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Revisiting Fantastic Dystopias

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a series of theoretical perspectives on dystopian spaces and narrations that helps to understand the internal and external stimuli conducive to of the emergence of a type of fiction that illustrates scenarios that are anything but optimistic. Unlike in utopian narratives, here, society and man are subjected, through oppressive mechanisms, to an irreversible process of alienation and even dissolution. The transfer of the concept of dystopia to fantastic literature meets certain terminological obstacles, sprung precisely from the definition of dystopia and from the reception of fantastic literature, compared to that of science fiction.

KEYWORDS

Fantasy fiction; Science fiction; Dystopian narrative; Alternative worlds; Archetypal conflict; Mythical dystopia.

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Concepts like dystopia and dystopian narration are hard or even impossible to use in the interpretation of fantasy literature, a literature that constructs magical and miraculous worlds being, in this manner, more connected to the mythical past than to the socio-political present we live in. That is why, for these concepts to prove their utility in fantasy literature, a revision of terminology is necessary, a revision through which to expand the set of characteristics through which a narration or the structures of a narration can be understood and represented as dystopian.

One of the basic scenarios of fantasy literature consists in adjusting the archetypal conflict between good and evil, starting from the form in which this conflict was initially built in the classical myths, and then in fairy tales and folk stories. Born as a counter-reaction to the 19th century realism,¹ fantasy literature has revisited, using imagination as a subversive agent, the classical myths, the occult medieval imaginary and the fantastical of the folklore, thus succeeding to coagulate as a distinct genre of literature, counterbalancing realist fiction. With the initiative of a restorative gesture, a refinement of the narrative discourse took place, specific for this literary zone, as well as a transformation of the fantastical imaginary, that has undergone nuancing,



ramifications and interferences with the realist imaginary. Consequently, the conflict between the (supernatural) forces of evil and those of good has become much more complex than the mythical one, especially since 20th century fantasy fiction was (ostentatiously) endowed with the function of transmitting fundamental truths (i.e. lessons), often constructed on the basis of an equation that kept as constants the values of Christian moral (see Tolkien and Lewis's novels). For a more detailed knowing of the history and mutations of fantasy literature, from its origins up to the present, I recommend for reading the *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, edited by Brian Stableford, and Richard Mathews' book, *Fantasy. The Liberation of Imagination*.

Before seeing if the forces and spaces of evil from within the fantasy imaginary could be understood as dystopias and dystopian structures, it is necessary to firstly come back to the manner in which researchers define dystopia and dystopian narration.

The concept of dystopian narration was and is still being theorised, chiefly in the science fiction literature that contains pessimistic or apocalyptic scenarios as metaphors of terror and repression, being invested with an expressive political and ideological vision. Tom Moylan, in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, offers perhaps one of the most prevalent and applied definitions of dystopia, starting, inductively, from particular negative clauses that favoured the apparition, in a literary plan, of fictions with a strong negative imaginary:

Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and

selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination. (xi)

Therefore, dystopian narration had as a catalyst both the totalitarian universes of evil that have also propagated in realist literature, with the entire range of symbolic manifestations of violence and disease, as well as the truly Kafkaian manner in which people were and are alienated in a consumerist society, which uses the humane as a main element in the acquisition of goods, but which eventually transforms the sellable good in an essential condition for man to exist. One of the most mentioned definitions of dystopia is the one given by Lyman Tower Sargent. In Sargent's vision, dystopia is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived" (Donawerth 29). In this respect, if the utopian imagination projects ideal spaces, selecting from the mundane reality the elements necessary for the construction of a perfect (but impossible) society, the dystopian imagination makes the reverse step, of mapping negative worlds which contain all that is morally, politically and socially worse than the society in which the author and reader live. So, "utopia and dystopia could be defined as the mirror-images Hamlet holds up to his mother in the famous closet scene in order to make her recognize the right moral course she should be taken" (Gottlieb 14). A synthetic definition of dystopia is that of Erika Gottlieb, previously quoted in her book, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*. For Gottlieb, dystopia is a "no-man's land between satire and tragedy" (13), or, to be precise, between a "militant criticism of



specific aberrations in our own, present social-political system by pointing out their potentially monstrous consequences in the future” (13) and the tragic experience of the individual who is dispossessed, in a nightmarish world, of his own identity, with everything it implies: faith, liberty, social status, etc.

