Socialist Surrealism: China Miéville’s New Crobuzon Novels

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How do politics and the science fiction and fantasy genres inform each other?

Science fiction has always had a strong undercurrent of utopianism – writers as different in their ideological predilections as Robert Heinlein, Ursula Le Guin and Frederick Pohl have used it as a means to reimagine political and social arrangements better to their liking. The dominant political strain in post-Tolkien fantasy, in contrast, has been an unabashed nostalgia for the loss of organic bonds and feudal relationships (although there have been counter-strains of fantasy that has questioned these assumptions).

China Miéville’s three New Crobuzon novels – *Perdido Street Station*, *The Scar* and *Iron Council* stand as an important – and entirely self-aware – counterargument to dominant strains in both fantasy and science fiction. Miéville’s work draws on both genres as well as horror. Indeed he argues that these three subgenres aren’t really distinguishable from each other, but instead form a common genre, which he dubs Weird Fiction. But even as he draws upon their tropes, he both reimagines them and argues with them. In a much-commented upon essay that draws upon Michael Moorcock’s scathing criticisms of Tolkienesque fantasy, Miéville describes Tolkien as the “wen on the arse of fantasy literature,” attacking his cod-Wagnerian pomposity, … his small-minded and reactionary love for hierarchical status-quos, his belief in absolute morality that blurs moral and political complexity.
In later writing, he’s indicated that he regrets the imagery and phrasing of this essay (although not his substantive criticisms of Tolkien), and has acknowledged the ways in which Tolkien consciously and unconsciously influences his own work.⁸ What he draws from Tolkien is his refusal to make fantasy allegorical – that is, to make the fantastic into “a kind of philistine, simplistic, moralising, fabular representation of soi-disant ‘meaningful’ concerns, as with fiction that despises its own fantastic.”⁹ Thus, Miéville’s intent is to “nurture the baby of Tolkien’s phenomenology of fantasy while chucking out the bathwater of his ideas.”¹⁰ However, unlike Tolkien, he doesn’t believe that fantasy is divorced from reality – while it isn’t subordinate to the mundane it draws its resonance from its connections (however oblique, however tangential) to our lived experience.

This conception of fantasy and related genres – as drawing their strength from its connection to our mundane reality, while not being subordinate to them – is the expression of a profoundly political position regarding Weird Fiction and what it ought to be.¹¹ Miéville is a socialist, who wants to see a radical transformation of society, and is intensely interested in how the imagination may play a role in midwifing that transformation.¹² His books – especially the New Crobuzon novels – are in large part an argument about the relationship between the fantastic and political. When he criticizes post-Tolkien fantasy, he isn’t merely attacking its overt nostalgia for feudal arrangements and organic ties between lords and serfs. He’s attacking its failure of imagination, its unfaithfulness to its own supposed goal of radically re-imagining the worlds in which people like us might live.
For Miéville, much of the power of fantasy, science fiction and related genres lie in their potential refusal not to take the status quo for granted. When they do what they are supposed to do, they reveal new possibilities to us, of what we might or might not be able to do. When they instead provide readers with exactly what those readers are expected to read, they’re failing, not only because the specific myths that they reinforce often tend to be ones that reinforce current hierarchies of power, but because they aren’t disclosing anything that the reader didn’t know or think already. If fantasy and science fiction are fundamentally literatures of the imagination, they need to tell us unexpected things. In Miéville’s words:

The impulse to the fantastic is central to human consciousness, in that we can and constantly do imagine things that aren’t really there. More than that (and what distinguishes us from tool-using animals), we can imagine things that can’t possibly be there. We can imagine the impossible. Now, within that you have to distinguish the “never-possible” and the “might-be-possible-sometime.”Crudely, this looks like the distinction between fantasy and science fiction, but I maintain that there’s no such hard distinction and that the differences between the “never-” and the “not-yet-possible” are less important than their shared “impossibleness.” That’s not to say in some dippy hippy way that everything is possible, but that there’s no obvious line between what is and what isn’t. In fact, that underlines many of the most tenacious political fights around us—the neo-liberal claim that There is No Alternative is all about trying to draw the line of the “never-possible” at a place which strips humans of any meaningful transformative agency.
This makes these literatures more easily amenable to political argument than other, more mainstream forms of writing, which aren’t explicitly concerned with rethinking how we might live if things were different. Rather than social realism, Miéville’s work is pushing towards a kind of social surrealism – a recognition of how the imagination plays a crucial political role by challenging the accepted rules and orderings of society.¹⁴

In Miéville’s conception, literary utopias work better as provocations than as blueprints.¹⁵ Utopia, by its very nature, can’t ever fully be implemented, and to the extent that it can, it is likely unimaginable to those who haven’t achieved it.

The depiction of successful revolution doesn’t solve things. In this case the attempt to express Marx’s ‘carnival of the oppressed’, can – being restrained by the words and context of a society defined by its lack of being-in-revolution-ness – easily degenerate into the kitsch of Stalinoid agitprop. Even if the work negotiates this, it raises the issue of depicting a post-revolutionary society. While thought experiments about such possibilities can be invaluable – see for example Michael Albert’s Parecon – if we take seriously the scale of social and psychic upheaval represented by a revolution, a post-revolutionary society is unthinkable: for someone not born in a post-revolutionary situation, it takes the process of going through a revolution to fully imagine it. To depict it is to diminish it.
Instead, while the fantastic imagination – the ability to imagine that things are different than they are in the world we live in - plays a crucial role for politics, it is an indirect one. It doesn’t substitute for political activity, or even necessarily guide it, but it expands the space of political possibilities, making people aware of the contingency of existing social arrangements and the possibility of changing them.

