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Magick as a Threshold to the Forgotten: Hope Mirrlees and Susanna Clarke's Fantasy

La Magia come Soglia verso il Dimenticato: La Fantasia di Hope Mirrlees e Susanna Clarke

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ABSTRACT

We explore how Hope Mirrlees's Lud-in-the-Mist *(1926) influenced Susanna* Clarke's Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell *(2004), both recovering lost English magic as a bridge to a mythic past. Mirrlees's Fairyland, a forgotten yet seeping presence, parallels Clarke's Faerie. Their transtextual ties reveal art as a second reality.* Lud-in-the-Mist*'s elusive, dreamlike tone subtly shapes modern fantasy, its quiet resonance felt in Clarke's intricate worldbuilding and beyond.*

Lud-in-the-Mist di Hope Mirrlees ha influenzato Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell *di Susanna Clarke, entrambe esplorando la magia inglese perduta come ponte verso un passato mitico. La Fairyland di Mirrlees, dimenticata ma persistente, riecheggia la Faerie di Clarke. I loro legami transtestuali rivelano l'arte come una seconda realtà. L'atmosfera sfuggente e onirica di* Lud *modella silenziosamente il fantasy moderno, con la sua influenza percepibile nella complessa costruzione del mondo di Clarke.*

KEYWORDS*: magic, Mirrlees, Clarke*

PAROLE CHIAVE*: magia, Mirrlees, Clarke*

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> […] the 'value' of fantasy has seemed to reside in precisely this resistance to definition, in its 'free-floating' and escapist qualities.[1]

1. *Introduction*

The influence of Hope Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926) on modern English and American fantasy, from John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981) to Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* (1999), has been paradoxically both decisive and almost surreptitious. This covert quality is due to Mirrlees's own ambiguity, to the fleeting and almost illusory atmosphere that reigns in her novel.

This pre-Tolkien fantasy by Mirrlees, the only novel in the genre the author ever wrote, went almost unnoticed in the 1920s —only to be reprinted in 1970 by Lin Carter as part of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series. This cryptic and hard to grasp story, set around a Dutch-like bourgeoisie on the threshold with Fairyland—which Farah Mendlesohn describes as a «liminal fantasy»—, would go on to exert a considerable influence on authors such as Crowley, M. John Harrison and James P. Blaylock. We are interested in the particular influence of Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist* in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2004).

Significant parallels can be drawn between the main actantial structure of both novels: the characters of Mr. Norrell and Jonathan Strange in Clarke's novel mirror the duo formed by Nathaniel Chanticleer and Endymion Leer, as consecutive and opposable protagonists. Both duos are furthermore complemented by a third and mysterious character, the Raven King in Clarke's case and his counterpart in Mirrlees's, Duke Aubrey, thus forming a *rara avis* threefold structure and a narrative scheme that contributes to the richness and complexity of both novels.

Written in the same fantasy tradition that led Lord Dunsany to conceive *The King of Elfland's Daughter* in 1924,[2] one of impressionistic fairy tales as in George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) or Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862), Mirrlees's fiction delivers an original rendition of the *topos* of Fairyland, devising an ambiguous and forgotten territory that leaks its magic through to the "normal world" and helps the author explore the theme of artistic creation as a second

[1] R. JACKSON, *Fantasy,* Routledge, New York 2007, p. 1.

[2] Michael Swanwick sheds light on the differences between Mirrlees and Dunsany, as perceived at the time: «Also, Dunsany was writing at the time and modernist read him, but he was old, a man from another time, writing in more of an impressionist sort of way that was harnessed by modernism. Lord Dunsany's The King of Elfland's Daughter, with its treatment of Faerie and our own world as distinct and equal realms, appeared in 1924» (M. SWANWICK, *Hope-In-The-Mist. The Extraordinary Career and Mysterious Life of Hope Mirrlees*, Temporary Culture, New Jersey 2016, p. 29).

reality. In Clarke's novel, an equivalent place called Faerie calls for a deeper examination of the transtextual links between these two fictional topologies.

