

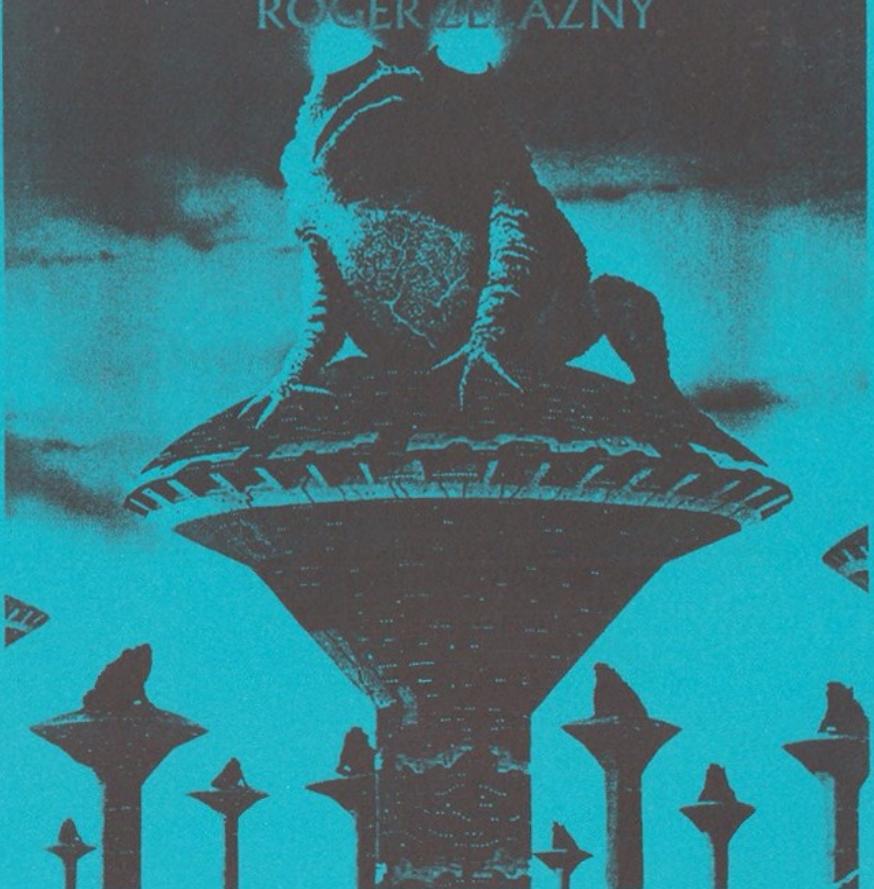


R. A. LAFFERTY

# FOURTH MANSIONS

'Whom the gods would destroy,  
they should have  
first read FOURTH MANSIONS.'

ROGER ZELAZNY



U.M. PRESS

The Boomer Flats Gazette

# FINE HUNDRED GRANDMOTHERS



dobson science fiction

RALafferty

JUST WHEN YOU'D GIVEN UP HOPE!!!

# ALARIC

a.k.a. THE FALL OF ROME

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HELLO folks! Made it to issue three. There was a moment there when I didn't think I'd have much more to share with you people but essays very slowly trickle in from diverse places (Germany and California most recently) and it looks pretty good for at least two more after this. I'm still hoping some of you guys will get over the shyness problem and send those articles you've been tempting me with.

Some of you have written to ask for publishing news. I'm not as knowledgeable about these things as I'd like but I can tell you that Bryan Cholfin's Broken Mirrors Press has opted the historical fantasy ESTEBAN and that Steve Pasechnik's Edgewood Press is considering a novel or another collection to follow the successful IRON TEARS. The last I heard from Chris Drumm the remainder of the second book in the IN A GREEN TREE tetralogy was ready to go. Chris has quite a few irons in the fire though and it may be a long while before we see them (it took from 1986 to 1990 to do the first volume).

My own United Mythologies Press (notice how we all have that word 'press' stuck on at the end there) plans to have the novel IRON TONGUE OF MIDNIGHT out by the end of 94 as well as, hopefully, at least one other Lafferty and a Lloyd Biggle Jr. collection. As you see on the facing page, ALARIC, the long-awaited reprint of THE FALL OF ROME is now available. Act quick. Save me from my creditors. Be the first on your block...

I should also note that Ray's story "Groaning Hinges of the World", which first

came to ink in T. Disch's 1971 anthology RUINS OF EARTH, was translated into Japanese only last year and has won the Seiun award, that nation's highest SF award, in the foreign works category. (Seiun translates literally as 'nebula' but the award is voted on by fandom-like the Hugo) It was unfortunate that no one made arrangements for the award to be accepted at the Worldcon in San Francisco. It was an awkward moment when the Japanese delegation announced its presentation and there wasn't anyone authorized to accept. Another lost chance to do some proselytizing. Oh well...

