Fantasy and Judgement: Adorno, Tolkien, Burroughs

Fantasy in Marx and Adorno

Writing in 1951, expanding on the Frankfurt School’s critique of US positivism and USSR Marxism, Theodor Adorno had nothing but good to say of fantasy.

Fantasy alone, today consigned to the realm of the unconscious and proscribed from knowledge as a childish, injudicious rudiment, can establish that relation between objects which is the irrevocable source of all judgment: should fantasy be driven out, judgment too, the real act of knowledge, is exorcised.¹

Compared to the positivist triumphalism of super-powers who believed hydrogen bombs could settle their ideological differences, Adorno’s humanistic epistemology – knowledge as inseparable from the judging subject – may look like liberal hand-wringing. However, unlike Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose resistance to dominant powers was

voluntarist and ethical, the Frankfurt School based its criticism on science. Adorno’s choice of *fantasy* as the remedy for modern ills was characteristically provocative, but it was nevertheless based on a historical-materialist understanding of philosophy and society. To the prismatic materialist, intent on the rays of possible meaning which shine forth from any word, the fact that ‘fantasy’ has since been applied to a genre of popular fiction is unavoidable. What would Adorno have to say about *Lord of the Rings*? The roots of fantasy need to be unearthed.

‘Fantasy’ derives from the Greek for ‘make visible’, from the root verb ‘to show’. Loyal to the word’s etymology, the *Oxford English Dictionary* begins with the word’s meaning for the mediaeval scholastics – ‘mental apprehension of an object of perception’ (1382) – even though an example of fantasy meaning ‘a spectral apparition, phantom, an illusory appearance’ predates it (1325). However, it would be wrong to conclude that the word was always an accusation hurled at the imagination by empirical common sense. In a religious era, the material world itself was deemed ‘fantasy’. When the author of ‘Song Of Yesterday’ wrote

This worldly blis
Is but a fykel fantasy

in 1325, he was denying empirical perception and everyday pleasures in favour of eternal truth – divine and revealed.

Adorno’s assertion that fantasy has a part to play in knowledge revives the historical residues of the word. ‘Fancy’ and ‘phantasy’ are variants of ‘fantasy’: the former was a vulgar contraction whose meaning became trivialised to mean ‘caprice’, ‘whim’ or ‘embellishment’, the latter was a product of the revival of Greek learning in the seventeenth century, applied to a grander idea of making visible, comparable to ‘imagination’ or ‘vision’. When William Wollaston wrote in 1738, ‘we know matters of fact by the help of . . . impressions made upon phancy’, he was using yet another (and short-lived) variant, but he was on strong technical grounds. The eye is not merely a window on the outside world: the mind needs to do work in order to ‘make visible’ what it sees.

The bourgeois revolution and the victory of the experimental method in