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An Odd Messiah

One of the main ideas of poststructuralist thought is that "Literary works should not be regarded as sublime and transcendent expressions of the human spirit, but as texts among other texts".¹ A compromise between the beginning and the end of this quotation is "literary texts". Starting from here, one may say that "there are certain texts among literary texts". Such texts might belong to science-fiction, for instance, though some voices claim that science-fiction is not a literary genre, but a parallel literature, having its distinct and corresponding categories such as heroic fantasy, the socio-political science fiction, new wave, swords and sorcery, and so on.

Both literature and science-fiction are subjected, more or less, to history. Literature may take the risk of representing certain events of the past, which can never be available to us in their pure form. The same thing applies to the future, it being largely the realm of science-fiction. The past and the future are not compact, unified entities, so they may be constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed from texts of all kinds, already written or in course of being written.

That is exactly the technique adopted and adapted by Frank Herbert in his saga of the planet Dune, a saga not very successfully re-told in a film directed by that famous "Tzar of the Bizarre", David Lynch. At the beginning of each chapter Herbert makes use of what seems to be different fragments from: a handbook, an infant or boyhood story, extremely simplified biographical sketches, a book of family comments, an analysis of a planetary crisis, secret files, essays, parables, memories, popular songs, introductions, sayings, forewords, conversations, personal reflections, chronicles, profiles, secret messages, legends, reports, etc., etc.

Joyce himself would have been proud of such a display, but they are all texts, unless we call them *fiction*, and that is an acknowledgement of the fact that they belong to a special, different order of textuality. They are verbal structures, too, and "As all verbal structures have some kind of sequence, [...], they are all mythical in this primary sense...".² And here is the shifting point from a virtual textual analysis to something else, because this very flood, this abundance of fragments, texts or verbal structures is not meant to construct varied degrees of the so-called "écriture", but to shape, first of all, a mythology.

It's a saga about an old civilization coming into a new life, and such a process needs and deserves new myths or, at least, new individuals incorporating and being incorporated by the old mythology. To what extent can science-fiction fight against Literature, which is "the direct descendant of mythology" and "an integral and inevitable part of a myth's development"?³ Is science-fiction only the ideal case of a trivial literature?

Frank Herbert's response to these difficult questions is to choose the most challenging among all myths, that of the Messiah. Dostoevsky himself testified about

1. See Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*.

2. See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*.

3. *Ibid.*

the burden of such a challenge in portraying his "Idiot", Prince Mishkin. Mario Varga Llosa might have been confronted with the same problems in "The War of the End of the World." These two exceptional accomplishments of the Messianic myth in literature proved the power of their authors to deal with a "sacred" myth, as opposed to a "profane" one, with which the poet, generally speaking, is free to do as he likes.⁴

The saga of Dune is not an ordinary science-fiction saga, which has to reconcile a scientific attitude with an aesthetic one. It is not dominated by the technical perspective, nor is it characterized first by action, pulp fiction or other elements such as the erotic triangle of the hero, the princess and the monster. It is concerned, above all, with the man of the future, who may perfectly be, and this is a paradox, an archetype. For "individual stories are being made to fit the pattern".⁵ The individual story of Paul Atreides, son of Leto, Duke of Dune, turns into a Science-Fiction Gospel not only for the sake of, or as a direct response to the natural environment described in the book. Though the desert is a very appropriate support for legends and myths, the fact is that one has to insulate him/her self through imagination against a hostile environment. This works for the people of Dune and works also for the twentieth-century science-fiction writer. So it is not entirely odd that, instead of writing about a new weapon, a new machinery or a strange, abominable mutant, Frank Herbert prefers to dream of a Messiah.

Perhaps we, too, need a Messiah, as much as the people of Dune needed one. The myth of Paul Atreides, or Usul, or Muad'Dib, — these are three names of the hero each having a particular significance, finally takes its place within the mythology of the planet. But myths are not only stories worth being re-created in literature, they are also programs of action, having a specific social function for a specific society. Paul Atreides knew that the people of Dune were waiting for a Messiah, he knew he had the powers of a Messiah but in the same time he was afraid, so he deliberately started to cooperate, in order to meet their terms, their mythical frame, their prophecies.