2. *The Mirrlees-Clarke Link*

Having just finished a novel he had anxiously waited for over a decade, in March 2004 Neil Gaiman wrote a post on his online journal eagerly recommending *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, where he stated: «[…] in my probably biased but not entirely uninformed opinion, [it] is the best English fantasy novel written in the last seventy years».[3]

Bloomsbury took Gaiman's words and quoted them on the book's dust jacket, which only added to the hype the publishing house was generating and that did not sit well with some critics and scholars, who thought Clarke's novel was being sold as a sort of Harry Potter for adults. Therefore, when it came to John Clute writing his review of Clarke's book, he decided to ask Gaiman directly about what he meant, probably because he felt that «in the last seventy years» needed some context («a somewhat overstated claim from him about the importance of the book», Clute stated), presumably thinking about the foreword Gaiman had written in 2000 to the Gollancz edition of *Lud-in-the-Mist*, where he opens by saying «Hope Mirrlees only wrote one fantasy novel, but it is one of the finest in the English language».[4] And thus Gaiman brought the last piece of information that was needed, stating to Clute that he had indeed *Lud-in-the-Mist* in mind when he wrote that, although in a hurry:

> […] stripped of excess, Gaiman's statement points right to the heart of the book. […] What Gaiman was pretty clearly not quite getting around to saying in dear was that, in his opinion, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* was the finest English novel of the fantastic since Hope Mirrlees's great *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926), which is almost certainly the finest English fantasy about the relationship between England and the fantastic yet published. (A personal communication from Gaiman has confirmed this sense that Mirrlees was very' much on his mind.)[5]

Thus, in some way, it could be stated it is Neil Gaiman the first to notice Mirrlees's cardinal influence in Clarke's —albeit inadvertently to most if it weren't

[3] N. GAIMAN, *Back in the Snow…*, https://journal.neilgaiman.com/2004/03/back-in-snow.asp (visited 15/10/2024).
[4] H. MIRRLEES, *Lud-in-the-Mist*, Gollancz, London 2018, p. IX.
[5] J. CLUTE, *Review of Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, in «The New York Review of Science Fiction», XVII, 2, 2004. pp. 9-11.

for Clute. It is never said how much of this noticing is thanks to Gaiman's personal relationship with Clarke, as they had been in correspondence since the early 1990s.[6]

The influence of Mirrlees's work on Clarke's novel was again noted in 2005 when writer Jo Walton lucidly stated in her review:

> Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is clearly written from an alternate universe where the great fantasy-defining genre-starting book of the twentieth century, after Dunsany, was not Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* but Hope Mirrlees *Lud-in-the-Mist*. It's not a great deal like *Lud-in-the-Mist*, but it's much closer to it than it is to anything else, or than *Lud-in-the-Mist* is to anything else.[7]

In another review from a few years later, Walton would add that, considering the influence of Mirrlees on Clarke, Gaiman and other authors, «[*Lud-in-the-Mist*] would be recognized as one of the founding works of the genre except for the way it has rarely been noticed and seldom reprinted. […] perhaps it has contributed to a particular strand of fantasy, a particular way of approaching the numinous».[8]

Despite being rarely noticed in 1926, *Lud-in-the-Mist* was rediscovered in 1970 by legendary editor Lin Carter, who reprinted it with a foreword stating he assumed Mirrlees had passed[9] and was handing down her work from Modernism to a whole new generation of fantastic writers who got a great deal of their literary education from the American Ballantine Adult Fantasy series, including *The Lord of the Rings*.

In 2000, a new edition of *Lud-in-the-Mist* was issued, now by British publisher Gollancz, in a sort of second revival of the novel (the same year they chose to publish Crowley's *Little, Big* and M. John Harrison's *Viriconium*). This time it came with a foreword by Neil Gaiman, a personal friend of Clarke's, who had read her work and helped her start publishing in the 1990s, and whose own *Stardust* had been heavily influenced by Mirrlees a year prior.

Farah Mendlesohn considers *Lud-in-the-Mist* as an example of *liminal fantasy*, a category particularly difficult to define, but that demands a sophisticated treatment of the structures of fantasy itself, as well as «a construction of a point of balance right

[6] Cfr. N. GAIMAN, *The View from the Cheap Seats: Selected Nonfiction*, William Morrow, New York 2016, p. 378.

[7] WALTON, Jo, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, https://jowaltonbooks.com/5th-february-2005-jonathan-strange-and-mr-norrell/ (accessed 15/10/2024).

[8] WALTON, Jo, *Next Door to Fairyland: Hope Mirrlees Lud-in-the-Mist*, https://reactormag.com/next-door-to-fairyland-hope-mirrlees-lud-in-the-mist/ (accessed 15/10/2024)

[9] Not only was Mirrlees very much alive, but would live until 1978, presumably unaware of this reprint (due to her living in France at the time). Also, regarding Carter's interpretation in that foreword, Gaiman shuts down the social reading early by saying: "I have seen editions of *Lud-in-the-Mist* which proclaim it to be a thinly disguised parable for the class struggle. Had it been written in the 1960s it would […] have been seen as a tale about mind-expansion. But it seems to me that this is, most of all, a book about reconciliation —the balancing and twining of the mundane and the miraculous." (H. MIRRLEES, *Lud-in-the-Mist* cit., p. IX.)

at the edge of belief»,[10] requiring even the subversion of the reader's expectations. Trying to pinpoint this category, the critic found that authors such as John Crowley, Elizabeth Hand and M. John Harrison all referred back to Hope Mirrlees as an inspiration (whose techniques also found an early extension into Mervyn Peake's works) and thus she placed *Lud-in-the-Mist*'s author at the center of a set designed to discuss the idea of *liminal fantasy*,[11] together with stories by Joan Aiken and Patrick O'Leary.

