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Anyhere, out where: fantasy, psychosis, and writing worlds

Abstract:

Ursula Le Guin claimed that fantasy 'is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence' (1979: 84). In 2015, I began work on a fantasy novel, *A life in streets*, and discovered that to write fantasy is to simultaneously exist in this world, that world, and the world of the keyboard. Consequently, the need to see and keep seeing an alternative vision of my past, present, and future realities is not without its illuminations, not without its spectres.

Anchored by the work of Kathryn Hume, Rosemary Jackson, and Slavoj Žižek, this paper argues that Jackson's paradigmatic positioning of marvellous or secondary-world fantasy as inherently non-subversive misses the mark. Moreover, her valorisation of the transgressive energies manifested by the literary fantastic seriously undervalues the transformative potential inherent to the construction of impossible, secondary worlds which, it could be said mimic something of a literary psychotic break: the articulation of an alternative reality involving a rejection of current forms of social authority and their subsequent reimagining in different developmental pathways.

Significantly, such a revision of the genre, forces both reader and writer into an apprehensive position. That is, it requires that traditionally dismissive attitudes attached to criticism related to fantasy – escapism and regression, for example – be fundamentally re-examined.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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In the early months of 2016, I began writing a novel. It started with a young girl called Maia wondering why she couldn't cry at her grandfather's funeral. Humming, she trudged through the rain, beside a wizard, a wizard who then sings a small box containing the seed of a weeping willow, torch flames, and a collection of mourning stones into a tree, a tree that grows around a coffin. It was magical. It was auto-writing. It was the beginning of an epic fantasy.

Around Maia a city started to take shape. A sketch, hazy, erased and redrawn, of a nascent world with a nascent plot. A loose collection of potential set pieces and their settings – a much more than nothing and a little less than something. I labelled this working draft 'The shape a girl makes', using it to map out the formative moments of Maia's childhood, those moments we encounter that dam and divert the current of our lives: forging friendships, confronting violence, discovering the fallibility of a parent, being lost and alone for the first time. But the map was incomplete. Maia's childhood was not enough. Blank spaces remained.

Planning replaced writing. Images were pasted into a notebook and dot points dot-pointed. A second protagonist emerged, and with him the shadow of a villain. Pivotal buildings rose brick by notional brick, around this nascent structure, districts and boroughs grew like mycelium breathing spores into the percolating systems of a political climate. I imagined and wrote a murder investigation, a revolution, character arcs, leveraged and inverted genre tropes, story beats, technological inventions, magical interventions, and narrative coordinates. For months, the clack, clack, clack of mechanical keystrokes.

In 2016, I wrote just over 100,000 words of a novel titled *A life in streets*.

In 2017, I wrote nothing.

When I started writing *A life in streets,* I was not entirely certain what I was writing. Not consciously. As planning developed and those plans were translated into prose, however, the freighting of certain impulses became increasingly apparent. As someone who attempts to be both writer and critic, Brian Attebery's claim that '[l]anguage records a culture's habits and concerns, its physical environment and its myths' (1992: 28) speaks to me beyond the scope of its oblique truism, underscoring the degree to which language is inflected with purpose. Not only do its signs and symbols have meaning, they *make* and *shift* meanings acting in and through the groups who speak its grammar and syntax. And while this meaningful social component will be addressed in due course, in retrospect, part of my problem was that this purpose, my purpose, was simultaneously unclear and circumscribed by peripheral visions glimpsed, but largely unseen. The first step, then, was to decide how I was to think and write my fantasy.

Like most, if not all fantasy writers, my approach to the mode echoes that of Kathryn Hume who argues that '[f]antasy is any departure from consensus reality' (1984: 21). Simple enough. However, embedded in the statement's common sense are two crucial factors: (1) fantasy comprehends and articulates reality; and (2) fantasy reflects, denies, manipulates, and/or critiques something held to be the consensus view. In other words, fantasy is a response to reality or, to put it more precisely, realties.

