

## Discussing *Iron Council*: Introduction

By Henry Farrell

China Miéville is one of the most fascinating people writing in the field of science fiction and fantasy. His first novel, “King Rat,” riffs on drum’n’bass, Max Ernst, Robert Irwin and contemporary London. His second, *Perdido Street Station*, took the genre by storm; a urban fantasy written with vigour, wit and ferocious intelligence. It won the Arthur C. Clarke Award. As Michael Swanwick said in the Washington Post in 2002, “It’s a little cheeky of me to declare as classic a book that only came out two years ago, but I think I’m on safe ground here.” His third novel, “The Scar,” received equal acclaim. He’s an official member of the [salon des refusés](#) of Granta’s “Best of Young British Novelists list.” China is also active in socialist politics - he ran for Parliament in the last election. His book, “Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory Of International Law,” based on his Ph.D. thesis, is being published this month by Brill.

China’s most recent novel, *Iron Council* was published in August. Michael Dirda of the Washington Post [describes it](#) as “a work of both passionate conviction and the highest artistry.” A few months ago, the Miéville Fraktion within CT decided that it might be fun to put together a mini-seminar around *Iron Council*, and to ask China to respond. He very decently said yes; you see the result before you. We’ve invited two non-CT regulars to participate in the mini-seminar. Matt Cheney blogs on literature and science fiction at [The Mumpsimus](#); he also writes for [Locus](#) magazine and [SF Site](#). Miriam Elizabeth Burstein blogs at [The Little Professor](#), and teaches Victorian literature at SUNY Brockport. Miriam very kindly agreed to join the project in its later stages, revising a long comment/review that she had already written (and that China had independently cited to).

The essays appear in the order that they are mentioned in China’s response (people who haven’t read *Iron Council* yet should be aware that spoilers abound). John Holbo begins his essay with comments on the relationship between Miéville and Tolkien; he goes on to use Bruno Schulz’s discussion of escape and the fecundity of inanimate matter to argue that Miéville can’t decide whether he prefers political economy or Expressionist puppetry as modes of expression. Belle Waring complains that the unrelenting grimness of Miéville’s urban settings and characters’ fates is a little formulaic; he should let his characters get somewhere and perhaps even succeed in something. Matt Cheney partly revises an [earlier essay](#) where he argued that Miéville needed to represent his villains a little more realistically; he discusses some of the reasons why Miéville might have done this, and talks about how Miéville reconciles pulp and avant-garde literature in his work. My essay compares Miéville’s reworking of history, myth and revolution with Walter Benjamin’s theses on the philosophy of history. Miriam Elizabeth Burstein examines how Miéville reworks ideas of martyrdom and messianism through the figure of Judah Low.

Finally, John Quiggin talks about *Iron Council* in historical context, arguing that just as the eponymous train of the novel becomes a myth that may return to ‘save’ us, so too the revolutionary traditions of the nineteenth century that are celebrated in *Iron Council* may continue to inspire.

China’s response replies to all the above, and more.

We’re opening up all of the essays, and China’s response, to comments. We expect that the main conversation will take place in the comments section to China’s essay; however, if you have specific points that you want to address in the individual essays, feel free to comment there. Note that offensive or inappropriate comments will likely be deleted - as always, we’re more interested in conversation than flamewar.

This seminar is being made available for distribution under a Creative Commons license, without any prejudice to the ownership of any material quoted under standard ‘fair use’ principles from *Iron Council* or from John Curran Davis’ translation of Bruno Schulz’ *Cinammon Shops*.

This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike Licence. For more information see <http://www.creativecommons.org>.

## *Contents*

Introduction 1

Contents 3

John Holbo, *We Shall Rise to the Challenge of Their Appointment to Life for That Single Moment: An Essay on China Miéville* 4

Belle Waring, *New Crobuzon: If You Can Make Re-Make It There! (You'll Make It Anywhere)* 21

Matthew Cheney, *Balancing Traditions: The Pulp Origins, Muddled Moralities, and Anxious Audiences of China Miéville's Aesthetic Revolution* 25

Henry Farrell, *An Argument in Time* 27

Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, *Undoing Messiahs* 33

John Quiggin, *Remaking the Past (and Future)* 35

China Miéville, *With One Bound We Are Free: Pulp, Fantasy and Revolution* 38

*We shall rise to the challenge of their appointment to life for that single moment*  
- An Essay On China Miéville

by John Holbo

### **1 Three Things About Miéville**

This post will be substantially pastiche of others I've written about China Miéville; remasticated bits encrusted around critical consideration of his new novel, *Iron Council*. No plots spoiled.

I'm going to pose a few questions for the author. I am not usually one for sniffing out intentionality behind the scenes, mind you. (Not that I think there is anything indecent about that angle.) But unusually, in this case, I find I am curious what the man can have been thinking. How admirably the world is arranged, since - oddly - he may answer.

Now a brief statement, not of my thesis, but of the obvious, to which my thesis hopes to bear a sturdy relationship.

1) Miéville is a superlative subcreator, to use Tolkien's term of art for the art of fantastic world-building. 2) Miéville is a polemical critic of Tolkien - more so: of Tolkien's generic legacy - on behalf of an allegedly more mature conception of fantasy as a genre. 3) Miéville himself tells stories which are substantially in line with generic fantasy conventions, in terms of overall form, also in terms of many types of detail.

So a critical question about Miéville is whether 1) suffices to back 2), with some to spare; for 3) has a notable tendency to corrode the credibility of 2).

One possibility also to be considered is that 2) is just snarky fun Miéville had, being a punk blowing steam on a [webpage](#). Then 1) and 3) needn't fight each other by proxy, knocking over and propping 2), but can simply be considered side by side.

### **2. The cluttered kipple of humanity shall never be swept neat**

Ridley Scott said of *Blade Runner* that 'film is a 700-layer cake'. This is a philosophy of production and composition, but it becomes a point about the content of a fictional world. *Blade Runner* was a revelation to SF fans not so much on account of its ideas or characters or story as on account of the stunning accretions of visual ...(what shall we call it?) [kipple](#), convincing us this world is thick, clotted; completely peopled (no pun on any screenwriter's name intended.) SF, in its thought-experimental way, can often be disappointing thin, like an abstract technical schematic. You want to see the clean, essential lines of the idea. But fictionally that can be a bad idea.

In *Blade Runner*, the kipple obscuring all clean, essential lines is largely chronological: 40 years in the future piled onto 40 years in the past, to paraphrase Scott; but it is also

cultural, economic, scientific and social. Humanity turned kipple, our very memories just odds and ends swept into our heads, perhaps someone else's after-thought. History as dustbin of history. Of course, *Blade Runner* ultimately affirms the individual human spirit against this. And, oddly, the story doesn't really make a lot of sense. A lot of *noir* and tough cop clichés jumbled together, but the lavish production makes this overlookable. We'll get back to this, implicitly if not explicitly.

What has *Blade Runner* to do with China Miéville or *Iron Council*? I think Miéville wants to write fantasy's *Blade Runner*. Make a world in which (as per Miéville's manifesto) ["things are gritty and tricky, just as in real life."](#)

Back to *Blade Runner*. Yes, yes, it would be wrong to say *Blade Runner* did anything first. Dark, brooding, gritty, tricky, messy, dystopian SF existed before. But the film did something new, largely visually. (I remember hearing William Gibson at a reading - or maybe I read it. He said he ran from the theater screaming. In 1982 he was in the process of writing *Neuromancer*; and, lo and behold, this director has scooped his highly surface-oriented visual conception.) *Blade Runner* achieved a decisive gravitational shift in SF sensibility. If it didn't cause the shift, it remains a highly visible marker for it. Yes, yes; by no means were we stuck before 1982 in some [Hugo Gernsbackish](#) rut. But - to get to the point - you might say fantasy hasn't had its *Blade Runner*. Yet. No work that drops a world in amongst all the Tolkien knock-offs, setting those typing monkeys howling like they've seen a monolith. Miéville wants to do that.

Miéville, like Ridley Scott, composes in the medium of kipple: artful accretions of haphazard junk - animate, inanimate, abanimate - conveying the powerful illusion of depth and density in all dimensions; time and horizontal expanse, upbuilt habitation and promiscuous inhabitation. Miéville's subcreative efforts succeed through sheer superfluity of ... debris; detail, if you prefer the polite term.

This is important because fantasy, like SF, can often be unsatisfyingly thin, not like an SF thought-experiment but through weak dependence on cliché. Henry Farrell [quoted](#) a nice bit from Mike Harrison some time back:

Before the word “fantasy” came to describe a monoculture, it was an umbrella term for work actually fantastic in nature. Nobody “wrote fantasy”. They wrote personal, strongly-flavoured, individual stuff, and the term was applied at a later stage in the proceedings. Unpredictability, inventiveness, oddness, estrangement, wit, could all be found there, along with machinery for defamiliarising the world and making it seem new. What we have now—or what we had at least until very recently—is long, evenly-planted fields of potatoes, harvested by machines in such a way as to make them acceptable to the corporate buyers from Sainsbury’s, McDonalds, & HarperCollins.

As [I wrote at the time](#) (I presume to quote myself since it will turn out I was literally right about the cart):

First, 'dreary monoculture' pegs it dead-on; that is the problem with genre fantasy, and Miéville deserves all credit for doing his part to muscle the cart out of horrid ruts. (If there's a new Robert Jordan novel, it must be Saturday!) And, of course, Tolkien is sort of at fault for all of this, providing the blueprint for the factory farm. But, then again, he isn't at fault. He did nothing of the sort.

Anyway, the strategy is to recover all those admirable literary qualities by planting weeds in all the even rows. This points the way to Miéville's anti-Tolkien polemics. But let's work up.

One of the choicest dramatic details in *Iron Council* is the scene in which The Flexible Puppet Theatre Troupe have their avant garde production of "The Sad and Instructional Tale of Jack Half A Prayer" disrupted by the New Crobuzon censors (for "Rudeness to New Crobuzon in the Second Degree"), then devolve into riot. ([Here's](#) a Miéville detractor, for example, who gives the Flexibles their grudging artistic due.) Little bits like this, multiplied a hundredfold, trick the reader's eye into regarding the city - its society, culture, economy, history, people - as real. New Crobuzon, where all roads in Bas-Lag lead, is not some Potemkin Village against which paper cut-out elves and wizards stage clichéd clashes with standard issue ultimate Evil. On the other hand, just because the scenery is palpably real, doesn't mean the performers aren't generic cut-outs. We're getting to that concern.

Now I'm going to do a stupid critic trick. China can say 'no, you're wrong;' and I'll probably take his word for it. Let me seize one detail and insist it is really a perfect lens through which all aspects of Miéville's art can be apprehended.

Miéville seeks to do, for fantasy, what his puppeteers are doing for Jack. (If you want to know about Jack, read the book, or Henry's post.) Consider the art of the Flexibles (their name is, I suppose, homage to martyred Ben Flex, right?) The fantasy cart of cliché, of which I spoke, shows up on schedule, in need of renovation and a load of fresh kipple:

There was the usual - the cart-sized puppet theatre with its little carved figures in garish clothes stock-still on their stage - but the miniature wings and proscenium had been torn off, and the puppeteers stood in plain view dressed too-nearly like militia officers in dark grey. And the stage was littered with other things, strange debris. A sheet was stretched and hammered taut and on it some magic lantern was projecting newspaper print ...

These Flexibles were consummate - arrogant pranksters yes but serious - and they played their audience with skill, so that after every such imposition [forbidden obscenities] was quick and funny dialogue, or jaunty music, and it was hard to sustain anger. But it was an extraordinary challenge or series of challenges and the crowd vacillated between

bewilderment and discontent ...

No one was sure what they were seeing, this structureless thing of shouts and broken-up lines and noises, and cavalcades of intricate incomprehensible costumes. The puppets were elegantly manoeuvred, but they should have been - were designed to be - wooden players in traditional moral tales, not these little provocateurs whose puppeteers had them speak back tartly to the narrator, contradict him (always in the puppets' traditional register, a cod-childish language of compound nouns and onomatopoeia), and dance to the noise and mum lewdness as far as their joints and strings would allow.

Images, even animations - pictures in such quick cycles that they jumped and ran or fired their guns - came in stuttering succession onto the screen. The narrator harangued the audience and argued with the puppets and other actors, and over growing dissent from the stalls the story of Jack Half-a-Prayer emerged in chaotic form.

I connect this passage with [Miéville's anti-Tolkien screed](#):

Tolkien is the wen on the arse of fantasy literature. His oeuvre is massive and contagious - you can't ignore it, so don't even try. The best you can do is consciously try to lance the boil. And there's a lot to dislike - his cod-Wagnerian pomposity, his boys-own-adventure glorying in war, his small-minded and reactionary love for hierarchical status-quos, his belief in absolute morality that blurs moral and political complexity. Tolkien's clichés - elves 'n' dwarfs 'n' magic rings - have spread like viruses. He wrote that the function of fantasy was 'consolation', thereby making it an article of policy that a fantasy writer should mollycoddle the reader.

That is a revolting idea, and one, thankfully, that plenty of fantasists have ignored. From the Surrealists through the pulps - via Mervyn Peake and Mikhael Bulgakov and Stefan Grabinski and Bruno Schulz and Michael Moorcock and M. John Harrison and I could go on - the best writers have used the fantastic aesthetic precisely to challenge, to alienate, to subvert and undermine expectations.

... Why not try to come up with some different themes, as well as unconventional monsters? Why not use fantasy to challenge social and aesthetic lies?

Nothing fishy about it, exactly, but odd that cod would show up in both if there were no connection. (Cod-childish, cod-Wagnerian. Am I reaching?) What Miéville is urging is a critical mass of new fantasy, updating the New Wave of the 60's; perhaps to be known as 'the New Weird'. So: Tolkien's arse wen is to Miéville's 'New Weird' as traditional New Crobuzon puppet theater is to the Flexibles' subversive art. (Am I right, China?)

