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**THE WOLFHOUND CENTURY TRILOGY:
WORLD BUILDING THROUGH GENRE AND ALLUSION**

PETER HIGGINS

A commentary submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD In Creative Writing by Publication), accompanied by printed copies of the novels *Wolfhound Century* (2013), *Truth and Fear* (2014) and *Radiant State* (2015).

The University of Huddersfield

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

A PhD In Creative Writing by Publication, comprising a trilogy of published novels – *Wolfhound Century* (2013), *Truth and Fear* (2014) and *Radiant State* (2015), described collectively as the Wolfhound Century trilogy – and an accompanying commentary.

The published novels are historical fantasy thrillers, engaging with Russian (predominantly Soviet) history and culture of the period approximately 1900 to 1960. The novels do not portray Russia directly, but create a refracted, re-imagined world of Russian-ness, troped as 'the Vlast'.

The commentary discusses the writing of the novels as practice-based research. It explores how the trilogy puts into practical fiction-writing use some concepts about literary tradition, genre and intertextual allusions which I first developed as an academic researcher in literary history. It describes the results of a writing process based on the use of wide-ranging and deliberate allusiveness and multiple, shifting genres and narrative voices, ranging from those of popular fiction to the highly literary and poetic: a practice which grew out of my prior study of literary modernism and classical and Renaissance epic. It explores how these formal strategies are used to extend and complement the novels' thematic concerns with the interaction between the totalizing, collectivizing state and the openness and plenitude of individual human consciousness.

The commentary also discusses my novels as a contribution to knowledge, specifically to certain genres of fantasy writing and to the interface between fiction seen as popular or mass market and fiction seen as literary. It examines the relationship of the Wolfhound Century trilogy to fantasy thriller, alternate history, historical fantasy, steampunk, and cultural/historical mashup and pastiche. It describes how my novels adopt aspects of those genres but also reshape and extend them by integrating heightened and more 'literary' modes of writing and an extensive and programmatic allusiveness to literary and cultural texts and ideas which lie outside the conventional boundaries of current fantasy and science fiction writing. It concludes that while the Wolfhound Century trilogy is related to and engages with a number of different genres, its foundational and driving creative purpose is ultimately that of high (or epic, or heroic) fantasy.

THE WOLFHOUND CENTURY TRILOGY: A COMMENTARY

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A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game.

Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this commentary is the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy, a sequence of historical fantasy thrillers comprising *Wolfhound Century* (2013), *Truth and Fear* (2014) and *Radiant State* (2015). The trilogy is a single work: it unfolds one extended story with recurrent characters across all three books. The whole work has a continuing, extended relationship to Russian (predominantly Soviet) history and culture.¹ But although it reflects Russian history, the trilogy does not refer to or portray Russia directly. It creates a refracted, re-imagined world of Russian-ness, troped as the 'Vlast', and sixty years of Russian history are compressed – condensed, distorted, essentialized – into a narrative that covers about six years in the story.

The trilogy's thriller structure provides an armature to support a wide-ranging exploration of the world the novels build, which tends consistently towards the compendious and encyclopedic: secondary characters include dispossessed aristocrats, shopkeepers, intellectuals, artists, archivists, civil servants, officers of the

¹ *Wolfhound Century* reflects the period from approximately 1900 to 1930: revolutionary unrest; modernist artistic and intellectual ferment; the war in the trenches; the dispossession of the aristocracy; Bolshevik propaganda. *Truth and Fear* reflects the 1930s and 1940s: heightening terror; the forced removal of whole populations; penal labour camps; the Great Patriotic War; the sieges of Stalingrad and Leningrad; the rise of Stalin, his consolidation in power and ultimate success as a war leader; the development of the atomic bomb. *Radiant State* reflects the post-war decades: a monolithic Soviet Union and its satellite states; the apotheosis of Stalin; huge concrete cities rebuilt amid the rubble; the rise of a middle-class technocracy; growing economic prosperity; workers' resorts; nuclear power; a space program culminating in the first human flight into space; the fall of Stalin.

militia, the army and the police, revolutionaries, informers, doorkeepers, scientists, technicians and engineers, explorers, lost children and cosmonauts. In the course of the three novels, the narrative takes the reader across an entire continent, from northern arctic tundra to arid southern semi-desert, from eastern forest to western ocean, down into underground tunnels and out into orbital space. It explores cities, towns and wildernesses, industrial complexes and coastal holiday resorts. The world of the Vlast is characterized throughout by a vein of fantasy: non-human figures include giants, rusalkas, versions of golems and vampires and werewolves and the walking dead, house-spirits, wood-spirits, air-spirits, witches and immense alien beings that fall from the sky. It is a world of magical and shifting possibilities, compressions and dilations of time, watchful trees and sentient rain.

Overt references to political and military events of the Soviet period rarely find their way into the novels. There is no communism in the Vlast. Where history does provide structure, as opposed to a well of sources, is in the trilogy's highly fictionalized, compressed and fantasticalized account of the life of Josef Djughashvili/Stalin in the person of Josef Kantor/Rizhin. The rise of Kantor from revolutionary terrorist, pamphleteer and gangster, his transformation into Papa Rizhin, the avuncular and all-pervasive President Commander of the New Vlast, and his eventual fall, is the core narrative that draws the main protagonists and secondary characters together. Kantor's story is modeled on the life of Stalin.² Although a few other characters in the trilogy have a tangential, allusive relationship to real people,³ Kantor/Rizhin is the only one

² I drew on many biographies and histories concerning Stalin and his era, but the main inspiration and core sources for my view of Stalin as it informed the novels are Sebag Montefiore 2003 and 2007.

³ For example, Lavrentina Chazia owes her name and function in the Vlast to Lavrentiy Beria, chief of the NKVD under Stalin, but as a fictional character she owes

who has a deep and extended connection with a personage from twentieth century history.

The Wolfhound Century trilogy was written consciously and programmatically as an exercise in bringing together within a single fictional work elements that are rarely found together. It does this in several different aspects. While (as this commentary will discuss) each of these strategies can be found in other works, I am not aware of a comparable work which does all of them, at the same time.

a) The trilogy is a work of historical fiction which deploys extensive research in, and adaptation of, historical sources to build a version of the history of the Soviet Union from its inception to the fall of Stalin, but relies primarily on sources quite different from the kind usually used in historical fiction. In constructing its version of Russian-ness it draws widely on – alludes to, adapts, incorporates, re-imagines – Russian poetry, art, novels, music, architecture, newspapers, radio, cinema, propaganda, myth, legend and folklore, and also makes extensive use of fictional representations of Russia (both Russian and Anglophone) with relatively little direct use of historical events, personages and settings, except at a broad and structural level.

b) It merges the tropes, strategies and structures of two different and usually separate mass market genres, thriller and fantasy, to remake and extend the scope of the fantasy thriller as a distinct genre.

more to Rosa Kleb in Ian Fleming's 1957 novel *From Russia With Love* and as played by Lotte Lenya in the 1963 film of the same name.

c) It is a densely and systematically allusive work, deliberately Modernist in approach, each page echoing and reflecting its chosen precursor texts, aware of its forerunners and picking up fragments from widely various traditions and historical periods. It derives its meaning in part from its consciousness of affiliation to, and difference from, those traditions. This Modernism has a thematic rather than simply a formal, aesthetic purpose: the period of history the trilogy deals with is the time of the birth of Modernist artistic strategies, and the novels' Modernist forms are a way of enacting and engaging with the thematic concern of full human development and inner revolutionary freedom set against the collectivizing, totalizing state.

d) It is a multi-layered, linguistically, aesthetically and thematically complex work which uses a range of highly and self-consciously 'literary' styles of writing but offers itself (with pride and without any trace of irony) as a mass-market commercial book for readers of fantasy and science fiction, rather than as a 'literary' novel. The modes and styles of writing in the trilogy aspire to the carnivalesque.⁴ The writing shifts constantly, ranging from terse, violent

⁴ The term 'carnavalesque' was introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin (writing on Rabelais) to denote the inversion within a literary text of norms of hierarchy and authority, and the outbreak of a polyphonic plurality of voice. I use the term here in its extended sense of mixing popular and literary forms, and the presence within a text of many voices, many genres, the suspension of dominant form and monoculture. This all connects thematically with the concerns of the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy: Bakhtin was a Russian writing under Stalin, drawing attention to the unsustainability of imposing single-voice discourse (his 'dialogic principle') while living under a totalitarian regime, and he did so by reference to a book about giants (Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*). Of course, the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy is also – perhaps more so – a reverse carnival. The novels take the popular and the playful and make them earnest, aiming to invest them with serious intent: hoping to give Bakhtinian critical theories a home in fantasy thriller. (On Bakhtin and the carnivalesque, see for example Groden, Kreiswirth & Szeman 2005 pp. 89-94 and Malpas & Wake p.160.)

thriller prose to intense, poetic prose, taking in a wide variety of genres and alluding to many traditions, many authors, many works of art.

It is a systematic feature of the trilogy that there is a close and complex relationship between theme/meaning and writing style/genre: form is meaningful and the writing is part of the story. All the strategies listed above are concerned with openness and crossing borders: bringing together in one work elements that are usually regarded as separate. The Wolfhound Century trilogy declines to acknowledge frontiers.

It is primarily on its wide inclusiveness, its mixing-and-matching, its mash-up of traditions, genres and approaches, that this commentary stakes a claim for the Wolfhound Century trilogy as a contribution to knowledge: putting elements together that have not come together before, seeing how they catalyse, support and illuminate each other, exploring afresh how to bring them into a cohesive and engaging experience for the reader. But this commentary also offers itself as a contribution to knowledge about the processes and techniques of creative writing.

I was a student, researcher and teacher of literary history and literary theory for a long time before I came to writing fiction, and this background has shaped my approach as a novelist. When I became a writer of fiction, I had to learn how to do it through practice and study and thinking it through. I was not a natural writer. While the writing of the trilogy involved a lot of spontaneity and free creativity, I first had to learn how to let myself do that, and all my free writing has been subject to subsequent critically-informed reflection, re-working and editing. Sources, models and influences were consciously sought out, sifted, selected and used. Though all creative production

and performance can be troped as research, regarding the Wolfhound Century trilogy as a piece of literary and creative research is not a trope.⁵ Accordingly, as well as considering the finished work, this commentary describes how I developed myself as a creative writer, coming to it from a background in literary study and research, and how I adapted a research-based approach to creative production. It outlines what I have learned about using sources, allusions and references to open up a way to write new things and build a fictive, fantasy world which draws the reader in and feels extensive, absorbing and real and it outlines an approach to literary genres which uses different kinds of writing as part of the meaning of the work, and as a writer's toolkit to help build convincing worlds and characters.

