FROM ELFLAND TO POUGHKEEPSIE

Ursula K. Le Guin

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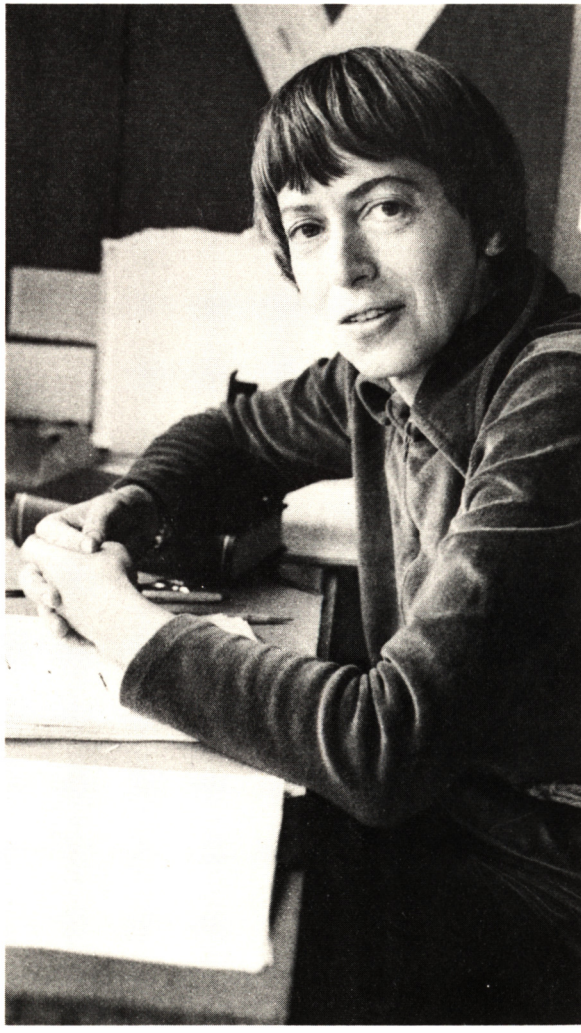

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by
Ursula K. Le Guin

with an introduction
by
Vonda N. McIntyre

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INTRODUCTION

Ursula K. Le Guin is a deceptively quiet individual. In the two years I have known her, I have never heard her raise her voice. This is an accomplishment worthy of special note, because during two weeks of those two years, she presided over the University of Washington's Science Fiction Writers' Workshop, an experience guaranteed to reduce almost anyone to raving mania. But neither a week's stay in a dormitory guest room with the approximate measurements and light level of the bottom of a well, nor the sight of one of the

stranger members of our class waving through the window of her second-floor sitting room shook Ursula's aplomb.

She does not need to raise her voice. Her quietness comes from the serenity of a person self-assured in her careers, her abilities, her life, without the vanity that "self-assurance" so often implies. She is one of the few writers around who is able to talk undefensively about a piece of her own work in terms of its flaws, rather than trying to maintain it as finished and untouchable. While lesser writers may refuse to acknowledge the validity of any criticism, viewing it as a personal attack, Ursula not only discusses it, but shows in her response that she has considered the subject herself, in great depth. I think this is because she recognizes the ability to dissect one's own work for what it is: an indication of growth and of the potential for continued growth as writer and as artist.

The flaws in her writing, however, are rare. Much more evident are the brilliance of prose and conceptualization, the characterization (so often lacking in traditional science fiction), the substance and consistency of her settings. These qualities have been recognized and hon-

ored by readers and professionals alike. In 1968 A Wizard of Earthsea *won the Boston Globe/Hornbook award "for excellence in juvenile fiction"; in 1969* The Left Hand of Darkness *won both the Hugo (the international fan award) and the Nebula (the award of the Science Fiction Writers of America) for best novel of the year; the second volume of her Wizard of Earthsea trilogy,* The Tombs of Atuan, *was a Newbery Honor Book in 1972. Most recently, her talent and dedication to excellence of writing were recognized by an even wider literary world: she was awarded the National Book Award in the category of Children's Literature for* The Farthest Shore, *the third Earthsea volume. To anyone who has not seen the trilogy, I recommend it without reserve. Like all the best children's books, the ones that are loved and become classics, they are as enjoyable for adults as for children.*