According to Mendlesohn, in works of liminal fantasy, «the magic hovers in the corner of our eye»,[12] which not coincidentally is a perfect way to define what happens in *Lud-in-the-Mist*. Furthermore, the critic helps us situate Mirrlees's novel as a defining work of reference in Susanna Clarke's generation.

The dynamics and the motion of narrative resolution in Mirrlees are similar to those of Clarke's, in what I consider to be a case of influence. Clarke amplifies the structure posed by Mirrlees —not necessarily making it more complex or intricate— and both writers point to the same: healing through a recovery of ritual (that is, the old English magic). In Mirrlees's case, this healing is first and foremost individual and later communitarian. In Clarke's case is perhaps more evidently a national matter, without leaving behind a spiritual or personal dimension that is intrinsic to each character's journey.

3. *Magick's Holy Trinities*

Carla Arnell surveys the Christian subtext and symbolism in *Lud* and states that: «Within Mirrlees's career […] *Lud-in-the-Mist* sits in the space between her initial imaginative apprehension of a Catholic sacramental theology and her later, more rational acceptance of Catholicism».[13] Thus, a relative presence of the Christian subtext in Mirrlees's work is established.

On the other hand, Paula Brown considers that there is a subtext of Gnostic tradition at work in Clarke's novel, «a Romantic version of Gnosticism that locates the divine within the human».[14] This subtext would be structured around an antagonistic trinity, where Mr. Norrell acts as the Father, Jonathan Strange as the Son (opposed to the Father, unlike in Christian tradition), and John Uskglass, the

[10] F. MENDLESOHN, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut 2008, p. 24.
[11] Ivi, p. 220.
[12] Ivi, p. 14.
[13] C. ARNELL, *Lud-in-the-Mist as Memento Mori: Existential Anxiety and the Consolations of an Aesthetic Theology in Hope Mirrlees's Fantasy Novel* in «Renascence. Essays on Literature and Ethics, Spirituality and Religion», LXXII, 3, 2020, p. 186.
[14] P. BROWN, *Gnostic Magic in Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* in «Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts», XXIII, 2, 2012, p. 239.

Raven King, as the Holy Spirit.[15] This structure is reinforced if we take into consideration the fact that this trinity also coincides with the titles of each of the three parts in which the novel is divided.

The assumption of this subtext is not necessarily justified in Clarke's readings and world of references, since the author has stated that her main inspirations are literary and has only talked about her own turn to faith later in life, after the long illness that followed the publication of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. A sort of *leitmotif* in Clarke's interviews is the mention of a chronic illness and incapacitating symptoms[16] that prevented her from finishing a sequel to *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* and that eventually led to her engagement in a briefer project such as *Piranesi* (2020). In an interview from 2020 with Sarah Lothian, Clarke talked explicitly about her religious beliefs:

> Clarke's own faith, she says, is real, and has developed over the course of her illness. Her father was a Methodist minister whose tenure changed every four to six years, resulting in house moves for the family. "The religion of my childhood in many ways did not suit me. I found it quite problematic. […] a certain sort of Protestantism got associated in my mind with being quite isolated and quite alienated from the people around me. That has made Christianity, in many ways, quite difficult for me. So, it's very much been a process of trying to overcome that. But when I got ill, […] I started attending […] an Anglican church, and quite different from any church I'd been to before. It was very free from dogma […]".

Clarke is now based in Derbyshire, but lockdown has given her the chance to attend a different church in Cambridge via Zoom. "It's an Anglo-Catholic church […]. I think God has been pushing me towards this for a while. I feel very at home with the liturgy, and the sense and pace of the services."[17]

Whereas Clarke declares an early involvement with Anglicanism and a later, albeit post-*Jonathan Strange*, turn towards Catholic ideas, Brown offers barely any justification for her premise and, thus, Gnosticism should rather be traced back through Clarke's reading of Mirrlees, an author much closer in influences and aesthetics to the religious and ritualistic anthropology thanks to her relationship with Jane Ellen Harrison—one of the founders of modern studies in Ancient Greek religion and mythology and a central figure within the Cambridge Ritualists, a group

[15] Here it is essential to remember a fact about the plot: the Raven King was a child stolen by faerie and taken to Fairyland, where he learnt magic and became their King. He later came back to unite both lands and rule over England as well. But three hundred years before the novel begins, he disappeared, apparently taking English magic with him.

