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The Morphology of Space in Fantasy Literature:

Portals and Secondary Worlds

Summary

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Summary:

Ever wondered what role does the portal take on in our daily life and in the construction of our lived space? What are the cultural roots of the portal and how does it operate inside this spatial semantics? How come fantasy is such an unlimited source of portals that tie a primary world to several secondary worlds? How does the miraculous emerge and what does it contain? What place does fantasy take in the system of possible and fictional worlds? Is fantasy a mere territory of the impossible, as numerous researchers have called it? What are the main signature features of space in fantasy fictions, fictions that were wrongfully categorized as children's literature and popular fiction? These are the main questions, assumptions and starting points of my thesis called: *The Morphology of Space in Fantasy Literature: Portals and Secondary Worlds*.

Fantasts and fantasy literature have facilitated the emergence of a large variety of spaces that construct a complex map of imaginary worlds. Wonderland, Neverland, Narnia, Middle Earth, just to name the most famous ones, are worlds that have already established their particularities and coordinates in the collective imaginary, turning into adjacent spaces to what we perceive and think as reality. Today reality is a concept that is being constantly reformulated, questioned and even doubted in numerous research areas.

The explosion of imaginary spaces and worlds (fantasy and Science Fiction), initiated in the 19th century and culminating in the 21st, might well have been a normal reaction and an unconscious attempt to synchronize with the more refined theories of space, initiated in the second half of the 20th century. The publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, that have rapidly gained popularity among readers, coincides with an important theoretical phenomenon, in the 60s and 70s, researchers have called the *spatial turn*. In other words, the revolution of fantasy literature through J. R. R. Tolkien, followed closely by C. S. Lewis, authors that have redefined the importance of imaginary spaces for the individual, thus influencing the relationship with the other and the world, has found an answer through the

reinterpretation of the concept of space. These efforts initiated by geographers have extended, for example in other areas such as philosophy and literary theory. In the introduction study to *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, Phil Hubbard and Rob Kitchin underline the way in which space and place have become "totemic concepts" in the exploration of social and cultural relations.

The subtle dispute between physical and humanistic geographers has its root in the nature of the concept of space. In physical geography space is absolute and a neutral container of social and cultural phenomena. Humanistic geographers (such as Anne Buttimer, David Ley, Edward Relph, Yi-Fu Tuan and Nigel Thrift) have applied phenomenological and existentialist methods in their effort to analyze the interaction between the individual and space/place, revealing the theoretical implications of the human experience of space. This dispute on the concrete or absolute nature of space has not emerged only in the 20th century, as it was initiated in Antiquity. While Thales of Milet reflected on the concrete nature of space, claiming that the primordial matter of the universe is water, Anaximander, part of the next generation of thinkers, considered that the primordial matter can only be the Infinite and the Unlimited. Moreover, the pros and cons issued by geographers and philosophers on the topic, continued throughout the 20th century and discussed, in a clearer manner, the concrete and existential nature of space versus the absolute nature of space. In the 70s humanistic geographers managed to gradually rethink/re-examine the notions of space and place. They dismantled the classical understanding of space and delivered consistent theories on the relationship between space/place and the cultural, social, political and economic phenomena inside it.

As humanistic geography expanded, the geographical and literary discourse influenced each other. Between the 60s and the beginning of the 21st century, numerous studies on space and the role of space/place in the novel have been published. Joseph A. Kestner, Leonard Lutwack and Wesley A. Kort have discussed these topics in their publications. Kestner, for example, was the first to point out that the novel, despite being temporal art (in a canonical view), contains a network of spaces that can no longer be ignored by theoreticians. Humanistic geographers have also turned their attention to the link between geography and literature, like in the essay series coordinated by Douglas C. D. Pockock *Humanistic Geography and Literature*. In recent years, the focus turned to the relationship between spatial structures and cultural phenomena. Bertrand Westphal introduced a new research field, geocriticism, while other

researchers debated on the link between real and fictional spaces, using methods of literary geography. These would be, in short, the main turning points in the history of the concept of space, a concept that has been discussed and reformulated through the constant transfer between research methods found in geography and those found in social sciences (philosophy or literary theory).