And Ursula is as fine a teacher as she is a writer. "Teacher" is perhaps not the most accurate word (there may be no accurate word); as James Sallis has said, "Thus far, we have not demonstrated that writing can be taught, only that it may be learned . . ." During

Ursula's week at the workshop, people wrote, and worked, and learned, for she is adept at providing situations in which learning is most possible.

Any educators in the audience, please take note: she calls the situations "games."

The general structure of the workshop is for the members to meet with the week's writer-in-residence for discussion of manuscripts in the morning, and for the afternoon to be more free-form. During the afternoons of her week, Ursula gives very short, usually in-class, assignments designed to stretch the imagination and to make people aware of the value and effect of every word they put on paper. While these are essentially training exercises, it is interesting that almost every one has resulted in at least one saleable story.

The first year, the last assignment of a series of "build your own alien" exercises was to invent a being thoroughly disgusting in all human terms – and present its point of view. Anyone who has read F. M. Busby's "The Puiss of Krrlik," from Amazing, *will agree that he succeeded, on both counts.*

Possibly the most successful – certainly the most memorable – was the construct game.

When the players arrived in Ursula's sitting room one day, they were confronted by a Thing. This Thing included the ceiling lamp, the rug, pieces of string, several ash trays, beer bottle tops, can openers, twigs, wires, bits of plastic. The assignment: to use it in a story.

Two of the pieces written that day will appear in Clarion III, *edited by Robin Scott Wilson (NAL, fall 1973). It's interesting to note that by the time all the stories were finished, no construct bore much resemblance to the one inhabiting Ursula's suite, and none – construct* or *story – resembled any other. Like any good game, the Thing was a tool to interest the imagination.*

Ursula left the construct in her room as a gift for Harlan Ellison, whose week followed hers. When Harlan arrived, wilted (as opposed to "fresh") from two weeks of New York City and one week of Michigan during a high-humidity heat wave, he took one look at the Thing lurking in his quarters, groaned, and went to bed for twelve hours.

Sometimes even the most imaginative of us are overwhelmed.

Another facet of the workshop is the science fiction lecture series, weekly evening talks

given by the writers-in-residence. The talks are free, and open to students of the University of Washington and the public. In two years they have progressed from unpublicized chats (it's hard to lecture eight people) in the basement of the biology building to gatherings of up to 400 people in the new lecture hall. "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie" was Ursula's speech in conjunction with the second annual Science Fiction Writers' Workshop, given in the summer of 1972. As I introduced her (and demonstrated to the audience that I really had *dressed up to introduce a big-name sf writer: I was wearing my fluorescent chartreuse socks), she glanced over the assembly of students, science fiction fans, a professor or so, and wild-eyed workshop participants. When she took the podium, she said, somewhat apologetically, "I had expected a stuffy and pedantic audience, so I wrote a stuffy and pedantic speech."*

As you will see, the speech (like the audience) was anything but stuffy and pedantic.

Vonda N. McIntyre

FROM ELFLAND TO POUGHKEEPSIE

Elfland is what Lord Dunsany called the place. It is also known as Middle Earth, and Prydain, and the Forest of Broceliande, and Once upon a Time; and by many other names.

Let us consider Elfland as a great National Park, a vast and beautiful place where a person goes by himself, on foot, to get in touch with reality in a special, private, profound fashion. But what happens when it is considered merely as a place to "get away to"?

Well, you know what has happened at Yosemite. Everybody comes, not with an ax and

a box of matches, but in a trailer with a motor-bike on the back and a motorboat on top and a butane stove, five aluminum folding chairs, and a transistor radio on the inside. They arrive totally encapsulated in a second-hand reality. And then they move on to Yellowstone, and it's just the same there, all trailers and transistors. They go from park to park, but they never really go anywhere; except when one of them who thinks that even the wildlife isn't real gets chewed up by a genuine, first-hand bear.

