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Taking the Red and Black Pill: Anarchy as a Cure to Modern Ails

By Dean-Liathine McDonald

When Johnny Rotten contorted himself around a spittle-covered microphone to vociferously scream the chorus of the infamous song *Anarchy in the U.K.*,[i] little did he know just how far his influence would stretch. It is safe to say he probably didn't imagine a wave of punk elves shaving off their long, Lothlorien-inspired locks to instead sport stiff multi-coloured mohawks. Yet, the movement that he had such a hand in rendering popular would influence and spread throughout anglophone culture and beyond bringing rebellion, revolt, repudiation and more or less vague notions of revolution to many a domain—not least of which, the arts. An interesting chain of events would bring Punk to 1980s adolescence, and magic to their fictional cities represented in the, then, burgeoning genre of early Urban Fantasy (UF). Fundamental to both Punk and UF are the ideas espoused by a particularly nebulous ideology, that of Anarchy. In order to best present these ideas to you, I'll first touch on some background information.

I'll start by explaining what I mean by early UF, then speaking about the Anglophone world at the time it rose to popularity. Then, I'll present the punk ideals of UF, before finally looking at Anarchy, the politics at the movement's centre, and how UF writers filtered these ideas down to find a more balanced synthesis between both culture and counter-culture, or to put it another way: the cure at the core.

Some of you may be wondering what UF is. A perfectly valid question considering that not only is the genre defined by its genre-hybridity and fluid nature, as McLennon (2014) points out,[ii] as well as its constant subversion of norms and tropes (see Langford's addendum), but also for the longest time, studies on UF were hampered by appellative confusion. Early on, for example, Brian Attebery (1991) in his *Strategies of Fantasy* would justly refer to the genre as "indigenous fantasy",[iii] Farah Mendlesohn would later use "non-horror intrusion fantasy" or "modern intrusion fantasy",[iv] others still would use terms such as "supernatural detective fiction", "template dark fantasy" (Kaveney 2011),[v] "paranormal romance", and the list goes on. As does time, and with it the popularity of the genre grew.

Steadily gaining in both scope and readership, fans would adopt the term 'urban fantasy' followed, after 2010, by a number of scholars. The term, however, would be used as a taxonomically-diffuse marketing device that subsumed and added to Clute's (1997) original definition.[vi] Once centred on city and edifice, UF now existed on the speculative borders between genres as in this image (see fig. 1). Prompting Langford to add the following addendum to Clute's definition in the online version of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*:



Figure 1 : Urban Fantasy on the border

> "2. The above is a rare instance in which this encyclopedia's terminology has been superseded by common usage. As a publishing category which has risen to enormous popularity in the twenty-first century, Urban Fantasy has come to denote the subgenre of stories set in an alternate version of our modern world where humans (often with special Talents) and supernatural beings – most typically Vampires, Werewolves, assorted other Shapeshifters, and very humanlike Elves or Fairies – interact via adventure, melodrama, intrigue and Sex. A closely related, indeed overlapping, publishing classification is Paranormal Romance. [DRL]"

For those of you who would like to delve further into the subject, allow me to suggest Leigh McLennon's (2014) genre history and spectrum definition of UF and Paranormal Romance and, of course, Stefan Ekman's (2016) indispensable aggregate study: 'Urban Fantasy: a Literature of the Unseen'.[vii] For the purposes of this paper, let us say that UF more or less involves an urban setting, typically in a version of our own world, though there are secondary-world UF such as Miéville's (2000) *Perdido Street Station*,[viii] with one main addition: magic exists.

In the 1980s, the city was anything but magical. The political pendulum had swung back to the right under Thatcher and Reagan. The previous decades of what Jones (1995) describes as the latrociny of the left had led to a rise in right-wing groups. He describes this shift as a reaction to cultural changes and laws surrounding sexual conduct, the status of women and family, religious belief, and the treatment of criminals.[ix] As voters turned to the right, however, the economic regimes of Thatcherism and Reagonomics rubbed many the wrong way and, more specifically, fuelled an already rebellious group, adolescents, to even louder heights. The ubiquitous fear of the Cold War and nuclear attack, coupled with high levels of unemployment and a rampant sense of boredom seeded the idea that there was no future for these displaced youth (see Worley 2017). And so, rebellion ensued.

Punk, a baby born of both nations, aesthetically American and politically British, was its medium. It was largely a misunderstood movement, from without and from within., due to media representations of gut rebellion and violence mixed with the multiplicity of meaning coming from members of the movement itself, both politically and in relation to its cultural position. In fact, Punk was a three-fold movement, equal parts youth trend, gut rebellion, and a voice of opposition (O'Hara 1999, 41), leading Dines (2016, 9) to describe it as a subculture built primarily upon "subversion and political malcontent".[x] Nevertheless, whatever form Punk took, it is best known for its music.

