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On the Nature of Portals in Fantasy Literature

ABSTRACT
This paper aims to analyze the nature of portal in fantasy literature. The portal is at the heart of mapping and building imaginary objects, creatures and situations that configure the alternative space. The symbolic journey a character makes through the portal is the matrix of fantasy fictions. Beyond the arguments that aim at revealing the structures of imaginary worlds, there are some questions that still need answers: What is a portal? A frontier, a process or maybe both? Are we talking about physical space, or rather about an internal and abstract dimension?

KEYWORDS
Fantasy Literature; Imagination; Portal; Border; Secondary World.

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What is a portal? What role does it play in fantasy literature? Using the portal as a theoretical lens, could we access a new perspective on this kind of literature? What is the rabbit hole through which Alice descends in Wonderland, or the wardrobe where the Pevensie brothers enter Narnia? Can these intermediary spaces take on a conceptual and cultural importance, beyond their thematic function of transporting characters into alternative worlds?

I tackled this issue, as a first step, in my study entitled “Intermediary Spaces in Fantasy Literature”[1]. There I focused on tracing some of the main directions from which one can start conceiving a morphology of space in fantasy literature, despite not having analyzed the entire theoretical nature of the portal. On the one hand during the Renaissance scarred by a tromendous censorship of the imaginary, the magical thinking was a metaphorical portal towards the ocult world of the spirits. On the other hand the concept of portal was refined in Romanticism by transferring the fantastic from the methaphysical to the psychological level. Hence, the romantic double is a symptomatic portal opening the human spiritual abyss and the unconscious[2]. In the same study, I showed how the portal can display a metaphorical and conceptual function next

to a thematic and literal one. The metaphorical and conceptual trait is showcased in the way in which researchers like C.N. Manlove, Gary K. Wolfe, Brian Attebery etc. have defined fantasy literature as a territory of the impossible that violates and restructures the laws of reality[3].

In the radical dichotomy between a consistent (possible) reality and alternative worlds (supernatural and impossible) we encounter a theoretical border, a red thin line, that can be difficult to cross. But what if we were to understand such a frontier as a metaphorical portal? Why should the perceived reality and the impossible one be opposed to one another and what is the structure of this settled frontier between them? Aren't thematic portals in fantasy fiction a mirror and a sign of the limits that researchers touch upon when dealing with this type of fiction? I am convinced that if we were to take the thematic portals (*id est* intermediary spaces) as a starting point, we can find more arguments for a complex understanding of fictional worlds (fantastic or not). These worlds are related and at the same time separated from the actual world by a metaphorical portal. In other words, a close analysis of the passages towards the fantastic world will not only ensure the proper concepts that enable a different perspective on the frontiers (and passages) between actuality and fiction, but also assure a better understanding of the relationship between the actual world and the imaginary constructions inside of it (heterotopias).

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, by C. S. Lewis, is the second book[4] in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and contains one of the most famous portals in fantasy literature: the wardrobe (maybe only the rabbit hole in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can surpass in fame this well-known piece of furniture). The novel tells the story of the Pevensie brothers (Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter), that enter Narnia through a wardrobe and are guided by the lion Aslan. They all join forces in order to destroy the dystopia imposed by Jadis, the White Witch, and, thus, to reestablish the paradisiac nature of Narnia. Lucy, the youngest of the Pevensies, is the first to enter the land of Aslan and this is how C. S. Lewis describes the scene:

> Looking into the inside, she saw several coats hanging up – mostly long fur coats. There was nothing Lucy liked so much as the smell and feel of fur. She immediately stepped into the wardrobe and got in among the coats and rubbed her face against them, leaving the door open, of course, because she knew that it is very foolish to shut oneself into any wardrobe. Soon she went further in and found that there was a second row of coats hanging up behind the first one. It was almost quite dark in there and she kept her arms stretched out in front of her so as not to bump her face into the back of the wardrobe. She took a step further in – then two or three steps – always expecting to feel woodwork against the tips of her fingers. […] Next moment she found that what was rubbing against her face and hands was no longer soft fur but something hard and rough and even prickly. "Why, it is just like branches of trees!" exclaimed Lucy. […] A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night-time with snow under her feet and snowflakes falling through the air[5].

