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Terry Pratchett's *Carpe Jugulum*

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## A Bloodless Coup, Metaphorically: Representations of 'Progress' in Terry Pratchett's *Carpe Jugulum*

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The key question, of course, is what kind of description is intended here? Surely it is not a realistic description of the situation, but what Wallace Stevens called 'description without place', which is what is proper to art. This is not a description which locates its content in a historical space or time, but a description which creates, as the background of the phenomena it describes, an inexistent (virtual) space of its own, so that what appears in it is not an appearance sustained by the depth of reality behind it, but a de-contextualized appearance, an appearance which fully coincides with real being. To quote Stevens again: 'What it seems it is and in such seeming all things are.' (Žižek 2008, p.5)

Slavoj Žižek relies on that poet of 'fresh perception', Wallace Stevens (Serio 2007, p.3), to draw a distinction between 'realistic' and 'artistic' descriptions, but the short passage quoted above is certainly relevant to our topic here, Fantasy literature. A 'description without place [...] which creates an inexistent space of its own' – there is something analogous here to how a Fantasy text is structured.

Fantasy literature is often dismissed as mere escapism, but what is usually missed is that its 'realist' formation (what I call the Fantasy *Pragmatikos*) allows it to mirror the structures of our social experience (our 'reality') and thus render it 'about us.' Of course, this being *Fantasy* literature, a Fantasy text must necessarily contain elements that are beyond or outside the social experience of our 'reality' (what I call the Fantasy *Allos*), but the presence of, for example, 'fantastical beasts,' should not lead us *automatically* to dismiss a text as somehow childish. The Fantasy *Allos* can certainly appeal to our wonder and

invite us to take a child-like sense of delight in the ‘pure imagination’ of the author (think maybe of the poison-spurred Gallivespians in Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* or the brilliantly intricate Stiltspears in China Miéville’s *Iron Council*), or appeal to daydreams of omnipotence (whether muscular, as in Howard’s Conan, or magical, as in Le Guin’s Ged), but the Fantasy *Allos* can also be a way not only to make us look again, but to make us look at the familiar *differently*.

In Fantasy, the outsider, the *other*, does not have to be from a different culture or social group but can actually be from a different *species* (as in the house-elves in Harry Potter or Miéville’s insect-human *khepri*). The valences of subjectivity do not have to be alluded to or demonstrated through the acts of characters, but can get up and talk, run, jump, fly or swim (as in Pullman’s super-ego daemons). The abstract is not confined to the plane of thought, but can collapse into the ‘real’ of the Fantasy *Pragmatikos* so that it is rendered *palpable* (as in the use of ‘belief’ as a kind of rocket-fuel of the gods in Pratchett’s *Small Gods* and *Hogfather*). In short, Fantasy can be a brilliant way, with its ‘complex combination of the familiar and unfamiliar’ (Armitt 2005, p.42), to approach the political and ideological because it allows a treatment that is not available to more ‘realistic’ texts.

I hope to demonstrate the ‘freshness of view’ that Fantasy literature can offer in the context of Terry Pratchett’s wittily-titled 1998 vampire thriller, *Carpe Jugulum*, by showing not only how this most political of his novels foregrounds the notion of ideological ‘quilting’ (of the heavily loaded term, ‘progress’), but also how this highly provocative treatment is entirely dependent on it being carried out in an ‘inexistent space of its own’ located outside ‘historical space and time’, in other words, in the (virtual) medium of the Fantasy genre. *Carpe Jugulum*, as we shall see, is able to approach the ‘real

being' of 'progress' precisely *because* it makes a Žižekian 'de-contextualized appearance'.

### **Introduction: Vampires with a 'Y'**

'You what?' said Nanny.

'You just ...killed someone?' said Agnes.

'Of course. We *are* vampires', said Vlad. 'Or, we prefer, vampyres. With a "y". It's more modern. Now, do come and meet my father'. (*Carpe Jugulum*, p.90)

'Progress' is a leitmotif that runs throughout *Carpe Jugulum*, manifesting itself as an idea that is valued by three separate groups. First, we have the vampire-modernizers, the Magpyrs, determined to throw off the shackles of old-fashioned, 'traditional' vampiring and become vampires with a 'y'. Next, we have the forward-looking Verence, King of Lancre, desperate to finally bring his kingdom into the Century of the Fruitbat with social reform and a policy of tolerance and, lastly, we have the priest of the reformed Church of Om, Mightily Oats, the embodiment of the values of an up-to-date religion who is *most definitely not* interested in burning anyone who is an infidel. Each should, of course, be considered as having a relation and attitude to 'progress' that is essentially *comic*, yet Pratchett's treatment manoeuvres the reader into a position where it can be seen that for each group 'progress' is a notion that is heavy with ideological import. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper only allows for an analysis of the first two groups, the vampires and King Verence, twinned as they through language and theme, but Mightily Oats' relation to 'progress' will certainly be worthy of consideration at some later stage.