The same sort of thing seems to be happening to Elfland, lately. A great many people want to go there, without knowing what it is they're really looking for, driven by a vague hunger for something real. With the intention or under the pretense of obliging them, certain writers of fantasy are building six-lane highways and trailer-parks with drive-in movies, so that the tourists can feel at home, just as if they were back in Poughkeepsie.

But the point about Elfland is that you are not at home there. It's not Poughkeepsie. It's different.

What is fantasy? On one level, of course, it is a game: a pure pretense with no ulterior motive whatever. It is one child saying to another child, "Let's be dragons," and then they're dragons for an hour or two. It is escapism of the most admirable kind – the game played for the game's sake.

On another level, it is still a game, but a game played for very high stakes. Seen thus, as art not spontaneous play, its affinity is not with daydream, but with dream. It is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not anti-rational, but para-rational; not realistic, but surrealistic, super-realistic, a heightening of reality. In Freud's terminology, it employs primary, not secondary process thinking. It employs archetypes, which, as Jung warned us, are dangerous things. Dragons are more dangerous, and a good deal commoner, than bears. Fantasy is nearer to poetry, to mysticism, and to insanity than naturalistic fiction is. It is a real wilderness, and those who go there should not feel too safe. And their guides, the writers of fantasy, should take their responsibilities seriously.

After all these metaphors and generalities, let us get down to some examples; let us read a little fantasy.

This is much easier to do than it used to be, thanks very largely to one man, Lin Carter of Ballantine Books, whose Adult Fantasy Series of new publications and reprints of old ones has saved us all from a lifetime of pawing through the shelves of used bookstores somewhere behind several dusty cartons between "Occult" and "Childrens" in hopes of finding, perhaps, the battered and half-mythical odd volume of Dunsany. In gratitude to Mr Carter for the many splendid books, both new and old, in his series, I will read anything his firm sends me; and last year when they sent me a new one, I settled down with a pleasant sense of confidence to read it. Here is a little excerpt from what I read. The persons talking are a Duke of the blood royal of a mythical Keltic kingdom, and a warrior-magician – great Lords of Elfland, both of them.

"Whether or not they succeed in the end will depend largely on Kelson's personal ability to manipulate the voting."

"Can he?" Morgan asked, as the two clattered down a half-flight of stairs and into the garden.

"I don't know, Alaric," Nigel replied. "He's good – damned good – but I just don't know. Besides, you saw the key council lords. With Ralson dead and Bran Coris practically making open accusations – well, it doesn't look good."

"I could have told you that at Cardosa."[1]

At this point I was interrupted (perhaps by a person from Porlock, I don't remember), and the next time I sat down I happened to pick up a different kind of novel, a real Now novel, naturalistic, politically conscious, relevant, set in Washington, D.C. Here is a sample of a conversation from it, between a Senator and a lobbyist for pollution control.

"Whether or not they succeed in the end will depend largely on Kelson's personal ability to manipulate the voting."

"Can he?" Morgan asked, as the two clattered down a half-flight of stairs and into the White House garden.

"I don't know, Alaric," Nigel replied. "He's good – damned good – but I just don't know. Besides, you saw the key committee chairmen. With Ralson dead and Brian Corliss practically making open accusations – well, it doesn't look good."

"I could have told you that at Poughkeepsie."

Now, I submit that something has gone wrong. The book from which I first quoted is not fantasy, for all its equipment of heroes and wizards. If it was fantasy, I couldn't have pulled that dirty trick on it by changing four words. You can't clip Pegasus' wings that easily – not if he has wings.

