This piece follows on so closely from the last one that I have been able to cut out some of the opening few paragraphs. It was produced under rather different circumstances, starting off as the 1994 keynote address for the Lloyd C. Eaton conference at the University of California-Riverside: by this time I had moved to America and taken the Walter J. Ong Chair of Humanities at Saint Louis University. The venue meant that the audience, all concerned with science fiction but not all of them academics, were definitely on my side, which accounts for a certain rah-rah element, especially towards the end.

The theme of the conference was ‘Contests for Authority’, and I stuck to the theme fairly closely. Still asking myself why there was so much critical hostility to and ignorance of science fiction, I answered that you could see from *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) that sf was likely to reject the authority of literary tradition. Moreau was like *The Odyssey* on the surface, but had turned the story round 180 degrees. Furthermore, Wells meant it. It was not that he thought writers like Homer were stupid, but knowledge is cumulative, science is based on knowledge – *scientia* is the Latin word for knowledge – and pre-modern authors like Homer or Milton or Swift just didn’t know as much as Wells. No special credit to him, but a fact all the same.

So sf authors did not respect traditional authority, but they did respect rational authority, and both halves of this were likely to cause alarm in the literary world: the former for obvious reasons, the latter because the literary world, and especially practitioners of what by then was being called ‘literary theory’, had also got into the habit of continually challenging authority. But this was mostly ‘gesture politics’. Unlike sf authors, they didn’t mean it. The authorities they were prepared to challenge were the outdated, defeated or unpopular ones, like hereditary class structures, belief in racial superiority, imperialism, or compulsory courses on *Beowulf*. Literary theory was not prepared to tangle with...
science, much less interact with it, and had developed an elaborate system for denying the existence of objectivity and the possibility of defining meaning. Of course this too wasn’t entirely seriously meant, not on an everyday level. But it had become a faith, and faiths don’t like serious challenge. This was another reason, along with sf’s commitment to change and its threat to literary caste-authority, for the genre’s poor reception by academics in the humanities.

I drew into all this the argument, from my 1992 anthology *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories* (where I credit a former student, James Bradley, for the word and the idea) that we were short of a useful term which needed to be invented. While there was a literary mode called ‘pastoral’, there was and always had been another mode which I call ‘fabril’, there but never named because, again, threatening, unpopular, regarded (until Wells again put the contrarian view) as not really fully human. ‘Fabril’ has not caught on as a critical term, but that may be part of the continuing ‘two cultures’ problem. Literary critics do not mix with engineers.

There was one area in the argument that follows where I would have liked to do more, and that is my suggestion that sf was highly ‘intertextual’. I meant that the authors were very aware of each other, especially when the genre was defined by a small number of magazines (see further item 5, below), and they still argue with each other through their fiction all the time. If one author does one thing with a scenario, another will come along and say, ‘no, what would really happen is this’. There’s also a sense that there are a number of ‘paradigm stories’, capable of constant rewriting, and often first written by Wells: the alien invasion story, the post-holocaust story, the mutant story, the clone story, the enclosed universe story, the world-changing invention story, etc. I have delivered several talks at sf conventions along these lines, and the authors I was discussing were often there and often interested, and they only sometimes told me I was dead wrong (though see the introduction to item 3, below). I still think that a ‘structural’ approach to sf would tell us something about sf, about narrative, and about the sf ‘metastatement’ which I think is in there somewhere. But – as I realised too late, see again the ‘Personal Preface’, above – we have been in a ‘post-structuralist’ phase since 1969, and the project has never really taken off. It works in some areas of medieval and folktale studies, but there one is dealing with a much smaller and now permanently closed corpus: easier to deal with but less productive. It is something to keep thinking about ...
All of us who work with science fiction, I am sure, have a store of insults to record from those in authority. Perhaps the award for the crassest example recorded at this conference should go to Sheila Finch’s senior colleague, who said to her after she had published her first science fiction work, ‘I hope your next book is a real novel’. But though that was remarkable both for its brevity and its dismissiveness, it also remains in a sense typical. I repeat that I am sure that all of us past a certain age have not only heard but have got used to hearing similar statements. In spite of their frequency, I would suggest that, if they were mere random and individual examples of thoughtlessness, or rudeness, the right tactic would be to tolerate and as far as possible ignore them. However, I do not think that is the case. It seems to me that the open hostility to science fiction so often seen within academic departments of literature has a common and even a compulsive root. By facing this, I think we put ourselves in a position to learn something about ‘contests for authority’, both within our field and over our field.

I have already suggested (see the previous essay) that these negative literary reactions can be used diagnostically. My starting-point there (again taken from personal experience) was that I had so often been told by literary colleagues, seemingly without awareness of self-contradiction, that (a) they hated science fiction, and (b) they never read it. I suggested that, regardless of the contradiction, these two statements were probably often true, and that they offered us a kind of generic indicator. I went on to propose, following Darko Suvin (1979), that science fiction depends on the novum, which (this time expanding on Suvin) I oppose to the datum: the latter is definable as one piece of that shared body of information which all readers need to read any text at all; the former the bit of new information which you must find within a text in order to read it as a science fiction text – a bit which is by definition initially not shared, which the reader has to be told. This view of the novum is not exactly
that of Suvin,¹ but is meanwhile by no means hostile or contradictory
to the view of John Huntington, who has argued that science fiction
(he cites Wells and William Gibson) is marked by a new *habitus*, a new
class-awareness, ‘the introduction of new class or group values into the
hegemonic canon’ (Huntington 1991: 63). My suggestion was, in brief,
that it is possible to reconcile the contradiction of hating without reading
by assuming that it is the presence of the *novum* that marks a work as
science fiction; but that as soon as some readers recognise a *novum*, they
immediately stop reading – recognising in the very existence of a *novum*
an implicit challenge to the old *habitus*, as to ‘the hegemonic canon’.²
Both Huntington and I were saying in effect that science fiction depends
on novelty, and that this novelty is seen as a threat (rightly, for it is a
threat) by conservative groups including academic groups.

