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## R.A. Lafferty's Escape from Flatland; or, How to Build a World in Three Easy Steps

> "The central problem at stake ... is that of works; in particular, that of language as *a work*."—Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (xi)

As Guest of Honor at the DeepSouthCon science-fiction convention in 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" ("Day After" 41). Lafferty gives a possible range between 1912 and 1962 for this sudden "destruction or unstructuring," this disaster which affects consciousness first and foremost: "We are, partly at least, in a post-conscious world" (43).

Lafferty attempts to orient himself within this new non-world, where the very language that we once used to record and relay our interactions with the world and with others has been "chopped off behind us." In the wake of this semantic devastation, in which the "large and intricate superstructure" of the world has been swept away, there remains only a general amnesia about the world that once was, and also about the post-world "Flatland" we now inhabit (41). In this existence shorn of a dimension, language itself is flattened out, pressed into the paper-thin pairing of signifier and signified. Lafferty takes upon himself the task of creating and sustaining a new world with new dimensions, and he exhorts all who would hear him to join in the joyous labor.

This Lafferty may seem somewhat removed from the author more often remembered for the rollicking humor and poetic verve of stories such as "Narrow Valley" (1966) and "Slow Tuesday Night" (1965). But as the recipient of an Augustinian education, Lafferty was thoroughly well-versed in philosophical history and rhetoric; as a devotee of Rabelais, besides, Lafferty saw philosophy and humorous narrative as near inseparable companions. While his reading interests ran more toward history and theology than continental philosophy, he nonetheless grappled with many of the same linguistic, psychological, and ethical questions as the theorists of his day. In the rhetoric of this 1979 address in particular, Lafferty is very near the work of Paul Ricoeur, who in an interview just a year earlier had said that:

> [W]e need a third dimension of language, a critical and creative dimension, which is directed towards neither scientific verification nor ordinary communication but towards the disclosure of possible worlds. This third dimension of language I call the poetic. (qtd. in Kearney 124)

By bringing these two writers into conversation, I will explore within Lafferty's work and poetics what Ricoeur calls "*the capacity of language to*

*open up new worlds* ... which transcend the established limits of our *actual* world" (qtd. in Kearney 124; emphasis in original). Drawing on Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory* (1976) and *Time and Narrative* (1983–85), with reference to the vocabulary of chaotic (or complex) dynamics, I will show how Lafferty sets about creating worlds out of cultural rubble and foggy, amnesiac notions of what a world is or should be—notions that must themselves be reconstructed, or better yet recollected, through a process itself cobbled together from the ruins of prose narrative. Along the way I will demonstrate a seldom-noted aspect of Ricoeur's methodology: his eagerly apocalyptic dismantling of previous paradigms (his "violence of interpretation" [cf. *Time and Narrative* I.72]) to provide material for his own formulations. After all, there can be no construction without destruction first clearing the way, and any semiotic or cognitive model that would move into the "third dimension of language" must account and allow for both processes. The work of building worlds (or in Ricoeur's terminology, borrowed from Hans-Georg Gadamer, "fusing world horizons" [*Interpretation Theory* 93]) is often bloody and always grotesque; the work of reconfiguring temporal experience (whether of seconds or decades) into narrative is hardly less so.

For Lafferty, this is the role of science fiction: to provide a genre in which, by convention, worlds may be created at will and destroyed on a whim. Sf serves as a sort of linguistic laboratory in which to conduct experiments on world-pieces—both linguistic and poetic—for potential use in the collaborative project of a new world-construct. In a similar vein, Samuel R. Delany argued that science fiction provides a "different discourse" from that found in mainstream or "mundane" fiction, making 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 used to illustrate this difference was "Then her world exploded" (103). Only in sf could this sentence be read as anything other than metaphor, which for Delany indicated that sf discourse, with its wider possible range of meanings, had 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" (104).

Lafferty follows this logic to its conclusion, finding that the effect of the apocalypse on the literary mundane has been to deprive prose fiction of the reality it set out to mirror—as "a reflection of an intricate construct," it "ceased when it no longer had anything to reflect" ("Day After" 43). Mimetic realism is a dead end because there is no longer anything real to mimic; in this non-world science fiction alone remains alive, because "it was never a properly fashioned fiction. It didn't reflect the world it lived in" ("Day After" 43). Instead, sf calls into being other possible worlds, even if only temporarily. Every single statement in an sf story is, to use J.L. Austin's term, a performative utterance: not merely the "what if" at the heart of any fictional narrative, but the stronger "let there be" that sets cosmic orders in motion. Additionally, as cognitive estrangements, science-fictional worlds need not mirror or derive from our own—which is both fortunate and necessary, as our own no longer exists.

Lafferty, of course, was far from the first to speculate about unbridgeable temporal and cultural rifts in the early to mid-twentieth century: Virginia Woolf famously (if somewhat facetiously) dated to December 1910 a momentous change in human character (96), and hers is but one of the many distemporalities dotting works of modernist theory and criticism. What marks Lafferty's as distinctive is, first, the priority of the linguistic in what is lost—all other calamities of the twentieth century, including the two World Wars, pale in comparison to this "powerful main catastrophe" ("Day After" 43); second, the invocation of "Flatland" (borrowed from Edwin Abbott's "Romance of Many Dimensions" [1884]) to characterize the contemporary condition of worldlessness; and third, the assertion that this condition can (and must) be remedied through a collaborative reassertion and reclamation of our linguistic resources—that is, through storytelling.

