| Francesco Bernuzzi

THE THIRD HEMISPHERE: LORD DUNSANY'S JOURNEY BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE FANTASTIC

Abstract

The following article considers the peculiarity of fantastic settings in Lord Dunsany's fantasy fiction. In contrast to many canonical examples of the genre, Dunsany's works, though openly rejecting realism, never fully exclude reality, creating instead a continuous dialogue between the two dimensions. The article examines the status of Dunsany's fantasy settings as extensions of reality, as parts of the world beyond the reach of common knowledge, rather than self-standing cosmologies. It studies the role of the first-person narrator, a narrative device frequently employed by Dunsany to present the fantastic tale as a personal experience and to involve his readers in the story. Finally, it analyses the use of irony in Dunsany's fiction and its importance in prompting reflections on the nature and role of fantasy literature.

Key words: fantastic, fantasy literature, irony, Dunsany

While frequently neglected by literary critics, in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries fantasy literature has experienced a remarkable surge in popularity, attested by the wide range of media this versatile genre has inspired: television and cinema productions, graphic novels, artworks and games. J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973) may be safely assumed to be the leading figure of twentieth century fantasy writing, and his works are a landmark for the compo-

sition, or as he would call it the "sub-creation"[1] of literary worlds of fantasy. Less known to the wider public, but no less established as a "Forefather of Fantasy", is the Anglo-Irish writer Edward Plunkett, 18th Baron of Dunsany (1878 – 1957). Lord Dunsany constructed his fantasy worlds in ways that may provide an alternative model for fantasy fiction, while also prompting deeper reflections on the practice of myth-making (mythopoeia) and the shifting, complex relationship between fantasy and reality.

In Tolkien's model, the setting of fantasy stories relies on the belief engendered in the reader, a belief achieved through the use of literary language. Such a "Secondary World", as Tolkien called it, is believable and self-standing because it is presented as a fully coherent and self-contained world: it has its own history, mythology and rules and is described as the sole reality in which narration takes place. To break this "spell" would be to let disbelief arise in readers, bringing them back to the "Primary World" and jeopardizing the credibility of the tale.[2] It has not been infrequent then, in fantasy stories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to represent the Secondary World as the only possible reality within the story universe, by removing and avoiding any reference to the Primary World.[3]

Such conventional understanding of the fantasy world contrasts quite starkly with Lord Dunsany's style of creation, most typically exemplified by a series of short stories published between 1905 and 1919, which will be considered here. Even though Dunsany eschews conventional themes and realist modes and sets many of his fantasy tales in exotic, otherworldly and dream-like realms, artfully described in an ornate, archaic prose, he never completely removes layers of reality. Rather, he adopts a series of literary devices that engage his fantasy worlds in a continuous dialogue with the real world, make the boundaries between real and fantastic worlds permeable, and pose questions as to the nature of fantasy fiction and the roles author and readers are found to play. Dunsany presents many of his fantasy settings as if they were part of the real world, or somehow connected to it, and thus accessible by real people. This, combined with the frequent use of a first-person narrator who recounts the fantasy tale as

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[1] J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories", in: *Tree and Leaf*, London: Harper Collins, 2001, pp. 1-81.

[2] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 37, p. 49.

[3] See F. Mendlesohn and E. James (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 66 on some passages where Tolkien himself appears to contravene to his theory by referencing to the Primary World in *The Lord of the Rings*.

a personal experience, urges the readers to envisage the possibility of the fantastic in their own lives. Irony itself, a recurrent mode in Dunsany's narrative style, works less as a strategy to distance oneself from the fantastic than as an effective metafictional device which performs two crucial functions. For one, irony candidly reveals the author as an artisan of the fantastic: one who creates worlds of fiction through literary words. At the same time, irony serves to lambaste the hypocrisy of a materialistic, overbearing society which, in Dunsany's view, has forgotten and forsaken beauty, especially as embodied in art and nature.[4] Yet beauty may still be attained provided that the readers agree to play the game of fantasy and thereby regain their sense of wonder.