This issue: a report by British Lafferty collector Alan Fitzer and an essay by his countryman John Ellison. Hope you enjoy it.

#### LAFFERTY IN BRITAIN

A Report by Alan Fitzer

This is perhaps best begun by an acknowledgement that R.A.Lafferty has not received wide acclaim in Britain. The British reader may know the name from a short story or two in a "Year's Best" anthology, or from imported SF magazines such as "Galaxy". This state of affairs may be due in part to the fact that much of Lafferty's work has not yet appeared in print in this country. The short stories, with the exception of sporadic inclusion in anthologies and magazines such as those already mentioned, are represented by only two collections. In total it probably amounts to less than one-quarter of the 200+ stories that have been published in the United States. Lafferty has fared a little better with his longer fiction, but in the

last thirteen years only two novels have seen a British publication.

#### The Publishers:

Between 1968 and 1980 nine books by R.A.Lafferty were published in Great Britain. One from Rapp & Whitling (PAST MASTER) and eight from Dennis Dobson - all hardback. No publisher's issue went beyond the initial print run (probably no more than 2,000). Two of these nine titles have also been published by the British Science Fiction Bookclub. The most recent is Morrigan's EAST OF LAUGHTER in 1988. To date only FOURTH MANSIONS has been made available in paperback in Britain.

PAST MASTER	-Rapp & Whitling (1968) -S.F. Book Club (1970)
THE REEFS OF EARTH	-Dennis Dobson (1970)
FOURTH MANSIONS	-Dennis Dobson (1972) -Star (paperback) (1977)
NINE HUNDRED GRANDMOTHERS	-Dobson (1975)
SPACE CHANTEY	-Dennis Dobson (1976)
ARRIVE AT EASTERWINE	-Dennis Dobson (1977) -SF Book Club (1978)
THE DEVIL IS DEAD	-Dennis Dobson (1978)
DOES ANYONE ELSE HAVE SOMETHING FURTHER TO ADD?	-Dennis Dobson (1980)
NOT TO MENTION CAMELS	-Dennis Dobson (1980)
SERPENT'S EGG	-Morrigan Press (1987)

EAST OF LAUGHTER -Morrigan Press (1988)

\*Note: Despite the listing in Chris Drumm's bibliography of 1982 the British SF book club did not publish FOURTH MANSIONS.

#### Part Two: A Collector's Dream (Nightmare?)

This brief outline of Lafferty's British publications describes a disappointing yet intriguing situation for the Lafferty fan and collector. Disappointing because Lafferty's work has not been made more widely available, and intriguing because his work is so difficult to come by. Add a few other elements to the mix and you have the recipe for the most interesting and demanding challenge a collector could wish for.

1. The quality of RAL's work, particularly the earlier material.
2. The wealth of material as yet unpublished in the UK. British collectors need to seek US editions (many now out of print) if they are to amass a comprehensive collection.
3. The diversity and obscurity of publications in which many of his short stories were first issued.
4. The increasing number of small press publications. The British collector needs to keep his ear closely to the ground if he's to keep up with what's available.
5. The trend, latterly, toward small print runs and/or special editions - an inevitable consequence of the small press syndrome.

#### The Short Stories

In Britain only a fraction of Lafferty's output has been made available. The scarcity of so much is, for the collector, the

ultimate paradox. Nowhere is the chase more exhilarating than the search for the short stories, particularly those not included in the two published collections (900 G.M. & DAEHSFTA). Britain saw only the first nine volumes of Damon Knight's ORBIT series, and only the first few of Terry Carr's UNIVERSE collections. Nothing from the other major sources of Lafferty shorts (no Elwood, Torgeson, Drumm or Dan Knight).

Thanks to the British anthologist and authour Ramsey Campbell, there is one published short story (the only one, I think) that has not yet been made available in Lafferty's home country. This is "The Funny Face Murders" which appeared in Britain in the 1980 anthology NEW TERRORS 2. Other British firsts include hardback editions for PAST MASTER, THE REEFS OF EARTH, SPACE CHANTEY, FOURTH MANSIONS, and NINE HUNDRED GRANDMOTHERS. The two Morrigan books are the first and only editions anywhere.

To aspire to ownership of all of Lafferty's published work is a considerable challenge, and to own a copy of the first publication of every novel and of every short story would be a remarkable achievement. Place that collector in the UK and the remarkable becomes the impossible! A complete set of first editions of the novels and collections is, I suppose, attainable. But the task gets more difficult by the day.

Alan Fitzer  
Birmingham, Sept. 1993

The following is an excerpt from a thesis in progress by England's John Ellison on certain themes and techniques used by American novelists with Catholic backgrounds. John has also mentioned to me the possibility of future essays on the humour of Lafferty and of the influence of certain Augustinian ideas on stories like "Maybe Jones and the City." We can only hope that he finds the time to further enrich us with his observations.

