John Sterling's "The Sons of Iron," a Pioneering Work of High Fantasy in English

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1.- A few necessary clarifications

Unlike science fiction, modern high fantasy has had almost no historians interested in its origins, nor in the study of its international evolution. It is true that there was no awareness of its existence as such until the creation by publisher Lin Carter of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series in 1969. He used the belated success of the works by J. R. R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard to bring together in a single fictional collection a number of stories that have a family resemblance to the literary procedures established by those two great writers. Lin Carter thus established the canon of what was thereafter called *fantasy*. This term is unfortunate, as it means in English practically anything that is not presented as a reflection (always illusory) of our mundane and phenomenal universe. In literature, that would mean considering anything that is not realistic as fantasy, except science fiction, as if travelling at hyperluminal speeds in hyperspace or communicating telepathically were not as fantastic and supernatural as seeing angels or elves, or having a magic spell working in practice.

Lin Carter himself aimed at being somewhat more precise in his conception of fantasy in his book *Imaginary Worlds* (1973), in which he pointed out quite a few of its characteristics, for example, the importance of the creation of imaginary fictional worlds complete with fabulous and often supernatural elements. He also discussed a linguistic feature that may serve to distinguish this type of literary fantasy from any other. Unlike mythological and historical fictions with supernatural interventions, fantasy according to Carter is distinguished by invented onomastics and toponymy, and he rightly praises lord Dunsany for his inventiveness in this respect. Carter's assertion has enabled a somewhat better delimitation of the idea of fantasy, or rather 'high fantasy,' to designate a particular literary species which, once recognised as such, can be the subject of theoretical and historical description.

However, Lin Carter's pioneering work is not without its flaws. In setting the canon of (high) fantasy, he left out everything that was not written in English, thus distorting its history. The genre cannot be rightly understood without mentioning at least the enormous influence of French decadent and symbolist writing on fantasy's own florid style of purple prose, starting with its first acknowledged master, Lord Dunsany, and continuing with Clark Ashton Smith (one of the first American decadent and symbolist poets, and also an occasional writer of French and Spanish verse). Given this influence, Carter and later historians of high fantasy should perhaps have considered whether this fictional mode could have appeared in an early period in France as well. This was, indeed, the case, although a vast majority of Anglo-Saxon scholars of high fantasy have paid little attention to that fact. Having limited themselves to the literatures in the English language, they only found nineteenth-century precursors of Lord Dunsany and his followers among British writers such as William Morris, even though the latter's legendary novels were late examples, being published in the 1890s, of chivalric romances that can hardly be considered high fantasy in today's sense no matter how much Tolkien and others admired them.

This assertion requires some justification, in view of the widespread belief that Morris or other Britons such as George McDonald (with his allegoric novel *Phantastes*, 1858) were the inventors of high fantasy. To do so, we will have to go beyond Carter in the specific characterisation of such a literary modality. Tolkien can help us in this task with his idea of subcreation, as well as with his own literary practice. Subcreation implies a creation within a creation. If our phenomenal world is taken as the creation, then subcreation would consist of the artistic creation of an imaginary world endowed with completeness, coherence and autonomy analogous to those of our own universe, the one that realist writers of all stripes strive to reflect in past, present or future tense. This subcreated fictional world should be closed and essentially distinct from our own. Being entirely the imaginary product of fabulation, it would be fantastic, even without the presence of supernatural events or characters as such. Being closed and self-contained, it cannot encompass any framework set in our mundane and primary world, thus excluding both the imaginary voyages such as Jonathan Swift's account of the travels of Gulliver and the so-called portal fantasies, in which characters from the primary world cross magical thresholds to access worlds such as C. S. Lewis's Narnia, as well as the (pre)historical fantasies inspired by archaeological hypothesis, such as Cornelius Mathews' *Behemoth* (1839), a novel subtitled

"A Legend of the Mound-Builders" of the American Midwest. We should also rule out fictions in which cultural traits as deeply rooted in our world as religions of the past or present appear. For this reason, we do not think that we can classify as high fantasy either the Arabian fantasies derived directly or indirectly from the subject matter of *The Arabian Nights*, with their continual invocations of Allah and His prophet, or the many chivalric fantasies which, like numerous poems from the Middle Ages onwards and the abundant Arthurian fictions of then and now, have as their protagonists knights in a Christianised milieu, with clergy and monasteries and all. Exit, then, William Morris's chivalric romances...