The commentary is organized as follows.

Section 1 outlines my background in literary research, how I approached turning myself into a creative writer and the personal conclusions I reached (up to the point of writing the Wolfhound Century trilogy) about the distinct elements of the creative writing process.

Section 2 considers the Wolfhound Century trilogy as a collision of thriller and fantasy. It explores the concepts of fantasy and thriller as I have used them, the effects of mixing them, and the contrasting roles of fantasy in Anglophone and Russian literature. It discusses how fantasy and thriller meet in the figure of the magical, compendiously perceptive hero-detective.

⁵ The definition of practice-based research adopted here and implicit throughout this commentary is that described in Candy 2011.

Section 3 describes the extensive and often covert allusiveness of the Wolfhound Century trilogy and the processes by which this allusiveness is written into the text.

Section 4 considers the Wolfhound Century trilogy's relation with and contribution to various genres of fantasy about history, namely: alternate history; historical fantasy; steampunk; and cultural/historical mashup and pastiche.

The **Conclusion** supplements the commentary's account of the rational purposefulness of the Wolfhound Century trilogy's forms and themes with some thoughts on the impulsive energy, emotional and partly unavailable-to-consciousness, which gives a writer's ideas life and shapes their choices in fiction-writing, and concludes that, while the Wolfhound Century trilogy is related to and engages with a number of different genres, its foundational and driving creative purpose is that of high (or epic, or heroic) fantasy.

1. HOW I CAME TO WRITING FICTION, AND TO THE WOLFHOUND CENTURY

This section is autobiographical in structure. Its purpose is to establish the context that shaped the writing the Wolfhound Century trilogy. I was a student and teacher of literary history and literary theory long before I came to writing fiction, and when I turned to fiction I did so in a distinctively planned and self-aware way. This background gives the work its character as practice-based research (indeed, research-based practice), is the foundation for its allusiveness, and also to some extent (I now see) influenced its desire to combine literary with mass-market writing and also its preoccupation with the struggle towards openness of perception and Jungian conceptions of the compendious plenary subconscious.

After a BA in English at Oxford University and an MA at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, I spent a further four years researching for a DPhil and teaching at Oxford, latterly with a Junior Research Fellowship at Wolfson College. By the time I left, I had acquired a deep sense of the relationship of literary texts to one another and to their cultural context over time, and a familiarity with literary theory from Marxist, post-structuralist and post-modernist readings to the Kabbalistic Freudianism of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. During my years of teaching and research I was also reading huge quantities of fiction of every kind. I consumed – was consumed by – crime novels, spy novels, thrillers, fantasy, science fiction, poetry, children's

fiction, nineteenth and twentieth century novels. Eclectic reading engrossed and absorbed and excited me.

However, I realise now that in all my reading and research I acquired almost no understanding of, nor even curiosity about, the processes by which books of any kind, whether mass market entertainment or self-consciously literary work, were actually written. I had internalized a conception, of which I was barely conscious and which I never interrogated or challenged, that writing 'creatively' involved starting with a blank sheet of paper, beginning at the beginning and writing through to the end, allowing the work simply to flow out and in effect transcribing it. This naïve conception of the process of writing stifled my own attempts to write, to the point of making it impossible for me. Whenever I tried to write anything – always starting with the first sentence of page one and having little idea of what might come next or how to find that out – I invariably failed. My hypertrophied critical faculties kicked in, and after a page or two – endlessly over-edited and re-written to death – I stopped. Eventually I gave up trying.

I did not come back to the idea that I might write fiction myself until some fifteen years after I had left literary research and teaching behind. I happened to read Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* (Wolfe 2000), and it jolted me. In that hugely sophisticated and ambitious work I found for the first time the joining together of things I had previously believed must be separate: a full and deep engagement with the tropes and traditions of mass-market genre fiction, combined with rich and intellectually serious large scale thinking and innovative creativity. It was a revelation to see how Wolfe's work used the adventuring of epic fantasy, collided

with far-future science fiction, to create a loving, compendious anatomy of familiar tropes and structures which was also a sophisticated and thematically complex, intriguing literary work. Equally exciting for me were the refusal to limit the work to one genre, but always to be *both ... and* , and the concomitant ambition to build a fictional world of encyclopaedic scale, completion and fullness. And at about the same time, I came across Joan Aiken's *The Way To Write For Children* (Aiken 1982).

It was Joan Aiken's book which showed me how to write: not what makes a good book – not plots, themes, characters, I knew about them – but what the *actual processes of making a story* are. From Joan Aiken I began to learn how to collect scraps and phrases and notes and ideas and put them all away in a box and keep adding to it; how to make plans before you write and ask questions of your work; how you could have second and third thoughts, leave your work alone for a while and come back to it; how you could change your mind as you went along; how you could try and fail and try again, and the failing did not matter, it was part of the process. I know that to many people this is all obvious, and I know that many writers do not need to do all this anyway, but to me it was a revelation.

After reading Joan Aiken I went on, painstakingly and systematically teaching myself how to write, learning it mainly from books, piecing it together and consciously articulating it for myself. Over a number of years I worked out for myself (and I still think this is right, for me, at least) how to go about the four distinct phases of writing good fiction:

- a) opening yourself up to free and spontaneous imaginative flow, listening to the fullness of the subconscious and permitting it to go about its creative business, ignoring your negating inner voices and allowing creative personal expression⁶;
- b) mastering the practical craftwork and techniques of fiction writing, and studying the creative practices of other artists (not just writers), so you can capture the flow of ideas and perceptions and learn to express effectively, control, plan and shape them⁷;
- c) writing for a *reader*: writing *stories*; and writing in a way that captures and keeps a reader's engagement⁸;
- d) understanding the specifics of the genre you are writing for, and the market and readership there is for it⁹.

I set about developing and practising all four, which are all necessary though not always obviously compatible and in some crucial ways they conflict¹⁰.

⁶ Key books for me were Cameron 1993, Brande 1934 and Goldberg 1986. Writing in this field shades across into 'New Age' material and broadly Jungian models of the psyche: I found Redgrove 1987, Stevens 1999 and Starhawk 1999 profoundly helpful in becoming a writer, and they also contributed thematically to the Wolfhound Century trilogy.

⁷ The book that helped me first and most (apart from Aiken 1982) was Stein 1995. Equally important was learning from creative practitioners in other forms and media. Tharp 2003 I found particularly crucial.

⁸ On stories. what they are and how to make them work: McKee 1997. On keeping and holding the reader, page by page and line by line: Knight 1997.

⁹ For my own two core genres, fantasy and thriller: Card 1990, Williamson 1987, Beinhart 1996 and Highsmith 1983.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the interaction and tension between open flow and reflective

I have gone at some length into the history of my development as writer in order to establish the extent to which every aspect of the writing of the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy was a conscious, deliberated and planned process. And combined with this consciousness and deliberateness of practice was a sense, which I retained from my years of literary research and study, that nothing in the text is ever neutral; that every choice of genre or point of view or turn of phrase is meaningful and thematic; that the book and every part of it is in constant dialogue with other books; that books are always shaped and saturated by their affiliations, their precursors, their origin-texts. All this is inevitably true whether the author wishes it or not, but it seems to me that if I know this, if I am conscious of it and consciously seek it out, I can to some extent at least take control of it and use it to make the book better. It also seems to me that the more open I am to the precursors of my own writing, the more I take down the barriers in a controlled and systematic way and make a positive point of it, the more capacious and ambitious and better the book can be.

Every part of the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy, therefore, is built on research and planning and experiment. Part of the process of writing any scene, any chapter, was systematically to consider and choose methods, styles and source texts. A fight scene is based on a study of how fight scenes are written. A character and what they do recalls other characters in other books. A landscape description draws on specific models and traditions of literary landscapes. And choices about what to draw on are taken, as far as possible, consciously and with an eye to themes and meanings, genres

control, and for a practical technique for doing both consistently and productively, see Redgrove 1995.

and traditions, and to what kind of book this is that I am writing, at this particular moment in the process of its unfolding.

2. FANTASY THRILLER: COLLIDING GENRES

The *Wolfhound Century* trilogy makes conscious and deliberate use of literary genres as building blocks, tool sets and part of the apparatus of meaning of the work as a whole. The procedure is fractal: it repeats itself at every level, micro to macro, structure to lexis. This section traces one of the key genre-mixings in the text, fantasy/thriller. It examines the opposition between them as I conceived it when I was writing: how that opposition relates to themes in the work and to the traditions of thriller, fantasy and fantasy thriller; and how that opposition is resolved in the hero-figure Lom and in the fundamental, underlying form of the trilogy, a high fantasy hero quest.

The fantasy/thriller collision is introduced in the first passage of the first book in the series. Like all openings in fiction, the opening of *Wolfhound Century* sets up a world and also sets up a genre: in this case, the thriller:

Investigator Vissarion Lom sat in a window booth in the Café Rikhel. Pulses of rain swept up Ansky Prospect, but inside the café, in the afternoon crush, the air was thick with the smell of coffee, cinnamon bread and damp overcoats. (*Wolfhound Century* p.3)¹¹

¹¹Quotations from the novels are taken from the Gollancz mass market paperback editions: see Reference List.

Readers of Eric Ambler, Graham Greene, Len Deighton, Adam Hall, John le Carré, Martin Cruz Smith or Philip Kerr will know pretty much where they are and what is happening, and may even notice an allusion, a referencing echo of the opening of John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*.¹²

Opening *Wolfhound Century* in this mode is shorthand. It cuts to the chase. The reader intuits what kind of writing this is and brings into play their own pre-existing understandings, emotional responses, connections, memories: totalitarianism, spying and surveillance, deception and doubleness, informers and political police, revolutionaries and dissident intellectuals. All these things are the raw material of the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy, and invoking this genre at the start is a kind of subliminal overture, drawing the reader in. The alignment of subject matter and genre-mode gives the world the story is building a familiarity, a felt-rightness and a comfortable fit. But at the bottom of the second page *Wolfhound Century* takes a sudden turn:

A line of giants, each leading a four-horse dray team and a double wagon loaded high with resin tanks, was lumbering up the hill from the direction of the river quay. (*Wolfhound Century* pp. 4–5).

