

Dancing with Scheherazade: Some Reflections in the Djinni's Glass

By Terry Dowling

Some of us are good at telling jokes, some of us aren't and have to work at it as best we can. It has to do with timing and delivery, the intricacies of verbal and non-verbal placement and tension, with knowing what to give and what to withhold, what to state outright and what to imply.

Within the eons-old meritocracy of storytelling, writers proceed much the same way. Whether they possess an innate gift that sets them apart or have to work doggedly at the craft through imitation, perseverance and judicious self-editing, they too discover what to give and what to omit. If they're truly smart about it, and take care to pay attention, they learn from the masters to a greater or lesser degree, come to sense what is needed, learn the difference between the facts and the spaces between the facts, the tension and power created by rhythms and the simple visual effect, the shape and form of words, heeding (as this writer at least) the advice Jack Vance gave during dinner in Oakland at Christmas 1995, "Words, words, words are the enemy of the writer."¹

As a writer working in the field of what is called science fiction, fantasy and dark fantasy, I have often gone on public record in interview as listing among my key formative influences the rich and evocative work of Jack Vance, Cordwainer Smith, J.G. Ballard and Ray Bradbury. These authors not only render decay and faded glory in a curiously appealing way but also have the gift of putting words into narrative patterns that are both resonant and apposite. Just as Surrealists like René Magritte knew to pair lyrical, evocative, and strongly contrasting namings with strikingly disparate images—the wonderful *A Little of the Bandit's Soul* (1960) readily comes to mind—they are in effect using a literary equivalent of the mystique of the chance encounter prized by Max Ernst and other Surrealists to create a heightened sense of intense, even exquisite, seeing—what can often be a recognition of something barely grasped yet somehow understood.

As storytellers they are also masters of the *donnée*—the "given"—facts that work as presumed knowledge and vividly create a sense of time, place, and a *locus mirabilis*: narrative décor not of this time and place.

As well as citing these four writers as being central to the cast of my own creative enterprise, I inevitably take pains to remind the overzealous that Philip K. Dick sits in that number as well, as do Fritz Leiber, Harlan Ellison, Alfred Bester, Roger Zelazny and, in latter days, Ian McDonald, C.J. Cherryh and Gene Wolfe, again writers who, through their great gifts with language and intuitive understanding of word dynamics, cadences, placement, and apposition, achieve an energy on the page, a connectedness

with words where those words do not get in the way of story, and who often use their skills to create pangs of longing for something never before experienced.

Before ruining the insight-on-process value of such a list of influences by mentioning others, let me add that the language, cadence, and delivery lessons taught by the first four writers just now named, as well as their ways of approaching story, have always been crucial to my own process as storyteller. Other influences include William Shakespeare and visual artists such as Magritte, Ernst, Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, and Paul Delvaux—with their own potent blending of light, landscape, and evocative décor, perception, conception, and immanence—and also include appropriate songwriters, poets, and musicians.

The parabolic method, to call it that—working according to well-established themes and tropes that allow the writer to springboard into something richer, fuller and of its time—underscores my own fiction, from the alien invasion Wormwood stories to what I like to call my tales of appropriate fear, both in themes employed and referenced and even in proven techniques for staging and delivery, techniques like using (but not overusing) appropriate cadence and euphony when creating patterns of text, for instance, or employing givens to help create a sense of place, a confidence of delivery, and what can only be called a narrative élan. In my own work you will readily find such genre standards as the alien invasion, the planetary romance, the first contact story, the galactic empire, even the postapocalyptic road movie, among others.

By way of illustration (and thereby suggesting a few possibly handy thematic classifications as part of a sampling rather than exhaustive analysis), perhaps the most useful example are the stories in the Tom Rynosseros cycle: forty-four tales set in a terraformed, postapocalyptic Australia a thousand years from now, gathered in four linked collections: *Rynosseros* (RS 1990), *Blue Tyson* (BT 1992), *Twilight Beach* (TB 1993) and *Rynemonn* (RN 2007), with “Marmordesse” (1987), “Down Flowers” (1999) and “The Library” (2009) ranging about them like free radicals awaiting a book incarnation large enough (or an infinite online page lucrative enough) to take them as the single work they were intended to be and ultimately became.