What happened, all this time, with the critical discourse of fantasy literature? Despite its rebirth through J. R. R. Tolkien's and C. S. Lewis' (writers that up until this day are the most relevant representatives of the genre) books, critics faced in the 60s at least two major problems that needed pertinent solutions: defining and legitimizing the general term of fantasy. Building imaginary, alternative worlds (such as Narnia or Middle Earth) coincided with the turning points of the concept of space in geography, philosophy and literature. If for humanistic geographers the cultural experience of real space is the key issue, for fantasts like Tolkien and Lewis the challenge resided in the human experience of imagined space (depicted in detailed maps of alternative worlds or even possible worlds that have their own ontology). From my point of view, using, for example, instruments acquired from the area of humanistic geography or from theories of fiction, would have been more productive in the understanding and definition of fantasy (and the miraculous space). Caught in the effort to define and legitimize, through canonical methods this type of literature, the most relevant researchers (C. N. Manlove, W. R. Irwin or Brian Attebery) had to turn, with few exceptions, to the same hypotheses and demonstrations that reveal a rather narrow area of interpretation and, therefore, rather closed for any interdisciplinary dialogue. On the one hand, some recent publications seem to be immune to essential contributions made by theories on fictional worlds (Toma Pavel and Lubomír Doležel) and their impact on our culture. On the other hand, being, first and foremost, a literature of space, fantasy can be read and interrogated from points of view considered, up until now, rather eccentric, but that can turn out to be rather useful in the analysis of imaginary spaces.

My thesis explores a large array of hypotheses and spatial structures, through existing theories on this type of literature and aims at integrating them into a conceptual ensemble that has its roots in humanistic geography, cultural studies, but also in theories on space in literature and theories on imagination and the imaginary. Despite this effort, fantasy touches upon vast areas, which makes it impossible to cover all of them. Therefore, I will focus solely on fictions in

which one or several characters enter, through a portal, into an alternative world. The portal, as a thematic and spatial element, has been less questioned in literary and cultural studies.

My original approach in the current thesis has three essential arguments. Firstly, the concept of the portal has not been investigated, up until now (with the exception of the works of Farah Mendlesohn and Lori M. Campbell), in order to avoid conventions and deliver clear-cut ideas regarding the construction of fictional space in fantasy. The portal is not a mere crossing point towards a secondary world, as it is actually a significant element that supports the entire symbolical and imaginary network in fiction. Secondly, fantasy has never been discussed through the lens of spatiality, as most scientists have focused on a more general mission and that is to define and legitimize this type of literature. Moreover, the term *fantasy* was a key issue, due to the fact that it was often mistaken with the concept of the *fantastic*, under the major influence of Tzvetan Todorov. This is why I start my endeavour with the analysis of the nature and structure of space in fantasy literature, using some key concepts applied in imaginary and humanistic geography (dystopia, eutopia, teratological space and in linking identity to space). Thirdly, the novelty of this paper resides in the effort to place and question fantasy literature from the perspective of fictional theories and aiming to deliver a general image on the modes of construction of secondary worlds.

The portal is actually at the centre of my analytical and conceptual endeavour. That is why I will turn to portal-quest fantasy fiction (defined as such by Farah Mendlesohn). Here, one or several characters enter, through a portal, into a secondary world. In my arguments and text analysis, I selected relevant fictions belonging to this subgenre of fantasy literature (read in translation, but also in their original version): *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll, *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911) by J. M. Barrie and the seven books of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) by C. S. Lewis. I also decided, wherever it was necessary, to mention other well-known novels, such as *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien and *Neverending Story* by Michael Ende.

The first part investigates the role of the portal in fantasy literature by looking at the cultural transformations of the concept and by discussing two case studies: the wardrobe through which Lucy enters Narnia and the window through which the Darling brothers, guided by Peter Pan, enter Neverland. My analysis started from particular situations in which the portal emerges,

enabling the revealing of a more general perspective on the function of the portal in fantasy (and other literary genres).