Before I go further I want to apologise to the author of the passage for making a horrible example of her. There are infinitely worse examples I could have used; I chose this one because in this book something good has gone wrong – something real has been falsified. There would be no use at all in talking about what is generally passed off as "heroic fantasy," all the endless Barbarians with names like Barp and Klod, and the Tarnsmen and the Klansmen and all the rest of them – there would be nothing whatever to say. (Not in terms of art, that is; in terms of ethics, racism, sexism, and politics there would be a great deal to say, but fortunately it has all been said, indirectly and therefore with all the greater power, by Norman Spinrad in his tremendous satire *The Iron Dream.*)

What is it, then, that I believe has gone wrong in the book and the passage quoted

from it? I think it is the *style*. Presently I'll try to explain why I think so. It will be convenient, however, to have other examples at hand. The first passage was dialogue, and style in a novel is often particularly visible in dialogue; so here are some bits of conversations from other parts of Elfland. The books from which they were taken were all written in this century, and all the speakers are wizards, warriors, or Lords of Elfland, as in the first selection. The books were chosen carefully, of course, but the passages were picked at random; I just looked for a page where two or three suitably noble types were chatting.

Now spake Spitfire saying, "Read forth to us, I pray thee, the book of Gro; for my soul is afire to set forth on this faring."

"'Tis writ somewhat crabbedly," said Brandoch Daha, "and most damnably long. I spent half last night a-searching on't, and 'tis most apparent no other way lieth to these mountains save by the Moruna, and across the Moruna is (if Gro say true) but one way . . ."

"If he say true?" said Spitfire. "He is a turncoat and a renegado. Wherefore not therefore a liar?"[2]

"Detestable to me, truly, is loathsome hunger; abominable an insufficiency of food upon a journey.

Mournful, I declare to you, is such a fate as this, to one of my lineage and nurture!"

"Well, well," said Dienw'r Anffodion, with the bitter hunger awaking in him again, "common with me is knowledge of famine. Take you the whole of the food, if you will."

"Yes," said Goreu. "That will be better."[3]

"Who can tell?" said Aragorn. "But we will put it to the test one day."

"May the day not be too long delayed," said Boromir. "For though I do not ask for aid, we need it. It would comfort us to know that others fought also with all the means that they have."

"Then be comforted," said Elrond.[4]

Now all those speakers speak English differently; but they all have the genuine Elfland accent. You could not pull the trick on them that I pulled on Morgan and Nigel – not unless you changed half the words in every sentence. You could not possibly mistake them for anyone on Capitol Hill.

In the first selection they are a little crazy, and in the second one they are not only crazy but Welsh – and yet they speak with power; with a wild dignity. All of them are heroic, eloquent, passionate. It may be the passion that is most important. Nothing is really going

on, in those first two passages: in one case they're reading a book, in the other they're dividing a cold leg of rabbit. But with what importance they invest these trivial acts, what emotion, what vitality!

In the third passage, the speakers are quieter, and use a less extraordinary English; or rather an English extraordinary for its simple timelessness. Such language is rare on Capitol Hill, but it has occurred there. It has sobriety, wit, and force. It is the language of men of character.

Speech expresses character. It does so whether the speaker or the author knows it or not. (Presidential speech-writers know it very well.) When I hear a man say, "I could have told you that at Cardosa," or at Poughkeepsie, or wherever, I think I know something about that man. He is the kind who says, "I told you so."

Nobody who says, "I told you so," has ever been, or will ever be, a hero.

The Lords of Elfland are true lords, the only true lords, the kind that do not exist on this earth: their lordship is the outward sign or symbol of real inward greatness. And greatness of soul shows when a man speaks. At

least, it does in books. In life we expect lapses. In naturalistic fiction, too, we expect lapses, and laugh at an "over-heroic" hero. But in fantasy, which, instead of imitating the perceived confusion and complexity of existence, tries to hint at an order and clarity underlying existence – in fantasy, we need not compromise. Every word spoken is meaningful, though the meaning may be subtle. For example, in the second passage, the fellow called Goreu is moaning and complaining and shamelessly conning poor Dienw out of the only thing he has to eat. And yet you feel that anybody who can talk like that isn't a mean-spirited man. He would never say, "I told you so." In fact, he's not a man at all, he is Gwydion son of Don in disguise, and he has a good reason for his tricks, a magnanimous reason. On the other hand, in the third quotation, the very slight whine in Boromir's tone is significant also. Boromir is a noble-hearted person, but there is a tragic flaw in his character, and the flaw is envy.