#### AN ESSAY BY JOHN ELLISON

In previous chapters I have tried to point to some typical themes that re-emerge in the novelists examined so far. For instance, there is a concern with the nature of communication (why and how does it actually work?) and reality (where does the boundary between the real and the fantastic establish itself in lived experience?). In this chapter I will continue to develop these themes, but will also argue that the narrative-consciousness that shapes the created texts of a writer, is matchable, in a kind of literary-theological manner, to the "textuality" underlying all of created existence.

We might begin by looking at two quite similar passages which convey the "shock of recognition" that occurs when the circumstances of the Incarnation are considered.

...Jesus came on cold straw. Jesus was warmed by the breath of an ox. "Who is this?" the world said. "Who is this blue-cold child and this woman plain as winter? Is this the word of God, this blue-cold child?"<sup>1</sup>

"The First Coming was ridiculous beyond the point of laughter. The King of the Universe was born to road-people in a cow-and-sheep barn, and was wrapped in a cow-blanket when he was brought forth and placed in a grubby food-trough for a bed."<sup>2</sup>

The first passage is taken from Flannery O'Connor's THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY, the second from R.A.Lafferty's SERPENT'S EGG.

An immediate point that might be made about the Incarnation is that Christianity is from its very beginning textual: the event is already dramatic and story-like with its implicit sense of narrative (God has moved into the world) and contrasts (the eternal and temporal- the All-Powerful and the powerless).

The pivotal role of recognition-scenes in establishing narrative consciousness touched upon in previous chapters might again be stressed here. In literature a recognition scene functions in a number of ways. Most obviously it heightens and concentrates the significance of the scene itself. Also, though, there are simultaneous moves in the direction of interpretation (the scene is referred backward to what has already happened) and anticipation (the scene promises fulfillment in what will happen). Once we grant the basic premise of the Incarnation, we might perceive it as a kind of archetype of the recognition scene: it extends the relevance of interpretation and anticipation through the whole of time.

The cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, used the concept of redemption to express a quite similar viewpoint.<sup>3</sup> For him redemption implied winning back for

significance all of that which has previously been despised or overlooked. In effect, the world is seen as a text which requires to be read and transformed under the light of interpretation. Even a non-theologically oriented literary critic like Roland Barthes expresses ideas compatible with a notion of a "story-shaped world".

..."Does everything down to the slightest detail have a meaning? ...This is not a matter of art (on the part of the narrator) but of structure; in the realm of discourse what is noted is by definition notable."<sup>4</sup>

Some theologians have puzzled over an idea closely related to all of this: the life of Christ and the shape of the universe are it has been argued equally meaningful "realms of discourse" because they are essentially expressions of the same reality.

A book which deals with such issues as this in fictional and narrative terms might be expected to be somewhat solemn and ponderous in its style and tone.

R.A.Lafferty's Arrive at Easterwine, in fact, makes the search for the true interpretive shape of the cosmos seem lively and fun.

Epiktistes, a sentient and mobile computer, and also narrator of the novel, is given the task, by members of the Institute of Impure Science, of collating the totality of knowledge and experience. From this it will produce a kind of visible representation of the true structure of the universe.

Many of the "texts" fed into Epiktistes seem improbable bearers of significance.

...Institute members were out now trying to read patterns and shapes in the fluorescence of se-lice, in snail slime patterns, in the cross-sections of marrow of rock-badger bones...<sup>5</sup>

These overlooked and fragmentary portions of reality are shown to have a real contextual depth. The particularity of an object does not seem to constrain whole series of open-ended narratives that may be derived from it.

...The patterns of badger-bone marrow give all the highway maps of the worlds. They give every inlet and tidal estuary of every planet of every sun. Here were all sorts of plans or patterns writ small. ...If the whole universe were destroyed it could be reconstructed pretty nearly from the patterns of rock-badger bone-marrow.<sup>6</sup>

Important in these passages is the sense of unfolding meaning that takes place by means of relationship. In other words, when relationship is absent we have a number of merely implicit communicative models, i.e. perception implicit in the object; response implicit in stimulus; interpretation implicit in the sign, etc. What a writer like Lafferty is concerned with is sharing both the diversity and the actuality of communicative content. Thus we find the most unlikely of implications and potentialities being realized in his stories. For example, we are presented with cross-species dialogue of every conceivable kind: machine to human; human to animal: even, as in the following passage, computer to unborn elephant.