Fundamentally, Hume's overarching position leans on reader response theory, positioning the work at the centre of a dialogical relationship between the world of the author (world-1) and the world of the reader (world-2). With a series of reciprocal interactions, Hume suggests that the author 'manipulates and distorts the givens from world-1 […], at least in his mind, and from its purely realistic phenomena he can create fantasy' (Ibid.: 11) even while world-1 influences the author's idea of reality, and the audience's sense of reality is challenged (Ibid.:10). Thus, in any given fantasy interaction there exists three worlds: the world of the author, the world of the audience, and the world of the work. Ultimately, Hume feels that the result of all these interactions, at least in terms of tangible purpose, may be to 'temporarily modify each audience member's relations with his or her own world-2' and 'if the work is extremely effective […] it may permanently alter the reader's relationship with world-2' (Ibid.: 24). Where such a thought becomes extremely interesting, at least for the author, is in the fact that while this model is seemingly geared towards affecting the reader's sense of reality, an author is always his or her first reader. And what I want to suggest is that there exists a reader-author distinct from the author per se, who, through the act of artistic production, is revealed and clarified like a photo in a dark room.

Very quickly, it will be of some benefit to trace exactly what this paper is talking about when it talks about fantasy. Labels can be slippery. For the most part, Rosemary Jackson's concept of the literary marvellous is an affirmative narrative encapsulated by secondary worlds, which are built with (more often than not) heroic and/or mythic archetypes, binary ethics of good and evil, and magical resolutions of social contradictions fundamentally directed towards social sublimation and individual consolation. However, this already triggers the need for a few addenda: (1) when Jackson discusses the positive aspects of what she calls fantasy in her work, what she means is the literary fantastic; (2) when this paper discusses fantasy it is fundamentally targeting the classical secondary-world sub-genre itself an admixture J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Robert E. Howard, and Edgar Rice Burroughs (among others), and their literary antecedents in Romance-Adventure narratives around which a host of revisionist and post-classical examples are accreting (we might look to the work of N.K. Jemisin, Brandon Sanderson, Philip Pullman, George R.R. Martin, Ann Leckie, J.K. Rowling, China Miéville, Richard Morgan, and R. Scott Bakker, among others); and (3) as this paper will argue, this sort of fantasy is, therefore, not inherently conservative or subversive per se, but functions as an interesting space with which to experiment, not only with how realities are constituted and constructed, but how subjects are constituted and constructed within their boundaries.

With concerted hindsight, then, mapping the development *A life in streets* yields an intriguing topography. Its primary protagonist, Maia, is a young musician whose music can bridge the divide between consciousness, allowing others to see and feel the world as she does. Its secondary protagonist, Turner, is a Justice – something between a police officer, law clerk, bounty hunter, and executioner – searching the city for a serial killer who takes corrupt city officials and transforms them into clockwork performance art. Maia's father is the architect of an underground revolutionary movement; Turner possesses a sense of justice that goes beyond the law and its prosecution by self-interested parties. At the end of the novel's first section, a revolution – called the

Rupture – breaks out and both protagonists are forced to adapt to a once familiar urban landscape, broken, bloodied, made strange and inhospitable. Consequently, the text is part detective novel, part secondary-world fantasy, part dystopia, part revolutionary critique. And like the fragmented terrain through which the story navigates, each of these narrative influences formed a patchwork quilt of discrete worlds that affected not only my perception of what the work was, is, and could be, but my perception(s) of reality. Here, Lucie Armitt's introductory remarks to *Fantasy fiction: an introduction* is useful:

> What literary fantasy and psychoanalysis have in common is their shared need to construct narratives to explain the utterly inexplicable: what drives us, what terrifies us and why, and what our greatest desires might be. (2005: 3)

Speaking in Hume's academic parlance, I had rendered an artefact comprising illusion (escapist alternate reality), vision (a novel, interpretative image of reality), and revision (the interpretive image directed towards action over agreement) (1984: 55-56), motivated to explore Armitt's claim as a broader social question: what drives us, what terrifies us and why, and what might our greatest desires be? In doing so, however, the surface socio-political action of *A life in streets* revealed a deeper, more personal inquiry which led to an impasse: I could not see a world beyond the failed revolution of the Rupture.