### 3. Oh, sweet ursinality of lifelessness!

Proceeding on this assumption, some thoughts about puppets, mannequins, golems. A tension. On the one hand, the idea might be that fantasy can become - well, more like [Henry says](#) Miéville's fantasy already is (see also [here](#)):

Miéville is a historical materialist, and pays a lot of attention to the economic fundamentals underlying his created societies. But he's very nearly unique among fantasy authors in so doing; most of them prefer to sweep the dirty business of material accumulation underneath the prettily woven carpet of chivalry, noblesse oblige &c.

I say something similar, but tongue in cheek, [here](#).

On the other hand, puppet theater - however socially aware and subversive - is never going to be about economic fundamentals, except in the most one-dimensional, expressionistic way. So when Miéville writes, in his manifesto, "Characters are more than cardboard cutouts," this is ambiguous. Is he going to make these traditionally one-dimensional beings three-dimensional, or is he going to deploy their one-dimensionality with a bit more puppeteer dexterity and brains? Two flavors of 'more', and not obviously flavors that go well together.

Let me quote again from one of my old posts, which seems to me prescient about this issue of puppet-mastery.

It took me a while to warm to Miéville. We had a moment of miscommunication, he and I. He comes wrapped up and recommended by reviewers as the rightful heir to the mantle of Mervyn Peake (to whom [a very fine website](#) has recently been dedicated. There are poems I had not read and pictures I had not seen and first edition covers and much wonderful stuff. May I recommend, in particular, [this](#) delightful envisioning of Carroll's walrus and carpenter; and [this](#) rather fey Alice.)

As I was saying, Miéville comes billed as the new Peake, and he acknowledges Peake as a main influence. And - well, yes, I can see it. And it isn't fair to blame Miéville for departing from his model (a debt of gratitude is not an obligation to plagiarize, after all.) Nevertheless, what Miéville has gotten from Peake is not what I like best about him: the grotesque whimsy and compulsive, self-delightedly overblown verbal energy of the [Gormenghast](#) trilogy. Haven't read it? Think Edward Gorey writes *The Pickwick Papers*. Better yet: read it.

And by the by, here is [a nice Edward Gorey cover gallery](#).

As I was saying, every Peake character is a puppet, and Peake's language

dances these finely crafted artifacts about in the most astonishingly skillful – above all visual - manner. It would be very natural to stage *Gormenghast* as puppet theater, except it would be less impressive that way because, after all, one expects to see puppets at a puppet theater. To meet with them – to really see them leaping off the page – in a novel; that is a more unique aesthetic achievement.

In that post I quote some long bits to illustrate the difference, if you want to go read more.

And now it occurs to me to ask, although this may seem beside the present point, just what Peake is up to with his puppet *Gormenghast* characters? It seems to me the likely answer - sheer aesthetic self-delight in lavish, expert construction of sets and mannequins - is expressed well by another author Miéville praises in his polemic, about whom I have written quite a bit lately: Bruno Schulz.

[Here](#) is my post on golems and Schulz' *Cinammon Shops* (a.k.a. *The Street of Crocodiles*). It contains a link to [this Schulz page](#), where you can read some new translations for free. The father character in *Cinammon Shops* is praised by the narrating son as a champion of escape ... from boredom at reality's drab dullness. I imagine this is what Mervyn Peake would have been like, if grossly underappreciated by his family:

The final and splendid countermarch of fantasy which that incorrigible improviser, that fencing master of the imagination led on the dugouts and trenches of the sterile and empty winter. Only today do I understand the lonely heroism with which he single-handedly gave battle against the boundless element of boredom numbing the town. Devoid of any support, without acknowledgement on our part, that astonishing man defended the lost cause of poetry. He was a wonderful mill into whose hoppers the bran of empty hours was poured, to burst into bloom in its mechanism with all the colours and aromas of oriental spices. But, grown accustomed to that metaphysical prestidigitator's splendid jugglery, we were inclined to belittle the value of his sovereign magic which had delivered us from the lethargy of empty days and nights.

No language of social or political challenge here, I might note. Unapologetic escapism, which seems to me what Peake is all about (also, Schulz.) I don't say Miéville denies it, but perhaps he is tempted to equate 'undermining expectations' with 'challenging lies', or tempted to equate escapism - i.e. a conscious refusal to face wintry reality - with mollycoddling readers in some warm, snug fashion. (Maybe Miéville isn't really equating these things. Maybe I'm reading too much in.)

What strikes me even more about Schulz, in relation to Miéville is that Iron Council is not just about puppets, it's about golems, also about a strange breed, the Remade. Schulz has a whole philosophy of mannequins - of golemetry, to use Miéville's term. I have quoted this stuff at length before but will do so now again because it is perfect for present

purposes. (All the following comes from new translations of Schulz - see link above):

- DEMIURGOS - said my father - did not possess a monopoly on creation - creation is the privilege of all souls. Matter is prone to infinite fecundity, an inexhaustibly vital power and, at the same time, the beguiling strength of the temptation which entices us to fashioning. In the depth of matter indistinct smiles are shaped and tensions are constrained - congealing attempts at figurations. All matter ripples out of infinite possibility, which passes through it in sickly shudders. Awaiting the invigorating breath of the soul, it overflows endlessly into itself, entices us with a thousand sweet encirclements and a softness which it dreams up out of itself in its blind reveries.

Devoid of its own initiative, voluptuously pliant, malleable in the feminine fashion, and compliant in the face of all impulses it constitutes outlaw terrain - open to every kind of sharlatanism and dilettantism, the domain of all abuses and dubious demiurgic manipulations. Matter is the most passive and defenceless essence in the cosmos. All may knead and shape it; it is submissive to all. All arrangements of matter are impermanent and loose, liable to retardation and dissolution. There is nothing evil in the reduction of life to other and new forms. Murder is not a sin. Many a time it is a necessary infringement in the face of stubborn and ossified forms of being which have ceased to be remarkable. In the interests of an exciting and valuable experiment, it might even constitute a service. Here is a point of departure for a new apologia of sadism.

My father was inexhaustible in his glorification of that astonishing element - such was matter. - There is no dead matter - he taught - lifelessness is merely a semblance behind which unknown forms of life are concealed. The range of those forms is infinite, their shades and nuances inexhaustible. Demiurgos was in possession of valuable and interesting creative recipes. Thanks to these, he called into being a multitude of genuses, renewing themselves with their own strength. It is not known whether these recipes will be reconstructed at any time. But it is unnecessary, for, even should those classical methods of creation prove to be inaccessible once and for all, certain illegal methods remain, a whole host of heretical and illicit methods.

And:

We are not intent - he said - on long winded creations, on long-term beings. Our creatures will not be the heroes of romances in many volumes. Their roles will be fleeting and concise, their characters without far-reaching plans. Often for a single gesture, for a single word, we shall rise to the challenge of their appointment to life for that single moment. We openly admit: we will not place any emphasis on either the permanence or

solidity of the workmanship; our handiwork will be, as it were, provisional, made for a single occasion. If they are to be people, for example, then we shall give them only one side of a face, one hand and one leg - namely the one they shall require in their role. It would be pedantry to worry about their other leg, not coming into play. From the rear they might simply be patched with canvas, or whitewashed. We shall state our ambition by this proud motto: for every gesture another actor. In the service of every word, every action, we shall call into life another character. Such is our fancy that there will be a world in accordance with our taste. Demiurgos was extremely fond of refined, excellent and complicated materials; we give precedence to shoddiness. We are simply enraptured by it; cheapness transports us, the scrappiness and shoddiness of the material. Do you understand,' my father asked, 'the profound meaning of that weakness, that passion for tissue paper in bright colours, for papier mâché, for lacquered colour, for straw and sawdust? It is - he said with a woeful smile - our love for matter as such, for its downiness and porousness, for its singular, mystical consistency. Demiurgos, that great master and artist, will render it invisible, commanding it to vanish beneath the pretence of life. We, to the contrary, love its raspingness, its unruliness and its ragdoll ungainliness. We like to see beneath every gesture, beneath every movement, its ponderous exertion, its inertia, its sweet ursinality.

So we are back to human kipple - brief, entropic debris of demiurgic subcreation. I have quoted these passages before, as I said, but without noting the almost unbelievably harsh irony of the manner of Bruno Schulz' own death: murdered callously by the Nazis, who didn't regard it as a sin to terminate an inferior form. A point of departure for a new apologia for sadism, Schulz' era proved to be, soon after he wrote this book. (I've posted a bit more about Schulz [here](#) and (only implicitly) here. His appropriation as an ideal romantic figure in David Grossman's [See Under: LOVE.](#))

I don't mean Schulz is, in any sense, complicit in the manner of his own death, merely because he wrote a romantic phantasmagoria of an escapist work in which he riffed about murder being all right. I mean, rather, to give Miéville his due. He urges political seriousness and social responsibility, even on writers of fantasy, and no doubt he's got a point. Puppeteer escapists aren't necessarily right about everything. But I am saying (how to put it? I'm not quite sure) that Miéville hasn't really worked out what he's up to - whether his subcreations are going to be responsibly thick or brilliantly, expressionistically thin. Fantasy novels matured into economic and political treatises, or characters thinned into puppets whose strings are plucked more dexterously. I must say, there is always an artistic way, but here I'm not seeing a way to combine these two impulses perfectly happily. I think Miéville is somewhat held back from his full potential as an author by an inability to decide between modes, both of which clearly attracted him, either of which he might plausibly master.

#### 4. Paper Cutouts, Feats of Clay

Let me illustrate Miéville's penchant for mixing political economy and puppetry - colorful grotesques that are theatrical with ones humanly horrible. In the following passage we hear about how New Crobuzon finds itself at war with Tesh, City of the Crawling Liquid. (Miéville never actually lets us see "its moats and glass cats, and the Catoblepas Plain and merchant trawlers and tramp diplomats and the Crying Prince.")

The arcane Tesh ships, the barquentines and dandy catboats [very Peakeish language] all raggedy with coloured cloth, whose crews wore henna and filed their teeth, had ceased to come to New Crobuzon's docks. There was a rumour through long-disused channels, Tesh's secret and hidden ambassador had told the Mayor that their two states were at war.

Reports of Tesh depredations in the Firewater Straits became more common and higher-profile, in the papers and government newposters. the Mayor had promised reverage and counterattack. Recruitment to the New Crobuzon Navy was intensified, along, Ori, heard, with 'booze recruitment' - press gangs.

It was still distant, abstract: battles at sea thousands of miles off. But it had escalated. It had featured more and more in the speeches of ministers. The city's new mercantilism was unrewarded; markets did not open for its exports; the war blocked its sources of uncommon commodities. Ships went and did not come back. New Crobuzon's boarded-up plants did not reopen, and others closed, and the signs on the doors grew mildew that mocked their proclamations of 'temporary suspension of industry.' The city was stagnant; it slumped and slumped. Survivors began to come home.

Destroyed soldiers left to beg and preach their experiences to crowds in Dog Fenn and Riverskin. Scarred, their bones crushed, cut by the enemy or in frantic battlefield surgery, they also bore stranger wounds that only Tesh's troops could have given them.

Hundreds of the returned had been made mad, and in their mania they raved in unknown sibilant tongue, all of them across the city speaking the same words together, in time. There were men whose eyes were haemorrhaged blood-sacs but who still had sight, Ori heard, who cried without ceasing as they saw the death in everything. The crowds were afraid of the veterans, as if their own bad conscience. Once, many months ago, Ori had come past a man haranguing the horrified crowd and showing them his arms, which were bleached a dead grey.

'You know what this is!' he was shouting at them. 'You know! I was at the edge of a blast, and you see? The sawbones tried to take my arms, told me they had to go, but they just didn't want you to see ...' He wagged his

ghastly limbs like paper cutouts, and the militia came and stifled him, took him away. But Ori had seen the onlooker's terror. Had Tesh truly remembered the lost science of colourbombs?'

I say this is perfect pitch. Right on the line between grim realism and gleeful puppeteering. The colourbombed veteran could be an [Otto Dix painting](#). But it seems to me, frankly, that the pitch can't - anyway, isn't - maintained.

But first, another good example. New Crobuzon employs thaumaturges in its Punishment Factories to remake criminals into grotesques. The philosophy of these remakings is, as it were, a sinister Foucaultian twist on Schulz' father figure's simple delight at demiurgic potentiality of dull matter. Poor criminals are Remade (then made to work to pay for their own remaking.) Their limbs replaced by animal parts or machine parts, to fit the crime or merely to mock and degrade their possessors. Very ghastly descriptions. A boy with insect legs growing all around his neck, like a ruff. Humans who die if their coke fires go out. Unsuitably Remade slaves forced to work, building the transcontinental railroad that is, in fact the focus of much of the novel. (See Henry's post.)

- Fucking useless, one overseer screams and beats a fallen man who wears many delicate eyes on his hands. - What fucking point is there making more Remades if they're peacocks like you? I tell 'em every godsdamned week we need Remade built for industry, not for their sodding whims. Get up and fucking haul.

Ghastly nightmare image. As Schulz writes: "If they are to be people, for example, then we shall give them only one side of a face, one hand and one leg - namely the one they shall require in their role." Ugly industrial implications. (Which is worse, in human flesh: enforced whimsicality or machine efficiency?) But I fear that soon, as per Belle's post, Méville is no longer succeeding as an expressionist but perversely refusing to show us anything nice or pretty or pleasant, despite having promised to show us everything, politically and economically speaking. (Where are all the nice parts of town?)

On the other hand, golemetry is nice; a kind of Hegelian dream. In Iron Council Judah Lowe considers:

What is it I've done? ... I made a golem from gas. Can I make a golem from even less solid things? Golemety's an argument, an intervention, so will I intervene and make a golem of darkness or in death, in electricity, in sound, in friction, in ideas or hopes?

