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Mythical Geographies of Fantasy Literature

-abstract-

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This paper aims to focus on certain aspects of the mythic and symbolic geography imagined by the three authors in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, G. R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* and Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials*, and to analyse how the discourse of fantasy literature is changing, given the time period between the publication of the first volume under review, *The Lord of the Rings. The Fellowship of the Ring* in 1957 and the appearance of the last published volume '*Dance of the Dragons*' (*Song of Ice and Fire* series) in 2011. The analysis will also try to highlight to what extent the question of the supposed change can provide a diagnosis of the changes in cultural mentality that took place in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, or what are the main axioms experienced by man in a century that was dominated by industrialization, technology and two World Wars. It seems that the world is in the midst of a process of 'de-energisation' caused by technology. The threat of the machine, robots, the destruction of natural habitats and pollution are some of the issues that each of these

three novels discuss, beyond the analytical discourse they propose. The spaces traversed have initiatory value. Joseph Campbell sets out in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* an exemplary path at the end of which the protagonist reaches fulfilment. The faces of this hero can be discerned from all the poses we find in the protagonists we have insisted on; Aragorn, Lyra Belaqua/Silvertongue, Bran Stark or Arya Stark. Each of them represents equally individualized ways of relating to life, knowledge or death. Compared to Aragorn, the classic image of the marked protagonist who becomes king, the other characters undergo a paradigm shift, and the image of the chivalric novel hero quickly disappears with Eddard Stark (the "unblemished" character in *Song of Ice and Fire*) and is replaced by either the mask-wearing heroine (his daughter Arya) or the shaman (his son Bran). Also a girl is the protagonist of "Dark Matters", and the motif is strictly about femininity and the role of women in Christianity.

The work, entitled "Mythic Geographies of Fantasy Literature", has 11 chapters that go through the fictional universe of the three novels. The first chapter provides a brief foray into the subject matter of the three novels before the second is devoted to the constituent territories, including the particular case of the multiple worlds of Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy. In this second chapter, called *Divided Worlds*, an overview is given of the continents that make up these imaginary worlds, with an emphasis on the political reasons for this division, the conflicts generated by the struggle for a particular territory, in this case Middle-earth or Westeros, and the geographical features that may have been associated with the realms present in the mythology. G.R.R. Martin's world map resembles the map of the world we live in, but the features of each continent have been essentialised, with elements of geography, history and race at the basis of their symbolisation. For example, the continent of Essos is a representation of Eurasia, symbolically marking the Greek peninsula, literally transformed into Valyria. The eastern end of this continent is marked by the mysterious yellow race that lives in dark and uncharted lands. Westeros, the continent that underpins most of the narrative thread, is the symbolic representation of the British Isles because many of the elements of culture, history, religion or mythology are found there.

The third chapter is called *Separate Worlds* and extends the analysis of space, this time focusing on the borders and boundaries that separate territories and people. The first of the sub-chapters is devoted to the wall as a symbolic element that separates and makes the issue of

differences from the Other very visible, whether it is just a stranger or monsters that threaten the existence of the whole world. We have dealt with aspects of the impressive ice building in the north of the continent of Westeros that separates the frightening and chaotic world of the Celestial from the civilised and orderly world of the southern royalty, and the associations have mainly concerned Norse mythology. In this case, we have insisted on the problems that the image of the Other, the Stranger, raises in terms of the diagnosis of actuality, whether or not race-related elements are included. In the second sub-chapter I talked about the bridge as a symbolic element that connects the worlds and I focused on the image of the bridge that connects two of the worlds of Philip Pullman's multiverse.

In the fourth chapter, I continued the analytical approach by outlining the path taken by one of the heroes of the novels that make up *Song of Ice and Fire*, choosing Bran Stark, a protagonist who does not follow the pattern of the classic hero, but who follows a shamanic path that will give him the opportunity to perceive the world as no mortal has been given to understand it. The pattern in which Bran Stark's adventure is created is made up of a multitude of elements borrowed from different world faiths and religions, coexisting in the same scenario, but which can be discerned as far as religious syncretism allows. Thus, a series of features, motifs, clichés or scenarios borrowed from different cultures are integrated into the construction of this character's adventure and development. Many of these traits can be found in shamanic cults. The analysis of the elements of the shamanic complex to which Bran Stark's initiation is linked is continued in the fifth chapter, called *Magic and Religion*, which will deal with the different aspects of religions and forms of magic in the three novels. Comparatively, we have established the differences between the ways in which the fictional worlds are constructed, starting from religious mindsets. For example, Tolkien's world is tributary to the dichotomy of Good vs. Evil and the tenets of Christianity that Philip Pullman rejects, harshly criticizing the Church and its dogmas. The magical acts present in this trilogy are diverse, and the methods used are put to the service of both good and evil. The novel's most visible magician remains Gandalf, a figure also emblematic of shamanism. The Norse religion, which has become a myth, is the primary source of inspiration for the creation of this character, who embodies one of the best-known archetypes. Gandalf's magical practice is important in the economy of the discussion, deriving from the many transformations he produces on others, but also the transformations he undergoes. The form of magic Gandalf or Sauron practises is the most complex of those practised in Middle-earth. In

fact, this land, populated by all sorts of fantastic beings, is witness to various forms of magic, from objects with magical properties, to enchanted beings or visions of characters, to spells or curses spoken by the two wizards.