The problem can be construed as an inability to reconcile my reader-author response to an unfinished world-2 with my authorial perception and manipulation of world-1. Furthermore, in the attempt to write my way out of this world-2, out of the Rupture, my world-1 very quickly became world-1s – a family world, a memory world, an Australian world, a Jewish world, a world of crisis and warfare, a multi-genre world, an editorial world, all in my peripheral vision, jostling, unreconciled, and mutable. Simply, there were too many worlds spinning in simultaneous orbits around my authorial intent, their competing meanings unable to harmoniously coexist. Is it any surprise, then, that *A life in streets* sank into and stopped within the fourth approach to reality proffered by Hume, disillusion? A type of fantasy which 'insists that reality is unknowable' and 'strives to dismantle our comforting myths and offers us no replacements' (1984: 56)? Which, aptly enough, brings us to Jackson and what we might consider as fantasy fiction's paradigmatic theoretical divide.

In summary, Jackson's thesis places the fantastic in the 'hinterland between "real" and "imaginary", shifting the relations between them through its indeterminacy' (1981: 35) and, out of this indeterminacy erupts a series of anti-social drives (necrophilia, incest, cannibalism, murder, etc.) that denaturalises the ideological interpolation of the subject within society. Given that this position relies on Tsvetan Todorov's structuralist framework which, among other things, suggests that the fantastic integrates the 'reader into the world of the characters; the world defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated' (1973: 31), Jackson's project is concerned with the dissolution of imaginary coherency which, echoing Adorno, is tied to rational mastery and social domination. The release of anti-social energy into an indeterminate world disrupts the 'unified, stable "ego" [which] lies at the heart of this systematic coherence

and the fantastic explodes this by seeking to make the heart's darkness visible' (Jackson 1981: 176).

Ultimately, the fantastic, as a literature of subversion, attempts to 'depict a *reversal* of the subject's cultural formation' (1981: 177), dissolving the Imaginary through the acidic action of the Real, which is usually kept hidden, kept absent, left unseen and unexpressed. Unlike marvellous fantasies concerned with constructing coherent, consolatory secondary worlds, the fantastic must move towards and remain in 'an imaginary zero condition, without time or space, a condition of entropy, the fantastic produces an "other" region […] of pure transgression' (1981: 78), which is ultimately 'non-thetic'.

It is important to grasp where this valorisation of transgression leads. In suggesting that 'the shady worlds of the fantastic construct nothing', and that '[t]heir emptiness vitiates a full, rounded, three-dimensional visible world, by tracing its absences, shadows without objects' (1981: 45), Jackson argues for a fantastic literature that destroys, dissolves, empties, and denies. It creates nothing; it offers no conversation, no dialogue, no alternative. It is a refusal, to a point, to engage politically – politics understood as a space of contested social relations governed by the continuous naturalisation and denaturalisation of ideology – because it assumes that the only viable progressive reaction to hegemonic closures of meaning is subversion. This position mistakenly concludes that subversion is simply a weapon in the progressive arsenal, something that the contemporary rise of populism, fascism, fundamentalism and their reactionary attacks on democratic politics calls into serious doubt.

Of course, I am not the first to encounter this problem. Here Mark Bould's 'The dreadful credibility of absurd things: a tendency in fantasy theory' (2002) is indicative of a contemporary critique responding to Jackson's work. For Bould, the fundamental issue is the fact that Jackson's thesis begins by perceiving 'genre as a constraint to be transgressed rather than as an enabling field of possibilities' (2002: 63), discounting the vast majority of what we might popularly think of as fantasy from her debate. More than a simple dismissal of literary examples, Bould links her dismissal of the marvellous aspect of the mode to Jackson's articulation of transgression and the fact that 'almost all fantasies neutralise this impulse' (2002:63). That is, a space for the representation of transgression is opened only to be subsequently closed once more. However, Jackson quashes the latter half of this circuit, conflating it with the transcendental tendencies of Tolkienesque secondary-world fantasy which she rails against. This is not to suggest that Jackson's thesis is not without merit. Only that the conclusion of its discursive logic – lingering in a transgressive zero-point which, contrary to understanding the absences that the fantastic reveals *because* history is contingent and mutable, suggests a fixed societal constellation – leads to a political dead-end.