I picked for comparison three master stylists: E. R. Eddison, Kenneth Morris, and

J. R. R. Tolkien; which may seem unfair to any other authors mentioned. But I do not think it is unfair. In art, the best is the standard. When you hear a new violinist, you do not compare him to the kid next door; you compare him to Stern and Heifetz. If he falls short, you will not blame him for it, but you will know what he falls short of. And if he is a real violinist, he knows it too. In art, "good enough" is not good enough.

Another reason for picking those three is that they exemplify styles which are likely to be imitated by beginning writers of fantasy. There is a great deal of quite open influencing and imitating going on among the writers of fantasy. I incline to think that this is a very healthy situation. It is one in which most vigorous arts find themselves. Take for example music in the eighteenth century, when Handel and Haydn and Mozart and the rest of them were borrowing tunes and tricks and techniques from one another, and building up the great edifice of music like a lot of masons at work on one cathedral: well, we may yet have a great edifice of fantasy. But you can't imitate what somebody does until you've learned how he does it.

The most imitated, and the most inimitable, writer of fantasy is probably Lord Dunsany. I did not include a passage of conversation from Dunsany, because I could not find a suitable one. Genuine give-and-take conversations are quite rare in his intensely mannered, intensely poetic narratives, and when they occur they tend to be very brief, as they do in the Bible. The King James Bible is indubitably one of the profoundest formative influences on Dunsany's prose; another, I suspect, is Irish daily speech. Those two influences alone, not to mention his own gifts of a delicate ear for speech-rhythms and a brilliantly exact imagination, remove him from the reach of any would-be imitator or emulator who is not an Irish peer brought up from the cradle on the grand sonorities of Genesis and Ecclesiastes. Dunsany mined a narrow vein, but it was all pure ore, and all his own. I have never seen any imitation Dunsany that consisted of anything beyond a lot of elaborate made-up names, some vague descriptions of gorgeous cities and unmentionable dooms, and a great many sentences beginning with "And."

Dunsany is indeed the First Terrible Fate that Awaiteth Unwary Beginners in Fantasy.

But if they avoid him, there are others – many others. One of these is archaicising, the archaic manner, which Dunsany and other master fantasists use so effortlessly. It is a trap into which almost all very young fantasy-writers walk; I know; I did myself. They know instinctively that what is wanted in fantasy is a *distancing from the ordinary*. They see it done beautifully in old books, such as Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, and in new books the style of which is grounded on the old books, and they think, "Aha! I will do it too." But alas, it is one of those things, like bicycling and computer programming, that you have got to know how to do before you do it.

"Aha!" says our novice. "You have to use verbs with thee and thou." So he does. But he doesn't know how. There are very few Americans now alive who know how to use a verb in the second person singular. The general assumption is that you add *-est* and you're there. I remember Debbie Reynolds telling Eddie Fisher – do you remember Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher? – "Whithersoever thou goest there also I goest." Fake feeling: fake grammar.

Then our novice tries to use the subjunctive. All the was's turn into were's, and leap out at the reader snarling. And the Quakers have got him all fouled up about which really is the nominative form of Thou. Is it Thee, or isn't it? And then there's the She-To-Whom Trap. "I shall give it to she to whom my love is given!" – "Him whom this sword smites shall surely die!" – Give it to she? Him shall die? It sounds like Tonto talking to the Lone Ranger. This is distancing with a vengeance. But we aren't through yet, no, we haven't had the fancy words. Eldritch. Tenebrous. Smaragds and chalcedony. Mayhap. It can't be maybe, it can't be perhaps; it has to be mayhap, unless it's perchance. And then comes the final test, the infallible touchstone of the seventh-rate: Ichor. You know ichor. It oozes out of severed tentacles, and beslimes tesselated pavements, and bespatters bejewelled courtiers, and bores the bejesus out of everybody.

