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Fantasies of Space and Time

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Abstract

How does fantasy engage with concepts of space and time, both understood in collective terms (e.g. the national/cultural/universal past and landscape) or as personal concerns (e.g. death and finite time)? This paper attempts to address such questions by surveying key fantasy works of the 20th and 21st century.

Keywords: fantasy, space, time, chronotope, death, immortality, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, K.K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, Neil Gaiman, Alan Garner, Pat O'Shea, Susan Cooper

1. Introduction: Playing with Space and Time

Have you ever heard of paracosms? Those “worlds” that young children create, usually around toys and often in collaboration with other children? (Cohen and MacKeith, 1991; Root-Bernstein, 2014). You will, of course, know of the Brontë siblings as adults. But have you ever heard of their childhood creations, the worlds of Gondal and Angria, complete with maps, a cosmogonical framework, interweaved stories and literary traditions? (Brontë et al., 2010). These stories were acted out through a set of toy soldiers belonging to the only brother of the group, Branwell and were supported by the siblings own miniscule manuscripts and other writings.¹

If you have heard of the young Brontës' story creations, it is quite possible you may also know about Boxen, a world of talking animals fashioned by a very young C.S. Lewis and his brother, Warnie, and based on a box of toy animals (see Lewis and Lewis, 2008). Again, the Boxen stories were augmented by elaborate adventures, maps, timelines, and other paraphernalia.

As is obvious, at least some members of both of these sets of siblings went on to become celebrated writers and especially well-recognised for their imaginative visions: the Gothic landscapes and fairy-tale references of the Brontë sisters; the land of the Animals that Talk in Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Paracosms are within the normal range of childhood experience – if I take a show of hands I am sure there will be many in this audience who

spent time as children building elaborate worlds and stories, often written down or drawn, and which were based on toys or stories picked up from books or TV, etc. In many ways, writing fiction is very much a continuation of such activities: as Umberto Eco wisely said, “writing a novel is a cosmological matter... to tell a story you must first of all construct a world” (1985, pp. 20, 23). All fiction creates a world. But some worlds are *seemingly* closer to ours, while some are “other”, alternative, imaginary, either in a subtle or in a self-conscious way.

Mark Wolf (2012) has recently examined the activity of building imaginary worlds as a topic worthy of study in its own right independent of any accompanying narrative. In most cases hitherto, narrative has been the main focus of literary criticism, while the world a novel builds is usually examined within the (rather limited) concept of “setting”: place and time. But think about that: place and time, how complex and rich are those two simple terms we all use in our everyday life if we pause for a moment to consider them further? If I actually change them to “space” and “time” instead, then you may get resonances of Einstein's space-time, which gave rise to Bakhtin's concept of the “chronotope” (the fundamental unity of time and space in a narrative – an idea very much inspired by contemporary scientific thought²), and the vast, multi-layered, fluid, or slippery sense of space and time we get in fantasy literature.

Going back to childhood paracosms, those worlds are often very much centred around concepts of space and time – the “where”, physically, can be the child's bedroom, or the garden, or the

¹ For a recent comparative analysis of the worldbuilding practices of the Brontë siblings and J.R.R. Tolkien, see Mann (2019).

² Bakhtin argues that: “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of

time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (1984, p. 84). The chronotope is not unlike the concept of a fictional world, in which space and time are integrally interwoven. Bakhtin himself acknowledges the influence of Einstein's theory of relativity on this concept (1984, pp. 84-85).

schoolyard. But that same “where”, imaginatively, can be a version of our world where the child is God, or a different planet, or weird, scary, mysterious, or enchanted country somewhere “far away” or out of sight. The same goes with time. The “mundane” time, governed by clocks, teachers, and parents, can be at night after the lights are off, or at play-time in school, or one of those lazy Sunday afternoons. But the imaginative time can be the past, or the future, or the indeterminate fairy-tale “once upon a time”. What is certain (and for many grown-ups who have moved too far away from their childhood selves, rather surprising) is that the child is keenly aware of this distinction (Golomb, 2011). During play, the muddy patch on the side of the lawn is a desert, or a pool of sentient sludge, or a volcanic landscape. The moment the bell rings or parent announces it is lunchtime, it is the muddy patch again, the traces of which have to be washed off from hands, and – occasionally – faces. The child navigates these alternate perceptions of space and time easily. And that is what we do too when we read fiction.