It was into this exact cul-de-sac that *A life in streets* managed to turn. Aware, perhaps, that the usual narrative uplift associated with secondary-world fantasy was inappropriate for the text's historically informed reality, I could not see beyond the ruins. To this end, a decidedly dystopian constellation of character, landscape, and outlook prevailed: the streets were rent from below; the river stopped up with abandoned boats; buildings were bombed out, blackened, broken; neighbourhoods were

emptied of people, and the city, seemingly cut off from the wider world, crumbled in on itself. Running battles punctuated lifeless silence. Where survivors clung to life, these did so in clannish enclaves, vigilant and disconnected, hoarding resources, humanity ossifying. And, importantly for our discussion, all the progressive energies driving the initial stages of the revolution quickly metastasised into the familiar, recriminatory excesses of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions carried out by figures of mutilated flesh, prosthetic replacement, and faceless automata. In this wasteland, the protagonists attempted to find purpose, tried to pick up some of the shattered pieces of their past to (re)cover the giant void consuming their present with the inexorable gravity of a black hole. Maia spent her days composing a musical map of the new, inhospitable topography, while Turner clung to an idealised sense of right and wrong that may never have existed. In other words, neither character had an eye turned towards the future as they were too busy struggling to comprehend the world around them.

What could they do? Where was a way out? Did I want a way out? How could the Rupture be sutured? Could I stomach a happy ending? Was a complete rewrite necessary? Those questions turned and turned and turned over in my head. And, interestingly enough, an answer to those question can be articulated via an examination of Jackson's critique of marvellous literature.

In 'On fairy-stories', Tolkien suggested that the marker of a good fantasy was recovery, where '[r]ecovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a regaining – a regaining of a clear view' (1947: 52). This 'clear view' is commensurate with a (re)confirmation of a universe freighted with purpose, that '*eucatastrophic* [a 'turn' of sudden, miraculous grace]' (1947: 60) impetus makes the world an uplifting place of wonder, restoring our faith not only in ourselves and the world, but a mythically charged substance that gives both a meaningful orientation. Hume's claim that Tolkien's fiction appears as a response to the increasingly scientific understanding of the universe seems more than plausible, the notion that '[s]cience has freed man from one kind of insignificance, only to participate him into a far more complete state of aimlessness' (1984: 42) clearly manifests in the heroic actions of the hobbits. The degree to which this 'turn' from tragedy to consolation is rebranded into a more secular morphology appears as the political answer to increasing social fragmentation in the form of a social principle that reinscribes the individual with a meaningful social existence.

Over an email correspondence we conducted in 2018, Dr. Geoffrey Boucher suggested that we all seek meaningfulness over the course of our lives, where meaningfulness (lowercase m) occurs when 'life history of an individual can be coherently narrated as the result of the interaction of a series of intentional projects with the contingencies of events,' and that this infers 'no transcendent goal, as well as that the life history does not have "blank chapters" caused by repression' (personal communication). On the other hand, Boucher said, Meaningfulness (uppercase m), stemming from an interpretation of figures like Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur, has a 'transcendent and unifying global meaning, linked to a cosmologically grounded axiology, that would give lives purpose, meaningfulness, basic moral orientations, and a sense of the integration of the elements of a life into a total pattern with a humanly intelligible design or goal' (personal communication).

Where this becomes interesting is in a conclusive acknowledgement that while we, as human beings, need meaningfulness, the attempt to find this in Meaningfulness is problematic Boucher said, insofar as ‘Meaningful worldviews, especially religious worldviews, tend to reject pluralism and deny the relativity of values’ (personal communication). In so many words, this is a transposition of Jackson’s dismissal of the marvellous whose secondary worlds and quest narratives transmit a ‘longing for imaginary unity, for unity in the real of the imaginary’, a ‘desire for an absolute, for an absolute signified, an absolute meaning’ (1981: 179). Her disdain for the theological freighting consciously embedded in Tolkien’s work is, perhaps, not far off the mark if, as Hume puts it, ‘the individual’s private and personal life is insignificant, but he can achieve significance through commitment and dedication to a cause’ (1984: 47). To the extent to which any given reader may intuit ‘themselves as crippled heroes, forced to operate in a materialistic universe which has lost its myths and monsters’ (Hume 1984: 47), the ritualised inscription of morally-inflected, cosmically-important meaningful action across generic fantasy suggests why the form is not only popular, but seems to be gaining more traction in an increasingly transmedial landscape. The trouble, then, is just what cause is being projected and if this seemingly conservative attribution is endemic to the form or just its more ‘classical’ manifestations.

