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‘What seems it is and in such seeming all things are’:

A dialogue between Terry Pratchett and Slavoj Žižek on belief, knowledge, fundamentalism, perversion, the law (...and diabolical ‘evil’)

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Introduction: Pratchett and Žižek (and Foucault)

This paper will establish a ‘dialogue’ between the British Fantasy writer Terry Pratchett and the Slovenian philosopher/cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek by considering Pratchett’s *Small Gods* (1992) and *Hogfather* (1996) in the light of readings of belief given in Žižek’s *Plague of Fantasies* (1997) and *How to Read Lacan* (2006). This dialogue will demonstrate how Pratchett’s texts, firstly, seem to stage and, secondly, actually develop and add nuance to Žižekian notions of belief/knowledge and the fundamentalist claim to ‘knowledge’. The dialogue will, thirdly, suggest that Pratchett, in a sense, also ‘joins up’, *coheres*, some of Žižek’s ideas on the relations between fundamentalism, perversion, the law and ‘evil’. Furthermore, these three movements in the dialogue, the interplay between text and theory, will be read in each case as being indicative of the capacity of secondary, alternative world Fantasy texts (hereafter, simply ‘Fantasy’) to be *radical*. In this reading, we will attempt to answer critics such as Rosemary Jackson who have dismissed Fantasy as being a *conservative* genre, a genre of compensation, incapable of interrogating the ‘real’ world, a

dismissal that centers on her notion that secondary worlds can only 'have a tangential relation to the 'real'' (1981: 42-3). It will be shown that it is actually in the very *form* of alternative world Fantasy texts, a form that consists of what I call the *Pragmatikos* (the diegetic 'reality' of the secondary world) combined with the *Allos* (that which is impossible or does not exist in our world but which is 'real' in the secondary world), that this capacity for radicality lies, since the Fantasy form accommodates a *radical way of looking*. As we shall see as examples in our texts, Fantasy can, firstly, do the impossible by taking the abstract/symbolic and *manifesting* it in the 'reality' of the Fantasy *Pragmatikos* so that it is made plain and rendered palpable, allowing the text to be the conduit through which topics that can only be approached obliquely in so-called Realist literature to be approached *directly*. Secondly, the *Pragmatikos* may be conceived of as an in-existent space wherein a purity of representation from which considerations of 'being realistic' are subtracted is made possible so that something approaching a *theoretical purity* may be foregrounded, uncovered and clearly seen. We read Fantasy literature, in short, as having a capacity to facilitate *a making visible*, which, in turn, lends it the possibility of being approached in the spirit of Michel Foucault's definition of the role of an intellectual (quoted in Kritzman 1988: xvi):

The role of the intellectual is not to tell others what they have to do. By what right would he do so? [...] The work of an intellectual is not to shape others' political will; it is, through the analyses that he carries out in his own field, to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way that do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions.

Pratchett, then, is our Foucauldian intellectual here, a designation that, of course, is equally applicable to Žižek.

Dialogue Movement 1: The Asymmetry between Belief and Knowledge in *Small Gods* and *Hogfather*: Pratchett Stages Žižek

Small Gods is a text where an abstract notion, that of 'belief', is central. Many other texts can, of course, make such a claim, but, in this particular text, 'belief' is not so much an oblique part of the textual fabric as a plot element that drives the narrative forward. *Small Gods* is, of course, in the Fantasy genre, and in the *Pragmatikos* of Pratchett's Discworld, 'belief' is not simply confined to the plane of thought. 'Belief' in Discworld rather physically manifests itself as a kind of divine nourishment (*Small Gods* [hereafter SG]: 6-7):

There are billions of gods in the world. [...] They are the small gods - the spirits of places where two ant trails cross, the gods of microclimates down between the grass roots. And most of them stay that way.

Because what they lack is *belief*.

A handful though, go on to greater things. Anything may trigger it. A shepherd, seeking a lost lamb, finds it among the briars and takes a minute or two to build a small cairn of stones in general thanks to whatever spirits might be around the place. Or a particularly shaped tree becomes associated with a cure for a disease. [...] Because what gods need is belief, and what humans want is gods.

With more and more believers, gods grow and grow, but the gods of Discworld may also be crippled by lack of belief. Without belief, they begin to starve and dwindle.

The 'small god' of the title is The Great God Om, who has been reduced to the form of a tortoise by his dearth of believers. Despite being in the Citadel that is supposedly the center of the Omnian faith, he can find only one person, the simple novice Brutha, who truly believes in him. This is a situation that should, on the surface, surprise the reader given that the Church of Om is in a state of holy paroxysm, awaiting as it is a prophet. Yet it is clear that there are many in the Citadel for whom the outward form of holiness *even in private* is nothing more than a custom (SG: 83):

Fri'tit was trying to pray.