I suggest that one of the most fundamental things that fantasy literature does when presenting us with imaginary worlds or reconfigurations of our world is to challenge, to question, to redefine, to understand, to grapple and eventually come to terms with, concepts of space and time. It does not only allow the writer and reader to continue this childhood play of moving from one world to another by opening a book – in many ways, all fiction does that. Think about opening a historical novel, for example, or a realistic novel set in the Victorian period. In these examples, the past *is* another world, a “foreign country”, as H.P. Hartley put it (1953, p. 1), in which the reader is immersed. But fantasy literature distorts space and time in impossible ways: for example, it can build a coherent and fully-realized alternative world with its own chronology and geography; or a version of our world in which supernatural forces erupt and challenge every sense of ‘here’ and ‘now’ we think we have; or it can construct a doorway to an “other” world or dimension, with a different concept of time; or offer us a hidden, invisible world somewhere around us, with its own historical traditions and spaces we cannot access. This is the sort of stuff of childhood paracosms writ large. Play, yes, but serious play and play with serious stuff – can it get more serious than space and time, concepts that anchor our perception of the world? So how can fantasy literature challenge and stretch our perceptions of space and time? Let me count the ways, by taking you to a journey around imaginary worlds and their creation and creators.

2. Blending Chronotopes: From the National/Local to the Universal

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) has been claimed to be a ‘founding’ text of modern fantasy, and the ‘mental template’ (Attebery, 1992, p. 14) we share for defining fantasy as a genre. The moment we open the book, we seem to be in a “mythical” or an approximation of a “medieval” space and time. Middle-earth is a pre-industrial world of kings and warriors, still forested at a pre-modern level. But once we start “zooming in”, as it were, and noticing details in the vastness of a seemingly coherent map, we find anachronisms and historical “accidents”. Though Rohan is a simulacrum of Anglo-Saxon culture, from the architecture of Meduseld to its Old English names and place-names, to the Beowulfian scenes we find incorporated in the plot (Shippey, 2005, pp. 139-45; Shippey, 2001, pp. 90-7; Honegger 2011), the Shire is not medieval. It is ‘more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the Diamond Jubilee’ (Tolkien, 1981, p. 230; see also p. 235), complete with pocket watches, umbrellas, and fireworks. And while Tolkien compared Gondor with Ancient Egypt, Rome, and Byzantium (1981, pp. 157, 376, 281), just around the corner, on the borders of Mordor we get a glimpse of the Somme, the rotting bodies of Elves, Men, and Orcs, friends and enemies moulded together in a grim reminiscence of Tolkien’s traumatic experience in the Great War (Garth, 2006).

This palimpsest of chronotopes – from Anglo-Saxon heroic culture to an Egyptian/Byzantine/Roman mash-up, to the Victorian pastoral, all the way to the battlefields of WWI – are weaved together in a tapestry that feels coherent – it is only when you turn it around that you see the knots and disparate elements “sticking out”, so to speak. Yes, each “chronotope”, each reference to historical space and time, brings along residues of associations that enrich and complicate the fantasy world Tolkien offers us. The hobbits’ insularism and little-Englishness chimes with their Victorian-English-village chronotope. The ‘noble savage’ freshness and virility we see in the ‘Dark-Age’ Rohirrim contrasts with the ‘decadent’ atmosphere of a civilisation which has reached its peak and is now in decline, already felt by the Egyptian and Byzantine resonances in Gondor. This sort of fantasy that plays with time and space by hybridising historical cultures to create a complex mosaic of geopolitical concerns is also evident in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1996-2011), in which we have at various points chronotopes that allude to the War of the Roses, medieval Spain, Viking raiders, and the lives of nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes (Larrington, 2016). It is not accidental that Tolkien claimed that his invented world, Middle-earth (itself only a part of a larger cosmological conception, Arda), is his “version” of Europe in some mythical “proto”-prehistory

(Tolkien, 1981, pp. 239, 376)³. Here is another challenge to how we perceive space and time: the imaginary world not as wholly “other”, “alternative”, or “invented”, but as an echo (or perhaps a hypothetical “draft”) of the world most fantasy readers recognise. Think about how this stretches the way we perceive space and time, specifically our perceptions of, and relationship with, the past.