...Gajah was handicapped very little by her circumstances. The unborn Gajah was intelligent even for an elephant and she responded to the drum language that Inneall set up to communicate with her.<sup>7</sup>

It is significant that there are many Biblical narratives that produce a shock-effect by the bringing together of a

communicated message with the least expected of messengers. Thus Balaam's Ass, feeling badly treated, suddenly gives voice to its complaint: "What have I done? This is the third time you have beaten me."<sup>8</sup>

I think that this tendency towards showing the expressive aspect of reality might be contrasted with more uniform or "static" theological world-views. Pantheism, for example, might suggest that "God is Nature", but in effect the argument, the need for expressive and illustrative instances, ends there.

A feature, then, of the narrative/theological model I am attempting to outline, is an attentiveness to detail and particularity. (As opposed to the unfocused totality of a statement like "God is Nature".) Similarly, "narrative-consciousness", on the part of the writer, is that searching out, and re-displaying, of the dramatic and acted-out quality of any particular situation.

For an authour to come near to fulfilling these requirements, as, I believe Lafferty does, there is a necessary involvement with textual moves and gestures more bold and intense than those associated with mainstream literature.

This willingness to always go beyond the obvious and expected might be seen in the symbolic use of wine in ARRIVE AT EASTERWINE. Whereas for the conventional and often secular poets who use wine as a "signifier" of the sacramental, what is usually involved is a facile access to another layer of connotative meaning, in Lafferty there is something more complex happening. For instance, we are given a kind of "theology of

the individual wine drinker" in the following passage: "...These guys look alike, they mumble and stumble alike (that red-eyed grin is almost a person in itself...) But they are not alike. Each is a private and picturesque world. Every derelict is (as Aquinas said of angels) a separate species composed of but a single member."<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, relationship involves active elements of communication and reciprocity. This is largely absent from the "camera eye" of the tourist, or the media that views people and events with a kind of static one-sidedness. In other words, an encounter with a derelict is less likely to be the recognition of "a private and picturesque world" than the occasion for capturing a colourful and "picturesque" scene on film and, then, significantly moving away from it.

Communication might be posed in terms of a kind of double-sided process of realization: as situations and events are "realized" in the sense of being acted out in palpable contexts, at the same time there is a narrative of "realization", or recognition, taking place at the level of consciousness.

This might be useful in considering the following quote from one of the characters in ARRIVE AT EASTERWINE: "...we will have to rethink the whole idea of people. If shape and substance are the same things, then perhaps communication or liaison and people are the same things."<sup>10</sup>

The difficulty in pointing to the dividing line that separates form and content, the individual and communication, is a theme that also occurs in Aquinas. He used the example of the activity of a Teacher teaching to show that the reality of this act

has to be located in the act of the Learner learning.<sup>11</sup> It follows, then, that a one-sided or abstract consideration of communicative events will miss their essential point. Similarly, the failure to address the fact that a person existing is itself an activity and "a lesson" leads to the kind of spurious and one-dimensional contacts already mentioned (ie. a tourist photographing exotic and eccentric "characters".)

Yet another way of expressing this understanding of the nature of the communicative is to suggest the diversity of human persons is analogous to the diversity of literary texts. An obscure and difficult life is as important as an obscure and difficult novel, even though, ironically enough, in judgmental terms the novel is often more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt. Different cultural traditions have a bearing on all this. Part of the European literary heritage has a distaste for that which strays outside the boundaries of uniformity and convention. By contrast there are important impulses in American literature that are less concerned with matters of form and sensibility. We see instead an interest in the wilder territory of hidden meanings, cryptograms and the grotesque: Edgar Allan Poe would be an obvious example of this tradition.

In Poe and Lafferty there is a kind of excess of meaning and significance. It might be argued that this is in fact more self-reflective of the human condition than the more refined and sensitive portraits of individual consciousness in traditional literary works. The following passage is

typical of this: it reflects the sense in which the path to interpretation passes through areas of profundity and parody which become harder and harder to distinguish from each other. "...It's an unusual place to write messages," he said, "on a snake's belly. But perhaps it is a logical place to write hidden messages. If I were a Power looming above the world where would I write messages that might not immediately be discovered? Why not on the hidden side of an object that has a certain repulsiveness?"<sup>12</sup>

The themes of hidden meaning and people's lives being agencies for some deep communicative/existential dialogue also figure in the novel PAST MASTER.

In this we see how the seemingly Utopian society on the planet Astrobe is gradually being rejected in favour of the shanty towns of Barrio and Cathead. Again this might be posed as a kind of narrative choice: the surface "text" of achieved happiness on Astrobe is rejected in favour of the stronger, more pungent stories that will be generated out of conditions of hardship. "...The Cathead thing is madness to most, a turning to poverty and abject misery from free choice, and that choice made by millions of people, more than a tenth of those on Astrobe so far.. The Cathead partisans say that their experiment is a Returning To Life. This I cannot explain to you, no more can they; you have to live your way into it..."<sup>13</sup>

The narrative sense of lived experience is conveyed by the phrase, "...you have to live your way into it." In a similar kind of way the active engagement with freely chosen situations, even if these seem bizarre and

extreme, points to a link between "doing" and "knowing". To fully understand existence seems to require passing through the full spectrum of experience. When one of the characters asks why so many dead bodies lie around unburied in the shanty-towns he is given the reply: "A reminder of death. Follow it out far enough and it becomes a reminder of life."<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, the descriptions of the placid uniformity of Astrobe life are lacking in any sense of impetus or "narrative drive".

