departs mysteriously, the younger follows him, reversing traditional science fiction's quests for life and power. He travels with a woman, a revived suicide, who like countless others of the eyelands' fugitives from life had been kept in suspended animation by her culture, which will not admit the reality and necessity of Death. In the wilderness of the "chitinlands" - uncolonised, and so still subject to reality - the narrator, Death, finds that the revived suicides, living new lives (their old ones drowned in Lethe), last only weeks, the cycle of youth and age accelerated and yet accepted with a grace not found in the eyelands. The dock for starships seen at the story's end - in traditional science fiction the springboard to a technological and territorial immortality - in Swanwick's text (pp. 30-32) is a "Sky Terminus", a place suggesting departure for realms of the dead. In his closing paragraphs,

Death sets out his function of keeping life in check (p. 32).

Swanwick's allegory, of science fiction's swarming Life pruned by folktales of Death, is particularly telling if its setting, the grasshopper, is considered. The human colonists are vermin living on the exterior of a creature itself held to be verminous; and when Death contemplates "the colonized universe", he beholds "swarming stars" (p. 32). The cosmos swarms with human life; by the same measure Death has become universal. The death-knell of science fiction - or of American science fiction's heedless traditional form - has been sounded.

The remaining stories in *A Geography of Unknown Lands* are instances and critiques of fantasy. The first of these, "North of Diddy-Wah-Diddy", has as its project the dismissal of the fatalism inherent in much eschatological and "dark" fantasy. Swanwick's scenario is superficially grim: a group of damned souls, whose relatively mild sins warrant their mild treatment in Hell, act as the staff or crew of a train bearing newly-deceased sinners into Satan's realm. The hopelessness of their situation is compounded by injustice: the narrator, generally a blameless and unvengeful individual, is damned purely because, in life, he was gay. Not only is he condemned purely by the prejudice of others; he knows that subsequent generations of homosexuals, those lucky enough to die after the Stonewall Riots and in the age of gay liberation, can enter Heaven (p. 43). It seems that Divine Justice follows the whims of contemporary human prejudice or enlightenment. Racial injustice also figures prominently: the narrator and others of the train crew are black (the narrator was lynched by white cops in the segregationist South); as railway staff, the jobs they are doing are humiliatingly reminiscent of the menial tasks Southern blacks were automatically assigned under the Jim Crow regime. The Hell train itself travels through a nightmarish landscape of desolation, a territory inhabited by monsters rather like those imagined by H.P. Lovecraft and his successors in the horror genre. Indeed, the initial atmosphere of grim acceptance in this story is distinctly Lovecraftian, an acquiescence in the monstrous. Politically, it seems the oppressed must endure their oppression; spiritually, traditional doctrines of redemption and damnation must apparently hold sway; in respect of genre, the stoicism and despair of eschatological fantasy and horror seem destined to govern the rather meek narrator.

But Swanwick rapidly brings a general ethic of liberation to bear on his material. Members of the crew, acting out of a rebellious goodness, divert the mother of Sugar, their leader, from her destined place in Heaven so that she can live with her adoring son in Hell. The conspirators are tried for this crime by representatives of God and Satan; but because they acted out of good intentions, they are promoted to Heaven (p. 64). The narrator, out of submissiveness and cowardice, has refused to be complicit in their plot and to share in their

judgement; thus, while they are redeemed, he remains on the train. It seems from this that individual will can be asserted in the face of a seemingly inflexible regime; it is meek acceptance that is sinful and limiting. At the story's end, the narrator prepares to escape his damnation, by fleeing the Hell train North, to join a woman who has already done so. He is implicitly discarding the Underworld Railroad for the Underground Railroad. And thus Swanwick performs his alchemy of liberation: once immutable eschatological doctrines of sin and damnation in time prove flexible and porous; black and gay liberation can echo even beyond death; a genre and mentality of abject surrender is retold in a contemporary voice, and turns towards hope and action. The monsters of dark fantasy or horror are revealed as mere attitudes of the mind; an activism typical of late-twentieth-century revisionist fantasy disperses the cobwebbed hopelessness of a preceding subgenre, as happens in Swanwick's novel *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*.

"North of Diddy-Wah-Diddy" is perhaps the weakest story in *A Geography of Unknown Lands* in that it presents a rather unsubtle allegory in excessively obvious terms. The same is not true of the next tale, "The Edge of the World". Here Swanwick elegantly juxtaposes two radically dissimilar realms of experience and literary discourse. The story's setting is the delicate Oriental lands-of-fable described in many of the short works of the early-twentieth-century Anglo-Irish fantasist Lord Dunsany, Swanwick's particular intertextuality being with Dunsany's tales of adventures and whimsical encounters near or at "the World's Edge". Dunsany was an author characteristic of the school of pre-Tolkienian erudite fantasy: independently wealthy, these writers wove elaborate tapestries of fantastic landscape and language, whose biblical, mythical, and classical references and resonances were reflections both of a privileged, educated aestheticism and of a determined intellectual escapism. Fantasy of this kind was ornate, deliberately divorced from any taint of the textures of contemporary life. Dunsany in particular drew on the European tradition of the oriental tale, frequently imagining fabulous sultanates and kingdoms at the eastern fringes of his pre-Copernican flat Earth, an imaginative imperialism and a misconstruction of the Islamic world. Historically, Dunsany's writing did gradually, over decades, engage more closely with mundane reality; in "The Edge of the World", Swanwick wreaks a far more radical transformation on Dunsany's material, bringing it into confrontation with the political traumas, and the alienated youth culture, of the 1980s.