This fixation on world creation and destruction was the single constant of Lafferty's work over his career; while those who remember him today do so primarily for writing science fiction, a commonplace among his contemporary reviewers was that his works were not sf at all but something else entirely. Some meant this as critique, others as praise; either way, to classify him thus is to misunderstand Lafferty's ideas on the genre. In his speech, he addresses "the phenomenon or consensus named 'Science Fiction'" in order to determine its function. Asking "What does it do?" he answers, "'Sometimes it designs new worlds.' This trait of sf may be timely because our previous world is destroyed and there is presently a vacuum that can only be filled by a new world" (42). All of Lafferty's works, whatever their genre packaging, aim to fulfill this basic function. Possibly the only way to bring together his wide-ranging writings is in relation to the worldless condition he hopes to ameliorate: historical stories show the worlds that were and are no more; future stories show worlds that could yet come to be. Stories set in the present often show the world either in the process of ending or in the process of being reborn.

This, perhaps, is what Lafferty is getting at in asserting that all his works—every last novel, story, and poem—are part of "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; undated ms.). In this reading, the "ghost" would be the dead world, haunting not only Lafferty's prose but also that of all his contemporaries. And the "deep underlay" would be the new and hoped-for world, everywhere marking the stories without quite breaking through to full presence and linguistic clarity. The "jigsaw puzzle" points to the collaborative effort necessary if this world (or any other) is to emerge: whatever pieces are in the box, they are useless unless people set themselves to work putting them together in new and startling configurations.[1]

Since many such configurations are possible and anyone can assist in putting the pieces together, the implication is that his work can never truly come to an end. Lafferty often struggled to bring stories to a close—he would

add epilogues, end on em-dashes, loop the novel back to its beginning, even suggest that the final page of the manuscript was lost and all the better for it: anything to avoid a sense of closure or absolute finality.[2] For the novel *Argo* (1992), he takes this hesitancy to the extreme of providing multiple endings, a device that prompts him to reflect not only on the novel but also his entire body of work. Recasting the moment quoted above, he writes that "I understood by some sort of intuition that what I had been writing was a never-ending story and that the name of it was '*A Ghost Story*'" (*Argo* 147). Stories do not end: they haunt; they linger around and make themselves available to examination from many perspectives besides the one through which we first approach them. In between the variant endings presented in *More Than Melchisedech* proper, Lafferty expands on this theme by quoting from the title character of a seemingly unrelated novel, *The Three Armageddons of Enniscorthy Sweeny* (1977):

> "An event is like a box or other geometrical object," Ennis would say, "and it should be pretty much the same no matter which side it is viewed from. Let us say that we look at it from the south side (that is the past), or from the east side (that is the present), or from the west side (that is an alternative present), or from the north side (that is the future). The event will look a little bit different from these various viewpoints, but not much. You must not reject one view of it when you come to another view. They are all equally parts of it." (*Argo* 141)

Following which, of course, Lafferty turns his face to the view from the west side—"to that alternate reality which 'should not be rejected.'" But also implied is the ever-presence of the north-side view, the perspective on the ending from a future that should, by rights, lie outside and beyond the novel itself.

There is in the above passage a complex play of authorship and readership that must remain in the background here so as to maintain focus on the relations between narrative chronology and "the event": most importantly, on the fact that no one can travel *back* in time—not even such experienced time-and-space travelers as the Masters of the Argo. For Lafferty, this vessel is both a mythological inheritor of the ship Jason sailed on, as well as one of the forms taken by the Catholic Church as it moves in and out of human history. The main strategy these Argonauts employ to combat evil is to travel forward into time, "into the probable future, effect[ing] changes there so that when the World arrives the obstacles will have already been dealt with" (Knight 12).[3] As the magus and Argo helmsman Melchisedech Duffey expounds, "we can change the present in the process of happening, by being a part of that happening. And often we can change the future which has not already happened. But not all our piety or wit will blot out any line of the past" (102). The print-based metaphor is telling: narrative events may be viewed from the past, but *from that perspective* their inscriptions cannot be altered or emended. The mere idea of traveling backward to effect change is, Duffey insists, "brainless … like a science fiction idea" (102).

Thus also for we who "are all of us characters in a Science Fiction Story named *The Day After the World Ended*" ("Day After" 46). In the present, largely brainless non-world, the amnesic fog of the post-apocalypse obscures our south-side view on any event in the ruined world of the past (and in particular, our view of the ruination itself). Furthermore, "even if we could go back there, a time machine from Flatland and eyes from Flatland would not be able to see dimension[s] not contained in Flatland" (42). With our vision so severely limited, any history we might undertake to write is, of necessity, an alternate history, a *uchronia*: a time that is not and never was. Seen from a Flatland present, the past is already flattened. We may attempt to send words backwards, as it were, but whether they return to us or not, they will in no way alter our present situation, much less provide a foundation upon which to build a new world.[4] Though pieces from past worlds may (perhaps must) be incorporated in the new, any relation with these pieces will not be geared toward the impossibility of recapturing what has been, but rather the possibility of ameliorating what may yet be.

And here we re-encounter Paul Ricoeur, who, like Lafferty, also undertook a lifelong project of re-creation, stretching from the earliest formulations of *Interpretation Theory* through *Time and Narrative* and beyond. In fact, throughout the foregoing we have never diverged far from the notions of utterance, event, and world that Ricoeur develops in the lectures that would become *Interpretation Theory*. There he is deeply concerned with rescuing, to the extent that it is possible, the idea of "intentionality" attached to an utterance, not in the sense of divining some sort of all-encompassing authorial meaning, but rather recognizing the utterance as an event whose intention is to be recognized for what it is: an utterance (18).