These claims help drive the argument of Miéville’s three (to date) New Crobuzon novels. This certainly isn’t to say that these books should be reduced to political texts. Although the books are concerned with politics, and clearly reflect Miéville’s socialism, they are something far more complex than a simple transposition of these politics into a fantastic setting, and in any event have many other strands than the political. But one important strain running through them is an argument about the relationship between politics and the fantastic imagination. Each of the books has at its core an argument about the extent to which it’s possible to reimagine politics. Perdido Street Station’s version of this argument is bleak – in a city controlled by a corrupt and vicious political administration, there isn’t any space where the fantastic imagination can play out, with genuine autonomy. The Scar’s version is even bleaker – it is precisely the main characters’ capacity for fantasy that blinds them to how things really are, and allows others to betray them. Iron Council provides the counterargument to these two, showing how under some circumstances the fantastic imagination can disclose new possibilities to actors, allowing them to reconceive the world and to act accordingly.

Perdido Street Station: Art Gone Rotten
Perdido Street Station is Miéville’s second book (his first, King Rat is a contemporary London fantasy) and his breakthrough novel. Set in the fecund, feculent city of New Crobuzon, it received both the British Fantasy Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award, as well as being shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award. The story is complex, even in its barest outlines. It begins with Yagharek, a garuda (a human-bird hybrid) whose wings have been hacked off by his tribe as punishment for the crime of “choice theft in the second degree with utter disrespect.” Yagharek wants to fly again, and comes to New Crobuzon, where he seeks out the help of renegade human scientist Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin. Isaac, in the course of his research on flight accidentally releases a “slake-moth” that he has acquired unknowingly from a government military research project. The slake-moth is a horrifyingly efficient predator that battens on human consciousness and is nearly impossible to kill; when freed, it releases four siblings from captivity (they have been sold by the city government to the crimelord Motley, who milks them to produce dreamshit, a drug that allows its users to experience the dreams and fantasies of the slakemoths’ previous victims).

In the meantime, Motley kidnaps Isaac’s lover Lin (who is a khepri, a woman with a giant beetle for her head), whom he had previously commissioned to create a sculpture of him. Isaac and his associates (most importantly Derkhian, a journalist for the underground newspaper, Runagate Rampant) go on the run. While hiding out from the city militia, they try to stop the slake-moths with the aid of the Weaver (a gigantic, irrational spider with quasi-godlike powers), the Construct Council (a secret cabal of machines that have achieved self-consciousness), and in the last moments of the book, Jack Half-a-Prayer (a remade human rebel with a mantis’ claw grafted to his right arm).
They succeed, but at great cost – Lin is rescued from Motley, but only after she has been brutalized and raped, and her mind has been ruined by a slake-moth. Isaac and Derkhian flee into exile and obscurity, bringing Lin with them. Isaac finally refuses to help Yagharek fly; he has discovered that Yagharek’s crime approximates rape. Yagharek then refuses Half-a-Prayer’s offer to join him in his quixotic campaign against the city government, instead accepting that he can no longer fly, and becoming a man.

This complex story introduces the reader to the city of New Crobuzon which is in many ways a fantasticized version of nineteenth century London, equal parts Great Wen and Old Corruption. New Crobuzon is a ruthlessly mercantilistic city-state, using its militia and its navy to enforce trading privileges abroad and to suppress unrest at home. A deeply corrupt city government, headed by mayor Bentham Rudgutter, presides over a political system in which only the propertied are guaranteed the right to vote; others have to participate in a lottery.

Political dissidence in New Crobuzon is a mug’s game. Miéville suggests that the dice are loaded when he links the “civilization and splendour of the City-State Republic of New Crobuzon” to the gladiatorial pit at Cadnebar’s, where:

Every night, the evening’s entertainments would begin with an open slot, a comedy show for the regulars. Scores of young, stupid, thickset farmboys, the toughest lads in their villages … would flex their prodigious muscles at the selectors. Two or three would be chosen, and pushed into the main arena before the howling crowd. … Then the arena’s hatch would be opened and they would pale as they faced an enormous Remade gladiator or impassive cactacae warrior.
The resulting carnage was short and bloody and played for laughs by the professionals.

Dissidents in New Crobuzon are far more aware of their situation and the odds against them than the farmboys, but they don’t fare much better. As soon as a dock strike threatens to create real solidarity between vodhyanoi stevedores and humans, the authorities move ruthlessly and effectively to suppress it. When the government thinks that the publisher of the illegal newspaper, Runagate Rampant, Benjamin Flex, may know something about the slake-moths, the city militia immediately seizes him from the hidden room where he has printed the newspaper. He realizes before being killed that the government knew all along what he was doing and where he was, but had previously been prepared to tolerate him as an acceptable nuisance.

The state doesn’t simply rely on the militia to ensure social order. In Miéville’s imagined world, magic, or thaumaturgy has been semi-systematized along scientific lines, allowing specialist mages (biothaumaturges) to reshape individuals’ bodies and to graft parts from animals and machines onto them. Biothaumaturgy is typically deployed to punish rather than to enhance - criminals and unfortunates are Remade in punishment factories according to the orders of masked Magisters (judge-magistrates). Sometimes the Remaking is intended to make them useful in some way or another, conjoining humans with steam-driven machines to make them stronger workers, or cabs whose cabdrivers are part of the machine. More specialized Remade are sold to the gladiatorial arenas or the brothels. Often, the Remaking is intended less for utilitarian purposes than to provide
a ‘fitting’ punishment for the individual’s crime according to some more or less grotesque aesthetic principle.

