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BY FRANK COFFMAN

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The following is a slightly edited (and I believe improved) re"print" of my article that appeared in *Studies in Fantasy Literature*, Issue Number 3 (2005) entitled "Moral Law, Secondary Worlds, and Crossed Planes." It outlines what I believed then and believe now to be an "extension" of sorts to theories of fantasy—indeed of literature in general—by noted fantasists: George MacDonald, J. R. R. Tolkien, and G. K. Chesterton with references to Robert E. Howard's fantasy as well. An embryonic form of this theory appeared in 2000 in my REHupa journal, *The Cross Plainsman*.

Moral Law, Secondary Worlds, and Crossed Planes:

Some Thoughts Upon the Nature of Fantasy

D. Franklin "Frank" Coffman, Jr.

At first consideration, George MacDonald (1824-1905), J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), and Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) are obviously connected across the broad spectrum of the many sub-genres of Fantasy, but also a decidedly odd "fellowship." They and their works represent and offer distinctly different colorings of viewpoint and of life. On the other hand, Tolkien reminded us that odd "fellowships" may sometimes work out quite nicely. The following essay touches slightly upon all three of these men, their literature, and their theories about literature, but its primary thesis will be to present some thoughts upon the nature of and the value of Fantasy itself and some critical perspectives which attempt to break new ground.

That Robert E. Howard delineated the boundaries, sketched in most of the background, and fleshed out most of the key elements of the Sword & Sorcery genre is little disputed. The many offspring of Sword & Sorcery mode are all descendants of those original "children" [Conan, Kull, Bran Mak Morn, et al.] who sprang full-grown from Howard's mind—as Athena from Zeus.

Any successful artist in any art both *extends* and *redefines* the genre or genres in which he or she works; few have done as much as Howard to set basic parameters. One could argue with great success that the work of Doyle in perfecting the Classic Detective Story initiated by Poe or the work of Wells in defining what Science Fiction was to become would qualify as similar monumental achievements. In that particular niche in the early twentieth century that could be called the "primordial adventure" Howard and Burroughs and very few others qualify as masters, although inspiration has to be acknowledged from writers of the Naturalist school—especially Jack London and Robert W. Service. Howard's first piece published in *Weird Tales*, "Spear and Fang," is a good example of this genre. And, of course, Howard wrote across many more genres than is generally known, doing what he called "splashing the field" as a writer for the pulp magazines of his day.

Yet, as T. S. Eliot maintains in his important essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.

The questions of analogues, influences, and inspirations for Howard's achievements are matters for other papers with other foci—although there are rich and waiting mines of material for the researcher to explore.

But my purpose here is not really to focus upon Robert E. Howard or the breadth of his work across any one or several genres, but, rather, a coincidence of naming and the accidental suggestion of an analogy that I believe offers some *possible insight upon the uses of the fantastic as a vehicle for objective truth*—or at least its potential for verisimilitude every bit as complete as that of "realism"—potentially far more successful, sometimes achieving the power of myth.

Robert E. Howard's brief, creative life as a published author and poet was lived after the family moved to the tiny town of Cross Plains, Texas. The varied vistas of central Texas offered springboards of inspiration for the writer's backgrounds, but the town's name coincidentally suggests an angle of approach and interpretation to the broader genre of all fantastic fiction.

What if we do some language "gaming" and change "Cross" to "Crossed" and "Plains" to "Planes?" Mulling over the combination "Crossed Planes" helped me refine a few thoughts on literary critical theory that I'd been considering for some time.

The simplistic form of the principle might properly be called "The Principle of Juxtaposition" or of "Bold Relief"—the notion that Fantasy is important and powerful as a genre in that, when it succeeds, it enables us to see objective and inviolable and unalterable Truth against a background of untruth. *At the very least it enables us to see the artist's "Truth"—whatever that vision may contain. In bold relief against the background of the fantastic.* When juxtaposed against the elements of what Tolkien calls the "Secondary World," those elements which we can relate to as human beings, those elements which ring "True," will stand out. These elements are sometimes, perhaps most times, blurred or indistinct or even lost against the backgrounds of so-called "Realism" [And we must be careful never to automatically conflate any purported "Realism" with "Truism." As Tolkien noted, he found it quite curious and, indeed, sad that most people think a horse is less "Real" than a "motor car."]