What is immediately striking in Lord Dunsany's version of the fantasy genre is the absence of a map, by contrast a relatively common feature of fantasy narratives. Tolkien himself, among many others, included a detailed map that helped his readers visualize the Secondary World of the story and clearly set it apart from real geography. That Dunsany should have failed to include maps simply because he was not involved in the visual aspects of his publications seems unlikely. In fact, his friendship and collaboration with illustrator Sidney H. Sime are well known, and Sime's artwork has been shown to have affected Dunsany's creative process on a number of occasions.[5] Ultimately, it is difficult to situate Dunsany's fictive lands, for his is the geography of dreams and legends. The story titled "Bethmoora" is a fitting example. Its eponymous city lies in view of the Hills of Hap and the mount called Peol Jagganoth, where "syrabub wine" is produced and local musicians play on the "kalipac", the "tambang", the "tittibuk" and the "zootibar."[6] Unlike Tolkien's, Dunsany's creative approach was not based on thorough philological accuracy. Nor did he strive to establish a canonical mythology. Rather, he disseminated his tales with a series of striking details of great suggestive power and often phrased in evocative sounds that contributed to the sense of exoticism and otherness while also bolstering the credibility of a Secondary World governed by its own rules and customs. Nonetheless, readers are presented with "familiar" elements that blur the boundaries between the fictional world of Bethmoora and the real world: the story opens with a description of London, and the first-person narrator reveals

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4 On the centrality of beauty, nature and art in Dunsany's work, see: W. F. Touponce, *Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft and Ray Bradbury. Spectral Journeys*, New York: The Scarecrow Press, 2013 and S. T. Joshi, *Lord Dunsany: Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995.

5 M. Amory, *Biography of Lord Dunsany*, London: Collins, 1972, p. 86.

6 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *A Dreamer's Tales*, Boston: J. W. Luce & Company, 1910, pp. 53-54.

that he has decided to leave the British capital in order to see Bethmoora. He also adds that there were other European visitors in the fabled city.

Similarly, in "The Fall of Babbulkund", another first-person narrator travels by sea and hires Arab guides to cross the desert on a quest to find the city of Babbulkund, carved by Pharaohs out of sacred hills but condemned for its sins by the prophet of a monotheistic religion. The cultural, historical and ethnic references explicitly remind the reader of the Near and Middle East and its narratives, but the setting of the story also overlaps with the fantastic and the unknown by mentioning the city of Babbulkund and the rivers Oonrana and Plegáthanees, which are nowhere to be found in a real-world atlas.

What is interesting is that Dunsany as a narrator often purportedly overlooks the otherworldliness of his settings. He simply presents his fantasy worlds and their stories as if they were part of shared, albeit slightly secretive, common knowledge. In a number of instances, the narrator nonchalantly suggests that some jewellers or antique shops in London in fact obtain their merchandise from supernatural sources, often with the help of thieves, as can be seen from this passage of "The Bird of the Difficult Eye":

> Seeing from this that some extraordinary revolution had occurred in the jewelry business I went with my curiosity well aroused to a queer old person half demon and half man who has an idol-shop in a byway of the City and who keeps me informed of affairs at the Edge of the World. And briefly over a pinch of heather incense that he takes by way of snuff he gave me this tremendous information: that Mr. Neepy Thang the son of Thangobrind had returned from the Edge of the World and was even now in London.[7]

The character that goes by the exotic and alien sounding name of Neepy Thang, son of Thangobrind (ironically preceded by the domesticating title "Mr."), will then proceed to reach the Edge of the World, and the Seas of Shiroora Shan, surprisingly enough, by train:

> He bought the purple ticket at Victoria Station. He went by Herne Hill, Bromley and Bickley and passed St. Mary Cray. At Eynsford he changed and taking a footpath along a winding valley went wandering into the hills. And at the top of a hill in a little wood, where all the anemones long since were over and the perfume of mint and thyme from

[7] E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Last Book of Wonder*, Boston: J. W. Luce & Company, 1916, pp. 53-54. The American edition uses the spelling "jewelry".

> outside came drifting in with Thang, he found once more the familiar path, age-old and fair as wonder, that leads to the Edge of the World.[8]

Nearly one century before J.K. Rowling's magical train to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,[9] Dunsany offers his own version of a train journey to the fantastic in enticingly familiar terms: a passage from known to unknown lands signalled by beautifully evocative natural descriptions, which are a known cypher and constant source of inspiration in the baron's writing. Yet the narrator does not forget to add references to real places, so that it is possible to reconstruct the train travel up to a village in Kent. A similar voyage between the worlds is undertaken by Pombo the idolater, protagonist of another story,[10] who takes a train from London to World's End (also a real British toponym), where he finds, in Last Street, a secret well opening into "the Edge of the World."