“Some woman living at the top of one of the Ketch Heath monoliths killed her baby … because it wouldn’t stop crying. She’s sitting there in court, her eyes are just … damn well empty … she can’t believe what’s happened, she keeps moaning her baby’s name, and the Magister sentences her. Prison, of course, ten years I think, but it was the Remaking that I remember. Her baby’s arms are going to be grafted to her face. ‘So she doesn’t forget what she did,’” he says.”

Derkhan’s voice curdled as she imitated the Magister.  

Remaking is a perversion of the imagination – a cruel and whimsical ingenuity that is put at the service of political power. As the journalist Derkhan describes it:

Remaking’s art, you know. Sick art. The imagination it takes! Remaking’s creativity gone bad. Gone rotten. Gone rancid. I remember you once asked me if it was hard to balance writing about art and writing [about politics for the underground newspaper, Runagate Rampant] … It’s the same thing. … I don’t want to live in a city where Remaking is the highest art.  

New Crobuzon is a city where the imagination has been almost entirely subordinated to the demands of tyranny. At one point, Isaac describes the slake-moths’ predation as a closed ecosystem; they exude effluvia that infect the consciousness of the
city’s inhabitants with nightmares and fever dreams, so that their prey’s imaginings will taste more succulent. But the same can be said of New Crobuzon’s political system. Even before the slake moths’ advent, New Crobuzon is a city in which the imagination has turned sour, answering to and reproducing tyrannical power relations in a self sustaining cycle. As becomes clear in *Iron Council*, the Remade are an integral part of the power structure in the city, precisely because they are isolated as pariahs. Unmodified humans or xenians reasonably fear that they will be Remade if they displease the authorities. The Remade also provide a reservoir of desperate labour that can be drawn on in case of worker unrest. Perhaps most importantly, the distinction between Remade and ordinary workers makes the latter more willing to accept the continuation of the system; they see themselves as part of an aristocracy of labour. By Remaking criminals or others who have displeased it, the city makes it far more difficult for the oppressed to achieve solidarity and to reimagine themselves as a collective political subject that might challenge the system.

The subordination of imagination to the cold realities of power plays out more subtly, but no less implacably among the relatively privileged in New Crobuzon. The two main protagonists of the novel – Isaac and Lin – are both readers of the underground press, and members of a small bohemian community of artists and intellectuals. But this community isn’t so much autonomous as it is tolerated by the city’s government; it has little or no scope to translate its (mostly passive) dissidence into action. Isaac is only able to pursue his research and Lin her art because of the compromises that they have made with the system. Isaac runs errands for the corrupt biothaumaturge Vermishank in order to maintain his access to the university, despite suspecting that Vermishank carries out
research on live subjects in the punishment factories. Isaac moreover refuses to acknowledge his relationship with Lin in public: sexual relations between humans and xenians are frowned upon, and would be “a quick route to pariah status, rather than the bad-boy chic he had assiduously courted” if he were seen not observing the proprieties by at least trying to hide it.\(^\text{18}\)

For her part, Lin resents the political compromises made by other khepri artists in the relatively prosperous neighborhood of Kinken, whom she perceives as having sold out their poorer sisters for a modest share of prosperity. However, her sense of self-righteousness crumbles when offered a lucrative commission by the gang boss Motley. She accepts it with nervous delight, even though she knows exactly where the money is coming from. As their relationship continues (and as Motley deliberately heightens her sense of discomfort by drawing her ever further into his world) she comes to realize that she has more in common with her sisters in Kinken than she thought. She too is willing to make compromises in order to pursue her art and gain financial independence. Her imagination and her vocation as an artist don’t in any sense free her from her material conditions – her aspiration towards a modest degree of autonomy is entirely dependent on the willingness of a spectacularly vicious patron to fund it.

The characters in *Perdido Street Station* don’t have any real way to change the city around them. The most they can do is to help stave off disaster, and, insofar as they can, prevent things from getting any worse. In his efforts to help Yagharek, Isaac makes a profound intellectual breakthrough, discovering how to tap and control ‘crisis energy.’ In a typical science fiction novel, this would then allow Isaac to change the world. In Miéville’s imaginary world, it does nothing of the sort. It allows Isaac to create and
amplify an artificial mind composed of the mentalities of the Weaver (the irrational imagination) and the Construct Council (a coldly calculating ego), which serves as bait to lure the slake-moths to their destruction. But this unification of calculation and imagination can’t be maintained for long, and Isaac, fearing the uses that might be made of this breakthrough by the Construct Council, disappears with Derkhan and Lin into obscurity and exile.

In the novel’s closing pages, Yagharek meets Jack Half-a-Prayer again after Isaac’s refusal to help him fly again. Half-a-Prayer offers Yagharek a “way out” into the “violent and honourable place from where he rages.” But Yagharek refuses – he is no longer suspended midway between his dreams of flight and of escape from the petty mundanities of the world on the one hand, and his winglessness on the other. He has come to accept that he is never going to fly again, and to accept that he is now not a garuda but a man, someone who belongs to New Crobuzon. While Half-a-Prayer’s quixotic struggle against the authorities is a honourable choice, so too is Yagharek’s decision to accept the limitations of who he is and what he can do. In New Crobuzon as it is, dreams of flight are dreams of escape from the world of politics and consequences; they aren’t a path to changing it.

