Tracing the Subconcious



Lafferty's Short Stories: Some Mystagogic Goshwow

Sheryl Smith

Editor's Note: What follows had been originally requested "by this person with an ordinal for a last name" (Guy Lillian III) for a chapbook to be distributed at a Southeastcon, where R.A. Lafferty was to be guest of honour (which will explain the references to convention activities like parties and roof-top missle launching). Sheryl remarks that the initial composition of this paper was "ten weeks of nothing but list-scribbling," all of which left her with about 75 titles especially worth discussing plus a sense of trying to organize "an unorganizable topic." But not wanting to lose this chance of proselytizing an entire convention, she finally did the undoable. I ask the reader to pass over lightly this critic's depreciating comments on literary analysis in general and her own, in particular: one can say only that if everybody possessed Sheryl Smith's ability at textual discrimination, most critical writing would be unnecessary--but then so would journals like the RQ.

I can always start by putting Lafferty into one of Smith's Homespun Larger Literary Contexts--in fact, since I've never begun one of these things any other way, it's probably unavoidable. There are, for my purposes, two major schools of s-f (and indeed, of fiction in general if it should come to that). The socio-anthropological school, which is the majority, uses the genre primarily to construct environments, both natural (the Analog planet-builders, et al.) and social (the political extrapolators, the alien-culturists, the if-this-goes-on forecasters, the satirists, etc.), in order to express what is true of human beings in relation to exterior, usually group, situations. Fiction as an art form, with the extensibility, dense detail and precise thought that only prose can comfortably accommodate, evolved as the vehicle of these social views. Yet the very flexibility of prose leaves room for a second, minority use of it by the personal/mythological school. This approach is oriented toward the expression of internal human truths, which can be manifest both in intensive, strongly-emotional character studies (exemplified in s-f by Harlan Ellison), and in the use of strongly-evocative symbolic material, the common stock of all mythologies, whose roots lie deep within the human psyche. And this is where R.A. Lafferty comes in.

Since it is not only possible but fashionable to divine myth in the most specific social situation, and social convention behind the most primeval myth, I'll try and clue you about what this archetypal whoopjamboreehoo is, to go with the above designation of what it isn't. Which may be tenuous going from a critical standpoint, as it all boils down to whether an artwork has a mythic feel to it. When a piece of art has archetypal symbols that are alive, alive-o and functioning,* they seem to radiate more meaning than can be grasped, and stir more emotional echos than can be accounted for.

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*Conveniently enough, the same myth (a modern dress version of a classic Indo-European hero) in its dead and living states may be seen by comparing the Superman comic book with Superman: The Movie.

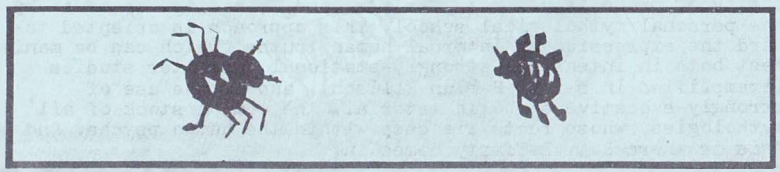
This is one of those statements that are bound to puzzle everyone but those who have experienced what I'm talking about, like--very like--those ubiquitous descriptions of mysticism. You'll just have to try some myth-art and see if you catch on.

Since science-fiction is required (by me) to have its fantastic elements grounded, at least implicitly, in an empirically-consistent, materialistic universe, myth needs delicate handling if it is to work in this form without turning it to fantasy. Conversely, if the matter-of-fact science fictional milieu is allowed to ride roughshod over a myth, so that its structures are distorted or its symbols are too constricted to resonate--which happens, by the way, in Poul Anderson's "Goat Song"--then the archetypal essence is lost. (Archetypes are tricky, though: sometimes they pop up and thrive in the weirdest places, viz. Blackie DuQuesne in Doc Smith's cosmic pinball arcade. However, mythological s-f is more than one archetype in a landscape of tinkertoys.) Two s-f writers besides Lafferty who have effectively combined myth and science-fiction are Roger Zelazny (in his pristine early period) and J.G. Ballard (in his Vermilion Sands stories). Both effected this by taking the basic patterns of specific myths and reworking them (with personal embellishments) to fit science-fictional contexts; and their best results using this method are excellent indeed.