This recognition depends on its grounding within a common *situation*, which Ricoeur arrives at by going down to the level of the individual sentence, the point where "language is directed beyond itself" (*Interpretation Theory* 20). Here sense meets reference, the linguistic utterance encountering the ontological condition of that utterance's existence within a world. Language itself, Ricoeur insists, "is not a world of its own. It is not even a world" (20). Only when combined with an *experience* of something, and the situation of that thing and experience, can it be referenced linguistically—we must first "presuppose that something must be" before we can identify it: world creation of necessity precedes world relation. This principle makes Ricoeur a valuable (and underutilized) resource for scholars of speculative fiction, while also distinguishing his world building from the possibilities explored by other narrative theorists who, to a greater or lesser degree, relegate those worlds that are possible to the one deemed actual.[5]

Having established this as a general linguistic principle, Ricoeur addresses one difficulty with such creative events: when transmitted through speech, they disappear as soon as they happen. This occurrence can only be "fixed," "preserved from destruction," through writing—but this same act "deeply affect[s] its communicative function" (*Interpretation Theory* 28), leading to the separation of intention and meaning that first prompted Ricoeur's hermeneutic

investigation. Moving beyond this impasse requires exploring further the situation of the written text: it differs from the oral in that the latter depends on "the situation perceived as common by the members of the dialogue" (35). It is precisely this commonality, this ground, which is "shattered by writing," requiring us to broaden our scope of reference such that we speak no longer of a situation, but a world—or, "the ensemble of references opened up by texts" (36).

An attempt at understanding a textual event is thus an attempt at apprehending "the outline of a new way of being in the world" (*Interpretation Theory* 37). Poetic language offers the possibility of creating new worlds as "the poet operates through language in a hypothetical realm ... the poetic project is one of destroying the world as we ordinarily take it for granted" (59). This fascinating, frightening model of apocalyptic possibility depends on aspects of explanation and understanding. Understanding, Ricoeur writes, must first consist in a "guess" as to the author's intent, which is itself of necessity "beyond our reach" (75). The text is marked by plurivocality and also by multiplicity of perspective, or stereoscopy. We can make "guesses" about the text that involve looking at it or hearing it in multiple, possibly contradictory ways; still we are constrained by the text's "limited field of possible constructions" (79). So when "the text speaks of a possible world and of a possible way of orientating oneself within it," this orientation is conducted with reference to "the dimensions of this world properly opened up by and disclosed by the text" (88).

This pro-jected world—this project of a world, proceeding along the referential horizon thrown open by the text—is in turn the object of comprehension and the corrective to faulty notions of *appropriation* that might otherwise derail the interpreter. What is appropriated is the meaning of the text: that is, "nothing other than the power of disclosing a world that constitutes the reference of the text" (*Interpretation Theory* 92). The joining of these capacities makes possible a Gadamerian "fusion of horizons" through which "the world horizon of the reader is fused with the world horizon of the writer" (93).

Lafferty aims at precisely this sort of collaborative world horizon when exhorting readers to join him in world building, albeit with the much greater challenge that the world itself has disappeared. In order to collaborate on fixing a world horizon, the writer and reader must first renew the ideas of *world* and *horizon*; only then can they conceptualize a stereoscopic means of escape from Lafferty's "Flatland." Coming to in this non-world, we find ourselves surrounded by ruins, the "bones and stones" of the world gone before ("Day After" 46); the task is not to rebuild that prior world but rather to build a new one that can fill the void. In the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur sketches the task of narrative in remarkably similar terms: through emplotment we "'grasp together' and integrate into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events" so that "a new semantic pertinence emerges from the ruins" of the previous order (I.x).[6]

Crucially, this model of narrative integration also describes how we incorporate our experiences within time: "in plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal existence" (I.xi). As the title of his study indicates, Ricoeur sees these two aspects of the human as inseparably linked: "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (I.3). This interplay forms a feedback loop—not as a tautological "vicious circle," but rather as an "endless spiral" of *mimesis*, a process he divides into three successive moments—$mimesis_1$, $mimesis_2$, $mimesis_3$; or, prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration (or, in Lafferty's metaphors, the "ghost," the "deep underlay," and the "jigsaw puzzle")—that "carry the meditation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes" (I.72).

Normally, this would be basis enough for any science-fictional undertaking, as the reader would draw on her own experiences and expertise in order to gauge the extent to which the textual world was estranged from her own, finding through the act of reading a shared world horizon between the two that is continually under negotiation as new information is incorporated. This, at least, is the rough model laid out, for example, in Hal Clement's article, "Whirligig World" (1953), where the reader is implored to join the author in a privileged position well above the world. But Lafferty's Flatlanders have no such altitudes. For them, the mimetic feedback loop is negative, serving only to amplify their alienated, worldless plight; their narratives are meaningless because they have no temporal experiences to portray, and their time is inhuman because their narratives remain semantically fragmented. Nor do they, caught in the infinitely indivisible present, have any separable moments in which mimesis might take place. "[T]he calendar is stuck. It comes up *The Day After The World Ended* day after day, year after year" ("Day After" 46). Lacking any location for things future or past (cf. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* I.10), the Flatlanders also lack any grounding for requisite narrative elements such as goals or motivations and as such cannot enact even the first stage of *mimesis*, or $mimesis_1$.

Deprived of the grounding components of $mimesis_1$, Lafferty must begin instead with $mimesis_2$, "the kingdom of the *as if*" (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* I.64), and then build backwards from configuration towards prefiguration. Since none of the traditional anchors of narrative can be accepted as given, they must all be called into being by fictive declaration before *mimesis* can be established in relation to any of them; only then can any mimetic capacity be reinstilled in Flatland humanity. The understanding represented by the "meeting of horizons" (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 93) is impossible so long as all humanity shares a flattened, uniform horizon.