But another way to view the achievement of effective fantasy is to view the world of our *perceived reality* and the world of the *received fantasy* as two separate "planes" of existence. This notion of fantasy happening on another level or plane is not new, but we may extend the metaphor with a little imagination. The concept of "parallel worlds" is often encountered in stories of fantasy or science fiction, or in that blend which is termed "science fantasy." But parallelism may be, in the final analysis, an incorrect metaphor. Parallel lines or parallel planes, by definition, never meet or touch. The truer metaphor is the imagined picture of intersecting planes—of "crossed planes" that have a line of shared points and commonality. All points along this "Axis of Truth" are touchstones of objectivity, allowing us to see the essential realities of our existence and our human situation to the clearest extent possible.

This revised view itself might actually be too simplistic. The metaphoric vision that includes a single, clear, and obvious "line" of intersection—something straight and true and perceived with little difficulty—likely needs modification and complication.

To extend this analogy further, the notion of "plane" provides the mental image of a flat, two-dimensional surface. I believe we must further modify our theory to change the word "plane" to "surface"—actually plural: "surfaces." These surfaces—to use Tolkien's concepts from his essay "On Fairy-Stories"—one of "Primary World" Truth and Reality, one of "Secondary Word" Imagination and Fantasy) with undulations and even peaks and valleys—are closer to the correct analogy, it seems to me.

Now we have a complex three-dimensionality and a "mind's eye" view of two decidedly "unflat" surfaces with various and sundry places where these surfaces touch, approach, intersect, *or even convolute or cross one another*. Perhaps Surrealism and "Magic Realism," etc. might be explained in this way. There are, now that we have complicated our three-dimensional model, single "points" of contact that we may perceive. There are places where the surfaces hover quite closely to one another, where "contact" seems imminent but ultimately fails to occur. There are places where an entire "line" of connections appears, but these lines are rarely straight and almost always demand following like a winding trail. There are places where the surfaces cross in wild shapes of significance, like the enigma of the Mobius strip or the convolutions of a three-dimensional [four-dimensional?] Klein bottle where patterns of commonality, patterns of reality, patterns of Truth suggest themselves, perhaps indicating a higher dimension of perception, taking our model from literary criticism into the realms of the metaphysicians and philosophers.

The great fantasist, George MacDonald writes in his seminal essay, "The Fantastic Imagination," that fantasy creation involves the necessity of breaking some laws and the necessity of keeping others. I include a fairly extensive passage to present the essence of MacDonald's ideas on this point:

The natural world has its laws, and no man must interfere with them in the way of presentment any more than in the way of use; but they themselves may suggest laws of other kinds, *and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms—which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation....* [compare Tolkien: "We make still by the laws in which we're made..."]

His world once invented, the highest law that comes next into play is, that there shall be harmony between the laws by which the new world has begun to exist; and in the process of his creation, the inventor must hold by those laws. The moment he forgets one of them, he makes the story, by its own postulates, incredible. *To be able to live a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it. ...* [compare to Tolkien's parallel views in "On Fairy-Stories"]

Law is the soil in which alone beauty will grow; beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed; and you may, if you will, call Imagination the tailor that cuts her garments to fit her, and Fancy his journeyman that puts the pieces of them together, or perhaps at most embroiders their buttonholes. Obeying law, the maker works like his creator; not obeying law, he is such a fool as heaps a pile of stones and calls it a church.