But what Lafferty does is something else again, for he is not refashioning old myths so much as recasting the elements of both myth and science-fiction (archetypes and concepts respectively) into something all his own, to which the vigorous humour of the American tall tale and an inimitable verbal dexterity also contribute. Prime Lafferty is among the best myth and the best science-fiction I have experienced, and his finest work reflects the storyteller's art at its most luminous.

It is now down-to-specifics time, so those of you within the sound of my pen who'd rather be reading Lafferty than me--or are inalterably underwhelmed by him and only came for the parties--may leave quietly whenever you like by way of the margins.

Well, at least I seem to have blundered into a way to organize this thing: I shall (ahem!) discuss some of these stories in terms of myth, and others in terms of science fiction, ruthlessly jettisoning those of my 75 semifinalists that seem least pertinent to these two categories, and if there's anything indispensable left over I'll see what I can fake when the time comes.



One of the characteristic shapes of myth is the cycle, the vehicle of endlessness and often of regeneration. Lafferty's three great end-of-the-world novels--Past Master, Fourth Mansions, Arrive at Easterwine--are comedies of (implicit) rebirth; and cyclic themes and structures are also prevalent in his shorter work.

The cycle at its most positive--what Lafferty elsewhere calls the ascending spiral--can be seen in the richly marvellous "Boomer Flats." In this tale three scientists discover a group of living Neanderthals -- the Lafferteian version of "the link that is never really missing, the link between the clay and the blood" -- resulting in a death-and-rebirth experience in which the reader participates more literally than is usual. Behold:

> There is, however, a gap in the Magi set, due to the foolish dying of Arpad Arkabaranan...
>
> One more is needed so that this set of Magi may be formed again. The other two aspects being already covered, the third member could well be a regularized person. It could be an older person of ability, an eminent. It could be a younger person of ability, a pre-eminent.
>
> This person may be you. Put your hand to it if you have the surety about you, if you are not afraid of green snakes in the cup (they'll fang the face off you if you're afraid of them), or of clay-mud, or of comet dust, or of the rollicking world between.



Lafferty also employs a recurrent cycle which is one of repetition without renewal. A three-part repetition pervades the very structure of one of his most flawless (and funny) tales, "Slow Tuesday Night" -- an ironic title since it deals with a world speeded up beyond reason, e.g.:

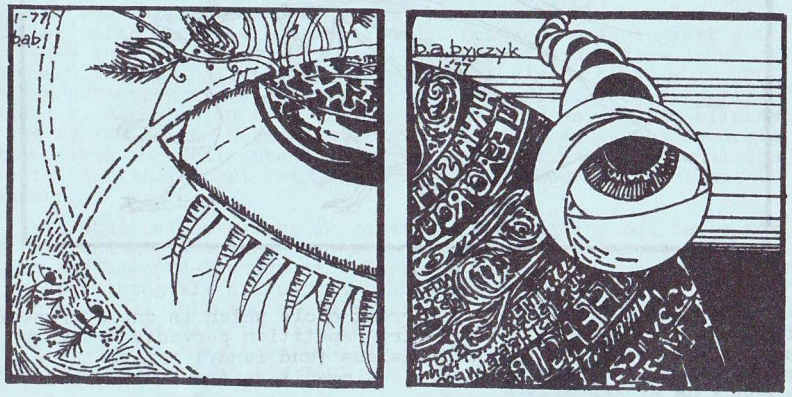
> The reviews of the first five minutes were cautious ones; then real enthusiasm was shown. This was truly one of the greatest works of philosophy to appear during the early and medium hours of the night. There were those who said it might be one of the enduring works, and even have a holdover appeal to the Dawners the next morning.
>
> Hundred-storied buildings had been erected, occupied, obsoleted, and demolished again to make room for more contemporary structures. Only the mediocre would use a building that had been left over from the Day Fliers or the Dawners, or even the Nyctalops of the night before. The city was rebuilt pretty completely at least three times during an eight-hour period.