A further way of putting this is to say that during my science fiction
‘lifetime’ (1958 to now) being a science fiction reader in academia has
been rather like being gay. In both cases, one could say, drawing out
the similarities:

– there was definite pressure, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, not
to admit the fact;
– there were social penalties if you did;
– you got used to hiding the fact;
– but there were places where you could meet others of the same
persuasion;
– there was very strong ‘networking’ among the concealed in-group,
whether these were science fiction readers or homosexuals;

¹ Suvin uses the term in a more abstract way, as a genre-indicator, not as
a ‘bit’ or ‘piece’ of information. It is part of my argument that nearly all
science fiction works have not one but many *nova* (or *novums*), just as any
paragraph of any non-science fiction work will contain much *data* (or many

² I cannot forbear from recording here the comment made by the chairman
of a session at which I read a paper at a University of London conference
on East European literature, in December 1992. At the end of the session,
on science fiction, the chair said, as nearly as I can recall his exact words:
‘What I want to know is when is any of this stuff going to make it into
the actual accepted canon?’ He was, it is true, severely attacked for saying
this, ‘canon’ having become a rude word in academic criticism (see the
introduction to the next item, here); but the stuff/canon antithesis in his
mind was no doubt identical with the science fiction/real novel antithesis
recorded by Sheila Finch.
– in both cases, too, discrimination was illegal, was frowned on theoretically, and people would deny they were doing it. But they did it just the same;

– and, finally, it was possible to ‘come out’ and get away with it, but only once you had reached a certain level of seniority.

Nevertheless, we have to recognise in both cases that the social climate has changed since the late 1950s. We now have ‘Gay Studies’ in colleges, as we do ‘Science Fiction Studies’. Furthermore, I said above that science fiction depends on a shocking or threatening novelty. However, one has to admit that modern academic circles are fascinated by novelty. It has become part of the collective myth or self-image of academic critics, especially practitioners of ‘literary theory’. Almost all fields, including some of the staidest, have felt the need to develop at least a rhetoric of novelty, so that we have, for instance, ‘the New Medievalism’, ‘the New Historicism’, ‘the New Philology’.3 ‘Boring old’ is regularly opposed as a trope to ‘brilliant young’ or ‘exciting new’. So why should we, as science fiction critics, not put the past behind us? Trade on the inherent novelty of our field? Assume that the revulsion from the novum will in future be professionally unacceptable instead of just personally rude? And make a bid for power, or at least authority, within the power-structures of our profession – such as the Modern Language Association (MLA)?

The brief answer is that for all the talk about widening canonicity, I suspect that while a place might well be made for science fiction within the MLA, it would be a subordinate or ancillary place. Major theorists are not theorising about science fiction (with the exception, incidentally, of Fredric Jameson, who gave the Eaton conference keynote address in 1992: see further both Jameson 2005 and Roberts 2000). More normal is the point of view expressed within Howard Felperin’s interesting critique of literary theory, Beyond Deconstruction, which closes with the words:

the virtual focus of our changing critical discourse will be the great classic texts, which continue to repay so richly each historical construction and deconstruction they attract. (Felperin 1985: 223)

The discourse may change, but, you notice, the classical texts will not.

One can hardly avoid remarking, *plus ça change, plus c’est – plus ça sera – la même chose*. Science fiction may have ‘come out of the closet’, to return to my analogy, but it has not got into the cocktail party. The image I have of our field within literary studies is that of the outsider on the edge of the group, allowed to listen, not excluded, but still not part of the conversation.

Is there a reason for the continuing exclusion, to explain why there is no ‘new science fiction-ism’ to go with the other ‘new-isms’; why we don’t say postrealist along with postmodernist, poststructuralist, postfeminist, postcolonialist (etc.)? I think there is indeed one, which I find I can sum up best by Edmund Spenser’s lines about the Garden of Adonis in *The Faerie Queene* (Book III, canto vi, stanza 36):

> For in the wide wombe of the world there lyes,  
> In hatefull darkenesse and in deepe horrore,  
> An huge eternall Chaos, which supplyes  
> The substances of natures fruitfull progenyes.

In my figure here, the ‘deep horror’ is that with which science fiction is so often regarded, a horror stemming from subliminal awareness of the ‘eternal chaos’ created by unlimited changes of *novum* and *habitus*. But this horror sadly fails to observe the ‘fruitful supply of substance’ which springs from that chaos.

*  

I would now like to illustrate what I have been saying so far by examining what I suggest is a critical moment in the origins of science fiction. I am aware that various people offer various moments for ‘the birth of science fiction’, and I do not mean to reject all the others. I am aware also that the one I propose to examine is not even chronologically the first, while it even refers within itself (in a way) to one of the other candidates, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, so strongly put forward as the originating work of science fiction by Brian Aldiss. But my candidate, I feel, has paradigmatic power in this context, that is, in the discussion of ‘contests for authority’. It is Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, see following note. For extended accounts of early science fiction, or proto-science fiction, see Stableford 1985; Alkon 1987; Alkon 1994.

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4 For Aldiss’s argument with regard to *Frankenstein*, see Aldiss and Wingrove 1986: 25–52. For the relevance of this to *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, see following note. For extended accounts of early science fiction, or proto-science fiction, see Stableford 1985; Alkon 1987; Alkon 1994.
Moreau (1896). Read this, and I think it is possible to see why the MLA, and the academic community in general, remain wary of science fiction.