For Tolkien, this connection of his imaginary world with the land he loved and lived in was fundamental for his creative project right from the start. When he began writing the stories of the Elves, complete with a cosmogony, stories of the gods, heroic legends, and romantic fairy stories, long before *The Lord of the Rings* was ever conceived, the world he was writing about was not Middle-earth, but England (Tolkien, 1984, pp. 278-94). Tolkien’s original impetus to create a world was a nationalistic project: he felt compelled to “restore to the English... a mythology of their own” (Tolkien, 1981, pp. 230–1), following similar projects of re-discovering (or inventing!) national mythologies in Germany, Denmark, and Finland, alongside (and in antagonism with) the earlier ‘Celtic’ revival (Fimi, 2008, pp. 50-55; Shippey, 2000). This concern with the national/cultural mythological past – it seems to me – is a particular interest of at least one strand of fantasy and fantastic writing. Good examples of this concern are the successful children’s and young adult fantasies that flourished in the British Isles in the generation that followed Tolkien and his friend C.S. Lewis. Susan Cooper, Alan Garner, Pat O’Shea and many other children’s fantasists did not invent entire alternative imaginary worlds. They set their stories in Cornwall, or Buckinghamshire, or Cheshire, or North Wales, or Galway – real landscapes of the British Isles in contemporary times, but with intrusions (or even eruptions) of the mythological past into the modern world. In *The Hounds of the Morrigan* (1985), rural Galway is invaded by the medieval Irish ‘goddess’ of strife and destruction, and the child protagonists enter an otherworldly version of Ireland (still recognisable by landmarks on the landscape, but also clearly ‘other’ and enchanted), in order to save their own intruded world from annihilation. In *The Owl Service* (1967), a cursed love triangle from the Welsh *Mabinogion* tales is involuntarily re-enacted by three teenagers and seems to affect the physical world around them. In Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising*

sequence (1965–1977), King Arthur returns from the Romano-Celtic past in order to continue a perennial fight between good and evil, a narrative focus which Cooper very much associated with her childhood memories of WWII⁴. Such fantasies begin as if they are realistic fiction and invite us to re-conceptualise the world around us, allowing it to be disrupted (and sometimes healed) by the past. Past and present stop being distinct but bleed into each other.

The case of the *Harry Potter* books (1997-2007) is in some ways similar, but also distinct. It has been argued that the *Harry Potter* books are an example of portal fantasy (Butler, 2012) with platform 9 ¾ as a ‘passageway’ to the magical world of Hogwarts. But I prefer Gamble and Yates’s classification of the *Harry Potter* series as a world-within-a-world, marked off by physical boundaries” (2008, p. 122). I think this taxonomical category acknowledges the fact that the *Harry Potter* universe exists in our world, the world as we know or perceive it. Hogwarts exists in a real place in Britain – in Scotland, in fact! – and Diagon Alley exists in London, as does Sirius Black’s house, 12 Grimmauld Place. It is just that we do not have the means or special powers to access them. Our ‘muggle’ eyes do not see them. But the world in which Harry operates is our world, though ‘revised’ to accommodate an entire alternative history that dovetails into, or even sometimes ‘explains’, ours. Take, for example, the historical witch-hunts and witch trials in Britain and Europe in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern periods. J.K. Rowling incorporates them into her ‘magical history’ of the wizarding world and ‘explains’ that us, ‘muggles’, have got the wrong end of the stick about them⁵. At the same time, the entire trajectory of the seven *Harry Potter* books is an attempt to re-tell the story of the Holocaust. From Social Darwinism, the Eugenics, and the rise of Nazi Germany, to the persecution of ‘mudbloods’ and the pursuit of a ‘pure’ magical race who adopts the motto ‘magic is might’, the parallels are deliberate and unmistakable. I have often taught the *Harry Potter* books in children’s literature courses, immediacy following books for children that deal with racism and segregation in a realistic, historical context, such as Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), which is set in southern Mississippi in the 1930s, or Jamila Gavin’s *Coram Boy* (2000), which is set in the 18th century, with slavery as one

³ For a detailed discussion see Fimi, 2008, pp. 160-88.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the way in which O’Shea, Garner, and Cooper engage with the “Celtic” past and with notions of heritage, see Fimi, 2017.