[16] The author was diagnosed with chronic fatigue compatible with Lyme disease.

[17] S. CLARKE, *Susanna Clarke: rescued by faith and Strictly (interview)*, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/11-december/features/features/susanna-clarke-rescued-by-faith-and-strictly (accessed 15/10/2024).

of classical scholars that shared an interest in ritual as the origin of myth and classical drama, inspired by Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890). The antagonistic trinity Brown recognizes, however, is clearly at work in Clarke's novel.

In Mirrlees, I believe we can also find a similar threefold actantial structure, where Endymion Leer would act as the Father —because of his authority as a doctor, always in possession of a secret knowledge, although his relationship with the Son figure will never be a direct one but rather a more symbolic one—, Nathaniel Chanticleer as the Son, always in a position of existential doubt, of apprenticeship: when the reader first meets Nathaniel Chanticleer, it is clearly stated that he is a man moved by fear of death, whose life is plagued by melancholy and dread of the unknown. The fruit symbolizes that freedom associated with the unknown (in Rossetti, it is sex, for Mirrlees it is a much more intricate symbol to define). And, finally, Duke Aubrey, a cryptic character that holds many similarities to the Raven King, for he is ruler of the unseen Fairyland, from which all magic once came but whose frontiers are now closed, as the Holy Spirit.

We should note, however, that Mirrlees's original structure observes an inversion regarding Clarke's, because the most conservative and inactive character is the one occupying the role of the Son, who must learn something and whose quest we ultimately follow.

The narrative motion runs in opposing directions in each novel: in *Lud*, the structure involves the direct transmission of knowledge. Duke Aubrey's truth goes through Endymion Leer and, although at first Chanticleer is reluctant to accept the gift, he finally gives in and transformation can occur for him and all of Dorimare. In *Jonathan Strange*, this truth is actively pursued, from the Father's inactivity (Norrell) to the Son's inquiring and even progressive stance (Strange).

Regarding the representation of magic in Clarke's novel, Deirdre Byrne offers an analysis where Norrell's bibliophile and illustrated magic opposes (and lastly complements) Strange's will to transcend his master's authority through the development of a practical and intuitive magic:

> […] Clarke suggests that neither a magic based on linear or printed words, nor one which entirely eschews the symbolic, can suffice. Rather, the joining of the two approaches grants both protagonists effective agency against the truly destructive acts of magic performed by the fairy and his cohort.[18]

This conception of opposable but complementary types of magic is somehow revisited by Nicholas Birns, who takes Byrne's stance as a starting point when he proposes an approach to the variety of magic in the novel in which Norrell's

[18] D. BYRNE, *The book and the spell in Susanna Clarke's Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* in «English Academy Review», XXVI, 2, 2009, p. 12.

"sociable" magic opposes Uskglass's, but also takes into consideration Stephen Black's outlandish magic representing historical otherness against Englishness[19]. We could consider what Birns states about the protagonist duo as a continuation of Byrne's proposal:

> Jonathan Strange seems, at first, the opposite of Norrell. […] That the two men are increasingly reliant on each other and are caught in the same predicament at the end underscores how, in the greater sense, they are really alike. […]
> Conversely, the true opposite to Norrell is not Strange but John Uskglass, […] antithetical to [their] the modernity […]. The eclipse of John Uskglass is matched almost exactly to the emergence of the modern world […]. The wish of Jonathan Strange to revive John Uskglass is at the heart of the potential of magic to fully rend the veil of reality. But in the novel, that veil is only slightly breached.[20]

Birns mentions the eclipse of Uskglass, which happens in 1485, together with the end of the Plantagenet dynasty and the Tudors rise to power. The emergence of the modern world —together with Gutenberg and Columbus—, for England, also meant breaking with Rome in 1533, thus burying Catholicism in the past, where it would collect the dust of myth. Mirrlees talks about this in her essay *Gothic Dreams* (1928), where she analyses the Kantian *sublime* behind Gothic literature and seemingly starts to take a pro-Catholic stance:

> What the Gothic revival in literature really sprang from was a sense that the past was frightening, a bad dream – the *Gothic* past, that is to say. But it is because it is Gothic that it is frightening rather than because it is the past. […] the Middle Ages were frightening because they were pre-eminently Catholic Ages. For many generations the Church of Rome had exercised a sinister fascination over the minds of Englishmen […]. In the Caroline Poets we find this two-edged emotion at an early stage. To Herrick, the Roman ritual is […] faerie.[21]