"...The people of Astrobe do not dream at night, for a dream is a maladjustment. We do not have an unconscious, as the ancient people had, for an unconscious is a dark side and we are all light. The future is now."<sup>15</sup>

The constriction of consciousness that takes place in the society of Astrobe is, in fact, comparable to the more extreme versions of empiricist philosophy in the twentieth century. These, too, have sought to narrow down experience into distinct and containable categories: everything becomes knowable only in terms of the independent functions of the senses.

Other thinkers, such as Hazlitt<sup>16</sup> and Bakhtin<sup>17</sup> working outside the limits of empiricism, have recognized that experience, whether of literature or of life itself, is multi-faceted. Hazlitt expresses this by saying that "one sense is understood in terms of another." Thus the potency of a work of art, such as a painting, cannot be derived solely out of its effect on the sensory field of vision. Rather the "passion of understanding", is multi-sensory, drawing on diverse series of contexts (past memories, the enjoyment of a recognizable present, future hopes, etc.)

In a similar view Bakhtin stressed the inter-textual aspect of any given work of literature. A particular piece of writing will always contain traces and overtones from other writings, just as its interpretive message is suggested and completed by contexts beyond itself.

At this point it might be useful to try and make a distinction between what we might call a "palpable sense of the fantastic" in Lafferty, and the more negative sense of fantasy as something unreal and nebulous. There is, for example, no distaste of the material world in his novels. The material world is not some kind of blank background on which a fantastic set of events is overlaid. Instead we have stories that are packed with the stuff and substance of the real world: food, drink, rivers, woods, rocks, fountains, etc. In a similar way, although most of the events that make up the stories are, strictly speaking, unbelievable, their communicative relevance is that they are, at least within the narrative, situated. They do "take place". By contrast, "empty fantasy" is associated with the inexpressible and ill-defined or with those processes of thought that seek to consign the knowable to the void.

The sense of opposition between the vacuous and the fulfilled is, in fact, an important theme in Lafferty. In PAST MASTER the historical figure of Thomas More, having been transported to the future world of Astrobe, comes to realize that it is a cipher, an empty figure, rather than the fulfillment of the desire for an ideal society. In the following passage he is conversing with the Programmed Persons, the

humanoid robots who rule and control the planet of Astrobe.

..."You are not conscious?" Thomas gasped. "That is the most amazing thing I have ever heard. You walk and talk and argue and kill and subvert and lay out plans over the centuries, and you say that you are not conscious?"

"Of course we aren't Thomas. We are machines. How could we be conscious? But we believe that men are not conscious either, that there is no such thing as consciousness. It is an illusion in counting, a feeling that one is two. It is a word without real meaning."

"But if we are not conscious then all is in vain," said Thomas. "To what purpose then is life?"

"To no purpose," Boggle cut in. "That is why we are doing away with it."<sup>18</sup>

Importantly we should not read a too simple symbolic link between machines and evil into Lafferty's work. Indeed, the machine narrator of ARRIVE AT EASTERWINE is rather an amiable figure given to complaining to the human characters, "You think machines don't have feelings too?" But whereas Epiktistes is constantly being filled with data and consciousness, the Programmed Persons malign aspect is linked to the empty consciousness they inhabit.

..."According to your ancient belief we are Devils. What we call ourselves is another thing, but we are older than our manufacture and older than our programming. These are houses and well-made ones, that we found swept and garnished; and we moved into them."<sup>20</sup>

The interpretive clue to this passage is

the metaphor derived from the Gospel story<sup>21</sup> of spirits moving into empty "houses" (ie. minds). Lafferty has given this an unexpected twist in that the consciousness being occupied is that of humanoid robots.

Certain of these themes and symbols- the sense of a Void or Vortex, and of secret conspiracies acting to produce negative ends- invite comparisons between Lafferty's work and writers such as Don De Lillo and Thomas Pynchon. We find then, in their novels<sup>22</sup> that Being itself has become a kind of hollowed-out shell or is occupied by some "empty presence" (sometimes conspiracy, sometimes entropy).

Having said this there are also important differences between them.

We might suggest that the theological perspective in Lafferty is less inclined to be reverential towards the concepts of "the ineffable" or Evil as an absolute force. (One of the characters in the novel says, "Deliver me from serious evil and evil seriousness..."<sup>23</sup>) By contrast De Lillo and Pynchon, in their pursuit of closed discourses of menace and banality, have to create an atmosphere of solemnity from which the disruptive effects of hope and laughter are excluded.

