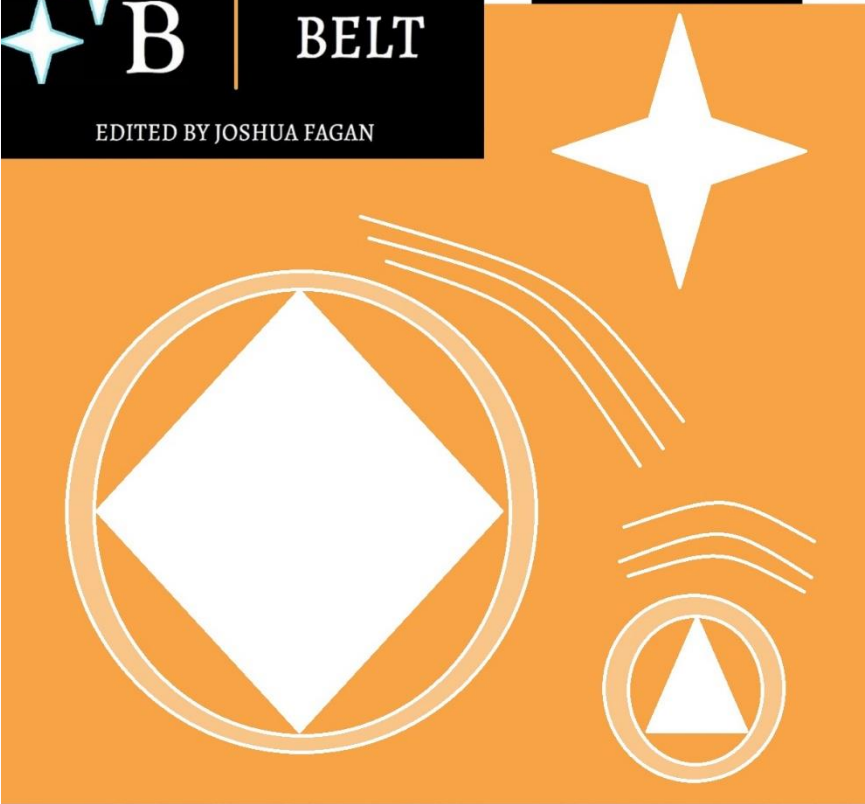




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Walking in the
Starry World

John P. Johnson

Prometheus,
at the End

Lia Swope Mitchell

Metaphor and
Speculative Fiction

Joshua Fagan

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Walking in the Starry World

by John P. Johnson

While my village slept, I slipped out
and made my way to the river. The world
had grown smaller and soft along the edges.
Even the stars hung lower, flickering
just beyond the branches.

While my village dreamt, I felt the world
become a dream. On the great hill, I climbed
to the top of the largest tree. There I clung above
the canopy, swaying. The world had never been
so wide, and the sky was wider still, yet close.

While my village was away, I used a stick to hit
a star. One fell, a boulder of moonlight, burning,
with a tail of white flame. It struck the hill, filling
the woods with luminous white milk, pouring
to the river. I cupped some in my hands to drink.

While my village woke, I returned. I told them
what I'd seen, how our village is not small
but vast, how we are made of light,
how the light turned everything into shine—
and how my lips still burned from drinking it.

Metaphor and Speculative Fiction

by Joshua Fagan

All fiction is to a certain extent metaphorical. The setting and plot points of a story matter, but they matter in that they create a foundation for the passions and laments and psychological tensions that give a story the capacity to captivate its audience. Theorists from Aristotle to Percy Shelley have discussed this idea, but a basic form of it is common knowledge. A story that only has plot points and no emotional resonance beneath them would be, in common opinion, a bad story. Narrative storytelling uses a layer of artifice, relating the facts of a made-up situation, in order to better communicate a layer of truth: feelings and yearnings that relate to the world we inhabit. Those story-facts have a metaphorical value, and that value is why they make us care.

Succession, for instance, is externally a story about three maladjusted adult children of a brutal news magnate fighting for control of his company, but if that was primarily what it was about, few would watch it. In reality, the essence of the story is about those maladjusted children trying and largely failing to balance their desperate desire for their father's approval with the knowledge that such striving is both practically futile and emotionally destructive.

Yet the metaphorical value of fiction is most clear in speculative fiction, which posits another world outside our own. The basic ethos

of speculative fiction, from *Lord of the Rings* to *Blade Runner*, is that rejecting the obligation to depict the external, physical realities of the world creates the opportunity to depict its internal, essential realities in a different and new way. Such a lofty statement does not, of course, imply that this ethos is always consciously present. A studio greenlighting the newest piece of *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* media likely does not act from any motivations loftier than convincing a group of ordinary people who want a break from the mundanity of their lives to spend their money on an exhilarating adventure. Yet that ethos remains implicit in speculative fiction for the simple reason that speculative fiction would have little lasting value to us if what really mattered were all those starships and magic wands.