3001 Nights

In the broadest strokes, the initial intention with the Tom Rynosseros stories was to try for the tonal and entertainment equivalent of some latter-day Arabian Nights compilation, a series of open-ended adventures set in some fabulous yonder that was sufficiently anchored in the real world—both plausible and familiar enough yet sufficiently removed and suitably exotic as to permit all manner of wonders, such as those liberties in décor and narrative made possible by future science and an ultimately unknowable day after tomorrow. You need only watch the harbor scene at the start of Alexander Korda’s 1940 classic *The Thief of Baghdad* to see the kite-drawn charvolants at the Sand Quay in Twilight Beach in Tom Tyson’s future day. On the one hand, this is a world of high technology and widespread enlightenment, including the most incredible breakthroughs in genetic engineering and the creation of all manner of artificial intelligences (AIs), such as geosynched satellites and orbiting space colonies. But on the other hand, this world is marked by a new tribalism, by rituals and strict

codes of conduct, and by striking new forms of parochialism, bigotry, and racial intolerance.

This Arabian Nights connection is deliberately and carefully intended and, as with so many of Jack Vance's planetary societies (the districts on Halma in *Emphyrio* [1969] and the domains on Koryphon in *The Gray Prince* [1974], to name two), gives the reader one vivid part of a global society characterized by what is effectively an enlightened medievalism. More specifically, one Tom Rynosseros story, "Djinn of Anjoulis" (*BT* 1992), as well as making pointed use of Aladdin's lamps, djinn, souks, and the djellabas and burnouses that are familiar desert wear throughout the whole story cycle, even makes a deliberate reference to Scheherazade, acknowledging this informal yet key narrative provenance.

Most importantly, however, such familiar things are changed by the realities of the future time in which we see them. The antique-seeming sandships at the Sand Quay may be kite driven, but they are operated by highly sophisticated navigation AIs and have laser defenses in place. The swords worn by their crews often possess living personas in their hilts, and the aforementioned Aladdin's lamps use an application from future science of heavy-light technology to produce their djinn. Moreover, while not always obvious, the mindset of the characters themselves is often different to our own contemporary ways of thinking.

It is a setting, then, that is changed strikingly by such technological advancements and the weight of future history, where, as can often be found in the visual and literary works of the Surrealists, familiar and conventional things are no longer necessarily what they seem or what they once were—whether a sandship, a sword, a dragon, or even a person. The future setting not only allows for a crucial distancing effect in terms of narrative logic and suspension of disbelief but also, as with Gene Wolfe's rejigging of a familiar word like *salamander* in *The Book of the New Sun* (1980–1983), permits a revitalization of the commonplace. It takes language and, thus, perception and conception through a reconfiguration so that there is a new, arguably powerful, potentially sublime relationship between such descriptors and what seems to be a living breathing world. At the very least, the future setting can deliver a frisson of the truly exotic; at its greatest effect, it can serve up a profound re-sensitization and reconnection with the phenomenal world as we know it.

For the best reasons in the world then, the Tom Rynosseros saga is one that, by its nature, revels in its influences, *homages* and careful borrowings and, with its mythic underpinnings, gains immeasurably by doing so.

For a start, Tom Tyson (named Tom Rynosseros after the kite-drawn sandship of that name) is the Wounded Man, the Fisher King, Tom O'Bedlam, the Fool of the Tarot. He is, by intention, *tabula rasa*, the Jungian and Campbellian hero, a man given a new chance (even what might be called a first chance in that he has no memory of what preceded his time in the Madhouse), prestige and considerable personal power, who rigorously opposes the artificial intelligences and manufactured life he finds all around him and yet, through a series of life-threatening, life-changing trials goes on the hero's

journey—through the fire, as it were—and becomes their champion, finally risking his only life to face death alongside those who have come to champion and cherish him. The closing scene in the cycle, set on the great fighting ground of Lake Air, with the sand-ships of the seven Coloured Captains rushing to meet the thousand tribal ships sent to destroy them, knowingly echoes works ranging from Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes* (467 bce) to Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* (1954) and John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). It is an ending that not only gives yet another mythic spin to that special number, but has unavoidable resonances extending to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and well beyond, by the nature of its open-endedness.