*The Scar – Savagery and Metamorphosis*

*Perdido Street Station* is not a hopeful book. It depicts a city where the fantastic imagination has little scope to express itself freely, much less to change things. But it’s far less deeply pessimistic than *The Scar*, which argues that the imagination, when given
free rein, can betray. The key theme of the book is the danger of the fantastic imagination when it’s disconnected from reality. The charismatic dictators who effectively control the pirate city of Armada – the Lovers – have become intoxicated with the idea of “adventure” as an end in itself. The most sympathetic characters of the book – the linguist Bellis Coldwine, the Remade engineer, Tanner Sack, and the former ship’s boy Shekel – betray themselves precisely because they allow their imaginations to open up. The two characters who are best able to manipulate the hopes and fears of others – the spy Silas Fennec and the swordsman Uther Doul – are also the most pathetic, precisely because they don’t have anything beyond their manipulation.

The book is set entirely outside New Crobuzon. We see its hinterlands and a nearby port, but never the city itself. Nonetheless, the shadow of the city stretches out over the novel. Bellis Coldwine, a former lover of Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin, has fled New Crobuzon for the colony of Nova Experium, fearing arrest by the militia, who are rounding up all of Isaac’s former associates, one by one. Her ship is intercepted by pirates, who take the passengers and ordinary crew (including not only Bellis, but also Remade engineer Tanner Sack, New Crobuzon spy and spy-venturer Silas Fennec, and the ship’s boy Shekel) back to their city of Armada, which is composed of a flotilla of conjoined ships pulled slowly by tugs hither and thither across the sea.

Armada is a mix of semi-autonomous ‘ridings’ or neighbourhoods run on different political principles (including inter alia representative democracy, military dictatorship, monarchy, and a market-based free-for-all), of which the riding of Garwater, under the charismatic dictatorship of the Lovers (a man and a woman who are never named in the novel), is the most powerful. The Lovers, with the help of their adviser-
bodyguard Uther Doul, want to catch a leviathan, the avanc, which they can harness to pull the city to the Scar, an ontological wound in the Swollen Ocean from which limitless possibilities erupt. Others in the city, most prominently the Brucolac, a vampire-turned-enlightened-absolutist are vehemently opposed to the Lovers’ plans. The Brucolac has a peculiar relationship with Uther Doul, who appears on the surface to support the Lovers, but appears to be tacitly maneuvering people into opposing their plans.

Fennec succeeds in convincing Bellis, who is unhappy in Armada, that he has intelligence on a planned invasion of New Crobuzon by the grindylow, a grotesque and malign race of human-eel hybrids. When she is sent to to the island of the anophelii (mosquito people) to act as translator for Kruach Aum, a male anophelius with crucial information on how to catch the avanc, she has an opportunity to pass Fennec’s intelligence, with the help of Sack, to a ship’s captain who can bring it back to New Crobuzon. However, she doesn’t realize that the supposed grindylow invasion of New Crobuzon is a hoax. Fennec is using her as a conduit to tell New Crobuzon that he has gathered intelligence allowing them to bypass or conquer the grindylow, creating an immensely valuable new trade route, in order to persuade the city government to rescue him. Shortly after the city harnesses the avanc, a major naval expedition from New Crobuzon catches up with the floating city, intending to rescue Fennec and his information. It’s repelled, but at the cost of thousands of lives.

The city then is towed by the avanc closer to the Scar; shortly before it reaches the Scar, Coldwine, again with the help of Tanner Sack, finds a way to stop it reaching the Scar and plunging into disaster. However, she realizes that she has been manipulated into
so doing by Doul, who has orchestrated her actions and others so as to frustrate the plans of the Lovers, without at any point appearing to take an overt stance against them.

The plot-structure of *The Scar* both replicates and undermines the traditional quest-narrative of a fantasy novel. It’s a vastly entertaining book, which goes to greater lengths than *Perdido Street Station* to evoke the variety and strangeness of the world where both novels are set. Even so, the reader is denied many of the satisfactions that she might have expected in a typical quest novel. A physical fight between the Brucolac and Uther Doul, which has been telegraphed for hundreds of pages, happens off-stage; we see its lead-up and its consequences, but not the fight itself. The grindylow attack Armada, not to gain back a statue of arcane puissance, which has been stolen from them (it turns out to be a macguffin), but to neutralize the threat posed by Fennec and his information. The capture of the avanc (its resemblance to Moby-Dick no doubt entirely intended) turns out not to be an end in itself, but a means to the end of reaching the Scar, which itself is never reached.

These frustrations have a reason. The tension driving the novel forward is the tension between the romantic imagination and the grubby realities of power and of material accumulation. Not only does the reader find that the book deliberately disappoints some of the expectations that its narrative form has set up; she finds that the book explicitly argues that these expectations are dangerous when they aren’t grounded in a proper understanding of politics. The desire to be a hero, for epochal fights in which issues are finally resolved, for questing and adventure without end, are traps when they’re shorn of material purpose.
The Scar itself, the subject of the book’s title, illustrates this theme. The Scar is a wound in reality. Possibilities explode forth from it, which can in principle be grasped and mastered by an arcane science. But it’s really a honey pot, a trap for the immature who want to pursue adventure for its own sake. The Lovers’ quest to reach the Scar is a sardonic comment on the infantilism of the quest-narrative. Not only are the Lovers themselves profoundly narcissistic, but they don’t have any idea of what they might want to do with the power that they believe they will gain if they reach the Scar. Their intoxication with the idea of limitless possibilities and endless adventures blinds them to the reality of the city that they are seeking to pull after them, a pirate community based on “brutal mercantilism,” albeit one that has been temporarily blinded to its actual situation by the Lovers’ rhetoric. As the Brucolac says in his final argument with Uther Doul:

If the fucking Scar exists … and if they (the Lovers) get us there and by some godsfucked miracle we survive, then they’ll still destroy us. We are not an expeditionary force, we are not on some fucking quest. This is a city, Uther. We live, we buy, we sell, we steal, we trade. We are a port. This is not about adventures. … If we survive this lunacy, as long as we’re tethered to the bastard avanc, these two will take us on another fucking voyage, and another, until we die. That’s not our logic, Doul, that’s not how Armada works.20

The desire for adventure as an end in itself is a chimera.
Even worse (to use a Marxian concept that Miéville implicitly appeals to), it’s a form of mystification. It obscures the material realities of trade, accumulation and political domination that actually characterize Miéville’s imagined world. This explains why Bellis Coldwine is taken in by the stories of Silas Fennec. She can’t easily penetrate through the veils of romance and adventure in his stories to discover his rather sordid motivations. Bellis fancies herself as a cynic, and is grimly amused at a New Crobuzon children’s book she finds which tries to whitewash New Crobuzon’s history, including, “most shamefully,” the culmination of the Pirate Wars when New Crobuzon bombed the rival city of Suroch with a Torque weapon. But when Fennec boasts unwisely that it was “merchants [like him] who traveled to Suroch, who brought back the maps Dagman Beyn used in the Pirate Wars,” she doesn’t get the hint. She’s entirely taken in by Fennec’s charm, and by his stories of travel to exotic places; she doesn’t think through the logic of why Fennec has traveled so far, or what information he may have brought back from the Gengris where the grindylow live. She takes Fennec’s claims at face value, temporarily overlooking the fact that Fennec is a spy and a merchant-venturer with a commission from New Crobuzon’s government.

Thus, when Fennec later manufactures his story about a planned grindylow invasion of New Crobuzon, she accepts it in its entirety, in part because this gives her a connection to her home city again, a way to become its savior by passing on the information about the grindylows’ attack plans, even though she knows she will likely never see the city again. Fennec astutely provides her with just enough information to construct her own internal narrative, in which she will be the noble heroine; that her nobility of spirit will go entirely unrecognized and unrewarded very possibly makes the
story even more attractive. Bellis’ homesickness for New Crobuzon is a weakness in her protective shell of rationality, self-control and skepticism, an opening that Fennec is able to find, enlarge and exploit.

Bellis isn’t the only character who reimagines herself, only to be betrayed by the reimagining. All the main characters undergo transformations that seem to open new possibilities. Tanner Sack finds that his Remaking – he has had tentacles grafted onto him - opens him up to the welcoming sea, and voluntarily submits to further Remaking to allow him to become more fully a creature of the water. Shekel, who has never learned how to read, discovers in joy and anger that an entire world has been kept away from him when Bellis begins to teach him how to move beyond reciting the alphabet.

These openings, these reimaginings, prove not to be expansions of possibility, but chinks that predators may exploit. In many senses, the underlying logic of the novel is that of a food chain. Metaphors of predation are nearly as frequent in the book as the metaphors of wounding, opening, scarring and scarification to which they are linked. At one point, Bellis summarizes a book by her friend, the naturalist Johannes Tearfly, *Predation in Iron Bay Rockpools*; “Such an intricate concatenation of narratives. Chains of savagery and metamorphosis … The oyster drill gnawing a murderous peep-hole in its opponents armour … a vivid little seascape … of shell-dust and sea urchins and merciless tides.”

The protagonists of this book find themselves in just such a concatenation of narratives, a seascape of metamorphoses and predation Bellis herself is not only gullied by Silas Fennec; she is manipulated and paid off by Uther Doul, whom she once imagined herself capable of falling in love with. Sack’s amphibian transformation allows
him to carry Fennec’s letter past the fearsome anophelii and thus inadvertently to betray his adopted city. When Shekel dies in the water, murdered casually by the grindylow, Tanner finds himself alienated from the ocean and fearful of it, unable to feel at home either on land or in the water. Shekel’s gift of reading allows him to find an important book that he gives to Bellis, who quietly betrays the trust that he has placed in her, beginning a chain of events that leads indirectly to Shekel’s death.

Yet if the protagonists end up either unhappy or dead, they are in a certain sense better off than those who manipulate them. They have some capacity for genuine agency, even if it betrays them. Silas Fennec and Uther Doul, who manipulate the protagonists in different ways are, like the mosquito women on the island of the anophelii, trapped in their patterns of predation, unable to connect meaningfully to other human beings. Fennec, when captured, is revealed to be no more than an “empty skin stuffed with schemes.” Uther Doul, who has tried to retreat entirely from adventures, and to wrap himself in the freedom from initiative that his contractual relationship with the Lovers gives him, finds himself utterly lost at the end of the novel, not knowing what he wants.

If the glamour of adventure and openness to new possibilities are traps for the unwary, it is a greater mistake to renounce them in favor of either the cynical manipulation of others’ illusions, or a refusal to take personal responsibility. The Scar suggests that neither willful imagination on the one hand nor careful calculation on the other is sufficient to provide real agency. The tragedy is that the two are set at each other’s throats in the novel – there isn’t any real scope for reconciliation between them.

The Scar thus presents a very substantial contrast to Perdido Street Station. In the earlier novel, there’s little scope for the free play of fantasy and the
imagination; both are largely subordinated to a corrupt and tyrannical city government. *The Scar*, at least initially, seems to offer an opening up of the fantastic imagination. Its characters, landed in a new city, have the opportunity to reimagine themselves in profound ways. But the imagination turns out to be a trap – it doesn’t provide limitless possibilities so much as it opens Bellis, Tanner and Shekel up to deceit and manipulation by others.