⁵ As Harry writes in a school essay: “Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at

recognizing it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burned so much that she allowed herself to be caught no less than forty-seven times in various disguises” (Rowling, 1999, p. 7).

of its thematic strands. For difficult themes such as racism, which many children still face today, it could be argued that tackling the issue through contexts set within historical novels can be at least as beneficial as that offered through contemporary fiction. It can, in fact, be easier to talk about *past* horrors (and give hope by offering a contrast with the, sometimes, improved situation today), rather than focus on the now and a child's immediate experience (Brooks and Hampton, 2005). Well, doesn't fantasy do the same thing? Instead of taking us to the "elsewhere" of the past, it takes us to the "elsewhere" of an invented world. In many ways, both *realistic* depictions of historical racial prejudice (such as *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*) and *fantastical* re-imaginings of historical racial prejudice (such as the *Harry Potter* books) create 'safe spaces' for children (and adults, I would claim!) to explore and question assumptions and ideological stances. The social commitment of this strand of fantasy is expressed via distorting perceptions of historical time. The *Harry Potter* books fulfil the function of 'mythologising' current anxieties and concerns – an idea I shall return to.

So fantasy often deals with the immediate historical past, but – as we saw above – also with ideas of heritage and the national/cultural past. We could think of fantasy as a post-Romantic phenomenon, a mode of fantastic writing that deals with local mythological traditions: the echoes of the past in the landscape. But there is also fantasy that moves beyond the regional or national. Turning to perhaps the most acclaimed author of American fantasy in the 20th century, and a creator of a world to rival Tolkien's, we find a different challenge to space and time. I am talking, of course, about Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series (1986-2001). In contrast to the large singular land masses that define the likes of Tolkien's Middle-earth and other fantasy worlds inspired by it, Le Guin made a conscious pivot away from the "white" "European" model, and set *Earthsea* within an archipelago of islands, thus providing a chronotope at once more primal and also more inward-looking. *Earthsea* is a world mostly made of water, where journeys are made by boat as opposed to long walks, and where communities are both isolated from each other, but more close-knit. It is also very deliberately a non-white world: the majority of characters are deliberately copper-brown in complexion (Le Guin, 2004). Le Guin evokes a more distant past, a past of tribal communities who share similar shamanic practices and rituals. In some ways, her fantasies are an effort to capture an "unrecorded" past, a past before the mythological traditions that rely on the written text, a past that we can only glimpse through anthropology. And I think that the past she is evoking is meant to be a universal past: what was there before Egypt, and Ancient Greece and Rome,

and medieval Europe? What was there in the other places of the world, where we do not get written mythological texts until much later, but where there must have been rich oral traditions, beliefs, folk narratives, and rituals? What were those first human tribes and social groups thinking, imagining, dreaming? As eloquently captured by Attebery:

Le Guin is taking her concept of magic from a different source than Tolkien's. She has gone right past courtly romance and peasant lore to the universal beliefs of tribal societies. Hers is the magic of ritual name-bestowal, and singing to the hunted animal, and in the beginning was the Word. Her wizards are shamans, witch doctors. Like Claude Lévi-Strauss, she revives the ancient, magical view of the universe, the so-called savage mind, as an interesting alternative to our mechanistic, scientific view of the cosmos. (Attebery, 1980, p. 168)

This same impulse to go back the universal is also evident in Neil Gaiman's acclaimed novel *American Gods* (2001), which is based on the premise of old gods and traditions moving, changing, and adapting in space (America, in that case) and time. Apart from the array of Egyptian, Norse, Baltic, and Celtic gods and divinities we see parading through its pages, we also get a glimpse of forgotten gods lost in the mists of pre-textual time. The tale of the priestess Atsula and the mammoth-headed god Nunyunnini is a story set in 14,000 BCE, following a group of nomadic people from a Siberian tribe. These invented people, with invented names, re-enact a story that Gaiman repeatedly follows in his novel, interweaved with actual named gods and recorded historical cultures: as they each come to America, they adapt and, often, change beyond recognition, or even become altogether forgotten. Just like Le Guin's invented tribal societies which can be read as an evocation of a universal 'primal' past, Gaiman's Siberian tribe seems to be an attempt to go back to a space and time of which we know nothing for sure, but which we can only imagine and construct as an 'other' version of ourselves.