One may easily recognize types of stories from the Gospels: Vocation or calling stories in which someone responds to a call by Paul to follow or believe; Recognition stories in which someone recognizes that Paul is the Messiah or Saviour; Witness or testimony stories in which either Paul or another character testifies about who he is or what he has done, — for instance, when he drinks the so-called water of life, an elixir obtained through the drowning of a huge sand worm, he acknowledges that he is Kwisatz Haderach, a name meaning the one able to be at the same time in different places and ages, such a person being announced by old prophecies on Dune and also expected by the Order of the Bene Gesserit Mothers. (Jessica, Paul's mother, is herself one of the members.)

The Bene Gesserit Mothers received a special education, and many of them never married or lived with a man. If they did, they would not have been allowed to give birth to a masculine descendant. Jessica breaks the pattern, and from this point of view, she represents an antitype of the Virgin Mother. She is, in fact, the Duke's mistress, and Paul will reinforce the new pattern not marrying Chani, his mistress from Dune, but making her the mother of their children. He will never touch his legal wife, princess Irulan, another Bene Gesserit bride, who remains a kind of a Virgin Wife, and keeps the record of Paul's sayings, conversations and memorable events.

Things are a little complicated and confused, but what is obvious is that a certain pattern has to be prescribed and constantly improved, for that's the way a myth develops. "The mere attempt to repeat a past experience will lead only to disillusionment, but there is another kind of repetition which is the Christian antithesis of Platonic recollection: 'Behold, I make all things new' — says the God of Israel".⁶ Paul Atreides is not the son of a god, nor is he crucified in the end. He represents the

4. See folktales and other related "genres".

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

embodiment of the royal metaphor, and for him the name Messiah may be used as it had been used for Saul or Cyrus the Great, in the sense of a legitimate ruler, the king of his people. Paul may be compared to Moses as well, leading his adoptive people out of the desert, to a future green promised land, which he will never see. And if we consider Moses a type of the Old Testament, then Christ is the antitype, from the New Testament perspective. Christ is not exactly what the Jews had been thinking the Messiah would be, as Paul is not exactly what the readers of Herbert's saga expected.

The writer settled the preconditions for a Messiah but ended in showing how his hero established both anew empire and a new religion, and therefore his dilemma starts: "the principle that one should render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's runs into trouble".⁷ Becoming aware of what he had done — he had turned the inhabitants of Dune into soldiers of a regular army and started a sacred interplanetary war, a jihad — Paul Atreides attempts to take back the place he had been awarded in the mythology of Dune. All he has to do is wait for the proper moment. After getting blind during a battle, he goes away to die in the desert, because blind people were useless, according to local beliefs. But the priests of his new religion betray his ideal, and that's how things happened with the Christian Church, the role of which was "to enter into a dialogue with the word of God, and not to replace it as the source of revelation".⁸ So he is forced to come back and fight against them under the mask of a prophet finally being killed in the middle of a confused gathering of people.

The restoration of his myth is a partial one, the author proving his incapacity to sustain the Messianic pattern up to the end. Yet the present paper is both a record of a failure and a celebration of an attempt. Because Frank Herbert has succeeded in transcending the barriers of the genre and has made us forget that science-fiction is a collection of texts among others, literary texts, or that it belongs to a different order of textuality.

The weakness comes from the balance between prophecy and fantasy, a balance biased by fantasy, although carefully and masterly handled up to a certain point. If the variety of texts introducing new chapters provides a mythical halo of a very special quality, the narrative gives up, step by step, in relating to faith, hope and vision. Too many names, character and episodic events consigned to a language that seems to have lost its metaphorical and metonymic phases in favour of the descriptive one. And when someone speaks/writes about sacred, legendary characters such as Christ or Moses, it is through metaphor or metonymy the way to faith, hope and vision goes. But probably Maurice Blanchot was right when he said that the power was no with the hand that wrote, but with the one that stopped writing. Many writers, science-fiction included, might have only one hand. Don't ask me which ...

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5. Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*