He hadn't done so for a long time.

Oh, of course there had been the eight compulsory prayers every day, but in the pit of the wretched night he knew them for what they were. A habit. A time for thought, perhaps. And a method of measuring time.

Fri'tit, in other words, exemplifies that belief has shifted from belief in the god to 'belief' in the *structure of worship/the church* (SG: 177):

'Around the Godde there forms a Shelle of prayers and Ceremonies and Buildings and Priests and Authority, until at last the Godde Dies. Ande this maye not be noticed...'

...there's a kind of shellfish that lives in the same way. It makes a bigger and bigger shell until it can't move around any more, and so it dies.

And this, of course, is what has almost happened to Om.

The device of making belief a kind of 'rocket fuel' (SG: 7) of the gods is a brilliant graphic tool, then, for not only suggesting that it is *humans* that create gods, but also for demonstrating that there may be a huge gulf between the *appearance* of piety and actual piety. That worship may be 'empty' worship of the shell of the religion is also acutely observed and dramatized by the fact that, in the 'real' of the Fantasy *Pragmatikos*, the god can *actually* die. Yet, Pratchett's provocative treatment does not stop here.

Set against those for whom the *form* of worship has become the worship itself is the fundamentalist Vorbis, head of the Church [In]Quisition. It is easy to contrast Brutha, a man who 'didn't just believe' but 'really Believed' (SG: 21), with those who have come to worship the

structure of the church, but how are we to contrast him with a man who seemingly believes so strongly that the Great God Om speaks to him 'in the confines of his head' (SG: 14)? Vorbis, indeed, seems to be so pious that he acts in his own mind in the mode of *agent of God*. He is defender of the faith against the 'heresy and lies [that are] everywhere' (SG: 16). He thinks it his 'holy duty' to protect Omnia from the 'despicable infidel' Ephebians who threaten Omnians with their 'worship of false gods', and 'wild and unstable ideas' that '[can] put [one's] soul at risk of a thousand years in hell' (SG: 24-6), heretical ideas that even now are beginning to gain currency in Omnia. Moreover, as the following passage indicates, he clearly identifies himself as a divine instrument (SG: 50):

[Vorbis] always made a point of taking a walk through some of the lower levels, although of course always at a different time, and via a different route. Insofar as Vorbis got any pleasure in life [...] it was in seeing the faces of humble members of the clergy as they rounded a corner and found themselves face to chin with Deacon Vorbis of the Quisition. There was always that little intake of breath that indicated a guilty conscience. Vorbis liked to see properly guilty consciences. That was what consciences were for. Guilt was the grease in which the wheels of authority turned.

Vorbis symbolically embodies the authority of the church/god, but so pure is his instrumentality that it is almost impossible to separate wielder and instrument. It is, in point of fact, almost as if those who come across Vorbis are coming across Om himself. And why does Vorbis/Om wander the corridors? To provoke a reaction (guilt) that simultaneously reinforces and provides a perverse *justification* for the authority he embodies.

Similarly, Vorbis and his Exquisitors are so closely identified with Om in their mode as agents of God that they even take on his quality of divine infallibility (SG: 60): 'The Quisition could act without the possibility of flaw. Suspicion was proof. How could it be anything else?'

So why is it *Brutha* providing the fuel of belief to Om rather than Vorbis, a man who would seem to be a strong believer by the usual criterion? How can we explain why the latter does not fuel Om? It is here that we can turn to Žižek to explain this apparent paradox.

First we should note that what we have observed about Vorbis above means that he fulfills Žižek's description of a fundamentalist (one who is, more accurately, a *pervert*) to the letter (2006: 116-7):

[A] pervert is not defined by the content of what he is doing (his weird sexual practices). Perversion, at its most fundamental, resides in the formal structure of how the pervert relates to truth and speech. The pervert claims direct access to some figure of the big Other (from God or history to the desire of his partner), so that, dispelling all the ambiguity of language, he is able to act directly as the instrument of the big Other's will.

Crucially, this claim to direct access, to direct instrumentality, is a claim to *knowledge*. A pervert-fundamentalist like Vorbis, in other words, cannot *believe* in God because he *knows* he is acting

for God.

What Pratchett has done in *Small Gods*, then, is brilliantly stage (and thus *make visible*) the dimension of belief that is lacking in fundamentalist thought: It is *demonstrable* that fundamentalists do not believe in the 'real' of the Discworld *Pragmatikos* exactly because the Fantasy form allows the impossible: abstract belief can be *manifested*.

* * *

In order to continue the colloquy between Žižek and Pratchett, we might also consider how Žižek continues the line of argument above and set his thoughts against another of Pratchett's texts, *Hogfather*.