What is Hegel's World-Spirit but a strangely animate, yet strictly unliving golem of an Idea?

As a counterpoint to that: if you pity humanity as so much entropic kipple, swept together and apart by the absent-minded broom of history, then golemetry can be a humanism. Pennyhaugh lecturing Judah on this science:

The living cannot be made a golem - because with the vitality of orgone, flesh and vegetable is matter interacting with its own mechanisms. The unalive, though, is inert because it happens to lie just so. We make it meaningful. We do not order it but point out the order that inheres unseen, always already there. This act of pointing is at least as much assertion and persuasion as observation. We see structure, and in pointing it out we see mechanisms and grasp them, and we twist. Because patterns are asserted not in stasis but in change. Golemetry is an interruption. It is a subordinating of the stasis IS to the active AM.

The difficulty is acknowledging, as the father says, "the profound meaning of that weakness, that passion for tissue paper in bright colours, for papier mâché, for lacquered colour, for straw and sawdust," while yet shoring up any mere brief interruptions against immanent destruction.

On that note I pass you over to Henry's discussion of Walter Benjamin and the nunc stans of Iron Council, lest I spoil a plot.

## 5. Storytelling

Let us now consider stories Miéville tells. The first thing I would like to say is that I greatly enjoy these stories. Hours of entertainment. The second is that I find that my fellow contributors have, by now, said most of what I was going to say in a negative vein. Belle makes the point that Miéville exhibits a peculiar obsession with whimsically grab-bag tactical situations. [Matt Cheney says it](#) bluntly:

The three books [*Perdido*, *Scar*, *Council*] are adventure novels, ones with similar plots overall: a mystery is raised and slowly solved, leading to unexpected outcomes, the main characters' lives are imperiled, the setting threatened with total destruction, and then lots of people kill each other, with bittersweet results. The formula works well in *Iron Council* up until the last two hundred pages, partly because of the complex juxtapositions of chronology and events, but threatening New Crobuzon yet again with eldritch forces from beyond seemed unnecessary, and I could have lived with about half as many battles, because the book began to feel more like a scenario for a roleplaying game than a novel: one seemingly impossible battle ("Good dice roll!") leads to an even more seemingly impossible battle ("Your weapons aren't effective against noncorporeal entities, but luckily coming down the hill...") leads to another and another and....

While I hope Miéville develops a new formula soon, I also understand that the one he keeps reverting to is inherent for the kind of story he wants to tell, and that it has been done much worse by other writers. Many readers won't mind at all - will, in fact, find the innumerable battles to be the best moments of the books. Miéville has so much else to offer, though, that it seems a shame he always ties things up by having his characters spend

most of their time killing each other.

Let me add one detail. Miéville has an odd (given his polemical stance) penchant for Hollywood-style special-effects extravaganzas just before credits roll. I am sure he is not in any conscious sense pitching for Hollywood. An unelective affinity, perhaps. It is also true of many small scenes that one thinks: better as CGI. For example, from the end of Part I, about 10 seconds of quality (but expensive) screen-time:

The golem was crude and instructed with murderous simplicity. Moving with assassin speed it reached arms that weighed many tons and held the handlers [nasty beasties that possess animal hosts]. They tried to face it. It took only minute beats of time for the golem to drive stone into the animal and break its neck, crushing the handler, the hand-parasite squirming in the horse's man.

The man was quicker. He spat fire that billowed without effect over the golem's face. With impossible strength the man wrenched at the arm of coagulated stone and dislocated it, so the golem moved clumsily. But its grip held. Even with its arm falling off in grots, the golem pulled the dangling man down, gripped his legs with one pebbled hand and his head with another and twisted him apart.

As the host was killed, while the flung-apart corpse was still in the air, the golem ceased, its task done. Its rocks and dust fell. They cracked and rumbled in a bloodied pile, half buried the dead horse.

The host's ruined parts rolled into bracken and sent blood down the stones. Something was spasming beneath the suit.

'Get away,' Cutter said. 'It wants another host.'

Drogon began to fire at it while the corpse still descended. The thing had just come to rest when something many-legged the purple of a bruise scuttled from its clothes. It came with an arachnid gait.

They scattered. Pomeroy's gun boomed but the thing did not let up [awkward term for not getting killed], and it was only feet from Elsie screaming when Drogon's repeated shots stopped it. The whispersmith walked toward it firing as he went, three bullets sent precisely to the thing hidden in the grass. He kicked it, hauled it up ragged and bloody.

It was a hand. A mottled right hand. From its wrist a short tail grew, it wung deadweight and dripping.

'Dextrier,' the whispersmith said to Cutter. 'Warrior caste.'

Now frankly this is not what the novel is made for. You might try an apologetic line about orthodox Flexible Puppet Theater dramaturgy: "Images, even animations - pictures in such quick cycles that they jumped and ran or fired their guns - came in stuttering succession onto the screen." But even that admits it belongs properly on the screen. Blow-by-blow splatter can never be novelistically great, as opposed to sort of fun. Even so, I had fun. More than that, I admired Part I of the novel for the unbelievably fast pacing. As a little experiment, I counted the number of new and original settings and/or exciting battles from the first 40 pages of the book. (Obviously a somewhat subjective metric.) *Iron Council* clocked in at a respectable 25. Perhaps you won't quite believe me that this is a good thing, but it truly does end up being far, far better than an advanced D&D module with a manticores in one room and, through the door, 30 orcs, and, in the corridor, a gelatinous cube, at the end of the corridor, a barrow wight and a chaotic evil cleric. Temporally, the speed is perfectly in order: "their roles will be fleeting and concise, their characters without far-reaching plans. Often for a single gesture, for a single word, we shall rise to the challenge of their appointment to life for that single moment." Geographically and socially, the effect is not like an ill-conceived dungeon graph-papered out by a 12 year old with no sense that he's left nowhere for the orcs to get food or go to the bathroom. No, it's like a Hieronymous Bosch painting. You admire this inventive cramming of grotesques onto one canvas. It's better for being absurdly busy. You don't ask: what do the bird-head guys eat? [Who is paying that mason to build the wall?](#) (Does he ever go on strike, and then who gets hired to scab? That guy with all the scabs?) Do they barter with those dead guys coming out of the eye of the demon? Etc.

Again we are back to the problem of political economy vs. puppeteering expressionism.

Miéville's talent for generating an ungodly superabundance of incidental Boschian detail was truly impressed on me when I read, recently, Steph Swainston's [The Year Of Our War](#). It has been heralded as proof there is such a thing as 'The New Weird'. It's not just China Miéville. (Although I fear the sub-genre will soon be afflicted with it's own tag, the equivalent of 'elves and dwarves'; 'bugs and drugs', maybe.) Swainston's book sports an effusive Miéville blurb, but I felt it didn't measure up, largely because the travels of its winged protagonist, Jant, across Swainston's world didn't leave me with such a rich sense of what that world contains. It didn't feel like a 700-layer cake. Maybe 70-layers at most. I didn't suffer the illusion that I was seeing every square inch of the mire even while being dragged through it at high speed, the way I feel with Miéville. Somehow this made it more apparent that, underneath the bugs and drugs, *The Year of Our War* is basically a stock 'the dark forces are coming' fantasy, plus soap opera costume-melodrama infighting among the stalwart defenders. It wants to be *The Lion In Winter* meets *Aliens*, with a touch of *Naked Lunch*. But I think the Lion In Winter bit didn't quite come together, nor the Naked Lunch bit, leaving bug fights, which are really quite impressive. I quite enjoyed it. It just didn't think it was great. It was entertaining escapism.

In Miéville's case, rapid-fire grotesque inventiveness - puppet a page - serves to disguise the conventionality of much of the narrative (although, as per Henry's post, a case can be made for *Iron Council* marking a sort of departure.) The disguise holds, largely, but it remains a disguise. And the only problem with our author being a conventional genre

storyteller is - well, it just doesn't fit with the polemic about this more mature, genre-busting sort of fantasy we are supposed to be getting. As Belle puts it in her post, if you are going to let a few absurdly overmatched heroes defeat the slake-moths, there is no obvious reasons why a preposterously successful revolution shouldn't be staged. The mature sense of 'history is painful that way' just doesn't resonate with the rigged, affirmative (sentimental, call it what you will) 'Frodo and Sam can make it!' conventions otherwise in effect. And there is a serious problem going for psychological realism while indulging these action-adventure genre expectations. No real person would be so heroic, so the sense of these characters as real people melts away like wax, when the action heats up, leaving us with ... well, genre mannequins. (And after all that painstaking effort to get the wax to look right.)

In short, just because Miéville's stories are "gritty and tricky, just as in real life" doesn't mean they are gritty and tricky in the same way life is. Life doesn't usually go in for conventional Freytag's triangle-style structures. (At this point I despair of ever finding [a half-remembered quote](#) from John Barth about Freytag's triangle and funhouses, only to find - to my amazement - that google knows all, sees all.) As I was saying, certainly life doesn't go in for 'the bomb is going to go off and everyone will die if we can't stop it!' Hollywood-style rollercoaster ride of thrills, spills, chills n' kills. Life itself goes in more for the [Jim Woodring](#), "Dear Supreme Altruist, Thanks very much for placing within me the bomb that never stops exploding,"-style story. And, in a way, that's what Miéville is going for with the train story. Fair enough. But the bomb story-line is straight outa Hollywood; all the grit and trick can't change that.

To conclude on a positive note, when I think back on the scenes I have liked most in all these novels ... well, first come the sheer accumulations of kipple, considered in its own right. That comes in first, second and third. Next come the scenes - as per above - in which for a brief moment political economy and puppetry seem balanced, but those moments can't last. For the rest, I like the moments when one or the other mood (political economic or puppet) is clearly ascendent. In *Perdido Street Station*, when Rudgutter and co. are negotiating with the devils for help against the slakemoths, then they realize the devils are afraid so they have to turn (shudder) to the Weaver. That scene is such giddy puppetry of power politics and 'fixers' who have to be called in when things get ugly. In the same vein, the overall 'hunting of the Snark' arc of *The Scar* is nice (thanks for pointing that out, Henry; I gather China himself clued you in to the puns on names. I didn't get them on my own.) For someone so influenced by Peake, Miéville really doesn't do comic. Which seems to me regrettable. He ought to try to write more comic stuff.

Moving to the political economic pole, we have the rough labor politics of the vodyanoi dock strike. (I've posted about that [here](#).) Very nice. Also, the secret agent spinning yarns about a grindylow invasion in *The Scar*. In *Iron Council* the best parts, I think, present us with the character of Weather Wrightby (whether right be?), captain of industry behind the transcontinental railroad; plus Judah's stint working for Wrightby as a scout-turned-anthropologist among the doomed stiltspear. There is a kind of low-key novelty to this wryly insistent insertion of social types and troubles from our world. Herein is supposed to lie the maturity, I suppose. It would be easy for these bits to devolve into parody, or

plain hokiness, but they don't. (Not that parody is bad. It can be quite good. I'm thinking of stories like Andy Duncan's "Senator Bilbo" (in [here](#)) in which race relations in the Shire after the fall of Sauron are envisioned. Orc immigrants, but old Bilbo can't stomach 'em. Nice pun on [Senator Bilbo](#). Miéville does things like what Tolkien parodists do, but without it turning into parody.)

Anyway, I think Weather Wrightby, who is oddly sympathetic in his monomaniac avuncularity, comes closest to meeting the high standards Miéville sets himself: not to portray good and evil simplistically. Wish there were more of him in the novel. That character had potential.

## 6. Tolkien

I meant for a bunch of thoughts about Tolkien to get worked in somewhere above, but now I'm not sure where to insert the shoehorn and start pushing. Surely I have said enough. Here goes. First, it seems unfair to swipe at Tolkien for "boys-own-adventure glorying in war". A man who fought at the Battle of the Somme - who saw friends die horribly in the mud, who was friends with C.S. Lewis, left for dead on the battlefield - may be guilty of glorying in war. But he cannot plausibly be accused of doing so in a boyish 'you only think it's fun because you haven't seen the mud and blood' way. If Tolkien is morally disordered, the disorder is of a different order. (Am I remembering the inklings' war records right?) I recall a bit from the audio commentary to *The Two Towers*, from [Tom Shippey](#). I'll just fire up that DVD and transcribe roughly:

So all these writers [Lewis, Tolkien, other inklings] - traumatized authors ... they have to write their own explanation [of W.W. I]. And strangely, but pretty consistently, they can't do it by writing realistic fiction. They have to write something which is in some way or other fantastic. So, after W.W. I, medieval literature seemed to be entirely relevant again. It was actually addressing issues which people had forgotten about, or thought were outdated. Well, they were wrong about that. They'd come back in.

The fact that they were veterans doesn't make them right, but it does complicate the interpretation of their response to their experiences. Also, it might be countered that there is a great deal of 'boyishness' in Miéville's own battle scenes. At their best they are like Bosch canvases, or inspired puppet theater. But the narrative thrill of Judah Lowe's golemetry powers - honed in games played in New Crobuzon, then taken into the field - is much the same as that of the protagonist's victories in *Ender's Game*. Instead of video game kid makes good, we have wargamer champ makes good. (That's a bit too harsh.)

Regarding narrative structure: one of the striking things about Tolkien is how badly he writes. Or rather, how he does things no self-respecting commercial author would try, apparently because he was writing to please himself and didn't know what the 'right' way to do it was. He composes text like masonry, as I've said before; which is just how he conceived of his beloved *Beowulf*, as per his essay "The Monster and the Critics". This is what gives Tolkien his monumental dignity. It's not like monoculture farming. It's gothic architecture; admittedly, clumsy stuff. This is what makes his hoards of imitators think

they can be just plain clumsy and get away with it, commercially. Which they can. But that is not Tolkien's fault.