But while I often knew what mythic and textual strands I was and would be tweaking, and often (though certainly not always, it's important to note) what borrowings and tips of the hat were being made, it's important to stress that—the above examples notwithstanding—it was never a labored, forced or overly contrived thing, no more than it was for Cordwainer Smith or Scheherazade for that matter, as far as we can know. Moreover, much of the time those “borrowings” and associations were at the unconscious and subconscious level—for instance, my learning that *Mira* (meaning “wonderful” and “astonishing” in Latin) was the name of Mira the Wonderful (Omicron Ceti), a famous variable red giant star in the constellation Cetus; this *after* my animate woman Mira Lari had already made her appearance in print in “Ships for the Sundance Sea” (1995, *RN* 2007), most portentous when you consider that Tom is haunted by three images from his time in the Madhouse: a Ship, a Star and a Woman's Face. I must allow that somewhere I *had* learned of that meaning, but it had no *conscious* place in the fabric of narrative delivery during the writing.

Antique Futures—The Medieval Reset

If Jack Vance and Cordwainer Smith in particular—in contrast to the leaner, less mannered writers like Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, James Blish, and Clifford Simak, whom I also enjoyed in my earlier sf reading years—taught me how to build worlds, a lesson reinforced by Frank Herbert in a single unforgettable novel, *Dune* (1965), it was equally assured and lyrical authors such as Ballard, Bradbury, and Bester who taught me how to adorn those worlds and find different roads for traveling within their narrative borders.

Not surprisingly, the parabola has been there throughout. For instance, when it comes to drawing insights from using, say, a well-worn genre standard like the postapocalyptic road movie to permit my quasi-Arabian Nights starting point for the adventures of Tom Rynosseros, we find ourselves faced with a fundamental thematic and design favorite of the parabolic approach generally: the re-medievalized tomorrow, or what, through future events, the vicissitudes of invasion, resource depletion, or catastrophe can usefully be called the antique future or the medieval reset.

Whether it's Frank Herbert's retro *Dune* milieu following the Butlerian Jihad; Gene Wolfe's Urth in Severian's day in *The Book of the New Sun*; or the distinctly antiquarian future of Cordwainer Smith's Instrumentality with its Lords, Ladies and feudal underclass, its quests and distinctive scop-and-jongleur narrative cadences, the

medieval future has proven to be one—arguably *the*—preferred staging mode for science fiction and fantasy storytelling. In fact, it seems to be one of its great recurring attractions, almost as a rather revealing “antidote” to the complexities and pressures of over-urbanization, overpopulation and the too elusive, daunting prospect of things like trans and post-humanism, singularity events, and nanotechnology.

Without even taking into account the myriad heroic fantasy novels that routinely make use of this medieval reset for the same “simplifying” and “remythifying” narrative purposes, science fiction—once cultural isolation and interstellar distances are factored in—is rife with them. We need only consider the extraterrestrial cultures in the novels of C. J. Cherryh or in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969); the mythic worldscapes of Zelazny’s non-Amber novels (*Lord of Light* [1967] and *Jack of Shadows* [1971]); or almost every sf setting in Jack Vance’s oeuvre—notably in *The Dragon Masters* (1962), *The Last Castle* (1966), and “The Miracle Workers” (1958), though every one of his Gaean Reach and Alastor novels possesses such qualities. Even William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) and Deckard’s future Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* (1982) have a definite antiquarian cast with their sense of a thoroughly lived-in, well-used, world-weary tomorrow. This future is marked by a signature ennui in spite of, perhaps even because of, the sheer inevitability of such stereotyped futuristic décor as overpopulation, hover-cars, and off-world colonies, and leads to a very real sense of—borrowing the title of a 1938 Surrealist work by Oscar Dominguez—a *Memory of the Future*. It would seem that, as Jack Vance has the mad poet Navarh say in *The Palace of Love* (1967), “Our refuge is medievalism” (144).