The archaic manner is indeed a perfect distancer, but you have to do it perfectly. It's a high wire: one slip spoils all. The man who did it perfectly was, of course, Eddison. He really did write Elizabethan prose in the nine-

teen-thirties. His style is totally artificial, but it is never faked. If you love language for its own sake he is irresistible. Many, with reason, find him somewhat crabbed and most damnably long; but he is the real thing, and just to reaffirm that strange, remote reality, I am placing a longer quotation from him here. This is from *The Worm Ouroboros*. A dead king is being carried, in secrecy, at night, down to the beach.

> The lords of Witchland took their weapons and the men-at-arms bare the goods, and the King went in the midst on his bier of spear-shafts. So went they picking their way in the moonless night round the palace and down the winding path that led to the bed of the combe, and so by the stream westward toward the sea. Here they deemed it safe to light a torch to show them the way. Desolate and bleak showed the sides of the combe in the wind-blown flare; and the flare was thrown back from the jewels of the royal crown of Witchland, and from the armoured buskins on the King's feet showing stark with toes pointing upward from below his bear-skin mantle, and from the armour and the weapons of them that bare him and walked beside him, and from the black cold surface of the little river hurrying for ever over its bed of boulders to the sea. The path was rugged and stony, and they fared slowly, lest they should stumble and drop the King.[5]

That prose, in spite of or because of its archaisms, is good prose: exact, clear, powerful. Visually it is precise and vivid; musically – that is, in the sound of the words, the movement of the syntax, and the rhythm of the sentences – it is subtle and very strong. Nothing in it is faked or blurred; it is all seen, heard, felt. That style was his true style, his own voice; that was how Eddison, an artist, spoke.

The second of our three "conversation-pieces" is from *The Book of the Three Dragons*, by Kenneth Morris. This book one must still seek on the dusty shelves behind the cartons, probably in the section marked "Childrens," – at least that's where I found it – for Mr Carter has not yet reprinted more than a fragment of it, and if it ever had a day of fame it was before our time. I use it here partly in hopes of arousing interest in the book, for I think many people would enjoy it. It is a singularly fine example of the recreation of a work magnificent in its own right (the *Mabinogion*) – a literary event rather rare except in fantasy, where its frequency is

perhaps proof, if one were needed, of the ever-renewed vitality of myth. But Morris is also useful to my purpose because he has a strong sense of humor; and humor in fantasy is both a lure and a pitfall to imitators. Dunsany is often ironic, but he does not mix simple humor with the heroic tone. Eddison sometimes did, but I think Morris and James Branch Cabell were the masters of the comic-heroic. One does not smile wryly, reading them; one laughs. They achieve their comedy essentially by their style – by an eloquence, a fertility and felicity and ferocity of invention that is simply overwhelming. They are outrageous, and they know exactly what they're doing.

Fritz Leiber and Roger Zelazny have both written in the comic-heroic vein, but their technique is different: they alternate the two styles. When humor is intended the characters talk colloquial American English, or even slang, and at earnest moments they revert to old formal usages. Readers indifferent to language do not mind this, but for others the strain is too great. I am one of these latter. I am jerked back and forth between Elfland and Poughkeepsie; the characters lose co-

herence in my mind, and I lose confidence in them. It is strange, because both Leiber and Zelazny are skilful and highly imaginative writers, and it is perfectly clear that Leiber, profoundly acquainted with Shakespeare and practiced in a very broad range of techniques, could maintain any tone with eloquence and grace. Sometimes I wonder if these two writers underestimate their own talents, if they lack confidence in themselves. Or it may be that, since fantasy is seldom taken seriously at this particular era in this country, they are afraid to take it seriously. They don't want to be caught believing in their own creations, getting all worked up about imaginary things; and so their humor becomes self-mocking, self-destructive. Their gods and heroes keep turning aside to look out of the book at you and whisper, "See, we're really just plain folks."