3. Personal Space and Time: Contemplating Finiteness

So far, I have talked about chronotopes in fantasy literature that make us reconsider (and re-evaluate) our relationship to space and time: Are imaginary worlds entirely imaginary? How do we grapple with fantasy's creative re-use (and often amalgamation) of mythological traditions, historical cultures, and the evocation of the national or universal past?

But place and time work in other ways too. There is that personal sense of time that definitely feels linear – at least that is how most of us experience it. We live our lives around calendars and clocks. We count birthdays and anniversaries. We remember things by meaningful dates which are

often rites of passage: births, graduations, weddings, deaths. Well, that is where I am heading really: death. The finiteness of time that many of us are keenly aware of: we plan our lives around achieving our dreams in the time we have, we compile 'bucket lists' of things to do before we die. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow so eloquently caught it in "A Psalm for Life", in that ruthless anapaestic metre that does, actually, sound like drums beating rhythmically:

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though strong and brave,
Still, like muffled drums are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.
(1868, p. 3)

That sense of the finiteness of time, of the inevitability of death, is something that fantasy literature has often grappled with. How do we live with the knowledge of death? How would we live if we did not die? What if there is something out there, after death? And what would be the cost of pursuing immortality against the natural order of things?

I'll start with Tolkien, again, for the reasons outlined above, and because he was quite outspoken about the centrality of death in his fantasy, not least in his self-reflective and self-theorizing essay "On Fairy-Stories", his 'manifesto' on what fantasy is and how it is supposed to work (Flieger and Anderson, 2008, p. 9). In his theorising, Tolkien offers 'escape' as one of the main functions of fantasy. He claims fantasy helps authors and readers *escape from* a trite, mundane, unimaginative world, but also, importantly, the constraints 'reality' imposes on us. For Tolkien, fantasy is a vehicle for breaking those constraints and satisfying impossible desires: the desire to converse with other living creatures such as animals; the desire to fly like a bird; and "the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" (Tolkien, 2008, p. 74). Tolkien went so far as to say that *The Lord of the Rings* 'is about Death and the desire for deathlessness' (Tolkien, 1981, p. 262).

Death vs immortality (or, perhaps more accurately, a definite end to life, vs serial longevity), is one of the central binaries in Middle-earth. Men are – as the One Ring verse brutally declares – "doomed to die". The Elves, on the other hand, do not partake in that "doom" – in that destiny. They can be killed by violence, but they have the ability to return. Their souls and bodies are bound to the created world itself – as long as it exists, they exist. What happens to Men when they die within the framework of Tolkien's mythology, is a mystery. No one knows. Just like in our 'real' world, there are educated guesses, but no one has come back to tell

the tale. In some ways, therefore, the anxiety and bitterness over the 'doom' of Men is one about knowledge vs ignorance, something captured in a poignant late work by Tolkien, published only posthumously, the (Platonic in mode) dialogue between Finrod Felagund and Andreth (Tolkien, 1994, pp. 301-66). In this piece, Andreth, a wise but all too human woman and Finrod, an Elvish Lord, discuss the problem of death. Is death a punishment? Is it a 'gift'? Is it part of a 'natural' cycle? I think it extraordinary how Tolkien's immersive worldbuilding is strong enough, secure enough, to allow the reader to explore and empathize with the dilemmas and metaphysical anxieties of a woman and an Elvish lord while they debate life and death: how can creatures with different 'dooms' interact in a world that accommodates them both? How can a mortal woman and an immortal man live and love together?