But though this society is too shallow for rebirth, there is something life-affirming (and exceedingly delightful) in its breathless continuance. (And yes, there's social comment here too -- nothing is mutually exclusive.)

But in "Continued on Next Rock" the cycle takes on a bleaker poignance. It is a recurring personal drama of unrequited love and destruction, in which three progressively-more-recent records in stone build to a present-time climax but not, it seems, an end. The two primordial persons involved have little hope of achieving their mutually-exclusive aspirations except in death, adding to this mythic comedy a near-tragic countertheme which is beautifully supported by the writing.

> "You fear the earth, you fear rough ground and rocks, you fear moister earth and rotting flesh, you fear the flesh itself, all flesh is rotting flesh. If you love not rotting flesh, you love not at all. You believe the bridge hanging in the sky, the bridge hung by tendrils and woody vines that diminish as they go up and up till they are no thicker than hairs. There is no sky-bridge, you cannot go up on it. Did you believe that the roots of love grow upside down? They come out of deep earth that is old flesh and brains and hearts and entrails, that is old buffalo bowels and snakes' pizzles, that is black blood and rot and meaning underground. This is old and worn-out and bloody Time, and the roots of love grow out of its gore."

There is even a Lafferty story with a regressive rebirth cycle: "Incased in Ancient Rind," which is also the most inimitable rampant-pollution story ever penned. In its carbon-shrouded world men revert to Neanderthal-cum-Genesis giants with long life-spans -- but become slow and backward, without the aspirations and bright distinctions of evolved consciousness. But even this has a positive value in that death of one sort is also life of another.



One other primary mythological motif in Lafferty, this one more peculiarly his own, is that there are two simultaneous realities, the everyday and the archetypal, both equally valid. This duality is clearly delineated in a number of Lafferty's stories, with a whole spectrum of positive and negative effects arising from their inter-relationships.

"Days of Grass, Days of Straw" provides the plainest depiction of the two worlds. In precise parallel construction it sets a day of archetypal vitality against what is supposed to be the same day in the orderly outer world. However, fertile and upsetting traces of the archetypal day keep breaking through day two's tissue of predictability, so the ultimate effect is the enrichment of ordinary life.

That these separate realities are at core the two levels of a single personality appears in "The Man Underneath." In this larkish tale the outer (conscious) and archetypal (unconscious) usurp each other's functions, but when they switch places also the business is set right again.

Then there is that mythic gem of a story "The Cliff Climbers," in which is demonstrated that the archetypal world may enrich the everyday one even when it is let in the back door, by mistake. Thus Professor Potter, by whose archaeological misreadings legends are loosed, leaves a legacy so other scholars, in Lafferty's wry view, may do the same:

> We will not record what he carved, as he has already done so, and besides...it was too stilted and stylish...In a later time by another professor who might not have the key to the precise letters themselves, it would be more correctly translated as follows:
>
> "I have slain the nightmare and set down the terror. I have climbed beyond dizziness on the cliff that once hung down from the sky before there was a world below it. Even the eagles when they were new would not fly this high. And this above all, while others have ridden on the wind, I only have ridden on the daughter of the wind. This is a red-haired goddess, a strong slight amazon, a magic anemonead with hair like a red sea and shoulders soft and sweet as the night itself. She sways beneath me but will not break, and the early sun is on her and she is silver and flame. Her neck is of living ivory."
>
> And the rest of it would be very hard to translate even by the best paleocalligraphist. But he would know that this was the hand of an ancient poet who had climbed a dizzy cliff to write a hymn to the dawn.