Exploding onto the world stage in the mid-seventies, by the 1980s Punk was everywhere. At the beginning of that decade, the youth centres and music clubs that facilitated the Punk scene were synonymous with the *city*. It comes as no surprise then, that the early UF writers would bring magic through music to the metropole. Charles de Lint had been involved in the Canadian music scene since he ran away from home at 15 and even held a number of jobs at record stores when he first started writing (Windling 2012),[xi] Emma Bull had been involved in three groups, including Cats Laughing (even winning mentions in various early UF stories), and she is known to perform at conventions to this day. Terri Windling brought these writers together in her 1986 shared-world anthology *Borderland* and *Bordertown*. In her blog, she writes (2014):[xii]

> "These writers were asserting that one needn't travel to imaginary lands, the medieval past, or even to the countryside to find a magical (dare I say "spiritual'?) connection to *place*: it was available to all…yes, even at the heart of the beast: the big, noisy, crowded, diverse, dangerous,

> exciting modern city. (And remember that these writers began working in the '80s, when urban decline rendered many cities far less appealing than they are today.)"

This push for a connection, a place within the city, meant taking into consideration both the good and the bad within both the mainstream and its subcultures, searching for an ideal between them. One such alternative was Anarchy.

Anarchy seems to reign beneath the surface of both Punk and early UF. But, what is it? The idea itself is hard to pin down. Looking in the Collins dictionary, Anarchy is defined as:[xiii]

> n. 1 general lawlessness and disorder, esp when thought to result from an absence or failure of government.
> 2. the absence or lack of government.
> 3. the absence of any guiding or uniting principle; disorder; chaos.
> 4.the theory or practice of political anarchism
> [C16: from Medieval Latin anarchia, from Greek anarkhia, from anarkhos without a ruler, from AN- + arkh-leader, from arkhein to rule]

This host of heterogeneity demonstrates the scope of potential interpretations and risk of possible confusion. A description of political anarchy is notably absent here, the definition is insufficiently summarised as a doctrine advocating the abolition of government. Even here, Anarchy as a political system remains liquid in form around a nucleus of decentralisation. Understandable, considering that the central tenet of Anarchy is a system limiting both hierarchy and the concentration of power. The individual interpretation made possible by this idea would help birth a host of systems from anarcho-syndicalism, to anarcho-punk, and even *anarquismo sin adjetivos* (anarchism-without-adjectives) to name but a few.[xiv] Of course, not all of these models are present in the aforementioned texts.

Specifically, three forms of Anarchy are visible in early UF: The ancient Anarchies of acephalous groups are represented in Charles de Lint's (1984) *Moonheart,*[xv] where the Quin'on'a people demonstrate equality in group decision-making by forming drum circles that provide the group's homologous harmony; the rebellious anarchic uprisings associated with the late 19th century mix with a dose of 20th century Punk in Emma Bull's (1987) *War for the Oaks* when protagonist, Eddi McCandry, tears open a space in the current binary, fay system through a magical battle for the soul of the city, and a call to arms that literally transforms the city-dwellers into a sonic sword to win the day, a metaphoric rendering of the spontaneous revolution of the masses acting upon a collective, instinctual desire for freedom;[xvi] finally, Anarchy runs free in many forms, including the Anarcho-syndicalist farming, reminiscent of civil-war era Spain, and Anarchy as societal breakdown, in Terri Windling's shared-world anthologies *Borderland* (1986), Bordertown (1986), and *Life on the Border* (1991), etc.[xvii]

Nevertheless, representation is not advocacy. Indeed, the above texts appear ambivalent towards political Anarchy, either showing it as ill-adapted to modern society (de Lint), arguably insufficient as an instigator of change (Bull), or dangerous and dystopic (Windling). There is a sense of critique against the cultural mainstream that has ousted the artist, but also of the resulting counter-culture. At their heart, these texts leave the reader with the impression that society as a whole is not functioning as it should be, all while highlighting the benefits of community. In the anarchist staple *Mutual Aid* (1902), Kropotkin posited that human society is constructed not on socialist Darwinism,[xviii] but on reciprocity—an idea espoused by both Guérin (1970) and Taylor (1982).[xix] Although Taylor goes one step further, his thesis effectively demonstrating that the ideal of reciprocity at the heart of Anarchy can only function

in small communities, as only these can avoid the problem of free riders or those who partake *sans* contribution to a public good. Of course, these small communities and the modern city seem antinomic, the anarchic structure a pipe-dream. In order to bring them together symbolically, the early UF writers brought magic and the mythical creatures of the past into their metropoleis.