Lafferty, however, uses these very elements of hope and laughter to undercut the feeling of the malign as a permanent and unchangeable force. At the end of PAST MASTER certain of the Programmed Persons have exhibited feelings of remorse, thus opening up the possibility of a kind of redemption.

....The Spirit came down once on water and clay. Could it not come down on gell-cells and flux-fix? The sterile wood,

whether of human or programmed tree, shall it fruit after all?<sup>24</sup>

In FOURTH MANSIONS the evil conspirators are shown to be susceptible to the simplest of human responses.

'...Oriel had been badly wounded by the laughter and was still gasping. She had been mortally affronted and her jeweled eyes had gone dull.'<sup>25</sup>

Within these themes we have been examining in Lafferty's work there is often an implicit critique of intellectual thought-processes that are abstracted from the content of human activity. The various hostile references to the theologian Teilhard de Chardin, are, I believe, explicable in this light.

..."Our worlds are the Teilhardian abomination after all the sickening emptiness of 'Point Big-O'."<sup>26</sup>

The theological system of de Chardin resembles the currently fashionable "New Age" spirituality in that neither has much to say about the circumstances of everyday experience. Thus, if we accept the premise of de Chardin that all significance is poised towards some Omega Point at the end of time, then the "here and now" quality of being situated and realizing the narrative of experience is, as it were, drained of content and context.

Equally, when "New Age" thought re-states a version of Spirit/Matter duality a consequence of this is that spirituality takes on elitist and exclusivist properties while the ordinary is relegated to the realm of the insignificant.

We might suggest, however, that an authentic theological outlook has the Passion

as well as the Incarnation as reference points. The model then becomes that of a suffering and participating God caught up "in the middle of things", not just located in a separate "spiritual realm". This position does not simply mean that communication or grace is indiscriminately present and realized in existence. For example, not all activity on the part of the individual is as readily sanctified as de Chardin seems to suggest here.

'...Now the Christian sees that he can love by his activity, in other words he can directly be united to the divine center by his very action, no matter what form it may take.'<sup>27</sup>

Previously I have tried to suggest that "narrative consciousness" is the ability to identify with persons and contexts beyond the limitation of individual subjectivity. This is a grounding on which creative activity can function. But clearly there are also kinds of dominative or pathological activity, often rooted in a false and distorted sense of individualism, which de Chardin doesn't address in the bland generality of a phrase like "no matter what form it may take."

Some lessons might be drawn from all of this: story and narrative still has inextricable roots in the popular mind (even if this is often realized in the "low" forms of cinema, science fiction, computer games, etc.). Modern religion, by contrast, with its compromise systems of spirituality, and a kind of individualistic pluralism (where becoming religious can be seen as a "lifestyle choice") is, to say the least, less firmly rooted.

Lafferty stands in the tradition of story telling and, as we have seen, there is an implicit moral framework to his texts. In an oblique way there is also the suggestion in his work that the popular imagination and theology cover the same narrative path. Thus we find favourable references in his novels to both Thomas Aquinas and Charles Fort. (This latter thinker, collector of anomalous data of every kind, has had an important, even if eccentric, influence on the popular mind.) Intellectuals are often as distrustful of the concept of "common sense" as they are of the idea of "low culture." Nevertheless, the common mind is capable of a shrewd judgement over things which more elaborate thought processes cannot grasp. For instance, it can accept that which in philosophical terms might be deemed to be an inexact statement, but is still a sound perception of how things really are e.g. that experience can be both knowable and mysterious at the same time.

..."God must love mystery and mystery stories," Dubu maintained, "he has made so many of them...The trouble with you Inneall is that you're always reading intelligent books instead of mystery stories. How will you ever get smart that way?"<sup>28</sup>

An interesting feature of mystery stories, and literature in general, is that in foregrounding the significance of the actions of the characters, the background context is also, as it were, won over for significance. This is most usually an unwitting effect on the part of the writer. The "who done it" authour is, after all, primarily concerned with plot and action.

Nevertheless, the locals of ancient Greece (Oedipus), the fog-filled streets of London (Sherlock Holmes) and the downtown areas of American cities (Chandler, et al) have become palpable elements in the collective consciousness. By contrast, the spiritual systems of Green and New Age philosophy which seek to overlook the "fallen" foreground of day-to-day human contact and concentrate on the backdrop of the Natural world, have left only weak traces on the collective imagination.

It is possible, I believe, to make a distinction between the ineffable, which closes off expression, and the mysterious (yet knowable). Human emotions and behavior, for example, may be felt and described as mysterious. The ineffable, though, is a kind of fluid or empty category on which narrative can neither ground itself or take place.