It is a more difficult task to distinguish high fantasy from fairy tale. In both genres self-contained, imaginary worlds are subcreated, at least in non-Christianised fairy tales. Tolkien himself does not seem to differentiate between them, calling them all 'fairy stories,' though they are certainly differentiated in his actual literary practice. His Middle-Earth matter is the result of a protracted process consisting of shaping invented fictional universes unlike those usually found in fairy tales. In the latter the setting and characters tend to be extremely conventional, being usually faithful to structural and descriptive features inherited from either folktale or literary tradition. As a result, their characters, such as fairies and princesses, can hardly be distinguished from one another; their venues, such as castles and royal courts are also so similar that they can hardly be told apart. Instead, Middle-earth is an individual artistic construct based on the prior invention of a mythology, geography, history and even languages unique to that subcreated world. Every work of high fantasy proper involves a similar kind of fictional construction that is specifically the fruit of the expansion

of humanistic knowledge; this follows the progress of philology and the subsequent scientific discovery of previously unknown civilisations, from classical India to Polynesian societies to Europe's own pagan civilisations, all with their literatures (written or oral), myths and history. Once this oral or written heritage was translated into English and other major Western languages, it soon inspired similar texts, invented this time as subcreations. For example, Pegāna, Lord Dunsany's masterful mythopoetic subcreation, derives from his discovery of Japanese pagan (pre-Buddhist) mythology. Tolkien did the same by drawing on many other mythologies scientifically studied from the 19th century onwards, such as Celtic (from ancient Ireland), Norse (from ancient Iceland) and Finnic (*Kalevala*), in devising his vast mythic and heroic universe. Even his elves have an origin that probably has more to do with the elemental spirit theories of Paracelsus than with folk fairy tales, and in any case, his work represents such spirits in the framework of his own civilisation and not in the typified and conventional venues of the fairy tale.

Despite their fabulous character and the presence of magic rather than science, high fantasy worlds are related to scientific knowledge and, more specifically, to human sciences. This fact will perhaps be more obvious if we think of the encyclopaedias of the natural environment, geography, history, myths and literature written for universes such as *The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time* (1997), for example. These encyclopaedias and the paratexts that accompany the central narrative, such as the appendices that Tolkien added to *The Lord of the Rings*, whose procedure has been adopted by many others in fantasy, as well as the quotations in the text of supposed fragments of the literary heritage of the sub-created world, generate an illusion of objective

plausibility allowing these high-fantasy worlds to seem as credible and fictionally complete as those of the pagan legends and epics that have continued to inspire them to this day.

In short, the fictional universes of high fantasy are complete and self-enclosed, and have their own spatial and temporal parameters, their own social, cultural and ontological order, and their own causality, which may or may not conform to the natural laws of our phenomenal world, but which is coherent and logical within their speculative universes. Such universes are constructed realistically, trying to make them seem plausible according to their own imaginary linguistic, ethnic, historic and mythic premises.

2.- John Sterling's "The Sons of Iron," in the beginnings of high fantasy

Having clarified some of what we are talking about, we can use the proposed definition, which applies without exception to the canonical worlds of modern literary high fantasy (Pegāna, Hyperborea, Hyboria, Middle-earth, Novaria, Earthsea, Nevèrÿon, Westeros, etc.), to inquire into their origin. Ultimately, it could be said that the Platonic Atlantis is already a high-fantasy world, like the kingdoms of the Amazons, all of which have given rise to a copious and more or less original production up to the present day. In fact, the 19th century saw the transfer of such epic and legendary matter to the novel, the main genre of modern high fantasy. Two significant early novels of each set in that kind of fantasy worlds can be recalled in this respect, both quite similar to future Howardian Sword and Sorcery fictions, namely Pedro Mata's *Las amazonas* (The Amazons, 1852) and Maurice Sand's Atlantidean romance *Le coq aux cheveux d'or* (The Cockerel with

the Golden Hair, 1866/1867). However, both Atlantis and the kingdoms of the Amazons were set in a real geography of our phenomenal universe, a geography in which both fabulous civilisations existed on the same plane as real places like Athens. These would therefore be literary traditions which, in the modernity following the humanistic globalisation brought about by the decipherment of most of the world's past and present languages and their scientific study throughout the 19th century, have run parallel to high fantasy proper. The latter reached its first apogee coinciding with European and North American colonial expansion in the *Belle Époque*, between 1871 and 1914, a period in which the aesthetics of the Decadence favoured the cultivation of all kinds of exoticism and recreations of ancient civilisations. From the recreation to the subcreation of these civilisations there was a short way to go, and this was bridged by various writers from all over Europe, some of them true modern classics like the Italian Gabriele D'Annunzio, author of a short and sumptuous high-fantasy poem from 1883 entitled in its final version "Il sangue delle vergini" (The Blood of Virgins, 1894). However, works of the fictional modality in question were isolated examples in most European and American literatures, except in French literature.