Here again there is some interesting information on the *Two Towers* commentary, so I'll just sort of paraphrase points made by others.

Tolkien started writing, ran into trouble. Instead of cutting and pasting and blocking, he went back and started writing it all over again. Got into trouble. Started all over. Got a little further. Got into trouble. Went back to the beginning. Like the waves coming up the beach, each wave got a bit further, but each one retreated back to the starting point, as the voice on the commentary approves. But it's worth adding that when a person behaves like that we think it's a bit obsessive-compulsive. (This fits well with my somewhat strained characterization of Tolkien as an untutored [outsider artist](#). Yes, yes, I know. He wasn't exactly isolated. He had C.S. Lewis and other inklings to critique his work in progress.)

LOTR is not structured like a proper novel, important characters not developed, too repetitive, opening too slow, ending too short, great deal of talk, long stretches of no action, Council of Elrond is 15,000 words of a badly chaired committee meeting, including much talk from characters who haven't been properly introduced to the reader. What courage to expect that the reader will put up with this nonsense! What brilliant naivete not even to realize it was courage to try!

Now more from Fran Walsh (half of the adapting team for the book-to-film) and (I think it's Shippey again?) on the oddity of the narrative structure of *The Two Towers*. As a narrative it's two books, almost artificially made one. The storyline through Rohan. And the Frodo-Sam-Golem story. Not really significantly intercut. You lose whole character groups for 150-200 pages at a go. Could have been a dangerous sacrifice of momentum. A sense of (wait for it) realism comes from a sense of not knowing what's going on, and what is going to happen next. Because the structure of the story gives you rather few genre cues, so oddly is it constructed. You can't deduce what's going to happen by surveying the angle of the plain on which you stand and deducing where you are on Freytag's triangle, in other words. A lot of the tension is the reader just burning up to know what's going on in the other narrative thread and having to defer gratification, rather than being treated to lots of comforting, fast Hollywood intercutting.

Anyway, the present point is that there is a sense in which - in constructing the story - Tolkien let his tutored competencies as philologist, historian, pedant and obsessive-compulsive hobbyist run away with his untutored incompetencies as commercial fiction writer. To glorious effect. What has happened since then, in the fantasy genre factory, is that Tolkien's highly personal idiosyncracies have ossified into cliches. Personal limitations that were authentic in him are not authentically transferable to just anyone else who wants to mimic them.

Miéville, despite the tell-it-backwards inventiveness of the *anamnesis* section of *Iron Council* (see [Matt Cheney's post](#)), is in some sense a more conventional fantasy novelist than Tolkien. This is not to say that Miéville is actually part of the monoculture culture,

after all, but it could be argued that in certain respects he is closer to it than Tolkien himself. Although Tolkien is the source of it.

And so: Tolkien, like Miéville, is suspended between thick and thin. Thick world-making. Oddly thin characters. In Tolkien the characters range from the just plain wooden to beautiful, architectonic figures. In Miéville they range from animated fantasy genre clichés, just muddied up a bit, to well-danced flexible puppets. It is precisely the oddity of lavish world creation plus paper-thin or wooden characterization that has so vexed many of Tolkien's detractors (Edmund Wilson, for example.) Miéville may be in the same boat with his critics (as I argue in "[Oo, that wicked watercraeft](#)".) So perhaps what Miéville should do is try to get even further off the factory farm not by trying to get away from Tolkien but by following him in this respect: writing less clearly commercial fiction and trusting his audience will understand what private preoccupations made him do it that way.

In other respects, of course, Miéville is free to go on being annoyed by elves and dwarves and Sam's dog-like devotion to Frodo. (But remember! Homosociality does not equal homosexuality! How often must we Tolkien defenders make this defensive point?) I have [saved](#) a snippet of choice Chuniania from the abyss of the man's disappeared blog.

Tolkien is the "wen on the arse" of Miéville's brand of fantasy. He has some cute descriptions of the Master: "cod-Wagnerian pomposity," "small-minded and reactionary love for hierarchical status-quo," and "belief in absolute morality that blurs moral and political complexity." I suppose one of the first questions that arises when evaluating this claim is to what extent these qualities are present in Tolkien's source material. Beowulf, to take one obvious example, does not have the "cod-Wagnerian pomposity," if I understand what Miéville means by this delicious phrase correctly, but it most certainly reflects a belief in "absolute morality" and a fondness for "hierarchical status-quo." Indeed it would be surprising if it didn't, considering its origin.

I said at the beginning it is quite possible Miéville really didn't mean all that stuff he says against Tolkien on that old page; that he just put it out there to get a rise. Which would be quite alright. It would mean I've rested a little too much critical weight on it here, and in my posts over the last year and a half. But it does seem to me that Miéville could probably clarify to himself what he is up to, in a salutary way, by trying to say exactly what it is that he objects to. Strip back the polemic and see what sober core of dispute remains. Since, after all, he and Tolkien have so much in common. As Shippey says, there is a brand of writer who can't respond to reality realistically. This lot have to write fantasy. Tolkien is one such. Miéville another.

## **New Crobuzon - If you can Re-Make it There! (You'll make it anywhere)**

By Belle Waring

WARNING: This contains massive spoilers to Iron Council, The Scar, and Perdido Street Station.

It seems bizarre that I might write literary criticism which the author might plausibly read. This never happens when I write about Petronius. And so, because much of what I have to offer is criticism, I feel the need to begin with some lavish praise. China Miéville is a writer of astonishing creativity. The material in the average two-sentence Miéville observation would serve a more parsimonious author of fantasy as the meat of a trilogy. (Or more: just consider that there are about 18 Robert Jordan novels, none of which contains a single thought not pilfered, feebly, from Tolkien or Stephen Donaldson.) The roster of novelists whose work I ever feel inclined to employ as the setting for an idle daydream, a fantasy proper, with Lake Como moved to Rome and so on, is very short, and most of the luminaries joined when I was younger than 15. So, when I tell you that I press Bas-Lag into this service, I am saying that Miéville's works have captured my imagination in the most literal way.

So what am I complaining about? Because I *am* complaining; I both look forward intensely to reading his books and feel genuinely irritated by them. On one level this is just a consequence of an aesthetic peculiarity of mine: I hate it when I feel the author is torturing his characters. There they are, the little things; helpless, pinned to the page. Is it really necessary to jerk them around like that? So, no Beckett, thank you. Thomas Hardy? I'd rather not. Now, it by no means follows from this that I don't like depressing books, because I do. I love Dostoyevsky, and I have to admit he tortures with the best of them, but I feel it to be justified by the demands of the plot in some unspecifiable fashion. I even like George Eliot, but it's touch and go there. I enjoyed Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Boy on Earth, but only in a second-order way. I admired the craftsmanship and was interested in the story, but...come on. Stop torturing the characters.

It's difficult to say at what point I decide that the bad things befalling the characters are so bad that they indicate a kind of authorial malice rather than unfolding organically from the necessities of the plot. But it is something I feel very keenly. (This may be a defect on my part. A related problem is that I am unable to watch situation comedies. The confusions, the fleeting embarrassments, the humiliation; it makes me agitated. On the whole, I prefer to watch people get murdered on Law and Order.)

I first began to feel resentful on this score about the fate of Lin in *Perdido Street Station*. It seemed to be deeply uncalled for. It has already been established that the slake-moths have two peculiar affinities: for the outré, and for the minds of those who were close to them when they were raised from grubdom. In the person of Mr. Motley we have a mind of spectacular weirdness, and the man responsible for the rearing of the moths. Furthermore he is physically vast. And in this situation, we are meant to believe the moth went for Lin? Of course, it is ridiculous to talk about probabilities in a case like this. It's not as if anyone has clear intuitions about the likelihood of various courses of action by magically mutated moths from the cactopic stain. So this is not really the problem. How to put it? I'll approach the point from another side.

That the heroes should save the city *and* be utterly unrewarded is clearly an important point for Miéville. He seems to me to be rebuking the reader and the genre, as if to say, "you thought it would all be lays about Nine-Fingered Frodo and the Crack of Doom, and the clouds parting to reveal the Western Shore, didn't you? Well, things aren't always like that." Miéville aims to inject a note of authenticity into the genre, a sense of economic and political reality. He rejects the airbrushed feudalism which dominates the fantasy genre. It seems odd to say of a book so utterly fantastic that it aims for realism, but many of the situations in Miéville's books, and much of their interest, come from an attempt to answer questions that go unasked in most fantasy works. What would it *really* be like to live in a world where some people could do magic? Thus we have labor strikes by vodyanoi watercrafters, or the seizure of rockmilk extraction platforms; these things feel fresh and new in a way that dwarves and magical rings cannot, ever again.

In his evocation of New Crobuzon, wonderful as it is, I feel that Miéville lets himself get carried away by his taste for the grotesque. He wants us to see the filth and the factories and the hovels held together with khepri spit; in this he succeeds admirably. Nonetheless, I sometimes find myself wondering, where is the nice part of town? What do the mansions of the rich look like? At a certain point our New Crobuzon protagonists (in *Iron Council*) move into (purportedly tony) Flag Hill. Uncharacteristic terseness overcomes Miéville: "It was a landscape of wide-open ways and sumptuous houses sheer onto the streets, backing onto shared gardens. There were flowering trees and banyans spilling their knotting creepers and making them roots and trunks emerging from between black paving." And? That's it? Even this brief description calls up an image of vegetal profusion cracking the black pavement. Having exhausted himself on the subject, he turns to his real interest: "There had been a slum in Flag Hill for years, like an abscess..." Four long paragraphs follow detailing the downward spiral of a failed experiment in city planning, and its eventual colonisation by the rich and transformation into slum museum. "The detritus of slum life was left in place, sterilised and dusted by attendants. IT SEEMS UNBELIEVABLE THAT IN MODERN TIMES SUCH SQUALOR COULD GO UNCHECKED [reads a plaque]."

I ask you, fellow reader: is it your impression of the city of New Crobuzon that there are areas of such cleanliness and elegance, and these so large or numerous, that any citizen could possibly be unaware of its multifarious teeming slums? Don't they ever look down from the cable car thing?

To return to my point, it is very important that the heroes of Miéville's books *both* triumph against all odds to save the city or the world, *and* have things go badly for them. If there's one thing you can be sure about, it's that there won't be a ticker-tape parade with the mayor of New Crobuzon pinning medals on everyone. It is my sense in reading the books that this important choice is a rebuke to the reader, and to generic conventions. The latter is a fine thing; the former irritates me. It is as if Miéville were standing over my shoulder as I finish *Iron Council* and saying, "surely you didn't think they would have a successful revolution. You're so naive. Life isn't like that; it's a messy business, and bad people with power tend to keep it." Well, all right. I might accept this rebuke from another author. But in this case, there is no fact of the matter about what Bas-Lag is like. It could just as well be the sort of place where people *do* have successful revolutions. But this is not quite what I mean, since I seem to be criticizing Miéville for making certain choices which are obviously his to make as world-creator.

I think the source of my irritation is really this: Miéville shows himself very willing to take advantage of *all the other* fantasy conventions except this one. Doughty, seemingly mis-matched heroes prevail against impossible odds? Do they ever. Conventional authorities unwilling or unable to fight the looming threat, such that a small band of adventurers have to go up against some world-spanning evil stuff? Yep. Even the battle scenes, in their spectacularity, sometimes call to mind the static set pieces of a Tolkien battle. Miéville's love of the bizarre also leads him to arrange battles which resemble nothing so much as a role-playing game gone wild: you have only twenty lightly-armed zombies in dirigibles, while your opponent commands a troop of pixies whose bite is near-fatal...etc. It is fun to read these things, but it makes me feel that anyone who is willing to have whispersmiths ride in at the last moment to reinforce light golems versus elementals shouldn't be so darn superior about generic conventions.

That Lin should get killed, OK. That she be raped and have the legs of her scarab head torn off one by one, and then have her mind partially destroyed so that her personality and her art are lost to her? Come on, dude. That is just uncalled for. It seems gratuitous: I'm willing to make things go maximally awfully for this character just to confound your generic expectations. I am perfectly aware that it is...peculiar, to say the least, to be exercised about abuses done to imaginary people by their creator, but there it is.

And so, I feel that the paralyzed train in *Iron Council* is emblematic of the arc of Miéville's novels. It is spectacular and grotesque, studded with the heads of magical beasts, forever moving forward, but quite unable to reach any destination. The long series of weirdness just freezes at a certain point. Nothing is resolved. Isaac saves the world and his only reward is the brutal, worse-than-death destruction of the one he loves. The Toroan revolutionaries kill the mayor, and nothing follows from it. There is a massive revolution, which effects no changes on the polity.

Miéville's burning desire to *not* have things end up neatly leads him even to vitiate what accomplishments there are. The heroic journey of the *Iron Council* is retrospectively shown to be part of Wrightby's schemes; the Councillors were saved by Drogon's

machinations, not their own efforts. The assassination of the mayor is shown to be the outcome of a single woman's grudge, and in some sense not a political act at all: "'We done what they wanted. We done what they come here to do.' 'Yes' *Yes, but it isn't the same. It was a sideshow, it wasn't what you were here for, and that's different, that makes it different.*" Even the abortive revolution is revealed to be part of Spiral Jacob's plan, a useful distraction and nothing more.

So if there is one thing I hope for in a new China Miéville novel, it's this: kick out the jams. If some people set off for the Scar, let them damn well get there. (Uther Doul's apparent subversion of a plan he has been risking his life to further for the last 700 pages is utterly motiveless.) If someone has a revolution, then change some things. I'm not asking for the mayor of New Crobuzon to pin medals on people. Please, just unbend a little. If you're willing to have your band of adventurers save the world against overwhelming odds, you should be willing to let some small good issue from it, some resolution. As Ann-Hari says to Judah Low, "you don't know, and now we don't either, we'll never know what would have happened." I want to find out what happens.

