From Belbury to Bernt-arse: The Rhetoric of the Wasteland in Lewis, Orwell and Hoban

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Abstract
Analyzes the rhetorical modes used in mythopoeic literature, using as examples 1984, Riddley Walker, and That Hideous Strength. Focuses on the rhetorical use of the image of the wasteland in these novels.

Additional Keywords
Fantasy—Use of rhetoric; Hoban, Russell. Riddley Walker—Rhetorical devices; Lewis, C.S. That Hideous Strength—Rhetorical devices; Orwell, George. 1984—Rhetorical devices; Rhetoric; Wasteland in That Hideous Strength
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The charge most often levelled at mythopoeic literature is that it is "escapist nonsense". Somehow the belief has grown that novels which use futuristic or fantastic settings are somehow less potent a force in the reader's everyday preoccupations than those which are set in the present and which raise present concerns. Such a belief is based on an erroneous perception of what mythopoeic literature is and what it does. In this paper, I hope to show, by highlighting one major motif found in each of three major mythopoeic works, that mythmakers are formidable rhetoricians, and their works, far from being escapist, are highly polemical and deeply provoking.

The particular rhetorical modes which apply to the mythopoeic are argument and persuasion, the appeal to reason and the appeal to the emotions. But mythopoeic fiction uses these rhetorical appeals in a unique and effective way. It uses as its topoi the device of analogy, but analogy constructed so that the initial appeal is not directly rational or emotional but imaginative. This is the case not only with contemporary mythopoeic literature -- it is the sine qua non of all mythopoeic literature. Fairy stories and ancient myths have this feature in common with the best of science fiction and fantasy and other imaginative fiction.

Mythopoeic literature, including those works I will be using as examples, is a direct offshoot of faery and is governed by the 'ethics of elfland'. Indeed these ethics are highly rhetorical in their intention and operation as G.K. Chesterton reveals in this quotation from his book Orthodoxy:

The things that I believed most [in the nursery], the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things. They are not fantasies: compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism is abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. It is not earth that judges heaven, but heaven that judges earth; so for me at least it was not earth that criticised elfland, but elfland that criticised the earth.1

Chesterton says, in other words, that elfland is an authority on this earth which can and should be heeded: its arguments are the concern, not merely of fantasy-lovers, but of all who have contributed to the state of things on earth. The "ethics of elfland" (it is Chesterton's phrase) are the material, not of escapism, but of confrontation with real issues about the human condition and our collective responsibility for this planet upon which we live.

Mythopoeic literature argues the ethics of elfland. It sets them out in fictional form so that they may, by the imaginative and rational process of metaphorical decoding, become part of our consciousness and of our wills. The mythopoeic is best approached as a rhetorical system, since ethically its implications involve the presentation of truth and the desire to reverse the values of its readers -- or at least, to present choices to them.

Let me turn now to examine some mythopoeic works. I have selected George Orwell's 1984, C.S. Lewis' That Hideous Strength and Russell Hoban's Riddley Walker since they all use the rhetorical figure of 'The Wasteland' by which to argue for human choices in the matter of our responsibility to other humans and to the environment.

I do not intend to engage at length in an expository discourse on the theme of the wasteland nor on T.S. Eliot's seminal poem of the same name. But I am choosing for the purposes of this discussion to see Eliot's vision in two ways. In the first instance, he sees the rather disgusting effects of human habitation on the environment. And in the second, he sees the wasteland as a barrenness of the human spirit. The two are inseparable: Eliot's lavish use of biblical and other religious allusions makes that quite clear. Let me quote some of Eliot's lines as an example:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.
Only There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),2
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a hand full of dust.2

Here Eliot alludes to the valley of dry bones in the biblical vision of Ezekiel; where there is nothing but death, desolation and waste. But the allusion to Ezekiel contains within it the hope of a rebirth, a refreshing of the dry bones and the restoration of the valley. A further biblical reference, this time to Isaiah 22:2, is contained in the suggestion that there is respite to be gained in the shadow of the rock. In the shelter of the rock, humankind needs fear no longer the dark shadows of existential angst that pursue them. There is the sustained rhetoric of the wasteland in the image of the dried out human spirit, which maintains a tension in the poem with the barely articulated rhetoric of hope. Eliot's Wasteland draws its imagery from the Arthurian legends, and there too 'wasteland' and 'hope' exist in dynamic tension awaiting the discovery of the Holy Grail.
The metaphor of the wasteland for the state of human spirit, then, is long established one in western literature, but it receives new rhetorical impetus in its use by the authors I have cited. Here the ‘wasteland’ is seen not only in a spiritual sense, but also in the sense of political, social and psychological desolation.