This panoptical view of theoretical perspectives on dystopian spaces and narrations helps us understand the internal and external stimuli that stood at the basis of the apparition of a type of fiction which illustrates scenarios that are anything but optimistic, in which, unlike in the utopian narrations, society and man are subjected, through oppressive mechanisms, to an irreversible process of alienation and even dissolution. The transferral of the concept of dystopia towards fantasy literature meets certain terminological obstacles, sprung precisely from the definition of dystopia and from the manner in which fantasy literature is understood compared to science fiction.

According to Colin Manlove, one of the first theorists of fantasy literature, fantasy is “a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms.” (1). Deborah O’Keefe defines fantasy literature almost in the same manner, to be precise, as “a type of fiction containing something impossible, contrary to the laws of nature as we know them”, insisting on “deviations from reality” which these narrations produce, although “all fiction is, in a sense, fantasy, being stories removed from the level of everyday reality” (22). In the essay “On Fairy-Stories”² Tolkien notes that the fantast is a ‘sub-creator’ of the ‘secondary world’ (the fantasy one), that must be perceived as true, and in which the reader can only enter

through a ‘temporary suspension of disbelief’ into the miraculous. Thus, the essence of fantasy literature is “the making of a ‘Secondary World’ which is ‘other’ and ‘impossible’” (Little 9).

Taking into account these definitions³ that try to explore fantasy literature as a territory of the impossible, being in contradiction with the ‘real’ space, we can draft a set of fundamental differences between fantasy and science fiction literature, differences that allow us to understand why dystopian narrations are exclusively linked to the latter. First of all, fantasy literature makes us imagine things that cannot be (that are impossible, inexplicable), while the science fiction imaginary is made of things that could be, being bound to a future that, through science and technology, could be possible (Hunt and Lenz 2, 14). Then, fantasy fiction recreates worlds, redefining myths and situating them in the vicinity of the reality we live in, while science fiction builds entirely new worlds, starting from the reality we live in (Hunt and Lenz 14). If in fantasy literature the primary world is a “product of long-term magical erosion”, in science fiction the primary world is a “product of progress, one in which a wealth of knowledge and technological apparatus has been accumulated” (Stableford xlviii). A short definition of science fiction literature, yet meaningful since it does not operate, as is the case with most researchers, with the procedure of excluding properties, is the one given by Edmund Little who clearly and distinctly states: “When Faerie is industrialized and given a technology, it is called Science Fiction” (8). We can speak of fantasy fiction when its imaginary is linked to a mythical, fabulous past, while science fiction projects worlds situated in a future marked by technological progress; that is precisely why, through their mythical status, fantasy worlds are open both to the present and to the future.⁴



Seeing that fantasy fiction imagines impossible worlds, contrary to the known natural laws, located in a sacred space-time inhabited by supernatural beings with which the reader gradually becomes familiarised, the fact that dystopias, in their standard/conventional meaning, do not find their place in these alternative worlds is due to the distancing or the almost violent rupture between fantasy fiction and the primary reality of the reader. Dystopia operates with negative socio-political elements, starting from the present and projecting a traumatic future, by amplifying and even hyperbolising the ailing imaginary of the present. That is why there is a relation of reciprocity between the dystopian imagination and science fiction, the worlds manufactured by science and technology could be dystopian in as much as they contribute to the isolation and depersonalisation of the characters. On the other hand, fantasy fiction often starts from a present which it does not consider important and suddenly puts aside in order to return to a mythical past, in which the belief in magic and supernatural (defined as being impossible in relation to the 'real') constitutes a founding gesture of identity. The degree and direction of alienation from the socio-political present mark the fundamental distinction between fantasy and science fiction, dystopian structures, in their conventional meaning, which can only be placed inside a fiction that reshapes the negative imaginary of the present.

As Tom Moylan emphasized in the book quoted previously, "dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century" (xi). This type of fiction is also a consequence of the industrial revolutions that allowed, for instance, that writers imagine robots that destroy the human species. But these dystopian narrations are not only this, and must not be placed only in a clearly specified historical context. They can be considered particular and

isolated manifestations of what we might call an archetypal dystopia. Constantly turning towards the past, fantasy fiction recreates the mythical conflict between the forces of good and evil, adding new nuances to it, according to the imaginative effervescence of each writer. By their nature and imaginary construction, the forces of evil from fantasy fiction are agents of the destruction of the paradise understood as a fantastical utopia, imagined through the accumulation and recreation of myths of spiritual anabasis. This generic evil, manifested through magical forms of violence, does not bluntly use current political instruments to eradicate the good, resorting to primary/predictable reactions of the reader facing fears and constituting a generator of the mythical dystopia which I shall try to define further.

