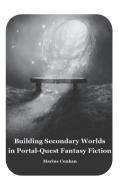Marius Conkan, *Building Secondary Worlds in Portal-Quest Fantasy Fiction*, Interdisciplinary Discourses, 2020

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OF GATEWAYS, RABBIT HOLES AND WARDROBES – A STUDY IN THE POROUS FRONTIERS OF SECONDARY WORLDS

Within the inner circles of scholars who have become well versed in the warps and woofs of fantasy literature, it has long been established that the act of tackling the genre from a theoretical angle constitutes a deceptively strenuous task. This axiom, of course, runs contrary to the arguments of those who seek to infantilize fantasy and brand it with the derogatory sigil of "children's literature". Many of these wayward indictments, which persist anachronistically to this day, have their origin in 19th century reactions to the nascent genre. More than capable of surmounting this often unexpected (and woefully still persistent) hurdle, Marius Conkan's book *Building Secondary Worlds in Portal-Quest Fantasy Fiction* proposes an enticing foray into the infrastructure of fantasy worldbuilding and – more specifically – the function of the portal, as a trope which remains central to the entire genre and its ontological semantics.

The scope of the entire volume boasts an impressive amplitude, despite its relative brevity. While not branching off into the perilous realm of overanalysis, it nevertheless compartmentalizes its subject matter rigorously and amalgamates its core tenets with other interrelated and equally alluring tangents. Although dealing with a general topic that could be warily deemed "platonic" in nature, Marius Conkan's research technique and method of composition present themselves as markedly Aristotelian. Compounding diverging opinions regarding the taxonomy and interpretation

of fantasy literature, the author eventually showcases a dazzling array of historical approaches to the genre (as well as towards its intrinsic mechanisms and patterns of emergence).

This is accomplished via the convergence of two trajectories, namely an exegetical direction harbored by the various theoreticians who have laid the groundwork in investigating the genre, paired with a complementary avenue which encompasses the systematic explanations offered up by actual fantasy writers and worldbuilders. Regarding the more academic side of this spectrum, both contemporary authors and more well-established ones – such as Mikhail Bakhtin or Michel Foucault – are given equal footing when addressing the validity of their conclusions. As far as Bakhtin and his key-concept of the chronotope is concerned, however, Marius Conkan tenuously distances himself from the complete assimilation of the theorist's traditional phylogeny into his own approach to fantasy literature. Conversely, the author gravitates more towards Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias and how some of its inherent presuppositions can be connected to another method of imbuing fantasy worldbuilding with renewed meaning.

Representing the other end of the spectrum, one can find Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, who is cited with his metaphysical differentiation between the two extant types of imagination. Alongside him, J.R.R. Tolkien (and his own theories on how mythopoeic artefacts may be forged), is also brought forth as a figure of authority. The concatenation of these occasionally disparate sources need not deter the potential reader. Their reciprocal

accommodation lends to the formation of a cohesive whole, with the various segments flowing seamlessly in succession as one system is juxtaposed to the next.

As far as the historical roots of fantasy literature (along with those of the portal trope) are concerned, one can find the same penchant for meticulous description and summarization in the author's discourse. Tracing one of its primary sources to an era greatly preceding the advent of 19th century romanticism and folklore, Marius Conkan identifies some of the timeliest anticipations of the genre in the magical and syncretic aspirations of the Renaissance. It is in the metaphysical frameworks of thinkers and writers hailing from this age that we discover a set of valiant efforts to reconcile the datum of empiricism with the indelible temptation of self-transcendence and a perniciously unshackled brand of imagination.

The portal, viewed as an archetype that engenders a potentially radical metamorphosis on both an individual level and a generalized, cultural one, remains the central axis around which the auxiliary theorizations posited by the volume coalesce. Defined in its broadest sense, it is not only seen as a functional ontological bridge between the dichotomous spaces that are so commonplace in fantasy settings (and, more specifically, within the portal-quest subgenre) but also as a font of personal existential incubation, in which one's identity may be torn asunder and subsequently renewed. Stepping through a portal, the fantasy protagonist allows himself to be deconstructed, as far as their preeminent sense of identity is concerned, and recomposed in accordance with the new ontological coordinates they encounter. The same

holds true for the reader of fantasy, as they too temporarily depart from the empirical world and embark on their own quest of meaningful attainment.