The scenario of Moreau, far from being new, is of course taken from what may be the oldest text in Western literature, Homer’s Odysseus, specifically Book X, the adventure of the Island of Circe: Circe, the witch who turns men into beasts, in particular into swine. Wells’s Prendick is a doublet of Homer’s Odysseus, Wells’s Moreau is the transforming Circe, the Beast-Folk are Odysseus’s crew. The parallel is quite consciously present within Wells’s text itself. After he has been rescued from shipwreck by the Ipecacuanha, and from the Ipecacuanha by Moreau, Prendick finds himself on Moreau’s island with nothing to do and little to read. There is nothing in his hut except ‘surgical works and editions of the Latin and Greek classics – languages I cannot read with any comfort’. The ‘surgical works’ make sense here as a reminder, or warning, of Moreau’s profession, but the classics seem both inexplicable and redundant: Robert Philmus, in his excellent variorum edition of Wells’s work, suggests that they can be regarded as ‘a piece of [Wellsian] autobiography’, while later on he sees the ‘crib of Horace’ that Prendick throws aside as symbolising ‘the epitome of Civilized Restraint’ (Philmus 1993: 92). Yet Prendick throws aside more than Horace, and more than civilised restraint. At the start of chapter 11, he refers directly to an English classical text which repeats the Circe myth. Thinking that Moreau is operating on men and turning them into beasts, Prendick sees it as a fate worse than death to be sent off, ‘a lost soul, a beast, to the rest of their Comus rout’. Comus is the villainous magician of Milton’s masque of 1637, introduced there as the son of Homer’s Circe, and following the same bestialising practices: Circe, Comus, these are the classical images, the classical scenario, that give the background setting, the ‘horizon of expectation’ for Moreau.

But of course the classical images, in Moreau, turn out to be dead wrong. Prendick is entirely mistaken. Moreau is not changing men into beasts, he is changing beasts into men. The vital question is, which is worse? A critical scene is chapter 13, ‘A Parley’. Prendick, who has run away, has been hunted down by Moreau and Montgomery, and is standing on the shore, ready to throw himself to the sharks rather than surrender to be transformed as he expects. And the Beast-Folk, the products of Moreau’s experiments, are standing behind Moreau and Montgomery, listening. Moreau has to reassure Prendick without them learning the truth – which he does in the language of the classics:

He coughed, thought, then started: ‘Latin, Prendick! Bad Latin! Schoolboy Latin! But try and understand. Hi non sunt homines, sunt
animalia qui nos habemus ... vivisected. A humanising process. I will explain. Come ashore'.

Prendick at first rejects this, but then is reassured, and comes ashore. There are, however, two points to make about this scene.

One is that there is something terribly degraded about Moreau's Latin, 'qui nos habemus ... vivisected'. In the first place, qui is intended as a relative pronoun. But animal is neuter, and the relative pronoun must here be accusative plural, object of 'habemus ... vivisected': quae, therefore, not qui. 'Habemus ... vivisected', meanwhile, must be an attempt at translating the English perfect 'have vivisected' into Latin. But Latin does not make a perfect with an auxiliary verb. One might expect, then, from the English form of 'vivisect', some such verb as vivisectavimus. However, the English infinitive is derived in this case from the past participle, and the Latin verb's 'principal parts' in fact go seco – secare – secui – sectum. Since Latin also conveys person and number by verb ending, the pronoun nos is furthermore redundant. What Moreau should have said is 'Sunt animalia quae vivisecuimus'.

To make these points is of course in one way an act of utter pedantry (reminiscent of John Cleese as the Roman centurion in the film Life of Brian). However, and more seriously, I would lay stress on the shocking and even insulting character of Moreau's errors. In my time, and in Wells's, saying something like that in a real school would have been a beating offence. Because Latin, in 1890s Britain, in Europe, and to a large extent also in America, was:

(a) a mark of the literary and the ruling caste
(b) still at least 90 per cent gender-related
(c) and taught entirely sub virga, under the rod.

What Moreau speaks, however, is a 'pidgin', a variant of Latin resembling the debased forms of European languages spread around the world largely by the slave-trade. It hardly makes sense for Moreau to speak this pidgin. Presumably the Latin classics which Prendick cannot read belonged to Moreau, in which case he ought to be well above this stage, even if he is perhaps 'condescending' to Prendick's level in the critical 'parley'. But I would suggest that we do not need here to work out complex explanations to do with Wells's autobiography or Moreau's linguistic awareness. What the scene does with great

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5 It is clear from Philmus's presentation of Wells's first draft of Moreau in
force is to express powerful contempt for a whole classical tradition of both language and literature. Prendick is, I repeat, just plain wrong in recalling his images of Circe and Comus: his literary knowledge is here useless and dangerous to him. Since that whole classical tradition is wrong, it is only appropriate that the major European vehicle of it, the Latin language, should be scornfully debased here into a mere utilitarian pidgin. The horror any classically educated person would have been educated to feel about Moreau’s grammatical mistakes is in Wells’s story simply overridden. The important thing in what Moreau says is content, not grammar or style.

The second and more important point about the scene is that this contempt is seriously meant. It is not just the classical images that are wrong, not just Prendick who is wrong. The classical texts are wrong too, and their authors and most of all their readers. They thought the worst thing that could happen was to turn men into beasts. That would certainly be bad for the men, like Odysseus’s crew, who are so turned. But what if you turn beasts into men? What are the implications of that? What would that say about people as a whole – including the ones who don’t get turned? Such a transformation, never imagined in any classical text, would say there is no essential difference between beasts and people at all: people in fact are beasts, mere human animals, the dividing line accepted by all from Homer’s time to Wells’s becoming simply irrelevant.

As I am sure we all realise, Wells in a sense means exactly that. And my phrase ‘in a sense’ contains much of the definition, and the alienation, of science fiction. The Island of Doctor Moreau is quite clearly a post-Darwinian story, and one of the major implications of On the Origin of Species is indeed that there is no uncrossable boundary between species in their origins. Beasts (as humans call them) evolved into people in reality: all Moreau is doing, then, is accelerating that process.

The Island of Doctor Moreau: A Variorum Text (Philmus 1993), that Wells was trying to give a lead to interpretation by mentioning books. He mentions at one point Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (115), and twelve pages later Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy. Interestingly, this book replaces Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, even in the first draft. All this makes Wells’s final concentration on Latin and the classics less likely to be merely casual.