The introduction of giants breaks abruptly out of the le Carré-ish genre-world which the first two pages have been building. Giants do not belong there, they come from

¹² The American handed Leamas another cup of coffee and said, 'Why don't you go back and sleep? We can ring you if he shows up.'

Leamas said nothing, just stared through the window of the checkpoint, along the empty street.

'You can't wait for ever, sir. Maybe he'll come some other time. We can have the polizei contact the Agency: you can be back here in twenty minutes.' (Le Carré 1963 p. 11)

somewhere else entirely.

This collision/elision of secret policemen and giants engages for the first time with the tension at the core of the Wolfhound Century trilogy as a fantasy thriller about the Soviet Union. Writing thrillers about European totalitarian states owes debts and responsibilities to history and to extra-literary reality and human suffering. It is (whether it likes it or not, whether it acknowledges or suppresses the fact) about the NKVD, the KGB, the Stasi and the lives they ruined. But fantasy is otherwise. Giants are rooted in ancient myth, folklore, fantasy and the subconscious: they are familiar, essential, but unlocatable. The roots of giants reach back – directly, with little mediation – to the beginnings of literature: to Homer's Polyphemus, and beyond that to creation myths, to ice giants, to Gaia and Ouranos, to the Nephilim. But also, less and more than that, giants are simply giants. For a fantasy writer, the word 'giant' is an empty signifier and an open invitation. Writing about giants can be freighted with any values: apart from size, they have no predetermined characteristics. They can be any kind of giants you want.

As I see it, thriller is a rule book and a set of responsibilities, and fantasy is permission. In fantasy nothing is impossible and there are no rules except those the writer chooses to accept or invent and impose upon themselves. A story, once it announces itself as fantasy, can do anything it wants to do, say anything and go anywhere, at any scale. Live on any scale, the tiny or the enormous. Bring back the dead. Cure any sickness. Live for ever, Take the mind from the body. Animate any inanimate thing and give it voice. In fantasy you take any pleasure you like from anything you can think of. And fantasy can connect with the reader at a deep

emotional level, triggering primary responses, recalling and retelling stories familiar since early childhood. Fantasy is the sub-atomic quantum physics world of fiction, containing enormous potential energies and infinitely multiplying, centripetal parallel universes, but mostly emptiness and nothing at all.

At a technical level, bringing thriller and fantasy together allows the emptiness and plenitude of fantasy to be channelled and made purposeful. A problem which faces the writer, once they have announced to themselves that what they are writing is fantasy, is that overabundance of choice kills story. Fantasy takes away challenge. By allowing anything and everything to be possible, it leaves nothing for the story to do. There is no difficulty that cannot be overcome; no constraints, no puzzles to solve; no conflict. No story. So to write fantasy that works as story you have to find a form of narrative somewhere else and bring it in, and at one level that's what thriller is doing in the Wolfhound Century trilogy. Thriller is discipline. Thriller is logic of plot, believability and verisimilitude, pace, threat, violence, mysteries that have hidden solutions and resolutions waiting to be revealed. The thriller narrative provides drive, focus, purpose. Using a thriller plot allows the Wolfhound Century trilogy to move along at speed, as thrillers do, telling the story in short, intense chapters with cliff-hanger endings. It puts the characters under stress and keeps them acting. It involves the reader in the story quickly, it gets investment, and keeps the reader reading. And it provides a fundamental familiarity: a home genre, with established conventions and expectations. Thriller here is an armature, a scaffolding to keep the fantasy in check and give it focus.

The fantasy/thriller conjunction can also be looked at the other way round, not as a

fantasy using a thriller plot, but as a thriller which keeps on erupting into fantasy. Looked at this way, fantasy breaks thriller apart. It splits the carapace and cracks open an inexhaustible well of narrative possibility. Refreshing and repurposing familiar tropes and devices, fantasy unlocks the thriller's strangeness, plenitude, richness and indeterminacy. The act of combining fantasy with thriller allows the narrative to uncover territories and create meanings which neither genre can access alone.

The tension between thriller and fantasy becomes in the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy, concerned as it is with the conflict between natural, individual human imaginative plenitude on the one hand and totalitarian oppression on the other, fundamentally thematic. It enacts openness versus closedness; possibility versus what has been determined; self-invention and self-liberation versus capitulation to the norms of production. The opposite of totalitarianism, fantasy is the freedom of inwardness and introversion, of the imagination, of inconsistency, of thinking what you want and judging by your own internal yardstick. Of permission. Of becoming, at least in your own mind, whatever you can think of.

Traditions of Fantasy and Thriller

The 'fantasy thriller' is itself a genre with a history as long as thriller itself. Fictional detectives have always engaged with ghosts, vampires, werewolves, the occult, and Lovecraftian horror. It includes investigators of the occult and paranormal such as E H Heron's Flaxman Low, Algernon Blackwood's John Silence and William Hope

Hodgson's Carnacki.¹³ Fantasy thriller is currently in the commercial mainstream, for example as a subset of urban fantasy in the novels of Jim Butcher and Ben Aaronovich. The *Wolfhound Century* trilogy differs from most fantasy thrillers in that it is set entirely in a fantasy world, a secondary world¹⁴, not a version of our reality, and in that the hero detective (himself imbued with aspects of magical capability and perception) is not investigating the strange and the uncanny, but the 'normal' threats of murder, terrorism, corruption and conspiracy that characterize mainstream thrillers. Formally therefore the trilogy can be seen as an inversion, a mirroring of the normal conventions of the fantasy thriller: in my novels fantasy investigates the real; the strange investigates the familiar; the forest investigates the Vlast. I see this as metaphoric of the basic approach I have taken in writing this work: using fantasy as a lens for looking differently at real things, at real twentieth century history, and defamiliarizing them.

There is also a more fundamental inversion of the relationship between fantasy and thriller at work in the trilogy, one directly connected with its imaginative engagement with Russian, and specifically Soviet, subject matter and source material.

At the start of this section I positioned fantasy as free and open imagination, and the thriller as responsibility to historical realities; seeing thriller as the 'home genre' for writing about totalitarian oppression and the twentieth century experience of it. This is true, but it is also a culturally specific, occidental view. In relation to Soviet Russia, or

¹³ For surveys of this tradition, see for example 'Fantasy Thrillers' (Rottensteiner 1978, pp. 104-106) and 'Occult Detectives' (Clute and Grant 1997 pp. 701-702).

¹⁴ 'Secondary World' denotes a self-coherent and autonomous fictional world where the rules are different from ours (e.g. magic possible) which is not intended to be taken by the reader as our world. (Clute and Grant 1997 p. 847)

Nazi Germany for that matter, the thriller of the kind I'm referring to, the genre that traces its roots and affiliations back to Erskine Childers, Eric Ambler and Grahame Greene, is a journalistic, tourist genre. Thriller is the pre-eminent genre of totalitarianism and of vicariously-imagined resistance to it *in the Anglophone world*. The Anglophone world has not directly experienced life under a twentieth century totalitarian state, as the people of Europe and Russia have. As Anglophone readers and writers we stand outside that experience; we examine it fearfully, with curiosity; and the genre we use pre-eminently for writing ourselves into it is the thriller. Through thrillers, vicariously, we imagine ourselves, covert and pretending to be part of it when we are not: we see ourselves as spies, as fugitives, as honest detectives investigating its secrets and darkneses; not as victims. In the Anglophone tradition, to write and read thrillers about this experience, this looking-glass world¹⁵ that is like us but not like us, is an act of self-projection and historical imagination.

But while the thriller is a tourist genre in the totalitarian world of the early part of the 20th century, fantastical narratives are not. Fantasy writing in Russia and Central Europe has long held a central, serious and urgent place, from Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* to Gogol's 'The Nose' or the writings of Kafka, and this became even more so in the Soviet era. The fantasy of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* or Bruno Shulz's stories; the science fiction of Zamyatin's *We* or Tarkovsky's *Stalker*; the folkish distortions and tall tales of Chagall; these, like the dense, pressured lyricism and allusiveness of Mandelstam and Akhmatova, the abstraction of Malevich or the

¹⁵ I take the phrase 'looking-glass world' from the title of John le Carré's 1965 novel *The Looking Glass War*. The image seems to me to capture perfectly the feel of the relation/confrontation between Russia and Western Europe in the twentieth century: the strange resemblance of opposites, the struggle between twins, that uneasy polarity of the similar and the reversed.

covert strategies and avant-gardism of Shostakovich are urgent, engaged, necessary and immediate responses to the pressures of living in that world. They carry an emotional charge, an importance, a literal dangerousness, for their creators and also for their first audience, which their formally similar counterparts in Anglophone fantasy and science fiction can't match. They are strategies for staying alive and staying open, maintaining channels of communication, expressing truths which cannot otherwise be safely spoken; holding the human door open.

I am not claiming any kind of equivalency with these artists for the Wolfhound Century trilogy. Apart from being *hubris*, that would be impossible: now is not then, here is not there. But I do see the fantasy of the trilogy as in some way a gesture of affiliation and an opening up to that world, letting it in to give the trilogy some energy, some meaning, some emotional charge that is non-trivial.

Conjoining Fantasy And Thriller: The Compendious Hero

The discussion so far has been based on the idea that the relationship between fantasy and thriller in the Wolfhound Century trilogy is uneasy, unstable and fissiparous. Yet in the trilogy they are not separate, and what holds them together, above all – what makes the trilogy a unified work – is the figure of the hero. Vissarion Lom is conceived as a merging of the two traditions. He is located at a crossover point, holding the two genres together. He also enacts and represents, in his heroic aspect, the core idea which connects the formal and the thematic concerns of the trilogy (the idea which I see as common to both thriller and fantasy heroes of this kind): the

aspiration towards compendious openness.