In both France and Belgium there was a veritable school of Decadent high fantasy, consisting mainly of short stories, although there was no lack of important novels such as André Lichtenberger's *Les centaures* (The Centaurs, 1904), as well as significant novellas such as "Les Xipéhuz" (*The Xipehuz*, 1887) by J.-H. Rosny aîné. Both authors used high fantasy (of course, without naming it as such, as virtually no one else did before the last third of the 20th century) to speculate on the origins of civilisation, following consciously or not the

example of George Sand's *Évenor et Leucippe* (Evenor and Leucipa, 1856), arguably the first fully high-fantasy novel. An earlier one, Eliza Haywood's *Adventures of Eovaai, Princess of Ijaveo* (1736), already presents the main features of the genre, from the complete subcreation of an imaginary ancient civilisation to the entirely invented onomastics, but it also subordinates invention to its satirical purpose, being a novel in code. This makes characters and adventures correspond to the people and the (bad) habits of contemporary mundane society, rather than generating a secondary world with its own fully individualised and coherent characteristics on the basis of an implicit work of subcreation inspired by the human sciences, as Sand's novel does.

If we look for the origin of modern high fantasy in the discursive genres other than the novel, we find earlier works, also in Britain. For example, William Blake subcreated a whole personal mythology in different poems written around 1800. Despite their marked abstraction and defective narrative, he is thus the first great precursor of Lord Dunsany and Tolkien in his subcreation of a coherent set of myths, including the onomastics of the gods and other invented divine figures. However, it is debatable whether Blake's mythopoetic poems are fictions in the literary sense, at least if we understand fictions as those written for artistic or at least entertainment purposes. What Blake surely set out to do was to define a new theology, not to devise fictions to excite or entertain, which he neither pursued nor succeeded in doing. Moreover, such poems were only rediscovered, and as poetry rather than fiction, in the late 19th century. Even today, virtually no one associates them with high fantasy.

Even more unfortunate in his reception was a somewhat later writer who does seem to have been a pioneer of this kind of literature in his country, only a few years after the publication in 1828 by Ludwig Amandus Bauer of *Der heimliche Maluff* (Secretive Maluff), a drama set in Oprlid, the first full-fledged high fantasy fictional world. The Scotsman John Sterling (1806-1844) was a close friend of the influential and famous intellectual Thomas Carlyle, who wrote his biography in response to the one that added by a mutual friend, Julius Charles Hare, to the posthumous collection of Sterling's *Essays and Tales* (1848, two volumes). Neither this publication, nor Carlyle's biography, succeeded in bringing Sterling out of obscurity. His splendid short fiction, consisting of symbolic tales often with supernatural elements, such as "The Palace of Morgana" (1837) and "A Chronicle of England" (1840), among others mentioned by Brian Stableford in the entry on Sterling in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997-1999), has not, to our knowledge, been republished. Stableford went so far as to state there that "although Sterling was certainly the most significant UK pioneer of fantasy he was soon forgotten" (1999 edition, p. 897). Such a statement is perhaps dubious as regards those stories, at least if we stick to our strict definition of high fantasy. It is, however, perfectly justified in the case of another story of his, which Stableford curiously does not mention. This is the one titled "The Sons of Iron" in the posthumous collection, which only appeared as an untitled text during in Sterling's lifetime as a story told by a character in his novel *Arthur Coningsby*, which passed unnoticed upon its publication in 1833.