For the claim of longing, we can turn to Charles Taylor for an enunciation of how the desire for meaningfulness translates into a submission to Meaningful ‘banners’. Scaffolded by a religiously inflected hermeneutic philosophy, Taylor’s *Sources of self* (1989) disperses a pre-modern religious primacy into a secular need for a ‘framework’ where one can find belonging, purpose, and moral sense. Not only is a framework a requirement in knowing who you are, but for knowing who others are, where you both stand in relation to one another, and how this resulting ‘we’ makes a comprehensible, meaningful reality ‘within which I am capable of taking a stand’ (Taylor 1989: 28). Thus, when Taylor argues that ‘a person without a framework altogether would be outside our space of interlocution; he wouldn’t have a stand in the space where the rest of us are’ (1989: 31) we perceive two suspicions and an opportunity. Firstly, we are suspicious because, as neuroscience suggests, a gap in information leads to fabrication of assumptions and, at times, tacit ignorance. That is, any assumptive or ideological framework is a crutch for ignorance that may, in fact, discourage introspective interrogation. Secondly, we are suspicious that, even if Jackson claims that her valorisation of transgression is not anarchic, it seems to discount the need for the Symbolic, simplifying social relations to a combative duology of narcissistic egos and their monstrous doppelgangers, arguably making a practical politics impossible. Lastly, however, in the fantastic’s exposure and erosion of hegemonic ideology there appears an opportunity to formulate alternative forms of subject creation and politics. If so, where might this opportunity lead?

Very quickly, by suggesting that the fantastic (if not all fantasy) reveals a contingent, historical repression – ‘as a desire for something excluded from cultural order’ (1981: 176) – via the fantastical elements synonymous with the mode, Jackson foregrounds the importance of exploring the not real, strange, unfamiliar and transgressive as a subversive exercise. However, when she valorises transgression and asks that we tarry in the morass of anxiety, dissolution, and open-ended meaninglessness, she pivots away

from understanding ideology as an 'omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable' (Althusser 1970: 35) hegemonically contested space towards ideology as an inherently negative, authoritarian 'false conscious' foreclosing any dialogue in this arena. The marvellous is immediately dismissed, seemingly dehistoricising the genre, ignoring its roots in literary Romance which has acted as a transmitter of what we might term cultural re-coding, in addressing secular, existential attitudes to things like life, death, identity, morality, and authority. Bould sees this as falling into the trap of 'a rather simplistic model of the relationship between the subject and the social order which makes no distinction between varieties of psychic and social repression' (2002: 63).

Taylor argues that the idea of the self is deeply rooted in 'interchange' where 'I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions' (1989: 35). Similarly, Hume posits that the attraction of Romance adventures is tied to a psychological impulse towards a narratively structured sense of self-purpose and self-worth, stating that

> [t]rashy though many adventures are, they encourage belief in the possibility of meaningful action. They deny that the individual is worthless, a negligible statistic. Even at lowest valuation, this reassurance has psychological value, for people who cannot believe in themselves have trouble engaging themselves with life in any fashion. (1984: 68)

What these two statements signpost is the social dimension of the ego scaffolded by a meaningful linguistic exchange, and the extent to which fantasy is capable of imagining an alternative reality whose very existence calls the parameters of this exchange into question. Now, this can be as prosaic as Attebery's claim that the anachronistic transposition of contemporary ideas, debates, characters into historical temporalities can radically affect our idea of the present (1991: 15-16). That, as China Miéville put it, all fantasy involves a 'slight of mind, altering the categories of the not-real' (2002: 45), or Hume's suggestion that '[d]reams and psychosis create new models of reality' (1984: 131).

