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ENG 38A—Fantasy Worlds: From Lilliput and Middle Earth to LARPs

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Naming, Listing, and Counting Fantasy: *Tales of Nevèrjyon's* Preface and Appendix

Tales of Nevèrjyon is a self-sustaining loop of two interconnected fantasy worlds, one more like our reality and one more like a traditional fantasy. One world is made up of the preface, which acts as the entryway to Nevèrjyon, through which Delany controls how the reader approaches his fantasy, as well as the appendix; the other is made up of the tales themselves, what would traditionally be seen as the meat of the book. I argue that the supplementary materials are as fundamental to *Nevèrjyon* as the tales, for reasons alluded to in the appendix itself: the commentary of the preface and appendix are the 'count' to Nevèrjyon's 'language,' according to the postmodern philosophy Delany creates in this supplementary material.

Tales of Nevèrjyon opens with a preface by K. Leslie Steiner. It is not unusual at first glance. The reader assumes she is a reviewer, a scholar, perhaps a fellow author. But within a few paragraphs Steiner casually mentions that she is a "fictive character in some of the pieces to come." This preface is, in fact, written by Delany himself. After this brief acknowledgement of her fictiveness, Steiner continues to relate how her work on the Culhar Fragment, an ancient narrative text, helped inspire Delany to write the Nevèrjyon stories deconstructing the Culhar, and extensively praises his writing and its deep intellectual roots. If a reader missed the single line quoted above about Steiner's fictional identity, they would be forgiven for not questioning the veracity of anything else printed in

this preface. But the rest of the preface is no more real than Steiner is—that is, it is real only within Delany’s fantasy—because the Culhar Fragment also does not exist.

Since the preface is not an ordinary one, it must have an equally extraordinary purpose. Normally, we would expect the preface to a novel to be the nonfiction to the fiction. It is usually also a marketing point, an addition to the text to induce readers to buy this new edition. It will validate the buyer’s decision to purchase the book by highlighting the novel’s value and importance. But Steiner’s preface has a different function. We must expect this because he chose to have it, and wrote it, himself. Sylvia Kelso notes “Delany’s insistence that form in itself is as important as content” (289). Delany is the kind of writer unconventional enough to make use of parts of the book usually not part of the fiction to advance his fiction.

The first function of the preface is to praise—a conventional purpose, except that the author usually leaves the task to someone else. Delany takes this opportunity to mythologize himself. Steiner’s praise shores up his reputation as an inventive author and waxes poetic on his intellectualism and achievements, evidenced by the many works he references and the large number of books he has sold. It almost has the tone of an author who cannot trust the reader to comprehend his genius, and feels the need to explain it himself. The preface ensures that Delany looms large over the book, while at the same time folding him (and us) into his writing by using the voice of a fictional character from the world of Nevèryon. If Steiner is capable of commenting on her own author, where is the line between reality and Nevèryon? How can she be located both within and outside of Delany’s writing? The circularity of which came first, Steiner who inspired Delany or

Delany who created Steiner, is only the beginning of a theme we will return to with naming, listing, and counting theory.

The preface and appendix create an entire secondary world, populated with both historical and real people and new fictional characters, complete with their own personalities and interpersonal dynamics. There is Steiner, a brilliant young scholar who enters a very small field and proves it important; S. L. Kermit, a somewhat curmudgeonly academic who regards Steiner's work with some condescension; and their many colleagues who contribute to the story of the Culhar Fragment in the world of academia and archeology, which has been shaken by new revelations about the ancient text. There is an entire storyline, some of which is related by Kermit in the appendix and some of which is implied by how Steiner and Kermit speak about each other, contained within the supplementary material.

Finally, the preface tells us how to and controls how we read the book. Part of this control is explicit: Steiner literally offers her opinion on where to read the sixth tale in the order of the stories. Part of it is more subtle: Steiner seems to ask the reader to expect Delany's work to be intellectual, but also enjoy it for enjoyment's sake. That is, both to look for its deeper messages and not to let its deeper messages ruin the experience of reading. How many authors get to instruct their reader this way? Delany seizes the ability to do so, as if out of frustration with the traditional level of control over the reader.

Kathleen Spencer explains that in reading realistic fiction, "we bring so much information about the world to our reading that it is difficult to be sure how much of what we know about the world of the text comes from the text itself, and how much we are supplying from our own previous knowledge" (60). Science fiction is usually the opposite,

with readers supplying “no information about the subject world outside the text” (60).