Lafferty writes, "The 'If only' premise is at the beginning of every Science Fiction flight of fancy. But in actuality we are at the 'If only' nexus right now. All the conditions have come together. All the 'If onlys' are more than possible now: they are wide open. They are fulfilled" ("Day After" 45). This last

statement is curious: Lafferty appears to be saying that the very fact of reaching this moment, this nexus of "If only" (or in its stronger aspect, "Let there be"), means that no sooner is it established than it is complete: all the possibilities are realized in the same moment that they are postulated. I will return to Lafferty's strategy for undertaking the enormous task of the initial postulate, but for the moment we must take it as realized, in order to consider his working-out of Ricoeurian *mimesis* when lacking a world to mirror.

Mimesis$_1$, as noted above, anchors the narrative in the world of experience; Ricoeur divides this mimetic moment into three features: "structural, symbolic, and temporal" (*Time and Narrative* I.54). The first of these makes use of "our competence to utilize ... the conceptual network that structurally distinguishes the domain of action from that of physical movement" (I.54–55). This anchorage is what allows the very idea of an actor to perform in a narrative setting and with that all the related terms familiar from structuralist literary analysis. In his reanimation of this mimetic capacity, Lafferty is very near the "Literature of Exhaustion" of John Barth, who in 1967 wrote that "it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature ... even characterization! Even plot!" (68). Barth heard the vast silence left in the wake of works by Beckett, Borges, and other late modernists, and imagined that silence being turned in on itself, becoming itself the subject of storytelling—such that they could anchor the characters in their stories to that silence and have their dramas play out in a world of absence. Likewise, Lafferty shows that this silent, empty stage serves both as present reality—"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?" ("Day After" 47)—and as mimetic backdrop for the sf narrative.

Ricoeur's second mimetic tether deals with the "symbolic framework of a culture," specifically how "human action can be narrated ... because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms" (*Time and Narrative* I.57). Elsewhere Ricoeur calls this "the *imaginary nucleus* of any culture" (qtd. in Kearney 117; emphasis in original), meaning not simply a center that exists only in the imagination but one existing *for* the imagination: a complex of information that "determines and rules" the actor-networks—"political, economic and legal, and so on"—within a society. Furthermore, this zone of mythic potential "will always transcend the confines of a particular community or nation. The *mythos* of any community ... is the bearer of other *possible* worlds" (Kearney 123; emphasis in original).

The ruins of Flatland are, in one guise at least, the nuclei that determined and ruled previous worlds and that are now bones and stones contributing informational density to a given region. But thanks to our amnesia, the previous states that spawned these relics are inscrutable; we can only speculate about them from what was left behind, as if encountering for the first time an alien cityscape. Hence, Lafferty notes, the story in which we find ourselves need not be "The Day After the World Ended"; the title may instead be "The First Day on a New Planet" ("Day After" 47).

This shift into a different sf register signals also a shift in perspective, from the east-side view of the present to the north-side view from the future. Fredric Jameson captures both of these aspects by referring to sf as at once an "archaeology of the future" and a product of the present (see, for instance, *Archaeologies of the Future* 211): maintaining both of these perspectives requires a stereoscopic outlook of the sort Ricoeur identifies as necessary for understanding. Similarly, stereoscopy is also necessary to perceive the *texture* that precedes the text (*Time and Narrative* I.58)—to see the ruins around us as building blocks, as banks of data rather than irrelevancies or impediments to further grubbing in the rubble. The writer of science fiction, gazing back "as if" from the future, can thus renovate and build upon abandoned forms and formats such as the Utopia, the *voyage fantastique*, and the colonial adventure—almost everything from the creation tale to the apocalypse. This depth of symbol provides a ritual background for the actions that will be portrayed later in the mimetic process.

"To understand a ritual act is to situate it within a ritual, set within a cultic system, and by degrees within the whole set of conventions, beliefs, and institutions that make up the symbolic framework of a culture" *(Time and Narrative* I.58). For science fiction, this symbolic framework is more often called genre convention, or disparaged as pulp fodder—what Mike Ashley in his authoritative survey of sf magazines dismisses as a collection of "lost civilizations, invasions by monsters, or adventures on distant planets" (71). But even in this formulaic fare, the very arrival on a new planet serves as ritual act and the exploration of that world is a passage as symbolically laden as the most visionary tasks of any other repository of myth. While Lafferty evinces frustration that so many writers largely fail, in his estimation, to engage with this symbolic depth on any other than a surface level, this does not for him nullify the potential inherent in the genre or invalidate the ethical imperative to continue building new worlds to explore. Here he meets Ricoeur's corollary that "poetics does not stop borrowing from ethics, even when it advocates the suspension of all ethical judgment or its ironic inversion" (*Time and Narrative* I.59); even the most inhuman, brutally naturalistic sf (e.g., the terminal beach in H.G. Wells's *Time Machine*) must take as setting a symbolically mediated landscape if any action is to take place.

This brings us to Ricoeur's third tether for mimesis₁—"the understanding of action" or our recognition "in action [of] temporal structures that call for narration" (*Time and Narrative* I.59). He links this to Heidegger's concept of *Innerzeitigkeit*, or "within-time-ness": "our relation to time as that 'within which' we ordinarily act" (*Time and Narrative* I.61). Narrative action requires time as well as space, and it is here that the pulp sf narrative proves most limited: its installments take place in no time more particular than "the future." And, as above, this sf future is the end result of symbolic mediation, and hence already more a space than a time, a staging ground for repetitive dramas of battle and conquest.[7] There is, in Heideggerian terms, little "Care" in the pulps, little concern for chronology beyond the clock ticking toward the next print deadline. Ricoeur glosses the relation thus:

> Within-time-ness is defined by a basic characteristic of Care, our being thrown among things, which tends to make our description of temporality dependent on the description of the things about which we care ... something other than measuring the intervals between limit-instants. (*Time and Narrative* I.62)

Planetary exploration *ought* to provide an occasion for demonstrating just such Care, as the hero is "thrown among things" and must relate himself to them or die. Far more commonly, though, the things themselves are interchangeable and of the moment (not unlike the ruins are to the Flatlanders), and the hero relates himself only to himself, a feedback loop hermetically sealed against novelty or ambition.

