

“Will there be a mythology in the future ... after all has become science? Will high deeds be told in epic, or only in computer code?”

—R.A. Lafferty, *Space Chantey* (5)

As the Guest of Honor at DeepSouthCon in New Orleans, 21 July 1979, R.A. Lafferty delivered an address entitled “The Day After the World Ended,” in which he demanded of those assembled: “If you are not right now making a world, why aren’t you?” The immediate context was his assertion that the world had indeed ended, and recently: “I am speaking literally about a real happening, the end of the world in which we lived till fairly recent years” (41).<sup>1</sup> The literary effect of this apocalypse was to deprive prose fiction of the reality it set out to mirror: science fiction, as that branch of literature most concerned with the designing of new worlds, was hence under an aesthetic imperative to fill the void. That Lafferty thought it necessary to deliver this message to an audience filled with writers, editors, and readers of sf demonstrates, first, its overwhelming importance to his body of work, and second, his growing conviction that his reading audience was missing that message, both in his work and in the genre as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> This article, originally published in *Philosophical Speculations in Science Fiction* 2 (Summer 1981), comprises Lafferty’s notes toward what was, for him, a rare public appearance. The speech was recorded, and audio cassettes of it released as a bonus accompanying the United Mythologies Press limited edition *Argo*, but I have not yet been able to obtain a copy.

For quality, quantity, and variety, few authors could claim the world-creative activity Lafferty did. After taking up writing at in his mid-forties—“to fill a gap caused by my cutting back on drinking and fooling around” (Whitaker, “Maybe They Needed Killing” 9)—Lafferty produced some 36 novels and 260-odd short stories (plus assorted essays and verse) before retiring in 1984, producing only occasional pieces afterward until a 1994 stroke relegated him to a nursing home. Over the course of his writing career, Lafferty wrote works nominally identifiable as mysteries, fantasies, histories, horror tales, ghost stories, and of course, science fiction.<sup>2</sup> The works are most easily sorted by their chronological position with respect to Lafferty’s contemporary Tulsa, with the works in the past including a treatise on the fall of Rome, properly titled *Alaric: The Day After the World Ended*,<sup>3</sup> to the four-volume *Coscuin Chronicles*, about the adventures of an Irish culture hero among the revolutionary fervor of nineteenth-century Europe and South America; those in the present including the story-cycles about the researchers at The Institute of Impure Science and also of the Men Who Know Everything; and those in the future including the dystopia *Past Master*, in which Sir Thomas More is snatched out of Tudor England and made president of a society built along the lines sketched in his *Utopia*, and the *Annals of Klepsis*, concerning the arrival of history on a hallucinatory pirate-planet previously without any. Yet despite the sheer

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<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Robert Silverberg among others notes, whatever the genre, “Lafferty writes stories so idiosyncratic that one need read only two or three sentences to identify an unlabeled piece as his work (111); in an introduction to one Lafferty story, Theodore Sturgeon went so far as to claim that “some day the taxonomists, those tireless obsessives who put labels on everything, will have to categorize literature as Westerns, fantasies, romances, lafferties, science fiction, mysteries....” (25, ellipsis in original).

<sup>3</sup> The book was published by Doubleday under the more generic and descriptive title *The Fall of Rome*; for its reprinting by United Mythologies Press, the original title was restored.

multiplicity of these story-worlds, Lafferty became increasingly convinced over the course of his career that his writings were not, in fact, separate works, but rather parts of “an overly long and never to be finished novel ... the name of it is A GHOST STORY” (“Shape of the Shapeless, Oh!” 2). Elsewhere, he describes his corpus as “one very very long novel ... a ghost story that is also a jigsaw puzzle. And the mark of my ghost story is that there is a deep underlay that has never attained clear visibility, never attained clear publication” (“Sometimes I’m asked” 1).

In this dissertation I will show that this underlay is the new world that Lafferty is attempting to bring into being, and that his ghostly jigsaw-novel is exemplary of the task of world-creation he saw as the central function of science fiction in a worldless society. Toward this end, I will outline the challenges and characteristics of Lafferty’s body of work before turning to a narrative theorist, David Herman, who uses the term *storyworld* to describe “narrative understanding as a process of building and updating mental models of the worlds that are told about in stories” (1). Drawing on Herman’s account of tools such as “deictic shifts” and “preference rules,” as well as the possible-worlds narratology of Marie-Laure Ryan, I will demonstrate how Lafferty uses his stories to model this process of modeling: essentially, how he writes stories about writing the exact sort of story he is writing—a strongly self-reflexive strategy illustrative of John Barth’s “literature of exhaustion” (cf. 62–76).

From there, I will turn to two oft-noted characteristics of Lafferty’s prose: his lurid depictions of death and dismemberment, and his deployment of narrative devices most commonly associated with oral storytelling. For the former—Lafferty’s “delight in bloody slaughter” (*Space Chantey* 29)—Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal work *Rabelais and*

*His World* will provide the primary theoretical framework, demonstrating the underlying concern of the grotesque mode with death and rebirth, on a scale ranging from the individual to the cosmic. For the latter—Lafferty’s “science of story areas” (“Cliffs That Laughed” 190)—Walter J. Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* will allow for an exploration of the uniquely oral aspects of Lafferty’s tall-tale prose style. Between the two, I will map out Lafferty’s program of genre play—the grotesque allowing for full-scale demolition and reconstruction of science fiction tropes, and the oral allowing for the reintroduction and sustenance of creative consciousness into a genre too often content with repeating the same story over and over again. In conclusion, I will consider Lafferty as an artist of the “post-postmodern,” showing his prose not only models the act of narrative comprehension and world-creation, but also renews the possibility of narrative modeling—of world-creation—for a humanity which has not merely misplaced that faculty, but forgotten it ever existed in the first place.

A commonplace of Lafferty criticism is to note, whether by way of critique or defense, that “there is not a bit of science in [his] SF” (Miesel 543). Indeed, given his array of work across multiple forms and genres, it is unsurprising that Lafferty’s initial classification as a writer of science fiction stories was largely thanks to historical accident: when at age 45 he began writing for publication, his most consistent sales were to science-fiction magazines,<sup>4</sup> especially to Frederik Pohl’s *Galaxy* and *If*.<sup>5</sup> By 1967,

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<sup>4</sup> Lafferty noted his submissions on the cover pages of his personal copies of manuscripts; the still-unpublished story “Chombo,” for instance, was sent to *Argosy*, *Action*, *Stag*, *Short Stories*, *For Men Only*, *Male*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Climax*, *Playboy*, *The Husk*, *Quarterly Review*, and *Rogue* before he finally abandoned it (Tulsa, Okla.: McFarlin Library R.A. Lafferty Archive, Ms. II.5.13).

<sup>5</sup> Many of Lafferty’s contacts within the genre were members of the influential Futurians group, for more about whom see Damon Knight, *The Futurians* (New York: John Day,

when his name appeared on the table of contents of Harlan Ellison's anthology *Dangerous Visions*, Lafferty had been swept into the New Wave, that loosely-affiliated movement which—in its formal experimentation, its explicit sexuality, and its epistemological skepticism—represented science fiction's grudging, forty-years-late acceptance of modernism (most immediately obvious in John Brunner's full-scale adoption of John dos Passos' technique for his *Stand on Zanzibar*). But from his very earliest stories, Lafferty demonstrates a sensibility out of step with much of the New Wave.<sup>6</sup> Instead, he exemplifies what John Barth termed “the literature of exhaustion,” using the “death” of fiction—for Lafferty, more widely, the “end of the world”—as a starting point from which to begin constructing a new kind of narrative, one marked by self-reflexivity, openness to pop culture, and a performative virtuosity through which the artist involves the audience as collaborators in the work.

In a retrospective comment on his essay, Barth notes that he “was interested in exploring the oral narrative tradition from which printed fiction evolved ... in ‘live’ narrative, in fiction as a performing art” (63). This idea of the postmodern author as a figure standing before, addressing, and responding to the crowd harks back to bardic

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1977). In addition to Pohl and Knight (who made Lafferty a mainstay in his *Orbit* compilations), Donald Wollheim and Robert A.W. Lowndes regularly bought stories from Lafferty, especially once he came to be represented by sf super-agent and fellow Futurian Virginia Kidd.

<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, the New Wave appears much more a historical accident than a focused campaign; most of its initial adherents, most notably Knight and Thomas Disch, eventually repudiated the label; others such as Samuel Delany and Joanna Russ drifted away from the genre. As Rob Latham laments in the Blackwell *Companion to Science Fiction*, though “SF’s repertoire of themes was powerfully expanded, its affective register enriched, its stylistic range boosted immeasurably[,] it never became an avant-garde literature and those who felt it ought to do so were compelled to take their business elsewhere” (214–15). Cf. also in the same volume Veronica Hollinger’s essay “Science Fiction and Postmodernism,” which unlike many treatments of the subject is not confined to cyberpunk alone.

storytelling<sup>7</sup> and to the exhortations of the carnival barker, whose language, per Mikhail Bakhtin, “invited all mankind to participate in the renewal of the world.” This figure, a “combination in one person of actor and druggist,” was the persona through which François Rabelais created his *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, “a writing which not only entertains and provokes laughter but also cures” (161). This is certainly Lafferty’s stance in his Guest of Honor speech, as he both pronounces a diagnosis — “Science Fiction has been carrying on about near-future or far-future destructions, and its mind-set will not allow it to realize that the destruction of our world has already happened in the quite recent past” — and lays out the cure:

[We have] a wide-open opportunity to make something new. A couple of hundred people here, a couple of billion there, working with uneasy brilliance, may come up with a stunning and unpredicted creation. The best way to be in on a new movement or a new world is to be one of the inventors of it. (46)

Gazing around at this non-world where he (like his audience, and the rest of humanity) finds himself, Lafferty notes that it is not without its consolations: “there is almost total freedom for anyone to do whatever he wishes” (44). Lafferty uses that freedom to begin inventing stunning and unpredictable worlds, and exhorts others to follow: “You can now set up your own rules for being a genius, and then you can be one. You can set up your own rules for being anything at all” (44–5). By and large, the critics approaching Lafferty’s work have not heeded this call, treating him mostly as a garish satirist, one of a diverse set “writ[ing] in the vein of off-the-wall whimsy or gross hyperbole” (Disch 32),

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<sup>7</sup> A role Lafferty explicitly adopts at the beginning of his first novel, *Space Chantey*; cf. the discussion below in connection with Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*.

or one of a few “singers of strange, sometimes acutely humorous songs ... [who] have shown genuine writerly attributes,” in the faintly damning praise of Brian Aldiss (326).<sup>8</sup> More frustrating are those who touch on Lafferty’s core concerns before retreating as if burned, as when Dena C. Bain in a primarily Jungian analysis finds that “[Lafferty’s] attempts to meld the deeper concerns of myth with the lightness of a folktale style often result ... in an unfortunate, sometimes frustrating, obscurity” (173).

On the contrary, Neil Gaiman—undoubtedly R.A. Lafferty’s preeminent modern-day booster—writes that “[t]o treat RAL as an eccentric, ribald sf writer is to misunderstand his genius.” Noting Lafferty’s “incapacity to fit the expectations of readers,” Gaiman finds that “there is a sense that one must know the whole ... before coming to an understanding of any one part” (554, 555). Hence it is difficult to fault Lafferty’s critics for failing to piece together a coherent picture of his jigsaw-puzzle body of work—primarily because his cheerful idiosyncrasy makes it difficult to consider him alongside other authors or within the terminology of sf criticism as it has developed, but more practically because of the difficulty in gathering all the pieces so that they may be seen as a whole. Any frustration resulting from the “obscurity” of his style is trumped by the unfortunate obscurity of so many of his publications; at present, only one of his books remains in print: *Okla Hannali*, a historical novel about the Choctaw in the nineteenth century. Though a near-constant in sf magazines and anthologies throughout the Sixties and well into the Seventies, many of these stories have never been collected, and must be tracked down individually. In the Eighties and Nineties, faced with a market increasingly

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<sup>8</sup> Whether Aldiss intends here to evoke Roland Barthes’ distinction between “readerly” and “writerly” prose is uncertain, as in the great bulk of *Trillion Year Spree* there are no references to the author of *S/Z*. Exploring Lafferty in connection with Barthesian theory, however, could prove quite fruitful.

indifferent to his peculiar brand of fiction,<sup>9</sup> Lafferty accepted offers from several fan presses to publish some of the mound of material he had piled up. These range in quality from attractive, cloth-bound books with specially commissioned illustrations, to mimeographed, spottily proofread booklets, in print runs never greater than a couple thousand, and often five hundred or fewer; almost all are now in the hands of collectors, and those that do become available are priced beyond the reach of the standard academic researcher. And, even with the considerable labors of the small-presses in bringing Lafferty to print, some forty short stories remain unpublished, as well as fourteen entire novels—among them the third and fourth volumes of *The Coscuin Chronicles*, as well as the bulk of his multi-generational Tulsa epic *In a Green Tree*.<sup>10</sup>

It is thus not surprising that even Lafferty himself, until late on in life, thought of his works in isolation—as “quite a few novels, and many shorter works, and also verses and scraps” rather than as one “never-ending story” (*More Than Melchisedech* 550). Yet there are tantalizing hints throughout of, if not an organized whole, at least a coherence of

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<sup>9</sup> There are a number of reasons for this plummeting popularity—the retirements or deaths of various ex-Futurian boosters (especially his agent, Virginia Kidd); the reaction against “soft” and especially New Wave science fiction; the arthritic pains that limited his typing time and prevented him from attending cons—but not least of these, by Lafferty’s own admission, was a decline in the standards of his short stories: “I never again put together a consistent string of superior short stories as I had done in 1970 and 1971” (Jackson 51). Though the ’80s saw a string of superior novels (including *Annals of Klepsis*, *Serpent’s Egg*, and *East of Laughter*), they were mostly fan-produced and aimed at the collector.