Usually is the key word, for Delany turns this on its head and provides the reader with some carefully curated information before the story begins in the form of the preface.

However, the conceit of the preface that disguises the information as part of our reality, so the reader might not realize what is happening. Their experience is being shaped without their realization. They are primed to see *Neveryon* as rooted in history, intensely intellectual, and already well-known as a fascinating work of fiction. Essentially they are primed to be impressed by it.

The supplementary material exerts control over the reader, to an extent authors are rarely able to do. Normally an author can only control so much, the content of the book. Even the packaging of the book, like the cover, or a preface contributed by another writer, is usually out of their hands. The author cannot control how, when, and where one picks up the book. But by taking some of these uncontrollable aspects into his hands, Delany influences how the reader perceives his work and gains more control over their experience. Delany’s newly seized control goes beyond the obvious. He is not only telling you through Steiner’s voice to be impressed by his work, but he also manipulates your intangible associations with the book—that of postmodernism and academia—by creating the secondary world discussed above, Steiner and Kermit’s community of scholarship. It merges and meddles with our primary world.

The relationship of Delany’s semi-realistic world to both our reality and to *Neveryon* is explained to us within the preface and appendix themselves when Steiner and Kermit explain to us the basics of naming, listing, and counting theory. In this field, the first level, naming, is “a collection of designated, i.e., named objects” (Delany 254). In the second level

one has a list of objects, meaning that “you not only know each object’s name, but you know it’s relation to two other objects” (254). A count adds even more relations between all the objects in a list. The third level, language, adds “a collection of rules that allows unidirectional substitutions of listable subsets of a collection of names” (254), including “complete loops of substitution” (255). One would expect the count to be the third level, but it is not. This is because it was supposedly discovered that “while it is fairly easy to generate the rules for a ‘language’ by combining the rules for a ‘naming’ and a ‘list,’ it is impossible to generate the rules for a ‘count’ *just* from a ‘naming’ and a ‘list,’ without generating a proper ‘language’ first — which is why a ‘language’ and not a ‘count’ is the third level of order. A ‘count’... is really a degenerate form of ‘language’” (255). Counting might be seen as a simplified description of language. It exists only in relation to language, as it can only describe what already exists.

The appendix provides a metaphor to understand the relationship between these concepts. In Mesopotamia, clay tokens represented concepts like amounts of grain or animals. They represent naming. They were sealed inside clay bullae “inscribed with a *list* of the tokens it contained” (253). These inscriptions came to be able to stand for the concepts the tokens stood for without needing the tokens to exist; there could instead simply be clay tablets read on their own. This is comparable to a count. When a person reads a tablet and comprehends meaning from it, I believe is when it becomes language.

I offer an additional metaphor of naming, listing, and counting. The *Tales of Nevèryon* are language, the most complex level of meaning. Our reality is the list which Delany, like all authors, has used to create his fantasy world, since one cannot create out of nothing. The preface and appendix are the elusive count. They describe Nevèryon. No

wonder they were written years after the stories (helpfully, each story and essay is dated): just as the count “presupposes ‘language,’ and not the other way around” (255), it is easy to write supplementary material about something that exists, and much harder to write explanatory material for something nonexistent. Once we understand this, the only question left is what it would look like to possess the preface and appendix without Nevèryon, the supplementary material without the primary material. In naming, listing, and counting theory would have that be impossible, but I find that view too limiting. I think counts without language might look something like my group project’s Thread of Gold fandom experiment and be an interesting exploration of story in its own right. Reading between the lines is still reading. Perhaps an implied story is still a story. I would argue that by creating the Thread of Gold fandom we created something akin to the rules, or count, of a nonexistent language—the shadow of a story (and I argue that organic fandom is also on that level of counting). I believe that if the supplementary material had been written without the Nevèryon stories, Delany could still have created the shadow of Nevèryon through them.

In the preface, Delany as Steiner writes that “Delany’s mega-fantasy is a fascinating fiction of ideas, a narrative hall of mirrors” (14). It would have been truer to write that Delany’s *meta*-fantasy is the fascinating fiction and hall of mirrors, for by adding a preface and appendix about his work that are as much fantasy as Nevèryon is, while operating under the guise of reality, Delany shows the reader a distorted reality that blurs into fantasy and makes us question the relationship between them. As an experimental form, it hints at even more experimental possibilities for the future of fantasy.

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