In G. R. R. Martin's world, divinity is unique, but masked under hundreds of forms, variants or names of gods that will turn out, we believe, to be multiple masks of death as part of the being that finds its place in nature. Here, nature and its magic are the divine laws that govern the known earth, and forests are never profane spaces. The god of Death is also the god of life because worshipping him is a strange form of existence for the Children of the Forest and the White Trees of the Heart that make up vast forests, existing only in the scary north of the continent. Forests and trees are an important part of the construction of the three worlds evoked. The forest means balance, refuge, mystery, ecosystem, but also "belly of the whale" and, above all, space of initiation. Of the three novels, the last of these roles is taken up by the most recently published "Song of Ice and Fire" in which the forest of heart trees creates, through the roots of these trees, a tomb/heaven in which Bran will die and then be reborn into another existence. The trees in this novel are, in fact, divinity, just as the Tree of Gondor is royalty, or the white pine in "Dark Matter" is magic, and the trees of the Mulefa world provide the perfect ecosystem of the multiverse.

Forests and trees are the subjects of chapters six and seven. Trees (especially one species, the tree-trees) are anthropomorphized, but not in the same way that J. R. R. Tolkien does for the Ents. The tree-trees are the keepers of mysteries of nature and the universe that only Bran Stark will have access to, whereas the Ents are the shepherds of the trees, the oldest inhabitants of Middle-earth. Here, too, I have also looked at the archetype of the king, closely related to the image of the white tree of Gondor. In Philip Pullman's novel *Dark Matters*, forests are not so generously represented, but I have illustrated how trees in a particular world (which will be visited by some characters) contribute to the ecosystem of the multiverse.

Of all the animals that populate these three fictional universes, we have stopped at ravens (in the 8th chapter, called Corbi), considering that they are given less space in interpretative analyses, compared to dragons or wolves, for example. Another reason was G. R. R. Martin's insistence on constructing a multi-purpose image of the ravens that populate the world of the novels of the *Song of Ice and Fire* series, an image that borrows elements from religions in which

these birds are valued sacrally (such as Norse mythology). With the exception of the profane role of messenger to humans (ravens are trained by masters to be messengers between the noble houses of Westeros), in all cases, ravens have at least the role of guide, to which is added the role of psychopomp animal, clairvoyant or host to dead or living spirits. Crows and ravens are common occurrences in Westeros, so common that they do not enjoy the status of phenomenal beings that would add attention and significance to their existence, but rather are profane to the uninitiated eye. In fact, crows, and especially ravens, by their sheer numbers, provide clairvoyance to the Old Gods. For example, Bran discovers in the cave beneath the Heart Tree that every raven (most of the time) or other bird (less often) is or was inhabited by beings like himself.

In Chapter IX we briefly looked at some of the principles on which the multiverse is built in Philip Pullman's *The Dark Materials* and then the last two chapters (*Worlds of the Dead* and *Armies of Horror*) are devoted exclusively to the Underworld. The tenth chapter analyses the journey that Lyra and Will (the protagonists of Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* novels) make to the last of the multiverse worlds, the world of the dead. The analysis will involve revisiting Philip Pullman's sources of inspiration (mostly from Antiquity and Romanticism) and the analogy that can be drawn with the mythological sources that underpinned the construction of a kind of modern Hell very much like the outskirts of a megalopolis, a kind of urban agglomeration on the edge of subsistence but a physically depopulated space. The last chapter is devoted to the recurring image of the army of the dead and we will establish some historical landmarks that may have been the source of the construction of the image of the monsters (living or dead), and the analysis will dwell on the White Walkers in G. R. R. Martin's "*Song of Ice and Fire*" series and on the ghost army that Aragorn unleashes in J. R. R. Tolkien's "*Lord of the Rings*". Significantly, in Philip Pullman's "*The Dark Materials*," even ghosts aren't scary. They're just desperate, desolate souls.

We believe that the originality of the work can be justified by the comparative analytical approach that brings together the three novels, putting together archetypal, mythical images hidden under the masks of a world in the process of "unravelling". Removing the mask under which the "true story" is hidden is the challenge of this work. As can be seen, I have selectively analysed elements of mythic geography in the three fantasy works chosen, for reasons that are

related to the size of these novels. Our approach has also focused only on those aspects considered to be less visible but truly meaningful. For example, Jon Snow's journey will be less followed, even if it may be of interest for aspects related to politics, royalty, armed conflicts, territoriality. On the other hand, Bran Stark's initiatory path seemed to us to be much more interesting for mythical representations of space, even if the primary meaning of the term cannot be associated with it.