<sup>10</sup> This series is often described as “autobiographical”; however, it is much more concerned with the history of a single class of a Catholic high school from first-grade to the grave, and eventually their successive generations; Lafferty’s stand-in character (“Paul Rafferty”) makes only the briefest of appearances in the first volume. This may reflect the Lafferty family’s move back to Iowa around this time; regardless, Lafferty does not write himself into the lives of these characters until the club-like stories of the Men Who Know Everything series. There he plays the part of “Laff,” the one member of the club who does not know everything.



purpose—something very like the “underlay” Lafferty identifies. Eric Walker, on his website GreatSFandF.com, points to Lafferty’s habit of introducing characters from one set of stories into another set, whether in a cameo role or merely in a long list of names; by using “those repeating names to thread together otherwise unrelated tales into a larger montage or universe,” Walker speculates, “the fanatic, with patience, could probably link all of Lafferty’s works.” Asked about this tendency in an interview, Lafferty replied, “Yes, sometimes I use the old trick of having stories connected by a common minor character or otherwise”; crediting the device to Balzac, he notes that “Several sets of my people will know each other, even if they may not be on quite the same fictional or reality level” (“Maybe They Needed Killing” 19). The result is something of a palimpsest in which characters interact not only with those on their own layers, but occasionally with those on other layers as well.

As a narrative mechanism, this is tremendously flexible—accounting for one of Lafferty’s persistent character types, the itinerant scientist who “turns up every time you get on a good one” (“Narrow Valley” 203)—but also occasionally bewildering, not least to the characters themselves. In *Archipelago*, naval grunt and part-time genius painter Finnegan struggles with his status as a fictional character living on multiple levels of reality. It is said of him that “He is a schizo ... He lives several lives. He believes that he is an alien being in one of those lives, and it may be that he is” (102). Some of these lives are set in the mythological past: Finnegan was Iason of the Argonauts, and Dionysus, and Ulysses (39); he is a being of an older recension (187); he also is Finn McCool (“Anamnesis” 14) and Cu Chulainn (“Interglossia” 18). Others are simultaneous: in one interval, “in what was possibly an alternate and unaccepted version of things,” Finnegan

spends a happy twelve years married to a woman who, in his own timeline, is married to his best friend; though both of them maintain memories of the period, those years cannot be reconciled with the consensus chronology (cf. *Archipelago* 201–2, “Anamnesis” 17). Likewise, the events of *The Devil Is Dead* are contemporaneous with those of *Archipelago*, and feature Finnegan in the midst of swashbuckling intrigue, yet there is no room for it in the life of *Archipelago*’s Finnegan; they take place in a series of “Lost Years” so-called not only because they pass in a haze of dissolution, but because they literally have no place in the timeline.

It’s appropriate that Lafferty’s comments on his “ghost-story” novel come in the context of Finnegan and the overflowing Argo Trilogy: specifically, in an afterword penned by Lafferty in response to his publisher’s confusion about the “multiple endings” of the trilogy’s final book, *More Than Melchisedech*.<sup>11</sup> In this short, rich piece—“An

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<sup>11</sup> To be absolutely precise, the afterword appeared first in the book *Argo*, third of the three volumes into which *More Than Melchisedech* was split for its initial publication by Universal Mythologies Press. The first two volumes, *Tales of Midnight* and *Tales of Chicago*, were published in separate hardcover editions (the three volumes were brought back together by the print-on-demand publisher Lulu Press at the instigation of an unidentified agent, for an edition now no longer offered for sale). Moreover, material from *Argo* overlaps, but does not precisely coincide with, the UM Press booklet *Episodes of the Argo*.

The previous two books of the series are likewise complicated. *Archipelago*, languishing after a number of rejections over many years before its publication by rarity specialists *Manuscript Press* (in an accordingly rare edition), is the simpler of the two to account for; *The Devil Is Dead*, on the other hand, though published by a major press, was made more problematic by the omission of two sections, the “Interglossia,” first printed in the fanzine *Is* and later collected in the *How Many Miles to Babylon* booklet, and “An Apocryphal Passage of the Last Night of Count Finnegan On Galveston Island (Unaccountably Omitted from the Standard Version of The Devil Is Dead),” collected in *Episodes of the Argo*. When considering also the tangential novel *Dotty*, the short stories (some, like “Episodes of the Argo” itself, alternate versions of happenings in the Trilogy text; others, like “Great Day in the Morning” and “The Casey Machine,” elaborating on the characters and their motivations), the poems, and the unpublished fragments (“And Seven Scenes from Sheol”; “The End of the End”)—and the limited availability of many

Essay Explaining the Alternate Endings of the Book *ARGO*, In the Course of Which I'm Obligated to Explain the Detailed Workings of The World Itself"—Lafferty does indeed detail the workings of the world:

It is established that the human race is made up entirely of glowing geniuses. That's something. And it's pretty well established that the begeniused human race is totally ghostly in in all the meanings of the word, that it is overflowing so that very often persons cannot be contained in a single body, that it runs pretty much on multiple and parallel tracks.

(*More Than Melchisedech* 552)

Hence, though there may seem to be multiple and contradictory endings in *Argo*, and in Lafferty's work more widely, "There aren't. There aren't any endings at all. A cross-cut of the multiplicities may seem like a bunch of endings, but that is only a seeming. It is a forward surge on multiple tracks of multiple powers, and it still goes on. It does not end" (554).

In capsule form, then, Lafferty's world is a collection of characters too overflowing to be contained by any single perspective or timeline—and, moreover, their exceptional nature is representative of all humanity because all humanity is exceptional. Sheryl Smith, one of Lafferty's most perceptive readers, notes that "When a piece of art has archetypal symbols that are alive, alive-o and functioning, they seem to radiate more meaning than can be grasped"; Smith pursues this line, demonstrating the simultaneous workings of the empirical and the archetypal in some fifty Lafferty stories, adding the important caveat that "he is not refashioning old myths so much as recasting the elements

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of these materials—the *Argo* "Trilogy" is a fair measure of the challenge facing would-be Lafferty bibliographers.

of both myth and science-fiction ... into something all his own” (74). Which is to say, the stories are not merely a vehicle for the myths; there is an equilibrium often missed or mischaracterized by commentators, such as Bain, dependent on Jungian terminology for their analysis.

For Lafferty, though, the personae identified by Jung are manifestations rather than explanations of the essential multiplicity of mankind; one more “testimony to the Detailed Workings of the World Itself” (*More Than Melchisedech* 553). They are representative, moreover, of certain set patterns of thought that must be escaped. As he writes when instructing the reader in the “Promantia” or Foreword<sup>12</sup> to *The Devil Is Dead*: “Learn the true topography: the monstrous and wonderful archetypes are not inside you, not in your own unconsciousness; you are inside them, trapped, and howling to get out” (9). Any reductive or structural analysis will invariably prove inadequate to the task of explaining Lafferty, not because systematic bodies of thought have nothing to add to the literature,<sup>13</sup> but because it must consider Lafferty’s work as a finished object, rather than always and necessarily unfinished. It strips away the multiplicity and forces the stories to operate on a single layer of meaning, halting their “forward surge on multiple

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<sup>12</sup> From the Greek *pro-mantéia*, a root that refers both to a prophecy and to the prophet and was one of the official titles of the Pythia at Delphi. It also can refer to the “right of consulting an oracle first”; hence, appropriate for the Foreword of a visionary, Delphic book which the reader must play some part in interpreting. Such complex etymological puns are one of Lafferty’s stocks in trade; for more see Webb

<sup>13</sup> Quite the contrary: a reading of the *Coscuin Chronicles* informed by, say, Marxist theory, would be fascinating, as would an explication of the Lacanian real, imaginary, and symbolic in the Argo Trilogy. But these would merely be additional perspectives on an already multi-perspectival object which, per Lafferty, would maintain its own integrity irrespective of any single view of it. Cf. *More than Melchisedech* 542, quoting his own *Three Armageddons of Enniscorthy Sweeny*.

tracks of multiple powers,” and colonizing the underlay in the name of one or another theorist.

Lafferty’s texts operate on a principle of radical openness. This is an author, after all, who ended two novels (*Annals of Klepsis* and *Where Have You Been, Sandaliotis?*) on dashes, and who, in *Archipelago*, left Finnegan, his sometime girlfriend Dotty, and a left-handed assassin exchanging gunfire on a beach near Havana, in order to conclude with a remark on “an advantage in very old and mutilated writings”; namely, “they are improved by the mutilation. It is the first and the last sheepskins that are always lost or worn. There is no story that is not improved by having its first and last pages lost” (283). Though never hesitant to adapt old structures when the story calls for one—“Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne,” for instance, takes as framework the old tale of the three wishes and the sausage—Lafferty nonetheless reveals within them the destabilizing power inherent in narrative. In “Charlemagne,” the members of Lafferty’s Institute for Impure Science set out to alter history by means of avatars sent back to the past to assassinate certain influential personages. To determine if their experiment has worked, they set out an objective reference to the pre-assassination world: a history text which will have to change if it is to accommodate the new historical order.

“Of course,” writes Don Webb, “following a long established tradition in science fiction, the change changes their memories and their external object” (91)—such that the story would initially appear little more than a cautionary twist on the run-of-the-mill alternate history. But Lafferty’s primary aim here is not to show off an alternate world,

but to explore the mechanism permitting the alterations<sup>14</sup>: in narratological terms, a *deictic shift*. This, as David Herman explains, is a tool “whereby a storyteller prompts his or her interlocutors to relocate from the here and now of the current interaction to the alternative space-time coordinates of the storyworld” (270). Or, to make use of Marie-Laure Ryan’s terminology, the narrative is “recentered” around an “alternative possible world” (or APW) which, through this act of recentering, becomes the “textual actual world” (or TAW) of the narrative in question—a world which has, in turn, its own constellation of alternative possible worlds.

From the reader’s perspective, the Institute scientists in “Charlemagne” make three such recentering moves: first, from the TAW to APW<sub>1</sub>, in which Charlemagne’s betrayer is assassinated before he can perform his act of perfidy, which has the effect of ushering in the Renaissance in the eighth century; then from APW<sub>1</sub> to APW<sub>2</sub>, in which William of Ockham is allowed (by the assassination of a devastating critic) to propagate a philosophy of nihilism, which returns civilization to the paleolithic; and finally from APW<sub>2</sub> back to TAW, in which they assassinate the avatar who was to have killed Charlemagne’s betrayer. Yet from the perspective of the scientists themselves, each of these APWs in turn becomes the actual world—in fact, their own supposed zero-state, the TAW before and after the experiment, has already been recentered from an “actual world” blighted by various baleful historical figures, who were subsequently, retroactively killed by one of the Institute’s members, Willy McGilly:

“Who did you, as a boy, ever kill in time, Willy?”

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<sup>14</sup> This is one of many instances that could be cited in support of Eric Walker’s dictum that, with Lafferty, “the story you are reading is never the story he is telling.”