By having postapocalyptic futures in both the Tom Rynosseros and Wormwood cycles, I am able to have the best of all worlds. The Tom Rynosseros future is the result of a global culling pandemic targeting specific racial groups (a solution to world population difficulties curiously and quite tellingly overlooked by most futurists, ethicists, and storytellers), while Wormwood is the result of alien invasion by incomprehensible overlords who likewise trim the host population to suit their own (perceived) ends. There is the aforementioned tabula rasa condition for the reader (and often the main characters), a suspension of (often tedious) real-world requirements for verisimilitude, and best of all, ample justification for including all manner of wonders in the resulting changed world—in short, the very real framing effect for symbolic, allegorical, and narrative resonance.

Some of these resonances are of far greater significance than others. My story “Stoneman” (*BT* 1992), for instance, can toss off its restaging of the confrontation between David and Goliath by deliberately ignoring everything to do with such a comparison until the tale’s final lines:

And he might have thought of Goliath then and the bringing down of the mighty, but his cross had become one with the darkness, and symbols and realities had merged, unknown and nameless, into the urgent black wind on which he ran. (164)

Thus the thematic disclosure becomes a grace note rather than an obvious and (I trust) labored thing. The blending of narrative elements from *Moby-Dick* (1851), the sinking

of the *Titanic*, and the book of Job in “What We Did to *The Tyger*” (1986, *RS* 1990) are likewise concealed within the workings of those subjective crises, private conflicts, and wholesale workings of destiny in this fraught and wondrous, quasi-medieval future of great continent-crossing sandships. Restaging the Judgment of Paris in “Roadsong” (1991, *BT* 1992) is something of a throwaway by comparison, of no significant narrative moment except for those who read the allusion for what it is when the young scholar Tamas Hamm must choose the most beautiful from among three Aboriginal ladies, and for this author using it as a pleasing motivating and tonal template while writing the tale. The same can be seen with Tom’s echoing Peter’s denial of Christ in “The Robot Is Running Away from the Trees” (*RS* 1990) when he denies knowing the robot Lud three times, or in “Coyote Struck by Lightning” (2003, *RN* 2007) having one of four Navajo shamans visiting the West Australian town of Cervantes bear the name John Coyote, echoing the Man of La Mancha when he then feigns madness and goes running off toward the wind rotors at the outskirts of town. It allowed one “madman”—Tom—to have a fond and effortless link with another, though in this case such a casual conflation of motifs triggered the central plot point that inspired the three stories, concluding the whole cycle. For me, this was an exhilarating return on developing a simple conceit, a true case of a disproportionately powerful tail wagging a very eager and receptive dog.

It bears repeating that much of the time these associations are incidental, sometimes even inevitable, a way of glossing events in the narrative text in obvious ways but at the same time neutralizing these same aspects by teasing out their allusive potential so others do not pounce on them and unduly overload an interpretation of authorial intent that does not consciously exist. Thus, “Sailors along the Soul” (*BT* 1992) flirts with the legend of the Flying Dutchman, “The Green Captain’s Tale” (*TB* 1993) invites associations with Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798), and “Marmordesse” uses Arnold Böcklin’s 1880 painting *Isle of the Dead* as a visual correlative. So, too, like Ballard using Dali’s paintings *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) and *Sleep* (1937) as clear visual cues for his Vermilion Sands stories “The Screen Game” (1963) and “Cry Hope, Cry Fury!” (1966), I homage Ballard homaging Dali by using a background detail from *Sleep* in my own “Nights at Totem Rule” (*TB* 1993).

On other occasions, the resonances are far more rigorously sought and prized. “Swordplay” (*RN* 2007), for example, is a Tom Rynosseros tale with distinct parallels to Scheherazade’s use of tale-telling as a strategy for forestalling her own death at the hands of the Sultan Shahryar. Tom seeks to use the Arthurian tale of Excalibur being returned to the Lady of the Lake to convince a sentient sword not to kill him, only to find that the story shifts and turns in the telling to become larger, less planned, and more organic, taking whatever it needs to fulfill itself. As the author, I can only say that this is exactly how it was in terms of unfolding events being brought to the page. Faced with Tom’s terrible crisis of how to distract and dissuade this bitter and deadly AI while lying exhausted, semiparalyzed, and nearly delirious within its strike radius, I too went wherever Tom found himself being forced to take it as an ad hoc, improvised thing born of desperation and gallows ingenuity. The result—I can only assert—is as it reads today, with that one intended narrative focus about Excalibur extending out to encompass the net of Indra and other motifs, and in the process finally persuading *me* as well as the sword. I realized only later that I had inadvertently given myself a true taste of