## **Balancing Traditions: The Pulp Origins, Muddled Moralities, and Anxious Audiences of China Miéville's Aesthetic Revolution**

By Matthew Cheney

When I first wrote about China Miéville's *Iron Council*, I wrote, [toward the conclusion](#).

Miéville has stated in interviews that he does not want to create stories with simple "good vs. evil" morality, but that is generally what he does. The government of New Crobuzon is populated entirely with people who operate with as much love and compassion as a Dark Lord. Miéville's main characters are often conflicted, impulsive, selfish, and wonderfully complex, but they end up fighting against forces that are entirely loathsome, which is a cop-out.

This is an idea that deserves attention and discussion, and I think my original language made the issue seem more cut-and-dried than I know it to be.

Anyone who wants to consider Miéville's work as something more than just "rip-roaring good yarns" (which they are) has got to keep in mind that he is mixing and melding among genres of popular literature. A collage of covers from pulp magazines should dance through the mind of anyone contemplating the homages Miéville pays to the past: *Weird Tales*, *Startling Stories*, *Fantastic Adventures*, *Sky Fighters*, *Sea War Stories*, *Ace-High Westerns*, *Railroad Men's Magazine*. One of Miéville's grand goals has been to write within those traditions while also transcending them.

What does it mean, though, to write within those traditions while also hoping for thematic complexity and subtlety of characterization, two techniques *Iron Council* employs? Does transcending "good vs. evil" cause the work to transcend the tradition itself?

I still hold with my original perception that the forces Miéville's protagonists fight against are "entirely loathsome", because I think it is obvious that they are presented that way (though less so in *The Scar* than in *Perdido Street Station* and *Iron Council*), but it may be the result of the main characters' perceptions, and those perceptions may tie into the novels' central ideas -- the double-edged power of passion that both motivates people toward heroic acts and blinds them to the subtleties of the world. We cannot know that there are, in fact, some well-meaning people in the government of New Crobuzon, because, apparently, none of the main characters know this. In *Perdido Street Station*, the slake-moths are unknowable; in *Iron Council*, the government is. We know them not through their intentions so much as we do through the effects of their actions, and the effects are horrifying.

What Miéville does brilliantly is create anti-heroes, pseudo-heroes, and non-heroes and then place them in situations demanding utter heroism. Thus, the morality becomes "not-entirely-good vs. evil". This may be exactly the balancing act he needs to write the sort of philosophical romanticism he seems to aspire toward. To muddle the whole "good vs. evil" dichotomy with complexity would be to destroy the heart of the original influence; to shatter one side while holding on to the other is to subvert, but not to obliterate.

It is one thing for the writer to maintain a balancing act, but what about the readers? *Iron Council* has gotten the most mixed reviews of the three New Crobuzon books, with many people saying something to the effect of, "Well, it's good, but it's no *Perdido Street Station*," or, "It's not bad, but I really liked *The Scar*."

*Perdido Street Station* appeared at a time when people were ready for it; perhaps even hungry for it. A large group of fantasy readers wanted a big, juicy book that was not another cog in a series of Tolkien rip-offs nor a touchy-feely myth in an urban milieu. It had exactly the right mix of ingredients to create its own audience. The problem for any writer who becomes popular, though, is that audiences don't tend to like change, even when they say they do. *Iron Council* is a vastly different book from *Perdido Street Station*, which is not to say that one is necessarily better than the other, but that their ideal audiences are not exactly the same. *Iron Council* is more subtle, less baroque than Miéville's previous books; it continues to explore the kinds of things he was exploring in the first hundred pages or so of *The Scar* -- life as it is lived, character as it is developed, history as it is experienced before it becomes quantified as "the past".

Such an approach actually reduces some of the pulpy pleasures later in the book, because we have learned to care about things other than big battles, and yet we're handed a lot more big battles. This, though, is an inherent part of the tradition -- the building of suspense, the culmination of heroic efforts in heroic clashes, the threats to the very existence of the world. In some ways, *Iron Council* may be such a good balancing act that it is impossible for it to fully appeal to anybody, because the audience that wants shoot-'em-up action will be frustrated by the nonlinear plot, the incantatory prose, the existential angst; and meanwhile, the reader who is thrilled by the growth of Miéville's skills as a writer -- his talent finally seems completely to be in his control -- will wonder why they have to slog through yet another clash of titans.

Or maybe Miéville's grand project is to show that the audiences actually can be the same, that pleasure in shoot-'em-up action doesn't preclude pleasure in complexities of craft. It's a mighty goal, one that may prove unachievable, but the attempt itself brings interesting results. For all the chatter about China Miéville's politics, in the end his revolution is likely to be less political than it is to be aesthetic.

## An Argument in Time

By Henry Farrell

*Iron Council*, like Miéville's earlier novel *The Scar* has a lot to say about betrayal. However, the most important betrayals of *Iron Council* have less to do with personal deceit than the more subtle treachery of political mythology; its ambiguous consequences and necessary faithlessness to the individuals whose struggle is mythologized. On the one hand, political myths hold out hope and inspire action, on the other, they don't reflect the aspirations of the individuals whose actions gave rise to them. *Iron Council* has at its heart an unresolved and unresolvable argument about the relationship between revolution, myth and history.

Michael Chabon says in the introduction to the latest issue of *McSweeney's* (an issue which contains *inter alia* a new story by Miéville) that:

Like most people who worry about whether it's better to be wrong or pretentious when pronouncing the word *genre*, I'm always on the lookout for a chance to drop the name of Walter Benjamin.

In this essay, I up Chabon's ante. Not only do I drop Benjamin's name; I try to construct a debate between *Iron Council* and Benjamin's brilliant, fragmentary essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Even if, as Miéville says in his reply, he didn't directly refer to Benjamin in writing *Iron Council*, juxtaposing the two can help us pick out some of the skeins of his novel – Benjamin's use of messianic Judaism as a wellspring for metaphors of the revolution has a surprising amount in common with Miéville's runaway train. If you squint from a certain angle, even the city of New Crobuzon seems Benjaminian – less the collision of London and Rio de Janeiro that it was in Miéville's earlier novel, *Perdido Street Station* than a refraction of Weimar Berlin and nineteenth century Paris, where shopping arcades rub up against with the Commune's barricades, and flâneurs theorize their endless walking as “a reconfiguration of the city” (IC, p.376). In particular, *Iron Council's* account of the myth-maker and golemist, Judah Low, is reminiscent of Benjamin's ideal of the revolutionary historian, who “takes cognizance of a historical subject” only “to blast” it “out of the homogenous course of history.” (TotPoH, p.263). Unlike Benjamin, Miéville problematizes this form of history-making; while it may be necessary (and provides the tempered hope of the novel's ending), it betrays those whom it celebrates, by not taking their own goals, their own agency, seriously.

One of the early chapters of *Iron Council* prefigures this theme in its account of the Flexible Puppeteers' production of the ‘Sad and Instructional Tale of Jack Half-a-Prayer.’ The puppet play tells how the anarchist rebel Half-a-Prayer, who has already appeared in the interstices of *Perdido Street Station*, is captured and dies at the hands of a mysterious pock-marked figure. The story, as it has been told over the intervening decades has several different interpretations, each with particular political implications. The ‘official’

story of New Crobuzon's corrupt parliamentary government has it that Half-a-Prayer was killed in vengeance by a relative of one of his victims. A later version of the story has Half-a-Prayer dying at the hands of one of his gang-members, who wished to give him a mercy slaying; this version too has the approval of the official censors (it portrays Half-a-Prayer, and his confederates as noble but doomed to failure, and isn't going to inspire rebellion). In the Flexible Puppeteers' new and more subversive version of the story, Half-a-Prayer dies in an attempt by one of his confederates to free him; "the two little figures were not doomed or cursed with visions too pure to sustain or beaten by a world that did not deserve them, but were still fighting, still trying to win" (IC, 68). This version of the story provides political inspiration to the streetfighter Ori and other characters, but it's *almost certainly wrong*. Readers of *Perdido Street Station* will recognize that the 'pock-marked man' is the renegade garuda Yagharek, and that his effort to free Half-a-Prayer is in all probability the repayment of a personal debt rather than a political act (Yagharek refuses Half-a-Prayer's invitation to join his political struggle at the end of *PSS*). While the Flexible Puppeteer's version of Half-a-Prayer's end incites a riot, and thus helps precipitate a more general revolution in New Crobuzon, it isn't and can't be true to Yagharek's intentions; its political significance crowds out what the events meant to the actors caught up within them.

So too, the "Iron Council" itself, and Judah Low's mythologizing of it. As Matthew Cheney has already said, the "Anamnesis" section of *IC*, which describes Judah Low and the rebellion that creates the Iron Council is perhaps the best and most powerful extended piece of writing that Miéville has ever done. He's found a new language – terse, agrammatic, sometimes extraordinarily moving. The train itself is a powerful and multivalent metaphor. The Washington Post's Michael Dirda has noted the parallel to Lenin's famous train journey to the Finland Station to foment a revolution; John Quiggin points to Trotsky's famous armoured train. I suspect that there's a third skein of reference here too - to Lenin's famous essay, "Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism", which saw the spread of the railways as a concrete indicator of the global progress of imperialism (Miéville hints that New Crobuzon's economic crisis is one of imperialist overproduction; access to external markets has been choked off). In *IC* the Transcontinental Railroad Trust's attempt to lay tracks across the continent is symptomatic of a particular mode of economic and social organization; and of the efforts of New Crobuzon's capitalists to spread their influence across the continent. Indeed, it's more than that; it's the assertion of a particular ideal of political and economic progress. As described by Weather Wrightby, the capitalist visionary behind the Trust, the railway is a force of history:

– I will only tell you that history is coming and your new tribe best move from its path.

– But dammit, says Judah. – This isn't empty land!

The old man looks bewildered. – What they have, what they've had lying there for centuries in that marsh, whatever it is, it's welcome to face the history I bring, if it can.

As its path is carved through the heart of the continent, the railway transforms space, disrupting the communities that it passes through and remaking them in its own image, throwing up temporary settlements of gamblers, workers and whores. In its own way, it's compelling; Wrightby is a genuine visionary, even if he's a monster. The Perpetual Train has the force of apparent inevitability, of a linear process in which the wilderness is ineluctably transformed into the hinterlands of capital. Judah Low, a surveyor who goes native with a tribe of aboriginals (the stiltspear), is paralysed at first, unable to protect them from the railway and the forces of progress. "He feels pinioned by history. He can wriggle like a stuck butterfly but can go nowhere." (IC p.161).

The creation of the renegade train, the Iron Council, disrupts this linear progression, so that a new set of forces spill out into historical time. The revolt that culminates in the Iron Council begins with a stilling of time, a momentary hesitation, followed by the action of an anonymous worker, who

Steps out and raises his arm. It is as if he pushes through a tension that has settled on the world, breaks it and pours out into time like water breaching its meniscus and others come with him

Miéville doesn't glamourize this moment and its aftermath – they're shot through with brutalities, with disagreements, with contradictions. They could have gone many different ways. But they have profound consequences – they allow the workers and slaves to take control of their own history, of what has been done to them, and to forge it into something new. In the words of Ann-Hari, one of the leaders of the revolt.

We don't give up what we have, says Ann-Hari ... We give up nothing. All our blood and muscle. All the dead. Every hammer blow, the stone, every mouthful we eat. Every bullet from every gun. Each whipping. The sea of sweat that come from us. Every piece of coal in the Remade boilers and the boiler of the engine, each drop of come between my legs and my sisters' legs, all of it, all of it is in that train. (IC, p.260)

She points into the darkness of the tunnel where the work continues. – All of it. We unrolled history. We made history. We cast history in iron and the train shat it out behind it. Now we've ploughed that up. We'll go on, and we'll take our history with us. Remake. It's all our wealth, it's everything, it's all we have. We'll take it.

The train quite literally departs from its tracks, taking a new direction into the wilderness, building new rails in front of it and pulling up those behind

Miles of track, reused, reused, it is the train's future and its present, and it emerges a fraction more scarred as history and is hauled up again and becomes another future ... . No longer a split line through time, but contingent and fleeting, recurring beneath the train, leaving only its footprint.(IC, p. 262)

In contrast to the failed revolutionary Ori, whose hope is to become a myth (IC, p.307) like his hero Jack Half-a-Prayer, the rebels of the Iron Council are concerned with the here-and-now – they want to take control of their lives, to take their history into their own hands. It is exactly this desire which is betrayed by the golemist Judah Low.

In order to understand Low, it's useful to turn away from *Iron Council* to Walter Benjamin's arguments about materialistic historiography. Benjamin's essay on the philosophy of history is an attack on both Rankean historicism, and the meliorism of Social Democratic historians. For Benjamin, the former makes history into a triumphal progress for the victors, robbing history of its political force; the latter abandons the struggles of the past in favour of a (never to be realized) promise of improvements in the future. Historicists see history as a *linear* process, telling events one after the other "like the beads of a rosary." Instead of this, Benjamin proposes a materialist conception of history in which the historian seeks to act as a sort of weak Messiah, to redeem the struggles of the past by connecting them to the present. The historian grasps the constellation of a past era with the present, thus establishing a present which is "shot through with chips of Messianic time," which has the possibility of being redeemed, and simultaneously redeeming those who struggled in the past. When the past rubs up against the present, the spark of revolution may flare. For Benjamin, this requires that materialist historians adopt a quite particular method.

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled.