In thriller terms, Lom is the investigator; the honest policeman without worldly success, who endures the contempt of the more cynical; the exposé of corruption and bringer-down of bad kings; the modest determined, non-grandiose defender of the weak and defiant challenger of bullies; the cunning, intelligent evader of traps and spotter of clues; the loyal and stalwart friend; the cautious, respectful lover who never, ever waivers and never, ever gives up. He is closely affiliated to Martin Cruz Smith's Arkady Renko, Robert Harris's Xavier March and John le Carré's mirror-rhyming pair of heroes, Leamas and Smiley¹⁶. In short, Lom is *this* (Raymond Chandler's famous definition of the detective as hero in 'The Simple Art Of Murder'):

... down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. ... He is the hero; he is everything ... a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man ... the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world (Chandler 1950).

It is in Chandler's formulation of the hero-investigator as *compendious* that I see the merging-point of thriller with fantasy, and also the connection of both genres to a far longer tradition. Compendiousness is about resourceful action, about not being at a loss, not ever. It is about cunning and success. But it is also about *experiencing* compendiously: going everywhere, feeling everything, perceiving what others

¹⁶ Arkady Renko is the detective in Martin Cruz Smith, *Gorky Park* (1981) and several subsequent books. Xavier March is the detective in Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992). Alec Leamas is in John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold* (1963) and George Smiley appears in many of le Carré's works, most centrally and expansively in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974) and *Smiley's People* (1979).

overlook. The conception of the compendious hero reaches back to Homer's Odysseus, and carries through into Renaissance epic fantasy (for example, Arthur in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*), Modernism (for example, Tiresias in T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* or HCE in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) and late twentieth century heroic fantasy.

Lom's compendious plenitude, is not expressed primarily through resourceful action or heroic wisdom but through broad, open percipience, engagement and exploration: in effect, through the modes and places to which he takes the novels. Conventionally, thrillers give the male hero (the best of men) a weakness, a fault, a dark side to make him engaging and humane. What the Wolfhound Century trilogy does with Lom is something different: it breaks him open to see what he's really made of, and it makes him magical. This, in the formal structure of the trilogy, is the bridge connecting thriller and core fantasy. Lom's trajectory owes a lot to – echoes, replays, re-imagines – the trajectory of what I think are among the greatest and widest-ranging heroes of modern high fantasy: Robin Hobb's Fitz the Assassin, and above all Gene Wolfe's Severian, the journeyman excruciator and executioner of the Torturer's Guild whose wandering across the Dying Earth lead humanity out into a new universe altogether.¹⁷ (Lom's name, Vissarion, is Severian rewritten.)

Lom's hero journey towards ever fuller openness takes him on a compendious voyage through the elements and through the history of the first part of the twentieth century. He passes through water (drowning in the Mir, floating in the sea), earth (exploring

¹⁷ Fitz is the central figure in Robin Hobb's *The Farseer Trilogy* (1995 – 97) and *The Tawny Man Trilogy* (2001 – 2003). Severian is the protagonist of Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* (1980 – 83) and *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987).

tunnels and souterrains), air (flying high in Gretskaia's Kotik), ice (the tundra of Novaya Zima) and fire (the burning of the Lodka), into the very heart of thermonuclear fission, running to the root of the mushroom cloud, and finally into the endless, centreless forest itself.

The essential characteristic of Lom's compendious openness is complete fullness of perception, a connectedness between conscious and unconscious mind, accessing the kind of plenitude and visionary empathy which he experiences, for example, in the back of a militia truck after he and Maroussia have been arrested:

He leaned back and stretched his legs in front of him. Closed his eyes and let his mind open, focusing on nothing.

Listen. Feel. Breathe. There is plenty of time.

He felt the faint, steady pulsing in the skin-covered gap in his skull. Focused all his attention on it.

Lom used to imagine his unconscious mind as a dark, irrational place, an airless primeval cave where monsters moved. But the opposite was true. The unconscious mind was immense. Bright, airy, perfumed, luminous, borderless, beautiful. The outside world poured into it constantly, without ever filling it up. Everything was felt, everything was noticed.

And all you had to do was pay attention.

Now, at this very moment, there was the street noise outside, the faint calling of seagulls, the rumble of the truck's wheels on the road, the working of the engine, the whisper of cloth against cloth, four people breathing. The smell of leather and sweat, hot steel and engine oil. The lieutenant's shaving

soap. Maroussia's hair. Her skin. And there was the rub of his cuff against his own wrist, the sock rucked under his foot, the pressure of the hard bench seat against his back and thighs. In the subliminal mind's timeless empire nothing was diminished. Nothing wore thin by tedium and habit. Nothing was ignored, nothing judged trivial. Nothing was forgotten. The luminous inner world contained everything he was and everything undiscovered that he might still become. His forest birthright. His strength and his power. (*Truth and Fear* p. 88).

Translated into the tropes of fantasy, Lom's openness and fullness of perception becomes a magical power of resistance, endurance, return and fighting back. But it belongs equally in the thriller genre: the universal shared characteristic of all detective heroes is that they are more perceptive than anyone else.

In his compendious journey towards completion Lom rehearses the ancient, archetypal, ever-repeated mythic hero-journey described by Joseph Campbell, a journey which passes through 'destruction of the world that we have built and in which we live, and of ourselves within it' to 'a wonderful reconstruction, of the bolder, cleaner, more spacious and fully human life ...'and a 'breakthrough into abundance' (Campbell 1949 pp. 20, 43). It is through Lom that the novels resolve the tension between thriller and fantasy modes and come to contain both. Fundamentally, although it lacks many of the outward markers of the genre, the work as a whole is a

high fantasy adventure, told in the trilogy form characteristic of that genre, concerning a hero quest to free a land from the growing domination of a dark lord.¹⁸

Modernism/Postmodernism

Brian McHale establishes a distinction between modernist fiction, which is in his terms 'epistemological', and postmodernist fiction, which he terms 'ontological'.

Modernist fiction poses cognitive questions: 'How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?'. In essence, it assumes there is one all-encompassing world and the task is to understand it and one's place in it.

Postmodernist fiction, in contrast, assumes the co-existence of many nested and overlapping worlds and selves, each partial, fictive and incomplete, and the task is to negotiate a path among them. Hence, postmodernist fiction poses postcognitive questions: 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' (McHale 1992, 146-7).

In the case of 'genre' fiction, McHale argues that detective fiction is epistemological and modernist, while science fiction is ontological and postmodernist:

¹⁸ High fantasy is one term for this genre, also called epic or heroic. John Clute defines it as 'Fantasies set in OTHERWORLDS, specifically SECONDARY WORLDS, and which deal with matters affecting the destiny of those worlds' (Clute and Grant 1997 p. 446) Whatever the term, its constituent elements come together and find their defining, catalyzing expression in J R R Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*. For a succinct history of the genre from its post-Tolkien inception in 1977, with the publication of Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara* and Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever*, through to 1996 see Pringle 1998, p. 37. For a comprehensive account of its tropes and conventions (most of which are absent from the Wolfhound Century trilogy, or present in unusual form, see Wynne Jones 2006.

Thus, while epistemologically-oriented fiction (modernism, detective fiction) is preoccupied with questions such as: what is there to know about the world? Who knows it, and how reliably? How is knowledge transmitted, to whom, and how reliably? etc., ontologically-oriented fiction (postmodernism. SF) is preoccupied with questions such as: what is a world? How is a world constituted? Are there alternative worlds, and if so how are they constituted? How do different worlds, and different kinds of world, differ, and what happens when one passes from one world to another? etc. (McHale 1992, 247)

McHale's conceptual framework suggests that, by combining detective fiction with science fiction (taking McHale's SF to include secondary-world fantasy), the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy merges the ontological and the epistemological, the modernist and the postmodernist; and in doing so creates tensions and incompatibilities which arise from something more fundamental than simply the conventions of different genres.

There is a sense in which this distinction illuminates the thematic struggle in the trilogy, between the epistemological world of the Vlast and the shifting and various perceptibility of the ontological world which the Vlast seeks to dominate. It illuminates the inadequacy of Lom's epistemological policeman-self (and the necessity of stepping outside it to discover other selves that work better in other worlds) and the association of modernist styling with the Vlast.

However, the implication of McHale's framework does not I think allow the trilogy to be described as an encounter between modernist epistemology and postmodernist ontology. As soon as one frames the novels as staging a combination (or merger or collision) of modernist fiction with postmodernist fiction, one has

already conceded that the entire text is fundamentally postmodernist. Modernism has become apostrophized 'modernism': a style, a way of thinking, one partial world-view among others, that can be adopted, adapted, ironized, deployed and discarded. Epistemology becomes one more card in the ontological deck. To put it another way: can one merge epistemological and ontological fiction? Epistemologically, no; ontologically, why not?

To translate the question back into 'genre' terms: can one merge detective fiction with science fiction or fantasy? From the point of view of core detective fiction, no: to solve a locked room murder mystery by saying the murderer used magic or teleportation, breaks a genre contract with the reader; to claim there really is a Baskerville curse and a supernatural hound, will not do. But from the point of view of science fiction and fantasy, yes; the detective tropes and conventions can be deployed, on the understanding that solving the epistemological crime is not the main point of the narrative's ontological business.

3. ALLUSIVENESS

The Wolfhound Century trilogy is extensively, fractally allusive. Allusions, both to historical events and personages and to other literary and cultural works – echoes, half-quotations, adumbrations, embedded borrowings, other authorial voices leaking in — proliferate throughout the work. This allusiveness ranges from the very obvious – the whole work alludes on a large scale to the history of the Soviet Union and the life of Josef Stalin – to the almost completely obscure, the covert. Virtually every page is in some way allusive. The narrative hides allusions like undercover agents, sleepers, cryptograms, microfilm caches. Literary steganography.

These allusions enter the text in several different ways. Sometimes the process of writing starts with another work: to write about a protest march in somewhere like St Petersburg, and make it both allusive and authentic – feeling somehow familiar and right – I turn to the description of such a march in *Doctor Zhivago*. Sometimes, I come across in my reading a phrase or a passage which chimes with something I have written, and I go back to my work and find a place for it. And sometimes (most often, perhaps) a snag of memory of some other text – some film or poem or piece of music, some fragment, some turn of phrase, some tangential similarity – occurs to me as I write and, rather than exclude it, I open up to it and let it in.