It is this 'modelling' in secondary-world alterity that rears as one of the most important aspects which Jackson's elides in her critical theory. Returning to Althusser, if we accept that 'the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects' (1970: 45), then emptying out the Symbolic is problematic. It suggests that the very thing constituting 'concrete individuals as subjects' cannot be changed, cannot be negotiated nor contested – it can only be dissolved by transgressive impulses (necrophilia, murder, incest, cannibalism) antithetical to political action seeking dialogue with social authority. Therefore, the very fact that all secondary-world fantasy begins with a revolutionary rejection of reality – be it physical, metaphysical, historical, political – is compelling insofar as it forces both writer and reader to accept what is patently impossible as real. Or, as Bould suggests quite succinctly, fantasy worlds are 'not only not true to the extratextual world but, by definition, do not seek or pretend to be' (2002: 81). Here we have the latitude to suggest secondary-world fantasy is a 'psychotic' literature because, at its core, regardless of how close the writer brings it to

reality or how many realistic elements are used in its world-building (cultural, economic, psychological, etc.), it presupposes a complete rejection of extratextual physics and contemporary forms of social appearance and authority. In other words, this psychotic coding built into the very 'What if?'—What if magic was real? What if animals could speak English? What if hobbits were real?—of the secondary world, allows the writer to produce an imaginative crucible where the fantasy compensates 'for the traumatic absence of a sensible Real by offering the interconnectivity of a ruthless hermeneutic' (Bould 2002: 80). Thus new pathways for subject formation might be proposed and explored, even if those pathways, as is often the case with this sub-genre leads back to a restoration of traditional authority.

Be that as it may, Armitt describes this imaginative foray, and the interpolation of the reader into the fictional landscape, as something approaching the psychology of mythic experience. Indeed, Armitt's basic read on fantasy's revelatory charge is closely aligned with Tolkien's, where readers immerse themselves in the '"dreamworld" of the text in order to reach a level of understanding we believe experience alone cannot give us' (1984: 30-31). The conflation of fantasy with a 'dreamworld' is telling, recalling much of what writers like Le Guin argue is native to speculative fiction: illusions used to get at the truth of our experience. Where this is as dangerous as it is exciting is centred on the way in which the narrative leads to the point where, as Armitt frames it, escape from extratextual reality into the text allows the reader to 'wake up to a more transcendent understanding' (1984: 31). Indeed, it is from here that Jackson's suspicion of the marvellous stems and where some of my own misgivings relating to how I might conclude *A life in streets* were found.

I became interested in brushing up against a Marxist catechism expressed by China Miéville: '[o]ur commodities control us, and our social relations are dictated by *their* relations and interactions' (2002: 41). As such, we return to the significance of looking at the marvellous or secondary-world fantasy as a psychotic literature. That is, via its imaginary break with reality to pursue alternative social and developmental pathways, it foregrounds how the subject can be ideologically interpolated while simultaneously enacting a renovation of authority. Given the grip classical Tolkienesque fantasy has on the popular imagination when it comes to this sort of fantasy, this renovation is usually expressed in quest narratives saturated with chosen ones and wise wizards and Dark Lord. Such texts are inherently cyclical Romances that support a status quo inflected with prelapsarian longing for a 'better' reality made meaningful by sublimation to a transcendent worldview[1]. In other words, my desire to distance my work from this form echoes Slavoj Žižek's reminder that 'the critique of ideology should not begin with critiquing reality, but with the critique of our dreams' (2014: 193), especially *recurring* dreams.

Indeed, this prompt perfectly encapsulates my creative struggle in that both Jackson's perpetual entropic nightmare (meaninglessness) and Tolkien's consolatory (re)vision (meaningfulness) were as unsatisfactory as they were seemingly incompatible. In slightly different terms, while I considered the subversive erosion of hegemonic structures a compelling place to critique reality, the result was unfavourable; a political cul-de-sac vulnerable to fundamentalist co-option. Furthermore, even as the alternative reality offered by secondary-world fantasy is excellent territory through which to

navigate different subjective positions and formation (we need only look at 'post-classical' work of writers like NK Jemisin to sense this), escapist wish-fulfilment is almost synonymous with the form, at least within the scholarship. However, while these two positions seem like diametrically opposed approaches to (re)writing reality, they may represent two sides of the same ideological coin.