Orwell and Lewis employ the metaphorical image of a moral, psychological and political wasteland as part of their arguments against the tendency towards totalitarianism which they felt was signified by the changes in the moral and political attitudes of postwar Britain. The kinds of things which attract such euphemistic tags as “freedom of conscience”, “sexual freedom” and “humanitarian methods of punishment” are the targets of both these authors. That they structure their rhetoric differently and that the ultimate outcomes of their dystopian visions are at variance reflects the individual Weltanschauung of the two writers, but authorial attitude also plays a part in the rhetorical process and I will take account of this in my analysis.

Hoban’s rhetoric is concerned with the ultimate physical wasteland — the post-atomic holocaust wasteland that will be this planet as a result of political power-mongering. But although the basic scenario of Hoban’s novel differs from those of Orwell and Lewis his thesis is similar: the wasteland is the desecration of earth’s physical and spiritual “garden” by the artifices of humanity. With theses developed from the earth’s physical and spiritual “garden” by the artifices of humanity. With theses developed from the garden of our culture and our dreams. This technique, Lewis calls the “fogging” technique. This technique, Lewis then has his characters fogging techniques, Lewis then has his characters to argue that the differentiation of the first term is seen to be merely as smoke-screen for a definition of the second term, ‘experimental’ which exploits the unfavorable connotations of the root word ‘experiment’. The link between Public Service ‘jargon’ and the wasteland caused by the sanctioned experiments is more sturdily forged because Lewis also exploits the character Feverstone, and the utterances of that character, in order to achieve Lewis’ own desired effect. The same strategy exactly is used in the TV series Yes, Prime Minister but for a primarily comic impact. Here both the intent and the performance are serious: the desired effect is polemical.

I have also called Lewis’ rhetorical strategy bilateral because he has also used the “fogging” technique here. His ‘authorial’ stance is ‘hidden’, as it were, by the immediate impact of the characters and their uttered rhetoric: the dialogue works against the character and for the author.

Having set up the relationship between jargon and fogging techniques, Lewis then has his characters articulate a Wasteland which is in every way the direct antithesis to the ‘garden’ image of those scriptural and literary paradises which permeate our culture and our dreams.

In fact, Lewis ‘offers a balanced structure of answering Mark by using a refinement of what psychologists call the “fogging” technique. This technique is, in fact, a rhetorical strategy which focuses on one element of a multi-faceted question (in this case the query about qualifications) and ignores the other (and possibly the key) elements. Politicians use the device frequently when they are confronting uncomfortable questions from interviewers or their constituents.

The rhetorical strategy in use here is more complex than that. Lewis is manipulating the speech patterns of his characters in order to argue that the political system which permits jargonistic “fogging” leaves itself open to corruption. The particular kind of corruption which thrives on jargon is that which leaves wasteland in its wake. Closely associated with the speakers of this jargon is the psychological and biological manipulation of the human race. Mark’s mentor, the shark-featured Lord Feverstone, tells Mark to “write down” the activities of the NICE as part of the public-relations program:

"...camouflage it. Only for the present, of course. Once the thing gets going we shan’t have to bother about the great heart of the British Public. We’ll make the great heart what we want it to be. But in the meantime it does make a difference how things are put. For instance, if it were even whispered that the N.I.C.E. wanted powers to experiment on criminals, you’d have all the old women of both sexes up in arms and yapping about humanity: call it re-education or re-education of the mal-adjusted and you have them all slobbering with delight that the brutal era of retributive punishment has at last come to an end. Odd thing it is — the word "experiment" is unpopular, but not the word 'experimental'. You mustn’t experiment on children: but offer the dear little kiddies free education in an experimental school attached to the N.I.C.E. and it’s all correct!” (p. 48)

Lewis’ bilateral rhetorical strategy in this passage is quite clear. The differentiation of the first term is seen to be merely as smoke-screen for a definition of the second term, 'experimental' which exploits the unfavorable connotations of the root word ‘experiment’. The link between Public Service ‘jargon’ and the wasteland caused by the sanctioned experiments is more sturdily forged because Lewis also exploits the character Feverstone, and the utterances of that character, in order to achieve Lewis’ own desired effect. The same strategy exactly is used in the TV series Yes, Prime Minister but for a primarily comic impact. Here both the intent and the performance are serious: the desired effect is polemical.