Those are positive relationships between the everyday and archetypal realities; but there are negative aspects in Lafferty as well. In the ironic "Entire and Perfect Chrysolite" the two worlds are sundered from one another completely, for the bright, constricted "Ecumene" (Eurasia) denies the existence of Africa, its primitive counterpart. That the dark world is there nonetheless is proved when some irresponsible people invoke it, finding it a more dangerous place than they are able to realize.

Here's another. In his "four men who know everything" stories, Lafferty writes himself in as "myself, who does not." "Old Halloweens on the Guna Slopes" tells how Lafferty, the fictional character, lost this ability, and personified unconscious forces are shown to cause this loss of specialness. 'Tis a fine piece, and very moving in its haunting implications.

In "Configuration of the North Shore," one of Lafferty's best from the mythological standpoint, the conflict between the two realities takes on a multiplex aspect. Here a dream-quest for a much-desired land is shown as diverting energy from a character's exterior life. His psychiatrist, recognizing the destination as the "Ultimate Arrival Nexus" whose individual achievement (paradoxically enough) confers incalculable benefit on the whole race, forces his patient to resolve the conflict in favour of external reality, then pursues the inner quest himself using spurious dreams to take him there. But the land he reaches, as he is unprepared to deal with it from his own resources, shows the face not of desire, but of fear.



And finally, in "The Ugly Sea" (a lovely story), Lafferty demonstrates that contact with the unconscious, beneficial as it is when proportion is maintained and guidance followed, leads to death if one succumbs too completely.

Finis to that section. Not that I've begun to exhaust Lafferty's rich lode of myth merely by tracing two of its seams through ten stories. But there's still the s-f part to do before I can totter off into the chthonium.

Science-fiction has been widely labeled a "literature of ideas" -- too often in reference to authors who have nothing else to recommend them, but let that pass. Lafferty, perhaps because of his superiority in the more purely-human areas, is rarely mentioned in this connection, though to my mind he has come up with some dazzlers. Here are a few of my favourites.

"Rivers of Damascus" -- would you believe polarized history? This is the most unique and striking of Lafferty's frequent fantasies on the nature of history, of which there is another in this same story, viz: "Patina is the recording and remembering and transmitting surface of everything." And the story is eminently worthy of these mind-blowers. Several "soft" scientists make a movie of the Moslem conquest of Damascus as it is recorded in the patina of the landscape, but with data polarized by the prevalent Damascene view their record of the event looks impossible. But when a too-rigid scientific establishment brands them crackpots, they turn their own polarizing eyes against its hidebound authority; and, this being Lafferty, the upshot is not mere revenge, but renewal.

> Oh, but the great and gracious modification which now became the prime original. (Yes, the Noble Thing itself /science/ was bruised a bit when the modification tore through the old encrustations, but...now, for a while, it was no longer smothered and shriveled.)
>
> But the final, elegant, polarized presentation was like an old promise fulfilled, like a hidden river rediscovered. It was an unfolding, a full-flowing. It was finally to see all dimensions of time and space with the elegant eye.

Which seems to lead naturally to "Through Other Eyes": I don't know why, since its operative idea -- that everyone lives in a unique world of his own perceiving -- is so far from new as to be a philosophical commonplace. (It's really fudging to put this story here, but it's that or put it nowhere.) However, Lafferty illuminates this by realizing a few of these alternate worlds, and by making his character's perception of them, contrary to expectations, a source of disillusionment and divisiveness. Another poignant triumph.

The unaccountably-neglected "Bubbles When They Burst" starts with the common science-fictional question of whether the speed of light can be exceeded. But Lafferty's "yes" is one of those breathless conceptual connections that makes new thoughts of old. The story is basically about the borderlands of materialism; there is, for Lafferty, an unusual amount of science in it; and without leaving this base, he shows how a person at the point of death can be a relay for instantaneous transmission, an identification that brings science and myth very close indeed.