Scheherazade's dilemma in the process. Like the familiar and well-worn parabolic vectors of the postapocalyptic future and the medieval reset, the mythic elements squirmed and struggled to become something both self-renewing and yet eternally new. While such mythic resonances readily occur in conventional mimetic fiction as well, they rarely do so without a disproportionate tendency toward bloat, bathos, and heavy-handedness. The medieval reset may provide its own mawkish and simplistic excesses, of course, but the successes—shown in a single example of an antique future like *Star Wars* (1977; along with its generous use of other thematic standards from the parabolic approach)—can be quite surprising and, I would suggest, remain much more tonally comfortable within their portentous trappings.

The Sea-Change

Once we adopt the genre standard of the postapocalyptic future, saddled as often as not with the associated simplifications and modifications of the medieval reset, we invariably get the sea change, arguably one of science fiction and fantasy's main and most enduring attractions for readers, that is, serving up all manner of wonders, marvels, and unexpected things as the familiar world is turned, indeed, into "something rich and strange." Whether the means of delivering them is nuclear holocaust, environmental collapse, breakthroughs in science, or alien invasion, the result is to make the narrative setting strikingly different to the quotidian one we know, if for no other reason than to trigger a sense of wonder within a sufficient suspension of disbelief for readers leading mundane lives at this particular moment in the history of the world. Functionally, such wonders can be everything from exotic, often incidental staging and eye candy (dare we allow mind candy, since concepts are often involved?) to elements for delivering theme and resonance. And an apocalypse is not essential for having them. Evolutionary trends, sufficient time, and the workings of Realpolitik are enough, theoretically, to bring us the wonders of planofarming and genetic engineering that we find in Cordwainer Smith's far-future societies and even in the prevailing antique cast that is part of its signature style. Many writers of speculative and imaginative fiction even forego or abandon the rational explication of such wonders altogether, simply adopting whatever is required as a given. In other words, the kingdom of [insert name] exists in the land of [insert name] simply because it does. It's worth noting in this regard that Anne McCaffrey's dragon novels were originally showcased as science fiction, not heroic fantasy. The novels are set on the planet Pern orbiting the star Rukbat, and the medieval reset found there was the result of colonial isolation and the centuries-long depredations of the Threads.ⁱⁱ The rigors of science fictional backstory simply became less necessary and presumably less desirable with time.

In a very real sense, this use of the medieval reset as a given and its associated sea change allows, in functional terms, what is very much a return to Tzvetan Todorov's 1973 classifications for the use of the marvelous in fantastic literature. Todorov's *hyperbolic marvelous* covers distorted reference, misunderstanding, and the exaggerated and erroneous report, which is frequently the result of fear, ignorance, and embellishment by the fireside storyteller. The *exotic marvelous* manifests when natural and supernatural phenomena are reported together as factual observation, with the known data tending to validate the false by supportive association. His *instrumental marvelous* is the area of possible but as yet unrealized technological devices, such as

when magic carpets and flying broomsticks provide fanciful antecedents for airplanes and hovercraft. His final classification, the *scientific marvelous*—the nineteenth-century progenitor of what we now call science fiction—is where the supernatural is given a rational explanation but operates according to laws not yet known to science, as with faster-than-light travel and interstellar colonies (Todorov 1973, 55–57).

All these forms can be found in the antique future, whether manifested as interstellar settings like Herbert's Arrakis, Smith's Pontoppidan, or Vance's Big Planet, or earthbound locales such as Ballard's Vermilion Sands or Bradbury's Green Town, Illinois. It can also be argued that trends in imaginative storytelling between, say, 1950 and the first decade of the twenty-first century show a distinct return to the exotic and instrumental marvelous at the expense of the scientific. The parabola, by its nature of accommodation and passing on, takes whatever it needs and allows whatever is needed, sometimes as planned and conscious steps taken by a knowing author, just as often as the result of working with wholly or largely unconsidered recurring forms within storytelling.