Partly, this dissatisfaction, manifesting in my own work, finds more than a little resonance with recent scholarship published by figures – for the purposes of this paper, epitomised by Žižek, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière – responding to the seemingly unopposed supremacy of neo-liberal, globalised capitalism. Indeed, even as their separate approaches and conclusions may differ, all three thinkers contend with the same social-political constellation, troubled by the feeling that '[t]he status quo has become naturalized and made into the way "things really are"' (Mouffe 2005: 5). For Žižek this means a concerted examination and attack of the rise of a 'post-political bio-politics' (2008: 34) that moves away from 'outdated' ideological combat towards the regulation 'of the security and welfare of human lives' (2008: 34). Which is not unlike Mouffe's claim that the Left has abandoned its native position as the 'very idea of a possible alternative to the existing order has been discredited' (2005: 5), becoming increasingly centrist in the attempt to build a consensus-driven politics in an era beyond 'Left' and 'Right'. Rancière might agree that Mouffe is more than justified to make this claim given that representative democracy, as it currently appears, represents both very little that is democratic for a very narrow band of interest:

> […] for what we call democracy is a statist and governmental functioning that is exactly the contrary: eternally elected members holding con-current or alternating municipal, regional, legislative and/or ministerial functions […]; governments which makes laws themselves; representatives of the people that largely come from one administrative school; ministers or their collaborators who are also given posts in public or semi-public companies; fraudulent financing of parties through public works contracts; businesspeople who invest colossal sums in trying to win electoral mandates; owners of private media empires that use their public functions to monopolize the empire of the public media. In a word: the monopolizing of *la chose publique* by a solid alliance of State oligarchy and economic oligarchy. (Rancière 2005: 72-77)

This all too familiar sentiment is the perfect contextual image of the social reality Jackson's concept of the fantastic strives to dissolve, but to which she offers no alternative. Bould is quite right to argue that this failure is representative of a broader issue connected an overvaluation of 'subversion and resistance in fantasy theory and criticism over the last twenty years […] which parallels the Left's increasingly common rejection of a programmatic Marxist politics of revolution' (2002: 72). Without much doubt, Jackson's work has been in no small way responsible for this sentiment within fantasy scholarship. The problem: without an alternative, without a meaningful articulation of a progressive, emancipatory, and/or revolutionary praxis, the resulting fissure can be and is being filled with more radical programs – namely, fascist populism and violent fundamentalism – backgrounded by simultaneous rejection of political engagement itself. What we currently see is the increased particularisation of society into the 'apolitical life of the indifferent consumer of commodities' (Rancière 2005: 29) whose prevailing liberal worldview inflects the rights of the individual as a closing

down of 'communal proximity', or as Žižek summarises, '*the right not to be harassed*, which is the right to remain at a safe distance from others' (2008: 35; original emphasis). The consequence of this is the closing-off of the individual to wide-reaching dialogue about the future direction of civilisation itself (2014: 87).

On the other hand, the global rise of populisms and fundamentalisms seems far more disturbing due simply to the visceral nature of its threat. At a macro level, Žižek, Mouffe, and Rancière purpose that the vacancy produced by the Left – be it in failed revolutionary moments, the destabilisation of states due to aggressive democratic colonialism, or centrist-consensus politics – is being filled by narratives offering meaning in a meaningless existence. For Žižek, this is most readily described (via recent upheavals in Iran and Egypt) in the effacement of symbolic fields without a strategy for their replacement, the resulting void leading to something akin to a return of the repressed in radicalised Islam (2008: 70). Closer to home, Rancière argues that against the backdrop of discontent directed towards borderless capital and a political class seemingly disinterested in representing any interest but their own, an 'appeal to the old principles of birth and kinship, to a community rooted in the soil, blood and the religion of their ancestors' (2005: 79) finds increasing traction.

Is this not the issue encountered in the previously discussed approaches to fantasy? The destruction of symbolic meaning on the one hand and the (re)installation of meaning through teleologically-freighted epics on the other? The complete acceptance that the status quo cannot be changed and must be destroyed, or the incorporation of the individual into transcendent schemas that reject pluralism, deny the relativity of values, and rationalised brutality?

The issue with these positions is how they translate all political opponents or obstacles into things to be warred against and extinguished. Why else would Jackson advocate approaching a realm as close to the non-thetic as possible? And why do generic secondary-world fantasies invariably conclude in a conflagration of violence that sees the utter defeat of this or that Dark Lord? Maybe this is a natural, or naturalised corollary of the basic way politics functions, its required 'collective identities […] established on the mode of an us/them' (Mouffe 2005: 13) whose similarly natural – or naturalised – outcome is the figurative and literal erection of walls, keeping the enemy (the terrorist, the immigrant, the neighbour, the other) at a safe distance or in various forms of internment.