There are, of course, still people who believe non-realist fiction is fatuous because what it depicts does not physically exist, but these people are less influential than in days past. In an age where superheroes and space operas dominate the big and small screens, the influence of these people is not what it was, that mass of practitioners of what Ursula Le Guin wryly called “anti-genre bigotry.” Even Edmund Wilson, a close friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald and one of America’s finest literary critics, mocked *The Lord of the Rings* as childish triviality. Wilson died a half-century ago, and the cultural attitude toward the fantastical he espoused has slowly withered.

The problem is that while the visceral disdain toward speculative fiction has waned, the intellectual foundation of that old disdain largely remains. Realism’s lobotomized ghost, stripped of the dignity

and vigor of George Eliot and Charles Dickens, continues to shamble forward. The demand that a *Star Wars* movie explain exactly how every gadget or scheme operates is the same demand that a film adaptation of *Portrait of a Lady* portray late-Victorian dress and manners accurately. In both cases, what matters are the external elements of the narrative, its decorations and trappings. The pathos and aspirations of the characters and the actions they take, despite creating the inner spirit of a narrative, has in this perspective only a secondary role. This perspective is, in the literal sense of the term, superficial: as in, concerned foremost with surfaces.

The oeuvre of no less a luminary than Shakespeare demonstrates the inadequacy of relying on historical accuracy as a corollary for artistic quality. Using *Antony and Cleopatra* as a historical source to learn about the distant past is as foolish as viewing a collection of Camelot tales as a true and exact history of England. Shakespeare, while he had historical sources, used them creatively, as a means to explore poignant tales of ambition and despair, desperate yearning against an uncaring world. Very few read *Hamlet* because of a passionate interest in the Denmark of the distant past. *Hamlet* remains a classic not because its setting is particularly luminous but because Shakespeare uses that setting to explore conceptions of malaise and anxiety that continue to have relevance.

For speculative fiction, the overwhelming fixation on the external elements of the world becomes not only supercilious but actively absurd. Depicting Victorian dress accurately has, if nothing else, antiquarian interest, as the Victorian period was a real time that can

be observed and studied. Viewing adaptations of Victorian novels only for “accuracy” conveys the same paucity of imagination as those who view *Succession* only as a portrait of an America corporate boardroom, but it is not innately absurd. Explaining in baroque detail the history of every sci-fi gadget in *Blade Runner*, conversely, has zero relevance because the gadgets have no external reality. The external elements of a speculative world have relevance only in how they illuminate the essences of the characters and their choices. That internal essence is what captivates our attention, because it reaches beyond made-up scenarios to the deeper and more broadly applicable truth contained within those scenarios.

As the critic Matthew Arnold long ago wrote, the concern of Shakespeare is with the “inner man,” the part of the psyche that remains largely unchanged even as civilizations rise and fall. The psychological and emotional force of Shakespeare’s plays is why we still read them. Their plots and settings have value, but that value is largely metaphorical. *Hamlet* uses ancient Danish politics because it provides a particularly amenable world for discussing certain feelings and sensations. Speculative fiction goes a step further. It uses not just a different time but a different and ethereal world. *Blade Runner* uses a certain set of aesthetics that we have come to call “cyberpunk” not because they look cool, but because they offer a particularly affective way to comment on ideas ranging from unchecked corporate power to the existential crises deriving from the inability to maintain a solid, fixed sense of self in a chaotic postmodern world.

The realist novel, despite its many accomplishments, helped propagate the understandable but mistaken idea that fiction can depict the world as it materially is. Stendhal famously described the novel as “a mirror which goes out on a highway,” reflecting everything that passes. In reality, fiction will never be able to depict the physical realities of the world as well as a documentary.

Yet fiction is a special kind of mirror, one glowing with the capacity to acutely portray the internal, latent essence of an environment, from old Denmark to the Victorian drawing-room, and it is that essence that has significance after the environment itself becomes a historical footnote. Speculative fiction should be prized because, at its best, it shocks us into a confrontation with this truth, the delightful and dizzying understanding that stories that have no obvious, external significance to the details of our everyday lives can nonetheless have immense metaphorical resonance because they describe feelings that will always be relevant.

Prometheus, at the End

by Lia Swope Mitchell

The man lies stretched across the rock, naked torso revealed to the morning sun. His skin clings to his ribcage, sagging and striated over absent muscles, bruised and tattered over the organ that daily swells and grows anew. He waits. A hundred years shackled to this mountain. Maybe a thousand. Nobody's counting.

The eagle never fails to come. Often at noon, when its spread wings offer some respite from the sun. Lately in the evening, already sated, reeking of whatever offal. Then it picks at his liver daintily, uninterested in this rich dessert.