C.S. Lewis does not offer any rational explanations that would decrypt and trace this miraculous crossing through the wardrobe. We encouter such rational explanations especially in *science fiction*, a literature that sets the stage for a distant future

and depicts alternative worlds as a product of technological progress. These worlds are mapped and accessed through scientifical portals, after the latter's rational mechanism is deciphred. But this is not the case in the scene described by C. S Lewis. There is a brief and mysterious account of the moment in which Lucy enters Narnia and thus turning the wardrobe from an ordinary object, with a specific utility in the actual world (see the image of the mothball), into a magical portal. Hence, the sense of wonder, in this case, is obtained through overlapping two distinct features of the wardrobe: the first nature is the rational one, characterizing an object of domestic utility, while the other attribute is magical and irrational, turning the wardrobe into a point of passage towards Narnia. The narrative perspective and Lucy's reaction display the way in which the two antithetic traits of the wardrobe interact and communicate with one another. Lucy crosses and opens the wardrobe like any other known space. Throughout the novel, Lucy is the only character that exhibits a fundamental magical thinking and never questions the existence of Narnia or that of the lion Aslan. The passage through the wardrobe is narrated like a meaningless account. What we witness in fact is how Lewis enhances the miraculous feature of the portal. There is a symmetry in the images that hallmark the contradictions of the two worlds intertwined by the portal, because the rational (actual) nature of the wardrobe is mirrored and reversed in its irrational (magical) part: the moth powder (an image of a rather aged order) is replaced in Narnia by snow; the fur coats (images of death) disappear in Narnia to become living and fabulous creatures; the tree turned into the wardrobe is actually a symmetrical image of the pine tree; in the room left behind by Lucy, daylight appears while Narnia is already engulfed by night. Hence, I will focus on three stategies that generate the sense of wonder and recreate the magical feature of the portal.

The first is the narrative strategy and serves C. S. Lewis to recount, from a familiar and rational point of view, a miraculous happening (the path through the wardrobe, towards another world). The magic of the wardrobe persists, as the narrator describes Lucy's journey toward Narnia, without turning it into an extraordinary voyage. The second strategy consists of turning an object that has a precise utility into a vehicle that carries one into the Other World. This "becoming" of the wardrobe is depicted authentically by juxtaposing its two main features (a simple object, but also a passage towards an unknown world). The third strategy enables a symmetry of images that show a reverse/ mirroring of the initial space in the alternative world. Such symmetries provide a slow and imperceptible crossing (for reader and character alike) into Narnia. Being similar from a denotative point of view (see the moth powder versus the snow), these images either recieve radical and antithetic connotations (the fur coats versus the creatures of the lion Aslan), or compose a symbolical and common map of the two worlds, related solely through the wardrobe (the moth powder is a sign of a rational and enclosed world, and can be placed in Narnia on a symbolic level with the eternal winter created by Jadis the witch).

Therefore, all these narrative and imaginary strategies turn the wardrobe into a magical portal and mediate, using a familiar framework, the way in which characters enter and connect to the alternative world. Thus, the sense of wonder appears through rational and precise structures that grant to an object (wardrobe) unreal functions (the wardrobe as a passage towards the Other World). But the object will take on these imaginary traits in such a natural manner and will ultimately reproduce the illusion of

reality. Hence, characters and readers alike believe that the wardrobe really opens an alternative world. In other words, a possible object (wardrobe), having a clearly defined meaning in the actual world (we do keep clothing inside), recieves an imaginary meaning (the wardrobe is the pathway towards Narnia). Moreover, these two meanings do not appear in contrast or in an antithetical relation, but rather display continuity and dialogue (the wardrobe *can also be* a vehicle towards other worlds). This strategy characterizes the entire production of imaginary objects in fantasy literature and is, in fact, a two-step action.