Now Cabell never does that. He mocks everything: not only his own fantasy, but our reality. He doesn't believe in his dreamworld, but he doesn't believe in us, either. His tone is perfectly consistent: elegant, arrogant, ironic. Sometimes I enjoy it and sometimes it makes me want to scream, but it is admirable. Cabell

knew what he wanted to do and he did it, and the market-place be damned.

Evangeline Walton, whose books, like Kenneth Morris's, are reworkings of the *Mabinogion*, has achieved her own beautifully idiosyncratic blend of humor and heroism; there is no doubt that the Keltic mythos lends itself to such a purpose. And while we are on the subject of humor, Jack Vance must be mentioned, though his humor is so quiet you can miss it if you blink. Indeed the whole tone of his writing is so modest that sometimes I wonder whether, like Leiber and Zelazny, he fails to realize how very good a writer he is. If so, it is probably a result of the patronising attitude American culture affects towards works of pure imagination. Vance, however, never compromises with the patronising and ignorant. He never lets his creation down in order to make a joke, and he never shows a tin ear for tone. The conversation of his characters is aloof and restrained, very like his own narrative prose: an unusual kind of English, but clear, graceful, and precisely suited to Vance's extraordinary imagination. It is an achieved style. And it contains no archaisms at all.

After all, archaisms are not essential. You don't have to know how to use the subjunctive in order to be a wizard. You don't have to talk like Henry the Fifth to be a hero.

Caution, however, is needed. Great caution. Consider: Did Henry the Fifth of England really talk like Shakespeare's Henry? Did the real Achilles use hexameters? Would the real Beowulf please stand up and alliterate? – We are not discussing history, but heroic fantasy. We are discussing a modern descendant of the epic.

Most epics are in straightforward language, whether prose or verse. They retain the directness of their oral forebears. Homer's metaphors may be extended, but they are neither static nor ornate. The *Song of Roland* has four thousand lines, containing one simile and no metaphors. The *Mabinogion* and the Norse sagas are as plainspoken as they could well be. Clarity and simplicity are permanent virtues in a narrative. Nothing highfalutin is needed. A plain language is the noblest of all.

It is also the most difficult.

Tolkien writes a plain, clear English. Its outstanding virtue is its flexibility, its variety.

It ranges easily from the commonplace to the stately, and can slide into metrical poetry, as in the Tom Bombadil episode, without the careless reader's even noticing. Tolkien's vocabulary is not striking; he has no ichor; everything is direct, concrete, and simple.

Now the kind of writing I am attacking, the Poughkeepsie style of fantasy, is also written in a plain and apparently direct prose. Does that make it equal to Tolkien's? Alas, no. It is a fake plainness. It is not really simple, but flat. It is not really clear, but inexact. Its directness is specious. Its sensory cues – extremely important in imaginative writing – are vague and generalised; the rocks, the wind, the trees are not there, are not felt; the scenery is cardboard, or plastic. The tone as a whole is profoundly inappropriate to the subject.

To what then is it appropriate? To journalism. It is journalistic prose. In journalism, the suppression of the author's personality and sensibility is deliberate. The goal is an impression of objectivity. The whole thing is meant to be written fast, and read faster. This technique is right, for a newspaper. It is wrong for a novel, and dead wrong for a fan-

tasy. A language intended to express the immediate and the trivial is applied to the remote and the elemental. The result, of course, is a mess.

Why do we seem to be achieving just that result so often, these days? Well, undoubtedly avarice is one of the reasons why. Fantasy is selling well, so let's all grind out a fantasy. The Old Baloney Factory. And sheer ineptness enters in. But in many cases neither greed nor lack of skill seem to be involved, and in such cases I suspect a failure to take the job seriously: a refusal to admit what you're in for when you set off with only an ax and a box of matches into Elfland.