A typical example of the effect of the ineffable on thinking processes is the kind of philosophical viewpoint that says, "Because of the immensities of the cosmos and the strangeness of quantum physics, it must follow that the ordinary life that takes place between all this is also equally meaningless."

More oblique examples would be the instrumentalist perspectives found in biology and sociology that propose that actions occur only as a function of achieving certain ends, but that neither means nor end should be defined as "purpose". This anti-teleological emphasis is present also in the literary theories of those critics who advance a "rhetoric of deconstruction" which sets out to drain all textual systems, even rhetoric itself, of any supposed sense of content.

One of the points of this chapter has been that idiosyncratic writers like Lafferty show a genuine kind of diversity and plurality that is really quite distinct from the formless pluralism that prevails in contemporary society.

Again, narrative can be used as a key to understanding this situation. A critic like Bakhtin, who developed so much of his work around the concept of the textual had, I believe, located a kind of cross-cultural model that works across all societies. Bakhtin's non-fiction writings have affinity to the fiction of Lafferty: each is, to use Bakhtin's term, "polyphonic", incorporating elements from mythology, adventure stories, history, allegory, and so on.

All of this might be contrasted to the move in "post modernist" theory to close down narrative: the old "Master Narrative" of History and of Literature are to be done away with. Undoubtedly these had unpleasant aspects attached to them (e.g. the uncritical glorification of Imperialism). What is unhelpful is that no new narratives or contexts are proposed to take their place.

Earlier I used the phrase "passion of understanding" to suggest the way in which the identity of the subject can bridge the gap between the sense of the self and the "other-ness" of experience. Identification also evokes a sense of the theological (the believer identifies with Christ, with values, etc.) and of the literary (the reader identifies with the main characters, the plot, etc.). What is proposed in post-modernism is a rejection of identification, substituting, instead, a kind of free floating world of unconnected signs

and individuals. The supposedly pluralistic aspect of this is taken for granted: "virtual reality" is presented as one more feature of the leisure and consumer age.

More to the point might be the feeling of oppressiveness expressed in the latter poems of Gerald Munley Hopkins, in which he senses the emptiness of solipsism and a world centered on the individual: "...searching nature, I taste self but at one tankard, that of my own being."<sup>29</sup>

I will end this chapter with some detailed notes from the novel SERPENT'S EGG. They are, I feel, pertinent to the question of where the free floating pluralism is leading, in that they describe a type of "post modern" society a number of decades into the next century.

...It became a free trade world... It became a free travel and a free communication world, and very nearly a free cost world... It became a world in which everything and nothing was public...<sup>30</sup>

All of this is achievable by the use of a vigorous "editorial" policy.

...One used to think of leveling as a trimming the top off something into a semblance of evenness. But these 'levelers' trimmed the bottoms off of humanity and computerdom and the world itself. The lower classes of everything were terminated without particular ado, without much apparent suffering, without any great quantity of visible bloodshed. The bereft families did not ask where the inept members had gone because most of the families went with them... The "Don't make a big thing

of it" mentality was rife in the world, so a big thing was not made of the disappearance of eighty-seven percent of the persons in the world.<sup>31</sup>

Anything that seemed inappropriate or offensive to the uniformity of the world was rooted out.

...excellence was still prized and even rewarded. But there was a certain high-headed and divergent excellence that had to be curtailed. Some of the high-headed blooms were more than exuberant. They were poisonous to the common weal. They militated against the free-and-easy tolerance of the floating world. They were of the garish colours that do not betoken healthy blooms. They made tall and jarring waves and such turbulent waves were dangerous to the floating world.<sup>32</sup>

The point of the narrative-model argued for in this essay can, perhaps, be seen in this picture of an editorialising and constricting world-system. The first "anti-narrative" consequences might appear as the control and modification of thoughts and feelings. This translates, though, quite easily into the world of practice, so that a situation may be arrived at in which the majority of the population are "edited out" of existence.