Mirrlees would then be pointing to the same thing as Clarke: magic functions as a threshold within the fantasy genre that both of them practice, towards what has been forgotten by English society, that repressed blending which, precisely, binds Catholicism to the land of faerie. For both authors, Catholicism symbolizes a more direct and authentic relationship with religion through ritual. The ritual of archaic liturgy as a method of reconnection and spiritual healing. If, as Mirrlees claims, the Roman ritual is «faerie», the magic expressed in fiction operates as a *symbolon* of

[19] To these typifications we could add the feminine and communal, protective, magic practiced by the Ladies of Grace Adieu within the same fictional universe.
[20] N. BIRNS, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell, The Magic of Sociality, and Radical Fantasy* in «Humanities», CXXV, 9, 2020, pp. 5-6.
[21] H. MIRRLEES, *Collected Poems,* Carcanet, Manchester 2011, p. 100.

suture to unite both parts and open the threshold that links Old England's superstition with an anagogical sense of Christian transcendence.

Having said that, if in *Jonathan Strange*, a novelesque novel in this sense, magic is represented *in praesentia*, as a practice verifiable by the transformative effects it exerts upon reality, in *Lud*, according to a more impressionistic and poetic regime of representation, magic is defined *in absentia* —we almost never see magic being done and in this Mirrlees inspired another great fantasist in the 20th century such as Mervyn Peake[22]. Magic in *Lud* is represented mostly by the effects of the fairy fruit and around a vague notion of healing and return of the sacred, like an object evoked and around which discourses and stands are made—essentially, an empty core that permits the circulation of symbols within the novel. The forbidden fruit that sets off the story and the quest is, to a certain extent, more of a *MacGuffin* to justify the "antisocial" ethos produced as a magical effect in those who consume it.

Naím Garnica reads Clarke's novel from the perspective of its coincidence with certain romantic principles and finds in the character of Jonathan Strange the same aesthetic conception that German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel attributes to poetry as «a force similar to the magical possibility of *unifying those elements of life that the era wishes to drive apart*».[23] Poetry and magic are thus put forward as strategies to heal the individual and national[24] psyche in the face of a despiritualized modernity.

Birns is of a similar idea when he states:

> *Magic in the novel is less a substitute for Romanticism than its parallel.* […] Magic provides the same challenge to familiar norms as Romanticism, but it does so through different means. Whereas Romanticism *suggests* magic, the magicians in the novel actually *perform* magic.
> […] It is not coincidental that Uskglass disappears just as the modern age begins […]. And then magic comes back, in the time of Romanticism, when people have had enough of technological improvement. *Clarke's English magic both replaces*

[22] In Mirrlees, the risk of the allegorical and the symbolic is constant; rather than speaking of genre, we should speak of a *fantastic mode* (R. JACKSON, *Fantasy* cit., p. 13). In *Lud*, the language evokes the fantastic, but when attempting to define or pinpoint it, it becomes elusive. In this sense, it is comparable to Peake's *Titus Groan*, a work generally considered fantastic, though nothing fantastic happens—it's only the language and the setting that constantly evokes the fantastic.

[23] N. GARNICA, *La persistencia de la estética romántica: magia y conocimiento en Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* in «Griot: Revista de Filosofía», XX, 3, 2020, p. 80 (translation and emphasis mine).

[24] The Raven King's prophecy is expressed in national terms: «I gave magic to England, a valuable inheritance / But Englishmen have despised my gift» (S. CLARKE, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Bloomsbury, London 2004, p. 132). In Mirrlees, Chanticleer, as mayor, seeks to uphold the ban on fruit throughout all of Dorimare, not just for his family.

Romanticism and alludes to it.[25]

This is what is said regarding Clarke. Let us remember that Mirrlees defends Romanticism (specifically Wordsworth and Coleridge, as the only ones to have achieved the sublime).[26] Additionally, the theme of Uskglass and modernity is revisited, forming a series: magic-Romanticism-Gothic-sublime-Catholicism.

Garnica also raises the possibility of reading magic in Clarke's via the Foucauldian notion of analogy as a model of knowledge, where magic serves to establish analogical relations that shed light on the complexity of nature. Let us extend this to Mirrlees and we can now read both works as proponents of magical language as a form of resistance, anachronism and retreat, in the face of the advances of a despiritualized modernity lacking rituals, as in William Blake's dark satanic mills. Garnica says: «Romanticism [let us think about magic, ritual] mixes again what modernity had tried to separate: feeling and reason, science and art, reality and fiction, magic and science, dream and reality, humanity and divinity».[27] Magic is meant to suture —in the sense of the Greek etymology of the word *sym-bolon*— the rift where civilization failed to reconcile nature with the supernatural.