Unlike the researchers who interpreted fantasy literature from the perspective of the way in which, through techniques alternative to the realist ones, it transposes impossible worlds, contradictory to the structures of the known nature, Richard Mathews, in his book, *Fantasy. The Liberation of Imagination*, feels that: "the literary genre of modern fantasy is characterized by a narrative frame that unites timeless mythic patterns with contemporary individual experiences. Its stories at their hearts are about the relationship between the individual and the infinite." (1). This relation lies in the fusion between contemporary experience (that of the present) and the archetypal (transcendental) manifestations, by integrating the reader in worlds made dynamic by the mythical conflict between the forces of good and those of evil. In other words, perpetually turning towards the past, fantasy literature abandons the mundane to relate the existence of the individual with sacred dimensions, where time and space have conserved their paradisiac substance. The

relation between the individual and the infinite, as a matrix of fantasy literature, presupposes the virtually religious union between the actual man and forms of the myth, contained in fantastic worlds alternative to the worlds of the past (Rabkin 6-7) and situated beyond the spatial-temporal limits of the present. It is not so much how science fiction literature, whose matrix structure is represented by the relation between the individual and his concrete projection in a world as a product of technology and science, operates. Starting from the present, fantasy literature recycles myths in a gesture of re-sacralising space and time; while science fiction literature, starting from the same present, explores worlds of the future where space and time are controlled through science and where the classical sacred is substituted by the technological myth. Between these two extremes lies the realist literature, that is based upon the relation between individual and 'real', or the link between the man of the present and his manifestations in the world perceived as real, to be precise.

Taking into consideration these morphological distinctions between fantasy and science fiction, it is no surprise that dystopian narrations have been attached to the second type of fiction, since they problematize the monstrous appearances that can be taken by certain societies that function incorrectly and aberrantly from a political perspective. Negative scenarios and spaces, formulated and imagined in fantasy literature, construct what we can call a mythical dystopia, since it confronts the man of the present with archetypal fears, which in science fiction literature are particularised, through a precise localisation of the dystopia. Evil witches thus become dictators, and the supernatural beings that in fantasy fiction cause evil are replaced by political agents of the oppression (to use as an

example a totalitarian scenario which, impervious to the degree of distancing from the present – towards a mythological past or a sombre future –, has exactly the same disastrous consequences on the human characters who come into contact with the dystopian forces).

In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson states that fantasy is a "literature of separation, of discourse without an object" (40) and that the fantastical imaginary is made of signifiers without a signified and without a correspondent in the plan of reality. Let us only think of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and of its distorted imaginary that, functioning in a zone of nonsense, lacks reference, even though it operates with perfectly logical relations between objects, but anti-rational from the perspective of reality. That is why, through the deviations it presupposes, "the fantastic is made, then, invisible in Plato's *Republic* and in the tradition of high rationalism" (Jackson 177). Despite that, "fantasies moving towards the realm of the 'marvellous' are the ones which have been tolerated and widely disseminated socially" (Jackson 173-4), as "a creation of secondary worlds through religious myth, faery, science fiction, uses 'legalized' methods – religion, magic, science fiction – to establish other worlds, worlds which are compensatory." (Jackson 173-4). Rosemary Jackson's observations are productive in what concerns this study and allow for a more applied understanding of the rapport between fantasy (mythical) dystopias and the science fiction ones. The dystopian structures of fantasy literature make up for an imaginary that lacks a correspondent in the plan of reality, because black magic and evil supernatural beings, through their belonging to a mythical register, constitute signifiers without a real object. On the other hand, science fiction dystopia, through the fact that it offers a criticism of the

aberrations of certain societies and political systems of the present, is umbilically linked to the present from which it acquires negative elements necessary for the construction of certain hyperboles of evil. From a structural point of view, the metaphor is at the basis of fantasy dystopia, while metonymy characterises science fiction dystopia. Through katabatic spaces (as is the Inferno) and through evil beings taken from mythology, fantasy dystopia contains a metaphorical evil, since the elements through which this evil is symbolised are not concrete and tangential with the reality known by the reader (Narnia frozen by the witch Jadis, from C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is a metaphor of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century). On the other hand, science-fiction dystopia is metonymical because it replaces the causal evil, existing in a 'real' society, with its effect taken to the extreme, illustrating worlds governed, at all levels, by fans of death (George Orwell's novel, *1984*, contains a metonymical dystopia in rapport to the totalitarian regimes). Metaphor and metonymy, as structural principles, are also linked to the localisation of dystopias, imposed by the degree of distancing from a reality taken as a reference. Thus, while fantasy dystopia is situated in a secondary world for Tolkien, and tertiary for Edmund Little (see his book, *The Fantasts*), meaning outside the space-time perceived and recognised as real, science fiction dystopia often constitutes a replica in the negative of a society that can be historically legitimised and contains the seeds of committing a monstrous evil.