## **'New-Vampirism' versus 'Liberal-Absolutism': The Fantasy Staging of 'Pure' Ideology**

In some ways, *Carpe Jugulum* can be seen as a staging of the Foucauldian notion that ideology manifests itself in its micro-practices, for what we have in this text are two groups, the vampires and Verence, for whom *personal* 'progress' is inextricably entwined with and naturally extended to *political* 'progress'.

Personal 'progress' for the vampire leader, Count Magpyr, means escape from 'traditional' vampiring. He believes that 'vampire[s] of the old school' (*CJ*, p.115), in other words, 'the stupid school' (*CJ*, p.115), have been inhibited and subjugated by entrenched behaviourisms and phobias that are mere 'cultural conditioning' (*CJ*, p.49). In order to counter-act what he sees as this pernicious influence, the Count has embarked on his own programme of (counter-) cultural conditioning for his family. A series of measures has been instigated to ensure that 'tradition [is] overturned' (*CJ*, p.175) and that his family are immunized from sunlight (*CJ*, p.135), garlic (*CJ*, p.88-9), running water (*CJ*, p.49), holy symbols and holy water (*CJ*, p.138). Count Magpyr is also keen to acclimatize his family to the civilizing delights of wine (*CJ*, p.135, 137), and it is clear that he will 'break with a stupid and superstitious past' (*CJ*, p.112) wherever possible, foregoing, for example, the 'customary' evening dress (except, of course, in the evening!) (*CJ*, p.85) and the use of bats or rats as spies (he prefers, as his name would suggest, magpies) (*CJ*, p.174-5). Here, then, is our first inkling that, while 'progress' in *Carpe Jugulum* may be the same Signifier as in the most *uber*-realist of texts, its re-contextualization into what constitutes personal 'progress' for *vampires* will force a different kind of appraisal.

Personal 'progress' for Verence also means an embrace of the modern and a rejection of the traditional (albeit within more familiar

parameters since he is human). Just as Count Magpyr applies his ideas in the form of (counter-) cultural conditioning for his family, so too Verence seeks to condition his new-born daughter. His modernity demands, for example, that Little Esme must have the newest crib ‘all the way from Ankh-Morpork’ (*CJ*, p.52) while her education and hand-eye co-ordination training have commenced at two weeks old (*CJ* p.170-1, p.173)! As he says, ‘It’s never too early to start’ (*CJ*, p.171). The treatment of personal ‘progress’ for Verence is not as funny as that of the vampires, lacking as it does the comic effect of juxtaposing the monstrosity expected of vampires with their actual progressiveness, but it is nonetheless foregrounded in its very parallelism with the progressive tendencies of the vampires. Crucially, the echoes in how Verence and the Count treat their families are also echoed in their extension of their notions of ‘progress’ to the political arena.

For the Count, the idea that they are ‘new’ vampires, that they are ‘up-to-date’ (*CJ*, p.109) and ‘advanced thinker[s]’ (*CJ*, p.112) segues naturally into their taking a new position in the world. As his son, Vlad says:

‘Things will be changing, Agnes Nitt,’ he said. ‘My father is right. Why lurk in dark castles? Why be ashamed? We’re vampires. Or rather, vampyres. Father’s a bit keen on the new spelling. He says it indicates a clean break with a stupid and superstitious past’. (*CJ*, p.112)

It is quickly clear that this ‘change’ will involve a takeover of Verence’s kingdom of Lancre:

‘And...you’re taking the country?’ [Agnes] said. ‘Just like that?’  
Vlad gave her another smile, stood up, and walked towards her. ‘Oh, yes. Bloodlessly. Well... metaphorically.’ (*CJ*, p.113)

The overt aggression of the intention is somewhat tempered by the wish for the coup to be *bloodless* (metaphorically!), and this is typical of the vampires' framing of political annexation/control in terms of 'progress', 'modernity' and the dues of civilization. To take a more extended example, look at how Vlad describes the village of Escrow, where the vampires, already firmly in control, have what is described as a 'covenant' with the villagers:

'Do you see how prosperous the place is? People are safe in Escrow. They've seen reason. No shutters on the windows, do you see? They don't have to bar the windows or hide in the cellar [...] They exchanged fear for security'. (*CJ*, p.336)

Escrow is also, according to the vampires, a 'model community [...] [where] humans and vampires learn to live in peace' (*CJ*, p.310), where 'everyone is happy because the vampires visit [...] because of co-operation, not enmity' and 'citizenship', where the 'mayor [...] appreciates being kept informed' (*CJ*, p.336-8). In other words, it is an example of, in the Count's words, 'vampires and humans in harmony at last', where the lack of hostility is 'a model for the future' (*CJ*, p.118). *Pax vampira*, one might say, power justified by its 'civilizing' benefits, a situation in which, as the Count says, 'there is no *need* for [any] animosity' (*CJ*, p.181).

Yet, of course, Pratchett works hard to undermine the vampires' professed values of 'progress' at every turn. Aside from the obvious fact that the Count wishes to seize power in Lancre, the ideological coordinates of the vampires are shown to have a distinctly Fascist-authoritarian edge. Consider the following extract where the values of personal 'progress' are explicitly juxtaposed with a Fascistic interpretation of the survival of the fittest:

The Countess walked over to the window and gingerly pulled aside the curtain...Grey light filtered in. The Countess shuddered and turned her face away.

‘You see? Still harmless. Every day, in every way, we get better and better,’ said Count Magpyr cheerfully. ‘Self help. Positive thinking. Training. Familiarity. Garlic? A pleasant seasoning. Lemons? Merely and acquired taste [...] There’s a new world coming, and there won’t be any room in it for those ghastly little gnomes or witches or centaurs [...] Away with them! Let us progress! They are unfitted for survival!’ (*CJ*, p.181-2)

The above are thoughts that echo Vlad’s earlier Fascistic aside:

‘The place is just full of...well, remnants. I mean...centaurs? Really! They’ve got no business surviving. They’re out of place. And frankly all the lower races are just as bad. The trolls are stupid, the dwarves are devious, the pixies are evil and the gnomes stick in your teeth. Time they were gone. Driven out’. (*CJ*, p.113)

And then there are the *actual* conditions of power in the village of Escrow, seen as we witness the ‘taxing’ of the villagers through the eyes of Agnes. Taxes are ‘not onerous’, the Count assures them (*CJ*, 108), just ‘a little drop of blood’, ‘it *used* to be so much worse’ (*CJ*, p.338), yet the villagers lining up to be ‘taxed’ look like ‘pigs queuing for Hogswatch’. Agnes cannot help noticing the face of the ‘happily co-operative’ mayor as she ‘feels the terror rising around her’ (*CJ*, p.338):

As the mayor turned back, he met Agnes stare. She looked away, not wanting to see that expression. People were good at imagining hells, and some they occupied while they were alive. (*CJ*, p.339)

No wonder they do not have to place bars over their windows – does the ‘freedom’ offered by the Count not evoke the Foucauldian reading of penal systems where altruistic ideals of enlightenment are a mask for a brutal authoritarianism that ultimately turns *the whole of society into an extended prison* (White 1979, p.107)? It is clear that the Count is sincere. He genuinely seems to believe that his version of ‘progress’ both for vampires and those subject to the ‘covenant’ is an



improvement on the past. We can note, for example, that the Count provides self-justification *even when he does not need to* (as his addressees are already subject to his mind control) (*CJ*, p.108) and that he is genuinely astonished when he discovers that the villagers actually preferred being subject to ‘traditional’, *monstrous* vampiring as embodied by the old Count (‘You can’t possibly prefer *that?! He’s a monster!*’ (*CJ*, p.400-2)). But, for the villagers, this is hell on earth; they are just ‘meat’ to the vampires, albeit ‘meat’ that is nodded to and smiled at in accordance with Count Magpyr's enlightened values (*CJ*, p.338).

So, to recap, ‘progress’ for the vampires is not only a personal frame that they apply to their escape from ‘tradition’, but also the political, *ideological*, frame by which they justify their proposed takeover of Lancre, the extermination of ‘lesser creatures’ and their absolute exploitation of the villagers of Escrow. It is worth pausing here, before we continue to the crucial comparison with King Verence, to consider this version of ‘progress’ in the light of our thesis that the power of Fantasy literature’s approach to the political and ideological lies in its allowing of a treatment that is unavailable to more ‘realistic’ texts.