Swanwick dismisses Dunsany's misrepresented East by retaining it in modified form. Swanwick's alternate late-twentieth-century Middle East conforms to Dunsany's imaginary geography of unknown Eastern lands in its literal physical aspect: Arab or Persian "Twilight Emirates" face onto an abyss at the

world's edge. But the fabulous aura is gone: Dunsany's imaginary "Toldenarba" hosts an American Air Force base, which may be used in an imminent World War Three; Toldenarba is an ugly industrial city, which casts its wastes into the deep beyond Earth's edge; everywhere around and on the cliff below that edge, graffiti, litter, and vandalism are to be found. Swanwick is making two related points here: first, that the actual East has never been a simplistic Arabian Nights never-never land, as Westerners have imagined; and secondly, that the drab despoliation and the political plight of the Islamic world (and the Third World generally) stem in large part from the Western Imperialism of which Dunsany's casual "Orientalism" is a small but influential part. One American woman at the air base condemns the Toldenarban Arabs as "[f]ilthy brown animals" who pretend "they're white people, deliberately mocking their betters" (p. 78): this ironically sums up the colonial issue, as the Easterners are only following the example imposed on them, while the West's literary Orientalism was a self-indulgent imitation of the East from the start. Swanwick's narrative must, against this background, investigate whether Dunsanian fantasy has any power at all to answer the authentic dilemmas of the twentieth century.

"The Edge of the World" is the story of three American army or air force brats, teenagers with the usual problems of their eighties generation: alienation from parents and teachers, drugs, hormones, and a general sense of ennui. One of them, Russ, intelligent but academically disaffected, finds in the fantastic "history" of the Twilight Emirates a genuine fascination (p. 68); he leads his friends, Donna and Piggy, down the stairways on the cliff beyond the Edge, seeking some trace of the region's original Dunsanian lustre. Initially, they find only vandalised remnants of glory, Dunsany's world scummed over by the twentieth century he rejected. But with the help of hashish (p. 84), which is a common route to mystical experience in Dunsany's stories, the three manage, like the ancient sorcerer monks described by Russ (pp. 85-86), to have one wish each fulfilled. Swanwick's indictment of Dunsany comes to a climax in these granted wishes: Piggy simply wishes to know a way back up to the world, which will merely return him to his unhappy home (p. 88); Donna wants to understand the motivations of others fully (pp. 87-88), but finds this knowledge bitter and fearful (p. 90); and the suicidal Russ, echoing the fable of annihilation in Dunsany's "The King That Was Not" (1906), wishes simply that he had never been (p. 89). Only Donna remembers that he ever existed. In the end, then, Dunsanian fantasy offers no valuable solutions despite all its gaudy magic; it is a pipe-dream born of hashish and escapism, and its formula of wish-fulfilment cannot help those with genuine problems, the inhabitants of this world. In these scathing terms, Swanwick suggests the necessity of a different sort of fantasy, one of engagement with social and existential realities.

The choice made by Russ in "The Edge of the World" is amplified in Swanwick's next story, "Radio Waves". This, like "North of Diddy-Wah-Diddy", is a work of eschatological fantasy; but it replaces activism with resignation. This is because Swanwick is now exploring the matter not of the Christian afterlife, with its assumptions of eternal survival beyond death, but rather of the supernatural ghost story, in which the dead live on only as phantoms, as wraiths of themselves. Swanwick questions how desirable such survival would be, and thus implicitly questions also the tenability of the ghost-story genre. Cobb, the narrator, discovers after death that people's ghosts are electrical patterns, most of which immediately fall into the sky upon coming into being, attenuating until they become part of the background radiation of the universe (p. 98). Only ghosts who fall into electrical cables or other conductive metal can survive on Earth in any measure. One of these "lucky" few, Cobb lives an eerie existence, walking on phone lines and fleeing an electrical monster, the "Corpsegrinder", who has devoured some of his memories, leaving Cobb in ignorance as to his own identity. In the end, meeting the ghost of a lover whom he maltreated and with whom no reconciliation is possible, and realising that the "Corpsegrinder" is simply a reflection of his own monstrous tendencies, Cobb opts to fall into the sky, to cease to be (pp. 125-126). Cobb's understanding that a life cannot be relived, that holding on to an exhausted life is futile, is Swanwick's judgement on the traditional ghost story. Nothing can posthumously be added to, or made of, Cobb's life. Therefore, ghost stories generally add nothing to our understanding of our lives. If ghosts are merely electrical signals, merely expired messages (a revisionist formulation characteristic of Swanwick), perhaps the ghost story is also past its prime, and should fade away, like all ancestral things.