“Lots of them. King Wu of the Manchu, Pope Adrian VII, President Hardy of our own country, King Marcel of Auvergne, the philosopher Gabriel Toeplitz. It’s a good thing we got rid of them. They were a bad lot.”

“But I never heard of any of them, Willy.” Glasser insisted.

“Of course not. We killed them when they were kids.” (174)

As Webb notes, “the Institute for Impure Science is here doing to itself what Lafferty does for his readers—changing the rules at some time before the action begins” (91). This suggestion that the world has *already* been altered from its baseline state sometime before the narrative demonstrates another of the principles Webb finds in Lafferty’s prose—the postulate that “the world (at least his fictional world) is actually much, much stranger than our own. It is not only broad enough for the strange event, it is broad enough to hold the *laws* which permit the strange event” (90). The emphasis is Webb’s, but as expansive as his claim is, I find Lafferty’s thrust here farther-reaching still: the “laws” are not merely the physical (or metaphysical) principles conditioning the fictional world, but more broadly the narrative principles and cognitive mechanisms that allow for the formulation of worlds much, much stranger than our own—or, as Lafferty might have it, strange enough to *become* our own.

Ryan captures this with some elegance in her linking of the practice of storytelling to “a game of make-believe.” Drawing on the philosopher Kendall Walton, Ryan writes that

[w]hen children engage in make-believe, they agree on a certain number of rules of substitution. These rules are instituted through an operator

indicating pretense: “Let’s pretend these buckets full of sand are cakes ...”

In fiction the rule simply states: “Let’s pretend the facts told by the narrator are true, and the world he describes is the actual world.”<sup>15</sup> (23)

Lafferty foregrounds this ludic gesture of “let’s pretend,” but for him the stakes are rather higher. While Ryan finds that “[a]s inhabitants of the one and only actual world, we realize that the textual universe is created by the text, but as players of the fictional game, we agree to regard it as preexisting to it, as being merely reflected in the narrator’s declarations,” Lafferty insists that there is no longer any “actual world”; that if there is to be another, it is we players of the fictional game who must make it and believe in it; and that any such world may—or rather, *must*—preexist the gesture that creates it.

This seemingly simple “child’s play” fuels Willy McGilly’s riffs on the “bad lot” he killed—and note here especially—“as a boy.” The rest of the Institute scientists may have forgotten what it was like to kill bad guys as a kid, but Willy hasn’t—and it is his contributions, extending beyond the boundaries of the story itself, which remain even after the assassin-avatars (terminators, as it were; embodiments of the words “The End”) are nullified. World-making is a taxing task, and world-sustaining more strenuous still<sup>16</sup>; though strongly invested in both, Lafferty puts his greatest efforts into the task of educating his audience in how to do both, so that his world need not fall apart when he lays down his pen.

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<sup>15</sup> Ryan follows up with a proviso about the refinements needed “to take into account the possibility of unreliable narration” (23); Lafferty rarely uses an unreliable narrator, though for one exception see the story “Hog-Belly Honey” in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* (New York: Ace Books, 1970. 236–45).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the discussion below on *Space Chantey* and especially “Days of Grass, Days of Straw,” but also the “Scribbling Giants” in the novel *East of Laughter* (Bath, Eng.: Morrigan Publications, 1988).



This DIY aesthetic pervades his work: often he provides the pieces, but leaves it to the reader to puzzle out the picture. In that same “Promantia” to *The Devil Is Dead* (published 1971, but completed in manuscript on New Year’s Eve, 1967), Lafferty warns the reader that “This is a do-it-yourself thriller or nightmare. Its present order is only the way it comes in the box. Arrange it as you will ... Put the nightmare together. If you do not wake up screaming, you have not put it together well” (9–10). Among the “blocks” with which we are to build “[our] own dramas of love and death and degradation” are an ogress, a mermaid, a Mr. X, a left-footed killer, and “the Devil Himself with his several faces”—but also there are less specific characters, not individuals but rather representatives of types: “the wonderful beauties and the foul murderers, the ships and the oceans of middle space, the corpses and the revenants.” Moreover, the chapters themselves function as pieces to be moved around: as Robert Whitaker noted, “Lafferty claims that one need not start with the first chapter of THE DEVIL IS DEAD ... one can open the book up to Chapter 5, read it to the end and then read the first four chapters” (“Some Notes” 9). Other readings are perhaps possible, but it seems certain that, as Whitaker ventures, “if this concept/actuality is the same with the whole of the trilogy ... could one say, start off in the third volume, in the middle and work one’s way around and still grasp the conceptional [*sic*] whole of the work?” (10)<sup>17</sup>

That Whitaker could speculate about this “conceptional whole” in 1976, before the other two volumes in the trilogy had been published (much less the other Argo stories

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<sup>17</sup> There are a number of parallels that can be drawn between Lafferty’s work and James Joyce’s—for instance, the Rabelaisian delight in bodies and laughter, discussed below. Another is the formal circularity noted here in *The Devil Is Dead*, and of course in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*; a detailed comparison between the pair would, I suspect, reveal techniques common to both, but lays outside the scope of the present essay.

and novelettes, or the “Essay Explaining...” that explicitly extended the metaphor to the entire corpus) indicates that not all the pieces need be in play for the collaborative world-building to get underway. In fact, many have suspected, from a very small sampling of the whole, that “under all the strangeness [is] a curious reality” (del Rey 221) or that, despite the presence of humor in one story, the reader may yet detect “undertones that are a bit more thoughtful” (Wollheim 65). But that these writers—in their own right, giants in the field—were mostly content to skim the surface and leave the “curious reality” unexplored or the “undertones” unsounded points to another problem: it is not enough merely to have the pieces; one must also know how to use them properly. Even if the building blocks of a new world were to fall from the sky—as they do in the story “Nor Limestone Islands”—ready to be pieced together into a marvelous structure, still many would balk at using them, or would employ them in only the most rudimentary manner. Bakhtin wrote of Rabelais that understanding him “requires an essential reconstruction of our entire artistic and ideological perception” (3). Thus also with Lafferty, much of whose science fiction as a result is self-reflexively concerned with instructing readers in the mode of cognition necessary to share in such prodigious labor.

When in one interview Lafferty opined that “all of science fiction is game-playing ... There aren’t any real characters—just types. And you move them around” (R. Wolfe 54), he linked Ryan’s “make-believe” gesture, and its roots in kids’ spontaneous story-play, to his own science-fictional puzzle: the latter cannot be approached without the former’s sense of wide-open ludic possibility. Lafferty dramatizes this toward the end of his complex and scarcely-read novel *Serpent’s Egg*, when a group of nine human or quasi-human mega-intelligent children (including a chimp, a bear, a seal, a python, a

parrot, and an ambulatory computer) are preparing for an ocean-floor dive to visit the great whales and read the runic writing on their Cyclopean undersea castles. What would in a purely Jungian novel be the Wise Old Man archetype, Satrap Saint Ledger, explains to the kids that they can survive in the deepest depths without diving equipment or breathing apparatus, if they learn to enter what he calls the “pseudo-dream state of Oceanic Metastasis” (134). But St. Ledger is not just an archetype: he is also a stand-in for Lafferty himself, a persona through which the author sets about reconstructing artistic and ideological perceptions.

The experiments that originally brought together this strange group of mega-intelligent children did so with the aim of producing a “wider humanity,” capable of exploring “new ways of looking at the world, but not too cockeyed new” (2). For, should they cross into “too cockeyed” territory, assassins are dispatched to eliminate them, ensuring that there would be no “high-headed and divergent” individuals, of the sort who might create “tall and jarring [and] turbulent waves” (81).

Several of the children are already dangerously near this high-headed divergence when the Satrap instructs them in Oceanic Metastasis, completing their transition to the “cockeyed new” vision (cf. 135), and hence to the fully realized state of turbulent genius that will lead ultimately to a new world on the verge of hatching from the titular “serpent’s egg.” St. Ledger insists that the technique involves no special equipment; just as diving helmets and bathyspheres would interfere with the new vision of the “Oceanic Hyper-Active Dream State”—“seen through the new Metastatic eyes the whole Ocean Depth was gloriously sunlit and of the sharpest and most varied colors in the world” (136)—so too would theoretical frameworks distract from the encounter with the Oceanic

Unconscious. Though it is certainly possible to interpret this voyage into the unconscious as a quest for individuation,<sup>18</sup> or a liberation of the id from the repressive superego,

Lafferty's image here is much closer to Italo Calvino's, when the latter writes:

The unconscious is the ocean of the unsayable, of what has been expelled from the land of language ... [it] speaks—in dreams, in verbal slips, in sudden associations—with borrowed words, stolen symbols, linguistic contraband, until literature redeems these territories and annexes them to the language of the world. (19)

In *Serpent's Egg*, the deepest recess of the Ocean—the territory Lafferty seeks to redeem—holds the great “Temple-City” of the whales, built by them out of great “blocks and shafts and trabants of marble ... beautiful pink, lilac, tan, orange, and mauve tinted” (136–7). Here is another representation of the building blocks Lafferty provides in the “Promantia” to *The Devil Is Dead* and, by extension, throughout his entire work; here too is an image of the construction his readers are tasked with: “To the unpenetrating eye, the building-activity of the whales seemed to be in a state of beautiful and multi-colored confusion. But to one in the Oceanic Metastatic State ... the plan of it all was as clear as it was beautiful” (137).

This *metastasis* is another of Lafferty's loaded Greek puns. Its most common meaning is “removal,” as with Satrap Saint Ledger removing the children temporarily from harm's way. But it can also indicate “revolution,” as in the overthrow of the faceless dystopia the kids hope to accomplish before its assassins kill one or more of them. Still

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<sup>18</sup> Though Lafferty *does* follow Jung in consistently identifying the unconscious with the Ocean, as made explicit by a draft manuscript table of contents for a collection of his early stories to be called *The Man Underneath: Stories out of the 'Ocean' called modernly the Subconscious on the Theme of Fun in Fiction* (Ms. II.16.14).

further, it can refer to a “removal of the scene to some hypothetical condition” (Liddell-Scott)—a recentering gesture of the sort Marie-Laure Ryan locates at the heart of all narrative fiction. Thus when the children enter this “ocean of the unsayable,” they do so in a manner modeling the “metastatic” state of any author embarking upon his fictive task. Then Lafferty complicates this still further when he reveals, through St. Ledger, that the ambulatory little-girl computer Inneall (Gaelic for *engine*) will experience the least difficulty in maintaining the Oceanic Metastasis because “her regular mental and somatic state is almost exactly the same” already—which is to say, she is most closely in touch with the process of creative exploration; preparing the way for the revelation on the book’s next-to-last page that Inneall is already an author, and that the entirety of the text to that point has been her own log of the adventures.

Yet from the beginning, the Ocean has also been Inneall’s (24): a new ocean pooling up in the middle of Oklahoma and spreading outwards, with the aim of covering the entire globe. Log and Ocean are thus one: both products of language, linked together in a continual cycle of expansion and narration. As *Serpent’s Egg* is the log, so also is it the ocean: to open the book (or any other Lafferty book for that matter) is to take a dip in this ocean; to study him is to dive into the Oceanic Metastasis in search of linguistic territory to be reclaimed. As one reviewer notes: “Lafferty has suggested figures and symbols so primal and overpowering as to be nearly pre-verbal in their impact” (Stine 23). He has provided the building blocks, and he has modeled the process by which they are fitted together—though at novel’s end the serpent’s egg has not yet hatched, and the Ocean not yet covered the surface of the globe. The novel’s last page, the “epilog,”<sup>19</sup> is

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<sup>19</sup> So spelled because it is a comment upon [Gr. *epi*-] Inneall’s log.

given over to a sea louse, in order to call into question the reliability of the entire narrative preceding it. The louse, one of many used by the whales to etch artistic designs into the stones of their grand Temple-City, represents both the actual method of inscription of the text and, luminescent upon the lines of its etching, the text itself as it exists in the Oceanic Unconscious. At least one reviewer finds that, on this last page, “everything falls into place. There becomes rationality where before it did not exist” (Morgan 38). In this respect it perhaps represents something like Calvino’s “unsayable,” reacting ambiguously to its “annexation” by noting that Inneall’s account is “full of lies” (166; there may be a pun intended with lies/lice), while at the same time being unable to make such notes without first being written into existence by Inneall’s log.