6 The connection is again explicitly made in the text. Moreau takes little notice of Prendick until Prendick reveals that he has ‘done some research in biology under Huxley’, that is, Professor Thomas Huxley, widely known as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ for his public defences of Darwin’s theories. Like Prendick, Wells had at least attended Huxley’s lectures in 1884–5, a fact of which he remained inordinately proud.
Furthermore, the process Wells imagined in the story was not in his view impossible. In a prolonged correspondence after the book came out,\(^7\) Wells defended the scientific aspects of his story as accurate and plausible within the knowledge of his time. What he was saying was that his readers had been reading science, but not, in a sense, fiction. That is a continuing claim of science fiction.

The contrast with all previous literature deserves to be stressed. Wells is implying that previous literature, like Homer or Milton, was indeed fiction, if not mere folk-tale. Its premises were false, its readers misinformed, by authors who wrote as they did because they knew no better. The deliberately contemptuous and contradictory nature of Wells’s attacks on literary tradition comes out elsewhere in the many ironies of the Time Traveller’s visit to the ‘dead library’ in South Kensington, which he eventually leaves to search for more ‘useful discoveries’;\(^8\) and in *Moreau*, Wells’s aggression towards the past is seen also in its frequent and deliberate religious blasphemies: the Beast-Folk with their parodistic ‘saying of the Law’, the ritual prohibitions imposed on them, Moreau’s unexplained urge to make beasts in his own image, Prendick’s invention of supernatural religion once Moreau is dead, in chapter 18:

‘Children of the Law’, I said, ‘he is not dead … He has changed his shape – he has changed his body … For a time you will not see him. He is – there’ – I pointed upward – ‘where he can watch you. You cannot see him. But he can see you. Fear the Law’.

I looked at them squarely. They flinched. ‘He is great, he is good’, said the Ape Man, peering fearfully upward among the dense trees.

This blasphemous element indeed caused far more indignation at the time of first publication than any mere reworking of Homer. But in order to keep attention on the literary caste, not the religious caste, I will indicate just one more assault on literary tradition, or literary blasphemy, which occurs at the end of the book. The ending of *Moreau* is clearly calqued on the very end of Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*, where Gulliver, returned from the land of the Houyhnhnms sees the whole human race as Yahoos, and ends up ‘not altogether out of hopes in some time to suffer a neighbour Yahoo in my company, without the apprehensions I am yet under of his teeth or his claws’. Similarly, Prendick in London sees the Beast-Folk everywhere:


\(^8\) See on this point Crossley 1991: 76–103, especially 86–90.
I would go out into the streets to fight with my delusion, and prowling women would mew after me ... Then I would turn aside into some chapel, and even there, such was my disturbance, it seemed that the preacher gibbered Big Thinks even as the Ape Man had done; or into some library, and there the intent faces over the books seemed but patient creatures waiting for prey.

Now, the absolute staple of Swift studies for decades has been to remind us that Gulliver, at the end of Book IV, is mad; so we do not need to take his disturbing vision seriously; we can ‘de-literalise’ it (= literarise it) by muttering the magic words ‘dramatic irony’.9 I have to confess that I was always doubtful about this literary strategy, even in my youth (though having the ‘gay’ habits of a science fiction reader I knew better than to say so). But the reason I was doubtful about Swift was that I had already read Moreau: and I knew that Wells, or Prendick, whichever one prefers – in the science fiction tradition there is no disgrace in characters serving as authorial mouthpiece – meant his final vision seriously. People were, in a sense, beasts, and, once Prendick stopped saying that (which might have been ironic), Wells went on with his postscripts and arguments about Moreau, which definitely were not ironic.

To sum up, my argument so far has been a double one. On the one hand, I suggest that there is a deliberate attack on linguistic and literary tradition in The Island of Doctor Moreau, which forms in fact the novel’s hinge.10 Classical literary tradition is condemned as not only untrue, but the actual reverse of the truth, while classical linguistic knowledge is even more contemptuously dismissed as being of mere marginal utility. Meanwhile, the authority of these traditions is replaced by a deliberate argumentative appeal to scientific truth, an appeal which science fiction still continues to make, though we have not as yet been able to frame a convincing literary way of discussing it.11

9 See, for instance, Foster 1961. In this work (which by intention represents generally accepted opinion) we find Gulliver guilty of pride (p. 279), ‘sick and morbid pride’ (p. 244), etc.
10 A point made also by Huntington (1982: 63).
11 This point comes up more than once in the contributions of Greg Benford (a practising scientist as well as science fiction author) to Eaton Conference volumes; see especially Benford 1986: 82–98 and Benford 1992: 223–9.
I turn now to the more general question of ‘contests for authority’ within *Moreau*, and note that these exist on three levels. They are what prevent *Moreau* from becoming a ‘great classic text’, to use Felperin’s phrase above. I will list them in ascending order of current theoretical unacceptability.

One, already discussed, is the text’s dismissive attitude towards previous authors. The text keeps saying, in effect: ‘these authors – Homer, Milton, Swift – they have no authority. They were wrong. as for the “anxiety of influence” – what’s that? I will take these classic texts, as I take the components of their classic language, and reform them without concern for their ruling structures. I will make a literary “pidgin” out of them’. Aggressive indeed! But I think our current literary caste, the contemporary ‘gatekeepers’ of interpretative tradition, might be able to cope with that. As I have said above, they have a rhetoric of ‘challenge’ and ‘disturbance’, ‘novelty’ and ‘parricide’. While it is not always practised as wholeheartedly as it is preached, the rhetoric is at least there to be appealed to.