And now, a Lafferteian nosegay of cosmological beginnings. From "The All-At-Once Man," the Big Bang with a tilt:

> Just before the Beginning there was a perfect sphere and no other thing...
>
> Then an exterior speck appeared. This was the Beginning, not the sphere's lone existence...Now there was both contrast and relationship.
>
> Now there was size and mass and temperature, space, time and motion; for there was something to relate to. The sphere was indeed found to be in furious and powerful rotation, now that it could rotate in relation to something. It was in such rapid roation that it deformed itself with its own centrifugal force, it ruptured itself completely and everything thence is from its pieces.
>
> What happened to the speck? Was it consumed in the great explosion? Probably not. Likely it had never existed at all. It was a mere illusion to get things started...

From "Been a Long, Long Time," the Christian view as depicted by the world's only Catholic Laughing Buddha:

> It was a sundering Dawn -- Incandescence to which all later lights are less than candles -- Heat to which the heat of all later suns is but a burnt-out match -- the Polarities that set up the tension forever...
>
> The Creative Event was the Revolt rending the Void in two. The two sides formed, opposing Nations of Lightning split above the steep chasm. Two Champions had it out with a bitterness that has never passed -- Michael wrapped in white fire -- and Helel swollen with black and purple blaze...It has been put into allegory as Acceptance and Rejection, and as Good and Evil; but in the Beginning there was the Polarity by which the universes are sustained.

And from "Nine Hundred Grandmothers," about all we know for sure:

> "...Oh, it was so funny how it began. So joke! So fool, so clown, so grotesque thing! Nobody could guess, nobody could believe."





Set the last, and a test of some sort: what Lafferty does with a run of stock s-f subjects, the type nearly everyone in this ingenuity-laden field has tried to wring for a new twist, rarely (for lack of less specialized qualities like human interest) a viable one. When Lafferty takes up such topics he's not reshuffling spare parts, but refashioning the whole as a vehicle for his own particular vision. Hence his versions seem, not just fresher, but truer than others', and sometimes what he does with a motif seems the very thing it was destined for.

Lafferty's original outlook is already apparent in "The Weirdest World," one of his early stories. It is a first-person account of an amoeboid alien explorer who is marooned on Earth, encounters human society, is unable to cope with it despite his superior abilities, and finally dies. The opening and closing of this typical s-f tale might have been written by anyone; but between these stock borders, the working-out of it all is Lafferty in full flower. For after initial acceptance as a zoological attraction-cum-nightclub novelty act, the alien goes on to acquire great wealth. He loses this, however, when he is declared a non-person by the courts, from which social ostracism and doom naturally follow. You can see there is a quiet verisimilitude at work in this amusing little satire, that makes the more usual abstract motivations (brotherhood and/or xenophobia) ring false indeed.

In "All But The Words" Lafferty tackles the attempt to make radio contact with extraterrestrial intelligence. In one of those logical but loony approaches common to Lafferty characters, the director of this project decides, having failed to raise anyone with universal symbols, to have a compulsive lonely-hearts-club type broadcast some everyday chit-chat. This garners a response from ET's of the same type ("low and common"), but without the flesh-and-blood limitations that keep human blather within reasonable bounds.

"Interurban Queen" is essentially one of those stories that show how a single technological divergence could produce an entirely different society. Choosing a more plausible example than most, Lafferty depicts an America where electric interurban transport had won out over the automobile, which the group-centred interurbanites have outlawed. The picture he paints is of a friendly, idyllic land free of urban blight, agriculture and industry being blended in a lovely, evenly-populated "quasiurbia" unified by convenient public transport. But it is also a land where, competition having yielded completely to cooperation, the individualist and the loner are not tolerated; and those who persist in driving bootleg cars are considered incorrigible menaces to society, whom it is the duty of all right-thinking citizens to shoot on sight in approved vigilante manner. What makes "Interurban Queen" so remarkable, though, is the incredible tonal balance with which Lafferty handles the two sides of this question: I cannot tell, even with inside knowledge of Lafferty's personal politics, where his sympathies lie -- probably a historic first in s-f of this type.