Firstly, the possible object recieves an imaginary meaning or one is transferred from an other possible object (the wardrobe turns into a vehicle). At this level, the effort of producing imaginary objects is purely combinatorial, as the sentence *Lucy enters through the wardrobe into Narnia* lacks a context to be credible. Fantasy literature is not a figment of the imagination and does not chaotically combine possible structures (as it is the case in surrealist literature, for e.g.). The initial meaning and the newly acquired one will enter a dialogue, through a proper narrative context and after the possible object recieves an imaginary meaning. On this second level, the wardrobe is at the same time a piece of furniture and a gateway towards an unknown realm. Furthermore, Lucy and the reader are persuaded that the wardrobe will keep both its meanings (see how C. S. Lewis describes the passage towards Narnia suggests this). To be more precise, the way in which an object recieves imaginary meanings is told as an ordinary and veridical fact, but we actually witness a subtle subversion of logical reality. This is how magical portals are created in other famous fantasy novels, like the rabbit hole in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or the picture in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), by C.S. Lewis. These are portals that overlay, in a credible narrative context, the possible object (the rabbit hole and the picture) and their imaginary meanings (the rabbit hole and the picture are gateways to Wonderland and Narnia), so that ordinary objects are transformed into structures with fantastic traits. The magical feature of portals does not solely involve ascribing to a rabbit hole or a picture the quality of being a passage towards the alternative world, but also how such familiar objects of reality are percieved as vehicles towards other worlds. Such an effort awards consistency and autonomy to the alternative worlds that, despite containing imaginary objects, inexistent in the actual world, can be built on a system of veridical relationships between these particular elements.

George MacDonald, one of the first fantasts, showcases a similar understanding of the consistency and the autonomy of fantasy worlds: "[the] world once invented, the highest law that comes next into play is, that there shall be a harmony between the laws by which the new world has begun to exist; and in the process of his creation, the inventor must hold by this laws. The moment he forgets out of them, he makes the story, by its own postulates, incredible"[6]. Just as reality functions according to rigorous laws that deliver and nurture its consistency, the fantasy world must be woven and guided by its own internal laws that make it credible and not merely a product of fancy. By mentioning these laws that deliver the bone structure of fantasy fiction, MacDonald comes close to the way in which imaginary objects are created by juxtaposing their multiple possible meanings. Hence, the internal law of fantasy fiction generates familiar frameworks for impossible objects and events. The latter feeds on possible structures that are transformed, combined and continued into new scenarios,

without altering their original meaning. To quote, in this respect, Brian Attebery: "Fantasy invokes wonder by making the impossible seem familiar and the familiar seem new and strange. When you put a unicorn in a garden, the unicorns gains solidity and the garden takes on enchantment"[7].

The internal law of fantasy fiction enters a reciprocal and direct relationship with the production of imaginary objects, as I previously mentioned. In portal-quest fantasy fiction[8], the first imaginary object to display such laws is, of course, the portal. Nothing seems to disturb the quasi-realist narration, that is until one of the characters goes through a portal. But, in the moment in which an ordinary object is turned, in a credible manner, into a portal, the internal laws of the fantasy world is put into action. Hence, for example, Tumnus the fawn with his umbrella, the first creature Lucy meets in Narnia, will look normal to her. The law of the fantasy world is, therefore, reflected in the way in which an ordinary object becomes a magical portal. This path is also contained in the relationship between the primary and the secondary imagination, as Coleridge has shown. The secondary imagination will reshape the creation of the primary one:

> The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead[9].

The secondary imagination involves a process that enables the recreation of a possible object (as an element of the "real" world) in fantasy literature as an imaginary object (and, thus, impossible). The secondary imagination, through a conscient and deliberate creative act, "dissolves," "diffuses," and "dissipates" the primary functions of objects. Coleridge sees in the secondary imagination the process through which all literature is created. How secondary imagination operates in the portal-quest fantasy fiction is visible, first and foremost, in building the magical portal. As an agent of human perception, primary imagination maps the existing nature of the object, even before its rendering as a portal towards other worlds. While hiding in the wardrobe, Lucy's perception on the piece of furniture is filtered by the primary imagination that integrates the meaning and the nature of the wardrobe in the system of her known reality. Afterwards, the primary imagination is continued and overtaken by the secondary one that will award the wardrobe a previously inexistent nature, without severing the meaning given by the primary imagination. This meaning will enter a dialogue with the wardrobe's second nature (vehicle carrying towards an unknown world) and will create the sense of wonder. Hence, the wardrobe is the place where the primary imagination and secondary one interfere, so that the portal reflects the neccessary mechanism that delivers imaginary objects in fantasy literature. In other words, the way in which an ordinary object turns into an imaginary one depends on the manner in which a wardrobe, a rabbit hole and a picture become magical portals, without ever losing