The gormless character Mark Studdock is a Sociologist and occasionally lapses into sociological jargon. But here the Deputy Director succeeds in not-
binary opposites which permit a straightforward "semiotic" reading of his carefully developed sign systems -- but which also enhances the rhetorical impact of the novel since stereotyping aids in the emotional appeals essential to persuasive discourse. A truncated table of these binary opposites (exploiting the underlying relationships of the elements to either "the Wasteland" or "the Garden") appears below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WASTELAND</th>
<th>GARDEN</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BELSBURY</td>
<td>ST. ANNE'S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STERILITY</td>
<td>Â€œFERTILITYÂ€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUMMER/AUTUMN IMAGES</td>
<td>Â€œGOLD, LIGHT, COMMUNITY, HEALING, LOVEÂ€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOISE</td>
<td>Â€œSCIENTIFIC, Â€œFAITHÂ€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TERRORITY</td>
<td>Â€œFAITHÂ€</td>
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<tr>
<td>HATED</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMBITION</td>
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<td>GREED</td>
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<td>DEMONIC CHANGE IN PERSONALITY</td>
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<td>Â€œABSORPTIONÂ€ Â€œBY MACDOESÂ€</td>
<td>Â€œFAITHÂ€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Â€œSIMPLICITYÂ€</td>
<td>Â€œFAITHÂ€</td>
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<tr>
<td>Â€œFEELING SMALLÂ€</td>
<td>Â€œFAITHÂ€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Â€œINADEQUACYÂ€</td>
<td>Â€œFAITHÂ€</td>
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There is a dual rhetorical purpose in the way Lewis has polarized the elements of the Wasteland and the Garden. Firstly, Lewis intends us to identify with the natural elements which are able to be chosen by, or which are to choose, one or other of the two regimes. Secondly, by maintaining correspondences between the Belbury system and St. Anne's, Lewis manipulates the choices. For example, if one chooses "the Garden" one must also take fertility and obedience as "part of the package deal"; if one chooses healing and love, one must also accept humility and death to one's "self". By the same token, a choice which includes Greed, Power and Ambition also includes torture, hatred and sterility -- and the Wasteland.

Names associated with 'the Wasteland' have a cold, eerie and hard quality -- 'Wither', 'Frost', 'Stone'. Those associated with the Garden are soft, "ordinary" and musical -- Denniston, Dimble and Maggs. The contrast between 'Hardcastle' ('Hard fortress') and 'Ironwood' (ironmaile, softwood, as in the cross of Christ) is extended to their functions in the plot: Fairy Hardcastle delights in torturing and maiming her victims, Grace Ironwood is a healer. It can be seen then, even from this brief survey, that Lewis exploits the polemic power of metaphor to serve his rhetorical intentions. George Orwell does something very similar.

In the Manchester Evening News of August 16, 1945, Orwell reviewed That Hideous Strength in an article titled 'The Scientist Takes Over'. He commented that, "Plenty of people in our own age do entertain the monstrous dreams of power that Mr. Lewis attributes to his characters, and we are within sight of the time when such dreams will be realizable." While it is true that Orwell was himself pondering the implications of the trend he detected towards totalitarianism in the politics of western democracies (as expressed, for example, in Animal Farm, also published in 1945), Orwell seems to have been impressed by the rhetorical power of Lewis' book, for some of the motifs which enhance Lewis' polemic occur also in Orwell's 1984:* Certainly the world of Ingsoc is both a physical and spiritual wasteland as the first paragraphs reveal:

...Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors... though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

The Hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats... at present the electric current was cut off... in preparation for late Week.

Were there always these vistas of rotting nineteenth century houses, their sides shored up with baulks of timber, their windows patched with cardboard and their roofs with corrugated iron...?

The Ingsoc vision is one of sustained ugliness and desolation. But -- in spite of the contrary opinions of most critics -- Orwell also seems to offer his readers a "garden" of sorts. The world of the proles at first offers a warmth of hope and fecundity denied to the citizens of Ingsoc:

The June sun was still high in the sky, and in the sun-filled court below, a monstrous woman, solid as a Norman pillar, with brawny red forearms and a sacking apron strapped about her middle, was stumping to and fro between a washtub and a clothes line, pegging out a series of square white things which Winston recognised as babies' diapers. (p. 113)

The world of the proles is primitive: "Proles and animals are free", according to The Party (p. 61), but there is also a primeval force in the fecundity and sexual freedom allowed them. But the "Garden" of the Proles is related to the paradise of the Eloi in Wells' The Time Machine -- in that there is here, also, a sense of the exploitation of the mentally underprivileged. Although earthy and basic emotions and sexual fulfillment are allowed, intellect is repressed; whereas the Party forbids eroticism for its intellectuals and extols the virtues of Artsem (artificial insemination). "The Party was trying to kill the sex instinct", Winston ruminates, "or, if it could not be killed, then [the Party aimed] to distort it and dirty it". (p. 56)

