STEAMPUNK AMBIVALENCES

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I am in the process of writing a steampunk play set in an alternate version of the British Empire, and I am tottering between the pleasures and the discomfitures of writing in the genre; there is a tension between the literary playground that steampunk offers and the problems of certain historical and literary legacies.

First, the enjoyable elements. The play unfolds from 1888 to 1922 in both England and Imperial India (I cannot really give more detail than that as I might risk revealing too much about a work that has yet to be performed). The research process has given me the opportunity to read a lot about this period (and the wider long nineteenth century). For all my preconceptions concerning the stuffier side of the Victorian and Edwardian eras (see below), these were times of huge technological and social change; from a writer's perspective, they are exciting to explore and are heavy with 'atmosphere.' They are also crucibles for fantastika; Kipling, Stevenson, Stoker, Verne, Wells, and many others were writing touchstone works in science fiction, fantasy, and horror around this time.

One can see easily why so many contemporary writers would want to delve in to the vivid, nineteenth century steampunk toy box. So, why do I feel ambivalent about the genre? There is the obvious answer: it is problematic to entirely revel in a fictionalised recreation of an era when I would have been culturally, politically, and economically marginalised by the attitudes and laws of the time. My initial perceptions of alternative history steampunk were coloured by this thought; I felt that the genre was an excuse for a nineteenth century jaunt that featured easy, unexamined cameos by historical and literary figures. I saw the mechanical replication and fetishisation of literary tropes and markers of historicity; this was genre as a medley of familiar, popular hits delivered by a covers band. This view was altered slightly by my further reading of both steampunk works and the nineteenth/ twentieth century fictional texts and history that inform them (it may be my writerly bias, but the long nineteenth century feels saturated by literature; the image of the period as presented by Dickens or Conan Doyle almost supersedes the 'actual' history in my mind's eye).

I approached the play with a particular cultural trope that I wished to explore; I wanted to examine, challenge, and satirise the Newbolt Man:

> Shyness in the presence of girls, satisfaction derived from a life
> of pioneering and adventure, a somewhat stern moral outlook,
> a desire for amateur rather than professional status as a
> practitioner of the arts, belief in the efficacy of rigorous training
> for boys, and acceptance – though not uncritical acceptance –
> of a social order in which prosperity was likely to be the reward

> of virtue – all these qualities were compatible with, and some
> were essential ingredients of, the character of Newbolt Man.
> There was too another characteristic of the typical Ballantyne
> boy […] the ability to derive continual pleasure from the
> slaughter of wild animals. (Howarth 44).

This figure permeates Boys' Own literature, but also percolates through a particular image of Englishness; the doughty, Empire-building, ex-public schoolboy. It feels appropriate to explore this given the parallels to a contemporary era peopled by figures such as Boris Johnson, David Cameron, and George Osborne; the current political spasms about English identity also still feel inflected by the loss of Empire (showing how, for Britain, the nineteenth was indeed a very long century). It is an easy subject to satirise (indeed, Michael Palin seems to have spent half his career doing just that). However, it is worth re-examining the source texts that have composted down to create this type in the popular consciousness. It came as a shock to me to read the first Biggles story; Biggles – that archetypal, jolly jingoistic hero of adventure tales – is presented with (to contemporary readers) clear signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:

> He had killed six men during the past month – or was it a year?
> – he had forgotten. Time had become curiously telescoped
> lately. What did it matter, anyway? He knew he had to die
> some time and had long ago ceased to worry about it. His
> careless attitude suggested complete indifference, but the
> irritating little falsetto laugh which continually punctuated his
> tale betrayed the frayed condition of his nerves. (Johns 17)

This encounter with a shell-shocked version of Newbolt Man made me reconsider how I perceived the trope (and perhaps made me humanise the caricature I had created a little). While Captain Johns' work is from a later time, I must confess that I approached most of the adventure literature of the nineteenth century with the assumption that it would be underpinned by a simplistic pro-imperial stance. In some instances (such as Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*) this was the case. However, I was shocked out of my complacency by Captain Nemo in Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1992); here was a character who was capable of making startlingly modern (if also inconsistent), progressive statements about empire and environmentalism: "That Indian, sir, is an inhabitant of an oppressed country; and I am still, and shall be, to my last breath, one of them!" (Verne 131); "Do you think I am ignorant that there are suffering beings and oppressed races on this earth, miserable creatures to console, victims to avenge? Do you not understand?" (Verne 162); "The barbarous and inconsiderate greed of these fishermen will one day cause the disappearance of the last whale in the ocean" (Verne 182). The incendiary nature of Nemo almost seems to unnerve Verne himself; he fluctuates in between admiration for the Captain's powerful idealism and the need to contain the dangerous Miltonic energy of this Satanic upstart.

Michael Moorcock's *Nomad of the Time Streams* trilogy – *The Warlord of the Air* (1971), *The Land Leviathan* (1974), and *The Steel Tsar* (1981) – made me reassess my perceptions of steampunk. As one of the urtexts of the genre, it was refreshing to see that, from its inception, steampunk was able to engage critically with colonial legacies; Moorcock's trilogy is full of sly humour and chips away steadily at the rigid Edwardian values of its protagonist, Oswald Bastable. The genre is particularly suited to this kind of wit; the reshaped past contains nuggets of more contemporary reference, Easter Eggs to the history that we know but the characters do not (a chap called Gandhi ends up staying in South Africa and forms a utopian republic; a Captain Caponi is a hero from Chicago; there is a Count Guevera). Moorcock asks uncomfortable questions; I remain to be convinced by his explorations of a permanently divided Northern and Southern United States, and the subsequent effect it has on race there. However, perhaps this also stems from my own anxieties about the deployment of irony in steampunk; I once assumed that some of the patriarchal attitudes of the past could be presented in a genre context with the critique of such outlooks being tacit – alas, the current cultural moment is making me question this assumption.

I hope I am not giving the impression of myself as a close-minded reader who is challenged continually by the limitations of his own preconceptions. Instead, I use my own experience as a way of illustrating the negotiation that goes on between the reader and the writer in the creative process. The steampunk genre exists in a tricky, hyper-literate realm where I have to navigate through the mythic soup of history; there are my own ideas of the eras I am rewriting, and my awareness of the (not uncontested) images of the past in popular consciousness (the Victorians covered table legs because they were scared of sex; Britain as pretty much white before the 1950s; the green and pleasant land of England's past). I am aware that, with the conscious anachronisms inherent in the steampunk genre, I risk creating 'fake' history (again an intrusion from a contemporary anxiety); however, the deliberate sf revisions of steampunk actually allow me to have a more lively (if occasionally fraught) dialogue about national and cultural identities. We shall see if this results in a successful piece of sf theatre.

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BIONOTE

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