By virtue of this dialectic between the primary world and its secondary counterparts, cultural values, a particularly solidified sense of oneself, deontological presuppositions, all can be potentially elevated to the status of a mythical sort of non-locality. It is in this sacred space that the protagonist (along with the reader) may be immersed, changed and primed for a more sagacious return to their reality of origin, which they will now have the power of confronting or revising.

Conjointly, the author is well-aware of the fact that one cannot divorce fantasy literature – and especially those works of fantasy specifically geared towards a younger audience – from the surprisingly convoluted concerns of didacticism and moral edification. Moreso than in the case of science-fiction, for instance, this central node of axiological preoccupation is naturally made all the more precarious, precisely by virtue of children's fantasy literature being axiomatically obliged to play a part in shaping its (often juvenile) readers' as yet unformed or rudimentary ethical compasses.

As follows, the simplistic antinomy between "good and evil" finds itself nuanced in the direction of contending for its viable utility as a pedagogical instrument. Naturally, this view places Marius Conkan's stance at a balanced midpoint between the somewhat reductionist conclusions of both authors such as Neil C. Robinson, who boldly asserts that the ethical dialectic typical of the fantasy genre brings forth "an archetype of conflicting good and evil

which (…) is incompatible with the complexities of human psychology"[1] and others such as Richard Mathews, for whom, within the confines of the same genre-specific parameters, "our human ability to imagine evil is (...) central to our capacity to work for good".[2]

While aiming to favor neither extreme, Marius Conkan nevertheless draws his own arguments not from the realist deconstructions adduced by rationalist thinkers, but from the works of those apologists of modern literary fantasy who appraise it as a medium through which mythical patterns of thought can reassert themselves with full ontological potency.

Far from deteriorating or appearing disingenuous, it is precisely this approach and openness to heterogeneity that elevates the volume's intellectual authenticity. While understandably disagreeing (given his own choice of methodology and axiomatic foundations) with some of the more "extreme" positions harbored by authors such as C. Neil Robinson, Conkan's taxonomy of fantasy and science-fiction dystopias, for instance, is but one case which provides us (by way of induction) with a bird's eye view of his volume's preferred and overarching theoretical framework – one which engenders a commendable capacity to, as it were, entertain opposing conclusions or positions without feeling obliged to award them any homogenized parity in terms of ontological validation.

It does, indeed, seem that one of the book's major shortcomings derives specifically from this propensity towards the encyclopedic amassment and exhibition of divergent theoretical frameworks. Granted, one need not derogate any such inherently salutary attempts by default, but rather the

implications of having them be arranged in a dazzling procession, compounded by a clear-headed erudition, while simultaneously depriving their concatenation of any substantial underlying filigree of personal exegetical prospects to counterbalance or complement them on equal footing.

As much as Marius Conkan remains adept at gathering and contrasting an impressive set of theoretical models, the observant reader will not be left unburdened by the notion that the author's primary engagement with his subject matter may be, on occasion, overtaken by a voluntary endeavor to put together a veritable cabinet of curiosities comprised of various dissonant hermeneutical viewpoints. Following from this, the proverbial pattern of warp and woof that accompanies the intermingling of external and original exegetical matrices, by way of leaning preferentially towards the side of the former, remains somewhat unbalanced, and all the more disappointingly so in those fragments in which it is transparent that the author's capacity to autonomously delineate his own demonstrations is primed for emergence.

Marius Conkan is clearly well-versed in his chosen sphere of scholarly thought and seems more than adequately prepared to collate his own theorizations with the multitude of external (and, at times, extraneous) ones he seems so determined and enthusiastic to showcase. By way of this infrastructural timidity, an overly-analytical critic may discern the deeper presence of a set of idiosyncrasies which define the methodological habits typically employed and favored by burgeoning, yet studious scholars. Among these inclinations, acting as keystone, one can identify an understandably tepid sort of hesitation that

is apt to hinder the self-assured assertion of a young researcher's own ideas, but also inhibit the arrogant solipsism that may unfortunately taint the praxis of their elder peers.