Hidden within the pages of that novel, it was perhaps natural that the originality of "The Sons of Iron" should be missed. When it was extracted and published as an independent text with its own title in 1844, its full fictional autonomy was underlined. This, however, did not make it any easier to recognise, then or now,

its fundamental contribution to the history of literature as a pioneering work in English of what would later be called high fantasy. In effect, it is a fiction of an entirely artistic nature that subcreates an entire civilisation with no previous existence in the real or phenomenal world, and which does so with an accomplished effort to achieve full inner verisimilitude. Even the influence of the human sciences is present, for the story told echoes, with all the freedom of literature, the different theories on the origins of humanity and civilisation (established religion, public institutions...) that had been emerging in previous decades and which, after feeding George Sand's speculation in *Évenor et Leucippe*, extended to Tolkien's own symbolic mythopoetics and beyond. Details such as the mention of the remains of the Iron Men half-hidden among the rocks or the continuity of the legendary tradition of their existence refer, for their part, to the nascent archaeology and the then nascent sciences of ethnology and the study of folklore and oral literature. All this contributes to singularly consolidating the reality of the imagined world, which also already displays one of the fundamental (and most easily recognisable) linguistic characteristics of high-fantasy discourse: the invented onomastics which have no correlate in the past or present of our world. Thus, the protagonist's name 'Chalybs' means steel in Latin, though this was not a proper name in that language. Rather, it refers to the mysterious people of the Chalybes or Chalibes, a legendary Caucasian people dedicated to mining and working iron.

The link with Greco-Latin antiquity suggested by this name illustrates one of the historical origins of high fantasy, which can be traced back to the classical tradition of legendary and mythical peoples, the most famous of which are the Atlanteans and Amazons. However, the text's link to this tradition is limited to this. Sterling's tale does not present itself as an imaginary recreation of the ancient Chalybes. Instead, he invents another group, which he calls 'Siderians' and for whom he invents a new mythological origin. Their name is said to originate in their creation by invented supernatural figures, which Sterling calls 'powers' and which perform divine functions, the main one being the establishment of the laws and way of life of the Siderians. From our human point of view, Siderians also have a fabulous and even supernatural character in their essence, appearance, origin and morality. The Siderians are metal beings that reproduce themselves artificially. Chalybs, the first of them, manufactures his descendants from the coal and iron materials found in his environment, a closed off and inaccessible valley. In turn, his descendants make other iron men, brought to life by the electricity of storms. Thus, in time and unknown to the Sidereans, a different and alternative primitive humanity is formed outside that valley, who also differ from us and our ancestors in lacking our defects. Although the manufacturing process does not always produce viable iron men, they are characterised bodily by their strength and morally by their virtue. Unfortunately, not even their progenitor Chalybs is able to resist the temptation to bypass the prohibition dictated by his own creators to enter the mysterious keep that stands in the valley, which turns out to be the way to our world and its women, that is, to the biological reproduction that will give rise to the race of the superhuman warriors of the epic legends, as well as to different metallurgical inventions. In this way, the tale becomes a kind of aetiological legend that is also charged with mythical overtones as it penetrates the traditional consciousness.

The sons of iron become the stuff of myth, a myth that goes back to a time both prior to human history and alien to it, because iron mankind has disappeared, its members having fled the valley in search of the love of flesh, thus closing its existence in time, just as it had been closed in space. His universe, then, is completely and genuinely a closed world independent of our own with such clarity that its classification within the universe of high fantasy is self-evident. For this reason alone, it deserves to be remembered, though its merits are not limited to this detail of literary history. Its perfect narrative rhythm, the richness of its symbolism, the originality of its conception and, furthermore, the degree of detail that the imaginary world reaches in just a few pages surely make it worthy of being considered one of the first masterpieces of a form of fiction that is today fundamental in our culture. The reason for its having virtually remained ignored for so long in the history of English and Anglo-American high fantasy itself is a mystery, but perhaps it can be explained by the fact that, after all, John Sterling seems to be a writer closer to George Sand, to the French-language symbolist storytellers (Camille Mauclair, Marcel Schwob, etc.) and to Jorge Luis Borges as their successor, than to the main course of Anglophone high fantasy, except for further contemporary aetiological legends quite similar to "The Sons of Iron", such as Edward Bulwer Lytton's "The Fallen Star, or the History of a False Religion", from his book *The Pilgrims of the Rhine* (1834). The latter legend goes as unmentioned in high fantasy surveys as Sterling's "The Sons of Iron," perhaps for the same reasons: they are both as devoid of fairy-tale characters (unicorns, elves, etc.) as they are of assertive heroes caught in Manichaean confrontations between good and evil. Lytton's history of the birth of a (false) religion and specially the more concise and poetic tale by Sterling on love and war are sophisticated parables using subcreation to convey not only relevant reflections upon civilisation and its origins, but also a disenchanted vision of human morality and passions that discerning readers will perhaps appreciate.