Pathways to other ontological levels (to a secondary or metaphysical world) have been represented, in cultural history, by the archetypal image of the portal. Hence, the portal links different religious and aesthetic views: the shamanic ritual that portrays the cave as a proper setting to communicate with the world beyond; magical thinking and the occult practices of the Renaissance; the romantic double as a reflection of the unconscious; magical thinking in fantasy literature, where the world beyond multiplies and turns into an alternative cosmos. Being ways of acquiring knowledge on the actual world but also on the world beyond, all these manifestations can be summed up into one archetype-image of the portal. Thresholds and rites of passages have constantly marked cultural history, being seen as portals for the senses (vehicles towards other worlds), as material portals (from the shaman's cave to spaces of transit in our world), or as adjacent portals like the window or magical objects. Even the concept of the metaphorical portal, seen as an abstract structure and an operator in literary analysis, has found a place in the imaginary of thresholds and crossing points. In fantasy literature, the portal is, in general terms, a metaphor for the magical thinking that has crisscrossed European culture and culminated in the 20th century, when the fantasists fully committed to it. Portals as a metaphor for magical thinking turned, in a particular way, into the expression of an inner portal, through which characters reach high levels of their conscience and are, therefore, able to touch upon the secondary world. On a material level the portal designates a palimpsest-space in which ontological processes occur. The latter lays the foundation for fantasy fiction, as once "erased" from the primary world and "written" into the secondary world, the character's identity is being "rewritten" in the crossing space. As a concept, the portal is the matrix for building imaginary objects in fantasy literature, as it establishes a dialogue between the possible (real) nature of object and the imaginary one. Moreover, the portal ensures the existing relation between the primary and the secondary imagination.

The introductory chapters open a general discussion on fantasy literature and enable a more detailed analysis of the functions of the portal, beyond the set of concepts previously discussed. There were several questions that needed answers, after an in-depth analysis of the magical wardrobe and the window towards Neverland. What is the link between the portal and the

secondary world? How are secondary worlds manufactured? What sort of imaginary and spatiality do they contain? What are the fundamental narrative mechanisms that structure these secondary worlds? My attempt to answer these interrogations found a proper conceptual language rooted in the dynamic relationship between primary and secondary worlds. The latter define portal-quest fictions, as these imaginary worlds are, first and foremost, polymorphic universes. Despite their apparent autonomy, these types of universes constantly rewrite our interpretation and images of „reality”.

The second part of my thesis sets out to investigate secondary worlds that are set beyond the portal. These worlds are erected through the classical conflict between good and evil, through the clash of dystopical and eutopical structures and through the emergence, in the background, of a teratological imaginary. Characters enter a portal to have their identities redefined according to the laws of the world they entered. Moreover, they will enter a battle for the salvation of the alternative (compensatory) space and the latter will leave a deep imprint on the characters' identity. The chapters found in the second part of my thesis showcase how the spatial imaginary of the secondary world is created. For my demonstration I use the term *defamiliarization*, as found in the works of Viktor Šklovski, Bertolt Brecht or Darko Suvin, but I also attempt to shed new light on the concept, enabling a different understanding of it. Defamiliarization is a classical tool frequently used in literary theory, but it has not yet been tested on fantasy literature. This useful tool is one of the structural procedures, which lay at the basis of portal-quest fictions (and of fantasy, in general). By offering a different approach to this classical term, I revealed how defamiliarization operates on an imaginary and structural level. Moreover, the entire process fuelled by defamiliarization can now be described and explained through current theoretical models. Secondary worlds can be interpreted from two different angles, as they are created by an acute process of defamiliarization of what can be perceived as possible. The first perspective would be imaginary geography and the second perspective consists of theories on possible/fictional worlds. These two approaches can set the ground for a morphology of space in fantasy literature.

Imaginary geography delivers key concepts that can define the spatial dimension of the secondary universe. Through portal-quest fictions concepts like eutopia, dystopia and the teratological space find relevant interpretations and new understandings. The secondary world is

often marked by a conflict between eutopian and dystopian structures. Despite both being constructing elements of the secondary world, only the eutopical structures display a regenerating force. The teratological space fluctuates between eutopia and dystopia, between the positive and negative monstrous. These categories and their fluctuations are usually influenced by the ideological underground found inside the text. The methods used by the imaginary geography can extract and display how secondary worlds work and what spatial typologies they contain, but can not explain how these worlds are constructed, from the point of view of their morphology, and how they emerge beyond the major process of defamiliarization.

Using concepts like heterotopia, eutopia, dystopia and the teratological imaginary, I was able to apply relevant theories and solve key issues concerning the nature of the spatial imaginary in portal-quest fiction. Fantasy literature, in contrast to Science Fiction, has been less interpreted through the lens of utopia. Concepts like eutopia and dystopia take on large research areas and my endeavour does not aim at covering the entire array of the imaginary geography. This is the reason why eutopias and dystopias are touched upon my analysis only when they are useful in revealing the manner in which secondary worlds are built.