Action disrupts; it damages temporality by breaking up the "simple succession of abstract 'nows' ... and resists that *flattening* or leveling which Heidegger calls the 'vulgar' conception of time" (*Time and Narrative* I.62; emphasis added). As a model, linear time cannot account for the perceptions of immediacy through which some events, however many years ago they took place, are more available to the mind, more "present," than unremarkable occurrences of even a day or two prior. Stories need not be structured as a "this, then that" succession to be understood as narrative; in fact, adherence to such a structure often marks narratives as inferior because mimetically defective in this respect. If the hero is concerned primarily with remaining himself so that he (or another just like him) can return unchanged for further adventures, there can be little Care for any narrative happening. One day becomes as good as any other, a merely abstract measure severed from the "correspond[ence] to our Care and the world in which it is 'time to' do something, where 'now' signifies 'now that...'" (*Time and Narrative* I.63).

The actor here serves as a strange attractor in a dissipative (or complex, or chaotic) system, an intervention into the process that pulls information toward itself—in a chemical solution, this process results in the formation of crystalline structures; in human communication, it results in narrative. This initial act is followed by a spontaneous self-organization of story elements. While it is impossible to predict in minute detail the final shape of a story from its initial conditions, there are nonetheless certain large-scale tendencies—such as the relation between the action and the goal of that action, and the relations between the actor and one or more helpers or antagonists—that can be identified and sorted taxonomically. These form the basis of structuralist paradigms, such as the Greimasian semiotic square, that purport to contain and describe narrative action and are useful at least in delineating the foundations for the first stage of mimesis$_1$. Yet "is it even certain," as Ricoeur asks, "that every narrative can be projected onto Greimas's topological matrix [?]... Our study of the metamorphoses of plot makes me tend to doubt this" (*Time and Narrative* II.60).

As often with Ricoeur's critiques, he aims not so much at refutation as at pointing out what supplement would be necessary to extend the validity of whatever is in question. In order to square off these fictions, Ricoeur finds, Greimas must first flatten them out, his projections more like maps or screens

than the holographs that would adequately represent a three-dimensional world-space. Though Greimas does attempt to build into his system an approximation of a further dimension by allowing for subsequent reinscriptions of the semiotic square onto successive layers of narrative, this suffices only to demonstrate the endlessly recursive nature of the narrative at any given moment as in a fractal structure—describing the paradigm but not the syntagm. Greimas thus places boundaries on what is properly boundless, curtailing the continuous flux necessary to sustain an informational system as complex as a narrative: in attempting to provide a box for narrative, he has instead constructed its coffin.

While this might suffice for the zombie-fictions that populate the Flatland literary scene, it will not fit the sf tale, at least not as Lafferty would tell it. As seen above, his attempts to escape the perpetual post-apocalyptic Day depend on that day serving simultaneously as locus for action, the now on which humanity must either act to create a world or remain inert and forever without one. Yet this presents a difficulty: if there is to be a "First Day on a New Planet," there must first be some sort of break with the "stuck calendar" that has pertained since the old world ended. Lafferty links this to the exercise of narrative Care, sharply satirizing those forms of sf that fail to care about anything other than short-term exploitation (the neo-imperial pulp narrative, in, for example, "Nine Hundred Grandmothers" [1966]), or their own parochial self-fulfillment (the utopia, in "Flaming Ducks and Giant Bread" [1974]). But these inadequate forms of sf cannot simply be tossed out; as part of the landscape into which Lafferty has been thrown, they must be Cared for as well. They are, however, unusable in their present form and must be pulled apart and analyzed, often bloodily, before being reincorporated into a new whole. As his demiurgic character Snuffles says to two planetary explorers he is about to devour, "[D]o 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" ("Snuffles" 164).

Ricoeur's own method has much in common with this grotesque mode of creation, with this stage of "violent interpretation" which the authorial stand-in Snuffles at one point calls "chewing." Rather than engage in straightforward critique, Ricoeur instead ruminates on a given theorist's output, whether singly (as with Greimas) or in combination—most famously, perhaps, with Aristotle and Augustine in the opening chapters of *Time and Narrative* (I.5–51). He also chews on his own earlier work—continually reformulating it to take account of new insights or old insights from prior critics, recontextualized. Like Lafferty/Snuffles, Ricoeur aims to improve his creation with each subsequent incorporation; of Ricoeur it could also be said that "The next world [he] made embodied certain improvements ... but it still contained many elements of the grotesque. Perfection is a very long, very hard road" ("Snuffles" 170). This is to say that Ricoeur's thought develops (or, at least, he presents it as developing) in narrative form—often explicitly, as in the Appendix to *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977), which tells the story of his shift from an existential to a phenomenological hermeneutics (315–22). And hence Ricoeur the philosopher must confront the same lacuna as Lafferty the storyteller: what is the position

of the thinker with respect to the representation of his thought? The development of that thought is necessary for the thought itself to come into being, but without the prior existence of the completed thought, the framework necessary to develop it is absent.

For Ricoeur, the "poetic solution to the paradox of distention and intention" lies in mimesis$_2$, in the act of emplotment itself, which "combines in variable proportions two temporal dimensions, one chronological and the other ... configurational" (*Time and Narrative* I.66–67). This latter dimension depends on the "guidance of an expectation that finds its fulfillment in the 'conclusion' of a story"; linear time, already unsettled, is here inverted, so that those who would make sense of a narrative must read "the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending." Of itself, this configurative process would prove insufficient as a frame for narrative understanding; it is merely the attainment of the "north-side" view that Lafferty's Sweeny describes. Bringing together the temporal dimensions of narrative views requires that there be, chronologically intermediate between them, a position from which "the entire plot can be translated into one 'thought'" (*Time and Narrative* I.67). This thought is not, however, situated atemporally; rather, it is a "now" moment, an ethical overlook calling for the exercise of Care.