While Dunsany never developed all-encompassing mythologies or cosmologies to undergird his fantasy worlds, he did set up recurrent themes and motifs: "the Edge of the World" is one of them. Already mentioned in the myths of *The Gods of Pegāna*,[11] the edge of the world features in at least six stories from *The Book of Wonder*,[12] as well as in many other collections. Indeed, if a name should be found for Lord Dunsany's fantasy setting, it would probably be "at the edge of the world" and "beyond the fields we know."

The underlying concept is intriguing: the stories are set in *the* World, the same world where London, Paris, Ireland and Kent are, the real world Dunsany and his readers are supposed to inhabit. The world that, by the first decades of the twentieth century, had been extensively and thoroughly mapped by explores and the Royal Geographic Society, its most "savage" and exotic features domesticated by the pervasive reach of colonial powers and duly explained according to the models of institutionalized science. Archaeology and ethnography disclosed the secrets of distant civilizations, while positivist philosophy enforced

8 Ibid., p. 57.

9 See J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, London: Bloomsbury, 1997.

10 E. Plunkett Dunsany, "The Injudicious Prayers of Pombo the Idolater", in: E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Book of Wonder*, Boston: J. W. Luce & Company, 1915, pp. 36-44.

11 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Gods of Pegāna*, Boston: J.W. Luce & Company, 1916, p. 50: "the edge of Earth", "the Rim of the Worlds."

12 "The Bride of the Man-Horse", "Probable Adventure of the Three Literary Men", "The Injudicious Prayers of Pombo the Idolater", "The Quest of the Queen'sTears", "The Hoard of the Gibbleins", "How One Came, as was Foretold, to the City of Never" in: E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Book of Wonder*.

faith in the powers of reason to comprehend the unknown and promote progress. The machine, the ultimate product of modernity, and a *bête noire* for Dunsany, greatly enhanced man's ability to subjugate the wild forces of nature and exploit its resources. The world is *known*, and it is often with this or similar appellatives that Dunsany refers to it: "the fields we know", "the known world", "Terra Cognita."[13] Nonetheless, those lands we know seem to always have a border, a limit, and some other place lies beyond them: beyond accepted rules and conventions. Dunsany's frequently mentioned "Edge of the World" hints at a view of the cosmos that is at variance with the established models of science and more akin to older mythical representations of earth. The Latin epithet "Terra Cognita" conversely recalls the "Terra Australis Incognita" and conjures up reminiscences of ancient and early modern maps, their blank spaces and margins decorated with monsters, ornate allusions to the unknown, the unconquered places of the world in which readers can still envision distant lands of dreams and possibilities.[14]

The fantastic is a sort of continent or land bordering the real: it is not separate but adjacent and contiguous to it. Exchanges between these two dimensions are possible: the entire plot of *The King of Elfland's Daughter* revolves around them. The story is that of the love between Alveric of Erl, inhabitant of "the fields we know", and Lirazel, princess of Elfland. In his second novel, Dunsany weaves together facts and fiction in one intriguing detail: Orion, son of Alveric, slays a unicorn of Elfland; the horn of that same unicorn will be used by Benvenuto Cellini for a chalice presented by Pope Clement VII to Francis I of France:

> This was the horn that was sent in later years as a gift from the Pope to King Francis. Benvenuto Cellini tells of it in his memoirs. He tells how Pope Clement sent for him and a certain Tobbia, and ordered them to make designs for the setting of a unicorn's horn, the finest ever seen. Judge then of Orion's delight when the horn of the first uni-

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13 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Book of Wonder*, pp. 72, 74.

14 For example the map *Vniversale Descrittione di Tvtta la Terra Conoscivta Fin Qvi* by Paolo Forlani, an Italian cartographer of the sixteenth century, displays a "Terra Incognita" in the southern hemisphere of the world, populated by exotic animals, both real and fantastic, including an elephant, a rhinoceros, a dragon and a unicorn. The map is reproduced in the catalogue of the exhibition "Quando l'Italia disegnava il mondo, Tesori Cartografici del Rinascimento Italiano", held in Bergamo, Palazzo del Podestà, in 2016. See Associazione Roberto Almagià (ed.), *Quando l'Italia disegnava il mondo, Tesori Cartografici del Rinascimento Italiano*, n/p.: Associazione Roberto Almagià Associazione Italiana Collezionisti di Cartografia Antica, 2016, pp. 44-45, table 03.