Žižek's train of thought reaches a characteristically surprising conclusion (2006: 117-8):

Both liberal-skeptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe, in the proper sense of the term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision that installs all authentic beliefs, a decision that cannot be based on a chain of reasonings, on positive knowledge...[This is dangerous because, in traditional secular humanism,] the status of [such values as] human rights is that of a pure belief: they cannot be grounded in our knowledge of human nature, they are an axiom posited by our decision...One is compelled to draw the paradoxical conclusion that in the opposition between traditional secular humanists and religious fundamentalists, it is the humanists who stand for belief, while the fundamentalists stand for knowledge...[The true danger of fundamentalism is not] in its threat to secular scientific knowledge, but in its threat to authentic belief.

This is in the territory of Laclau and Mouffe's 'empty' Signifiers which 'paper over the cracks [in society] to invent stability and system where no such things exist...[where, for instance,] the clarion cry 'freedom' produces the illusion that it exists and that a social order based on freedom is attainable' (Freeden 2003: 111). Žižek seems to accept that such Signifiers are 'empty' (and even 'lies') but, nevertheless, implies that it is *dangerous to lose belief in such values*. This seems to be a point with which Pratchett agrees in *Hogfather*.

As in *Small Gods*, the narrative of *Hogfather* is driven by belief, or, properly, its *absence*. Again we see that belief in the Discworld *Pragmatikos* is the fuel of the gods when the minor deity Hogfather (a kind of porcine Father Christmas) is 'assassinated' by *lack of belief*. As a result of meddling by the life-hating Auditors, the children of the Discworld no longer believe that it is the Hogfather delivering their Hogswatch presents, a cessation of belief that causes him to 'die'. So far, then, this seems like some kind of Christmassy tale *à la* Disney's *Nightmare Before Christmas*; yet Pratchett's treatment is characteristically more radical since the narrative drama of *Hogfather* is generated by the appalling 'real' consequences that will result from this breakdown of belief, for, if belief in the Hogfather is not restored, *humans will cease to be human*.

The following dialogue takes place between Death and his grand-daughter, Susan, towards the end of the novel. Susan, unable to understand why renewing belief in the Hogfather had been so important, interrogates her grand-father (note that Death always 'speaks' in capitals) (*Hogfather*: 422-3):

"All right", said Susan [...]. "You're saying humans need...fantasies to make life bearable".

REALLY? AS IF WAS SOME KIND OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.

"Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little-"

YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING HOW TO BELIEVE THE *LITTLE* LIES.

"So we can believe the big ones?"

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

"They're not the same at all!"

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN *SHOW* ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET- Death waved a hand. AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME, SOME...RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

"Yes, but people have *got* to believe that, or what's the *point*-"

MY POINT EXACTLY.

This is an extraordinary extract. The claim that we need to believe the little lies (about Father Christmas/ The Hogfather) in order to practice believing in the big ones (about justice, mercy and duty) appears utterly outrageous; that is, it *seems* outrageous until read alongside Žižek's passage on the loss of the (humanist) ability to believe. Pratchett echoes Žižek's warning only in much more apocalyptic terms: Why do we need to believe? Pratchett's dramatic answer (in both senses) is: because, otherwise, humans will not be the place where the falling angel meets the rising ape: they will be *in-human*. To put it bluntly, they will be *Vorbis*.

Dialogue Movement 2: *Connaître/Kennen* Versus *Savoir/Wissen*: Pratchett's Nuanced Reading of the Fundamentalist Claim to 'Knowledge'

If, in the first movement of our dialogue, we have indicated that, in Pratchett's texts, 'belief' is contrasted with fundamentalist 'knowledge' in a way which Žizekian theory can elucidate, the focus in this second movement will be on how Pratchett apparently develops and adds nuance to Žizek's theory. In particular, this movement will focus on the question of *how* the fundamentalist claims 'knowledge'.

Before we proceed, however, let us take a quick detour through another of Žižek's texts, *Violence* (2008), for here, in his reference to the poet Wallace Stevens and his notion of art, Žižek

unwittingly brings to bear conceptions that can be directly co-opted into our idea of how the Fantasy form is connected to the radical potential of Fantasy literature (2008: 5):

The key question [...] is what kind of description is intended here? Surely it is not a realistic description of the situation, but what Wallace Stevens called 'description without place', which is what is proper to art. This is not a description which locates its content in a historical space or time, but a description which creates, as the background of the phenomena it describes, an in-existent (virtual) space of its own, so that what appears in it is not an appearance sustained by the depth of reality behind it, but a de-contextualized appearance, an appearance which fully coincides with real being. To quote Stevens again: 'What it seems it is and in such seeming all things are'.