Vampires escaping a superstitious past. Fascistic repression of centaurs. Taxing villagers with blood – the surface content of *Carpe Jugulum* is obviously unrealistic on a certain level. But can we say that re-contextualizing into the (virtual) space of Discworld somehow *subtracts* this surface content (we cannot take vampires seriously, after all), leaving as its residue a ‘reality’ on the level of conceptuality? Surely it is exactly the lack of one-to-one correspondences with ‘real’-world individuals that allows us to gaze on the foregrounded political concepts (the Fascism that professed values of ‘progress’ may hide) in what can be likened to, to return to Wallace Stevens again, a

state of ‘pure being’? In other words, the (usually hidden) ideological dimension to declarations of ‘progress’ is made visible and crystallized for our contemplation in the text through its very attachment to the inexistent vampires. It would, however, be a mistake to consider that *Carpe Jugulum*’s capacity to treat the political in ways not open to a more ‘realistic’ text lies solely in its power to place familiar concepts in the mouths of unfamiliar, inexistent beings. As we shall see, although Verence is human (and not, therefore, an ‘inexistent being’), the fact that he is delivered from any kind of ‘real’ social or historical space is crucial to Pratchett’s radical treatment of ‘progress’ as a ‘quilted’ Signifier.

Verence, at first glance, apparently stands in contrast to the vampires because his ideological framework for ‘progress’ is bound with what we might see as ‘doing good’ for his kingdom. After all, by contrast to the Count, who wishes to establish a kind of (conceptually) fascist state, Verence wishes to institute a kind of ‘forward-looking’ [absolute-] liberalism, with democracy (*CJ*, p.40), sanitation (*CJ*, p.41), religious and racial toleration (*CJ*, p.58) and a Society for the Betterment of Mankind (*CJ*, p.57), and, of course, we have learnt over the course of the four novels in which he has previously appeared that his sincerity is not in doubt and that Verence too genuinely believes that his ‘new world’ is an improvement on the past (in other words, that it represents ‘progress’). Yet, despite the fact that everything to this point suggests that Pratchett has brought Verence and vampires together for purposes of *contrast* (difference), there is ample reason to suspect that they have also been brought together for purposes of *comparison* (similarity). The treatment, as we shall see, certainly invites the question: just *what* exactly is the difference between the two?

What Pratchett does first is to bind Verence and the vampires together in language. The effect of this is to demonstrate that, whatever the ideological differences, the political desire of both Verence and the vampires is framed by the same references to ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’. To take a few examples, the Count’s talk of ‘a new world order indeed’ (*CJ*, p.27) becomes Verence’s ‘there’s a new world order’ (*CJ*, p.60) just thirty pages later, while Verence’s ‘the world is changing’ (*CJ*, p.60) and ‘the sunlight of the dawning millennium’ (*CJ*, p.61) are echoed in ‘things will be changing’ (*CJ*, p.112) and ‘the glow that marked the rising sun’<sup>1</sup> (*CJ*, p.134).

Next, Pratchett subtly manoeuvres the vampires and Verence so that there are exact (but inverted) parallels between how the two choose to rule. Take, for example, the situation of the Escrow villagers. Tied into a ‘covenant’ which suggests a bargain freely entered into, it is apparent from the way they line up in the middle of the night like prisoners in a punitive roll call (*CJ*, p.337) that this agreement is *coerced* and that they must, in effect, ‘choose what is already given to them’ (Žižek 1989, p.165).

Now compare the villagers’ position to the situation of the Lancre subjects of Verence in this extraordinary comic reversal:

Verence was technically an absolute ruler and would continue to be so provided he didn’t make the mistake of repeatedly asking Lancre subjects to do anything they didn’t want to do. (*CJ*, p.306)

In Lancre, in short, it is not the *subjects* who are subject to the forced choice, but the king, the absolute ruler, who *must choose what is already given to him!*

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1 The conceptual historian Quentin Skinner notes that, when applied to ideologies, time becomes an interactive factor not only in locating but in constituting ideas, and that the specifically fascist conception of time is as *renewable*, in other words, ‘a new dawn is breaking’ (see Freedman 74–5). It is reasonable, to say the least, to think that Pratchett’s wording is not accidental.