The final story in *A Geography of Unknown Lands*, "The Changeling's Tale", carries forward the critique of traditional fantasy offered in "The Edge of the World". In this case, Swanwick's argument is with J.R.R. Tolkien himself. This is immediately evident in the texture of Swanwick's narrative, which is richer than in the previous stories, in direct stylistic correspondence with *The Lord of the Rings* and its mythic material: "Music floated over the march, drums and cymbals mingling with the mournful call of the long curling horn named Serpentine" (p. 130). Swanwick borrows literally and liberally from Tolkien: his narrator, Will Taverner, like Tolkien's Frodo, a dweller among simple, rather rustic folk, is recruited into the ranks of elven armies that go to fight in distant lands; elves, giants, and dragons feature in Swanwick's imaginary world, along with the swords and spells of Tolkienian high fantasy; Swanwick echoes Tolkien's elaborate invented languages, both by using imaginary vocabulary and by investing his elves with complexly polysyllabic names, such as Cackara-

vartin, Ratanavivicta, and Krodasparasa. Thus far, Swanwick is composing a homage of sorts to Tolkien, just as most modern fantasy authors, like Stephen R. Donaldson and David Eddings, automatically and reverently do; "The Changeling's Tale" is in this respect an accurate and economical imitation of its model.

But it is this very economy that signals Swanwick's subversive intention. He is setting out to retell the essence of Tolkien's three-volume narrative in a short story of thirty-six pages, which implies that much of Tolkien can be discarded. Swanwick's choice of title is significant in this regard: in fairy tales changelings are fairy children mischievously exchanged for human ones, or vice versa; Swanwick is substituting a brief, intense, and elliptical fabulation for Tolkien's grandiose epic, a deft parodic interpolation with some malice aforethought. In fairy tales the human child abducted by the fairies often finds time passing with mercurial swiftness, as Will Taverner does in "The Changeling's Tale"; by the same measure, three volumes can pass in thirty-six pages. But this air of mere mischief, so like that of traditional fairies, is in fact sinister, both in its implications for Will Taverner and for Tolkienian fantasy. Taverner is a boy living in his family's inn on a bridge across which the elven host is marching; tempted already by the glamour of these aristocratic beings and haunted by mysterious glimpses of a heroic future for himself, he joins them in the smoking of a magical drug, which makes those glimpses into prophetic visions. He joins the elves, fighting bravely with them, falling in love with one of their princesses, slaying a mighty dragon; but, with the elves having committed racial suicide, he returns home many years later, remembering very little of what he has experienced. In effect, his life has been accelerated, stolen from him, and the elves are revealed as false benefactors. As he says, his proper mundane life has been denied him: "I have lost the life I was meant to have, children on my knee and a good wife growing old and fat with me as we sank into our dotage" (p. 153). This theft of life or partial death is the crux of Swanwick's argument against Tolkien and his successors.

Because they become shrouded in amnesia, Taverner's heroic years seem empty indeed, to him and to the reader. They are the mass of superfluous narrative cut away by Swanwick in his conversion of epic into short story. In effect, Swanwick is questioning the entire heroic-fantastic formula Tolkien entrenched at the heart of genre fantasy. Why waste time (the best years of one's life) on massive Tolkienian trilogies and their empty symbolic quests, Swanwick asks, when the same matter can be summed up so succinctly, and when real life, so yearned after by the returned and mature Taverner, is so much more deserving of discussion? Supernatural certainties are fool's gold in this light. This explains Swanwick's quite distinct technique of fantasy writing, as

exemplified in *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*: mundane contemporary life is intensified and interrogated through the use of the fantastic, not evaded or distorted through misleading heroic exaggeration. Swanwick admits the abiding appeal of Tolkienian heroism, in that Will Taverner wishes in the end that he was his young self again, that "[t]he dragon was not slain, the road untravelled, the elves alive, the adventures ahead, the magic not yet passed out of the world"; but the fact is that Taverner is home (p. 154). It is the realities of home that he must confront now, as must fantasy, putting away its youthful toys.

In summary, then, *A Geography of Unknown Lands* is a compendious critique of many varieties of science fiction and fantasy. In effect, it functions as its title promises, as a critical geography of the lands and landscapes of the speculative genres. In one story, science fiction becomes a Gothic folly, liable to architectural analysis and condemnation; in another, it emerges as a place of vermin and of death, despite its claims to rationality and immortality. In two stories exploring the "undiscovered country" of Death, traditional eschatological fantasy sustains perhaps mortal wounds; in two others, high fantasy's whimsy, its moral archaism, and its high-flown invention of other (and thus escapist) worlds are harshly interrogated. Like his fellow parodists, Swanwick ransacks the past of genre, extracting conventional treasures and recasting them into more self-conscious, contemporary, and exacting forms. Swanwick's achievement is that he sketches the geography of the unknown in such a way that it begins, at last, to resemble the geography of the known.

## Note

1. All subsequent quotations from *A Geography of Unknown Lands* are identified by page number only.

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