In the article "Good and Evil in Popular Children's Fantasy Fiction: How Archetypes Become Stereotypes that Cultivate the Next Generation of *Sun* Readers", C. Neil Robinson severely criticises fantasy fictions that contain and promote a unilateral antinomy between good and evil, offering children an erroneous perception of

reality. The author begins his demonstration from the hypothesis that "when the archetypal symbols of good and evil are rendered simplistically, as polar opposites, their status is reduced to stereotype" (Robinson 30). At least two pertinent arguments sustain this hypothesis: 1) "the voices of authority teach that good and evil are diametrically opposed. As thesis and anti-thesis, the two cannot meet without one overcoming the other." (Robinson 32) and 2) fantasy fictions "offer an archetype of conflicting good and evil which, while serving as raw material for the child's construct of his or her own inner reality, is incompatible with the complexities of human psychology" (Robinson 34). Since good (thesis) and evil (antithesis) are in an irreconcilable rapport, through which the archetype is thus reduced to stereotype, Robinson concludes that "children need a literature which, in examining the good and evil behaviour of which human beings are capable, offers a synthesis of thesis and anti-thesis; an integration of archetypal extremes" (34). This somewhat didactic perspective is rather oriented from the reader's reality towards fantasy narration, analysing the manner in which the hyperbolic opposition between good and evil leads to a distorted perception and a misrepresentation of reality that the child-reader acquires. But the function of being compatible with the depth of human psychology primarily pertains to realist fiction, and not to a literature that operates with a logic of the imaginary that is, by excellence, antirational. That is why, returning to Rosemary Jackson's considerations on the fact that signifiers without a real object are attached to the fantastic, we could say that fantasy fiction contains archetypal conflicts between good and evil, that, through the fact that they are taken to the extreme and placed in 'other worlds', have no correspondent in the plan of the reader's



reality and, so, must be received and interpreted exclusively at a symbolic and metaphoric level. In this respect, dystopian structures, specific to fantasy literature, are not inadequate and incongruent with a possible real evil, but make use of mythical protagonists and construct imaginary negative spaces to talk about a matrix-evil that, as we remove the fantastic stratum of the narration, individualises itself and becomes a symptomatic evil of the reader's reality.

"The death of 'I' is central to dystopia" (Schlobin 14) – this is, perhaps, one of the most profound and acute definitions of dystopia, since it synthesises all the scenarios in which the identity of the individual is dispersed, annulled, objectified through subversive and even monstrous means of obtaining power. Fantasy fictions, especially those that construct "portal-quest" type⁵ secondary worlds, are, therefore, characterised by the interaction between human characters that enter other dimensions and the dystopian structures (evil creatures, negative spaces) which, in their attempt to destroy or substitute the alternative paradise, are capable of producing, in a contradictory manner, both a spiritual initiation/elevation of the characters, as well as their descent towards an eternal void.

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Notes

¹ Even though “the distinction between literary fantasy and literary realism is less that literary realism mimics ‘the real’ while fantasy does not – for, in fact, fantasy does this too – than the fact that realism sticks more closely to the restrictions placed upon us by ‘the real’ than fantasy does” (Armitt 51).

² Electronic version of the text.

³ An inventory of the definitions of fantasy literature is made in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*: “For W. R. Irwin it is ‘the literature of the impossible’ (1976: 4); for Eric S. Rabkin: ‘its polar opposite is reality’ (1976: 14), for Colin Manlove, it is ‘of another order of reality from that in which we exist and form our notions of possibility’ (1975: 3) and ‘a fiction involving the supernatural or impossible’ (1999: 3). Brian Attebury attempts to make the term a little more self-referential: for him, fantasy violates

‘what the author clearly believes to be natural law’ (1980: 2); Le Guin turns it into a survival strategy: fantasy is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not anti-rational, but para-rational; not realistic, but surrealistic, superrealistic; a heightening of reality. (1992: 79).” (Hunt and Lenz 10).

⁴ “Some scholars, liking symmetry, say that science fiction deals with the future while fantasy deals with the past. More precisely, science fiction may indeed deal with the future but fantasy, the more general category, has things to say about past, present, and future.” (O’Keefe 23).

⁵ In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn divides fantasy fictions in four categories: portal-quest, intrusive, immersive and liminal.