In sympathetic magic, as Frazer explains it, the possibility is raised of modifying reality based on similarity or contiguity (for instance, what is inflicted upon an image or effigy is believed to affect the person it represents, just as actions performed on hair or nails—which once belonged to the person—carry magical consequences). This conception of magic is, in a certain sense, metonymic (*pars pro toto et totus pro parte*), where the magical act or ritual functions as a signifier that conceals the magical action, which is the transformation, its meaning. In the same way, when we consider the fictional representation of magic in these works, the magic itself occupies the place of the signifier, hiding the meaning of something that reappears in the text as a lost cultural element in society (fantasy, poetry, spirituality, ritual, religiosity... all iterations of a nostalgia for a rural, pre-industrial, and even pre-Reformist world), thereby exercising a political fantasy: I imagine a world where magic exists, where what I yearn for was never lost or where it can return. This is also the mythogenic predisposition of English culture to the return of the king (or the ancient world in general), from an Arthurian background.

Every fictional representation of magic entails, and conceals, a political fantasy by means of sublimation. The critical issue is to determine what is hidden behind the word «magic» in each novel, what it is replacing and symbolizing. It would not be too hazardous to perceive magic's leitmotif in these novels as a detachment from

[25] N. BIRNS, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell, The Magic of Sociality, and Radical Fantasy* cit., pp. 5-7, emphasis mine.
[26] Cfr. H. MIRRLEES, *Collected Poems* cit., p. 101.
[27] N. GARNICA, *La persistencia de la estética romántica* cit., p. 80.

the more atavistic one of Lost Paradise and the Golden Age and, ultimately, as a retreat from a demystified Modernity and toward a more authentic, albeit lost, relationship with mythos and divinity, a sort of anthropological rewind by means of ritualistic experiences.

When referring to the theme of the Lost Paradise, the Spanish theorist Claudio Guillén points out its close connection, throughout the history of literature, with the theme of the Golden Age and the origin of the utopian genre. The literary motif of Lost Paradise stems from the idea that every irrecoverable loss in human existence refers back to the biblical expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. As a cosmic drama, Adam's fall becomes a symbol through which the existential category of loss is expressed. Every use of this motif implies the construction of two antithetical spaces: a utopian space, set in the past and far away, idealized by the mists of time, and a dystopian space, embodied in the present, where the prosaic and banal feed the glow of the irrecoverably lost paradise. It is clear that this narrative structure is at play both in Mirrlees's and in Clarke's.

The longing for a lost past triggers the desire (in terms of romantic *Sehnsucht*), almost the necessity, for a socio-political utopia as well as an individualistic "Land of Heart's Desire." And what is that but the end of *Lud*, when Nathaniel Chanticleer comes back from Faeryland as Duke Aubrey's deputy and magic returns to Dorimare? What is that but the end of *Jonathan Strange,* when both magicians, albeit trapped, finally learn to work together and a new society of magicians is founded, thus magic returns to England?

> […] At that moment the Golden Age and the idea of a utopia in the political-social sense merged: the former was projected toward an immemorial past; the latter modeled an absent space and an unknown future. […]. From the here and now, the visionary sets out toward other spaces and other times. The desired space may be remote, but it is of this world or else ultraterrestrial: celestial paradises. If we reject the present, the exemplary time can be a retrospective Arcadia or a utopian future. Certainly, these categories are intermixed on one another.[28]

Thus, Mirrlees's and Clarke's political fantasies entail a return to the past (a retreat). As Mirrlees says in *Gothic Dreams*, Catholicism is at the heart of the Gothic: «It is merely pushing the symbol a stage back and discovering behind the Gothic castle a Popish church».[29] What is yearned for are the lost powers to transform the world, nature, and one's own psyche. What has been lost is innocence. In some way,

[28] C. GUILLÉN, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge – London 1993, pp. 223-224.
[29] H. MIRRLEES, *Collected Poems* cit., p. 101.

the motifs of the Golden Age and the Lost Paradise operate here surreptitiously, as Claudio Guillén suggests.

Jonathan Strange asks: «How can we restore English magic until we understand what it is we are supposed to be restoring?».[30] Uskglass bears obvious similarities with King Arthur, as he is said by his acolytes to be waiting to return as king.