their primary meaning. On the contrary, the primary and secondary meaning of the object become one and contribute decisively to the emergence of the sense of wonder. The shadow of Peter Pan[10], for example, despite being coiled up and placed by Mrs. Darling in a drawer, does not showcase a sense of wonder through the loss of the practical meaning of what a shadow really is, but rather through the way in which the depiction of a familiar context attaches the meaning of another possible object (a fabric that can be coiled up). Furthermore, despite knowing it is a shadow (on the level of primary imagination), Mrs. Darling percieves Peter Pan's shadows as a piece of clothing and puts it into the drawer (on the level of the secondary imagination) and, thus, constructing a credible irreality.

That is how fantasy literature spawns the sense of wonder. Fantasy literature transfers on objects and things extrinsic traits, but keeps their primary (possible) nature in consubstantiality, verosimilitude and familiarity with their second (impossible) nature. Hence, fantasy literature does not oppose reality, but overlays in a rational manner multiple forms of reality and numerous, incompatible functions of objects. Fantasy is reality as a broken mirror finding its coherence and consistency in this sort of fragmentation. The fantast will not remake the broken glass in order to solve a puzzle, while trying to recreate an original image, but will suture all incompatible and incongruent pieces together, in order to concieve new structures that have their own essence, as it is the case for the imaginary objects, creatures and situations. Such fictional worlds, in J.R.R. Tolkien's own words, are a product of the Sub-creation that reassambles images and concepts of the real world[11]. Tolkien sheds a different light on the relationship established by Coleridge between primary and secondary imagination, especially by distinguishing between the primary world – as a product of the divine creation – and the secondary world – built by the Sub-creator (these concepts are often used and discussed by researchers of fantasy literature). Close to George MacDonald's arguments, that touch upon the necessity of an internal law granting consistency and credibility to the fantastic world, Tolkien argues that the Sub-creator must build the secondary world as such, that it can be percieved as real. This perception is linked to the Secondary Belief and presupposes that the reader believes in the fantastic world, as he or she believes in the primary one.

All these standpoints above can be brought together if we peel off any mystical shell and investigate the poetics of fantasy fictions. The latter is synthesized in the way in which objects, characters and their connections in the secondary world are created, animated and activated by an initial crossing through portals – aspects I discussed in the current paper. Such a perspective places the portal at the heart of mapping and building imaginary objects, creatures and situations that configure the alternative space. The symbolic journey a character makes through the portal (from the primary imagination to the secondary one, from the *ex-nihilo* creation to the Sub-creation, from a primary to a secondary world) is the matrix of fantasy fictions. Beyond these arguments that aim at revealing the structures of imaginary worlds, there are some questions that still need answers: What is a portal? A frontier, a process or maybe both? Are we talking about physical space, or rather about an internal and abstract dimension?

Potential answers can be found in Thomas Pavel's theory on possible worlds. Despite not having used and analyzed the concept of portal, *per se*, or the manner in which such a term can help redefine imaginary world, Thomas Pavel offers a theoretical framework that can be extendend,

reshaped and reformed, if we apply the concept of the portal. His paper "The Borders of Fiction"[12], that was later modified an integrated in his book *Fictional Worlds*[13], exhibits the distinction between profane reality and the mythical world by:

> [Describing] the ontology of societies which use myths, one needs at least two different ontological levels: the profane reality, characterized by ontological paucity and precariousness, and a mythical level, ontologically self-sufficient, unfolding in a privileged space and in a cyclical time. Gods and heroes inhabited the sacred space; but this space was not seen as fictional; if anything, it was ontologically superior, endowed with *more* truth[14].