Herein lies one of Marius Conkan's hidden strengths as an aspiring scholar in the field of comparative literature or, equally, in the wider and more convoluted sphere of comparative studies of the imaginary. Walking across the razor's edge, as it were, his willingness to engage in dialectical analysis invariably paints an accurate picture of the shifting paradigmatic state of affairs which currently permeates the ongoing discussion pertaining to the matter of possible worlds, their ontological competition with vestigially positivist notions of a primary or empirical counterpart, as well as their ethical or metaphysical functions in acting out their *a priori* role as the architectonic bedrock of fantasy literature.

Guided through a tattered landscape of ideation that sporadically bears no negligible resemblance to a battlefield, the reader is presented with a panorama of competing models still fraught with inexhaustible contradictions, dissensions or incompatible points of acumen.

While diplomatically attired in the outward trappings of evenhandedness, the axis on which the book spins its demonstrative threads is bolstered by an implicit arsenal of core deontological tenets which, alongside the author's diffident penchant for speculative interpretation, proves to be not only expectantly eccentric (and pleasantly so), but also effective in coalescing the exhortations of the volume's second half. Keen on fully expanding their markedly autonomous nature, it is these less restrained passages of authentic

speculation that succeed in constructing a sincere apology of the more unfettered and phantasmagorical aspects of classical fantasy literature. These constitutive elements (among which the mytheme of the "portal" occupies a privileged position) are, of course, taken as part and parcel of the entire gamut of archetypal fantasy world-building, finding themselves validated alongside the ultimately moralizing architecture of the genre's indispensable symbolical geographies (or alongside the very broader notion of "secondary worlds" and its manifold configurations). However, this hyperbolic approach only becomes fully apparent when lengthier segments, later in the volume, bear witness to and – by their nature, as isolated "case studies" - embolden the author's increasingly ardent emancipation from "foreign" models of interpretation, as the boundaries of his initial, more conventional, equanimity are overstepped.

In keeping with the typical permutations that such patterns of scholarly exposition engender, Marius Conkan's chosen case studies oscillate between a more reserved tone of firm sagacity and another of daring speculation. It is this second mode of discourse which, as far as our appraisal of the volume is concerned, constitutes the bare bones of the work's especially innovative turns. On the one hand, drawing upon Saul Kripke's already cemented framework of modal logic – and, perhaps adroitly, avoiding the juxtaposed pitfall of having to validate or justify any cosmological position of hard "modal realism" - the author's insistence on championing the theoretical autonomy of secondary worlds hits its mark with unflinching poise. On the other hand, a small number of original points of axiomatic departure can still seem tenuous or far-fetched. As some of the major fantasy works of C. S. Lewis or Lewis Carroll are brought to attention and deftly dissected, it remains apparent that Marius Conkan's analysis of the "portal" as a mytheme central to fantasy literature is by no means a mere exercise in tepid historical (or "historicist") description and consideration. Indeed, the entire foundation of the genre, with all of its implicitly adherent excrescences, is exposed as being imbued with a cosmological function that retains its cardinal ability to still cause intricate stirrings within the established or dominant worldviews of the modern age – more specifically, fantasy literature, by way of Conkan's wider demonstrations, builds upon the archaic and mythological function of reasserting the sacred, ultimately disempowering the hegemony of 19th Century "realist" parameters of aesthetics, gnoseology and ontology.

Curiously, as an unexpected point of meta-textual junction between Marius Conkan's own preference of stylistic expression and a relatively robust trajectory of recent fantasy literature exegesis, one can observe how a habitual use of dualistic discourse permeates not only the author's thought patterns, but also his very syntax. In the segments focused on the analysis of Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, for instance, this peculiar (albeit justifiable) mode of ratiocination is especially laid bare, lending itself to viable comparisons with Rosemary Jackson's classical expose on the means through which the earliest instances of "modern" fantasy literature, by virtue of their infrastructural liaisons with their Gothic forebears, are bedecked with romanticist remnants of dualistic interfusions between identity and "otherness".