Žižek relies on Wallace Stevens to draw a distinction between 'realistic' and 'artistic' descriptions, but, notwithstanding the fact that Stevens is a doyen of high culture, the notion of a 'de-contextualized appearance' in the short passage quoted above is, I think, extremely pertinent with regard to our thesis. A 'description without place...which creates an in-existent virtual space of its own' - there is surely something here analogous to how a Fantasy text is structured.

If, in the first movement above, we focused on an example of how the abstract/symbolic collapsing into the 'real' of the Fantasy *Pragmatikos* can make a conceptual framework plain, here, in the second (and, in fact, third) movement, co-opting Steven's notions, we will show an example of how the Fantasy *Pragmatikos* can create a space, an '*in-existent, virtual space*', where it is possible to foreground subjects in a theoretically/conceptually pure state. A state, that is to say, of '*real being*'.

Precisely, we will show how the 'real being' of fundamentalism is laid bare in the figure of *Vorbis*.

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Back then to our argument that Pratchett develops and adds nuance to Žižekian theory on belief and fundamentalist 'knowledge'.

We noted in the first movement that a religious fundamentalist has a perverse libidinal economy in the Žižekian sense because his claim of direct 'knowledge' of God (as big Other) allows him to act as His pure agent. Žižek's theoretical framework is extremely coherent, but his account raises a crucial question, namely: precisely *what kind* of 'knowledge' is the basis of the pervert-fundamentalist's claim? This is, I think, where we can see that Žižek's sense of the pervert-fundamentalist's claim to 'knowledge' is somewhat limited because the beginning of our answer must be that the English language does not actually allow an exact description of what this 'knowledge' is.

In his wildly inaccurate *Mother Tongue*, Bill Bryson at least gets one salient fact correct

(1990: 4):

Other languages have facilities that [English] lack[s]. Both French and German can distinguish between knowledge that results from recognition (respectively *connaître* and *kennen*) and knowledge that results from understanding (*savoir* and *wissen*).

For us, this is a crucial point as it is central to our purposes here to recognize that the pervert-fundamentalist claims 'knowledge' in the form of *connaître/kennen* rather than *savoir/wissen*. It is this nicety, indeed, that those such as Richard Dawkins who try to reason with the fundamentalist, who try to explain the *irrationality* of belief, perhaps miss. *The God Delusion* (2006) is a brilliantly argued piece of polemic, but the force of its argument that God (probably) does not exist is wholly dependent on an appeal to *savoir/wissen* – an appeal to which the fundamentalist, deriving his 'knowledge' as he does from *connaître/kennen* is wholly resistant. The 'truth,' in other words, cannot be subject, from the pervert-fundamentalist's perspective, to mere empirical 'facts'.

If Žižek makes no mention of the crucial *connaître/kennen* versus *savoir/wissen* distinction in his un-nuanced reading of the fundamentalist claim to 'knowledge', then Pratchett is most certainly aware of it, for, in *Small Gods*, he brilliantly captures the immunity of fundamentalists to 'truth' claims based on *savoir/wissen*. Consider Vorbis' response when it is put to him that there is empirical evidence that the world is flat. In an ironic commentary on Galileo (for, in the Discworld *Pragmatikos*, the world is, of course, *flat*), Vorbis insists that the world is a *globe* (SG: 26 my italics):

Drunah glanced at the scroll.

"He says here he went on a ship that sailed to an island on the edge [of the world] and he looked over and -"

"Lies," said Vorbis evenly, "*and it would make no difference even if they were not lies*. Truth lies within, not without. In the words of the Great God Om, as delivered through his chosen profits. Our eyes may deceive us, but our God never will".

Or consider how Vorbis answers when it is put to him that the (enemy) Ephebians murdered the evangelical Brother Murduck in Ephebia (SG: 180-1):

"And so it is with truth", said Vorbis. "There are some things which appear to be the truth, which have all the hallmarks of truth, but which are not the *real* truth. The real truth must sometimes be protected by a labyrinth of lies..."

I mean, that which appears to our senses is not the *fundamental* truth. Things that are seen and heard and done by the flesh are mere shadows of a deeper reality..."

"But at the moment, lord, I know only the trivial truth, the truth available on the outside", said Brutha...

"That's how we all begin", said Vorbis kindly.

"So did the Ephebians kill Brother Murduck?" Brutha persisted [...]

"I am telling you that in the deepest sense of the truth they did. By their failure to embrace his words, by their intransigence, they surely killed him".

“But in the *trivial* sense of the truth”, said Brutha,...”Brother Murduck died, did he not, in Omnia, because he had *not* died in Ephebe, had merely been mocked, but it was feared that others in the Church might not understand the, the *deeper* truth, and thus it was put about that the Ephebians had killed him in, in the *trivial* sense, thus giving you, and those who saw the truth of the evil of Ephebe, due cause to launch a - a just retaliation”.