Appropriately, then, it is this vantage point, reached at the end of the section on mimesis$_2$, from which Ricoeur retrospectively outlines that same process: out of all potential events, factors, and relations, the narrator grasps only those that will allow the story to be followed through to its end. That this is mimesis$_1$ viewed from a "higher altitude" on an "endless spiral" will be made explicit in the approach to the still-loftier mimesis$_3$, where the storyteller's world intersects with the reader's world, with its own entanglements and referential presuppositions (*Time and Narrative* I.72). What is not yet clear is the provenance of the "now," that position above the fray of pure incident that seems beyond the capacity of Flatlanders to achieve or even to imagine. How can such be recognized if it cannot be so much as perceived—or, even if perceived, is categorically misunderstood? As with Abbott's original fable, the impingement of higher-dimensional zones or beings on lesser dimensions can only be comprehended by the latter in terms of their own limited perceptions. Hence the difficulties faced by Lafferty in delivering his lecture and Ricoeur in presenting his endless spiral to those accustomed to thinking in two dimensions: their horizons intersect only at a single point. Even if the spiral were somehow to be collapsed by way of explanation, it would be perceived as just another vicious circle.

The conflict is between "innovation and sedimentation"; Ricoeur finds in their "interplay" the basis of tradition (*Time and Narrative* I.68). Left nebulous is the precise mechanism that allows them to play, as it were, on the same field: between "the two poles of servile application and calculated deviation" (dipping here almost into a single-dimensional Lineland) is a vast range of "rule-governed deformation," which—returning to circular metaphors —"constitutes the axis around which the various changes of paradigm through

application are arranged" (*Time and Narrative* I.70). This deformation amounts to a *twist*, the result being neither circle nor spiral but rather a Möbius strip.

The aptness of this image for fiction can be seen in such pat terms as the "twist ending," but Barth provides a more tangible example in his story "Frame-Tale" (1968), a single page separated into a strip printed on the recto ("ONCE UPON A TIME THERE") and the verso ("WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN"), and brief instructions on how to cut out, contort, and join together that strip (1-2). Here it is evident that the poles for application and deviation are not *separated* by a single line but rather *joined* by it: they represent stages in a deformative feedback loop. Rather than shuttling back and forth across a coordinate grid, narrative moves successively through phases of innovation ("ONCE UPON A TIME THERE") and sedimentation ("WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN")—revealed here to be at once paradigmatic opposites and syntagmatic complements. Moreover, while the twist is a localized phenomenon (viz. the cut and the tape), the curvature propagates along the entire strip—the deformation is a holographic phenomenon, spreading throughout the entire shape and potentially the entire system.

Yet until this story structure comes into contact (here, literally) with a hearer or reader, this potentially systemic distortion remains just that— potential. In an Author's Note, Barth states: "'Frame-Tale' is one-, two-, or three-dimensional, whichever one regards a Moebius strip as being" (ix). Only in the exercise of this "regard" can the strip resolve dimensionally; until some "one" other than the author interacts with it, its horizon remains indeterminate. Narrative thus requires composition, transmission, *and collaboration*—this last being what Ricoeur describes as mimesis$_3$. Notably, at this point in *Time and Narrative* Ricoeur defends himself against the charge of vicious circularity, using instead as a model his "endless spiral"—but between the loops of this spiral are gaps impossible for Flatlanders to traverse; for them narrative is invariably a *mise en abyme*.[8] The twist in the Möbius strip, though, allows this spiral to remain endless while also doubling back on itself so that its different layers of narration and mimesis need not be (often, cannot be) separated by altitude.

This deformation also provides an intersection of linear and narrative timelines—a "now" point, or the "Day," that is both the one after the world ended and the first on a new planet. As a twist on a straight line, it allows linear time to "stack," presenting opportunities for even Flatlanders to recognize recurrence—which is to say *action*—as a disruption of temporality. Yet as a redoubled spiral, it allows narrative time to collapse upon itself, such that even the logic of cause and effect becomes snarled, resulting in what Douglas Hofstadter calls "a kind of upside-down causality" (172). This may seem to frustrate the "sense of an ending" that Ricoeur insists is one of the central aims of plotting (*Time and Narrative* I.67). But the end in view here is not finality, but possibility. This distinction can be seen in the construction of scientific thought experiments such as Schrödinger's cat, which place "impossible idealizations"—i.e., the materials of story (cf. Csicsery-Ronay 121)—in the service of a fundamentally irresolvable scenario. By positioning

the cat equally between life and death, Schrödinger disrupts the most basic distinction that can be made in narrative; likewise, while the thought-experiment could be concluded by an observer opening the box and definitively establishing the cat as alive or dead, such an ending would be beside the point: establishing a moment not of *suspense*—in the sense of "what will happen next?"—but rather of *suspension*—"what is always possibly happening?"

This moment's science-fictionality may be seen in sf's "tak[ing] thought-experiment as its given reality, which it then artistically and ludically exaggerates and estranges" (Csicsery-Ronay 124); it is more particularly Laffertian in this thought-experiment's "kinship ... with a particular kind of joke: the tall tale fitted out as literary hoax" (125). In a Flatland where all things are suspended between death and life, Lafferty sees not prose fiction but "zombie-fiction," the demonic parody of the thought-experiment: "This is personal posing and peacock posturing, this is pornography and gadgetry, this is charades and set-scene formalities" ("Day After" 43). Such works encourage not collaboration but consumption: like the zombie of latter-day cinema, they chew not to incorporate and re-create but to devour and destroy, to make an end of all things. Against this neglect of narrative Care—or, perhaps, this practice of narrative *abuse*—Lafferty sets up a story (the "very very long novel") that does not end, that "must not end"—for we ourselves are within the story and if it should end, so would we (47).