Tolkien asked that question the other way around too, at least twice. The Elvish maiden in love with a mortal man is at the heart of one of the key stories of Tolkien's extended mythology, the tale of Beren and Lúthien, and these two names meant much more to Tolkien than just the embodiment of two different life spans and the dilemma of love between two different 'species'. It is well-known that the love story of Beren and Lúthien is a 'calque', a 'mythologising' of the young love, forbidden and therefore reinforced, between the young Tolkien and Edith Bratt, later his wife and lifelong companion (Carpenter, 1977). They are buried together at Wolvercote Cemetery in Oxford, and their gravestone bears the names of Beren and Lúthien. The motif of the 'fairy' woman and the mortal man, the latter seduced and doomed to lunacy, melancholy, or death, is an international folklore motif and common in many Northern European traditions. But in Tolkien's hands, it becomes a vehicle to explore the question of death and immortality again. Like an inversion of the Orpheus story (Libran-Moreno, 2007), Lúthien brings Beren back from death, but in doing so, has to forgo her immortality in order to be with him. That same dilemma is re-enacted thousands of years and many generations later by Aragorn and Arwen, descendants of Beren and Lúthien when Arwen faces the same ruthless choice. The moment of Aragorn's death, as narrated in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Arwen's subsequent aimless existence contemplating her own demise is a curious mix of melancholy and despair⁶.

This is the stuff of myth – the sort of fundamental human questions that myth in its religious or spiritual guise has attempted to answer through

⁶ Despite Tolkien's usual rejection of despair (see esp. Tolkien, 2004, p. 269).

the centuries. The tales of Beren and Lúthien, and Aragorn and Arwen are comparable to that of Eos and Tithonus in the Homeric Hymns (Faulkner, 2008): Eos is the goddess of the Dawn, who wished for her mortal lover, Tithonus, to become immortal. He was granted that gift from Zeus, but Eos forgot to ask for eternal youth for him too, so Tithonus is condemned to be forever ageing but never will he die! In some later retellings, he becomes a cricket, or a cicada, singing eternally, begging for death. In Tolkien's world, the Elves grow weary of the world to which they are tied and cannot escape. One way of looking at it is that the Elves are 'stuck' in the world, 'doomed' to be disillusioned, tired and melancholy, while Men may actually 'escape' to an unknown, but perhaps more interesting 'other' place through death. Time and space mean something very different to Elves and Men in this context.

The desire of deathlessness is also an important part of how fantasy deals with time. What if we could find a way to avoid death? What would be the price of non-finite time?

Death is a central theme in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. As part of a recent interview with J.K. Rowling, Geordie Greig claimed that 'Death is the key to understanding J K Rowling'. He quotes her saying:

My books are largely about death. They open with the death of Harry's parents. There is Voldemort's obsession with conquering death and his quest for immortality at any price, the goal of anyone with magic. I so understand why Voldemort wants to conquer death. We're all frightened of it. (Greig, 2006)

But 'understanding' Voldemort's desire does not mean approving or rewarding it. The central 'message' of the *Harry Potter* series is that death is a natural part of life and should be accepted as such. Attempting to escape it is not just folly, but at best morally questionable, at worst reprehensible. In Rowling's world, other than possession of the Philosopher's stone (which is deliberately destroyed at the end of the first book⁷) it takes an act of murder to achieve a semblance of immortality by ripping part of one's soul from the whole. But even this is more like an insurance against death, which is still finite. The price is too terrible. The power it bestows too intoxicating. In Le Guin's *Earthsea*, one wizard's pursuit of immortality threatens the invented world itself. At

the beginning of *The Farthest Shore*, the final book of the first trilogy, we encounter a state of "thinning"⁸: magic is seeping out of the world, and people and animals are sickening. The main protagonist, Ged, whose life we have followed throughout this entire first trilogy, and who is now the Archmage of Earthsea, travels with the young prince Arren to the "Dry Land", the land of the dead. Here, Ged and Arren find a deranged wizard who has managed to breach the divide between the world of the living and the land of the dead so as to guarantee his own immortality – or, more accurately, his serial longevity. However, as is so often the case in the many tales we have examined, this comes at a great cost to the protagonist, who now exists in a pitiful state in-between life and death. But this condition of being half dead and half alive takes on a greater significance, when one understands that in contrast to Tolkien and Rowling who operate within a Judeo/Christian worldview in which there is hope for 'something' beyond death, in Le Guin's trilogy, operating within an Eastern/Taoist perspective, death is but one aspect of a circular rite of passage, rather than the 'end-game' within a more simple linear structure. Accordingly, when Ged refers to the long-dead legendary king of Earthsea, Erreth-Akbe, he explains that the part of the King that survives is not merely his name, nor his shadow in the land of the dead, but rather it is out there, in the world of the living, albeit in a different form:

He is the earth and sunlight, the leaves of trees, the eagle's flight. He is alive. And all who ever died, live; they are reborn and have no end, nor will there ever be an end. (Le Guin, 2018, p. 371)

Earlier on, Ged has already explained to Arren that:

Life rises out of death, death rises out of life; in being opposite they yearn to each other, they give birth to each other and are forever reborn. And with them, all is reborn, the flower of the apple tree, the light of the stars. In life is death. In death is rebirth. What then is life without death? Life unchanging, everlasting, eternal? What is it but death – death without rebirth? (Le Guin, 2018, p. 343-5)

Importantly, Philip Pullman also manages to explore the finiteness of personal time and death in *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000), but this time from a humanist, rather than a religious or spiritual perspective. When Lyra descends to the land of the dead to free ghostly remains from an existence of perpetual remorse and torment, she

⁷ Already from the first book in the series, which addresses a younger readership, we have a clear indication that death is something to accept. As Dumbledore says to Harry about the choice of Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel to destroy the philosopher's stone and eventually die: "To one as young as you, I'm sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organised mind, death is but the

next great adventure" (Rowling, 1997, p. 215).

⁸ The term comes from Clute and Grant's definition of the structure of fantasy, which often begins with the stage of "bondage", a sense of "wrongness" which can be expressed by the "secondary" world undergoing a "thinning of texture, a fading away of beingness" (Clute and Grant, 1997, p. 339).

promises them a version of an 'afterlife' that chimes with Le Guin's, whilst also applying a materialistic understanding of the universe: "a pure physical absorption into cosmic matter" (Wehlau, 2008, p. 45):

"This is what'll happen," she said, "and it's true, perfectly true. When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, just like your daemons did. If you've seen people dying, you know what that looks like. But your daemons en't just nothing now; they're part of everything. All the atoms that were them, they've gone into the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all the living things. They'll never vanish. They're just part of everything. And that's exactly what'll happen to you, I swear to you, I promise on my honour. You'll drift apart, it's true, but you'll be out in the open, part of everything alive again." (Pullman, 2000, p. 335)

In the last two fantasy texts, I have discussed, death is not just bound to time (the notion of a cut-off point of a personal timeline, and what may come after) but also to space. In Pullman and Le Guin we get a "land" of the dead, a particular place where the dead live, or where they are rather trapped and from where they can be freed. This is a very different version of Tolkien's notion of "escape". This is not escaping from death into deathlessness but escaping the view of afterlife prevalent in the classical and Judeo-Christian tradition, into other spiritual or philosophical alternatives.

4. Fantasy and/as Myth

Fantasy comes very close to the function of myth when dealing with death and immortality and other 'big' existential questions, such as the origin of evil. Not by attempting to establish religious dogma or offer a scientific explanation, but through the telling of an imaginative story. In many different cultures around the world, myth has served as a creative, but also an economical way of thinking about the world and fundamental questions of human existence. Mary Beard (in Bragg, 2008), in a concise and lucid discussion on the function of myth, has suggested that we should be thinking of myth as a verb ('to myth'), as a process that allows different societies to express their worldviews, beliefs, fears and anxieties by *telling a story*.⁹ The same can be claimed about the way in which fantasy deals with national, cultural, or universal pasts and landscapes – it hybridises and mythologises them. Laurence Coupe, drawing on the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, has examined myth as a vehicle to explore and understand reality via a symbolic, metaphorical way of thinking (Coupe, 2009, pp. 8-9). Fantasy seems to be doing something very similar. By stretching, distorting, and expanding space and time – understood as

either collective or personal concepts – fantasy harnesses creativity to make us think of new, alternative, fresh ways about them. In many ways, it brings us back to those moments of childhood imaginary play: the sort of activity that helped our younger selves develop. As the late, and much-missed, Terry Pratchett once, reportedly, said:

'Fantasy is an exercise bicycle for the mind. It might not take you anywhere, but it tones up the muscles that can.' (2015).

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⁹ See also Fimi (2012).

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