What could Dawkins possibly do with Vorbis? The recognition of a ‘fundamental’ or ‘deeper’ truth *annexes* truth, places it out of reach so that arguments based on *savoir/wissen* are relegated to a ‘trivial’ truth. *It makes no difference even if evolution can be proved, it is still based on lies*. There is no way in, and it is little wonder Vorbis is described as having a mind ‘as impenetrable as a steel ball’ (SG: 106).

On a more basic level, we might also note that Pratchett insists on the crucial *connaître/kennen* versus *savoir/wissen* distinction with regard to claims to ‘knowledge’ by weaving it into the very fabric of the pervert-priest’s language. Vorbis’ claim to knowledge (*connaître/kennen*) is not simply *a matter of semantics*, but is also expressed on the level of *grammatical choice*, and, in this regard, *Small Gods* works by staging a direct contrast of the fundamentalist Vorbis with the blind philosopher, Didactylos, who follows the western rationalist (Enlightenment) tradition of uncertainty and cautious claim to ‘knowledge’ (*savoir/wissen*).

Didactylos, in fact, always takes the stance of uncertainty (SG: 172 my italics):

“But is all this true?” said Brutha.

Didactylos shrugged. “*Could* be, *could* be. We are here and it is now. *The way I see it is*, after that, everything *tends* towards guesswork”.

“You mean you don’t know it’s true?” said Brutha.

“*I think* it *might* be”, said Didactylos. “*I could* be wrong. Not being certain is what being a philosopher is all about”.

Use of such hedging and modal, ‘grey area’, language is Didactylos’ implicit acceptance that all assertions are open to doubt (crucial in a tradition where no final way to guarantee ‘knowledge’ is possible), but the fact that the writer/speaker does not make a one hundred percent commitment to know also, crucially, releases the recipient from the obligation to agree. The claims to ‘knowledge’ (*savoir/wissen*) in this discourse are, in other words, *arguable*: they *invite disagreement*.

Vorbis, of course, leaves no such space for doubt or dissent in his claims. We are frequently told by Pratchett that Vorbis is certain, ‘not a man who dwelt in grey areas’ (SG: 53). Yet this is strictly unnecessary as his absolute certainty is manifest on the level of *discourse*. Take, for instance, the passage already quoted above (SG: 180-1) where Vorbis lays claim to a ‘fundamental’ truth. What is immediately noticeable is that, despite the fact that he is making a ‘truth’ claim, there is a total lack of modality in the pervert-priest’s language, *none* of the modal language or hedging (*may, might, could* and so on) that one would expect in a claim to ‘knowledge’ in the rationalist *savoir/wissen* sense (as exemplified in the speech of Didactylos).

Moreover, beyond the lack of modality, there also is a sense in which the absence of interpersonal qualities in Vorbis' language commandeers the 'truth'. Brutha notes that 'Vorbis seldom ask[s] a question if a statement w[ill] do' (SG: 179), and we can see why in the following exchange where the pervert-priest is on board a ship discussing the porpoises that follow the ship with the captain (SG: 102-3):

"This must be very convenient on long voyages", he said.
"Uh. Yes?" said the captain.
"From the provisions point of view", said Vorbis.
"My lord, I don't quite-"
"It must be like having a traveling larder", said Vorbis.
The captain smiled. "Oh no, lord. We don't eat them".
"Surely not? They look quite wholesome to *me*".
"Oh, but you know the old saying, oh lord..."
"Saying?"
"Oh, they say that after they die, the souls of dead sailors become-"
The captain saw the abyss ahead, but the sentence had plunged on with a momentum of its own.
[...]
Vorbis leaned back on the rail.
"But of course we are not prey to such superstitions", he said lazily.
"Well, of course", said the captain clutching at this straw.
[...]
"Fetch me a harpoon", said Vorbis.
[...]
"But, ah, uh, but your lordship should not, uh, ha, attempt such sport", said the captain. "Ah. Uh. A harpoon is a dangerous weapon in untrained hands, I'm afraid you might do yourself an injury-"
"But I will not be using it", said Vorbis.
The captain hung his head and held out his hand for the harpoon.

What is striking about this section is that the regularities of conversation as manifested in the speech of the captain, the pauses, the broken sentences, the interjections, the vocative addressing of the speaker, the seeking of clarification, is totally absent in the speech of Vorbis who proceeds with a series of precise declarations of (apparently self-evident) 'truth-fact'.