*Iron Council: Fantasy Remade*

*Iron Council* revisits and reworks many of the themes of *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar* to more hopeful ends. Characters mentioned in passing in the first two books (the vagabond Spiral Jacobs, the Remade woman whose dead baby’s arms are attached to her forehead) come to center-stage. More importantly, some of the events of *Perdido Street Station* have assumed a historic resonance that might have appeared unlikely at the time they occurred.

Again, *Iron Council* has a complex plot, with three main movements – the efforts of Cutter and others to find the golemist Judah Low and to save the renegade train *Iron Council*, which went renegade decades before, an extended flashback to Judah Low’s formative experiences as a young man who helped create the Iron Council, and finally the drift (contemporaneous with Cutter’s search) of the young militant Ori into the orbit of a violent group of apparent insurrectionaries. The book is set some twenty years after the events of *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar*; New Crobuzon has fallen on hard times. It’s experiencing a sustained economic crisis and losing a war with the city of Tesh.
Dissidents are becoming ever more confident, and have joined together to create a Caucus, which they begin to transform into a second power in the city, ready perhaps to take it over. The myth of Iron Council – a train which was taken into the wilderness by rebellious Remade decades before – has become an inspiration to the dissidents, but the New Crobuzon government has discovered where the train and the rebels are, and is sending an expeditionary force to destroy them.

As dissidents such as the young street-fighter Ori argue about how best to seize power in the city, Judah Low, who once helped seize the Iron Council is traveling across the continent to warn his comrades on the train about New Crobuzon’s plans. He’s followed by a small group led by his sometime lover, Cutter. The Iron Councillors decide to return to New Crobuzon with their train, and to help the Caucus win power. Back in New Crobuzon, Ori gravitates toward a gang led by the mysterious bandit Toro, which has taken up the tradition of violent, direct action against the state that Jack Half-a-Prayer represented in *Perdido Street Station*. Ori is guided by the mysterious vagabond, Spiral Jacobs, who provides him with a large sum of money towards the cause. He becomes a trusted member of Toro’s gang, helping her to kill the Mayor and her Magister lover. However, this breaks him – he discovers that Toro, far from being committed to political change, is instead seeking revenge against the Magister who ordered her Remade. Moreover, Spiral Jacobs is the emissary of Tesh (which we have learned in *Perdido Street Station* always appoints a vagabond as ambassador) and is using the disorder as cover for a vast spell that he is weaving to destroy the city. Cutter and Judah return from Iron Council, which is approaching New Crobuzon, to try to forestall this threat; they succeed with the help of a renegade Teshite.
However, as the Iron Council gets closer it is becoming increasingly clear that the Caucus’s rebellion is doomed, and that the Iron Council and its passengers will be ruthlessly destroyed when they enter the city. Cutter tries to persuade the Iron Councillors to turn back, but fails; Low constructs a time golem that freezes the train in time shortly before it can reach the city, simultaneously saving it and snatching away its destiny. He’s killed shortly thereafter by his former lover Ann-Hari, who is furious at his arrogance in taking away the choice of the Iron Councillors to go forward. But his intervention works; it creates an engine of change, never moving, always on the point of arriving in New Crobuzon, that seems likely to impel further change in the future. As the *Runagate Rampant* says in the closing section of the book.

“Order reigns in New Crobuzon!” You stupid lackeys. Your order is built on sand. Tomorrow the Iron Council will move on again, and to your horror it will proclaim with its whistle blaring: *We say: We were, we are, we will be.*

*Iron Council* not only borrows characters and settings from the first two books. It reinterprets them, and in a sense redeems them. Events which seemed at the time to confirm the power of New Crobuzon’s government now inspire the strikers and activists of the Caucus. Benjamin Flex, who died in near-despair in *Perdido Street Station* has become a hero to the Caucus. This redemption of the past isn’t entirely true to it. The New Crobuzon section of the book begins with a puppet show playing the Sad and Instructional Tale of Jack Half-A-Prayer’s demise. The puppet show is deliberately subversive, deviating from both of the official state narrative’s of Half-a-Prayer’s death.
(that he was killed by the relative of one of his victims, or killed by one of its accomplices, who was hoping to spare him the misery of official execution). Instead, it argues that Jack was killed in a failed rescue attempt by a comrade, a “version of the classic” in which “the two little figures were not doomed or cursed with visions too pure to sustain or beaten by a world that did not deserve them, but were still fighting, still trying to win.”

This retelling of the myth is clearly intended to inspire solidarity, to suggest that there is hope for those struggling against the city government. But it’s almost certainly wrong. The figure who perhaps tries to rescue Jack is, from his description, clearly the garuda Yagharek, who, from what we know of his last meeting with Jack in *Perdido Street Station*, is likely helping Jack out of a sense of personal indebtedness rather than any broader solidarity.

Jack’s Sad and Instructional Tale signals two of the key themes of *Iron Council*. First, it shows how political myths and the process of mythologizing can provide a basis for the kind of political agency that is mostly lacking in the first two books. The mythicized history of the Iron Council (created at least in part by Judah Low) show how people use myths to build effective campaigns of solidarity over time, and how it’s possible to take on the power of the state and, at least sometimes, win. The *Iron Council*, by defeating the militia that had been sent to stop it, and disappearing into the wilderness, laying down and taking up its own tracks as it went, has created a political myth that helps inspire the Caucus to organize and take up arms. Myths of this kind connect the real and the imagined by disclosing possibilities of action.