But simply letting allusions in is only the start. They have to be used. Put to work. They have to have meaning in the context of the narrative. This section explores some of the uses to which the allusiveness of the work is put.

A) Worldbuilding and *Fragre*

Worldbuilding is a fundamental element of fantasy and science fiction writing. In essence, it is the concept that the world in which the narrative occurs is not our own here-and-now, so the writing needs to establish that world for the reader and develop it consistently and convincingly. Commonly, worldbuilding is said to be about establishing a history, a topography and geography, flora and fauna, rules of magic or invented science, a social culture, and so on.¹⁹ Worldbuilding is about consistency and solidity, about the author having worked out how things work and where things are and why they are so and not otherwise. The *Wolfhound Century* trilogy makes use of the usual methods of worldbuilding, but also uses allusion extensively as a means of making the text rich, connected and resonant.

In building the *Wolfhound Century* world – its Russian-ness, its Central-Europe-ness, its relationship to twentieth-century history – I've worked largely with cultural materials (literature, art, myth, music, newspapers, cinema, radio, dance, the design of common objects, anything ...); only vaguely and impressionistically with historical events and personages; not at all with the politics or religion of the period; and certainly not with authentic period accuracy in material things like maps, fashions,

¹⁹ See for example VanderMeer 2013 pp. 211-244. My own starting point for how to do it is the chapter 'World Creation' in Card 1990.

brand names, real-world persons and places. I wanted the world to feel real, rather than to resemble reality. A world which, while fantastical and other, would also feel to the reader as lived-in, tangible, weighted with history and complexity, extending beyond the borders of the narrative into other stories, other lives. Layered with fractal possibilities and traces. Simultaneously familiar and not.

I do not know whether readers will pick up any of these allusions. I am not expecting anyone to, and it is not meant to be part of the reading process for the reader to be consciously aware of them. Certainly for any one reader the great majority of them will go unnoticed. It was my working hypothesis while writing the work (part of my practice-based research) that the many allusions to Russian and other sources would build up a pervading sense of felt-realness; that for the reader, the fact that the text is saturated with subliminal allusiveness (even though – indeed precisely because – they will not recognise most of them, nor be conscious that allusiveness is there) would make the experience of reading the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy feel like a visit to real but foreign place.

So, for example, the apricot juice on the first page of *Wolfhound Century* (lifted from *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov 1988, pp. 13-14) is worldbuilding. It is meant to feel slightly surprising, distinctive and authentic, the kind of thing you get might get to drink in early-period Soviet Russia. Nobody reading the text is expected to think of Bulgakov and his fantasy version of Moscow, but it is there, subliminally: a buried affiliation-trace in the genome of *Wolfhound Century*. Buying apricot juice at a kiosk adds to the atmosphere, the aroma, the feel of this reality, alongside the scents in the Café Rikhel of cinnamon bread (which smells of Bruno Schulz's 'Cinnamon

Shops') and damp overcoats (which smell of Gogol and 'The Overcoat'). Similarly, you do not have to know the names Durnovo or Burliuk²⁰: 'Durnovo-Burliuk Street' is there because it *feels right*, and it feels right because it is not just vaguely Russian-esque but also because it actually *has* a meaning and relevance to the sources and themes of the trilogy, even if the reader does not know what it is. In that way, it works like a real street name does. A visitor to London may not know why Charing Cross is so called, but there *is* a reason - the name is a weathered, half-recognizable outcrop of buried history – and subliminally, incrementally, through the build-up of allusion after allusion, the reader may come to sense that there are reasons in the Wolfhound Century trilogy for what it says about its world and how it says it.

All the time and everywhere, layer upon layer, the obvious overlaid on the hidden, the prior, the analogous, the Wolfhound Century goes about building its world. Not just its rules and its maps, but its *world-feel*. Its *fragre*.

Fragre is a term I have appropriated from the novel *Transition* by Iain Banks. In the world of *Transition*, there is not one reality, but many: 'we live not in one world – singular, settled, linear – but within a multitude of worlds, forever exponentially and explosively multiplying through time. ... disparate, ever-branching and unfolding and developing realities' (Banks 2009 p.96). The novel tells stories of the 'Aware' and the 'Transitionaries' – those who are 'au fait with the realities of the realities' (Banks 2009

²⁰ Pyotr Nikolaievich Durnovo (1845 - 1915) was Minister of the Interior under Tsar Nicholas II, and a particularly harsh and oppressive leader of the Okhrana, the Tsar's secret state police, forerunners of the NKVD and KGB. (On Durnovo and the Okhrana, see Hingley 1970 and Ruud & Stepanov 1999). David Burliuk (1882 - 1967) was a Ukrainian poet and painter, a founding Russian Futurist and Neo-Primitive, co-author of the aesthetic manifesto *A Slap In The Face Of Public Taste*, who fled Russia in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, and lived from 1922 in the USA. ('Burliuk' in Cornwell 1998)

p.96) and know how to travel from one to another. This travelling is done, not physically, but by temporarily entering into and occupying the consciousness of a person living in it, and taking possession of their body. It's point-of-view hopping. Travelling between many realities, many versions of the world, many Londons and many Venices, the Transitionaries learn that each reality has its own distinctive feel: an atmosphere that belongs to it, and distinguishes it from all other versions. The term they use for this is 'fragre':

There ought to be a certain point in one's training for the post of transitionalary ... when one realises that one has discovered or acquired an extra sense. It is in a sense the sense of history, of connection, of how long a place has been lived in, a feeling for the heritage of human events attached to a particular piece of landscape or set of streets and stones. We call it fragre.

Part of it is akin to having a sharp nose for the scent of ancient blood. ... However, much of it is simply the layered result of multifarious generations of people having lived there; lived and died, certainly, but then as most people live for decades and die just once, it is the living part that has the greatest influence over the aroma, the feel of a place. (Banks 2009 p.104)

Of course, all fantasy worlds have a *fragre*. But because so much of the Wolfhound Century trilogy's *fragre* is made up of allusions to other works, and because those allusions, the subliminal as well as the evident, are *themed* – they reflect and participate in core thematic meanings of the books – the *fragre* here feels significant, meaningful, it has a hinterland. Meaning and fragre are both fractal: no matter how

closely you look or how far back from the work you stand, the patterns and the meanings, the referentialness and the allusiveness, are there, telling the same story at different levels.

This approach to worldbuilding is connected to a distinction made by Jonathan Raban in *Soft City*. The 'hard city' is the town planners' city, the objectively-there city, the city that 'one can locate on maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture'. But the hard city is not what you experience if you live there or visit there. The city as it is actually experienced is 'the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare' (Raban 1974 p.10):

To live in a city ... you have to act on hints and fancies, for they are all that the mobile and cellular nature of city life will allow you. You expose yourself in, and are exposed to by others, fragments, isolated signals, bare disconnected gestures ... The city, our great modern form, is soft, amenable to a dazzling and libidinous variety of lives, dreams, interpretations. (Raban 1974 p.15)

If, as Raban says, a city takes its most vivid forms from the way we imagine it, remember it, rehearse it, as we live there, rather than in the accurate recording of its material details, then a fictional city – and by extension a fictional world – needs to be built from the same materials, if it is going to feel real and compelling and fully present to the reader. This is what I have tried to do in the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy: build a world out of subliminal allusiveness – out of fantasy and thriller and myth, out of Russian and central European literature and allusive, blurred, indistinct historical reference – out of 'soft' materials.

Mirgorod, the capital of the Vlast, adopts St Petersburg as its nearest analogue because St Petersburg has become, in the writings of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky and Bely, the ultimate soft city: built on mud, a façade of Western orderliness containing Eastern indeterminacies and immensities, a city of layered names and layered history, 'a shadowy world of intangibilities and unrealities, alien to man's reason and apprehensible only to his unconscious being' which Dostoevsky called 'the most fantastic and intentional city in the world' (Bely 1983 p. xiv) and which with its intangibility, its mists, its white nights, was for Gogol 'elusive, mysterious, and above all a place of utter alienation' (Gogol 1972 p.11). This soft Petersburg has entered Anglophone literature also, for example in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*:

Russia is a sphinx; St Petersburg, the beautiful smile of her face. Petersburg: loveliest of all hallucinations, the shimmering mirage in the Northern wilderness glimpsed for a breathless second between black forest and the frozen sea. ... St Petersburg, a city built of hubris, imagination and desire ... (Carter 1984 p.111)

Allusion in the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy is a function of form as well as content. Using the conventions of appropriate literary genres also seems to me to make a contribution to building for the reader a sense of familiarity under the strangeness, of almost recognizable felt-realness, of being in a world they have been in before. So for example when *Wolfhound Century* opens as a thriller, using the conventions of thriller, and echoing specifically *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*, I'm not expecting the reader to recognize the original source. (One or two might, and that

would be great, but the vast majority will not.) Beginning (and continuing) as thriller and including traces from key examples like *le Carré* is meant to give the reader a deeper sense of genre integration and felt-rightness: they have read about worlds like this before; it is an imaginative place they have already constructed; a zone in their interior topography they are visiting again. As always, what I am hoping for is a subliminal recognizability which will spill over and make the whole world of the novel feel that bit more real. A momentary, subconsciously-absorbed marker of authenticity.

B) Modernism

The allusiveness of the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy, including not only its tendency to initiate, echo and rework other specific texts, but also its compendious mixing and inclusiveness of literary kinds and modes of writing, its periodic breaking out into stretched, intensified, lyrical poetic language, and its incorporation of inset genres such as poems, songs, manifestos, catechisms, newspaper articles, political speeches – is itself an allusion, and an allusion with a thematic purpose. Making the form part of the content, it is consciously an attempt to create, incorporated within the trilogy, an expressly and programmatically *modernist* work. It looks towards and aims to share something with the way works like *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos* and *Ulysses*, go about their business. It is aiming at the 'allusive and encyclopaedic interconnectedness' which is 'paradigmatically modernist' and characteristic of those three texts (Butler 2010 p. 4).