Much more seriously unacceptable is a ‘contest for authority’ in *Moreau* on a second level. I would like to record here as a piece of evidence that I never noticed this particular ‘contest’ till my very last reading of the text, while it has also as far as I can tell escaped any comment from others. The reason for my blindness is overfamiliarity: this aspect of *Moreau* is written, to use Huntington’s term, from my ancestral *habitus*. The reason for American critics’ silence, I suspect, lies conversely in reluctance or alienation. But the fact is that *Moreau* follows a once-familiar imperialist paradigm, the story about gaining power through prowess and losing it by human weakness. Like the Circe story, this is an ‘island’ tradition, but its definitive works include *The Tempest, Robinson Crusoe, Lord of the Flies*, and a host of other ‘boys’ books’ now forgotten. However, the model for this aspect of *Moreau* is probably Kipling’s story ‘The Man Who Would Be King’ (1888). Wells’s admiration for this is on record, expressed with odd gratuitousness (like his disregard for Moreau’s greek and Latin classics) near the start of chapter 7 of *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899). Here the Sleeper comes upon some puzzling cylinders in the future world he has woken into. After a while he realises that they are labelled in phonetic script, and puzzles out the title of one of them, ‘The Man Who Would Be King’, a story he recalls vividly as ‘one of the best stories in the world’. Kipling’s story tells the tale of two Europeans who decide to conquer a country of their own with rifles, discipline and Freemasonry. They succeed in this,
but fail in the end when one of them is bitten by a girl, and bleeds, showing the natives of the country that they are only men, not gods. The tale is closely followed in Moreau, with Moreau and Montgomery obviously posing as gods to the Beast-Folk, and anxious above all not to let them taste blood. Both stories are parables of imperialism: Moreau may wish to break down the separation between man and beast, but he has every intention of maintaining the separation between rulers and ruled.

This imperial tradition has become increasingly unacceptable during the twentieth century. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that it was a tradition which knew a great deal about contests for authority. Prendick figures within this tradition simply as a failure. Once Moreau and Montgomery are dead, and only he is left, he tries to take up the imperialist role. He sees the Hyena-Swine, and knows ‘His continued life was ... a threat against mine’. Under the imperialist code, it is essential for him to act at once (‘Any decision is better than no decision’), and Prendick knows that much at least:

I was perhaps a dozen seconds collecting myself. Then I cried, ‘Salute! Bow down!’

His teeth flashed upon me in a snarl. ‘Who are you, that I should ...’

And Prendick shoots, but misses. Prendick is a poor imperialist. He knows some of the rules – all of them carefully taught in the literature, or sub-literature, of Wells’s time and my own: never show fear; never hesitate; never give an order you know will not be obeyed; if you give an order and it is not obeyed, instantly punish disobedience; a wrong decision is better than indecision (and so on). But he fails to put them into practice. His boast near the end of the story, in chapter 21, ‘that I held something like a pre-eminence among them’, is only an indication of his failure. A true imperialist is not supposed to be *primus inter pares*, pre-eminent among equals; he is supposed to impose himself as completely different in kind.

The point is that in this particular ‘contest for authority’ the Wells text asks its readers insistently to take the side of the imperialists, and to note Prendick’s failure to live up to that role as simply a failure. This

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12 Symptomatic are some of the apologetic comments made by Philmus – for instance, the condemnation of Wells for ‘bigotry and sexism’ (p. xxii), the readiness on the next page to see *The War of the Worlds* as a ‘satire of imperialism’.
is now totally unacceptable to modern literary culture, and perhaps to political culture also. Is it possible to say that these are merely contemporary stereotypes from 1896, having nothing at all to do with modern science fiction? It may be so. Yet one may also reflect on the American-imperialist, or American-colonialist, rhetoric of Heinlein (discussed in the essay below on ‘the critique of America’); on the space empires of Niven and Pournelle; on the sympathy with failing empires in Poul Anderson’s ‘Flandry’ series; and a dozen other prominent examples, and conclude that there may indeed be something in the ideology or mindset of traditional science fiction that is not as out of touch with the Kipling/Wells tradition as is most of modern literary culture (see Kerslake 2007). If that were to be the case, it would explain a great deal of subliminal critical hostility.

However, it is the third and least easily defined level of ‘contest for authority’ which has done most to keep texts like Moreau out of the ‘hegemonic canon’. This may be approached by reference to Stephen Greenblatt’s book – it is a landmark of ‘the New Historicism’ – *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980). In the first chapter of this he asserts a number of propositions about his classic Renaissance texts and authors:

(a) they are all middle-class rather than aristocratic;

(b) for such figures self-fashioning ‘involves submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self’ – God, Bible, court, colonial or military administration;

(c) ‘self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile’;

(d) the alien is chaotic or demonic, it always resurges, violence used against it turns against the self, etc.

My immediate reaction to this was to think how easily these remarks, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to Wells: lower-class rather than middle-class, self-defining in relation to such aliens as Beast-Folk or Martians, well aware of the rebounding effect of violence (as, for instance, in the fight of the Thunder Child against the Martian war machines in *The War of the Worlds* chapter 17, and so on. But the problem, the real problem for science fiction in its contests with literary authority, lies in item (b) above. It is perfectly clear that Greenblatt feels he can rise superior to the authority images of his Renaissance texts because they are no longer authorities. God, the Bible, the court, colonial or military administration: these authorities are in modern literary culture either deposed, objects of ridicule, or in doubt. Wells’s ‘absolute power or authority’, however,
Hard reading is science: as exemplified in particular by Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley, Wells’s tutor, and Prendick’s, and Moreau’s. These authority-figures, and even more the source of their authority, have not been deposed. It is impossible for literary critics to apply their rhetoric of control and condescension to them with any conviction.

I return to the thought of ‘deepe horrore’ and ‘huge eternall Chaos’. If there is one thing which characterises all schools of modern literary theory, it is their denial of objectivity, and their insistence on chaos. We have: self-referentiality, the text as a purely linguistic construct, the failure of linguistics as a model, human beings as cultural artefacts, literary discourse resting on historical discourse which rests on mythic discourse (‘turtles all the way down’, as has been said), the aporia, the scandal, the mise-en-abîme, the whole deconstruction movement, and all the rest of it. To quote the Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism (1994), not for its pre-eminence but for its deliberate centrality:

If language, metaphor, and consciousness really are structured by difference, then there can be no solid foundation, no fixed point of reference, no authority or certainty, either ontological or interpretive. (Kneale 1994: 187)

Such views have become entirely characteristic of the authority structure of the critical profession, which we may label for short as the MLA. They are impossible to reconcile with the claims for truth-to-fact of much science fiction, and all serious science. This is the last and I feel the most insuperable of the obstacles preventing Moreau, and science fiction with it, from being accepted into the central and authoritative core of literary culture. The deepest horror which such works now create, deeper than that coming from rejection of tradition or acceptance of authority-by-power, stems from their perceived obedience to an authority outside ‘the text’.