Here, the setting may be modern, yet these UF writers romanticised the medieval. Of course, this is arguably the case within the Fantasy genre in general. Maund (1997), for example, describes 'History in Fantasy' thusly:

> "Fantasy as a genre is almost inextricably bound up with history and ideas of history, reflected and reworked more or less thoroughly according to the needs, ambitions and intentions of individual authors. Its roots can be found… in the backward-looking romanticism of the pre-raphealites; and in academic Classical and medieval scholarship… predominantly associated with medieval history… Many fantasy authors borrow historical events and ideologies, and transform them to provide the basis of a new world… quasi-medieval (often highly inaccurate)… never free from romanticism and idealism…"

The mythic creatures in early UF may have adapted in some way to the modern setting, but their very presence evokes the medieval. Elves (or their less-Eurocentric homologues the *Manitou*), the Fay folk (Seelie or Unseelie), and magic-wielding bards allude to, perhaps even personify, the past. What's more, as Bull's Faerie Nobleman and supernatural guitarist, Willy, attests, even those who manage to fit in to modern society do not fully adapt. Although not entirely adherent to the archaic organisation of his original group, he injects the modern-day setting with an element of the old-world artistry that charms the protagonist. With this in mind, the use of mythic creatures that allow for a romanticised borrowing of anachronistic, anarchic ideologies becomes *natural* when placed in the city setting.

The medieval city was anarchic—and artistic. At least, it was according to Kropotkin (1902). Despite Anarchy failing to maintain a viable system of government in recent times, he claims that the ideals fought for and briefly exemplified by both civil-war era Spain and 19th century Ukraine, had already flourished in the walled and independent medieval city (108). Just as the Elves and Faerie-Folk of Fantasy are often associated with masterful endeavours in art and craftwork, so too was the medieval city. Relying on self-jurisdiction, no two cities were identical, each a "result of struggle between various forces which adjusted and re-adjusted themselves in conformity with their relative energies, the chances of their conflicts, and the support they found in their surroundings" (105). On top of this, the creative forces of both function and aesthetics came together in these guilds, as each object was made not only to serve the community but also to demonstrate the artisan's skill. Those tight-knit guild workers worked within, what Kropotkin describes as, a "conception of brotherhood and unity fostered by the city," it was this that engendered such feats of skill in art, architecture (116), and other crafts. These communes of master craftsmen exemplify Taylor's (1982) anarchic structure of small communities, which he believes is the only functioning form of Anarchy, made possibly because members share the group identity, caring for each other and the community as friends, or what he calls "secular family communes" (164).

Anarchy, Anarcho-Punk, and UF, share a common goal. Whether it be the anarcho-syndicalists of the past, the noisy, pogoing, mohawk-sporting Punks of Britain and America searching for meaning in a world that seemed to have forgotten them, or the mythic beings of a medieval *long, long ago*: building a better society that fulfils the needs of its members was

key. While Punk's relationship to Anarchy may have been, at times, ambivalent, the desire to be useful, to transform the build-up of boredom and tension into positive action and creative endeavour can be seen throughout the era. Early UF drew their readers through a magic mirror into a fictional world that was a reflection of our own. They pulled inspiration from this extremely politicized period of recent history and Punk's reaction to it, stripping the latter of its negative elements by highlighting the dangers of violence and nihilism, and filtered it down to its core message: the magic of family and community and authentic creativity. In these stories, the reader finds the nostalgia for the past that is so common in the fantasy genre mixed with the now ineluctable urban environment of the city. Yet, this resulting alchemy is not to be despaired. Instead, Bull, de Lint, and Windling use it to highlight, what the latter (2014) refers to as the "metaphorical search for wonder and natural (rather than supernatural) magic in city settings;" the sense of connection with the land and those with whom it is shared that can be found when one looks for it, even in the city.[xx] In other words, UF stories sought to convince those that felt displaced that a sense of place was possible, that it is normal to feel lost in the city crowd because humans flourish through community and the mutual aid that Kropotkin (1902) believes was key to our evolution (161).[xxi] The magical creatures that erupt from the middle-ages into modernity, bring with them the veneration of artisan creation that animated the medieval city and the love of nature that animates them in turn. Their mere presence denounces the destructive nature of unbridled capitalism and consumer culture and calls for a return to a past form of society. The writers of early UF forced the reader to look simultaneously at the past and contemporary society, creating a magical amalgamation of the positive elements found in both, an enchanting representation of something that never was, as if this nebulous genre was dipping into the roots of our collective past seeking ancient cures for modern ails.

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