Orwell eschewed the optimism afforded by Lewis' eucatastrophic Christian vision, however, and sustains his rhetoric of pessimism through the dehumanizing of Winston: a common man if ever there was one; common in that he is one of "the masses", and also in the sense of being somewhat vulgar as the details Orwell supplies about him suggest -- middle-aged, pale, with a varicose ulcer (and therefore varicose veins). Winston is a rather abject creature -- a far cry from Lewis' apotheosized Ransom. But Winston does parallel Lewis' Mark Studdock to some degree. Both are somewhat gormless; both are offered choices; both undergo conditioning and both tamper with the news. While Mark pre-writes the news, Winston re-writes it --
the desired end, the Machiavellian manipulation of the facts for the purpose of maintaining control, is the same.

Orwell's rhetoric is essentially the rhetoric of pessimism, but inherent in his rhetoric is the hope that his warning might be heeded. Within the text, Winston suggests that "if there is hope, it lies in the Proles" (pp. 69, 72); but Winston is an unreliable source and the hopes he offers are cruelly dashed.

... if the object was not to stay alive but to stay human, what difference did it ultimately make? They could not alter your feelings: for that matter you could not alter them yourself, even if you wanted to. They could lay bare in the utmost detail everything that you had done or said or thought; but the inner heart, whose workings were mysterious even to yourself, remained impregnable (p. 136)

These brave ruminations are countered at the end of the book by the gin-sodden image of an inhuman being whose mind and whose feelings have been appropriated by Big Brother. As with Lewis' novel, it is possible to construct a schematic representation of the rhetorical elements to show how Orwell's 'Ingsoc' encapsulates all the qualities of a spiritual and physical wasteland and presents both a rational and an emotional appeal to its readers.

WASTELAND
INGSOCC

TECHNOLOGY
ARTSEN
BIG BROTHER

HATRED
TORTURE
LIES

'SNEUTRALS' WHICH
POLARISE (OR MAY
POLARISE)

LOVE (EROTICISM)
ENDURANCE

REASON & THOUGHT
POETRY, SONG

FREEDOM

Figure 2

Orwell deliberately omits a beneficent Deity or the consolations of the spirit. But that omission compounds the lack of the "spiritual" in the sense of aesthetic appreciation — for example, the 'London' of the novel is unrelievably ugly. The ugliness is that of decay and neglect, of disease and deterioration. Winston himself exemplifies the disgusting degeneration of the human with his varicose ulcer — a seeping open degeneration of the tissues in which the skin turns gangrenous and from which there arises the stench of rotting flesh.

The 'garden' images are available mostly through Winston's daydreams, through the interlude in the country with Julia, and through the rose or the anemone in the paperweight. But Orwell's wry pessimism decrees that 'the gods are just and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us'; so even these items of aesthetic value become the instruments of betrayal. The rhetorical of pessimism in Orwell is unrelenting; the forces of the Wasteland lay waste to everything that has value in human existence, and even the human spirit, far from being unassailable, is all too easily destroyed. And yet Nineteen Eighty-Four has probably been influential in restraining a fulfillment of that dreadful vision, at least in most western democracies. If the real Wasteland has been held at bay, we may have Orwell to thank, at least in part, for it. In Riddley Walker, Hoban uses a similar rhetorical strategy and to similar ends. Written some thirty-five years after Orwell's novel and forty after Lewis', it nevertheless takes its theme, as the others do, from Lord Acton's time-honored adage: "All power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are often bad men". Hoban's argument does not center on the specter of totalitarianism but on the existential angst of the modern age and the omnipresent fear of a nuclear holocaust. Despite the shift in focus, however, the rhetorical strategies Hoban uses are familiar ones. He creates a Wasteland characterized by its mutilated language in order to argue for "right" choices — the abrogation of technology and political domination and the acceptance of human spirituality and creativity. Hoban's novel may also be schematically represented to show the binary oppositions into which the major themes and images may be classified so that the matter of individual choice and its cosmic implications are emphasized. (Hoban is closer to Lewis than to Orwell in the quality and depth of his myth, and closer to Orwell in his broader pessimistic vision since Hoban suggests that history is cyclic and that humanity at large bent on self-extinction, will repeat the errors of this pre-holocaust age.)