Vorbis is not trying to engage in *dialogue* but is presenting the captain with a *fait accompli* by using a language of pure ideation that renders the captain helpless. Although he desperately looks for an opening against the accumulation of statement, there is no way in for him. We have already seen that on the level of ideas Vorbis presents an impenetrable façade, an impossible fortress of will, yet, in the extract above, there is also an in-human blankness of language that makes him impossible to communicate with, let alone *argue* with, in any meaningful sense. This culminates in the *coup de grâce*, the incredible annexing of the other's will in the statement, 'But of course we are not prey to such superstitions'. Utterly defeated and humiliated, the captain hangs his head in shame.

Let us finish the second movement by linking what we have seen of Vorbis and his fundamentalist claim to ‘knowledge’ (*connaître/kennen*) back to our promise at the beginning of this movement to give an example of how the Fantasy *Pragmatikos* can make a space (analogous, we said, to Wallace Steven’s ‘in-existent, virtual space’) which is perfect for the foregrounding of the theoretically/conceptually pure (equivalent to Steven’s ‘real being’).

It is obvious, then, that, in the ‘in-existent, virtual space’ of the Discworld *Pragmatikos*, Vorbis does not have to be ‘realistic’ (in Steven’s terms, he does not have to be “sustained by the depth of reality”). He can, in fact, be *physically* constructed as in-human (his blackness of eyeball, his baldness by design, his gleaming, force-field skin, his stick-thinness and so on) as well as be a subject who uses in-human *language* (a fundamental/fundamentalist grammar of ideation, a language minus the (modal/interpersonal) human dimension). But what, I think, is crucial to our point here is the *effect* of this lack of ‘realism’.

Lack of ‘realism’ in fiction is usually equated with lack of ‘truth’ (authenticity), but here we must note that it has exactly the *opposite* effect, for it is precisely the effect of rendering Vorbis ‘unrealistically’ in-human that is the ‘truth’ of his “real being” as a pervert-fundamentalist. A ‘real’ pervert-fundamentalist, that is to say, *is* ‘unrealistically’ in-human.

Pratchett, then, is able to exploit the space created in the ‘de-contextualized’ Fantasy novel to capture that which is, I would argue, simply beyond ‘realistic’ literature.

Dialogue Movement 3: Pervert-Fundamentalism, the Law and Diabolical ‘Evil’: Pratchett Coheres Žižek

It has hopefully been demonstrated in the first two movements of our dialogue that Pratchett and Žižek’s ideas on fundamentalism and perversion harmonize and inform one another. To recap, we have so far shown (in the first movement) that Žižek helps us to frame theoretically why Pratchett’s fundamentalist-pervert, Vorbis, does not and cannot believe and also to understand the reasons why (secular, humanist) belief must be defended. Moreover, it has also been shown (in the second movement) that, although a ‘mere’ Fantasy writer, Pratchett seems to grasp the niceties of theory quite readily, recognizing in his depiction of Vorbis that the fundamentalist’s claim to ‘knowledge’ is based on *connaître/kennen* rather than *savoir/wissen*, a staging that we argued developed and added nuance to Žižek’s own reading of this claim to ‘knowledge’. If, then, it has already been implied that Žižek would do well to note Pratchett’s subtleties we will add here that there is also a sense in which Pratchett is able to ‘join up’ some of Žižek’s somewhat disjointed (although brilliant) ideas about fundamentalism, perversion, the law and ‘evil’. We say ‘join up’, for not only does Pratchett seem to artistically actualize a figure in the form of Vorbis who rolls a number of Žižek’s

ideas these concepts into one terrifying embodiment, but he is also prepared to give this unholy conflation a specific Symbolic designation, *exquisite*, a theoretical neologism of sublime aptness. But we are head of ourselves. Let us backtrack a little in order to build up this argument from the beginning, starting with an exposition/recap of some of Žižek's ideas.

Žižek's magpie-thoughts, then, are not always easy to keep track of, but it *is* possible to formulate how (if we juxtapose certain of his seemingly random ideas together so that they coalesce into what might be thought of as a logical progression) they suggest a figure that Pratchett ultimately names. The order imposed on Žižek's disjunct ideas runs as follows:

1. The fundamentalist is properly a *pervert*, the object-instrument of the big Other (God). (1997: 33; 2006: 105, 116)
2. The (Lacanian) pervert, reversing the position of the 'traditional' pervert as *transgressor*, seeks to *establish* the (divine) law. (1997: 14, 35, 77)
3. The (transcendental) injunction to establish and then uphold the law is regarded by the pervert as an *ethical* injunction, a duty in the Kantian sense. (1997: 225-6; 2006: 106)
4. That it is the transcendental agency/big Other inducing the pervert to uphold the law is a prerequisite for the committing of atrocities that would otherwise be subject to self-limiting constraints (of the superego). (1997: 228-230; 2006: 98)
5. The atrocities committed in the name of the transcendental agency/big Other (as an 'ethical' duty) should properly be designated diabolically 'evil', in other words, 'evil' that is 'elevated to a consistent ethical principle', a *rational* 'evil'. This is far more radical than 'commonplace' egotistical 'evil', which is motivated *pathologically* (in other words, by 'greed, lust for power, even sadistic pleasure in inflicting pain on other human beings'). (1997: 231-5)