*In the moral world it is different: there a man may clothe in new forms, and for this employ his imagination freely, but he must invent nothing. He may not, for any purpose, turn its laws upside down. He must not meddle with the relations of live souls. The laws of the spirit of man must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent. It were no offence to suppose a world in which everything repelled instead of attracted the things around it; it would be wicked to write a tale representing a man it called good as always doing bad things, or a man it called bad as always doing good things: the notion itself is absolutely lawless. *In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take their laws with him into his invented world as well.* [all emphases added]*

Many of these same points are paraphrased and expanded upon by Tolkien and others, especially as they pertain to Tolkien's distinction between Primary and Secondary Worlds and the creation of Secondary Worlds. And Tolkien has it right. In correcting Coleridge's often quoted but erroneous phrasing—"a

willing suspension of disbelief—Tolkien asserts that true success at verisimilitude happens with what I will call an "unwilled enchantment or enthrallment of belief, a spontaneous acceptance brought about by the "magic" of the work itself actually "working" upon us as readers.

MacDonald's essential point (and Tolkien's) is that fantasy answers a creative urge within us as "creatures," as the high form of life in the great worldly creation. But when we act as artistic "creators," we must do so in accordance to some sense of order, indeed a sense of Law. To MacDonald's (and Tolkien's) view, this Law is the Law of God. The basic premises are that, for fantasy to be achieved, natural "laws" of our primary world must be broken or none can call it "fantasy." But moral laws and deeper laws that govern the human psyche and soul must not be violated; hence the touchstones of commonality and Truth under our present consideration. In MacDonald's (and Tolkien's) explanation, point and lines of contact, points of shared surface geometry in our metaphor are, in proper Fantasy, points of the unalterable Law(s) of God—or of Truth as far as we may know it.

Tolkien considered one value of fantasy to be "arresting strangeness." The point MacDonald is considering above has to do with that same detaining and captivating strangeness whereby the fantasy "holds"—in at least two senses of the word: it *holds together and seems believable* "while we are, as it were, 'inside'" (Tolkien), and it *holds us as readers and appreciators* of the fantastic art, captivated by the power and magic of words [the LOGOS] and the truths discovered against the strange background of untruth. The formalists and structuralists have called one aspect of this "defamiliarization.

Dickens saw the word "mooreffoc" from the inside of a London coffee room on the glass window advertising the place—of course reading the advertisement backwards from the inside of the establishment—and jotted it down in a notebook. In his biography of Dickens, Chesterton said that it denoted the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle. Dickens, Chesterton, and Tolkien are emphasizing the importance of observation and the importance of seeing things in a new light and keeping a sense of awe.

I believe what really happens quite often is actually a "refamiliarization," *a regaining of what was lost, or a revelation of a truth present all the time and right before us, but thus far unnoticed and unappreciated.* As Robert Browning puts it in "Fra Lippo Lippi":

*For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted—better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out... (lines 300-306)*

Of course with Robert E. Howard, these "Truths" often highlight the more sinister and barbarous aspects of our nature, contrasted with those highlighted by MacDonald and Tolkien. At the very least, they are those of the "worse angels of our nature" (to twist Lincoln's famous line): the primordial, physical, lustful, often violent "Club and Fang" laws of the Darwinian principles to which Howard seemingly adhered—the belief in the ultimate triumph of barbarism over civilization. On the other hand, Chesterton, as he notes in his important essay, "A Defense of Detective Stories," civilization and order are always under attack by the forces of chaos—"the enemies at our gates"—but they continue to endure; similarly Tolkien affirms that, "Above all shadows rides the sun...."

While Howard's "Truths" might differ from MacDonald's and Chesterton's and Tolkien's this potentially adds another element or layer to this evolving critical perspective. The discussion thus far has been along the analogy of these two "planes"—or better, "surfaces"—the one being the world of the fantastic text, the other being the "touchpoints" representing objective Truth or Law.

But let us now throw *intertextuality* into the discussion. Let us consider the admission of multiple

surfaces (multiple stories by multiple authors) and allow into our imaginary vision the manifold and complex interplay of "surfaces." While this may at first seem to be a huge source of confusion, does it not, upon further analysis, help the cause of the critical perspective—to discover Truths of the human condition and universal situation through their bold relief against the background of the Fantastic? Now we may discover and examine places of multiple convergence, discovering those points and lines of thought, emotion, insight, revelation, or inspiration where many or even all surfaces "relate," connect, or at least closely approach one another. And, thereby, are we not closer to a vision and understanding of whatever possible Truth or Truths that our limited potentialities may discern?