Stylistic and generic multiplicity is a central theoretical and practical concern for modernist writers and artists. It is crucial, for example, to the conception of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the episodes of which:

were all written in widely divergent styles, using all the figures of the rhetoric books in 'Aeolus', a musical definition of morpheme and syntax in 'Sirens', parodies of the prose styles from Anglo-Saxon to modern American in 'Oxen', of popular fiction in 'Nausicaa', and pretty well every form of Dadaist, expressionist, and surreal fantasy in 'Circe', and much more. (Butler 2010 p.11)

And it is not only Joyce; it is *The Waste Land*, it is Picasso, it is everywhere in modernist work:

The cultural chaos bred by the populous, ever-growing city, a contingent and polyglot tower of Babel, is enacted in similar chaos, contingency and plurality in the texts of modern writing, the design and form of Modernist painting. (Bradbury 1976 pp.98-99)²¹

But the modernism of the Wolfhound Century trilogy is not simply a matter of collecting allusions, and thus resembling other works that collect allusions. It has practical and thematic purpose.

One such purpose is to create a certain kind of fictional relationship with history. The

²¹See also Butler 2010 Chapter 1.

allusiveness of, say, *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos* or David Jones' *Anathemata* and *In Parenthesis* has the effect – for different purposes in each case – of compressing and short-circuiting times and places. Merging languages. Dissolving nationalisms. Opening up to everything. Letting many voices speak. Making the whole of history, the whole of tradition, the whole cycle of fall and grace, present in one moment, inside and outside of time. As Leopold Bloom says in *Ulysses*: 'Past was is today. What now is will then tomorrow as now was be past yester.' (Quoted by Conrad 1985, p.600). Allusive modernism of this kind is about creating distillations and essentializings of history, as the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy aims to do.²²

Another, more directly thematic purpose of the modernism embedded with the trilogy is to affiliate the work with forms of art opposed to the totalizing, collectivizing state. Modernism (as I conceive it in making these novels) is expressly a strategy of openness, freedom, liberation; a resistance to totalitarianism:

This modernist choice of styles is not a sign of instability, but an aspect of freedom. Diversity of style is liberal democracy in art ... it was the Soviet and Nazi dictatorships that demanded an explicitly anti-modernist reversion to an official unity of realist style in the arts. (Butler 2010 p.12)

It is characteristic of the totalitarian regimes of the early twentieth century which form part of the raw material for the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy that they and their apologists seek to suppress and extirpate all versions and perceptions of the world but their own. Whether it be the Nazis burning books and shaming 'degenerate' art,

²² The trilogy's relationship to history is discussed further detail in section 4 below.

Stalin's post-war *Zhdanovshchina* unionising writers and imposing cultural norms of Socialist Realism, or the learned and subtle critical theorizing of a writer like György Lukács, the principle is the same²³: there is one version of reality, the 'real' one, it is obvious, total and exclusive, assimilation to it and repetitious reflection of it is a citizen's duty, and departure from it – by modernist artists, by fantastical fictions – is subversive, traitorous, corrupt, diseased, illusory.

Modernist art and artists are present throughout the trilogy. Fictional versions of artists appear as characters and their works are described, and the works of many modernists inhabit the text as allusions and models. This becomes explicit at times,. For example collision between an official reality and the possibilities of oddity and fantasy and individuality, is directly connected with modernist art, with Dada and cabaret and Constructivism, book-burning and Zhdanovshchina, in the Crimson Marmot scene in *Wolfhound Century*:

‘The Novozhd! Do you know what he said about my picture of Lake Tsyrkhal?’ He stared around the table, daring them to speak. ‘I made the water yellow and black, and this is what the Novozhd said: As a hunter, I know that Lake Tsyrkhal is not like that. So now he forbids us to use colours which are different from those perceived by the normal eye. What is the point, I ask you, of a painter with a normal eye? Any idiot can see what’s normal. But do I fear this Novozhd? No!’ (*Wolfhound Century* p. 129)

²³ For an overview of Nazi and Soviet cultural engineering and repression, see Overy 2004. For Lukács' arguments in favour of 'realism' and against fantasy and modernist transgressive experimentation, see Lukács 1937.

In the world of the Vlast, despite the efforts of the regime to impose a carapace of ordinary reality, other versions, other potentialities, are always present and intermittently, often disturbingly, break through. Here is an example (a scene which re-imagines the paintings of Chagall and itself becomes a subject for art as one of the photographs of the Mirgorod psychogeographer Raku Vishnik):

The sheen of the zinc counter top separated itself and slid upwards and sideways, a detached plane of reflective colour, splashed with the vivid blues and greens of the tourist posters on the opposite wall. The hot-water urn opened its eyes and grinned. The floorboards turned red-gold and began to curl and writhe. The woman's arms were flat, biscuity, her hands floated free, dancing with poppy-seed rolls to the tune of the gusting rain, and the girl in the black dress was floating in the air, face downwards, bumping against the ceiling, singing 'The Sailor's Sorrow' in a thin, clear voice. (*Wolfhound Century* p. 77)

By becoming itself a modernist work, the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy aligns itself with the modernist writers and artists whose work it alludes to and who fictitiously appear, or whose works are recreated, in the story it tells. The trilogy places itself alongside the paintings of Lakoba Petrov and the works that hang on the walls of Raku Vishnik's apartment or the Crimson Marmot cabaret club. It sets itself in opposition to the unifiers, the one-reality commissars, the Socialist Realists of the Zhdanovshchina. Its form projects a manifesto. It is an act of solidarity. In the theme of struggle between, on the one hand, totalization, and on the other hand opennesses and freedom, the *Wolfhound Century* is not neutral. The telling of it is an act of

solidarity. It takes a side.

There is a dissonance, or partial misalignment, between the thematic purpose claimed for the co-option of modernist strategies in the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy as an act of affiliation with ‘openness, freedom, liberation: an opposition to totalitarianism’ and some of the actual models claimed.

The conception of the modernist avant-garde as incompatible with and inimical to totalitarian regimes, which the trilogy adopts, was, as discussed above, a positioning imposed on it by Nazi and eventually Soviet discourse. It is primarily from those cultural moments that the notion deployed in the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy of a thematic narrative of modernism v. totalitarianism arises, although the manifestations of both ‘modernism’ and ‘totalitarianism’ are then developed in the novels’ own terms. It was also a conception adopted (naively, as it turned out) by many artists in the immediate post-Revolutionary period in Russia, who believed that 1917 had liberated a new and all-encompassing sensibility, ‘breaking down barriers between the inner and the outer life’ (Wullschlager 2008, p. 226). The thematic positioning of modernism in *Wolfhound Century* in particular is very much influenced by Wullschlager’s account of Chagall and his contemporaries between 1917 and 1920, when Lunacharsky and his Commissariat of the Enlightenment gave official positions to artists like Meyerhold, Mayakovsky, Shterenberg, Tatlin and Chagall himself, and encouraged the production of cubist, futurist, suprematist, constructivist and other styles of work in (as the artists saw it) an intoxicating liberation of plenary human expression. This, it seemed, was, as Tugenholdt put it, ‘proletarian art ... essential to explode and undermine former feelings of oppression’ (Wullschlager 2008, p. 230). Chagall in particular emphasised the connection between

stylistic freedom and eclecticism, and personal expressiveness and humanity: in the People's Art College he ran under Party auspices in Vitebsk he insisted on being careful 'not to erase the individual peculiarities of each person, while working in a collective'. (Wullschlager 2008, p. 236)

The 'dissonance' mentioned above arises from the adoption of modernist strategies in *Wolfhound Century*, and to a lesser extent in the other novels, which – while thematically connected with post-Revolutionary Russia – are largely drawn from and allude to texts from what Sara Blair calls 'canonical Anglo-American Modernism'. (Blair 2011, p. 155) While Christopher Butler asserts that 'the greater part of modernist art ... was liberating and individualist in tendency' (Butler 2010, p. 90) other scholars have drawn attention to modernism's 'notorious engagements with Fascism' (Blair, 2011, p. 158). Tim Armstrong – who notes that modernism is 'in fact characterised by a series of seeming contradictions' (Armstrong 2005, p. 5) – shows how Anglo-American modernism, while partially rooted in William James's formulation (similar to the early Commissariat of Enlightenment doctrine) that 'as a rule men habitually use only a small part of the powers which they actually possess and which they might use under appropriate conditions' (Armstrong 2005, p. 64) also in practice often swerves into eugenics, antisemitism, fascism and other thinking associated with the totalitarian right. (Armstrong 2005, pp. 64 – 89)

Whether modernist aesthetic strategy is liberating and individualist or not depends on perspective: who is being liberated, by whose modernism, and from what? However, whatever view one takes of modernism, the proposition that by adopting strategies from the anglophone modernist canon – Joyce, Woolf, Eliot – the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy can affiliate itself (thematically, ideologically, or in cultural tradition) with the Russian works of Chagall or Mayakovsky or Malevich,

never mind Akhmatova or Mandelstam, is debatable and problematic²⁴. This is how the trilogy goes about its business. The novels appropriate and refract their points of reference; anachronize, distort, re-imagine and mix with other things; transgress cultural and chronological frontiers; shift from one frame of reference to another. In Brian McHale's terms, the novels' engagement with modernism, or rather 'modernism', is not epistemological but ontological: 'we regard our own metanarrative ... as no more (and no less) than a strategically satisfying fiction in the key of "as if"! (McHale 1992, 24). Or, in genre terms, it is fantasy modernism.

As the trilogy progresses the sources of allusion shift, and to some extent the modernism partially fades. *Wolfhound Century* makes more use of Russian poetry, novels and independent art than *Radiant State*. The latter tends to refer more to Western texts about Russia (such as Ian Fleming's *From Russia With Love* and John Steinbeck's *Russian Journal*) and to state sponsored Russian material like architecture, public monuments, the speeches and writings of Stalin himself, and Socialist Realist paintings. This reflects the cultural reality of the different historical periods underlying the novels: the early years of the Revolution liberated much, and often adventurous, artistic and literary experimentation. By the 1940s artists and writers had largely been exiled, imprisoned, killed, co-opted to the production of Party-authorized material or fallen silent. The creative explorativeness, the radical

²⁴ Not least because it blurs modernisms, crossing boundaries that are themselves problematic and debatable. Armstrong lists numerous versions of modernism, including 'a politically engaged, radical avant-garde modernism before 1918 ... the more conservative 'high' modernism of the 1920s ... a 'late' modernism with various periodicities ... before noting that: 'The object of literary study called 'modernism' is a retrospective construction, largely American, post-war and academic'. (Armstrong 2005, p. 24)

frontier-crossing and sense of artistic possibility of the early years of the revolution²⁵ gradually departs from the trilogy. The Pollandore leaves the world for the timeless inwardness of the forest, literary quotations are chapter epigraphs, and fantasy figures are largely in retreat: the walking dead in the slowed-time villages, the vyrdalak sisters in the ruins of the abandoned Lodka. Genres are separating.