The Evocative Evasion

A final key element the first three writers in my list (in particular) taught me to prize, and work to replicate, is a technique I have long called the evocative evasion—the use of often minimal, euphonious allusions that suggest wonderfully strange, mysterious, savvy, and sometimes half-known things: a life-form, a place, an artifact, the décor and feel of the future, or an alien place in just a few apt words. Cordwainer Smith has it in his richly evocative use of terms like *planoforming*, *cranching*, *congohelium*, *locksheets*, and *wirepoints*, *Go-Captains*, and *Manshonyaggers*, and even in words like *Instrumentality* and *Lords and Ladies* themselves, which by simple capitalization, transcend in context all mere known precedents. Jack Vance can so casually toss off *hangman tree*, *termagant*, *house-ghoul*, *starmenter*, and *merling* in the right combinations and transport us effortlessly to far worlds and distant times. Ballard speaks of drained swimming pools, abandoned launch gantries, Zapruder frames, and spinal landscapes and suddenly we know—or almost know—what is meant, and relish the near knowing for the force of the recognition it almost brings.

This simple yet judgment-intensive trick is often the quickest, most potent, bravura way of creating a sense of something other that feels just right and is a major factor behind what I like to call “voice of truth” in writing classes: that quality of confidence, sure-handedness, and élan that lets readers know that this time they have lucked out and it's the real deal. They are in good hands. The major Surrealist painters had this knack with their striking, paradigm-rattling images and evocative titles, an interface where word, concept, and image collided to powerful, often numinous, effect: again Magritte's *A Little of the Bandit's Soul*, for instance, or de Chirico's *The Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914), Alberto Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.* (1932), and Dali's *The Chemist of Ampurdan Looking for Absolutely Nothing* (1936). The tension, the immanence, the numinous recognition, and even the very *shape* of the words on the page yoked to such works made word and image fresh and vibrant again, rich and dangerous, the way the very best sf and fantasy was able to and still can on a good day.

It is little wonder that Irving Wardle wrote in the *Observer* in 1966 that Surrealism and the higher science fiction are “both last-ditch retreats of the romantic imagination” (27). It would be inappropriate to comment on my own competence with this prized skill, except to say that an earlier career as a professional songwriter and musician at least indicates a working respect for euphony, rhythm, and economy of expression in the relevant key areas. In storytelling terms, I am inordinately proud of coinings that came exactly as needed, such as “shatterwrack” (the glass from a broken car window), “flamfeudine” (someone employed to protect players of fire chess from errant dust devils), “brinraga” (a wind), “aerotropt” (a flying AI), “corio” (a funeral practice), and “charvolant” itself (a rejigging of the French expression *char volant*—literally, flying car—to name a common type of kite-drawn sandship in Tom’s day).

When one enthusiastic reader once asked how I knew to put the words “after all” in the final paragraph of the final page of the final story in *Twilight Beach*, I could only answer that it didn’t seem right any other way.

The message? The words of Eye? Of course Tom played them, heard them once, twice, alone, with not even Cota by him. I could give you the few hundred words, make *Rynosseros* real by them, but that can wait. For now it is enough that Cota was taken into hiding, to another place in the bittersweet redemption of his own past, another attempt. For now enough that you see how it came to be that there was a ship that ran the corridors of AI, that ran before lightnings and was known as *Disinherited* and *Deceiver* and to some *Ishmael*, to others *Leopard*, but that had its own true name, though maimed and murdered and resurrected to its own true destiny, the ship of the Blue Captain after all, the Madman Aspirant, the great corsair, yes, the pirate, Tom Rynosseros. (“Ship’s Eye,” *TB*, 270)

It would seem that both Todorov and Wardle were on to something and that the minstrels, bards, and troubadours who once used sound parabolic traditions to spin their yarns afresh, exactly as circumstances dictated, later went on to find themselves at home writing science fiction stories, arguably the dreamsongs and vital touchstones of the new millennium.

i. Vance, Jack. Personal conversation (video recording) 25 December 1995, cited in *Hard-Luck Diggings: The Early Jack Vance*, Terry Dowling and Jonathan Strahan (Eds.), Subterranean Press 2010, p.245.

ii For example, *Dragonflight* (1968).