In *Iron Council*, Judah Low is a historian of just this kind, and golemetry, in its highest form, is precisely a manipulation of time, an "interruption." Lowe has a twofold role in the book; he is both a golemetrism (a creator and controller of golems) and the Iron Council's bard in exile, who keeps its myth alive for the citizens of New Crobuzon, the city that the rebels have left behind. The two roles are intertwined; Low's golemetry is a literalization of his role as an itinerant propagandist for the Iron Council; both involve abstracting the Iron Council and freezing it as an image. Low's final use of golemetry in the book is the culmination of his role as a bard; after mythologizing the Iron Council for many years, he quite literally turns Iron Council into a myth.<sup>1</sup> Like Benjamin's materialist historian, he compels the Iron Council out of its own era, its own track of history so that it becomes something outside of time, caught in an eternal *nunc stans*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Another interesting possible parallel is between the golemist and theoretician. When Miéville has Judah Low prophesy that the renegades will find a place where they can "hunt, fish, rear cattle," read books and write others, he's of course quoting the early Marx.

Low is able to do this because he has learnt golemetry from the stiltspears, who were fishers and hunters in the swamplands. Low begins by animating brute matter, but uses recordings of the stiltspear to learn how to trap time. In his final act, he ‘saves’ the Iron Council, which is about to arrive in New Crobuzon, and almost certainly to be destroyed by the massed forces of the city’s militia. On the point of its arrival, Low sets a golem trap so that the train is quite literally blasted out of time, becoming a frozen image that cannot be touched but is always on the point of arriving.

The perpetual train. The Iron Council itself. The renegade, returned, or returning and now waiting. Absolutely still. ... The train, its moment indurate.

It could not always clearly be seen. The crude rips in the temporal from which the golem was made gave it edges like facets, an opalescence of injured time. From some angles the train was hard to see, or hard to think of, or difficult to remember, instant to instant. But it was unmoving.

This simultaneously saves and betrays the train. Or, to use Benjamin’s description, the lifework of the renegade history is “preserved,” but at the same time “cancelled.” Even while the image of the train survives as an inspiration for others, the hopes and desires of the renegades on the Iron Council, who were perfectly prepared to go to their deaths, are negated. Low’s beatific ruthlessness, his willingness to take the Iron Council rebels’ decision about their ultimate fate from their hands is symptomatic of his disconnection from them *as people*. He “looks at the world through glass,” (IC, 193) and as another renegade says, he isn’t quite to be trusted:

“Oh gods, don’t get me wrong, I ain’t saying you’re a traitor. ... but you watch from outside. Like you get to be pleased with us. It ain’t right, Judah.” (IC, 472)

Low treats the renegades of Iron Council just as he treated the stiltspears who fled and died as the railways advanced; as a historical lever, a means towards an end. He loves them in an abstract way, but he doesn’t really respect them as individuals. As Ann-Hari says at the end of the book:

We were never yours, Judah. We were something real, and we came in our time, and we made our decision and it was *not yours*. Whether we were right or wrong, it was *our* history. You were never our augur, Judah. Never our saviour.

If Low is a materialist historian in Benjamin’s sense of the word, then Benjamin’s enterprise of historic redemption is flawed by design. If it is to do what it is supposed to (to preserve the myth of Iron Council as an inspiration for struggle), it has to betray the real people who made the Iron Council live and breathe, and turn them into an abstraction. The ability of the historian to act as a messiah, to ‘redeem’ those who fought in the past is at least in part illusory; she can’t save them on their own terms.

And this leads to the tension which is at the heart of the book. Myths betray. While they

inspire political action, their meaning does not and cannot remain faithful to the people whose struggle they celebrate. The conscious desire to make a myth (Judah Low) or to become a myth (Ori) can have ambiguous or even devastatingly awful consequences. The most unambiguous hero of the book, Cutter, does something that will allow the enemy to create their own counter-myth, because the alternative is so appalling. And yet (this is the rub, the contradiction, the dialectic), the blasting of Iron Council out of history *works*. In the closing chapters of the novel, we see how it creates a historic tension between the present and the past, between the myth of Iron Council - always coming, always coming - and the sordid reality of political struggle and compromise. A tension that may explode, and allow the meniscus of history to be broken through again. In Walter Benjamin's closing words:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter.

Or in the words of *Iron Council's* revolutionary newspaper, the *Runagate Rampant*:

“Order reigns in New Crobuzon!” You stupid lackeys. Your order is built on sand. Tomorrow the Iron Council will move on again, and to your horror it will proclaim with its whistle blaring: We say: *We were, we are, we will be.*

## Undoing Messiahs

By Miriam Elizabeth Burstein

There's been some grumbling about China Miéville's third entry (which, apparently, is the last one he plans to write [for a while](#)) in his series of novels about the remarkably filthy city of New Crobuzon. I have to assent to the loudest grumble--namely, that the novel takes too long to get itself in gear: while the ambiguity of the opening chapters is fine in and of itself, narrative tension temporarily collapses under the cacophonous weight of the usual odd creatures. Once things get rolling, pun intended, the pace intensifies noticeably. The narrative itself is divided among three alternating focal characters: Judah Low, a would-be messianic figure who specializes in making golems; Cutter, his lover and most devout follower; and Ori, a discontented young radical. And then there is the "Iron Council" itself, a quasi-utopian mobile city of ex-criminals, ex-laborers, and ex-prostitutes, forever in motion on its stolen train. The plot's actual workings are much closer to *The Scar* than to *Perdido Street Station*, although Miéville continues his cheerful habit of happily killing off or psychologically mutilating his main characters. Two of the novel's major plot points resolve on complicated double-crosses, albeit not quite so detailed as the one in *The Scar*.

Miéville gets lumped in with the steampunk novelists on occasion, since Bas-Lag seems to be populated by remarkably twisted and deformed Earth creatures and concepts. In *Iron Council*, we hit Bas-Lag's nineteenth century, and the novel offers us a remarkably nineteenth-century figure: the train as metaphor for history, progress, and modernization. I couldn't help thinking of Walt Whitman's "To a Locomotive in Winter," which salutes the train as "Type of the modern! emblem of motion and power! pulse of the continent!" (Or, far more ambivalently, Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, with its disruptive, ultimately fatal train.) *Iron Council* makes the fight for control over the train into a larger political and metaphorical debate. On the one hand, there is Weather Wrightby's TRT, which wants to lay track across the continent; in Judah Low's flashback narrative, we see that one of the results will be the destruction of any inconvenient races which happen to get in the way. (Significantly, Judah learns his magic from one such group.) On the other hand, there are the TRT strikers who seize control of the train and randomize its tracks:

Miles of track, reused, reused, it is the train's future and its present, and it emerges a fraction more scarred as history and is hauled up again and becomes another future. The train carries its track with it, picking it up and laying it down: a sliver, a moment of railroad. No longer a line split through time, but contingent and fleeting, recurring beneath the train, leaving only its footprint. (262)

Instead of the TRT's proposed directional and utilitarian movement, in which the tracks

will clear a path across the continent in order to expand New Crobuzon's economic horizons, the Iron Council's "perpetual train" lays transient and ephemeral paths. The perpetual train's apparently random movement across its territory finds an echo later in Cutter's desperate cry that "[t]here's no plan to history" (497); where the TRT's goals are very much definite and profit-minded, the Iron Council simply seeks to perpetuate itself and its communal way of life. But nevertheless, the perpetual train leaves scars in its wake, "indelible marks" (264) in the landscape. Even the liberty promised by the perpetual train, then, comes at a cost to the territory it occupies.

This is a novel in which radical political movements tend to collapse in on themselves, with debates over ends vs. means peeping through here and there. Ori's segments contain the most spectacular collapse: he conspires with the famed criminal "Toro" to commit a key political murder, only to discover that the politics were actually a smokescreen for Toro's real motives. (Attentive readers will realize that we came across Toro in a previous novel.) To make matters worse, he reads another character as a figure of political liberation, only to discover that he actually brings something far more dangerous. Similarly, Judah Low's Christ-like attempt to "save" the Iron Council, with startling and partly fatal results, results in a martyrdom that isn't:

..."But we were never yours, Judah. We were something real, and we came in our time, and we made our decision, and it was *not yours*. Whether we were right or wrong, it was *our* history. You were never our augur Jonah. Never our saviour. And you won't hear this, you can't, but this now isn't because you're a sacrifice to anything. This isn't how it needed to be. This is because you had no right." (552)

In this unmaking of Christ's passion, Judah doesn't play the role of the prophesied figure who will atone for man's sins by dying for them; instead, he dies for the presumption that salvation was his to offer in the first place. While, at a literal level, he preserves most of the Iron Council from death at the hands of the New Crobuzon militia, *his* choice eliminates *their* free will. In the trinity of central characters, Judah comes uncomfortably close to Ori, the misguided revolutionary: he presumes that events set in motion can be kept under control and that motives carry more moral weight than actions. As we learn shortly before Judah's death, the perpetual train served a purpose far other than Judah thought it did; like Ori, he fails to see that his utopian vision was co-opted from the get-go. But if the novel seems cynical about would-be messiahs and violent revolutionaries, the ending holds out some hope for the spirit of social change itself.

## Remaking the Past

By John Quiggin

Science fiction and speculative fiction have always been as much about the past as about the future. Buck Rogers, reawakening in the 25th century, liberates his oppressed compatriots by refighting World War I, complete with artillery barrages. A step up from this kind of pulp, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series inaugurated the 'future history' genre with a replay of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Then there are the innumerable translations of medieval romances, sea stories and Westerns into various mixtures of SF and fantasy.

Although not uniformly dreadful, this kind of thing seems rather pointless. The essence of science fiction is the idea that science and technology matter, that, in a different world, we would live fundamentally different lives and find out new things about ourselves. 'Hard' scientific fiction invariably adheres to this premise, though the application is often rather simplistic - adjust technological knob A and produce outcome B. There is still the problem that, since we don't know the future, we inevitably draw on the past or the present. But writing about the future as a carbon copy of the past doesn't seem to go far.

For most of the 20th century, through the early days of space exploration and up to the end of the Cold War, commentary on the present dressed up as speculation about the future, as in *1984* and *Brave New World*, was generally a more promising source than a review of the past. But even if we are not at the end of history, there seems to be little in our present times or the foreseeable future to provide a basis for radical speculation.

The great discovery of recent years, after a period when the whole genre of speculative fiction seemed in danger of exhaustion, has been the fictional potential of the 19th century, the time when modernity, the transformation of life by science and technology, was still new and startling. The dominant approach has been alternate history, including William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy and, in a rather different vein, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.

China Miéville takes the whole process a step further, in *Iron Council*, the recent sequel to his *Perdido Street Station*. In its literal presentation, this is standard SF with a fully-realised new world, non-human species and biotechnology both marvellous and horrible. But the New Crobuzon in which Miéville set *Perdido Street Station* is recognisably London of the late 19th century, with its respectable upper and middle class veneer of liberalism, its massive and variegated underworld and the constant foggy miasma overhanging everything.

Although the ambience is that of London, the politics is that of Continental Europe, and particularly Paris, with gendarmes and *agents provocateurs*, and a ferment of radical and revolutionary organisations, occasionally breaking out into political assassinations or barricades and streetfighting. All of this is even sharper in *Iron Council* where the central

character is that great emblem of the 19 century and the Industrial Revolution, the railway. The Iron Council's railway is revolutionary in more ways than one - the members of the Council are the workers on a transcontinental railway project who have overthrown their masters and fled into the unexplored wilderness. An immediate association is with Trotsky and his armoured train, dashing from one battlefield to the next.

As the story begins, a revolt has begun in New Crobuzon, precipitated by war and economic crisis and the Council must return to the aid of the rebels. The message is brought to the Council by Judah Low, whose early association with the railroad (as an anthropologist/surveyor 'gone native') has given him the art of creating and working with golems. Following years in the radical New Crobuzon underground, he sets out to recall the Iron Council. The story shifts back and forward in time and space, gradually filling in the history of the thirty years or so that have passed since the end of *Perdido Street Station*.

But how can a story like this end? In the real history of the 20th century, the battle between workers and bosses has fizzled out in a tame draw with the sharp edges smoothed over by economic growth and social democracy. Admittedly the fight isn't over yet, and the bosses who were retreating for most of the 20th century, regained a lot of ground in its last decades. But at least for those of us who are living through them, battles over the Private Finance Initiative or welfare reform don't seem to be the kind of thing anyone would want to read about.

On the other hand, the task of writing a plausible alternative history ending in a fully-realised socialist state seems like an impossible one. And the alternative of a glorious defeat seems equally unsatisfactory.

Miéville's solution is for Judah to create his ultimate golem, a time golem which suspends the Council in an unending moment, an endless reminder to the rulers of New Crobuzon that a better day is coming. This is a familiar mythic device; all over Europe, there are companies of knights sleeping in caves and hollow hills, waiting for the hour of ultimate danger when they will be called to arms for the last time.

This is, it seems to me, the right metaphor for our times. Despite the disappointingly prosaic reality of postwar social democracy, and the dispiriting defensive struggle of the past twenty-five years, the memory of the workers movement that emerged in the 19th century is still both powerful and potentially liberating. The way in which that memory can be revived and put to use remains unclear. Perhaps the emerging community of the Internet can be rescued from the dotcom hucksters who turned it, for much of its early life, into a gigantic Ponzi scheme. Perhaps Europe will finally live up to the dreams of Orwell and others for a socialist United States. Whatever happens, the struggles of the past will be with us.

As Miéville concludes,

*We come back again, again, again.*

*Years might pass and we will tell the story of the Iron Council and how it was made, how it made itself and went, and how it came back, and is coming, is still coming. Women and*

*men cut a line across the dirtland and dragged history out and back across the world. They are still with shouts setting their mouths and we usher them in. They are coming out of the trenches of rock toward the brick shadows. They are always coming.*

## **With One Bound We Are Free: Pulp, Fantasy and Revolution**

By China Miéville

Warning: Enormous spoilers to *Perdido Street Station*, *The Scar* and *Iron Council*, follow.

### **INTRODUCTION AND CAVEATS.**

I am deeply flattered by and grateful for the attention that the Johns, Belle, Miriam, Henry and Matthew have paid to my stuff, and by their invitation to respond. Even more than having your work liked, having it thought about means a huge amount.