When an aside speaks of “Inneall’s Ocean [as] a recent and poorly-explained phenomenon” (43), it reads now as a sadly prescient comment on the neglected novel, and on Lafferty’s work in general. In yet another of its facets, *Serpent’s Egg* concerns itself with the author’s uneasy fit in the genre of science fiction, which itself could be compared to a series of Experiments aimed at “explor[ing] new ways of looking at the world”—except that Lafferty’s vision is just “too cockeyed new” for many readers of SF. In a brief but useful survey, Sandra Miesel gathers several adverse reactions to Lafferty’s tales, noting that, just as “Exposition and dialogue overshadow action. Events are more often predicted or recollected than depicted” (542).

In the terms favored by David Herman, this points to Lafferty’s defiance of the genre’s “preference rankings” for “process types”; i.e., the most-commonly used methods for constructing narratives in terms of what the narrative participants actually do in the text. Drawing on M.A.K. Halliday, Herman identifies three primary processes—material,

mental, and relational—as well as three secondary processes, each combining two of the primaries: behavioral (=material/mental), existential (=material/relational), and verbal (=mental/relational). Herman suggests that narrative genres can be distinguished from one another by their preference for certain processes and their comparative “disprefferal” of others (cf. 140–8). As indicated by Miesel’s comments, science fiction “prefers” material processes, which concentrate on actions most often directed at goals, and in which “no participant need be human or human-like, and the distinction between conscious and unconscious beings is largely irrelevant” (Herman 141). In Lafferty, by contrast, “[e]xposition and dialogue overshadow action” (Miesel 542); which is to say that Lafferty disprefers the material in favor of the verbal. When Miesel avers that “[t]here is not a bit of science in Lafferty’s SF” (543), she is not impugning his stories for a lack of scientific content—after all, it is the Institute for Impure Science stories for which he is most often remembered—but rather asserting that the material aspect of that science is totally enveloped and dominated by the linguistic aspects of storytelling.

In a famous commentary upon his hard SF novel *Mission to Gravity*, Hal Clement writes that “a science fiction story is fun, not work ... The fun, and the material for this article, lies in treating the whole thing as a game” (216). For Clement, the game involves two players, the reader and author, with the former trying to ferret out such scientific errors as exist in the text, and the latter trying to forestall that by making as few as possible. For this game of hard SF to be played to its fullest, both author and reader would need to themselves be scientific professionals (or highly-trained amateurs): men of action extending the boundaries of empirical knowledge by day, and constructing worlds around their findings by night. Clement’s is a game that requires technical equipment and

specialized knowledge—in other words, the exact sort of apparatus done away with by Lafferty (through Satrap Saint Ledger) in *Serpent's Egg*. “The more traditional functions of literary narrative—to motivate collective and individual human actions within the world frames—are much less important to this kind of sf gaming than the rigor of setting” (Csicsery-Ronay 114). For Lafferty, who seeks precisely to motivate collective and individual human actions toward the construction of world frames, the *Mission to Gravity* type of cheerful competition simultaneously takes world-creation too seriously and not seriously enough. Lafferty’s game of collaborative “make-believe,” which operates with much simpler (one might say nonexistent) rules, is played not just for amusement, but for the emergence and sustenance of a new world for humanity. All other aspects of his prose—the metafictional trickery, the puzzle construction, even the gleeful bloodletting and whopping great lies—are related and subordinated to this higher-order quest, which not only makes use of the traditional mechanism of estrangement embedded in science fiction, but also expands the boundaries of what is possible within sf, essentially estranging the genre from itself.

Critiques of Lafferty from within the sf community<sup>20</sup> often echo those found by Mikhail Bakhtin in the criticism of Rabelais: “Many were repulsed and still are repulsed by him. The vast majority, however, simply do not understand him. In fact, many of his images remain an enigma” (3). Indeed, the similarities between Rabelais and Lafferty are striking, and Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* is an invaluable resource for understanding the sources of Lafferty’s aesthetic. But even matching Rabelais and Lafferty point for point would not provide the “essential reconstruction of perception”

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<sup>20</sup> Critiques of Lafferty from outside the sf community are essentially nonexistent, with the exception of the small body of literature around *Okla Hannali*.



required. As Bakhtin notes, the “enigma” above “can be solved only by means of a deep study of Rabelais’ popular sources”; merely pointing out correspondence would be to invert Bakhtin’s analytical method, which aims not at understanding of carnival elements in isolation, but rather at apprehending and appreciating the essential unity upon which Rabelais drew—the carnivalesque culture of folk humor and its transformative renewal of the world around it.

Lafferty, like Rabelais, “perceive[d] the world in its laughing aspect” (Bakhtin 13); however, given that humanity lacked a world, he had first to create one before this aspect could be perceived. What he found in science fiction was not only a lucrative market, but also a genre in which, by convention, worlds were created at will and destroyed on a whim—a sort of linguistic laboratory in which to conduct his research on human perception. Samuel Delany argues that science fiction provides a “different discourse” from that found in mainstream or “mundane” fiction, which makes for “clear and sharp differences right down to the way we read individual sentences” (103). It is no accident that one of the sentences Delany uses to illustrate this difference is “Then her world exploded.” Only in sf can this sentence be read as anything other than metaphor, which for Delany indicates that sf discourse, with its wider possible range of meanings, has effectively appropriated the mundane: “With each sentence we have to ask what in the world of the tale would have to be different from our world for such a sentence to be uttered.” For Lafferty, of course, the situation is rather more urgent. The actual world having come to an end, it is not only textuality that has become science-fictional, but reality on the whole; with each sentence he asks what in the world of the tale can contribute to the world that humanity is charged with reconstructing.

One of his earliest such experiments was the story “Snuffles,” his first publication in *Galaxy* (December 1960). On its most basic level, the story is standard pulp fare—what Mike Ashley in his authoritative survey of early sf magazines dismisses as a collection of “lost civilizations, invasions by monsters, or adventures on distant planets” (71)—a landing party on a strange planet comes under attack from the native fauna and is wiped out before help arrives. The official report of the too-late rescue team provides this simplistic interpretation—“No explanation of the fact that no attempt seems to have been made to use the weapons, though two of the party were killed nearly a week later than the others. All were mangled by the huge pseudo-ursine which seems to have run amok from eating the local fruit, seasonally narcotic” (269–70)—which only hints at the bizarre experience as perceived by the members of the landing party.

From the first, something seems off about Bellota, the world on which they have landed. As the party’s naturalist explains:

Bellota was made for fun. It is a joke, a caricature, a burlesque. It is a planet with baggy pants and a putty nose. It is a midget world with floppy shoes and a bull-roarer voice. It was designed to keep the cosmos from taking itself too seriously. The law of levity here conspires against the law of gravity. (243)

This is the language of carnivalized creation; already in his first newsstand story Lafferty is sending up the worlds built by his predecessors—burlesquing *and* dismissing, for as the scientist of the party finds, according to his own peculiar doctrine, “Bellota was the only body that behaved as it should. It was the rest of the universe that was atypical.” This claim is borne out also metatextually, as Lafferty’s narrative proceeds in a manner

far different from the search-or-die-trying topographical exploration of the Golden Age tale. Lafferty's explorers pursue conversation more than adventure—conversation, moreover, which is philosophical and playful rather than intrepid.

The one point of interaction between Lafferty's tale and the model he's burlesquing is the interaction between man and alien, in this case the "pseudo-ursine," which they name Snuffles. The being fits his planet: "Snuffles was a bear—possibly—of sorts. The bear is himself a caricature of animalkind, somehow a giant dog, somehow a shaggy man, an ogre, and also a toy. And Snuffles was a caricature of a bear." His presence sends the party's engineer into a discourse on the mythological and etymological significance of the bear, a sweeping survey summed up by the ship's icy biologist: "So you make God and the Bear and the Devil one." The response comes from the expedition leader: "In many mythologies it was the bear who made the world." (147–8).

Friendly at first, Snuffles soon turns on the party (as alien fauna tend to do) slaughtering four of the six of them in a sudden, brutal, calculated attack: "With one move, Snuffles had killed the leader, cornered three of the others, and cut off the remaining two from base weapons, to be hunted down later." But just as Lafferty seems about to bring his story into line with more traditional sf tales—says the engineer to the icy biologist, "it isn't unheard of for the hunted to outsmart the hunter ... possibly we will be saved in the nick of time": holding out the hope of survival via romance plot—he deranges the tale beyond any possibility of genre conformity. Snuffles chases the pair through a belt of the planet where all the plants are hallucinogenic; later they will realize

it is not that one part alone, but the entire world that is undergoing “a narcotic season ... a built-in saturnalia. But we have not been able to enjoy the carnival.”

During their hallucinatory flight, the pair hears Snuffles speaking inside their heads; through which communication he reveals himself in his role as “king of this world.” The pseudo-bear did indeed create the world; his attacks on the party members are because of their failure to adequately praise his creation. But as he is also “king of the carnival,” he carries out his destruction in appropriately grotesque fashion. As Bakhtin notes, “Death, the dead body, blood as a seed buried in the earth, rising for another life—this is one of the oldest and most widespread themes” (327); so too Snuffles kills that he may create again. He tells the pair: “Do not be afraid of dying. Remember that nothing is lost. When I have the pieces of you, I will use them to make other things”; he even provides a grotesque resolution for the romance plot, as the heroine relates that “when he chews us up he will take a piece of me and a piece of you and chew them together to make a new thing.” And then Snuffles kills them both, the icy biologist as well as the engineer who notes just before his bloody death that “the narcotic period of the planet is over. The carnival is coming to an end” (168). He will chew on the bodies of the explorers and on the terrain of Bellota: the two were always the same, for “the grotesque body is cosmic and universal ... [it] can merge with various natural phenomena ... It can fill the entire universe” (318).<sup>21</sup> After the official report, the story comes to a close with a vision of Snuffles at work on his next world.

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<sup>21</sup> In a penetrating critique of Bakhtin and the science-fictional grotesque, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., in his magisterial study *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* finds that “In his focus on carnality ... Bakhtin does not note that with the scientific enlightenment the human body ceases to be a unique cosmos ... While [he] continues to look for the grotesque in human carnality, with science the grotesque is extended into the

Lafferty here channels his self-reflexive impulse into what will become a trademark of his, a science-fiction story about writing a science-fiction story. Snuffles is the projection of the author onto his created world of Bellota—which, as the impersonal narrator points out, means “acorn”: it is a seed-world, designed to die so that future worlds might live. The telepathic communication is Lafferty talking with his textual creatures in the medium of text, and he when he brings the world of their story to an end, he will chew them together to create new characters for stories yet unwritten on worlds yet uncreated. What he learns from Bellota, and from the writing of “Snuffles,” he ruminates on and makes use of thereafter: “The next world that Snuffles made embodied certain improvements, and he did correct the gravity error, but it still contained many elements of the grotesque. Perfection is a very long, very hard road.”

Under the mode of the grotesque, “the world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed”; moreover, “the principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which the grotesque is based ... frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities” (48–9). In “Snuffles,” Lafferty carnivalizes the exhausted sf space exploration narrative, dismembering explorers and space alike so that both may be renewed and revealed in their new potentiality.

This process of dismemberment and re-creation, destroying the old to make possible the new, is central to the grotesque mode of perception, and it recurs throughout

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body of the universe.” In “Snuffles” the two forms are again conflated, in the form of an unsteady nonhuman creator and a planetary body in perpetual flux—a fitting illustration for Csicsery-Ronay’s statement that “Grotesque objects bring a fundamental principle of mythological thought into rationalistic modes of perception. While the latter strive to set up clear distinctions and dependable frames of reference, the mythic imposes perpetual metamorphosis” (cf. his discussion in 185–8, leaning heavily on Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, [Princeton: Princeton University Press], 1982).

Lafferty's corpus as he continually chews together pieces to create new things. Time and again, Lafferty carnivalizes and dismembers whole subgenres of sf to provide fodder for his reconstruction of artistic and ideological perceptions. At the same time, he reaches out to his colleagues to join him in this all-important project. Hence his irritation with those for whom the practice of science fiction involves writing the same story again and again, as if time had stopped several decades earlier and the old recension of human consciousness still pertained; as Barth notes, "to be technically *out* of date is likely be a genuine defect" (66). Lafferty vents his frustration at this repudiation of renewal in his masterly story "Nine Hundred Grandmothers," where he uses the principle of laughter, channeled through the culture of folk humor, to confront and banish this complacency.