Second, it shows the complexities of the relationship between the myths and the lived histories of those depicted in them. This vexed relationship – between the
imperative to hold faith with personal solidarities and histories on the one hand, and the necessity of subjecting them to the more impersonal and political demands of mythmaking (which has no necessary respect for the individual) on the other, is at the crux of the novel. It’s best represented in the relationships between the key character in the book, the golemist Judah Low, and those around him. Judah is both golemist (maker of golems that animate brute matter, air, time and darkness) and bard, and is usually more comfortable with abstract forces and with stories than with people.

Indeed, the book hints strongly that Judah’s skill, his (to use the loaded term that Miéville employs) *cathexis* as a golemist is so powerful exactly because he has been wounded into a kind of disconnection. He learns about golemetry among a tribe of swamp-dwelling stiltspear which is about to be destroyed by the advent of the railway, but it’s only when he has begun to disengage from the tribe, to realize that they’re doomed, that he finds the ability to animate golems himself. His power grows hand in hand with a vast and impersonal sense of benevolence towards those around him, a sense of justice, and a desire to right some of the wrongs of the railway. But in many ways, this is reminiscent of Judah’s old antagonist Weather Wrightby, the father of the railway project that the Iron Council subverted and destroyed. Wrightby, like Judah, is suffused with a sense of purpose and holiness. Both are monstrous, possessed of a certain beatific ruthlessness, a willingness to steer history in the direction that they believe it must be steered, regardless of the individual costs. Both, as a result, are *consequential* in a way that other, more sympathetic and human figures in the novel, such as Cutter, are not.

Judah’s relationships with others are mostly one-way. Cutter, the dissident and former shop owner, loves him hopelessly, but can’t ever hope to have that love returned.
When Low has sex with him, it’s given as a gift; there isn’t any sense of mutuality. Cutter’s companions, who go with him into the wilderness to catch up with Low, are inspired as much by love for the man as by their political cause. Like Cutter, they can’t hope to have this love returned except in an abstract and impersonal way. Low isn’t entirely devoid of sentiment; when he sees the Iron Council and his comrades again, he’s possessed by an open delight that Cutter’s never seen before. But again, his love is more for what they represent than what they are in themselves. If Low appears entirely incapable of jealousy (when, for example, his former lover Ann-Hari goes with other men), it’s because he’s no longer capable of the kind of personal and immediate attachment that jealousy follows from. He’s lost a little bit of what it means to be human.

Judah’s saintly benevolence is at odds with the more personal solidarities and goals of the Iron Councillors. When the Remade renegades and their allies take the Iron Council, and ride it into the wilderness, they’re doing so because it allows them to choose their own history. Ann-Hari, the prostitute turned political firebrand (her name is likely a reference to La Pasionaria) describes this specifically as a Remaking of what has happened to them, which turns it into something new, something they can work from.

We give up nothing. … All the dead. … Every bullet from every gun. Each whipping. The sea of sweat that come from us. Every piece of coal in the Remade boilers and the boiler of the engine, each drop of come between my legs and my sisters’ legs, all of it is in that train … We unrolled history. We made history. We cast history in iron and the train shat it out behind it. Now we’ve ploughed that
up. We’ll go on, and we’ll take our history with us. Remake. It’s our wealth, it’s
everything, it’s all we have. We’ll take it.26

The renegades aren’t concerned with making a myth for others, so much as taking
their own histories into their own hands, creating what amounts to a small scale utopia in
the wilderness. Their primary loyalties are to each other. When the train comes close to
completing its decades-long circuit, approaching New Crobuzon, they aren’t willing to
turn back, not because of what it might mean to the strikers and insurrectionaries in New
Crobuzon so much as what it might mean to them. To flee into the hills and become
bandits would be to abandon the history that they have made for themselves.

This is what Judah doesn’t and can’t understand. The Iron Councillors’ ability to
“take their own history with [them]” is more important to them than their broader
historical role, the myth that Judah, as itinerant bard, has created around them. It’s also
more important than their continued survival. Thus Judah decides to “save” them from
almost certain death at the hands of the New Crobuzon militia, by trapping them in time.
Judah’s golemetry is rather more than the ability to animate clay that his historical
namesake, Rabbi Loew, had. It’s a broader ability to shape and control impersonal forces.
In his greatest work, he creates a “time golem,” a frozen moment to trap the Iron Council
and preserve it motionless, unchanging, into a future age.

The perpetual train. The Iron Council itself. The renegade, returned, or returning
and now waiting. Absolutely still. … The train, its moment indurate. It could not
always clearly be seen. The crude rips in the temporal from which the golem was
made gave it edges like facets, an opalescence of injured time. From some angles the train was hard to see, or hard to think of, or difficult to remember, instant to instant. But it was unmoving.

This is both a preservation and a betrayal. It prevents the Iron Council from being destroyed by New Crobuzon, but it does so at the cost of taking the Iron Councillors’ history away from them again, changing them from living, breathing people into an abstraction. As Ann-Hari says, just before she shoots Judah:

We were never yours, Judah. We were something real, and we came in our time, and we made our decision and it was not yours. Whether we were right or wrong, it was our history. You were never our augur, Judah.

Never our saviour.