It may be that this does not matter. We can easily recognise (even if we are reluctant to admit) that the views of the MLA cut absolutely no ice outside the MLA. Literary discourse has become sharply different from scientific discourse, which is still overwhelmingly characterised by:

– a denotative linguistic system (parodied of course in Swift’s Laputa, but now in practice). It includes but is not confined to mathematics;
– rigorous training in that system, which is now world-wide;
– built-in ‘upgrade capacity’ for the system, so that change is
a permanent contingency, but does not affect the hegemonic structure;

– a uniquely coherent and international interpretive community.

This does not of course mean that there are no disagreements in science, as one can remember by thinking of ‘cold fusion’, the controversy about the HIV theory of AIDS, the struggles of the DNA discoverers to get a hearing, and so on. I am, however, saying that those disagreements take place within a frame accepted by all disputants as objective. The reaction of those literary critics who notice this at all is often mere denial. Felperin’s work cited above declares for instance in a note on pp. 87–8 that:

…it is difficult to argue that alchemy, for example, does not have exactly the same epistemological status as chemistry, however surprising such a view might be to a professional chemist engaged in research.

Doesn’t chemistry, unlike alchemy, ‘work’, one might naively enquire? No, Felperin replies, for:

Alchemists and chemists desire and expect different kinds of results from their activity, and would thus mutually deny the effectiveness of each other’s practice.

The decision as to whether something ‘works’ or not is in short ‘culturally relative’. This is not the impression I get of medieval alchemists from the alchemist in Chaucer’s ‘Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’, who seems passionately to want his science to work in precisely a modern way. But the denial of objectivity, even in science, seems to me now to be compulsive within the literary field, within the belief-structure of the MLA. Among the gatekeepers.13

13 After reading an early version of this article, Dr Joseph Miller, of the Department of Biological Sciences at Stanford, wrote an interesting comment to the effect that doubt and uncertainty have indeed had an effect on the authority of scientific knowledge. ‘The “Men who would be King” (he wrote) ‘have seen their own blood’ and ‘reject the imperial certainty of Newton’. I accept these comments, but feel that doubts about objectivity are still a long way from day-to-day science. Scientific method furthermore strives conscientiously for self-correction, and has institutionalized doubt and challenge from its inception.
If I am correct in what I have said, then the gap between the ‘two cultures’ of humanities and sciences is here total. One might look at the elaborate apparatus for non-commitment of modern critical writing – the inverted commas, the parentheses, the slash marks, the spelling changes, the placing of items sous râture, ‘under erasure’, so they can be read/not-read at the same time. Against that a paradigmatic image is that of the dying Richard Feynman putting the piece of space shuttle gasket in his glass of ice water before the television cameras and saying, ‘nature is not fooled’. He meant that observers, human opinions, bureaucratic procedures, all had no value. If you ignored the nature of the material, it would fail, the shuttle would crash, and its crew would die. When he said that, Feynman was repeating an old theme of science fiction. But I would add that while it was of course tragic that scientific administrators had so readily gone over to the alternative, non-scientific habits of ‘public relations’ and ‘relative values’, it has perhaps this century been even more tragic that politicians and scientific administrators have had to cope with ethical questions without the assistance of any powerful literary or ethical tradition, that tradition having disqualified itself in their eyes by its outdatedness and lack of realism. One may well think of Harry Truman having to cope with the Bomb with habits of mind derived, as H. Bruce Franklin has shown, not from literature or philosophy but from early science fiction and the *Saturday Evening Post* (Franklin 1988: 149–54). The urgent question is not whether the literary profession can somehow succeed in putting science and science fiction back in its (subordinate) place but whether the literary profession can,

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14 I should say that in writing this article I reviewed the old debate over ‘the two cultures’ from C.P. Snow’s 1959 lecture onwards, and was once again struck by the petty critical manoeuvres of the literary spokesmen in it. For a balanced view, see Green 1965. Martin Green, like John Carey (mentioned on p. 4, above), is another former colleague, this time from old days in Birmingham; and, like Carey, is another determined academic contrarian, expressing similarly hostile views of early twentieth-century literary culture in his book *Children of the Sun* (1976).

15 For a full account of this incident, see Gleick 1992: 414–28. Feynman actually wrote in his final report: ‘For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled’.

16 Seen classically in the Tom Godwin story ‘The Cold Equations’ (*ASF* Aug. 1954). A controversy about this can be seen in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, nos. 54, 60, 64 and 66. One might remember also the extensive series of science fiction satires on scientific bureaucracy, a feature of *Astounding/Analog* from at least the early 1960s.
perhaps with a lead from science fiction, succeed in regaining any of
the authority which it has, in the wider world outside its own authority
structures, very largely lost.

The omens are not good. I note among other things Greg Benford’s
uncompromising remark that ‘the most penetrating way to view science
fiction [let alone the wider issues that I have raised] has not yet been
evolved’ (Benford 1992: 228). Yet a review of the history of criticism may
offer one way forward. There was a time when literary studies had an
ambition to become strictly scientific. The great hope was to apply the
quasi-anthropological methods devised to work on pre-literate cultures,
and to adapt them for cultures of full literacy: to move, one might
say, from Propp’s Morphology of the Folk-Tale (trans. 1975) to Todorov’s
Grammaire du Décaméron (1969) and on to a syntaxe littéraire. Roland
Barthes looks back on this period as le rêve euphorique de la scientificité (see
Felperin 1985: 86), and it is of course quite a common theme in science
fiction too: to have a hard social science which can look at a culture,
transcribe the culture into some universally agreed mathematics, and
then say what is going to happen! You may remember the scene at the
start of Foundation, when Hari Seldon, founder of ‘sociohistory’, passes
the slide-rule (!) to his acolyte and tells him to work out the equations
for himself. Well, slide-rules have gone. But we still have no sociohistory;
likewise no syntaxe littéraire; and as for le rêve euphorique de la scientificité,
how are we to translate it: ‘the euphoric dream of … what, Scientology’?
It could be said that if you try and turn science fiction into social reality,
you end up with L. Ron Hubbard. Not an encouraging image.