> corn he ever took was such as to be esteemed generations later the finest ever seen, and in no less a city than Rome, with all her opportunities to acquire and compare such things. For a number of these curious horns must have been available for the Pope to have selected for the gift the finest ever seen; but in the simpler days of my story the rarity of the horn was so great that unicorns were still considered fabulous. The year of the gift to King Francis would be about 1530, the horn being mounted in gold; and the contract went to Tobbia and not to Benvenuto Cellini. I mention the date because there are those who care little for a tale if it be not here and there supported by history, and who even in history care more for fact than philosophy. […] How the unicorn's horn found its way from the Castle of Erl, and in what hands it wandered, and how it came at last to the City of Rome, would of course make another book.[15]

Far from being invented, the anecdote of the unicorn cup is mentioned in Cellini's own autobiography and faithfully reported by Dunsany.[16] Once again, an anecdotal detail refers to the time when scientific categories were less fixed than in the strict model of Linneus' taxonomy, so that a narwhal's tooth could pass for a unicorn's horn.[17] It also serves as tongue-in-cheek evidence for the actual existence of the fantastic, with dates and historical sources implying the common currency of unicorn's horns in the discourse of sixteenth century Rome. Dunsany reverses historical and fantastic paradigms as he notes that, in older days, unicorns were *still* regarded as fabulous, as if they were now known to be real. The passage also leaves open the possibility for new stories, since history and reality themselves may be seen as tales to be expanded by other narrators. Dunsany seems to express a wish for the substantiation of the fantastic in human history, or at least for the expectation that the fantastic may transfigure history and yield new insights about reality itself. In fact, in his novel the fantastic eventually prevails over the real as the King of Elfland uses a spell to extend the boundaries of his kingdom and take over, geographically and physically, the lands of Erl in order to include them within the territory of fantasy, beauty and perpetual youth.

Even when Dunsany refers to the Lands of Dream, he never presents dreaming merely as an activity of the brain during sleep but as a journey across specific landscapes and regions, as described in "Idle Days on the Yann":

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15 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1973, p. 133.

16 F. Tassi and B. Cellini (ed.), *Vita di Benvenuto Cellini, orefice e scultore, scritta da lui medesimo*, Firenze: Guglielmo Piatti, 1829, p. 268.

17 See O. Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn*, New York: Avenell Books, 1982, pp. 253-272.

> I [went] to find my way by strange means back to those hazy fields that all poets know, wherein stand small mysterious cottages through whose windows, looking westwards, you may see the fields of men, and looking eastwards see glittering elfin mountains, tipped with snow, going range on range into the region of Myth, and beyond it into the kingdom of Fantasy, which pertain to the Lands of Dream.[18]

"Idle Days on the Yann" is one of the rare stories by Dunsany that are part of a cycle. In the following tales "A Shop in Go-by Street" and "The Avenger of Perdóndaris" the narrator will once again visit the Lands of Dream, the river Yann, its cities and inhabitants, this time by physically stepping through the back door of an unlikely shop in a secret street near the Strand in London.[19]

Quite clearly, in many of his stories Dunsany's main interest is not that of establishing an alternative cosmology in which to take refuge. Rather, through his tales, he tries to ensure an expansion of reality by adding a "Third Hemisphere": his fiction conveys to the readers the idea that there is still room for dreams, for romance and for poetry in their everyday reality. The effort in Dunsany's fiction is that of illuminating "secret corners" of our world, safe spaces where the frail, endangered beauty of nature and art may be preserved and take free shape, may thrive and later exert its subtle influence on our life. The notion of a "Third Hemisphere" comes from *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, the title of Dunsany's 1919 collection of stories. And while the idea is not further developed in the book, I believe it offers thought-provoking clues as well as a useful visual model. Geometrically speaking, of course, the world's globe can only consist of two halves, but this playful linguistic invention flouts the rules of the known, *mapped* reality. The power of literary words adds a further dimension, another "hemisphere" that overlaps actual geometry, interferes with reality and illuminates it with the light of wonder.

The power of Dunsany's linguistic games lies not only in how he portrays his fantasy setting, but also in the position he assumes as a narrator and in the relationship he establishes with the readers. William F. Touponce has very clearly shown how Dunsany's mode of narration is chiefly that of *storytelling*.[20] He relates his tales as if they were either experiences that he has lived in person or as traditions that have been handed down to him and that are shared within

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18 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *A Dreamer's Tales*, p. 91.