Much of the impulse behind this refusal to create new worlds is economic; it's an easier paycheck to exploit the same world over and over again, or to piggyback on the aging creations of others—a sort of aesthetic colonialism. Thus "Nine Hundred Grandmothers" establishes early on a nakedly commercial tone; the story takes place on "Proavitus—a sphere that almost tinkled with the potential profit that might be shaken out of it" (7). So a hypermasculinized expeditionary force, the pride of vintage sf, is sent to shake it. Led by Manbreaker Crag, who leads a cast including Heave Huckle, Blast Berg, and George Blood among others, it is a group that is "supposed to be tough, [so] they had taken tough names at the naming"—all except their cultural officer, Ceran Swicegood, who keeps his original name. This disgusts Manbreaker: "Nobody can be a hero with a name like Ceran Swicegood! Why don't you take Storm Shannon? That's good. Or Gutboy Barrelhouse or Slash Slagle or Nevel Knife? You barely glanced at the suggested list."

Lafferty here turns the entirety of genre convention into a matter of names, suggesting the sort of list a novice writer might consult when trying to prove that his characters are tough enough for the genre—or even when trying to find something for himself that will look good on a magazine cover.<sup>22</sup> Ceran, however, resists this renaming, and is as yet an imperfect fit for the colonial sf story: the narrator notes that, “Had [he] assumed the heroic name of Gutboy Barrelhouse he might have been capable of rousing endeavors and man-sized angers rather than his tittering indecisions and flouncy furies.” This imperfect masculinity resigns him to the role of cultural officer, leaving him to consult with the natives; his counterpart among the Proavitoi is “likely feminine”—there is a “certain softness about both the sexes” there that bodes ill for an expedition member who has not firmly established his manhood before touching down.

Ceran Swicegood’s primary failing is his concern with time. Stories about aliens and astronauts rarely bother much with time: they take place in the future, and their heroes act in the present. But Ceran, with his “irritating habit [of] forever asking the question: How Did It All Begin?”, is inexplicably concerned with the past, to the point of even refusing to give up his own in the naming. So when he is put on the tip that the Proavitoi do not die, and moreover that they have a Ritual that passes along from the very oldest the origin story of the universe, he believes he is finally near to answering his burning question. But this viewpoint is unsuited for an expedition man, who should already have had his orientation toward time fixed in the Ritual of the naming. As Manbreaker Crag tells him, “It don’t make a damn how it began. What is important is

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<sup>22</sup> Lafferty also scores a preemptive point here on Miesel, who writes that he “justifies his premises on etymological rather than scientific grounds: the name *is* the object” (543). In “Nine Hundred Grandmothers,” Lafferty suggests that in sf, this has *always* been the case.

that it may not have to end.” For Crag, this is a Fountain of Youth story, a chance to gain an immortality that will allow for neverending conquest and plunder, delivered in regular monthly installments.

But Ceran, perversely, seeks to get beneath the surface of the pulp standard fare, and he ventures into the caverns underneath Proavitoi in search of the eldest of them all. The title “Nine Hundred Grandmothers” refers to the regression of ancestors, as Ceran goes ever deeper into their memory of the past. When he reaches bottom, he is confronted with the one thing the hypermasculinized sf narrative cannot abide: laughter. “Oh, it was so funny a joke the way things began that you would not believe it,” says the ultimate grandmother, and Ceran’s exasperation grows as they all seem too caught up in laughter to actually answer him. But the laughter *is* their answer: as Bakhtin notes, “the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning ... in an Egyptian alchemist’s papyrus ... the creation of the world is attributed to divine laughter.” During the time of Ritual, that primal laughter still echoes in the caverns—“emerg[ing] from the depths of folk culture,” as Bakhtin puts it (71–3). “How good to wake up and laugh and go to sleep again,” the grandmother says; for her, and for all Proavitoi, laughter is both carnival and “the expression of [their] historical consciousness.” It is a consciousness alien to the astronaut: Ceran flees, “we[eping] and laugh[ing] together.” Having failed at Ritual, unable to discern the answer to his question even as it rang out all around him, he undertakes instead the ritual of the naming, adapting himself to a serialized, dehistoricized existence: “On his next voyage he changed his name to Blaze Bolt and ruled for ninety-seven days as king of a sweet sea island in M-81, but that is another and much more unpleasant story” (19).



This coda indicates Lafferty's impatience with that mass of science fiction untouched by the carnivalesque culture of folk humor, dubbing it "heroic tedium," produced by "writers who have become machines writing for readers who are also machines."<sup>23</sup> To him, science fiction is a genre ripe with immense regenerative potential—yet so many authors create worlds solely for their surfaces to be exploited by tedious heroes: in their serial adventures "the calendar is struck. It comes up *The Day After the World Ended* day after day, year after year" (46). At just the moment when it should be most active, when in Bakhtin's words, "the existing world suddenly becomes alien" and "there is the potentiality of a friendly world, of the golden age, of carnival truth" (47), science fiction too often turns away from the cavernous cosmic laughter of carnival consciousness: Ceran Swicegood becomes Blaze Bolt; the calendar remains stuck; and the "friendly world" turns "unpleasant"—it is, in effect, stillborn.

Meanwhile, Lafferty would seem to have created in Proavitus a world that is both vibrant—echoing still with the original cosmic laughter—and seemingly sustainable. But the reader departs this world along with Ceran Swicegood, and Lafferty does not return to it in later work for the simple reason that he cannot; as the Proavitoi do not die, they cannot aid us in our rebirth. This asteroid Proavitus (the very name means "ancestral" in Latin) is a finished world, representing a stage of perception prior to historical consciousness, a stage from which humankind has become irrevocably sundered. But now "we are, partly at least, in a post-conscious world" (43); any remaining connection to our ancestral past has been lost. The exile from Proavitus reminds us that whatever new

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<sup>23</sup> Lafferty's criticism is not related to the skill of the authors, but to a perceived "pomposity" in their execution. Among the authors slated are Ursula Le Guin, John Varley, and Stanislaw Lem.

creation does arise will do so only after we undertake the grotesque task of dismemberment.

With his emphatic insistence on the need for humanity to progress, one might expect Lafferty to be a political revolutionary as well. But Lafferty was no utopian: “I do not regard Utopias and Dystopias as opposites: they are the same thing, and they are always disastrous ... They are highly organized error” (Whitaker, “Maybe They Needed Killing,” 17).<sup>24</sup> This judgment could be extended to those stories which take as their basis utopian political thought, and in his story “Flaming Ducks and Giant Bread,” Lafferty critiques both fictive and political utopia in much the same way as he interrogated the pulp sf narrative in “Snuffles”: setting up and tearing apart a carnivalized burlesque of the world in question.

Satires of utopia are nothing new; some would argue (and Lafferty among them) that Thomas More’s *Utopia* is itself a satire, and hence that the thing itself was predated by its own burlesque.<sup>25</sup> Lafferty builds this mechanism into his story, noting of one anachronistic structure that “it was a burlesque of what it later became. There is no law saying that a burlesque of a thing may not appear before the thing itself” (45). Here, as he did with “Snuffles” and planet-fall science fiction, Lafferty presents “Flaming Ducks and Giant Bread” as a utopian story about writing utopian stories. In it he develops the concept of the “lustrum year” across two parallel tracks—the year 1313, and the

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<sup>24</sup> Lafferty regarded his anti-utopian novel *Past Master*—in which the citizens of Astrobe reach a thousand years back into the past to retrieve Thomas More, and make him the figurehead-leader of a planet built off his *Utopian* blueprint—as a failure: too many people took the novel as a straight-faced utopian venture.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Frederic Jameson’s discussion “Morus: The Generic Window” in *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), 22–41, in which he grapples with a position which, thanks to C.S. Lewis citing Erasmus, has become deeply entrenched.

chronological “present” of the story (date of composition, 1973; publication, 1974)—while allowing them to converge just beyond the horizon of story’s end. A lustrum year is one in which the entire structure of society is swept away, and an inverted version arises to take its place. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin identifies this as the “characteristic logic” of carnival, “the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out,’ the ‘turnabout’ ” in which is constructed “a second world of folk culture ... a parody of the extracarnival world” (11). In “Flaming Ducks,” the researchers at the Institute for Impure Science recover details about the “complete turn-around” that transformed “the Empire City of the World, Roma” into the city “Amor, or love”—details including such “feast of fools” imagery as the devil in motley appearing as “the Yellow Dwarf” and a newborn hermaphrodite seizing pontifical power under the title “Pope Joan,” as well as the further examples of extensive creative anachronism, such as steamboats, electric guitars, and clown cars.

These chronological displacements are not limited to 1313: as they are catalogued by the Institute scientists, they increasingly intrude on the narrative of the present time. The dislocations begin with the “flaming ducks and giant bread” of the title—burnt capons and great gobs of bloody flesh that come hurtling out of the sky—and continue on through the hermaphrodite, the clown-suited devil, and all the other elements that indicate an inverted society. This fulfills the warning delivered by Gregory Smirnov, director of the Institute, that the lustrum year is “a sinister year ... a contorted year” which cannot be entered, “even vicariously and experimentally, without [one]self becoming contorted.” The story itself undergoes contortions, as its internal present is wrenched onto the track of the lustrum year—a year “subjectively much longer than one year ... half a dozen decades on its own less real level” (43). But as the projection of 1313 Amor gains in

strength, it becomes more pointedly a satire of late '60s and early '70s society, especially of its manifestation in the 1967 Summer of Love.

Lafferty's critique, however, is not narrow moralizing; rather, it expresses his frustration at the squandering of a rare chance. After the upheavals of the 1960s, "[t]here has never been a place swept as clear of accumulation and superstructure of ours"; all the giants of the preceding generations have been exploded, and their bloody flesh rains down on the earth, rendering it extremely fertile. Though he repudiates utopianism, still he sees "an opportunity here that doesn't come every century, for not every century has the room to be creative ... Anything that you can conceive of, you can do in this non-world. Nothing can stop you except a total bankruptcy of creativity" ("Day After" 45–6).

Yet the promise of renewal goes unfulfilled: "The seedbed is waiting. All the circumstances stand ready. The fructifying minerals are literally jumping out of the ground. And nothing grows. And nothing grows. And nothing grows," he says, before asking, "Well, why not?" For Lafferty, the answer appears to be that most people simply cannot fathom the freedom they possess: confronted with the radically liberating power of carnivalized laughter, they flee from it, seeking instead like Ceran Swicegood the comfort of a Fountain of Youth fantasy. Hippie culture is merely another manifestation of this flight from aesthetic responsibility; granted "the opportunity of determining what happens next, an opportunity that is absolutely unprecedented," Amor in 1313 and America in the late '60s<sup>26</sup> both build societies that stop at the surface: the buildings of Amor, for instance, are "built of bark and willow-withies," or from burlap "which shapes much more easily than does stone, though its strength is less." It is "architecture almost

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<sup>26</sup> Localized, as are many of Lafferty's stories, in his native Tulsa; here he leaves it to the reader to spell it backwards as "A slut."

without weight ... gilt with fools' gold in whirling design, and at the same time all in motley"—a description that could as easily pertain to the tent cities that sprung up at the mass gatherings of hippie culture. As could the overwhelming wall-of-sound noise, the eccentric dancing, the drugs, the libtinous sexual arrangements, Pope Joan (Baez?), and the insistence on love, love above all. It is a society perfect in its own way—yet, as Lafferty notes:

The thing wrong with perfection is not that it repeats itself, but that it stands still in its first instance and freezes time. The thing wrong with love is that the false will so often supersede the true. The thing wrong with that town was that it was introverted and backwards; there are those who will live in it forever, but there are also those who will break out of it. The thing wrong with that year is that it began to come apart before the first week of June. (48)

Amor Town thus stands as another kind of stillbirth; freed from the endless repetitions that characterize the Blaze Bolt style of science fiction, the citizens of Love are yet content to remain on the surface. "There was no maturity about them: they did not desire maturity. And at the same time there was nothing of the childlike: they sure did not desire children. 'That no thing come to term!' was another of the high Amor mottoes." This denial of two of the most potent carnival archetypes—the child and the old woman, often combined in the image of the pregnant hag—demonstrates the terminal adolescence of a world in which one can conceive of anything, but no actual conception will be allowed to develop—not for them the child's play of "make-believe" that precedes the creation of lasting worlds. So also the story fails to come to term: it ends as it begins, with "huge

bloody gobs falling from the low sky” and “flaming ducks ... thudding, thudding, thudding to the earth day and night” (50).