Inevitably, this permeability, or outright reversibility, of narrative boundaries brings us back again to the Möbius strip. Like this twisted figure, Lafferty's ghost-story novel presents the illusion of interiority but is in fact radically open. Navigated in a straight line—as it must be by any Flatlander—its perimeter proves entirely traversable, "inside" and "out"; this allows for the externalization of the interior elements that compose Ricoeur's mimesis$_1$, and for multiple, potentially infinite, intersections with the Flatland plane. Because the strip doubles back on itself, the line segments may be encountered in any order; because the curve is holographic, every part reflects and in some measure contains every other. Glossing *Interpretation Theory*, any particular utterance here is potentially an event, any interaction a locus for an instance of dialogue and the subsequent actualization of discourse (8–16). At such a dialogic moment, "[t]he text speaks of a possible world and of a possible way of orientating oneself within it. The dimensions of this world are properly opened up by and disclosed by the text" (89).

Lafferty's "story" can thus be seen to project simultaneously a world and a discourse for interacting with it. Ricoeur finds this projection to be the "destination of discourse"; through the sf process of literalizing metaphor, we can understand this not just as rhetorical figure but as actual physical location. "Here showing is at the same time creating a new mode of being" (*Time and Narrative* I 88)—here too the potential for a "fusion of horizons" (93), succeeding where the dialogue between Sphere and Square in Abbott's *Flatland* failed.[9] *This* is the "deep underlay" in Lafferty's fiction—the new and hoped-for world that humanity so desperately needs.

But Lafferty cannot sustain such a world on his own; by his own admission, and despite his immense labors, he could not even bring this underlying world to "clear publication" ("Sometimes I'm asked" 1). Only through "group ingenuity" can this be accomplished and that on a massive scale: "It can be done by a small elite of only a few million geniuses" ("Day After" 45). Hence his harangue of the DeepSouthCon attendees, all of them potential geniuses: "Declare yourself one of them!" he exhorts. "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" ("Day After" 46). Knowing that crowd would fall somewhat short of the required millions—and sensing moreover that it was writing, not speech, that could free itself sufficiently to reveal a destination of discourse—Lafferty built into the various parts of his story a self-reflexive didacticism that would instruct readers in how to read his work and ultimately to inculcate the habits of thought necessary to build the stories and, by extrapolation, worlds that prose fiction had stopped supplying. While the "Day After" speech came toward the twilight of his active career, Lafferty from his earliest published stories (such as "Snuffles") at once tells stories and teaches his audience how to read them, challenging his readers and showing them how they might challenge themselves.

From the very first, Lafferty wrote with collaboration (Ricoeur's mimesis$_3$) in view. While he may not have realized until the very end of his career that what he had been writing all along was one single work, the strange loops of his narrative nonetheless enable us to see this latterly recognized, deeply hidden coherence as an upside-down cause of even the early works. In saying that the world *can* be brought about, "on an unconscious level at first perhaps, and then on a conscious level," Lafferty speaks as much to himself as to his audience ("Day After" 45), even then moving toward a view of humanity in which

> The people of the world are none of them common, are all of them geniuses, are all of them wonderful. So the power is always there, and the great overspilling of the multiplicity and the power. All the people are ghostly, and all of them are split or exploding people. They have rapport with all their fellows in time and in space, with all of them now in the world, with all of them who have been or will be in the world. (*Argo* 151)

Merely to exist, to be a person in the world, is to be a genius and to contribute to the "great overspilling of the multiplicity and the power."[10] That this overspilling *is* the world itself—Lafferty even capitalizes it: "World Itself"—is demonstrated in this explanation of the "Detailed Workings" of this World, a necessary part of the proof that there are no "alternate endings" to the volume *Argo* for which this statement serves as afterword (*Argo* 151). Asked by his publisher to explain why, then, there are anywhere from two to eight *apparent* endings, Lafferty first notes that the question is "impossible" to answer, then proceeds to answer it:

> 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.
   Because that is the way the world works. (*Argo* 151)

Thus there have never been any endings, and any sense of one is just that: a
sense and not an actual event. It is a cross-cut of the Möbius strip, a
paradigmatic disruption of the forward surge of narrative.

   So too ultimately the "end of the world" was only a seeming. This is not
at all to say that such seeming ends are anything but devastating; even being
in "rapport" with all who have been or will be does not much ease the pain
that can result from any particular slice across the multiplicity. But a still
greater pain comes from *forgetting* that we have this rapport, either by cutting
ourselves off from it willfully (as within "zombie-fiction") or by losing our
way in the amnesic fog. The struggle within and for narrative is largely still
the same for us today as it was for the rhapsodes of Homer's day and long
before: it is a struggle to remember that story remains possible. And though
our technologies change, our strategies for remembering are much the same:
we remember that story remains possible by telling a story and putting that
possibility to work. While building a world may seem a more daunting
impossibility than answering a question, we must remember along with
Lafferty that both are *works* of language (see Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*
xi), and thus will prove easy—"Still impossible, but easy" (*Argo* 151). If the
world seems to have ended, that is just the view from one side of the event,
one section of the multiplicity—there are always others. Hence for Lafferty the
"twist" in narrative, the initial impetus toward the restoration of story and
henceforth the world, is the recollection that story and world are always
present, always potentially available to those who remember the exercise of
narrative Care.