19 In E. Plunkett Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, Boston: J. W. Luce & Company, 1919, pp. 104-119 and 120-147.

20 W. F. Touponce, *Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft and Ray Bradbury. Spectral Journeys*, New York: The Scarecrow Press, 2013.

a circle of readers, which conveys the sense of wisdom being passed down within a community of knowledge. Dunsany's habit of introducing the most bizarre elements of his fantastic stories as if they were something that "is known" or "is told" concurs to this effect. "The Hoard of the Gibbelins" opens: "The Gibbelins eat, as is well known, nothing less good than man";[21] while no one could possibly know about the dietary habits of the Gibbelins, characters of pure fiction, readers are given the distinct feeling of being made privy to a sort of mysterious yet authentic culture.

But a key element of Dunsany's storytelling mode is the use of a first-person narrator, a literary device he frequently employs in his short stories, to the point that the narrator becomes a character in his own right who bears many resemblances with the author himself. Often enough, the narrating voice mentions London as a familiar place, where as a matter of fact the Dunsanys spent much time and enjoyed a large group of acquaintances. At other times it is Ireland, the seat of the barony of Dunsany in County Meath, or Kent, where the Plunketts owned a second house and were eventually laid to rest. The refined, measured and elegant tone is that of a learned, aristocratic gentleman. "The Hashish Man", a sequel to "Bethmoora", opens with the narrator in the middle of what seems an upper-class party in London:

> I was at a dinner in London the other day. The ladies had gone upstairs, and no one sat on my right; on my left there was a man I did not know, but he knew my name somehow apparently, for he turned to me after a while, and said, "I read a story of yours about Bethmoora in a review."
> Of course I remembered the tale. It was about a beautiful Oriental city that was suddenly deserted in a day—nobody quite knew why. I said, "Oh, yes," and slowly searched in my mind for some more fitting acknowledgement of the compliment that his memory had paid me.[22]

Here, the boundary between the author and the narrator becomes tenuous: Dunsany and his literary persona seem to coincide, since none other than the real Dunsany had in fact written a tale about Bethmoora, first published in "Saturday Review" in 1908.[23] The stranger and Dunsany's literary alter ego then proceed to converse amiably about what has happened to the city and seem to

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21 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Book of Wonder*, p. 74.
22 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *A Dreamer's Tales*, p. 116.
23 S.T. Joshi, *Lord Dunsany: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2014, p. 48.

suggest that another way of travelling to fantastic lands might be through mind-altering substances.[24] The author himself seems to be concerned about the fate of Bethmoora, as if it were not a product of his imagination but an actual place, independent of his control, a place which may be stricken by an actual calamity. Dunsany-narrator then turns into an avid listener, a member of the public, as the role of the narrator passes over to the hashish man. Eventually, if we follow the logic of the game, we find that the readers, and at this point Dunsany himself, are left to wonder about the reliability of this second storyteller:

> [A] servant came and told our host that a policeman in the hall wished to speak to him at once. He apologised to us, and went outside, and we heard a man in heavy boots, who spoke in a low voice to him. My friend got up and walked over to the window, and opened it, and looked outside. "I should think it will be a fine night," he said. Then he jumped out. When we put our astonished heads out of the window to look for him, he was already out of sight.[25]

The narrator also displays the characteristics of an experienced traveller, as seen in stories like "The Fall of Babbulkund", "Bethmoora", and what may be called the *Yann cycle*. By the beginning of the First World War, young Dunsany had already visited the Swiss Alps, Gibraltar while on military duty, South Africa, where he fought in the Boer War, as well as the Maghreb and Egypt. These life experiences were to provide a major source of inspiration for Dunsany in his later works, as recorded in Mark Amory's biography,[26] and it could be argued that these first glimpses of the exotic would soon be turned into his otherworldly cities of fantasy. But the creative process worked also the other way round: "Idle Days on the Yann", the story of a boat trip along the river of dreams, was written before a cruise on the Nile, so that even the anticipation of a real experience had the power to influence the author's imagination: "I did not feel in the least as though I were inventing but rather as though I wrote the history of lands that I had known in forgotten wanderings."[27] The effect of this artifice is that the real Dunsany sounds as if he is either relating his first-hand experiences in the land of dreams or telling tales he has personally collected, much

[24] Replying to the only letter he received from Aleister Crowley, who praised the tale and commented on hashish, Dunsany clarified that "the strongest drug he took was tea". M. Amory, *Biography of Lord Dunsany*, p. 72.