As Yagharek’s tribe might describe it, Judah is guilty of choice-theft. Yet in a broader sense, his intervention works. It creates a dynamic tension with the politics of the city, providing a vision of a messy but genuine utopia. From this tension will come new forms of resistance, and perhaps, one day, the revolution,

Iron Council thus provides us with a very different account of the relationship between the imagination and politics than that which prevails in either of the other New Crobuzon novels. It shows us a version of the fantastic imagination that still is in a relationship of tension with politics and with people’s actual, lived solidarities. But in contrast to either Perdido Street Station or The Scar, the tension is a productive one. Like
a novelist or a political thinker, Judah reimagines the world in ways that don’t always bear faithful witness to the events or people that he begins with. He isn’t an inspirational leader so much as a grappler with abstract forces, but by virtue of his reimagining, he can create the necessary conditions under which others can change the world. The Iron Council becomes a kind of material myth, which gives the lie to the claims of New Crobugzon’s government that the political order it has created is something given, a part of the natural order, and that resistance will always be crushed ruthlessly and effectively.

Conclusions

Miéville’s three New Crobugzon novels deal with the relationship between politics and the fantastic imagination in different ways. In some ways, their relationship to each other mirrors the logic of Hegelian dialectic – thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Perdido Street Station gives us a city in which the imagination seems to be ruthlessly and effectively subordinated to the political order – at best it is trammeled, at worst (Remaking) utterly corrupted. The Scar leaves the city for the boundless oceans, where it appears at first that there is free scope for the imagination to work without limits. In some ways, this turns out to be even worse than direct tyranny. It is only in Iron Council that politics and the fantastic imagination stand in a healthy relationship towards each other, in which it is possible to reimagine politics, to see how things can be different, and to begin, perhaps, to change them.

It’s the final book which gives us the necessary clues to figure out what Miéville is up to. He’s Remaking the conjoined genres of fantasy and science fiction, not as an art-
form that is entirely subordinate to given power relationships, nor as a means of escape from them, but as a specifically political act of imagination. He’s arguing that stories, if they’re understood rightly, can allow us to reinterpret our circumstances and think through how to change them. The fantastic imagination is important because it’s potentially political in the most profound sense – it can choose neither to reaffirm politics as they exist today nor to hide from them, but to challenge them. In *Iron Council*, it can even create a radical break in history, revealing new possibilities of political action. Of course, Miéville isn’t claiming that writing – or reading – fantasy novels will bring about the revolution. Nor does he use fantasy to construct positive visions of what his ideal Socialist society might look like. Instead, to borrow Russell Jacoby’s term, he’s a negative utopian – in Miéville’s view, we may hope for utopia in our current circumstances, and build toward it, but we cannot imagine what it would be like to live in it.

In *Iron Council*, Miéville puts a famous passage from Marx’s *German Ideology* into the mouth of his flawed would-be prophet, Judah Low. It’s an act of appropriation where Miéville suggests that Marx too was a fantasist in the positive sense of the word, someone who was willing to imagine that things could and must be different from how we experience them in the here and now. Just as Marx’s somewhat hazily imagined Communist utopia was powerful because it stood in violent tension with the world of nineteenth-century capitalism, so should fantasy (in both the narrower and broader definitions of the word) stand in a relationship of tension with the world we inhabit today. To make it otherwise, Miéville suggests, to divorce it from our world, is to rob it of its force.


3 One of these strains can be traced through British writers like Mervyn Peake through M. John Harrison, both of whom have been important influences on the work discussed in this chapter. Another descends from Fritz Leiber’s urban fantasies (especially his Lankhmar series).

4 References to *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar* are to the UK Pan paperback editions of 2000 and 2002 respectively. References to *Iron Council* are to the 2004 US hardback edition.

5 Miéville (undated a)


7 Miéville (undated b).

8 Miéville (2005).

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

In the remainder of the chapter, I use the term ‘fantasy,’ as does Miéville, to refer not only to the fantasy genre as it’s usually conceived, but to the other sub-genres grouped under the rubric of Weird Fiction, and concerned with the creation of imaginary worlds and settings that deviate in some strong sense of the word from the world depicted in realist fiction.

11 Miéville also holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics, and has written an academic monograph (based on his dissertation) on the sources and form of international law, but his academic work is less directly relevant to his fiction than are his political convictions.

12 Gordon (2003).

13 Indeed, Miéville’s arguments have a lot of common ground with the emphasis of Soviet dissidents such as Andrei Sinyavsky on grotesquery and phantasmogoria as alternatives to the intellectual hegemony of Socialist Realism.

14 To use Russell Jacoby’s useful nomenclature, Miéville is an “iconoclastic utopian” rather than a “blueprint utopian. See Jacoby (2005).

15 p. 115, *Perdido Street Station*.

16 pp.115-116, ibid.

17 p. 16, *Perdido Street Station*.

18 p.866, *Perdido Street Station*.


22 p.626, *The Scar*.

23 The character who comes closest perhaps to reconciling the two is the Brucolac, a vampire who, in contrast to most vampires in fantasy novels, isn’t in the least infatuated with his own mystique. Instead, he views himself as a “bureaucrat not [a] predator,” and has set up a system of tithes and interlocking loyalties to maintain his rule over the riding of Dry Falls. His role isn’t that of a traditional aristocrat but of an enlightened absolutist, who sees more clearly than any of the other characters what is necessary to ensure the continued survival of his polity.


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New Crobuzon is a fictional city-state created by China Miéville and located in his fictional world of Bas-Lag. It is prominently featured in both Perdido Street Station and Iron Council, and serves as a plot device and background for The Scar. Miéville has discussed the inspiration behind New Crobuzon: Several commentators have noted that New Crobuzon is reminiscent of Victorian London, but sometimes note other possible influences such as modern Cairo and the Vieux Carre of New Orleans.