   As Ricoeur's life and career neared an end (no, not an end, only a
seeming), he turned to similar questions in the magisterial capstone to his life's
work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000). Lafferty capped off his own opus
with two short pieces on remembrance: the brief essay appended to *More than
Melchisedech* and a short story called "Anamnesis" (1992). Lafferty closes the
former with a humble "Thank you all"—but as he is always aware of Greek
overtones, it is also to be read as εὐχαριστῶ, as invitation to the remembrance
of the Sacrament. In the latter story, he gathers many characters together in
Conclave, under the watchful eye of magus and demiurge Melchisedech
Duffey; brought into such close rapport, they recollect their mythological roles
and, through this remembrance and in fellowship with one another, succeed in
renewing and enriching their entire world. Lafferty offers here one last twist
in the narrative, a loop at once final, comprehensive, and exceedingly strange.
He offers the story itself—or more generally, Story Itself—as corroboration of
the world's reanimation: "The chapbook or brochure with the name *Anamnesis*
exists only in the World According to Melchisedech Duffey. Really. We defy
you to find it in any of those minor alternative worlds" ("Anamnesis" 20).

   So saying, he closes the loop and concludes his work. But the world itself
does not conclude: it is a forward surge on multiple tracks of multiple powers,
and it still goes on. It does not end....

NOTES
   1. The technique is foregrounded in the "Promantia" to the novel *The Devil Is
Dead* (1971), where 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" (9). Not only the plot elements, but also the chapters themselves function as pieces to be moved around. As R.J. Whitaker noted, "Lafferty claims that one need not start with the first chapter of *The Devil Is Dead*…. [O]ne can open the book up to Chapter 5, read it to the end and then read the first four chapters" (9). On a larger scale, *The Devil Is Dead* is part of a "trilogy," the Argo Legend, in which it is a sort of dark mirror to the first volume, *Archipelago* (1979)—the two center around the character Finnegan, and present him acting within mutually contradictory yet equally valid timelines. Both of these chronologies are comprehended and compounded by the third volume, *More Than Melchisedech* (published in 1992 as three volumes: *Tales of Chicago*, *Tales of Midnight*, and *Argo*), which goes on to present multiple endings for the trilogy without resolving or seeking to resolve the earlier apparent contradictions. This is complicated still further by the publication of an additional offshoot novel, plus novellas, short stories, and poem cycles, some of them filling in gaps in the fractured chronology, others disjointing it still further.    2. See respectively *East of Laughter* (1988)*, Annals of Klepsis* (1983)*, The Devil Is Dead,* and *Archipelago*.

3. The characters, in addition to whatever other identities they occupy in the various timelines, also take on the roles of the Argonauts of Greek (and, as Lafferty would have it, earlier) legend.

4. This may account for the somewhat uneasy fit of alternate history within science fiction. Lafferty dramatizes this situation in the aforementioned *Three Armageddons of Enniscorthy Sweeny* (1977), in which an alternate reality without the World Wars is eventually wrenched into our own baleful timeline through Sweeny's operatic compositions.

5. In her analysis of possible worlds, Marie-Laure Ryan proposes a "principle of minimal departure," stating that "we reconstrue the central world of a textual universe … as conforming as far as possible to our representation of [the actual world]" (51). This principle, with its assumption that humanity has a pre-existing standard against which any "departure" might be measured from minimal to maximal, is latent in the work of most other possible-worlds theoreticians. Whether in Lubomír Doležel's heterocosmic incompleteness, in Thomas Pavel's gradations of being, in Kendall Walton's child's play, in the "pretending" and "pretense" of Wolfgang Iser and Michael Saler, respectively; however radically indeterminate the relation between actual and possible world, the latter ends up dependent on the former. Even the philosopher David Lewis, whose cosmic pluralist model establishes our world as only one out of an infinitude of concretely realized possibilities, leans on examples drawn from worlds diverging only in the slightest from the one we inhabit, such as missing rather than hitting a shot in a sporting contest, when explicating his modal realism. Additionally, the mode of reality that we inhabit is privileged through the causal isolation of the alternate possible worlds; for all the concreteness of the latter, we are nonetheless left with the one we have—or, Lafferty would insist, do not have.

6. Ricoeur briefly synopsizes his work *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975), where the same operation is carried out at sentence level; there is again here a specific pertinence for science fiction where stories are so often literalized metaphors (see above on Delany).

7. For an outline of the birth and development of "the future," see Alkon or, more recently, Gomel.

8. Fanfan Chen examines the Möbius strip in connection with hypotyposis and metalepsis, both of which (as placements *beyond*) would seem out of the reach of Flatlanders without the moment of mimetic ambiguity afforded by the "twist" in the

strip. This holds even at sentence level: *vide* Harold Bloom's recursive definition of metalepsis in *A Map of Misreading* (1975) as "a metonymy of a metonymy" (109).

9. This leaves unaddressed for the time being the Square's notion of the fourth dimension, and the subsequent rebuke from the Sphere.

10. Lafferty's definition of *person* is quite expansive, viz. the novel *Serpent's Egg* (1987) with its group of nine mega-intelligent human or quasi-human children (a group that includes a chimp, a bear, a seal, a python, a parrot, an angel, and an ambulatory computer; also, one of the human children started out as a wolverine).

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ABSTRACT

R.A. Lafferty's reputation for rollicking humor and poetic verve, as demonstrated in such stories as "Narrow Valley" (1966) and "Slow Tuesday Night" (1965) belies the considerable theoretical and narratological complexity of his entire body of work. This article draws on the vocabulary developed by Paul Ricoeur in *Interpretation Theory* (1966) and *Time and Narrative* (1983-85) to explore Lafferty's process of world creation in light of his startling 1979 announcement that the cognitive world of humanity had come to an end. Thus, in this post-conscious state, it was left to science fiction to develop potential replacements. In his writings Lafferty seeks not only to project new worlds but also to reconstruct the world-building capacity in others, enabling readers and writers alike to collaborate toward a future for humanity.