Fantasy literature contains imaginary worlds created through revisiting and recycling classical myths. These worlds are, on the one hand, complex and sophisticated constructions, built on the narrative structures of the fairy tale. On the other hand, they forge new myths (starting with old ones) and reach a form of sacrality. For example, the land of Narnia is a hybrid, a mixture of ancient greek, celtic and christian myths that manufacture an original myth, the one of the lion Aslan – and all characters firmly believe in the truth and in the functionality of this myth. Furthermore, the relationship Thomas Pavel identifies between the profane reality that is ontologically precarious, and the mythical level, ontologically superior and having more truth, is similar to the connection between the primary and the secondary world Tolkien thackles in "On Fairy Stories." The secondary world (accessed through magical thinking) is charged with a higher degree of ontology then the primary world. The latter is temporary abandoned by the characters with the main purpose of taking a journey of initiation towards other realms. Thomas Pavel calls the crossing from a profane reality to a mythical level – in Tolkien's words from the primary to the secondary (sacred) world – mythification:

> The transferring of an event across the border of legend can be labeled *mythification*. The distant kinship between mythification and what the Russian formalists called defamiliarization is worth noticing: for what else is it to project an event into a mythical territory if not to put it into a certain kind of perspective, to set it at a comfortable distance, to elevate it into a higher plane, so that it may easily be contemplated and understood?[15]

From this point of view, the portal is the actual process of mythification, as it transferrs the primary world into the secondary (sacred) one. For example, the wardrobe as an imaginary space is the projection of an internal portal that mythifies characters. The Pevensies, ordinary pupils in the primary world, are mythified in the land of Aslan. Hence, the mythifying portal is a pathway towards accessing higher planes of consciousness[16] and portal-quest fantasy fiction involves crossings, transitions, negotiation and experience[17] – stages present in a journey of initiation into the imaginary world.

The portal is not only the mythification process itself, but also an open border between rational and magical thinking, between I and non-I, and between conscious and the unconscious. The portal designates but also erases all disjunctions and contradictions that exist between two worlds different in nature, as it will dismantle any similar manifestations between the characters' primary and imaginary identity. On the level of building secondary worlds, the

manner in which normal objects and spaces are turned into a magical portal uncovers the way in which all imaginary objects, characters and situations are shaped in fantasy literature. But as an internal structure, the portal carries all characters into secondary worlds that are internalized through magical thinking. These worlds guide, on a mythical level, unconscious fears and reformulate characters. The wardrobe is, in the end, a projection of an internal portal Lucy has to approach and enter, in order to find the land of Narnia hidden inside of her.

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Notes

[1] Marius Conkan, "Intermediary Spaces in Fantasy Literature," in Iulian Boldea (ed.), *Studies on literature, discourse and multicultural dialogue*, Târgu-Mureş, Arhipelag, 2013.

[2] See Corin Braga, *10 studii de arhetipologie*, Polirom, 2006.

[3] See Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 2: „Any narrative which includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law – that is fantasy."; Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, New York, Methuen, 1984, p. xii: „By fantasy I mean the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal."; C.N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975; Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986, p. 38-40.

[4] *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) is the first published book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series; following the

storyline this book is the second part, being anticipated by *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) where the genesis of Narnia is described.

[5] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Harper Collins e-books, 2008, p. 6-7.

[6] George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893), Introduction from *The Light Princess and other Fairy Tales.* Web: http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/ortsx14.htm, accessed on 20. 02. 2014.

[7] Brian Attebery, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[8] Farah Mendlesohn, in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, identifies and discusses four types of fiction present in fantasy literature: portal-quest, immersive, intrusive and liminal. Portal-quest fantasy fiction (a concept taken from Medlesohn for this study) relies on portals in order to access fantastic world.

[9] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, The Project Gutenberg EBook, 2004, p. 194.

[10] See J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan şi Wendy*, Translated by Ovidiu Constantinescu and Andrei Bantaş, Chişinău, Prut Internaţional, 2008.

[11] See J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," Web: http://public.callutheran.edu/~brint/-Arts/Tolkien.pdf, accessed on 20. 02. 2014.

[12] Thomas Pavel, "The Borders of Fiction," in *Poetic Today*, Vol. 4, No. 1/1983, p. 83-88.

[13] Idem, *Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986.

[14] Idem, "The Borders of Fiction", p. 85.

[15] Idem, *Fictional Worlds*, p. 77.

[16] See Lori M. Campbell, *Portals of Power*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2010, p. 6: the portals are „all those living beings, places, and magical objects that act as agents for a hero(ine) to travel between worlds and/ or to access higher planes of consciousness."

[17] See Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy,* Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2008.