Today it's early. Already its shriek echoes up from the vale. The man shades his eyes with the three fingers on his untethered hand.

With a sudden rush of wingbeats, it lands. A massive bird, dark and gold-limned feathers folding, talons like small curved daggers. Yellow eyes. Yellow beak. He can't help staring at that beak, the hooked knife set to rip at his innards.

"You must be hungry," the man says.

"I am," says the eagle, taciturn as always.

"Surely you could catch a nice rabbit."

"I could." The eagle hops forward, strangely awkward on land, and settles at his side.

The conversation is a repetition, almost a ritual. Today it runs aground. The eagle sits poised in its usual spot, no doubt ready to fulfill its sacred purpose. Today it hesitates. The hard stare drifts off

on the wind, perhaps tracking some smaller bird too distant for the man to detect.

“Is my liver no longer succulent?” the man asks, wanting the ordeal finished. “Would you prefer some bony scrap of sparrow?”

“Lovely crunch in the beak,” the eagle answers. Still it does not move.

The eagle is in an odd mood, evidently. This is rare, but not without precedent. In the early years the bird had no moods at all, nothing but cold, predatory hunger. Over time, though, the long, steady diet of divinely regrown liver must have affected the creature. The man had never expected any answer to his exhortations, observations and bitter asides; but one day, in an odd, creaky voice, an answer came.

Some decades ago, after a similar silence, the eagle wrenched off his right little finger, gnashing the bloody digit with such a stupid stare that the man did not understand at first that his hand was thereby freed. He could smack the biting flies, scratch himself, shield his eyes from the sun; had he the slightest desire left in his wretched body he could have masturbated. He could have even tried to grab the eagle by the neck and throttle the thing. But if he were successful, he knew, another bird would take its place, likely some idiot vulture not given to small mercies.

“What detains you?” the man asks.

The eagle watches the wind.

“What do you see that I cannot?”

The eagle fluffs and replies: “For many years, as I flew here, I saw a man pushing a boulder up a mountainside. Every day what I passed over he was there, pushing. I wondered, would he ever get to the top? But now the boulder is sitting in the valley alone, and the man is gone.”

The man blinks thoughtfully. “What else?”

“I flew, looking,” says the eagle. “I flew over mountains and islands and seas. I saw the gods rotting underwater. I saw little fish what picked their bones clean.”

“They are dead?” the man says, realizing that he knows already. For a while he’s suspected something, felt some lack. A diminution of violence in the light, an absence of figures among the stars.

“Yes,” the eagle answers. “We are the last divine beings.”

The wind unsettles its feathers, sends dust into the man’s eyes. He feels like crying, feels like laughing. Feels another thousand years old. Kept alive by a curse after the god who cursed him is gone.

“So I have thought—we need not continue.” The bird twitches, ruffles. “I am god among birds, now. So—I may choose.”

The mountainside seems to spin into the plummeting distance below, the green vale the man has so long imagined—shading trees, running streams, soft grass. The rock digs into the sores in his back, into his wasted spine. He watches the bird, its face as expressionless as always. “You’d give up a ready meal?”

The eagle lets its attention catch on some faraway rodent, bobs as if considering takeoff, then settles again. “For a long time,” it says in its high, gruff voice, “I have not been like other birds.”

“You miss them.”

“Do you miss your humans?”

The man thinks about those few happy nights long ago, when he built fires for his people, and told them divine secrets, and watched them sitting in awed circles around the flames. They adored him; he loved their adoration.

“I don’t know them anymore,” he answers.

“You will find them much the same,” the eagle answers. It edges close to his shackled hand, cocks its head above his splayed fingers, takes aim at the small one.

“I will miss you,” the man says.

“When I am hungry,” says the eagle, “I will find you.” And like a flash its head descends.

Notes on Contributors

Lia Swope Mitchell is a writer and translator from Minneapolis. Her fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Asimov's*, *Apex*, and *Terraform*, and her translations of Georges Didi-Huberman and Antoine Volodine have been published by the University of Minnesota Press.

Joshua Fagan is a writer and critic currently residing in Scotland. His creative work has previously been published in venues including *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Fantastic Other*, and *Star*Line*. As an academic, his work focuses on the intersection of literature, myth, and technology in the aftermath of Darwin, and his critical work has been published in *The Robert Frost Review*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary speculative-fiction publication *Orion's Belt*.

John Philip Johnson has published in many journals and magazines and won a Pushcart Prize in 2021 for a genre poem. He has two comic books of graphic poetry, *Stairs Appear in a Hole* and *Outside of Town and The Book of Fly*. He lives in Nebraska with his wife, Sue, two of their children, and three of their four cats. He would love to visit Mars.