Having demonstrated the inability of both the traditional space-exploration tale and the utopian construct to fulfill the enormous potential that science fiction represents, it is left to Lafferty to provide a narrative model that can act as a conduit for the Rabelaisian carnival, one which makes use of dismemberment *and* cosmic laughter, channeling both toward the creation of a new mode of perception. While ultimately the whole of his “Ghost-Story” novel fulfills this function, the first work to demonstrate the potential of Lafferty’s brand of sf is his novel *Space Chantey*, which begins as another fable of carnivalization, but continues on to demonstrate the absolute creative freedom inherent in the genre. A space-opera retelling of *The Odyssey*, the book begins with a group of spacemen—fresh off a decade-long galactic war<sup>27</sup>—heading for home after they take just one small detour to the planet Lotophage, literally the planet of the Lotus-Eaters.<sup>28</sup> The life there is easier even than on the big rock candy mountain of song, and

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<sup>27</sup> Though the context of the Vietnam War seems here inescapable—and Lafferty was, as Rob Latham notes, the “one figure clearly linked with the New Wave” who signed onto the prowar, rather than the antiwar, advertisement in the June 1968 *Galaxy* (213)—the manuscript evidence is more ambiguous. Lafferty’s first draft of *Space Chantey*, as a short story, appears to have been no later than 1960, well before the deployment of American troops. However, there is a significant revision between drafts that may speak to doubts in Lafferty’s support for the war—or, at least, an increasing cynicism about its motivations. Where the manuscript has the very Homeric: “The War was finished. It had lasted ten equivalent years and taken ten million lives. Economically and ecologically it was of healthy effect— and who should grumble?” (1); the published version inserts between the second and third sentences this analysis: “Thus it was neither of long duration, nor of serious attrition. It hadn’t any great significance; it was not intended to have. It did not prove a point, since all points had long ago been proved. What it did, perhaps, was to emphasize an aspect, underline a concept, highlight a trend” (6).

<sup>28</sup> The characteristic sf practice of “fictive neology” (which, as noted above, is one of Lafferty’s stocks in trade) is the first of Csicsery-Ronay’s “beauties”; it is inherently grotesque, illustrating the instability of language as it is adapted to the vastly estranged

the men quickly sink into a lethargic stupor. But this eternal present is not one of dismemberment and re-creation; rather, it is one of degradation and decay, as they are absorbed into the earth, and ultimately used to feed the successive generations of cosmic tourists. Their situation is like that of the expeditionary members in “Snuffles,” failing to understand that for them there will be no last-second external rescue—no “salvation by Marines” device invoked by a lazy author’s complacent reliance on generic convention. The pulp story *is* Lotophage, and many are the adventurers—and writers—who have been absorbed by it, and used to feed the next wave of stupefied explorers.

This is the science-fiction story that is “exhausted,” in Barth’s terms, the dead-story that Lafferty dismembers as Snuffles and which he reconfigures as the narrator-bard in *Space Chantey*. As the embodiment of future mythology, Roadstrum alone is able to transcend it; he rouses himself and drags as many crewmen as he can to the ships, and they fly for whatever destination they can reach, which turns out to be the planet of the Laestrygonians, a tribe of Old Norse-speaking half-trolls. These jokey ogres call the crew to “the big breakfast,” a most enormous feast, complete with whole oxen skinned and roasted, stags (antlers, hooves, and all), pies full of foxes, mountains full of beer, the whole spread. Then the giants show them to the battlefield, where, their leader Bjorn explains, they “will fight the great fight to the great death” (25). “There was never a folk who took such delight in bloody slaughter as did the Laestrygonians” notes the narrator, and the giants certainly revel in the carnage.

So do Roadstrum and his men, once they get into the spirit of the thing. Their blaster pistols prove to be objects of fascination: after they blast a hole in one giant by

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realities of science fiction (nor is Csicsery-Ronay hesitant to neologize, as shown in his “Seventh Beauty,” a sort of anatomy of the sf tale he calls the “technologiade”).

way of demonstration, all the rest clamor to be shot as well. Once met in combat, men and giants are blasted, transfixed with spears, decapitated, “cloven from crown to crotch,” crushed by stone slabs, and struck by great boulders. Deaths are gleefully lurid:

“Crewman Mundark’s ... limbs were unstrung, he burst asunder, and he died. Crewman Snow was similarly slain, but in louder fashion.” Finally at sunset, Roadstrum and Bjorn alone are left; they take to the skies and strike mortal blows on each other—and arise the next morning, to be called again to the “big breakfast.” The planet, of course, is Valhalla; having seen how much fun can be had there, the spacemen leave it only reluctantly. (Two of them, being transformed into giants by the joy of battle, elect not to leave at all.)

The feasting and fighting serves as a ritual catharsis, both for the men and for the science fiction tale, putting them back in touch with “the dead body, [with] blood as a seed buried in the earth, rising for another life [that] is one of the oldest and most widespread themes” (Bakhtin 327). Life on Lotophage is bloodless, and men who bury themselves in that earth—Roadstrum and his epic excepted—will rise no more. In their daily dismemberments, the giant Valhallans act out the perpetual *becoming* that for Lafferty is the state appropriate to science fiction—again, as he noted in his speech, sf as a genre is in the business of creating and destroying worlds.

But, as with Snuffles’ world-destruction, the savage play of the Laestrygonians also serves as metaphor on the metatextual level, representing that chewing-together by which Lafferty repurposes his texts and themes. The documentary history of *Space Chantey* is illustrative: it began as a short story that was written, rejected many times over, rewritten, rejected, set aside, and finally expanded almost tenfold, assimilating



much more of the *Odyssey*, and also aspects of a number of other, older Lafferty stories; “Snuffles” is just one of the more prominent incorporations.

This repurposing brings to mind the basis of oral epics, with their rhapsodic rearrangement of discrete units of poetic meaning over top a vast and flexible framework—a mnemonic system that Lafferty’s barker-bard insists is simultaneous with the reading of the book: Captain Roadstrum, hearing some jangly doggerel, asks where it came from, and is told that “It’s a popular epic *composing itself* these days ... It’s called the Lay of Road-storm, and it’s about yourself” (15, emphasis added). The mythology of the future is being formed before our eyes; Lafferty proclaims it anew to each reader who comes to the book, speaking to him through the text as Snuffles does to his doomed humans. It is a mode of textual organization that Northrop Frye called “kerygmatic”—“the point at which the cleavage between active speech and reception of speech merges into unity” (118). The text is continuously *present*; Lafferty, of course, is fully aware of this, for he sets the stage for his performance in *Space Chantey* with the direction: “Here trumpets blare. Here the high kerigma of heralds rises in silvery gibberish. Here it begins” (6).

That simple sentence, *Here it begins*, contains within itself the entire mythology of the future. In the bardic mythology of the past, the sentence would imply ending as well as beginning, bringing closure to the workings of fate. But the bard of the Chantey proclaims a beginning that, as a present moment moving ever into the future, can have no end. Just as Lafferty’s lifelong “novel” will never be finished, *cannot* ever be finished, neither will his worlds come to an end, for as often as they are destroyed they are reconstituted and proclaimed anew (though crucially, only so long as there remains

someone to proclaim them). Lafferty's workings are *always* grotesque; like the Laestrygonians, he delights in bloody slaughter, whether of his own characters or of the conventions of his genre. But his destruction is also always in the context of carnivalized creation—whether as writer, bard, or pseudo-ursine, he dismembers so that we may all re-member.

These practices of textual destruction and reconstitution likewise serve to illustrate Walter Ong's dictum that "[L]iteracy, though it consumes its own oral antecedents and, unless it is carefully monitored, even destroys their memory, is also infinitely adaptable. It can restore their memory, too" (15). Ong's seminal treatise *Orality and Literacy* contrasts the "ways in which primary orality, the orality of cultures ... totally unfamiliar with writing ... contrasts with literacy" (6). Ong aims to uncover the alterations in our cognitive processes occasioned by the development of writing—a difficult task since, as he points out, "we—readers of books such as [*Orality and Literacy*—are so literate that it is very difficult to conceive of an oral universe of communication except as a variant of a literate universe" (2).

Criticism of Lafferty has run into much the same roadblock. In an encyclopedia entry John Clute notes the standard description of him as "an author whose tone is fundamentally oral" (685); Sandra Miesel finds that though "he writes rather than recites his exhilarating stories [he] nevertheless retains a primary allegiance to the spoken word" (542). While these depictions can be quite elaborate—"Like some Gaelic magician of a bygone era, Lafferty incants for us the strange names and stranger places of another reality" (Eisner 574)—few critics consider the *effect* such an "allegiance to the spoken word" might have on an author's prose; most are content to characterize him as a "teller

of tall tales” and let the matter lie. One who doesn’t, Roman Orszanski, believes that “[b]ecause Lafferty follows the form, style and content of the oral tradition, he is not appreciated in print ... he has been neglected because of a literary bias towards the written word” (14).

Though Orszanski overstates his case somewhat—Lafferty certainly experienced enough success in his career to rebut Orszanski’s stark assertion that “the form of his work doesn’t suit the written word” (18)—it is undoubtedly the case that Lafferty’s appropriations of oral technique are too often considered deviations from the established conventions of prose fiction, a “failure to observe normal canons of writing” (Clute 685) rather than, in Michael Swanwick’s phrasing, a “reinvention of the language of literature for [himself] from the ground up” (ii). Swanwick’s use of the word *literature* is significant; Ong rightly rejects the oxymoronic term “oral literature” (favoring instead “oral narrative” or “verbal art forms”), while at the same time recognizing that literature is an inevitable outgrowth of orality. “We can never forget enough of our familiar present,” he writes, “to reconstitute in our minds [oral consciousness] in its full integrity.” However, “we can reconstruct it pretty well ... [and] bring a better understanding of what literacy itself has meant in shaping man’s consciousness toward and in high-technology cultures” (15).

Given this conjunction of narrative, technology, and consciousness, it seems as though Ong’s work should be well-trodden ground for science-fiction academics—yet despite its incorporation into many other fields of literary inquiry, critics of sf have by

and large ignored the work of Ong, Eric A. Havelock, and others on oral narrative.<sup>29</sup>

Sketching the pioneering work of Milman Perry and Alfred B. Lord, Ong writes that, in order to approach Homeric and other epic verse, “the scholarly world had to reawaken to the oral character of language”; almost thirty years after Ong’s study, sf slumbers on.

This curious void in the scholarship, I would argue, reflects a blind spot within science fiction itself: as the narrative genre most closely concerned with the development and deployment of technology, sf is also the most prone to fetishizing written language, the development of which Ong in his subtitle characterizes as “the technologizing of the word.”

“Literacy,” Ong writes, “is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of ... explicative understanding of literature and of any art” (15). Yet, as may be seen from any number of totalizing schemata aimed at explicating science fiction literature and art,<sup>30</sup> there exists within the genre a shared pool of themes and settings that makes it amenable to much of the analysis Ong provides for oral narrative. He writes that, in primary oral cultures,

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<sup>29</sup> Among the recent spate of “Companions to Science Fiction”—from Cambridge University Press (2003), Blackwell Publishing (2008), and Routledge (2009)—there is not a single reference to Ong; nor are there any in the major critical statements such as Csicsery-Ronay’s *Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2009), Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* (2008), or Adam Johnson’s *History of Science Fiction* (2005). A thorough exploration of this missed connection would likely require a thesis-length project; not only expanding the characteristics of the genre discussed above, but also considering sf history as it relates to publishing technologies and as it gestates in the pulps and the zines.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Gary K. Wolfe’s “iconography” in *The Known and The Unknown* (Kent State University Press 1979), or Brian Attebery’s concept of the sf “megatext” in *Strategies of Fantasy* (Indiana University Press, 1982). This “megatext,” of course, is not limited to printed material; it has drawn as much (if not more) from cinema, television, radio, video games, and other media that make use of audio technology. Ong refers to these as the marks of “secondary orality,” which depend on writing and print for their existence (3). The implications of this with regard to science fiction in general and Lafferty in particular are broad and deep, and will be elaborated in future work.

Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper', and so on) ... (34)

Science fiction inherits much of this "psychodynamic" from its oral-epic ancestors, in particular the *Odyssey* and its tale of the original science-hero (or "Handy Man," cf. Csicsery-Ronay 227), Odysseus. Of his adventure, James Gunn writes, "Place such a voyage among the stars, and it would evoke what Sam Moskowitz would call the sense of wonder." Though, as he adds, "[m]any a science-fiction writer has done just that" (10), it was Lafferty who restored the voyage to its bardic context. The question that begins *Space Chantey* proper, "Will there be a mythology in the future ... after all has become science?" is, as its continuation implies, essentially a *linguistic* concern: "Will high deeds be told in epic, or only in computer code?" He does not leave his hearers in suspense for long: "[A]fter the questing spirit had gone into overdrive ... there *did* grow up a mythos through which to view the deeds. This myth filter was necessary. The ship logs could not tell it rightly, nor could any flatfooted prose" (5). *Space Chantey* is an apologia demonstrating Lafferty's vision for a truly epic science fiction—the vision required for "deeds too bright to be viewed direct," which "could only be sung by a bard gone blind from staring at suns that were suns" (5).

Lafferty's project mirrors Ong's in *Orality and Literacy*, except transposed into the register of apocalyptic fiction: confronted with a "post-conscious world," a world catastrophically "chopped off behind us" ("Day After" 43), Lafferty revisits the crucible of human consciousness in hopes of piercing the "almost impenetrable amnesia that

obstructs the examination of the actual catastrophe” (41). In oral narrative, memory is of paramount importance—“You know what you can recall” (Ong 33)—and all other considerations of craft are subordinate to this overwhelming imperative: “Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax” (34). Outside this framework—that is to say, considered in light of the “received set of standards most writers work from” (Swanwick ii)—many of the devices Lafferty employs can confuse or confound the curious reader, and cause even his defenders to label his prose “rough and clumsy” (Tidmarsh 44). With Lafferty assuming a bardic role, however, these written elements—among them direct address, episodic structure, and doggerel verse—evoke the psychodynamic of oral narrative, and form a common program of recollection, or *anamnesis*.<sup>31</sup>

Roman Orszanski marks the beginning of his inquiry into Lafferty’s sound from his realization that, in Lafferty’s work, “the author is typically speaking directly to the reader” (14). Lafferty uses direct address as a means of creating an *audience*, a community of hearers, out of the indeterminate mass of his *readership*, a concept which as Ong notes is a “far-gone abstraction” (74). “When a speaker is addressing an audience,” he continues, “the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker.” This harks back again to Rabelais’s stance as carnival barker but also, more universally, to any speaker attempting to build rapport with an audience. Lafferty uses narrative *you* not to create ambiguity with respect to the reader’s

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<sup>31</sup> Lafferty wrote two stories by this name: the first was eventually published as “Company in the Wings” in a fan-press chapbook collection; the second “Anamnesis,” an important piece of the Argo “Trilogy,” was published as a limited-edition booklet accompanying the publication of *Tales of Midnight*. Though it is difficult and perhaps impossible to date the work of his last years with precision, this latter story may be the last Lafferty ever wrote.

distance from the text (cf. Herman 350–68), but rather to collapse that distance entirely. Herman uses the classical Greek term *apostrophe* to describe such uses of narrative *you* (361), but this implies a “turning away,” and Lafferty’s direct address is continual: his narrative voice evokes the sense of “presence” necessary to oral epic. If the narration ends, so too does the world of the story—and with it the audience constituted by the telling of that tale.<sup>32</sup>

In *Space Chantey*, Lafferty, as he must, immediately embarks on this project, beginning with the doggerel lines

*The Lay of Road-Storm from the ancient Chronicles*  
*We give you here, Good Spheres and Cool-Boy Conicals,*  
  
*And perils pinnacled and parts impossible*  
*And every word of it the sworn-on Gosipel. (5)*

Every chapter of the *Chantey* begins with similarly pained couplets; they also appear at the end of most chapters and in the middle of others. Again, this is not an *apostrophe*, but rather an evocation of oral-epic performance: the lines bear the attribution “NEW SPACE CHANTEYS” (or, afterwards, “Ibid”<sup>33</sup>) and the sheer wretchedness of the rhyme serves as a mnemonic aid. Lafferty’s doggerel couplets work much the same way as Homeric

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<sup>32</sup> In a later section of the *Chantey* that deserves far more attention that space allows for here, Lafferty places himself in the role of Atlas, and tricks his Odyssean character, Captain Roadstrum, into sustaining the “world”—the narration—upon his shoulders for a time. Roadstrum staggers under the burden of creative cognition: “At every moment I must see and feel the totality of it and all the ultimate detail in this great mind of mine.” When he at last returns to once again shoulder the burden of the tale, Lafferty-Atlas (in the text, “the big fellow”) commiserates: “One has to be inside it to comprehend the magnitude” (64–5).

<sup>33</sup> Save the last verse in the book, which is attributed “Aliunde”—Latin for “elsewhere,” indicating the continuance of the Roadstrum verse beyond the confines of the printed volume immediately at hand. Indeed, Lafferty would go on to write another Roadstrum story, “Hound Dog’s Ear” (*Strange Plasma* 4 [Summer 1991], 3–13); the “Aliunde” lines, naturally enough, do not appear there, though others attributed to a variety of other sources do.

hexameters: both are shaped primarily by the requirements of their form: the metrical variants in the latter—which plagued scholars of Greek till Milman Perry’s groundbreaking work on methods of oral composition (cf. Ong 20–23)—finds a correspondence in the nonsense syllables of the former: “*We pitch a party, sling the dangest dangeroo / Whoop, whoop and holler! He’s a hero-hangeroo!*” (31); that is, it provides a stock element the poet can introduce while anticipating the lines yet to come. Hence Lafferty’s use of rhythm is “the postmodern equivalent of the Homeric epithet,” as Don Webb asserts in making the intriguing connection to Yevgeny Zamiatin’s concept of the “prose foot,” which “by causing the reader to reader an earlier part of the narrative bec[omes] a force for a choral cohesion [binding] the story together in a different way than plot mechanics” (90). Webb illustrates his point with the story “The Transcendent Tigers,” where Lafferty again establishes the device of rhyming couplets, but this time in connection with the destruction of cities—“Eggs and batter / Cincinnater”; “What the hecktady / Schenectady” (124–5)—so that by story’s end, when the agent of destruction (a seven-year-old girl) pronounces “Knife and fork—” the audience is left to complete the couplet, and thus becomes complicit in the horrific destruction.

This habit of binding together the story “in a different way than plot mechanics” is perhaps the foremost complaint of those expecting from Lafferty a more traditional sort of sf narrative. Even those who, like Sandra Miesel, are perceptive enough to note how Lafferty’s “oral mannerisms” attack him on the basis of his poor plotting: “[H]e mistakes the accumulation of vignettes for the construction of a novel” (542).<sup>34</sup> But this is to

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<sup>34</sup> Miesel’s primary example here is the novel *Arrive at Easterwine*; her criticism of the structure is decisively preempted by Sheryl Smith’s article “*Arrive at Easterwine*: Some



mistake Lafferty's novels for accumulations of vignettes, in spite of Miesel's prior recognition that "rhythmic repetitions of phrases and epithets tie the material together." Though he himself referred to his novels as "short stories strung together" (Schweitzer 79), this too is reminiscent of the oral poet's practice of selecting episodes from the huge repertoire available to him, and making connections between them in the course of the performance. As noted above, in Lafferty's stories, "the present order is only the way it comes in the box"; we are free to—and often, expected to—"Arrange it as [we] will" (*Devil Is Dead* 9).

"The lengthy climactic plot comes into being only with writing," Ong notes, and even then it "comes into being first in the drama ... and does not make its way into lengthy narrative until more than 2000 years later" (144). Yet scarcely a century later this mode of rigid control had such a stranglehold on prose fiction that Lafferty, in attempting to bring the techniques of oral narration into written narrative, found himself again and again having to explain the basics of the verbal art form. Hence his self-reflexive didacticism (such as the dive into Inneall's Ocean) likewise reflects the presence of oral modeling:

Human beings in primary oral cultures ... learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not "study." They learn by apprenticeship ... by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, ... by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection. (Ong 9)

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Arrant Roadmapping" in *Gorbett* 6 1974, 25–33; reprinted in *A Multitude of Visions*, ed. Cy Chauvin, Baltimore: TK Graphics, 1975.

Learning to read Lafferty, learning to piece together his jigsaw puzzle, serves to inculcate the habits of thought necessary to build the stories—and by extrapolation, worlds—that prose fiction, “a structured form ... impossible in a society that has become unstructured” (“Day After” 43), can no longer supply. “There are fine building stones around us, whatever ruins they are from,” he says, “But nobody is building.” (45).

In “Cliffs That Laughed,” Lafferty provides a characteristically self-reflexive lesson on the method of oral storytelling and its potential applications to science fiction. It is ostensibly a story about a Malayan hereditary storyteller named Galli, and the tale he tells the first-person narrator, an unnamed GI. However, the story starts with an interruption—an intrusion on the narrative, followed by the narrator’s protestation: “*No, no no! That’s the wrong story ... the one the fellow told me in a bar years later.*”<sup>35</sup> But the narrative cuts directly from false start to Galli’s instruction: “ ‘One often makes these little mistakes and false starts,’ Galli said. ‘It is a trick that is used in the trade. One exasperates people and pretends to be embarrassed. And then one hooks them’ ” (182).

The GI gets the tale off Galli in exchange for an issue of *Wonder Woman*, which the Malayan believes he can use “to link her in with an island legend and create a whole new cycle of stories ... We used the same stories for a thousand years,” he adds, “Now, however, we have a new source, the American Comic Books” (183). And indeed, the story he sets on “Willy Jones Island” could as easily be set on “Willy Jones Planet”: there is a bloody battle between ships; there is the conquest of an island, and the obligatory taming of the beautiful but proud woman; there are wonder drugs that provide immortality, at a steep cost; there is the proud, beautiful woman’s terrifying revenge. But

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<sup>35</sup> Italics in the original. This false start accords with Ong’s finding that “Oral poets characteristically experience difficulty in getting a song under way” (143).

it is the three beings Galli calls “golems” that mark his tale as borrowed from sf; they are robots, lifted by Galli from the comic books and made part of the “whole new cycle of stories.”

But the exchange here is mutual, for the GI learns from Galli the storyteller’s art; as he picks up on the devices Galli uses, he employs them in his own narrative: pregnant pauses, interludes for song and flute (if you know the song, or have a flute), asides on details strategically “forgotten” until they come up in the telling. The false start is the first such device, but there is a twist: the story begun by the “fellow in a bar” continues to break into Galli’s tale, and the two narratives gradually come to circle around the same central episode. By the end of the *written* text of “Cliffs That Laughed,” three acts of narration (some with nested subnarratives) are clearly in play: Galli’s, the fellow’s in the bar, and the unnamed narrator’s juxtaposing the elements of the other two to create a *bricolage*-story uniquely his own. Yet there is a fourth narrative here less immediately apparent: Lafferty’s own, in which he assumes the role of Galli instructing all of us—his unnamed audience—in the art of storytelling. And this exchange is likewise mutual (though adapted to the economics of the sf trade): our purchase of his story allows him to continue as a professional storyteller, and allows us the use of his techniques in shaping our own narratives.

Lafferty’s offer, moreover, is wider ranging than Galli’s; while in “Cliffs That Laughed” he makes use of the Malay oral heritage he picked up while stationed in the South Pacific during World War II, he adds to that also the “happy double-jointed

tongue” of the American GI<sup>36</sup>; in the wider frame of his unitary “ghost-story” novel, he tosses in the knowledge gained from “a reading knowledge of all the languages of the Latin, German, and Slavic families, as well as Gaelic and Greek” (Biggle 111). He places readers in the lineage of storytelling passed on to him by his frontier Irish family during his upbringing in Oklahoma, a “mixing bowl” where “the American Tall Tale had its shaggiest growth” because “there was nothing to do but to try to scrape out a living and tell tall stories” (Whitaker, “Maybe They Needed Killing” 15). And he offers all of this specifically to science fiction, that “heroic literature” that has at its disposal material for “whole new cycles of stories,” with only Galli’s one caveat: “Besides hard science, there is soft science, the science of the shadow areas and story areas, and you do wrong to deny it the name” (190).