Eutopia, dystopia and teratological images, being marked by the miraculous, point at the nature of the fantasy world and the spatial typologies they contain. Up until now, the structure of secondary worlds has been investigated using ambiguous concepts (the impossible, non-rational or the non-natural), limited also by a theoretical language still caught up in the doctrine of the mimesis. Besides illustrating the way in which the miraculous is being created in terms of a interiorized magical "novum" at the level of perception and knowledge, the key concept of defamiliarization can clarify the semantic dialog between the possible and the impossible, as they cease to be irreconcilable terms. In other words, defamiliarization designates the process through which possible images and structures are revived and integrated into a new perception and overtake the automatism of the categories into they were initially placed. When these familiar elements are deprived of their possible context and turn, through a succession of transformations, into a miraculous space, they will not be perceived as impossible or untrue. On the contrary, the ontology of these defamiliarized images is established by the internal law of fiction. The latter cannot be questioned through the laws of reality, because both fiction and reality are possible worlds that derive from different general orders.

We, thus, find ourselves in the complex territory of possible and fictional worlds. Fantasy literature has been rarely analyzed through fictionalism. That is why, the last part of my thesis attempts to fill, as much as possible, this hermeneutical gap that caused the distance between newly acquired theories of literature and classical modes of interpreting fantasy fictions. The main stand I take is the logic of non-contradiction that eliminates any sort of structural oppositions between the possible and the impossible, between the real and the imaginary, between reality and fiction. My endeavour did not seek to solely apply the theories of Toma Pavel and Lubomír Doležel, despite the fact that they served as a starting point. I set out to investigate and test their theories on fantasy literature, but also to extend their functions and define concepts that can be useful for the entire research field on fictionalism. One relevant concept is the portal, as it fulfils a major role in the construction of fantasy worlds and ensures the semantic communication between structures in an apparent contradiction (possible vs. impossible, primary world vs. secondary world). Moreover, in this effort to answer key questions at hand, I applied, in order to clarify my theory and fuel an interdisciplinary dialog, methods, ideas and concepts defined by humanistic geographers (the link between space and identity, hybrid identity, existential space and spatial depth).

Whilst the second part of my paper tackles the nature of secondary worlds and their spatial typologies, the third part (as the main part of my thesis) showcases the fictional construction of fantasy world. Using the axis primary world – portal – secondary world, it enabled me to discuss the semantic communication between the two fictional realms, mediated by a third space (the portal), in which the characters' identity versions emerge. The portal contains some deontic restrictions, as it allows or bars access to the secondary world by "selecting" according to the alethic features of some of the characters. These characteristics can fit, in the case of some of the characters, into the standards of the primary world, but for others they can reach beyond them. Moreover, the portal reflects the nature of the secondary world and it delivers its main modal structures: the alethic structure, through which the impossible is displayed and perceived as possible, because the general order is established through magic and anti-rational elements; the axiological and epistemic structures record the characters' initiation journey, as the rite of passage through the portal places the ontological transformation and the experience of the secondary universe into the abyss. The network of images, that depict the portal, reveal the

specific imaginary of the secondary world, as I have shown in my analysis on the magical wardrobe and the rabbit's hole. Moreover, there are also portals that mark a sudden transition from one fictional realm to another. These portals don't have the consistency of a clear and defined space. That is why I chose to discuss only portals that are part of the dyadic system, being a third space that engages rites of passage and can, therefore, be described in detail. The material portal is seconded by a metaphorical portal (dreams, hypnosis, and hypnagogic states), minimizing the contrast between the natural and supernatural and mediating the emergence of the characters' identity versions.

The axis primary world – portal – secondary world signalizes the semantic dialog inside the dyadic system but also the interdependence and transfer of properties between the two fictional domains. The primary world is defamiliarized and rewritten, once one enters the portal, to become the secondary world. The secondary world will, in turn, influence the features of the primary world. As Doležel has pointed out, fictions are created from the material of reality, but they end up reconfiguring our perception and images through which we filter reality. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* the primary world is voided of meanings and Alice fills these not with relevant meanings, but with the abundance of non-sense around which the general order in Wonderland orbits. The rabbit's hole includes a miniature of the secondary world that functions „in reverse”, being the antipode of reason and the expression of a language performed in an absurd manner (but logic in its anti-logic). This secondary world is also the product of schizophrenia spreading upon space. The portal marks the alethic structure of Wonderland, setting it under the weight of an atypical category of the impossible: the miraculous, in its classical meaning, is replaced by a dialog between magic and schizophrenia. In other words, the alethic structure combines specific elements of fairy-tales with the characters' schizophrenic reflexes. Therefore, we encounter a bizarre form of the negative miraculous, which does not evoke evil witches or monstrous creatures, but calls for demented characters. Alice's dystopic journey is flagged by the space growing and shrinking (in a fractal, entropic and schizophrenic manner), until the main character's alienation is complete. The epistemic modality becomes visible in Wonderland through negative structures leading to a sort of anti-knowledge and opening the pathway towards a nightmarish register. That is why Wonderland, in the universe of secondary worlds in fantasy, claims a special place. This realm drifts away from the classical