C) Affiliation

Allusiveness in a text is the means by which it seeks to participate in – to take a role in, reshape and converse with – the deeper, wider traditions of literature. As Peter Conrad puts it, allusive modernism 'turns temporal succession into spatial companionship' (Conrad 1985, p.600). Allusiveness is about making the process of writing an active interaction with other writers. It is, in part, an act of apprenticeship and journeyman humility, but it is also about marking out a simultaneous belonging and difference, and articulating purpose and ambition.

Wolfhound Century's opening echo of *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold* is at one level an act of modest, pragmatic craft. To open a thriller of a certain kind, find how a brilliant and successful model does it, and learn from that. Do similar. Don't re-invent the wheel. But the allusion to le Carré is meant to do more than that. It begins the

²⁵ There is a good account of what it was actually like to be an artist at work in the early years of the Revolution in Wullschlager 2008, especially Chapter 12, 'Commissar Chagall and Comrade Malevich; Vitebsk, 1917-1920'. For the cultural changes in Russia between 1900 and 1950, which are central to the purposes of the trilogy, I also drew heavily (for sources of allusions and for theme/conception) on Figs 2002, particularly Chapter 7, 'Russia Through The Soviet Lens'; Billington 1966, Part VI: 'The Uncertain Colossus'; Conrad 1998; Sinyavsky 1990; Heller 1988; Lenisashin 1988; Petrova & Marcadé 2005; and Antonowa & Merkert 1995.

process, which continues throughout the trilogy, of the text affiliating itself with core precursor works in the thriller genre and seeking to mark out its place among them. The *Wolfhound Century* trilogy, as it unfolds, aims not only to affiliate to the thriller genre, but to recapitulate part of the history of that genre and to absorb and merge a series of chosen precursor texts; texts whose styles and approaches it incorporates and seeks to hold, dissolved (or rather emulsified) within itself. Thriller writers whose work has been alluded to and/or whose style has been consciously adopted at key points in the trilogy include: Eric Ambler; John Buchan; Lee Child; Tom Clancy; Joseph Conrad; Ian Fleming; Frederick Forsyth; Graham Greene; Robert Harris; Geoffrey Household; Hammond Innes; Captain W E Johns; John le Carré; David Morrell and Martin Cruz Smith.²⁶

Approaching allusion as an act of affiliation and self-definition is an idea and a practice which I discovered as a student and researcher in Renaissance and Modernist literature, and which I have sought in the *Wolfhound Century* to bring into contemporary mass-market fiction. I see the allusion in the opening of *Wolfhound Century* to the opening of *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold* as doing something analogous to Milton's allusions to Homer and Virgil in the opening of *Paradise Lost*, or to Spenser's allusions to Virgil and Ariosto in the opening of *The Faerie Queene*, or to Joyce's allusion to Homer in the opening of *Ulysses*.²⁷ Each author refers to his

²⁶ I would have liked to give an equivalent list of modern Anglophone fantasy writers who have shaped the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy, and whose works are present as allusive echoes in the work. Certain fantasy writers are strong presences in my sense of self as a writer: J R R Tolkien, Gene Wolfe, John Crowley, Robert Holdstock, Robin Hobb, Mary Gentle, Ursula K. LeGuin among others. But their presence in what I write is tonal, structural, gravitational. Conscious verbal echoes of their work in the trilogy are few and trivial.

²⁷ The opening lines of *Paradise Lost* adopt the genre-conventional pattern – an opening *invocatio* and *principium* – of Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, and

predecessors as an announcement, increasingly covert and coded in the line from Spenser through Milton to Joyce, that their work is to be read as participating in the flow of literary history.

Wolfhound Century's opening allusion to another book's opening (which is also, as it were, an opening allusion to the practice of making opening allusions) is for me a signal and gesture of *literary taking part*. It is about making the process of writing an active interaction with other writers, It is about entering a tradition and opening it up.

One way of troping this *taking part* is the image in E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, of all writers working simultaneously, in conversation with one another:

... in the rather ramshackly course that lies ahead of us, we cannot consider fiction by periods, we must not contemplate the stream of time. Another image better suits our powers: that of all the novelists writing their novels at once. ... they all hold pens in their hands, and are in the process of creation. ... all the novelists are at work together in a circular room. (Forster 1927 p.31)

A different, and perhaps better way (because less bound up with clubability and exclusiveness and literary canons) of articulating the idea that a new work participates with its peers and precursors, joins with them, is shaped by and reshapes them, is

include lexical echoes of both those classical epics, before stating its ambition to overgo those precursors and pursue 'Things unattempted yet'. (Annotations to PL Book I, lines 1-16 in Fowler 1971). The opening stanza of *The Faerie Queene* adopts the structure and lexical phrasing of the opening of Virgil's *Aeneid* and slides from there into a near-direct quotation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. (Annotations to FQ Book I.i.1 in Hamilton 1977). Joyce's *Ulysses* opens in the rhythms of Homeric hexameter. (Butler 2010 p.3)

Alberto Manguel's vision of the library whose contents are all one book, a book that flows like a stream:

Some nights I dream of a library in which books have no title and boast no author, forming a continuous narrative stream in which all genres, all styles, all stories converge, and all protagonists and all locations are unidentified, a stream into which I can dip at any point in its course. In such a library, the hero of *The Castle* would embark on the Pequod in search of the Holy Grail, land on a deserted island to rebuild society from fragments shored against his ruins, speak of his first centenary encounter with ice and recall, in excruciating detail, his early going to bed. In such a library there would be one single book divided into a few thousand volumes and ... no catalogue. (Manguel 2006 p.63)

With its multiplicity of genres, its shifting styles, its openness to other writers voices, the Wolfhound Century trilogy wants shelf space here, in Manguel's library. It wants to join the streaming library, and it wants to let the stream soak into it and saturate it. The new work, the new writer, always wants a place at the table and always wants, even if only in their own mind and only while the writing is happening, to join the conversation and shape it to a new direction. I am aware this may sound grandiose, excessively ambitious, even hubristic. But ambition is an enabling strategy. It gives you support, and the courage to go off in odd directions and write what you find there. Ambition gets something written, at least. Something that wouldn't otherwise get done at all. Covert, private, interior ambition is a programme of research. Ambition can take you somewhere interesting, even if not the whole distance.

4. FANTASIES OF HISTORY

Section 2 above considered the Wolfhound Century trilogy as an encounter between fantasy and thriller, and as a contribution to fantasy thriller as a genre. But the trilogy is also an encounter between fantasy and history, and this commentary would be incomplete without discussion of its relationship with alternate history, steampunk, fantasy history and cultural/historical mashup and pastiche.

Although the trilogy is not alternate history²⁸, the novels share with that genre an interest in evoking the frisson of recognizability combined with strange difference, a seriousness of engagement with what a real historical period might feel like to those who live there, and a concern with the impact of historical changes on individual lives. And from steampunk²⁹ and its offshoots drawing on the 1940s ('diesel punk') and the 1950s³⁰ comes an engagement with the strangely forceful imaginative draw of the *materiality* of a historical period: the technology and products that make a time and location feel powerfully distinct and textured. So for example the Wolfhound Century trilogy concerns itself with the this-ness of railways and aeroplanes, horse-

²⁸ Alternate history takes a Point of Departure (Hitler Wins, The Ottomans Take Vienna, something like that) and apart from that one change everything is obedient to the rule of recognizability: this is our history, our world with one small change, and all that follows from that. Alternate history offers a pleasure derived from familiarity, a near asiderness from truth, the touch of a world against ours. On the historiographical roots of the genre and its own history, see Clute and Nicholls 1993, pp. 23 – 25.

²⁹ For a definition and brief history of steampunk ('a marriage of urban fantasy and the alternate world tradition') see Clute and Grant 1997 pp. 895-896.

³⁰ For example the graphic novel *The Ministry of Space* by Warren Ellis and Chris Weston.

drawn cabs and hydro-electric dams, the offices of bureaucrats, the specificity of firearms and the lunkiness of atom-powered spacecraft.

The Wolfhound Century trilogy owes more to the kind of historical fantasy which I would term 'fantasy history'. Fantasy history creates a world which is not ours, but resembles our world at some point in our history and introduces to it elements of fantasyland: wizards, giants, dragons, warriors and kings, strange gods and guilds of assassins and thieves. Specifically, fantasy history tells the *history* of that world: its wars and its dynasties, its invasions, its survival crises and the power struggles played out between ruling houses. This is what Tolkien did with the stuff of Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon to build Middle-earth (Shippey 2005). And George R R Martin appropriates the dynastic wars of mediaeval England and Renaissance Europe (and storylines from Greek tragedy) for *A Song of Ice and Fire* (see e.g. Holland 2013). In genre terms, the Vlast of the Wolfhound Century novels bears the same relationship to the Soviet Union that G R R Martin's Westeros bears to fifteenth century Europe.

This kind of historical fantasy, 'fantasy history', regards history as a well of story, legend and myth: writing one is a process of distillation and transformation, sifting out the narrative. Guy Gavriel Kay³¹, for example, sees fantasy about history as a way of universalising and essentializing the past and bringing out the deeper themes, while being liberated from the (as he sees it, ultimately impossible) task of being true to the specifics:

³¹ Kay appropriates history and legend from Renaissance Italy (*Tigana*), mediaeval Spain (*The Lions of Al-Rassan*), Tang Dynasty China (*Under Heaven*) and many other periods, turning them into expansive fantasy history adventures.

