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Preface

Fantasy and the Medieval Tradition

Before embarking on the main task at hand in this collection let us begin by laying out some necessary conceptual and methodological context for the exercise. What we have selected for literary analysis is a twenty-first century text. It has been the received opinion of the reading public and the critics that it belongs to the genre of modern fantasy. By such a term we commonly refer to those prose texts produced in the last six or seven decades which go beyond the immediate human sensory perception in the creation of their imagery, adopting the kind of supernatural component which is based on the principle of using magic as an equivalent mode by means of which the spiritual manifests itself in the material reality. This type of the supernatural has its origins in the theory and practice of the literary subcreation practised during the Middle Ages and then well into the Renaissance. From this definition of the supernatural we would thus exclude both the ghosts and apparitions of Gothic fiction and the epic machinery of *Paradise Lost*. If we then attempted to move on from a technical dictionary-form definition of the genre to a definition which attempts to capture its defining spirit we might further suggest that, whatever the degree to which fantasy texts rely on the explicit presence of magic (which in some cases is quite small, especially if compared to the extent to which the supposedly realistic novel has tended to rely on modern ideologies), their unifying feature is that they invariably take a stance as regards the traditionally

conceived spiritual dimension of reality, which may be either affirmative or evaluative, or else critical, but is never indifferent.

This observation will lead us from a synchronic to a diachronic context of the genre. Here we will, of course, observe that the modern concept of the genre of fantasy has been forged by the literary and critical legacy of J. R. R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. It is thus easily noticeable that within the mainstream of contemporary fantasy writing of the last half century each successive literary creation has had to position itself in relation to this looming legacy. Because of the pervasive impact which *The Lord of the Rings* and *On Fairy Stories* have had on defining the nature of fantasy fiction from the later 1970s, it has in fact come to pass that Tolkien's work is now situated at the pivotal point whereby all previous (post-medieval) critical theory dealing with the fantastic mode in literature has been rendered invalid or at least incomplete and ultimately ineffective for dealing with the emergent new genre which was based on distinctly different conceptual premises and exemplified different generic ramifications vis à vis other forms of literature. At the same time, all fresh theoretical discussion of the mode and the genre of fantasy has had to approach Tolkien's ideas as the conceptual starting point.

Now the effectiveness of Tolkien's ideas for the fantastic seems to consist in the fact that it has, on the one hand, connected modern fantasy with its rich and largely forgotten heritage of literary genres crucial for medieval literature, the abandonment of which, Tolkien rightly argued in his seminal essay *On Fairy Stories*, made contemporary literature unable to effectively come to grips with some central aspects of the human spiritual condition.

But reclaiming the imagery of the fantastic into the world of contemporary narrative fiction – long bound to reliance on narrowly-defined sensory perception, reinforced by three centuries of civilisation based on a conceptual outlook defined by empirical science – was no longer feasible. Tolkien, therefore, remodels the medieval notion of literature as human subcreation into the idea of the secondary world. The greatest genius of this is perhaps the way in which the ingeniously novel concept stems from, and brings one back into, the deepest layer of the tradition it seeks to reclaim for the contemporary intellectual reality.

Thus, for the medieval consciousness, the fantastic elements were a plausible extension of the common earthly sensory experience, by means of which imaginative subcreation sought to come closer to the unquestionable spiritual reality of which man's earthly existence was a function, or else to expose its underlying presence more emphatically. For the contemporary mind the (sub)creation of a secondary world, conceived of as an autonomous parallel universe, creates a plausible equivalent framework for the suspension of disbelief. The suspension of disbelief makes use of the culturally received tendency to rely on the notion of universally determined physical laws as the principles of orientation in physical reality, which will invariably characterise the contemporary mind. As a result, it effectively frees the recipient of the fictional world from an automatic reliance on the cognitive habits of the primary reality. This process allows for fantastic elements to be subsequently introduced as part of a coherent secondary fictional reality where, as in the medieval genres incorporating fantastic imagery, the overall effect is designed to bring the audience, by their experience of the fictional reality, into close contact with what once was the spiritual and is now termed as the existential human condition.

What this effectively achieves is the reversal of the four-centuries-old process of the progressive internalisation of human ethical conflicts by recreating the medieval overt moral universalism in an autonomous fictional reality where impressions based on immediate sensory experience and fantastic imagery are once again forged into a coherent creative framework.

Now the way in which the elements of fantasy functioned in literature created during the medieval period was of course founded on some of the defining, inherent characteristics which determined human cognition and intellectual condition at that time, and as such it extended well beyond the boundaries of any specific genre. Nevertheless, it is now of key significance that these elements would have normally manifested themselves in the specific context of a particular literary text – a text created in an age when generic conventions shaped the particular literary creation in a more determinate way than perhaps ever before, and certainly ever since.

This means in turn that by referring to and drawing upon the medieval heritage contemporary fantasy has been coming into constant and intimate contact with the medieval genres which provided what has become its stock imagery. It seems warranted to make the generalisation that the genres in question would be mostly those which originally operated in the broadly conceived context of myth. This would mean the dream allegory, the fable, the bestiary, the ballad and the folk tale and legend, the romance and the Breton lay, along with *chansons de geste* and the earlier tradition of heroic narrative poetry, as well as all the adjacent allegorical tradition.

What in fact happened in the process of the appropriation of the traditions of those genres for the purposes of the post-Tolkienian fantasy is that the wholesale adoption of their stock imagery meant now that it was not only the avowedly fantastic elements that were incorporated into the fabric of the newly emergent genre. Those elements of the original imagery which went beyond the contemporaneous sense-experience have become, by the twentieth century, distant enough from contemporary experience to share the appeal of the marvellous and, as such, to become inseparable from whatever in those original old texts exceeded the warrant of plausibility as testified to by the universal sensory capabilities of human perception. It thus turned out that the elements of the original genres of medieval literature, once understood to be realistic have achieved with time the same aura and appeal of cultural continuity and tradition which once made anachronistic poetic diction such a valuable artistic tool for primary as well as secondary epic poetry.

In consequence, all these elements of imagery acquire a newly defined poetic status, but what they potentially convey is of course essentially the same as in the original texts, i.e. the socio-cultural conditions of the life of the community which produced the original texts and the ethos and values which that community embraced and aspired to embody.

Thus, in the briefest possible outline, one may seek to define the nature of the relationship between the genre of modern fantasy and its medieval heritage. Of the many fascinating vistas which open up for the literary scholar who sets out to pursue the particular themes

and issues some are deftly tackled by the individual authors of this collection. While it will certainly not exhaust the wealth of interpretative possibilities which the intriguing subject entails, it is nevertheless to be hoped that it offers a fresh collective insight into the perennial discussion about the ways in which literary culture constantly interacts with, and is sometimes so beautifully illuminated by, the legacy of its past.