model in which characters reach the secondary world in order to be ontologically recreated (in a positive manner). The *Chronicles of Narnia* are built on such a matrix, inspired by the ancient epos, the medieval imaginary and the fairy-tales' formula. The Pevensie brothers, travelling through portals into Narnia, take on the task of re-establishing the paradisiac order in Aslan's realm (contaminated by the forces of evil). Moreover, along with the battle for Narnia, the characters cross a series of epistemic and axiological quests that actually mark the semantic depth of the secondary universe. Most portal-quest fictions (from *Peter Pan and Wendy* to *Neverending Story* or *Harry Potter*) project such journeys of self discovery that start with crossing a portal and ending in the transformation of the characters' original world.

The axis primary world – portal – secondary world, opening epistemic and axiological quests, is retraced in a reverse manner, as the entire semantic content of these initiation processes is transferred upon the primary world. This axis reveals the importance of spatial versions and the meaning they have in reconstructing the original world the characters (with their redefined identity) perceive, through the lens of the miraculous. I chose to discuss *The Chronicles of Narnia* as, beyond the initiation journey C. S. Lewis decides to depict, the aesthetic purpose of the author overhauls the cultural model of the epos and the fairy-tale. *The Chronicles of Narnia* portray, first and foremost, an alternative and detailed cosmos, in which numerous religious and mythological visions are moulded into. Moreover, C. S. Lewis managed to rewrite, in fantasy language, fragments from the *Old* and *New Testament*, due to his vocation as a theologian and his implicit Christian views. Lewis' endeavour is only equalized by J. R. R. Tolkiens trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, as both authors were part of the fantast group *The Inklings*, a group that founded the modern and postmodern fantasy literature we know today.

In the chapters on fictionality I take a closer look at the semantic communication between the primary world, the portal and the secondary world, using theories that are still valid in interpreting the modes of construction of possible and fictional worlds. I would like to point out that fantasy literature has never been approached from this point of view. Therefore, my effort aimed at integrating concepts and methods that were applied, up until now, to fiction, in general. Revisiting fantasy through the lens of fictionality has revealed the theoretical relevance of the portal in a dyadic system, rooted in the classical relationship between the natural and the supernatural. The portal has not been, with few exceptions, a priority for researchers. Hence, its

conceptual value had to be linked to several hypotheses formulated by critics of fantasy literature. Moreover, in order to conceptualize the portal, I approached theories formulated by humanistic geographers, anthropologists and thinkers on fictionality. Such an interdisciplinary project, that has led to a different approach on portal-quest fictions, is not a mere personal fascination. Such fictions are an esthetical and narrative choice for numerous fantasists. The portal and the secondary world can always be subjected to reinterpretation, as I did not aim (and it was impossible to do so) to test all the premises that can, in a way or another, cover the whole area of meanings fantasy literature can refer to.

In my analysis on several portal-quest novels and in the theoretical parts of my thesis, I discussed and explained how spatial and identity versions, when engaging with the portal, are created. I attempted at defining secondary worlds through possible worlds and established their structures and working mechanisms (alethical, axiological and epistemical). I have also underlined the defamiliarization process and the role of the portal, as a modal operator and as a first rite of passage towards the characters' journey of initiation. Inside this polymorphic dyadic system, I revealed the way in which the secondary world swings between an eutopical and dystopic order, or can even reflect an entire negative space. My main ideas, concepts and hypotheses (followed by subsidiary arguments) have entered a relevant dialog in the chapters on fictionality, in order to remind the reader all defining elements of prior chapters.

Through fantasy literature, the reader experiences the impossible as possible to such an extent that it can have a complete value of truth. The research area of fictional worlds, source for all possible worlds, can never be complete. This is also the case with the theory at hand. That is why scientists who reach the sensitive cord of fictionality always leave an uncharted territory, in order to be filled with other possible interpretations. This is also what I am going to do, in the name of my fascination for the miraculous.