A fantasy is a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous; and *it will change you*.

The general assumption is that, if there are dragons or hippogriffs in a book, or if it takes place in a vaguely Keltic or Near Eastern medieval setting, or if magic is done in it, then it's a fantasy. This is a mistake.

A writer may deploy acres of sagebrush and rimrock without achieving a real Western, if he doesn't know the West. He may use space-

ships and strains of mutant bacteria all he pleases, and never be anywhere near real science fiction. He may even write a five-hundred-page novel about Sigmund Freud which has absolutely nothing to do with Sigmund Freud; it has been done; it was done just a couple of years ago. And in the same way, a writer may use all the trappings of fantasy without ever actually imagining anything.

My argument is that this failure, this fakery, is visible instantly in the style.

Many readers, many critics, and most editors speak of style as if it were an ingredient of a book, like the sugar in a cake, or something added onto the book, like the frosting on the cake. The style, of course, *is* the book. If you remove the cake, all you have left is a recipe. If you remove the style, all you have left is a synopsis of the plot.

This is partly true of history; largely true of fiction; and absolutely true of fantasy.

In saying that the style is the book, I speak from the reader's point of view. From the writer's point of view, the style is the writer.

Style isn't just how you use English when you write. It isn't a mannerism or an affectation (though it may be mannered or affected). It isn't something you can do without, though that is what people assume when they announce that they intend to write something "like it is." You can't do without it. There is no "is," without it. Style is how you as a writer see and speak. It is how you see: your vision, your understanding of the world, your voice.

This is not to say that style cannot be learned and perfected, or that it cannot be borrowed and imitated. We learn to see and speak, as children, primarily by imitation. The artist is merely the one who goes on learning after he grows up. If he is a good learner, he will finally learn the hardest thing: how to see his own world, how to speak in his own words.

Still, why is style of such fundamental significance in fantasy? Just because a writer gets the tone of a conversation a bit wrong, or describes things vaguely, or uses an anachronistic vocabulary or shoddy syntax, or begins going a bit heavy on the ichor before dinner – does that disqualify his book as a fantasy?

Just because his style is weak and inappropriate – is that so important?

I think it is, because in fantasy there is nothing but the writer's vision of the world. There is no borrowed reality of history, or current events, or just plain folks at home in Peyton Place. There is no comfortable matrix of the commonplace to substitute for the imagination, to provide ready-made emotional response, and to disguise flaws and failures of creation. There is only a construct built in a void, with every joint and seam and nail exposed. To create what Tolkien calls "a secondary universe" is to make a new world. A world where no voice has ever spoken before; where the act of speech is the act of creation. The only voice that speaks there is the creator's voice. And every word counts.

This is an awful responsibility to undertake, when all the poor writer wants to do is play dragons, to entertain himself and others for a while. Nobody should be blamed for falling short of it. But all the same, if one undertakes a responsibility one should be aware of it. Elfland is not Poughkeepsie; the voice of the transistor is not heard in that land.

And lastly I believe that the reader has a

responsibility; if he loves the stuff he reads, he has a duty towards it. That duty is to refuse to be fooled; to refuse to permit commercial exploitation of the holy ground of Myth; to reject shoddy work, and to save his praise for the real thing. Because when fantasy is the real thing, nothing, after all, is realler.

NOTES

1. Kurtz, Katherine, *Deryni Rising*, New York: Ballantine Books, August 1970, p. 41.

2. Eddison, E. R., *The Worm Ouroboros*, New York: Ballantine Books, April 1967, p. 137.

3. Morris, Kenneth, *The Book of the Three Dragons*, Junior Literary Guild, copyright 1930, New York: Longmans, Green and Company, p. 8.

   [This excerpt also contained in *Dragons, Elves, and Heroes*, edited by Lin Carter, New York: Ballantine Books, October 1969, p. 59.]

4. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Fellowship of the Ring*, New York: Ballantine Books, October 1965, p. 351.

5. Eddison, E. R., op. cit., pp. 56-57.