It is not difficult, indeed, to show how each of these ideas is taken up by Pratchett and staged in *Small Gods* through the figure of Vorbis:

1. Vorbis clearly regards himself the object-instrument of the big Other (Om) ('Vorbis knew his destiny. Hadn't the God himself told him?' (SG: 13)) Moreover, not only does his gaze fully coincide with that of the big Other ('Vorbis' gaze was dreadful. Vorbis looked through your head to the sins inside, hardly interested in you except as a vehicle for your sins' (SG: 124-5)), but also, in certain respects, it might even be said that so pure is his instrumentality that *he becomes inseparable from the big Other himself*.
2. Additionally, Vorbis is closely identified with the law in two ways. First, through his creation of a Book of Laws (the Book of Vorbis) and, second through his voice, which, in its

impersonality and lack of modal/interpersonal features, suggest that Vorbis somehow coincides with *the Law as the Other's voice*, as Borch-Jacobsen puts it (1988: 219).

Furthermore, in similar fashion to Vorbis' direct conflation with the big Other described in 1. above, so closely is Vorbis identified with the law that *it is impossible to imagine him on trial*: 'Brutha blanched at the thought that was almost impossible to hold in the mind. It was the kind of thought that made no sense. Vorbis on trial? Trials were things that happened to other people' (SG: 209). How, we might ask, *can* one try the law?

3. The (divine) laws, of course, exist (at least according to Vorbis) in order to protect people from sin, heresy and the risk of damnation. To uphold the laws, to prevent men from being lured from 'the path of true knowledge' (SG: 188) and from being poisoned by 'lies' is, in fact, a duty, a '*holy duty*' (SG: 28).
4. The punishments for breaking the laws are (unsurprisingly) severe. At his brilliant best, Pratchett outlines unrestrained punishments for masturbation ('There were twenty-three other novices in Brutha's dormitory, on the principle that sleeping alone promoted sin [...] People allowed to be by themselves overmuch might indulge in solitary cogitation. It was well known that stunted your growth. For one thing, it could lead to your feet being chopped off' (SG: 80)), and for heresy ('When the Omnian Church found out about [the heretical thoughts of] Koomi, they displayed him in every town within the Church's empire to demonstrate the essential flaws in his argument. There were a lot of towns so they had to cut him up quite small' (SG: 109)). In *Small Gods*, moreover, we commonly find men being tortured by Vorbis' Church. Perhaps, however, the supreme indication of the sheer perversity of the punishments meted out by Vorbis and his Church is exemplified by Pratchett's sublime introduction of *pre-emptive* punishment ("Where there is punishment, there is always a crime", said Vorbis. "Sometimes the crime follows the punishment, which only serves to prove the foresight of the Great God"./"That's what my grandmother used to say", said Brutha automatically [...]/"She used to give me a thrashing every morning because I would certainly do something to deserve it during the day"./ "A most complete understanding of the nature of mankind", said Vorbis' (SG: 123)). Can such a logic of breathtaking perversity be imagined *without* a transcendental agency?
5. It is apparent that Vorbis is *rational*, albeit somewhere on 'the other side of madness' in a place where he has 'built some kind of logical structure [...] rational thoughts made out of insane components' (SG: 294). He is in a Nietzschean space *beyond good and evil* in which his *atrocious* actions (torture) are fully consistent with his God's ethical 'good' (he does it for their own benefit, to save their souls), in other words, a place of diabolical 'evil'. We must also note that the pathological motivations of sadist *inquisitors* are counterposed with those of Vorbis. As the egotistically 'evil' Deacon Cusp, a torturer who "had got where he was today [...] because he liked hurting people" muses: 'Hurting people because you

enjoyed it...that was understandable. Vorbis just hurt people because he'd decided that they should be hurt, without passion, even with a kind of hard love' (SG: 293-4).

When we contrapose Žižek's five theoretical ideas with Pratchett's literary actualization of them, we can see clearly, then, the sense in which Pratchett coheres disjunctive Žižekian ideas, rolling them all up into the form of Vorbis. But Pratchett advances still further by filling in what is only implied by Žižek, the missing link that brings diabolical 'evil' *back to* pervert-fundamentalism to make this not a chain, but a *circle*.