The inventor as social misfit appears periodically in Lafferty stories, as does that peculiarly American trickster-figure, the lovable con man; but only in "Eurema's Dam," his Hugo winner, does the one turn into the other. This "last of the dolts" is described as inventing machines out of a well of absolute incompetence. Inferior to his fellow-men, intimidated by his grandest contraptions, he decided to end it all -- until a little machine he built to have hunches (hence his true mechanical counterpart) shows him that the apparently-superior world is really a warren of fair game, and promises plenty of fun in the plucking.

In "Hog-Belly Honey" Lafferty essays the invention that goes out of control. Told in the first person by this anthropoid-type itinerant genius, it's about how he and his scholarly milquetoast buddy build a nullifier that can selectively dispose of anything useless. They run into trouble, though, when the machine takes this to include useless people. The style here is delightfully suited to the character, full of sly malapropisms, and misconstructions in every sense of the term:

> "A garbage disposal!" he sing out. "The aeons labored to give birth to it through the finest mind -- mine -- of the millenium, and this brother of a giant ape says it is a garbage disposal! It is a new aspect of thought, the novo instauratio, the mind of tomorrow fruited today, and this obscene ogre says it is a Garbage Disposal!! The Constellations do homage to it, and Time has not waited in vain, and you, you splay-footed horse-herder, you call it a GARBAGE DISPOSAL!"
>
> Maurice was so carried away with the thought that he cried a little. It sure is nice when someone agrees with you as long and loud as Maurice did. When he was run out of words he got aholt of the brandy bottle and drunk it all off...
>
> He looked kind of sheepful when he finally woke up.
>
> "I feel better now, outside of feeling worse," he say. "You are right, Spade, it's a garbage disposal."

Ah, "Hole in the Corner"--now who but Lafferty would've seen the parallel earths theory as a vehicle for knockabout vaudeville? In this, Diogenes Pontifex, one of Lafferty's less orthodox scientists, sets up a gateway between the dimensions, and its musical characters as (almost) the same husband comes home three times.

And "Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne," an appropriate wind-up for this little donnybrook as it is the last word in time-travel paradoxes as well as one of Lafferty's very finest short stories. Borrowing the structure of a well-known fairy tale, it concerns the Institute for Impure Science's various attempts to change the past. They first effect a pre-Renaissance revival of classical culture by killing the traitor who sabotaged Charlemagne's treaty with the Moors; however, since the advance this brings about leaves the world, to them, the same as it always was, they then decide to investigate the effect of intellectual attitudes on culture by preventing decisive opposition to the ideas of mediaeval philosopher Ockham from arising. However -- and they are vaguely aware of this -- the previous cultural advance they had effected has turned the formulator of the Razor into the propounder of nihilism, and giving him free rein reduces the Institute and their computer to three savages and a voodoo mask. Their world is also as it always was, but their intimation of the previous situations is clearer still; and by unorthodox (but wonderfully prepared-for) means they manage to destroy the agent of the temporal changes, restoring everything to square one--almost:

> "Did it work, Epikt? Is it done?" Charles Cogsworth asked in excitement. "It must have. I'm here. I wasn't in the last one."...
>
> "Push the button, Epikt!" Diogenes barked. "I think I missed part of it. Let's try again."
>
> "Oh, no, no!" Valery forbade. "Not again. That way is rump of skunk and madness."

In other words, paradoxical worlds both are and are not real -- and if their inhabitants should remember not being in a world where they never existed, it's no dizzier than anything else in the paradox game.

Well, that caps it. I cannot say this paper covers Lafferty's published works, with at least 50 stories of comparable quality on the cutting room floor, and the Three Great Novels (Space Chanty makes four), which are incomparable, wholly disregarded.

In any case, you're on your own from here on out. And once you start reading R.A. you'll realize you didn't need me in the first place. In fact, critics will be drones until they can broadcast their artistic responses via ESP on all wave-lengths, since only personally-experienced art can be of any use to you.

Anybody want to go up on the roof and make these old lists into paper aeroplanes?