This was my struggle with the Rupture – the fictional enclosure of the aesthetic, generic, and theoretical gaps in my apprehension of reality via a secondary-world fantasy. Penned in by city walls, the narrative witnessed the destruction: the destruction of the status quo; the destruction of a revolutionary movement; the destruction of community and neighbourliness; the destruction of individual meaning and purpose; and, finally, the destruction of my will to write. Maia remained lost, attempting to recover the familiar, and for Turner, the hunt for one murderer leads him into a city of monsters. Courthouses were good for nothing but executions. Humanity succumbed to despair or, in response to despair, machine logic. Frustrated by Jackson's denial of socio-political alternatives, and unwilling to encode the potential of a power vacuum with consolatory

wish-fulfilment, I stopped that world, held it in stasis – a fixed moment of cynicism, melancholy, horror, and rage.

Without realising, however, I had seeded my narrative with something approaching hope – faint, but determined. When it comes to revolutionary movements (and their failure), Žižek is fond of quoting Lenin's call to 'begin from the beginning over and over again' (2009: 86), which is not as defeatist as it may first appear. Rather, it is acknowledgement that the work is never done, that the struggle does not stop after that moment of 'divine' violence and

> [t]his is why every revolution has to be repeated […]. It is only after the initial unity of the people falls apart that the real work begins, the hard work of assuming all the implications of the struggle for an egalitarian and just society. It is not enough to simply get rid of the tyrant; the society which gave birth to the tyrant has to be thoroughly transformed. (Žižek 2014: 104)

In the ruins of the Rupture, a potential mechanism for such a transformation is beginning to be imagined. Firstly, a university, its students and its academics survive, a haven for those able to escape the first stage of revolutionary violence. Secondly, safeguarded by the remnants of the city watch, a city block is transformed into a close-knit enclave. And lastly, in the undercity copy of Maia's childhood home, children learn how to build and cook and sing and play piano, literally writing their stories on the back of Maia's father's designs for the city he once hoped to create. Certainly, these three enclaves are different, they are directed by different impulses and different dreams. However, united by the desire to survive – and, in surviving, utter a vision of a better world – they are not enemies, or, as Mouffe puts it, 'persons who have no common symbolic space' (2005: 13). They conform to Mouffe's compelling pursuit of 'agonism': a political contest not between enemies, but adversaries, 'friends because they share a common symbolic space but enemies because they want to organize the common symbolic space in a different way' (2005: 13). Without a doubt, this sounds utopian, but only, perhaps, because the world where this sort of society exists seems so very, very far away. I do not know if what I produce will be successful. What I do know, however, is that it is an attempt, a struggle, a puzzle, an agreement with Hume's declaration regarding the importance of fantasy fiction that states: 'We of the western cultural tradition can ill afford to despise exposure to alternative styles of living: we need to reconsider our own too acutely' (1984: 123).

Endnotes

1. There is something of a purposeful omission that should be addressed here. What is quickly becoming an 'industry-standard' critical work on fantasy literature, Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of fantasy* (2008) is conspicuously absent from this paper for two reasons: practicality and conceptual focus. Firstly, there was a need to briefly rehearse the positions of both Jackson and Hume, as this paper is very much a close conversation with those two figures in relation to my own practice. Secondly, the paper was not intended to take issue with Mendlesohn's reading of what she terms 'portal-quest fantasy'. Rather, it is more interested in conceptualising fantasy in modal (fantasy as a mode dependent upon the relationship generated between protagonists and the world) and anthropological (fantasy as an example of a narrative coping mechanism addressing an uncertain if not

hostile reality) rather than rhetorical (strategical provoking emotional effects) approaches. Consequently, while Mendlesohn's implicit argument—that certain rhetorical strategies (portal-quest, immersive, intrusive, and liminal fantasies) are geared towards specific ideological outcomes—may need to be critiqued and discussed in more depth, that is discussion for another paper.

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