Nevertheless, I think we can find a more positive self-image; some
points of encouragement; and a more positive critical strategy, which I
will outline briefly. For a better self-image, I think we need some new
terms. One I am happy with is ‘fabril literature’. Fabril is easily defined.
It is the dark, alien, Other of pastoral.

– Pastoral has been with us as a literary mode since at least the time
of Theocritus. So has fabril, I believe, but it has not been named
or recognised.

– Pastoral is about people, in a state of nature, with animals and
plants. Fabril is largely about made things, artefacts.

17 I discuss the term ‘fabril’ in the ‘Introduction’ to The Oxford Book of Science
Fiction Stories (1992). As I say there, the term is not my coinage, but that
of Dr James Bradley of the University of British Columbia, to whose
unpublished writings I also owe the fabril/pastoral opposition, and the
remarks on Joseph’s trade.
Pastoral is of course based on the pastor, the ‘good shepherd’, fabril on the *faber*, the maker: often the blacksmith, the metal-beater, but also the Moreau, the manipulator of biology and even of society.

It is remarkable how *homo faber* has been written out of history, even literary history. What was Jesus’s father’s trade? By well-established tradition we believe he was a carpenter; old iconic irony shows him in his workshop carpentering a cross. Nevertheless, in the Latin Bible he is described as a *faber*, and in the Greek as a *teknon*. The common meaning of the Latin word at least is ‘blacksmith’, while the Old English New Testament (written by men remote from the Mediterranean world of literary culture) quite correctly translated the word as *wyrhta*, that is to say, a ‘wright’. Woodwright, cartwright, shipwright, wainwright – even playwright. A wright is someone who works things: there is a strange suitability in the fact that the pioneers of flight were called Wright, as if technophilia lurked in their genes. One could even translate *wyrhta*, like *faber*, as ‘engineer’. How striking that this has been totally censored out of our official cultural myth, so that Joseph has to be a carpenter! The underlying opposition seems to be: wood / natural / pastoral = good: metal / artificial / fabril = bad. The prejudice which Joseph’s carpentry embodies extends also to a systematic downrating of many aspects of science fiction, not least its continued and collective attempt to raise the status of the wright, the engineer, or the *faber*.

As so often, H.G. Wells seems to have written the ‘paradigm story’ for ‘fabril man’, in this case his 1903 tale ‘The Land Ironclads’, which for that reason alone I selected as the lead story in my 1992 anthology. Wells here opposes two nations at war: one a hardy and pastoral breed, the other a race of townsmen. At the start of the story the former group seem to be well in command of the trench-warfare that has (prophetically) begun: they are tougher, more cunning, better shots, full of imperial virtues. The war correspondent on whom the story centres notes the ugly, cunning, arrogant, masculine face of one of them and thinks it typical. Then the ‘land ironclads’ appear, a prophetic vision (details apart) of the coming of the tank thirteen years later. With a predictable irony, the war correspondent, the nearest we get in the story to a ‘literary man’, immediately changes sympathies as he sees the hardy pastoralists brushed aside by the dispassionate urban tankers, and contemplates a piece to be entitled ‘Manhood versus Machinery’. What he fails to notice, but what Wells leaves as his final word and focus, is that:
the half-dozen comparatively slender young men in blue pyjamas, who were standing about their victorious land ironclad, drinking coffee and eating biscuits, had also in their eyes and carriage something not altogether degraded below the level of a man.

Wells's young tank commanders, in brief, provide an image of ‘fabril man’, which one should note is deliberately unheroic, even unmilitary: the urbanists have been forced into war, but decline to take up its traditions, like wearing smart uniforms and drinking strong liquor, preferring to see it merely as another job to be done. It is striking that Wells should have realised as early as 1903 not only the technical possibilities of trench-warfare and armoured vehicles, but also the immediate sentimental reaction against ‘fabrilism’ of the traditional writer, so marked ever since.

The story which I chose to set against Wells's as the last item in the Oxford collection was David Brin's ‘Piecework’, from Interzone (1992). This has in most obvious ways no resemblance to Wells's at all. It is female-oriented rather than male. It contains no elements of war, or metalwork, or smithcraft. It has a strong mythic strand. Yet it seems to me in a deeper way to help to define the idea of the ‘fabril’. In Brin's story, two women, Io and Perseph, are in the business of renting out their wombs to produce – if they are unskilful, like Perseph – organic industrial materials, or if they are skilful, like Io, creatures not unlike the Beast-Folk, but sentient, with human genes and superhuman powers, capable even of citizenship. The activity of womb-renting of course seems deeply inhuman, and Brin suggests at the start of his story that the two women are in a way in a kind of Hell: Persephone is of course in some myths the queen of Hades. Io, however, is in Greek myth one of the loves of Jupiter, turned into a heifer by his jealous wife Juno: among Io’s animal womb-competitors are the ‘fabricows’. The point about the Io myth, however, is that in it she regained her true shape; while in Brin’s story the heroine Io, evading the plots of her jealous friend, eventually gains the final admission of human status in her world – permission to bear a human child.

What this story shares with Wells’s is the assertion that true humanity resides not in following traditional patterns but in having the skill and character to dominate a new technology: a physical one in Wells, a biological one in Brin, in each case rejected by one side or character, embraced and used by the other. Both authors also feint cunningly at the reader’s expectations, making it seem as if sympathy should go to the traditional side and playing up the horrific aspects of the new technology, before insisting finally that all technologies remain in the
hands of their creators, if the creators (unlike Dr Frankenstein)\(^\text{18}\) have the will to use them.

Both authors seem to know, in fact, that readers will not like their central characters, for one reason or another! This trait is taken to a further extreme in a story included near the middle of the Oxford anthology, Larry Niven’s ‘Cloak of Anarchy’, from *Analog* 1972. The story here need not concern us. It is enough to say that its image of *homo faber*, an especially clear and detailed one, is also a very clear description of what is now called a ‘nerd’. Ron Cole is ‘an artist and an inventor’. He cannot, however, remember anyone’s name:

Ron Cole had better things to think about than what name belonged with whom. A name was only a tag and a conversational gambit ... A signal. Ron had developed a substitute.