It puts me in a slightly awkward position, though. I don't generally publicly respond to reviews, no matter how wrong-headed or perspicacious I think them. Nine times out of ten, writers' responses to critics seem to me at best undignified. One of the usual arguments authors level is the foolishness that 'I know better than you because I wrote it'. To make my position absolutely clear: authorial intention be damned. I do not necessarily know best. Which is to stress that this unusual and gratifying opportunity will inevitably be a Response To My Critics, and I beg them not to read it as defensive. Where I disagree, I say so in the spirit of open-minded debate.

I've tried to approach this thematically. There are countless issues raised in this discussion, direct questions, issues I wish I could engage with at length and references I'd love to explain, but inevitably space precludes discussing them all.

Above all, I want to offer my deepest gratitude to everyone involved.

### **1. NEVER MIND THE BALROGS.**

Tolkien looms over this conversation (as he always seems to). It may sound disingenuous, but I'd like to get to the point where I can stop talking about him. It's generous of John H. to offer me the get-out clause that my *PSS*-era attacks on JRR were punk kickings against the pricks, not to be dwelt on any longer. Tempting as it is to agree, though, it would be untrue.

Which isn't to say there was *no* punk posing in my sneers. 'The wen on the arse of fantasy...'? These days, of course, I wince a little at that. (Not least because I've had it pointed out that wens are a kind of boil exclusive to faces. There is no such thing as an arse-wen. D'oh!)

But as a few of my later pronouncements have tried to make clear, my piece was less an

attack on Tolkien than on his influence. Not that I'm distancing myself from specific critiques of Tolkien's work (none of them original to me, of course. For the last few years I've been riffing off Mike Moorcock's essay 'Epic Pooh').

The thing is that I *did* want to take on Tolkien, in *PSS*, which was conceived in radical antipathy to as much of his aesthetic and thematic furniture as I could think of. As far as I was concerned I was then done. Tolkien loomed over *PSS*, but he did not – consciously at least – over *TS* or *IC* (though of course it would be naïve to imagine that I've 'escaped' his influence, or that I'm not a descendent of his).

### 1.1: *In Grudging Defence of Tolkien*

John H.'s analogy, I think, is a good one: Tolkien is an outsider artist. His genius lay in his neurotic, self-contained, paranoid creation of a secondary world. That act of profoundly radical geekery reversed the hitherto-existing fantasy subcreation: unlike Eddison's Mercury and Leiber's Newhon, Middle Earth comes before the stories that occur within it. It's precisely this approach, the subject of most scorn from the 'mainstream', which is Tolkien's most truly radical and seminal moment. His literalised fantastic of setting means an impossible world which *believes in itself*, and has no truck with the tedious symbolism which mars so much 'magic realism', for example, in which the fantastic does not trust itself, and which the author is keen to stress is 'really about' insert-theme-here.

Tolkien's 'cordial dislike' of allegory does not, as some of his followers, most of his detractors, and the man himself seems to think, imply a fiction divorced from reality – a fiction 'about' nothing real. What it means is a fantasy that is not *reducible* to a kind of philistine, simplistic, moralising, fabular representation of *soi-disant* 'meaningful' concerns, as with fiction that despises its own fantastic. Dispensing with allegory cannot mean dispensing with metaphor: fantasy that believes itself is about itself and *also* about other things.

Fundamentally, that is why I think fantasy at its best doesn't have to choose between John H.'s two poles: political economy vs. puppeteering expressionism. Because the realism of concern and the weird of expression are each their own end, but through metaphor, that magic dialectical glue, they are also, in a critical fantasy, functions of each other. (None of which, of course, is to say that I've got it right.)

This is not, of course, to repudiate any of the rude things I've said about Tolkien's themes, prose, women, class politics, moralism, etc. In focusing on the way fantasy thinks of itself, the way a self-believing fantasy impacts the reader, I'm arguing to nurture the baby of Tolkien's phenomenology of fantasy while chucking out the bathwater of his ideas. It's very dirty by now.

## 1.2. *An Admission on War.*

I want to agree with John H. over Tolkien and the war. My criticism of him as falling prey to a boys-own-adventurism was misplaced. I still hold that Tolkien's battles are 'morally disordered', but as John H. says, 'the disorder is of a different order'.

Instead, the overwhelming tone reads as a kind of melancholic glorying, faintly elegiac, Tragic-with-a-capital-T, with swords a-flashing and valiant steeds a-galloping, not *Just William* but Light Brigade. Rather than the product of never having seen modern war, this in fact seems to me an *attempt to forget*. Tolkien's modernophobia manifests in the attempted invocation of a nobility *he knows doesn't exist*.

It's interesting to compare him to that other great outsider artist of the fantastic, Lovecraft. Though Lovecraft never saw war, he did see, quite clearly, the social chaos that the First World War ushered in. The 'Great War' was the most shattering event in Modernity's conception of itself as a rational, humane system: the paradox is that Tolkien, who experienced that carnage first-hand, attempted to turn his back on the truth of post-traumatic Modernity, whereas Lovecraft was thousands of miles away from the heart of horror, but was a neurotically acute barometer of society's psychic disorders.

These different approaches manifest in their fantasies. To put it with unfair crudeness, Tolkien's is the fantasy of a man murmuring to himself 'it's alright, it's alright', but not believing it; Lovecraft's of a man shrieking 'none of it is alright, nor will it ever be'. Unconvinced forgetting versus psychotic fixation: both are the results of trauma.

## 2. ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

### 2.1 *There goes the neighbourhood*

In both Belle's and John H.'s pieces the same question is asked: in New Crobuzon, where is the nice part of town?

Back in the day, one of the most interesting reviews of *PSS* (Tom Arden in *Interzone*) said exactly the same thing. I read it, and had that gnawing annoyance that comes when you know a criticism is right. Like all those writers who self-importantly think of themselves as into 'gritty' 'harsh' 'gnarly' reality, etc, I'm more interested in crumbling bricks than in new ones, in the fucked-up mess than the neat marble columns. I knew there were a few uptown scenes in *PSS*, but my heart can't have been as in them as the downtown, and it must have showed.

I took that to heart, and in *IC*, resolved to do better. I was never going to feature as much of the smart stuff as of the lower orders, but I tried not to be so one-sided. Self-consciously, I took the characters to Flag Hill and various other more sedate byways. I was proud of having redressed the balance.

Obviously I didn't. I can only throw admit failure. In mitigation, I plead two things.

- i) These are poor-town protagonists, and unlike *PSS*, the point-of-view is much more tightly controlled. If they feel isolated from uptown, which of course they do, so do the readers. ii) Why should I show uptown? In my wildest dreams (and with apologies for hubris), I would like *PSS* and *IC* to read for New Crobuzon as Iain Sinclair does for London. Would *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* or *Downriver* be improved with more of a balance-redressing focus on Kensington or Chelsea, instead of their constant fascination with the East End? Does Céline's relentless focus on the less salubrious arrondissements really hamstring his work, or define it?
- ii) The section Belle quotes, involving the slum museum in Flag Hill, has a very specific aetiology. It was a reference not only to the relentless gentrification of working-class areas in London and elsewhere, but about the way the trappings of these areas, including their very collapse, become fetishised, how their history isn't effaced but emasculated. I was inspired in part by a poem by Mike Rosen, who angrily and brilliantly describes how a neighbourhood school in London is run down, the plaque bearing its name becoming more and more verdigrised and ruined, until the school is at last closed and refurbished as yuppy flats, at which point the sign is, for the first time in decades, finally cleaned, made a curio. Hence the slum museum.

As to the question of whether it is possible 'that any citizen could possibly be unaware' of the slums, I'd say the situation is as it is for many inhabitants of Eton Square in London now. To the extent that they know that a couple of miles away estates are crumbling into shameful ruin, their knowledge is highly partial, hedged with apologia, inevitabilism, and a kind of philanthropic anxiety predicated on the sheer abstraction of their knowledge. And some, in fact, simply would not believe it, just as many might not believe that almost 40% of London's children [live in poverty](#).

Of course, the issue isn't fundamentally of architecture, but of social honesty. The relentless rookerie-ophilia is deemed as much a lie as the scrubbed towers of Minas Tirith. These days, it's true, slums are more of a cliché than hallowed halls.

However, all truth is, of course, partial, and the truths represented by *IC* are of people who live in the rookeries. I would hope that uptown *does* feature in the books, is referred to regularly, is a constant presence, but primarily in its absence. That is how the protagonists experience it.

## 2.2. *Sadism versus Symbolism*

If you kill a main character, then you're obviously a 'brave' writer. Etc etc. This is the specious and middlebrow gravitas of charactericide. It's not always an aesthetic con to do a protagonist in, of course, but it shouldn't be an automatic brownie point.

This apparently most extreme thing you can do to a character, bumping her/him off, is easily assimilable by nebulous structures of comfort. (The question of what if anything is wrong with that is huge, of course, and fundamental to many of the issues here. For here, I'm just going to assert that all my writing tends to be sceptical of consolation and comfort.)

This is precisely why I'm not surprised by Belle's resentment at the fate of Lin in *PSS*. It was, yes, precisely 'uncalled for'. 'That Lin should get killed,' Belle says, 'OK.' Well quite. Had she been killed, it would have been ok. More than that, it would have presented us with one of the most trite figures in Romantic Art: The Beautiful Dead Female Lover. I didn't want Lin to turn into Eurydice, which is why what happened to her had to be utterly foul and *uncalled for*. I maintain that it was *more* respectful of her as a character to give her a fate that *vigorously resisted aestheticisation*, than to subordinate her to the logic of myth, symbol and genre. (Particularly when (Ophelia in the water, consumptive beauties a-coughing) it's a logic deep-structured with fetishised misogynist despite. Hmmm... raping and mind-ruining a female character as striking a blow against the structures of gender essentialism? Well *yes*, actually.)

Of course, the problem with this strategy is that it's a fine line to walk. Push it and you're gratuitous. There is, it's undoubtedly true, a cheap and spurious kudos to aesthetic sadism. This is the lie behind the tedious transgressions of much 'brave', 'transgressive' and 'underground' literature. Did I step over that line? I hope not. I don't know how I could have avoided Lin being eaten by the voracious maw of Meaningful Tragedy had I not taken her through the mill as I did. And I precisely tried to avoid the sadism by having her disappear while the nastiness was going on. Maybe it didn't work. But that was the idea.

It is also possible that the searingly unpleasant and supposedly meaningless, amoral trials that befall my characters are an overcompensation, an always-already failing attempt to deal with the fact that the representation of 'real life' without abstraction, fetishism and moralism is impossible. The *in-fiction* critique of fabulism and moralism is ultimately and intrinsically limited. John H.: 'Life doesn't usually go in for conventional Freytag's triangle-style structures'. This is absolutely true. The fact is that by writing a story *at all* one subordinates ones characters to a narrative, which is, of course, a form of consolation, an imputation of meaning. Lin's fate, though I stand by it, might be read as me facing this problem and protesting too much.

### 2.3. *Tangled Webs.*

'Miéville's burning desire to *not* have things end up neatly leads him even to vitiate what accomplishments there are. The heroic journey of the Iron Council is retrospectively shown to be part of Wrightby's schemes'. (Belle's essay).

Yes, I want to suggest a complication, a disentangling of the book's reality from mythic structure, even the very myths by which people make the decisions they then perceive

mythically. One way of destabilising such usually-heroic-sometimes-tragic-always-abstracted-and-fetishised narratives is precisely to unveil a tangle of unsavoury underlying motives or forces at work. However, what I hope is that this is *not* reducible to a ‘sordid truth’. Because *despite* such countervailing politics, the actions come to exercise their own dynamics.

This, I think, is what Henry fascinatingly discusses. The fact is that *despite* Weather Wrightby, the council *does* achieve something extraordinary and inspirational: *in its concrete achievement, it eclipses, or at least supersedes, the baser dynamics that informed it in the abstract.*

The uncovering of the ‘truth’ *informs* the achievement, but does not destroy it: actions gain their own momentum. Learning of Wrightby’s interventions does *not* derail the council. The person who thinks it does is Cutter, who goes to Ann-Hari with precisely Belle’s concern: this isn’t real, we aren’t really doing it, or not for the reasons we think. She says to him, in effect, ‘but we’ve actually *done* it, and we did it for our reasons, whether what you say is true or not’.

### **3. DARK LORDS AND TAKING SIDES**

Matthew tempers his original comments that the ‘baddies’ in New Crobuzon – crucially, the government – are depicted as entirely bad. ‘[I]t may be the result of the main characters’ perceptions, and those perceptions may tie into the novels’ central ideas – the double-edged power of passion that both motivates people toward heroic acts and blinds them to the subtleties of the world’.

It is true that I intend the one-sidedness of the novel’s moral schema to be the result of the narrative’s location among the insurgents, where the individual members of the government *are* hated. The crimes of the Mayor are known and enumerated, but are somewhat abstractly conceived, such that when Ori finally comes face to face with her, while he feels little pity, he can’t relate to her concretely as the purveyor of these things.

The first draft of *IC*, in fact, included a ‘sympathetic’ militiaman. I took him out. The careful intrusion of such ‘balance’ felt forced, a frankly trite nod to moral complexity that a novel in any way ‘sophisticated’, or at least not ‘simplistic’, is usually vaguely deemed to have to acknowledge.

But this is a novel seen through protagonists steeped in conflict, who relate not necessarily simplistically but thoroughly antagonistically with their enemies. Just as few Bolsheviks in 1917 or supporters of Allende in 1973 constantly reminded themselves that some tsarists or some of Pinochet’s officers might be good people, so Ori and the councillors and their comrades do not focus on the perhaps-honourable motivations of their oppressors. It is not the responsibility of a novel written in an attempt to depict that revolutionary fervour to break what intensity it can achieve with a dutiful reminder that there are other points of view. (Of course the stacked deck of my political examples

makes it clear that *IC* doesn't just *depict* fervour: it takes sides.)