The development of this “science of story areas” occupied Lafferty’s entire career, and is nowhere so thoroughly worked out as in his story “Days of Grass, Days of Straw” which, being equal parts folktale, kerygmatic proclamation, science-fictional fable, and frontier lie, showcases every aspect of his art. At first glance this appears to be a story of simple cognitive estrangement, which, as the inescapable Darko Suvin assures us, is the “formal framework of the genre” (8). Christopher Foxx is “walking down a city street. No, it was a city road. It was really a city trail or path. He was walking in a fog, but the fog wasn’t in the air or ambient: it was in his head. Things were mighty odd here” (31). But the story takes Shklovsky’s famous dictum that “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult” (18) and flips it around: Lafferty doesn’t

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. the piece “Oh Happy Double-Jointed Tongues” published by Lafferty in *Son of GPIC* (April 1990, 2–4), the newsletter for the Oklahoma Science Fiction Writers group with which Lafferty was associated in Tulsa. The piece was also incorporated into *Deep Scars of the Thunder*, the unpublished third volume of his *In a Green Tree* series.

take something known and make it strange; he comes upon something strange and wrestles with it to make it knowable. He is in the same situation as Christopher Foxx, trying “to make something out of ... the strange day, or the newly strange man who was apparently himself.”

Christopher asks the date, but the answer given him—by a man called Strange Buffalo, apparently his friend, who calls him in turn Kit-Fox—is that “it is the second monday of Indian Summer,” despite the respondent being unsure that “it is a monday” because “it sounds and tastes more like a thursday or an aleikaday.” Much more importantly, though, it is a “day of grass,” one of those “rich days, bubbling with ecstasy and blood” full of feasting and battle and thunder, a day that stands apart from the more common, less vivid “days of straw.” These days do not just occur randomly; they must be won, wrestled out of the hand of God by prophets who work out their salvation—Lafferty says, emending the Bible—in “fear and chuckling, in scare-shaking and laughter-shaking” (44).

Lafferty here offers a corrective to the inadequate utopias he burlesques in “Nine Hundred Grandmothers” and “Flaming Ducks and Giant Bread”: the proper resistance to time and its tyrannical march toward the end of the world is not to stop it as some arbitrarily designated date, but rather to allow for days that “are not part of the official count.”<sup>37</sup> He takes the dictionary to task for its inadequate definition of “Indian summer: *A period of warm or mild weather late in autumn or in early winter.* So Webster’s Collegiate defines it, but Webster’s hasn’t the humility ever to admit that it doesn’t know

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<sup>37</sup> In his complex alternate-history novel *The Three Armageddons of Enniscorthy Sweeny*, the title character manages (temporarily?) to suspend the final Armageddon by causing an entire year to repeat.

the meaning of a word.” Instead Lafferty declares that an Indian summer is one of those “seasons, in addition to the four regular seasons that are supposed to constitute the year” (40). This maneuver allows the story, like the two previous, to develop across two different “times,” one of which, permeated with the carnivalesque, does “not count in the totality of passing time.” Hence there is no conflict between the times: they are layered and thus simultaneous, or at least coexistent.

Lafferty presents these layers in two successive sections, showing the same day as it unfolds in both timeframes. In the day of grass, he becomes Kit-Fox—not in the sense of a ritual renaming, by which a Ceran Swicegood becomes manly hero Blaze Bolt, but in the sense of recovering a more vibrant version of himself, one too lurid to exist in the day of straw. There, he remains Christopher Foxx, and his companion Strange Buffalo is instead Buford Strange. The two of them are attending an academic symposium on

Special and Temporal Underlays to the Integrated World, with Insights as to Their Possible Reality and Their Relationship to the World Unconscious and to the Therapeutic Amnesia; with Consideration of the Necessity of Belief in Stratified Worlds, and Explorations of the Orological Motif in Connection with the Apparent Occurrence of Simultaneous Days (41)—

which is to say, a symposium on the story itself. But Lafferty’s metatextual pyrotechnics have barely begun. In the first section, there is “a day-of-straw quality that kept trying to push itself in. ... to reestablish rigor and rule and reason for just a little bit.” This is the temptation to turn away from the cosmic laughter, to refuse the wrestle: here, though, the day-of-grass quality tells it to “Go away,” for “The wrestle was won this morning, and this is a day out of count” (36). In the second section, this day-of-grass quality pushes

back with increasing force, until the narrative is hijacked, hauled up onto the mountain where one of the prophets is preparing to wrestle God for control of the day:

“We will wrestle,” the Indian said to God in the mist, “we will wrestle to see which of us shall be Lord for this day. I tell you it is not thick enough if only the regular days flow. I hesitate to instruct you in your own business, and yet someone must instruct you. There must be overflowing and special days apart from the regular days. You have such days, I am sure of that. ... It is necessary now that I wrest one of them from you.” (45)

In the space of a sentence slick with sweat and blood, the Indian wins the wrestle, and the day of grass becomes a conduit through which cosmic carnivalized laughter—the fear and chuckling, the “how it all began” of the Proavitoi—can penetrate into the mundane straw-day world and create it anew. The story itself is thus also a “day of grass,” something Lafferty has wrestled away from God.<sup>38</sup> His stand-in on the mountain being an Indian reflects his own Oklahoman roots, but also gathered on the mountain are “prophets, wrestlers, praying-men of other sorts,” striving for “kaffir-corn days or ivory-tree days ... sailfish days or wild-pig days”; once there had even been frost giants “shaking the pillars of Heaven [for] a million terrible days of fimbul-winter.” These days take place in a hundred different of the “seasons out of count,” “aberrant times or countries: St. Gervais’ Springtime, St. Martin’s Summer ... Dog Days, Halcyon Days,” and so on (45–6).

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<sup>38</sup> If this view of the deity (or of imagination, or the muse) is felt to be too anthropomorphic, Lafferty would likely say, along with one character, “But we are anthropoi ... what other view [can] we take?” (49)

All of these, of course, represent bodies of myth, and all of them are ways of gaining access to the rejuvenation of universal laughter. But there is a specific import for science fiction in Lafferty's statement that "It is only by the most sophisticated methods that even the existence of these intervals may be shown." Since he is documenting the intervals, his own story is one of these "sophisticated methods"—he presents himself as a researcher studying a phenomenon with the most advanced analytical tool at his disposal: namely, science fiction. The academic symposium conducted on the straw-day, then, is not merely an object of satire, but marks as well the beginnings of the sort of inquiry on time that Lafferty as researcher of "the science of story areas" undertook throughout his career, aiming to get at the "temporal underlays of the integrated world." This project represents an advance on the blunt, Blaze Bolt form of sf, which with its relentless projection of technocratic science out into the cosmos turns the "future" into just another date on the official calendar, a blank space to be filled and conquered.

In "Days of Grass, Days of Straw," Lafferty reverses the process: as the grass-day shatters for good the staid day of straw, he writes of "The whole afternoon shudder[ing]. ... There was a great breaking and entering, a place turning into a time" (49–50). It is a textual Big Bang: Lafferty wins lordship over this particular day, and with it the prerogative of seeing a world into being. His successful wrestle answers as well the question of Ceran Swicegood, and his answer is the same as the grandmothers of the Proavitoi: it all began in laughter—in fear and chuckling, in scare-shaking and in laughter-shaking.

Bakhtin writes of Rabelais's work as "the most fearless ... in world literature" (39); Lafferty's too must be without fear. As with many scientific disciplines in their



infancy, the early experiments in the “science of story areas” are fraught with danger; but to avoid them out of fear is, like Ceran Swicegood, to turn away from that cosmic laughter, or like Pope Joan, to bury it in edicts and error—or worse still, like Buford Strange, to be revealed as too craven to make the jump, and to slump over and die as a straw-man. In the case of the prophets on the mountain, to lose a wrestle is to be tossed off the mountain to smash on the rocks below. Each time a holy man falls, a place is opened up for another to rise; as the blood of a head “smashed like a pumpkin” seeps in and nourishes the soil, so already another is sweating blood and ascending in ecstasy.

Lafferty made his ascent, and spent his years wrestling God in the mist amid the days of grass on which his stories take place. These oral-inflected tales, for which the “days of grass” function as self-reflexive metaphor, funnel the torrent of carnival consciousness, offering at the least a suspension of the officiousness of technocratic science, and beyond that the hope of an entirely new and exhilarating world. But it is not a world he can sustain forever on his own; in his New Orleans address he already speaks as one looking to pass on his bardic mantle, aware that a day will come when he too will lose his wrestle and fall, and a spot on the mountain open up for whoever is prepared to seize the chance.

Lafferty works in cognizance and defiance of death, that paradoxically close associate of writing (cf. Ong 81). Though his Catholic faith provides him some assurance about the final destination of his individual soul, the fate of human consciousness seems day by day less secure. Hence his constant emphasis on raising an audience that can among themselves, given time and guidance, sustain the world, any world, something to tip the precarious balance: “There is a large silence occupying the present time. Is it the

silence just before a great stirring and banging? Or is it a terminal silence? Well, what does happen now?” (47)

John Barth noted this same silence, tracking it as it swells to fill every aesthetic space, from empty stage to musical rest to blank page. “After which,” he adds, “it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature—such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation ... even characterization! Even *plot!*—if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one’s predecessors have been up to” (68).<sup>39</sup> Like Barth, Lafferty makes it conceivable that this “large silence” might come to an end, that it might even be broken by the cosmic laughter of creation. But the sustenance of that laughter will require the active and continued participation of others following after him:

We are all of us characters in a Science Fiction Story named “The Day After the World Ended ... Can’t any of the characters in this “do-it-yourself” Science Fiction story come up with any sort of next episode? Would it help to change the name of the story from “The Day After the World Ended” to “The First Day On A New Planet”? (67)

Here Lafferty speaks to the inherent science-fictionality of the postmodern world, what Brian McHale would later identify as sf’s “ontological” core (16). McHale identifies a number of “typical postmodernist questions” that go right to the heart of sf:

What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds

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<sup>39</sup> Emphasis and ellipsis in the original. See also Ihab Hassan’s writing on the “Literature of Silence” as prelude to postmodernism, in *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 1987), 3–22.

are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (10)

Over the course of his career, Lafferty wrestled with these questions as strenuously as he did any anthropomorphism on any elevated mountain—as have many sf authors, from the New Wave to cyberpunk, from the New Weird to slipstream. But Lafferty does not merely diagnose and depict the postmodern condition; while recognizing that the present era is, in Dick Higgins’ provocative term, “post-cognitive” (quoted in McHale 10), he repudiates the assertion that this is necessarily so and points to a way forward: a newly rejuvenated and carnivalized consciousness, a “bloody slaughter” clearing the way for further experiments in the “science of story areas.”

“Part of story logic,” David Herman writes, “is its power to create new possibilities for projection; narrative itself can work to readjust the contextual parameters in terms of which people produce and understand stories” (334). Lafferty takes this story logic and makes it broader still, using narrative to *establish* the contextual parameters in terms of which people understand *anything*.

In this, Lafferty forges a strange alliance (given their ideological presuppositions) with postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson. In his own work on postmodern SF, Damien Broderick considers especially Jameson’s discernment of “a certain flatness, a lack of mimetic or illusory ‘depth’ ” as “one of science fiction’s special strategies” (109). But Lafferty, especially in “Days of Grass, Days of Straw,” smashes through precisely this sort of surface-level narrative: in his Guest of Honor speech, it is for exactly this sort of “Flatland” which draws his fiercest ire (“Day After” 43). Lafferty aims to get “beyond”

this “life ... which is like life in a photographic narrative.” In this he is joined by Jameson, for whom, beyond the postmodern, “lie radically new forms, ‘[an] invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale,’ a ‘post-postmodernism’ ” (Broderick 114)— a description equally apt for Lafferty’s use of archaic cognitive mechanisms to invent and project a new globe, a new world.

In properly grotesque fashion, and in keeping with the “never-to-be-finished” aesthetic of his life’s work, Lafferty ends his speech by refusing to end his speech: “I refrain from writing *The End* here. It must not end.” The project he inaugurated to reconstruct human perception and bring about a new world remains underway. Over the course of his three-decade career, R.A. Lafferty demonstrated the techniques required for such a project, and provided as well a puzzle box full of pieces for use in the construction. John Clute writes that “Final judgment of [Lafferty] ... awaits a coherent presentation of his work as a whole” (685)—but to present his work at all, much less coherently, is to attempt his puzzle, and to shoulder the burden of sustaining his world.

This project is ongoing. A few million geniuses are still needed, and there are certain matters on which God still requires instruction.

If you are not now making a world, why aren’t you?

*Destroyed? His road is run? It’s but a bend of it;*

*Make no mistake, this only seems*

*the end of it.*

*—Space Chantey (123)*

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