And let us look for a moment at what is ‘stipulated’ in the ‘contract’ between King Verence and ‘His Majesty, the Lancrestian subjects’:

The people of Lancre wouldn’t dream of living in anything other than a monarchy. They’d done so for thousands of years and knew that it worked [...] [The king’s] job as they saw it was to mostly stay in the palace, practice the waving, have enough sense to face the right way on coins and let them get on with the ploughing, sowing, growing and harvesting. It was, as they saw it, *a social contract*. They did what they always did, and he let them. (*CJ*, p.58 my emphasis)

‘They did what they always did, and he let them’ – can we not also say that the obverse is equally valid? Could this not be reversed to say, ‘He did what he always did, and they let him’? This is an anti-contract. A grotesque, hilarious parody of Rousseau – a contract that mutually binds the contractees to complete freedom from any binding!

At first glance, this comparison of freedoms may seem to be in Verence’s favour – certainly the modern liberal reader will respond to the lack of exploitation in Verence’s model. But Pratchett’s radical treatment should give us pause for thought in two respects.

First, Verence’s (comic/fantastic) lack of any power actually serves to illuminate the fact that value systems, however ‘progressive’, however ‘enlightened’, however ‘humane’ are always underpinned by force. This, in turn, suggests that the only difference between him and the vampires is, in fact, purely formal with the one being just the same as the other *in potentia*.

Second, the text manoeuvres so that the desirability of the different ideological stances on ‘progress’ offered by Verence and the vampires can be seen as *purely a(n) (arbitrary) matter of perspective*. Although, according to our liberal values, Verence’s ideas of ‘progress’

involving democracy and tolerance seem enlightened and benign, Pratchett is careful to show us that they are certainly not considered so by the Lancrestians, in other words, by those who would actually be subject to them:

The people of Lancre could not be persuaded to accept a democracy at any price [...] on the basis that governing was what the King ought to do and they'd be sure to tell him if he went wrong [...] Lancrestians seldom changed anything [...] [T]his was depressing King Verence [...] His plans for better irrigation and agriculture were warmly applauded by the people of Lancre, who then did nothing about them. Nor did they take any notice of his scheme for sanitation, i.e., that there should *be* some [...] They'd agreed to the idea of a Royal Society for the Betterment of Mankind, but since this largely consisted of as much time as Shawn Ogg had to spare on Thursday afternoons Mankind was safe from too much Betterment for a while. (*CJ*, p.40, p.41, p.57)

'A Royal Society for the Betterment of Mankind' – this is wrapped up as a joke, but do not these words conjure up some vague warning of threat, some intimation of punishment? If Verence were in a position to push through his ideas, it can only be concluded that this would be just as great an imposition, and thus just as reprehensible, as those actually imposed on the villagers of Escrow by the vampires.

We should note, to return to our original thesis once more, that Pratchett's radical treatment of 'progress' is facilitated by the Fantasy space, for it allows two conceptual points to be rendered visible. First, there is a revelation of the indissoluble link between (enlightened) 'progress' and the excesses of power whereby the imposition of the former can be seen to be utterly dependent on the latter (revealed in the fantastic reversal of the ruler-subject positions). Second, there is a staging of ideological fields (or Master Signifiers) 'quilting' a free-floating Signifier. 'Progress' in *Carpe Jugulum* is devoid of any meaning, it is unfixed, *empty*, beyond that which is imputed to it

through the frameworks of Verence's 'Liberal-Absolutism' or the vampires' 'New-Vampirism'. The concept of 'progress' is, in other words, the stake of the struggle between the two competing ideological frameworks. Verence seeks to wield bloodless power (literally), while the vampires seek to wield bloodless power (metaphorically), but both ultimately seek to wield power as a means to implement their own ideological 'quilt'.

Only in an inexistent space, a space unfettered by 'real' historical-political considerations, can we have rulers who must choose what is already given to them and contractees bound by freedom from binding. Only in an inexistent space can we have 'Liberal-Absolutism' and 'Enlightened-Vampirism' fighting for domination. Only in an inexistent space can we have surface content that must be subtracted because it cannot be taken seriously. But only in an inexistent space can we have a subtraction of surface content that renders visible 'pure' notions that must be taken very seriously indeed.

'What seems it is and in such seeming all things are' – we are back with Wallace Stevens one last time. Can we not say by way of conclusion that the *Carpe Jugulum Pragmatikos* is in some sense *more* 'real', at least on a conceptual level, than a 'realist' text? Can we not say that, paradoxically, 'real being' can only be staged in 'the nothing that is not there', the 'empty' arena of a Fantasy novel?

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