As Jackson herself posits: "dualism is thematically central to nineteenth-century versions of Gothic. There develops a recognizable literature of the double, dualism being one of the literary 'myths' produced by a desire for 'otherness' in this period. The double signifies a desire to be re-united with a lost centre of personality and it recurs as an obsessive motif throughout (...) Romantic art."[3]

This stance would, of course, later be adopted and fastened to not only other facets of early fantasy, but also to more recent permutations and sub-spheres spawned by genre. Such is the case of urban fantasy, for instance, in relation to which one can discover the same exegetical propensity towards dualism in many descriptive undertakings intent on cataloguing its frameworks. Within this field, Stefan Ekman, for instance, provides us with a convenient (and recent) example of the type of dualism-inclined discourse also avowed by Marius Conkan and other scholars of fantasy: "The protagonists and their allies can belong to the fantastic domain or not, be born into it or recently have discovered their powers. The fantastic can derive from existing myths and folklore, as well as from beings well-established in Gothic horror stories."[4]

By employing dualistic thought and language to better entrench his own intra-textual model of the portal and its semantic utility within the fantasy genre, Marius Conkan willingly showcases an affinity for modes of rhetoric and demonstration that remain ironically compatible with the seminal axioms of his source material's earliest forebears. Also in keeping with Jackson's basic assumptions regarding the core tenets of the fantasy genre, in their peak moments of autonomous efflorescence, Conkan's poignantly intimate symbolical decryptions maintain their stalwart capacity to stand apart from the conclusions of various tangential influences, while concomitantly paying tribute to the peripheral or external sources of conjecture or scholarly research which initially nourished them.

Such is the case of Marius Conkan's general interpretation of the time-space continuum which underlies the vast majority secondary worlds or, more specifically, of its hypothetical plasticity in relation to schizophrenia (or, rather, schizophrenic patterns of cognition and imagination), an amalgamation that fully unfolds itself in Carroll's absurdist tale. As porous and liminal nodes of semantic valence, portals display a natural tendency to, as it were, catalyze extreme ontological shifts of this exact sort. For example, favoring a psychological turn in his reading of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Conkan proposes that it is the heroine's very subjectivity that enforces or precedes the extreme transformations of her chimerical environment. Thus, the portal becomes a conspicuous metaphor which organically follows the (still) enticing scholarly inclination of deciphering liminal spaces in fantasy literature as modern expressions or "profane" versions of archaic rites of passage and initiation. As another author, Kristen McQuinn, forthrightly points out, while discussing the fantasy works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman: "often, liminal space is physically portrayed by a portal or a door, and the act of opening a door and stepping through can have lifelong consequences as well as rewards (…). Adolescents in various cultures often undergo rites of passage, another form of liminality, before they can become fully adult (...)"

As a systematic investigation of these speculative fields and modalities, Marius Conkan's scholarly endeavour delineates a robust study of fantasy literature through the lens of its numinous interstice and vehicle, the portal. One can only assume that other, subsequent inquiries will soon follow suit and continue to explore these initial and promising avenues. All too fittingly, perhaps the present volume could very well serve as a portal all of its own to those who wish to be initiated into the inner workings of fantasy literature, and also into the metamorphic dimensions cloistered in its transcendental points of locomotion.

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NOTES

1. C. Neil Robinson, "Good and Evil in Popular Children's Fantasy Fiction: How Archetypes Become Stereotypes that Cultivate the Next Generation of Sun Readers", in English in Education, 2 (2003), p. 34.

2. Richard Mathews, *Fantasy. The Liberation of Imagination*, New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 63.

3. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London, Methuen, 1981, p. 64.

4. Stefan Ekman, "Urban Fantasy: A Literature of the Unseen", in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (97), 2016, p. 463.