Precisely, Mirrlees's influence on Clarke is most noticeable because both novels restore, through magic as a signifier of the culturally lost, an entire imagological system of Englishness, where that sympathetic magic —whether clearly portrayed or merely evoked according to the epistemological and fictional model it embodies— rather recovers that Victorian and Edwardian fascination with English magic as *magick*, as the occultist and founder of Thelema religion, Aleister Crowley, named it to distinguish it from mere stage illusionism (those same street magicians Mr. Norrell so despises). The *magick*: real magic, the ritualization of one's spiritual will, the omnipotence of the mind that Freud placed under the category of the uncanny and which, in the English fictional tradition, operates as the opening of that threshold that History had closed, as the union of the worlds separated by the bar of repression, and which, as an inevitably reactionary political fantasy, is nothing other than the nostalgia for that rural and pre-industrial England, unpolluted, forgotten but only dormant, whose signs have always configured the background of original Englishness from which to cast out the reifying effects of «progress.»[31]

English fantasy literature, while it may have its quintessential *locus* on the *other side*—the Fairyland—has placed the core of its epistemological and narrative mechanics within the liminality of the threshold, which is neither one side nor the other. However, insofar as the threshold functions as an enabler of crossing, it also represents the rift established in a hypothetical past: the moment when both worlds experienced a separation that the narrative seeks to rejoin via a myth of circulation and contamination. The story begins with the crossing of the threshold… and History begins with the closure of the threshold.

4. *Conclusion: On Faerie Land as a Primitivist Ritual to Recover Englishness*

Faeryland for Mirrlees, Faerie Kingdom of Lost-Hope for Clarke—the Land of Faerie serves as the perfect *topos* for setting gothic dreams and establishing a space outside reality, whose veil the narrative aims to rend. What the veil Birns mentions reveals once rent (as we stated, what magic symbolizes for Mirrlees and later also

[30] S. CLARKE, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* cit., p. 686.
[31] P. MATTHEWS, *English Magic and Imperial Madness: The Anti-Colonial Politics of Susanna Clarke's Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell,* McFarland & Company, North Carolina 2021, p. 30.

Clarke) is Catholicism, ergo a Christian belief in transcendence. If the true fantastic —what Mirrlees wanted to prove to Harrison, «Art […], according to Mirrlees, was for Harrison merely an escape. *Lud-in-the-Mist* […] may have been an attempt to suggest otherwise. Mirrlees explicitly uses Harrison's own theory to support her case for fantasy»[32]— leads to a transcendent belief, then the Catholic ritual would merely point in the right direction.

Jane Ellen Harrison, Mirrlees's partner in the 1910s and 20s, is perhaps the greatest influence in Mirrlees's work. As Michael Swanwick stated, «Her thoughts on religion, ritual, and ecstasy were to provide the theoretical underpinnings for all three of Hope's novels as well as her one major poem».[33] According to Nina Enemark, through Harrison's theory of art, Mirrlees is able to regard fantasy (and the fantasy genre, its expression) as a form of ritual, which becomes clear in two aspects of *Lud-in-the-Mist*.[34] First, in the fact that Mirrlees argues through her novel that a certain strand of the Romantic tradition that combines Gothic fantasy, dream vision and mystical experience (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats) grew out of ritual. Similarly, Garnica interprets Clarke's novel in a similar light and considers Jonathan Strange a Romantic hero.

Second, «The novel can be read as deploying the Nietzschean concepts of the Dionisyan, Apollonian and Socratic —a cornerstone of Harrison's theory— to polemically argue a case for fantasy literature».[35] Can we read Clarke in a similar or even the same, light, given that we have already established the link between her work and Mirrlees's? Also, can we extend the Nietzschean reading to incorporate Aby Warburg's ideas on the survival of ancestral fear of magic (the *Nachleben* of a *phobos* toward the *monstra* that lurk outside reality)? That Dionysian aspect that Enemark identifies as a substratum in Mirrlees could be interpreted as the phobic reflection of historical memory, an undercurrent of magical fears akin to Warburg's notion of *Nachleben*, especially if we consider ritual as a way of both conjuring and invoking that unsettling exteriority behind the veil of Maya.[36] For Mirrlees, Gothic Romanticism was nothing but a genealogical survival (much like Warburg's *Nachleben*) of central motifs and figures that emerged in pagan rites and Christian religiosity.[37] In this, Mirrlees echoes the *Belle Époque* primitivist tendency (Frazer,

[32] N. ENEMARK, *Recrossing the ritual bridge: Jane Ellen Harrison's theory of art in the work of Hope Mirrlees*, PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015. https://theses.gla.ac.uk/6443/, p. 186.
[33] M. SWANWICK, *Hope-In-The-Mist* cit., p. 6.
[34] N. ENEMARK, *Recrossing the ritual bridge* cit., p. 177.
[35] Ivi, p. 178.
[36] Cfr. E. GOMBRICH, *Aby Warburg. Una biografía intelectual*, Alianza, Madrid 1992, pp. 200-2008; G. PRÓSPERI, *Del Monstruo a la Idea. Aby Warburg y la psico-arqueología del hombre* in «Cuadernos de Filosofía», 72, pp. 38-42.
[37] N. ENEMARK, *Recrossing the ritual bridge* cit., p. 182.