Fantasy is not just about magic and supernatural quests. It can also be a way of dealing with history, with the elements of our own past. ... [T]he genre allows the universalizing of a story. It takes incidents out of a very specific time and place and opens up possibilities for the writer - and the reader - to consider the themes, the elements of a story, as applying to a wide range of times and places. It detaches the tale from a narrow context, permits a stripping away, or at least an eroding of prejudices and assumptions. (Kay 1999)

The final genre of historical fantasy I want to mention as part of the context of the Wolfhound Century trilogy is what might be called cultural/historical mashup and pastiche. This ill-defined, amorphous genre (the term for which I have invented) merges characters from fiction with real historical personages and events, is often allied with generic multiplicity and parody, and is freely and deliberately anachronistic. It includes much of the best work of Alan Moore and Michael Moorcock, as well as, for example, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.

I want to examine one such work in more detail. Michael Moorcock's re-imagining of Elizabethan England in *Gloriana: Or, The Unfulfill'd Queen* (Moorcock 1978) remakes not just the historical period, but also earlier fictional versions of that world from Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* of the 1590s to Virginia Woolf's time-stream hopping and gender-swapping *Orlando* of 1928. Fearlessly mucking about with high literature, Moorcock shoves them together and reappropriates them for his own use. Fictions are real and history is fiction. Instead of the dark, troubled, warring Christianity of the period, he gives us Zeus and Thor and Mithras, and real

Elizabethan figures rub shoulders with fictionalised versions of historical figures loosed from their own time stream: the nineteenth century occultist Cagliostro; a man called Adolphus Hiddler. In Moorcock's alchemical crucible, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston* crunches into Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and turns into the Thane of Hermiston. A fantasy of Scotland. This is art that consumes both the factual and the fictional past and recycles it all as raw material. It is a process of plundering. A kind of purposeful freedom.

Moorcock's history is not alternate history, not the counterfactual historian's history; it is something different. It is the past as imaginative space, memory space, atmosphere: a place where histories and fictions, realities and fantasies, myths and legends, emotions and desires, morph and jumble and jostle in serious play. All is real and everything is possible in this marvellous junk shop. It is a carnival. But Moorcock is also aware of the history of the tradition he is writing in. The core precursor texts he alludes to throughout *Gloriana* – namely, *Orlando* and *The Faerie Queene* – are serious literary works, and he has got to the essence of them. This kind of historical/fictional mashup and pastiche has been I think an important liberating influence on the Wolfhound Century trilogy. From it comes a freedom to flex anachronisms, to combine historical and fictional sources, and to stretch, twist and re-imagine them in whatever ways the story might require, seriously or playfully or both.

These then are the principal genres of fantasy about history that I have taken account of in writing the Wolfhound Century trilogy. Something fundamental has entered the trilogy from each of them. The Wolfhound Century trilogy draws from all but belongs to none, and by its borrowings and mixings it aims to discover new aspects and

possibilities in all of them. But also (and more so than any of the core works in these genres, I think) the Wolfhound Century trilogy is marked by a seriousness, even an earnestness, of purpose in its engagement with the cultural and historical materials that went into its making; by an awareness of literary-historical traditions well outside the fantasy canon; and by a wide-ranging absorption of styles of writing more often found in books marketed as 'literary'; all of which places it outside the usual scope of fantasies about history. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that the Wolfhound Century trilogy is more 'literary' than historical fantasy generally. This is not about 'raising the tone' of fantasy. Fantasy does not need its tone raised, thanks. The merging and bridging of genres which the Wolfhound Century trilogy seeks to do is all about openness, plenitude, freedom from boundaries and frontiers. And it is about allusiveness. In a sense the Wolfhound Century trilogy is neither a fantasy nor a literary novel. What it does is allude to both.

CONCLUSION

In this commentary I have sought to give an account of the ideas and processes which contributed to the creation of the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy, and of how I see the completed work's place alongside the different kinds and traditions of writing it brings together and engages with. I have outlined my own development, first as a student of literary history and then as a writer of fiction, and some conceptions of the nature of writing which grew out of that. I have described my thinking about genre, allusiveness, multiplicity of styles and modes, literary traditions and affiliations, and how I have used them, experimentally and ambitiously, to collide and combine a range of different kinds of writing in a single text which aims to be both popular fiction and literary. I have discussed my work's relationship with, and contribution to, the genres it uses: specifically, its engagement with fantasy, thriller, fantasy thriller, high fantasy and various kinds of historical fantasy, and of modernism. I have touched upon the use of these strategies of form to attempt a kind of historical re-imagining, or rather a fresh imaginative engagement with a particular place and period in twentieth century history: namely, the social and cultural upheavals of the Soviet Union from its inception to Khrushchev's disavowal of Stalin. And I have tried to show how all these aspects of the work are related one with another thematically, connecting the forms and styles of the novels with the trilogy's themes and subjects: to show, in other words, in a term I have used several times in this commentary, that the work is fractal;

that its concerns are present at every level, enacting the same forms and preoccupations in all its elements, macro and micro.

What a commentary of this nature does not capture, however, and in fact tends to obscure, is the exploratory nature of the writing process that led to these novels. I have come to understand, partly as a result of preparing this commentary, that it is a fundamental aspect of any creative process to make spontaneous and partly accidental discoveries. One is struck by surprises, one almost thoughtlessly does things and some of them seem to work, and then one reflects, learns to articulate what one has done and where it has come from, and practices repeating it and putting it to purposeful use.

This is true of all aspects of the *Wolfhound Century* trilogy that I have discussed in this commentary, but none more so than the work's extensive engagement with Russian-ness, and with the use of Russian folklore, literature, art and culture in its world-building, which began as an experiment in bringing a feel of atmosphere and place into what I then conceived of as a high fantasy adventure set in a vaguely Central European land, but which rapidly, and wholly surprisingly to me, grew and deepened until engaging with and re-imagining Russia became the driving purpose of the work as a whole.

When *Wolfhound Century* was published the question I was asked most often was, why Russia? It is a question I have always struggled to answer adequately. The same fundamental question – *why choose to do that, rather than something else?* – is raised by all the elements of the trilogy discussed in this commentary. Although I have been

able to say sometimes where an idea came from, and always, I hope, given an account of the purposes to which I think I have aimed to put it in my work, the question of why these ideas rather than others have excited and absorbed me – why they in particular struck me at some point with dizzying, explosive excitement and became in a real sense *necessary* to pursue, because I could not see past them until I had taken them as far as they could go – that is less easy to account for.

For example, what I felt as the luminous urgency of engaging imaginatively with Russia, for example, might perhaps be traced to my Cold War childhood and the sense I think I acquired then of the Soviet Union as a vast and threatening but also intensified and magical other place, a place of art and suffering and danger, an inaccessible place beyond a frontier that was simultaneously very near, and a place both very like and completely other than my own. But when I describe it like that, I see that I am also describing the worlds of many high fantasy books which gripped my attention so strongly in childhood and youth: I am also describing Narnia and Middle Earth and Gormenghast and Earthsea and the rest. So all I can really say is that the murky imaginative need which compelled me to fantasy also compelled me to Russia, and that thrillers in Russia or central Europe and adventures in Tolkien's Mordor or Gene Wolfe's Urth are for me, in one sense, all doing the same thing. Meeting the same need. Filling the same emotional and imaginative gap.

The purpose of writing fiction, as I see it, is not limited to creative self-expression. A novel is a form of communication: the reader is an active participant in creating the experience of a novel, and for that reading experience to be rich and engaging, the finished novel has to be written so as to let the reader in. It must leave room for the

reader to play their part. Achieving that openness to readers in a piece of writing is about learning to use the techniques of story-telling (an aspect of the Wolfhound Century trilogy which I have not touched upon as much as I would like). But though that outward looking openness to being read is essential, it remains true that the primal scene of the work, its inception, is to be found in the inwardness of imagination, in those explosive sparks of recognition; those moments of realizing that one idea and not another has, in some not-entirely-rational-and-conscious way, *importance*. As Ted Hughes puts it, 'you write interestingly only about the things that genuinely interest you. This is an infallible rule.' (Hughes 1967, p. 96).³²

That this pre-verbal, pre-conscious imaginative need and creative impulse is felt by me above all as a search for, and a vividly alive response to a *world*, an imagined place and an imagined time, is, I now realize, the crucial factor which connects all the elements I have explored in this commentary. It also connects my engagements with fantasy and with thriller, and with the various kinds of hero I have brought together in the figure of Vissarion Lom. And this is what ultimately brings me to realize that for me the genre which the Wolfhound Century trilogy belongs to is, in the end, and despite the fact that it shares relatively few external characteristics with it, a high (or epic or heroic) fantasy. As David Pringle writes, the most important and most distinctive thing about such fantasy is that its primary interest is in making and inhabiting a *world*:

³² By 'genuinely interest you' he means not what you are merely curious about, but what engages 'real private feelings' and is 'truly alive in [you]' and makes you alive as a writer: 'and in writing, as in everything else, nothing matters but life.' (Hughes 1997, p. 99)

Invariably, though, heroically scaled works of this sort, whatever their actual length, have as their chief characteristic the fact that they are set in a wholly imaginary world ... In Heroic Fantasy, the invented world – what Tolkien termed a 'Secondary World' – is of more importance, both to writer and to readers, than any individual hero. ... What matters most, and what gives the work its unity and consistency, is the world ... (Pringle 1998, pp. 35-36)

This I am sure is the most important thing there is to be said about this kind of fantasy.

What makes Lom's compendious openness (as discussed in section 2 above) so central to the Wolfhound Century trilogy is, I now come to understand, that it is through Lom's opened and magical perceptiveness that the Vlast and the forest are explored and apprehended. And what connects the two kinds of hero Lom combines, the fantasy quester and the investigating detective, is that both are *travellers*, the one geographically and the other socially. Both kinds of hero are licensed, and indeed impelled, by their story role to go anywhere and everywhere, to cross frontiers and open doors, to observe curiously and intently, and ask all the important questions. It is through them, these compendious heroes, that the world of their novels is built.

Although I have explored in the foregoing sections the ways in which generic multiplicity and allusiveness to other works aligns and affiliates my own novels with precursor traditions, and helps to create a sense of subliminal familiarity, felt-rightness and *fragre* for the reader, there is also a sense in which I am appropriating them and integrating them into a world which I am making for myself, and by re-

imagining elements of Russian history I am breaking down and re-building that time and place, excluding what I do not want and singling out, re-imagining and foregrounding what I need, what for me, in Ted Hughes' phrase, is truly alive.

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