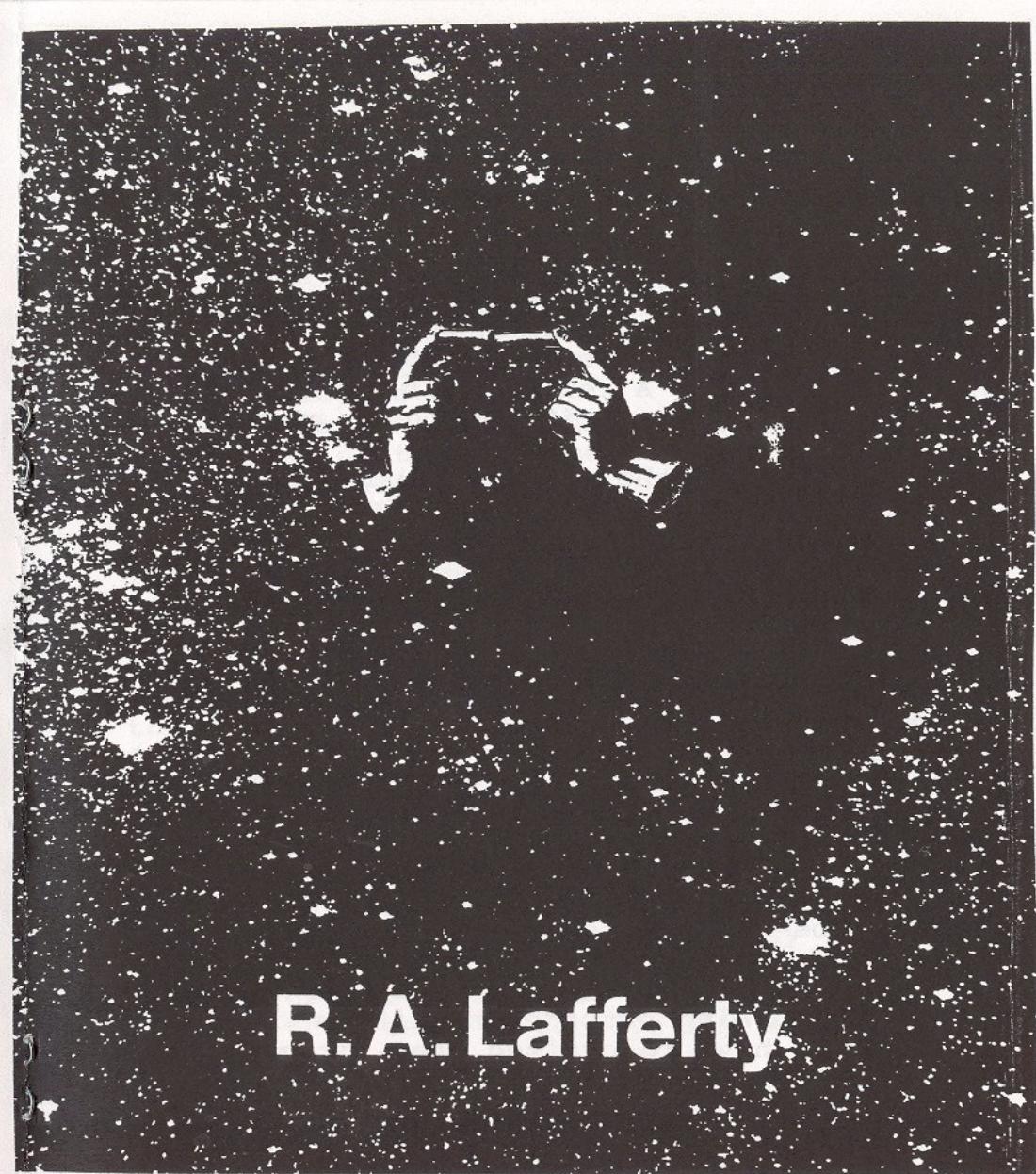
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- 22- for instance Don DeLillo's THE NAMES and Thomas Pynchon's THE CRYING OF LOT 49
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- 27- Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, LET ME EXPLAIN (London: Collins) 1970, p123
- 28- Lafferty, SERPENT'S EGG, pp.162-3



All artwork by Richard Weaver



*Does anyone else have  
something further to add?*

*dobson science fiction*

- 29- Gerald Manley Hopkins quoted in the  
NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, fifth  
ed., vol.2, p.1581  
30- Lafferty, SERPENT'S EGG, pp.79-80  
31- Ibid, pp.80-1  
32- Ibid, p.81

**A FEW FINAL WORDS:** Alan Fitzer informs me that he is still searching for a copy of the 1971 Scribner's edition of ARRIVE AT EASTERWINE. The book should have its dust jacket and be in excellent or better condition. You can contact Alan at 38 Jephson Drive, Yardley, Birmingham, England B26-2HW

I should also say that as I was preparing this edition Alan wrote to inform me that after consulting with the publisher he has discovered that all of the Dobson Lafferty's (with the noted exception of THE REEFS OF EARTH) are still available! I've written myself for ordering information but it's been over 4 months and I haven't had a response. I hope Chris Drumm or some other worthy dealer will take advantage of this opportunity. I know I'd like a set. I'll keep you informed.

ALSO, people interested in obtaining Japanese editions of Lafferty's work are invited to contact Sinji Maki, East No. 1, #203, 1-18-4 Higashitoyoda, Hino-city, Tokyo, 191 Japan. Lafferty is enjoying a flowering of interest at present. The nation's premier magazine in the field will be carrying a new translation in every issue for the next six months! (March 94- Aug.)

# Not to mention camels



R.A.Lafferty