This single-mindedness doesn't mean revolutionaries don't at some level know that there are layers of complexity to the motivations of opponents, nor does it make them (either in the book or in real life) unsophisticated: it is a corollary of the fact that they are facing *enemies*.

In *Weather* Wrightby I wanted precisely to provide a character who was believable, impressive, moved by absolutely opposing motivations than the protagonists', but one who has to be taken seriously, and is not cipher-like 'evil'. I don't believe that any of the baddies are 'entirely loathsome', though the protagonists doubtless want to conceive them as so. Even the Mayor, at the point of her death, is a person, not a snarling banshee of capitalist hate. But Wrightby in particular is an enemy, yes, but is also a visionary.

#### 4. ESCAPE TO VICTORY

The basic debate over escapism has been rehearsed many times. It has pitted Moorcock against Tolkien, with me an undignified cheerleader waving pompoms (Give me an M!). Interestingly, the claim that fantasy is escapist is made both by the field's detractors and some of its defenders.

The detractors argue that therefore it has nothing to say to us, turns its back on what's important. The counterargument here is that fantasy may *think* of itself as escapist, but it of course escapes nothing, and the idea that it therefore does not have anything to say about 'reality' is wildly simplistic.

Fantasy's defenders, in turn, claim that in the turning away, the escapism itself, is a repudiation of an unacceptable reality. This argument is crystallised in Tolkien's claim that 'Jailers don't like escapism'. The self-deluding nature of fantasy's so-called 'escape' has been pointed out by, among others, M. John Harrison, and Tolkien's *bon mot* has been utterly destroyed in Moorcock's devastating riposte that jailers love escapism, that what they don't like is escape.

The discussion is, I think, sometimes hamstrung by a misunderstanding of what constitutes escapism in literature. For example, John H. discussing the breathtaking ruminations of Bruno Schulz says 'No language of social or political challenge here... Unapologetic escapism, which seems to me what Peake is all about'. I would disagree with the implication that only overt social or political challenge is non-escapist. Peake, for example, reads to me as in part a debate about dead ritualism versus dynamic change, about loyalty to a system versus the morality of self-serving concrete ambition, which in the context of post-War Britain was very much to the social point. *Not* that that's what his books are narrowly 'about', much less 'for': only that the idea that they are *escapist* and fail to engage with reality seems to me to be wrong.

Schulz's astonishing excursions on time, on the 'sidings' of history, on cul-de-sacs of

history into which hermetic bubbles of alterity might grow, his discussions of the allure of the cheap and second-best, have clear ‘real’ social and psychological resonances. I doubt John would deny this. The sense in which Schulz is ‘escapist’ seems to be that he stresses the liberation of fantasy and the imagination against the constraints of dull reality. The point is, however, that in having this discussion, Schulz creates a fiction *about* escapism, *interrogating* escapism – or escape. Schulz is not so much escapist as meta-escapist.

This is not mere wordplay: the alternative, the drabest commercial fantasies, appear to *believe themselves to be escaping*. This is not only less sophisticated than Schulz: it is in fact self-denying. In contrast to those works, what escape there is in Schulz is predicated on a profound awareness *that there is a reality against which escape velocity must constantly be assayed*.

Those of us who want to defend ‘non-escapism’ as worth fighting for in fiction and fantasy have to move away from the simplistic idea that something is only non-escapist if it overtly and explicitly throws up a challenge to the status quo.

Related to this is the question of subjectivity. When radicals admit, shame-faced, to a predilection for some ‘escapist’ books (people confess this to me regularly, for some reason), what they often mean by escapist, I think, is that these books gave them pleasure. There’s a terrible and common elision between ‘escapist’ and ‘enjoyable’.

I would want not to judge something as escapist because it has a ‘happy ending’ or, god help us, *is enjoyable*, but because it loses its sense of the complex, oppressive totality of life. ‘Art which loses the sense of the social lie’, as Trotsky said, ‘inevitably defeats itself by affectation, turning into mannerism.’ Mannerism and escapism. And this, of course, applies as much to supposedly ‘realist’ fiction as to fantasy (many of what Iain Banks calls ‘Hampstead novels’ are predicated on hermetically sealing off a particular middle-class milieu and defining it as the morally meaningful universe), and almost as much to ‘gritty’ and ‘experimental’ fiction as to ‘mainstream’. (It’s hard to think of much more mannered than later period Beat Writing, for example.)

## **5. PULP, SUBVERSIONS AND CONVENTIONS.**

John H., Matthew and Belle are quite right to point out that I am, in important ways, a ‘conventional genre storyteller’. Matthew points out how much I write within various pulp traditions, and questions whether from within, I can ‘subvert, but not ... obliterate’. As Belle puts it, I am ‘very willing to take advantage of *all the other* fantasy conventions’ apart from happy endings.

The fact that I’m pretty faithful to various pulpisms and genrifications doesn’t mean that the criticisms I’d make of those traditions don’t have teeth. I can dis the consolation and abstract morality while retaining the firefights and cliffhangers, for example. The question is why one would want to do that. For me, banally, it’s because the tradition of

page-turning storytelling is exciting and interesting.

One of the ways of panning for credibility in the pulpstream is to nod and wink at the reader that one is far too sophisticated to not know what one is doing, using all these popular devices. At its worst, this becomes a tedious nodding at the audience: I've called this the [postmodernism of philistines](#).

Perhaps self-conscious genre retains a bit more credibility than unreflexive genre. This is moot, but one can at least argue that it bespeaks a critical and thoughtful approach to reading, so let's not dismiss it out of hand.

The cheerful parodies of my D&D-style trappings are accurate and funny. It was with the self-reflexion of the cliché in mind that I had some characters in *PSS* described as 'adventurers ... Thrill seekers ... [who] court danger ... unscrupulous grave robbers ... Anything for gold and experience'. Because that of course is what player-characters look like to everyone else in Greyhawk, or should if that world and others like it made social sense. If you get the joke, you're its target. *De te fabula narratur* – it's not the most sophisticated manoeuvre but it was designed to let me have my geek cake and eat it.

Similarly, having decided years ago that *IC* would be a Western, it was massively overdetermined that at some point in its narrative the Cavalry would Ride To The Rescue. This is an attempt at inoculation from criticism of pulpism by saying 'yes I *know*'. It works up to a point, but it's limited.

Crucially, it's limited because, as Matthew says 'the audience that wants shoot-'em-up action will be frustrated by the nonlinear plot, the incantatory prose, the existential angst' while those to whom that appeals 'will wonder why they have to slog through yet another clash of titans'. This bifurcation has been clear in the utterly contradictory responses to *IC*. For every reviewer for whom the 'Anamnesis' section is the best thing I've ever done, there's a reader for whom it ruined the book. For everyone who liked the beginning because it had lots of *stuff* in it, there's another who found it disjointed and shallow. (To generalise, reviewers for magazines and pro websites have tended to be positive about the book, while 'fans' have been far more sceptical.)

The bottom line of course is that I write the books I want to read. The cavalry rode to the rescue partly for the wink-factor, but partly because I like watching them do so. I *like* hallucinatory prose, avant-garde stylings, nonlinearity and existential angst, *and* I like monsters and gunfights and robust pulp. John H.'s suggestion that I might try 'writing less clearly commercial fiction and trusting his audience will understand what private preoccupations made him do it that way' is intriguing, but the 'commercial' (ie, storytelling) isn't a constraint for me, it's an urge.

I confess though that the comments on this issue, have given me pause. My problem (?) is I like battle scenes, and I like writing them (even though they might perhaps be as much a fetter as a pleasure). As John H. asks, 'to what degree are various aesthetic values mutually destructive within a given work?'

I wish I could answer this. It seems to me at least plausible that these different kinds of values do ‘erode’ each other (John’s excellent metaphor). These values are several – the avant-garde sensibility, of depicting realistic social structures, of the ripping yarn – and it’s unclear the extent to which each can fruitfully coexist with others in a single text.

John H. understandably presses me on this point, and I’m sorry that I’m bound to disappoint him. I simply don’t know whether I can have this cake and eat it too: critically depict political economy, while having shots ring out and people swinging off cliffs to magical battles. The best I can do is offer a thought. Even if it’s true that the different values fundamentally work against each other, the attempt to marry them may never succeed, but it might approach success asymptotically. Try again, fail again, fail better. That tension, that process of failing better and better – the very *failure*, if it’s the best kind of failure – might generate interesting effects that a more ‘successful’ – ie aesthetically integrated – work cannot do.

## 6. MYTH, MEMORY AND REVOLUTION.

Henry is exactly right to describe *IC* as containing an argument about ‘revolution, myth and history’. His analysis of the incommensurability between individuals’ intent, politics and myth is astonishingly accurate as to my intent (though the Benjamin essay, while a favourite, wasn’t one I was consciously riffing off). While I wanted to depict the radical movement warts and all, within Bas-Lag, Iron Council ends as a myth, an inspiration.

All three of the Bas-Lag books, particularly *PSS* and *IC*, have culminated with what are designed to be insoluble dilemmas. In the former, there is no correct way for Isaac to respond to the revelation about Yagharek’s crime. In the latter, the rub, as Henry so astutely points out, is that ‘the blasting of Iron Council out of history *works*’. His take – his stress that Iron Council qua myth is, as far as the motivations of the councillors are concerned, a lie – is not exactly different from mine, but it focuses more on the melancholic. There was no ‘correct’ course: had the council reached New Crobuzon, it would have been shattered. However, that it was not allowed to is a betrayal, by Judah, of the councillors themselves, whose decisions were ignored. Judah’s death is not the messianic moment as which he must understand it: ‘he dies for the presumption that salvation was his to offer in the first place’, as Miriam’s perspicacious essay puts it.

John Q puts his finger on one aspect of the Iron Council’s fate, its transmutation into The King Under The Hill, into the Prague Golem, waiting, a promise to emerge at ‘time of greatest need’. But John sees this as a ‘metaphor for our times’ despite the ‘battle between workers and bosses ... [having] fizzled out in a tame draw with the sharp edges smoothed over by economic growth and social democracy’.

I don’t share this political analysis, which would posit the council-as-metaphor as a kind of nostalgia for ‘real’ class politics. In fact in this era of anti-capitalism’ (or ‘anti-globalisation activism’ or whatever else one wants to call it), the pace of politics is

speeding up, the sense of class antagonism, though not marked by the level of industrial militancy of the 70s, is growing sharper. (Elsewhere I've even speculated that a good part of the vigour of much fantastic fiction today is in its mediated response to that new politics.)

I realise, of course, that John and I won't necessarily agree about this, and that it's another debate. However, *IC* is directly informed by my approach to this question. While it does represent a clash of rights between Judah and the councillors – it was both correct and quite unforgivable to do what he did – the ending also articulates the insoluble dilemma that faces the leftist novelist (or this leftist novelist at least).

For a socialist, an irruption of fundamental social change – the revolution – represents a necessary horizon, a defining part of the social imaginary. Many novelists have depicted revolution. The paradox is that for a novelist committed to the potentiality and necessity of revolution, that revolution is both of vastly more importance than to her/his uncommitted colleagues, and yet is concomitantly, unlike for those colleagues, *unrepresentable*.

If the revolution is portrayed as unsuccessful, the fiction can, perhaps not inevitably but easily, insinuate that revolutions are unwinnable, noble-but-doomed, the quintessential tragic endeavour. This sanctification of the failed revolution/revolutionary is one of liberalism's classic strategies for emasculating revolution.

On the other hand, the depiction of successful revolution doesn't solve things. In this case the attempt to express Marx's 'carnival of the oppressed', can – being restrained by the words and context of a society defined by its lack of being-in-revolution-ness – easily degenerate into the kitsch of Stalinoid agitprop. Even if the work negotiates this, it raises the issue of depicting a post-revolutionary society. While thought experiments about such possibilities can be invaluable – see for example Michael Albert's *Parecon* – if we take seriously the scale of social and psychic upheaval represented by a revolution, a post-revolutionary society is unthinkable: for someone not born in a post-revolutionary situation, it takes the process of going through a revolution to fully imagine it. To depict it is to diminish it.

There is a third kind of depiction, in which the revolution seems both to succeed and to fail. This is the most reactionary model of all, in which the revolution occurs and wins but ultimately *nothing changes*. Either the revolution eats its children, as the invidious cliché goes, or those children make their peace with power. Exemplary of this approach is Ian MacLeod's impressive but, for a socialist, troubling novel *The Light Ages*.

So the revolution is both incomparably more important to a socialist than to a non-socialist, and is incomparably more problematic to write. It is not a setting, but a moment necessarily present in the most banal quotidian, let alone in moments of heightened social tension. The nearer a socialist novelist closes in on the revolution itself, the more impossible the task of its representation becomes.

But then, fantasy specialises in the impossible.

Some have read the ending of *IC* as elegiac, as constructing a kind of memorial to revolution. In fact, the intent was to embed it, render it permanently immanent, with one of the impossibilities, one of the literalised metaphors that do not however subordinate their literalism to their metaphoricism, in which fantasy fiction excels. Primarily an expression of the revolution itself, the ending was also intended to be a vindication of and homage to fantasy. Because, I hope, the genre allows not only the *scientifically* impossible (monsters and magic), but the *politico-aesthetically* impossible (writing a revolution without diminishing it).

Of course, as with everything I write (pulpist that I am), it's intended that you don't have to be interested in any of this, that the gunfights, monsters and Remade will keep you happy. For those who care, though, *Iron Council* was also something else. My two great passions are socialism and the fantastic. I've always had an inchoate sense that, for me at least, the two are linked. Above all, *Iron Council* is an attempt to marshal the unique resources of the fantastic to allow a revolutionary socialist to write a revolution.