Into a momentary gap in the conversation he would say, ‘Look at this’, and hold out – miracles.

He works, in fact, with things rather than people. The story shows him to be irresponsible, stubborn, poor at understanding people, a bad politician – not, however, necessarily wrong. He offers yet another thoughtful image of ‘fabril man’, in which as usual the reader is offered the chance of rejecting him in favour of more normal images of humanity, but also invited to consider whether, as with Wells’s ‘slender young men’ or Brin’s Io, he does not have something in him that ought also to be part of a balanced human whole.

My main point here, however, is not to suggest that science fiction should be seen just as a branch of ‘fabril literature’ and interpreted solely in that light. I do mean to suggest that the literary terminology we have inherited from antiquity is inadequate, and that we should not hesitate to create our own, perhaps especially if that terminology can be seen not just as un- but as anti-traditional. I mean to suggest also that science fiction is often engaged in the process of creating new human images of authority, which often seem profoundly anti-authoritative, engineers, host-mothers, or nerds. However, my main point is this: in spite of my careful selections of first and last stories, I suspect that much the same points as those I have made here could have been made from

\(^{\text{18}}\) It is just possible that some such thought as this may have led Wells to delete the reference to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* from his first draft of *Moreau*, see n. 5, above. Despite Brian Aldiss’s claims for it as a progenitor of science fiction, *Frankenstein* is more convinced of the dangers than the potentials of a new technology.
any collection of thirty or so science fiction stories chosen by anyone. Certainly I could have reached much the same conclusions by discussing, for instance, not the Wells – Niven – Brin sequence from my collection but the stories by Schmitz, Clarke, Sheldon and McAuley. Nor were the stories selected to make such points, the points emerge seemingly inevitably from the stories. It is this belief which leads me to my final suggestion, which is about developing a more positive critical strategy for the special case of science fiction.

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I begin with the thought that science fiction is, to a degree unparalleled in modern literature, an intertextual mode. It has often seemed to me as I have read it over the years to be more like a classic folk-tale collection than a great literary tradition. The texts borrow from each other with astonishing speed, vitality, competitiveness and freedom. Yet they are all written by individual authors, nearly all of them perfectly self-conscious and articulate, well able to ridicule fashionable critical attempts to see them as mere clusters of social forces. In spite of its ‘intertextuality’, in no field is the author less dead as faber, as producer; or less important as ‘authority’, as rule-giver.

In this field, if nowhere else, I think there is a chance of reviving the dead project of scientificité littéraire, literary scientificity, or, to de-etymologise it, literary knowledge-making. This would be a search for knowledge, note, not based on analysis alone of ‘the great classic texts’, but on setting individual texts within their paradigms, paradigms which would be formed (just like the morphological paradigms of dead languages) by looking at a lot of individually non-significant examples, as I have done in an extremely sketchy way above: to see what was shared and what was not. Could the conclusions then drawn be turned outwards on texts which are not science fiction? I would like to think they could, but even if they could not I think the aspiration would be valuable. Near the start of this chapter I suggested that the science fiction field was (in academic circles) like the outsider on the fringe of the cocktail party. Another model might be that of the children’s playground. Anthropologists of childhood report that in most areas of fashion – say, popular music – one function of fashion is to exclude those junior. Suppose that, at a certain time, for seventeen-year-olds, the in-group is U2. Eventually the fifteen-year-olds find out about this and take up the fashion. Fifteen-year-old approaches seventeen-year-old and says ‘I like U2 too’. But the seventeen-year-old says: ‘Really? We’re
all into Nirvana now’. The word passes down. The thirteen-year-olds find out about U2. The fifteen-year-olds find out about Nirvana. But already the seventeen-year-olds have gone over to some other group. This model has a certain similarity to critical fashion: the worst thing to be is a ‘Me-Too-er’. By the time you’ve found out what to say ‘Me Too’ to, it’s passé. Better to find what suits your own genius. My own feeling is that science fiction is the field for structural, paradigmatic, intertextual studies, based on a coherent belief structure, and tolerant of a ‘fabril’ tradition resolutely and deliberately excluded by the literary and rhetorical interpretive community – often a Latin-based interpretive community – since at least late Classical times.

What I have said accounts, I think, for some questions often raised in discussions of science fiction. Why are some science fiction authors acceptable in literary circles and some not? The acceptable ones are so because they do not pose the challenge of truth-to-nature to our literary authorities. Why are some authors – E.M. Forster, C.S. Lewis, Huxley, Orwell, Doris Lessing – given disproportionate space in syllabuses and textbooks? Because they are easily assimilable (sometimes against their own will) to established ‘gatekeeper’ paradigms. Why are there continuing debates within the field about ‘hard science fiction’ and ‘Cold Equations’? Because these bring in the issue of objective truth too aggressively.

What we have to face, meanwhile, are ‘strategies of neutralisation’, or, to use Howard Hendrix’s term, ‘cultural sanctioning mechanisms’ (Hendrix 2002: 143), backed by the full force of office and faculty politics. We are increasingly offered tolerance, as long as we ‘know our place’. This is an offer I find easy to reject. It would also be open to us to pursue the strategy of claiming that science fiction falls into the Foucaultian category of ‘subjugated knowledge’, as indeed I have hinted. But one should say in a more robust way that science fiction is only subjugated in literary academia; and literary academia is subjugated in every other respect: in popular esteem, in its effect on the national or international culture, increasingly in student enrolments and in pay scales. By contrast, science fiction continues to flourish like a hardy weed, and to move out from its literary in-group into the mass media. It is open to us to regard ourselves as on the margins of a marginal group (literary academia, or, if one prefers, the MLA) or near the centre of a much more central group, our fellow-citizens as a whole. Our own personal ‘contest for authority’, then, is eminently still there to be won.