Warburg, Jung, Conrad, Stravinsky, Machen, Lovecraft) that some critics have linked to the concept of *Imperial Gothic*.[38]

Finally, Enemark says that for Mirrlees, at the heart of fantasy writing, lies the psychological source of ritual, «a mystical, mythic expression of emotion arising from the depths of the unconsciousness».[39] This is embodied in Nathaniel Chanticleer's experience upon hearing *the Note* for the first time after which «his life was poisoned at its springs by a small, nameless fear»[40] for «he would gaze on the present with the agonizing tenderness of one who gazes on the past».[41] Even though there is no perfect equivalent in *Jonathan Strange*, the entire novel is imbued with an epiphanic relationship between magic and reminiscence of the past—specifically, the past of English magic. The emotional and mystical access to the old magic of the collective unconscious is the threshold that Strange can cross because he lacks the literate culture of magic that, in Norrell's case, suppresses instinct.

Fairyland as a space within the fantastic genre has its origin in ritual imagination. Both Mirrlees and Clarke deliberately withhold its full representation from the reader, as it corresponds to an ineffable experience. Conversely, Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* (1999) as well as Joanna Russ's *The Zanzibar Cat* (1971)—both at once a homage to and a critique of Mirrlees—attempt to fill that void, producing perhaps more conventional narratives.

Within Harrison's own theory, Fairyland stems from ritual and pagan imagination.[42] Germán Prósperi suggests that one is never truly able to describe *the outside*, only imagine it, specially through the imagination of unreal and fantastic.[43] Thus, we can establish a correspondence between Fairyland as a space where the collective unconscious dwells, but also with the *outside* beyond reality. Birns says that:

> […] it is important that the novel reveals Uskglass and his wild, medieval magic as a force that is possibility still latent in the fabric of the universe. But it may be that the medieval otherness of Uskglass is thus a *katechon* [that which holds back] rather than something heterotopic, other, radical, something more in line, in its revealing of alternate possibilities in modernity, with queer and multiracial discourses than with a nostalgic idea of sovereignty. […] Uskglass's temporal otherness is another way to question the hierarchies whose ultimate subversion is

[38] P. BRANTLINGER, *Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880-1914* in «English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920», XXVIII, 3, pp. 243-252.
[39] N. ENEMARK, *Recrossing the ritual bridge* cit., p. 178.
[40] H. MIRRLEES, *Lud-in-the-Mist* cit., p. 3.
[41] Ivi, p. 6.
[42] Cfr. N. ENEMARK, *Recrossing the ritual bridge* cit., p. 180.
[43] Cfr. G. PRÓSPERI, *Metanfetafísica*, Miño y Dávila, Buenos Aires 2023, pp. 295 *infra*.

> the emergent power of the African-descended manservant in the house of Sir Walter Pole, Stephen Black.[44]

The difference between Clarke and Mirrlees lies in the fact that, for Clarke, the return of an atavistic past serves (and is actively sought) as a means to enable heterogeneity. Mirrlees, on the other hand, remains on an almost mythical plane, where the highest form of otherness is still that of the self: what returns to Dorimare is its own original magic, transformed into otherness only by what was forgotten.

Magick functions in both novels as a means of return, a suture between psyche and reality. However, ideological distinctions emerge between both forms of magick in the way they frame the return of a lost Englishness. Unlike Mirrlees, where the otherness represented by Faeryland constitutes the lost English identity, at the end of Clarke's novel, it is Stephen Black —African born and symbolically enslaved by the English crown— who becomes the conduit and vessel of the old English magic, in a twist of postcolonial irony. The primitivist regression to the English magic that returns from the collective unconscious transforms into political unconsciousness (in the sense of Jameson) as it reorients toward a future of cultural heterogeneity and a political reinterpretation of that mythified Englishness. In other words, in Clarke, it is other forms of otherness that return, demanding a new balance of forces, where Englishness itself is cast into the realm of colonial otherness.

[44] N. BIRNS, *Jonathan Strange* cit., p. 8.