The novel, Riddley Walker, is a Bildungersoneman; and in the development of the character whose name gives the book its title the rhetoric of choices, and the arguments against Machiavellian power and enslavement to technology, become more lucid and more cogent. Hoban's novel is, however, polysemous; at no one level is it autotelic. Each fragment of decoding fits into a complex pattern, and attempts to isolate arguments must take cognizance of the complexities of the structure. Like Lewis, Hoban locates his meanings "farther up and farther in"

For example, like Lewis and Orwell, Hoban uses language to depict his wasteland. At first glance, the language of Inland — Hoban's futurist Kent in England — seems over-simple; gradual acquaintance with it reveals an array of puns, multiple entendres, allusions, metaphors and metonymies. For example, the "Eusa" is first taken to be a corruption of the name, St. Eustace; but can be seen as a metonymy for the nuclear age technological and political hegemony of the United States, whose nuclear bases proliferate in strategic locations in the United Kingdom and Kent, only twenty miles from the Continent, is of prime strategical importance. But the applications do not halt there; in a novel full of computer jargon "Eusa" is "User", since nuclear war is, after all, a matter of computerization and in the hands of a "user". David Lake discusses in his article of 1984, some of the other puns available in this text, all of which exhibit the same profundities of reference.
Hoban's final argument is available at the end of a meticulous decoding exercise. Not for nothing is the book called "Riddley Walker". Hoban explores the riddles of human existence and human nature and, with his mystical insight, is himself a riddle.

Hoban juxtaposes what he perceives as ultimate choices for human beings according to their causal relationships. Causal analogies such as these are rhetorically effective since "proofs" are offered which rely on existing scientific data. Thus we have the wasteland of Inland, summarized by "Bernt Arse", a name which seems to have exploited some of the metaphorical possibilities of the present Ashford and which also suggests that human beings who tamper with nuclear technology will burn more than their fingers.

It is, I think, part of Hoban's careful rhetorical strategy that Riddley's story begins at or near "Bernt Arse Dead Town" with two deaths -- that of a wild boar and that of Riddley Walker's father. Between the two events, Riddley relates the story called "The Hart of the Wood" in which parents kill and eat their child. In an age of innocence "cleverness" is promised over the dead body of a child sacrificed to technology. Confronted by death, surrounded by legends of death and destruction visited upon humanity by "Cleverness", Riddley tells his story:

That's why I finely come to writing all this down. Thinking on what the idear of us might be. Thinking on that thing what's in us born and lone and oansome. (p. 7)

Hoban argues for a rebirth of the imagination, which is concomitant with the rebirth of spirituality. The spirituality which Hoban portrays is not that of the unassailable certainties offered by Lewis in That Hideous Strength; rather Hoban provokes his readers into a questing, questioning spirituality which offers no answers except self-individuation and unity with nature. Humanity will always be susceptible to evil and to the kind of existential angst represented by Aunty, Arga Warga and Drop John; but individuals have choices and true power is spiritual and psychological wholeness.

Riddley's choice of art rather than technology brings him close to the mystical "oneness" of union with the Nature goddess and his own psychological integration. He walks "down rivver tords Cambry. Thats where the senter is" (p. 190) And at Cambrv Riddley is "born again" as Hoban's imagery suggest:

Dark of the moon it ver. Pas the failing moon of my getting and fulling on tords the moon of my getting and fulling on tords the moon of my bearing I gone to the hart of the wud. I gone to the stoan I gone to the woom of her what has her woom in Cambr.

(p. 191)

His rebirth is both imaginative and spiritual; it is the rebirth of innocence in a world corrupted by technology. Riddley, the artist, travels with his Punch and Pooty show, doing in fact what all three of these mythopoeic authors are doing -- holding up mirrors to humanity, and through the rhetoric of their fictions, offering choices.

The theme of "the wasteland" is almost a universal one in western literature, and its rhetorical power is exploited in much modern (post-Industrial-Revolution) writing. It replaces the former image of the Dantean or Miltonic hell, but in doing so it offers a much greater scope for arguments about the impoverishment of the human spirit by politics or by technology. And to deny human spirituality is to deny "human-ness": where the Machiavellian politics of power are practised and where technology intrudes into the space vacated by spirituality the result can only be a wasteland. On this point, Hoban, Orwell and Lewis concur.

Each of them, moreover, includes in his rhetorical construct the distortion and manipulation of the logos, a feature not always exploited by other authors. But the significance of language in the books I have discussed is no minor point. It is not for nothing that the world's scriptures caution the use of the human tongue, and that later sages comment on the power of the pen. But Lewis, Orwell and Hoban have used their pens to rhetorical purpose, presenting arguments which have the power, if not to influence our choices, then at least to make us aware that we have them.

NOTES