For surely implicit as an extension to the five of Žižek's ideas strung together above is a *number six*, a number six that we can write because, in a way, Pratchett has already mapped it out for us:

6. In carrying out an 'ethical' (in other words, diabolically 'evil') act for the transcendental agency/big Other, the subject becomes a pervert-fundamentalist who displaces his *jouissance* outwards onto the transcendental agency/big Other. This is an *exquisite* moment because it brings the subject into direct contact with the big Other's desire. Nevertheless, the displacement of the *jouissance* outwards onto the big Other means that the subject himself can feel no pleasure...

This is a perfect description of Vorbis' mode of operation, of course. Pratchett brilliantly short-circuits diabolical 'evil' and fundamentalist/perversion through his pervert-priest and nonchalantly supplies the Symbolic mandate: *Exquisitor*. This marker of sublime insight is Pratchett's shorthand for, his squaring the circle of, Žižek's implied pervert-fundamentalist/lawyer/diavolo/*pervert-fundamentalist*.

* * *

Let us finish this third movement by indicating that this theoretically pure pervert-fundamentalist/lawyer/diavolo/*pervert-fundamentalist* can emerge and be so brilliantly foregrounded in the Fantasy *Pragmatikos* *precisely because* this medium does not require 'depth of reality'. Crucial here, I think, is the presentation of how Vorbis' ethical stance intersects with his actions.

Žižek identifies that one can never be sure (when considering 'evil') quite where *ethical* 'evil' blurs with *pathological* 'evil'. How can it be determined that the ego of the subject is not intruding, that there are *human* motivations of selfish interest behind apparently 'ethical' deeds? The answer, of course, is that *one can never be sure*, but this is where the Fantasy text steps in for Pratchett demonstrates that it is nonetheless possible to *represent* pure diabolical 'evil' by elimination of the

human dimension. In the in-existent Fantasy space, the 'real being' of diabolical 'evil' can and is represented by Pratchett in the figure of Vorbis exactly because Vorbis' ego *can* be subtracted. As Vorbis is rendered *beyond pathology*, he *can* fully coincide with acts of perverse-fundamental diabolical 'evil'.

Pure pervert-fundamentalist, pure lawyer, pure diavolo: *pure exquistor*. The final way of making the conceptual visible is confirmed by Pratchett's break with 'realism' in his use of a neologism, a 'pure' Signifier. Fundamentalism's connection to diabolical 'evil' (and back again) emerges into visibility and is crystallized for our contemplation in *Small Gods* through its very attachment to the virtual notion of 'exquisition'.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated, firstly, that a 'dialogue' between Fantasy literature and philosophy/cultural theory, as exemplified by Pratchett and Žižek, can be a productive one. We do not mean to suggest, of course, that Pratchett reads Žižek or that Žižek, indeed, reads Pratchett, but what *can* be suggested is that both (albeit coming from seemingly opposite directions) introduce and engage with similarly disconcerting and arresting notions about belief and knowledge and the way in which these notions can be coupled to fundamentalism, perversion, language, the law and diabolical 'evil'. Their ideas can, above all, be said to *harmonize* with one another.

The notion of a dialogue, moreover, seems a useful one. In the first movement, we started with Pratchett's staging of the asymmetry between belief and knowledge before moving to Žižek for a theoretical framework for interpretation. In the second, we moved back to Pratchett to demonstrate how he develops and adds nuance to Žižek's notion of the fundamentalist's claim to 'knowledge'. In the third, we moved once again to Žižek and a string of his disjunct ideas on fundamentalism, perversion, the law and 'evil' before moving back to Pratchett again to show how he beautifully *coheres* them. A strange meeting of minds, maybe, a clash of Fantasists, but back and forth the dialogue goes, generally in harmony, but each adds a dimension, a *resonance*, to the other that each would be much poorer without.

The second point that this paper has demonstrated is that Pratchett exemplifies the capacity of Fantasy to be radical because he utilizes certain unique aspects of the 'Fantasy armory' (tools available to Fantasy but unavailable to text that may be thought of as operating under the confines of 'realism') in order to engage in a Foucauldian disturbance of the reader's equilibrium. Abstract concepts of belief and knowledge are re-examined so that their libidinal relationship with fundamentalism, language, perversion and the law are *made visible* firstly through Fantasy's (impossible) power to collapse the abstract/symbolic into the Fantasy 'reality', and, secondly, through Fantasy's facility to approach 'real being' through its staging in the Fantasy

Pragmatikos, the in-existent space where de-contextualized appearance allows a purity of representation.

‘What seems it is and in such seeming all things are’: can we not say by way of conclusion that, far from having a merely tangential relationship to the ‘real’, as some critics would have it, the *Pragmatikos* of a Fantasy text is directly related to the ‘real’ because, in some sense, it can be *more* ‘real’, at least on a conceptual level, than ‘realistic’ texts? Can we not say that, paradoxically, conceptual ‘reality’ is best staged in ‘The nothing that is not there’, the ‘empty’ arena of a Fantasy novel?

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