[25] E. Plunkett Dunsany, *A Dreamer's Tales*, p. 126.

[26] M. Amory, *Biography of Lord Dunsany*, London: Collins, 1972, pp. 24-27.

[27] Ibid., p. 46.

like a new Herodotus of the fantastic: "It is many a year, they tell me, since Bethmoora became desolate. Her desolation is spoken of in taverns where sailors meet, and certain travellers have told me of it."[28]

The first person narrator almost invariably involves a second person, the reader, in a dialogue, as in this vivid description of princess Sāranoora's beautiful dance:

> And if I could get thirty heathen men out of fantastic lands, with their long black hair and little elfin eyes and instruments of music even unknown to Nebuchadnezzar the King; and if I could make them play those tunes that I heard in the ivory palace on some lawn, gentle reader, at evening near your house then you would understand the beauty of Sāranoora and the blaze of light and colour in that stupendous hall. … Then gentle reader you would be gentle no more but the thoughts that run like leopards over the far free lands would come leaping into your head even were it London, yes, even in London: you would rise up then and beat your hands on the wall with its pretty pattern of flowers, in the hope that the bricks might break and reveal the way to that palace of ivory by the amethyst gulf where the golden dragons are.[29]

In this powerful example Dunsany's "gentle readers", as he often addressed them, are personally called into question. The author strives to tear down the barrier between fantasy and reality, between himself and his readers, who inhabit their safe day-to-day world inside the walls of homes made familiar with a "pretty pattern of flowers." He wants them to experience the same intensity that strikes him when he delves into the far-reaching depths of the fantastic.

In terms that closely recall the conventional patterns of oral story-telling, Dunsany the storyteller has his readers partake of secret lore: he draws them in, and has them accustomed to the fictional familiarities of a story-based world, so that they may themselves venture into the wider realm of fantasy and confidently experience it first-hand: "I will not play those tunes in any streets we know. I will not bring those strange musicians here, I will only whisper the way to the Lands of Dream, and only a few frail feet shall find the way, and I shall dream alone of the beauty of Sāranoora and sometimes sigh."[30] The preface to *The Book of Wonder* is an explicit invitation for the reader to leave behind the mundane and enter the fantastic, its epilogue a farewell to readers and a thrilling anticipation for ever new stories: "But for this I must first return to the Edge of the

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28 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *A Dreamer's Tales*, p. 53.
29 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, pp.131-132.
30 Ibid., pp. 132.

World. Behold, the caravans start."[31] Both the storyteller and the reader will ultimately be free to embark on new journeys.

Despite this urgent call to experience the fantastic in the real world, to share and to amplify it, there still remains a prominent feature of Dunsany's literary voice that needs to be accounted for, a feature that often seems to work exactly against the mechanisms of the fantastic, that is, irony. Critics and admirers alike have often characterized Dunsany's literary production as a slow progression towards cynicism and disillusionment, as he gradually abandons his fantasy settings for more realistic concerns. H.P. Lovecraft in particular lamented a perceived loss in the author's initial naïveté for the sake of a more self-conscious voice that comes close to self-parody. In his literary theorization of fantasy, Tolkien explicitly opposed the idea of humorously undercutting magic itself from within a fantasy story.[32]

Such criticism seems questionable because it excludes the possibility that a writer may wish to evolve and experiment. More importantly, it disregards the fact that a vein of irony was present in Dunsany's writing ever since his literary debut with *The Gods of Pegāna*. There, Dunsany's irony subtly targeted prophets whose prophecies backfired or a host of improbable deities, like the gods of smoke and dust, the god that turned ember to ashes and the one who wept for lost and broken things.

It is true though that irony poses serious threats to the fantastic, as it undermines the foundations of Secondary Belief. The ending of the "Distressing Tale of Thangobrind the Jeweller" is a fitting example of how irony was deployed to disrupt or at least to undermine the veil of illusion. A merchant prince had promised the soul of his daughter to Thangobrind if he stole the diamond of the spider idol Hlo-hlo. After Thangobrind failed in the quest and met his distressing doom, the maiden, finally safe "felt so little gratitude for this great deliverance that she took to respectability of a militant kind, and became aggressively dull, and called her home the English Riviera, and had platitudes worked

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31 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Book of Wonder*¸ Preface, Epilogue.

32 Lovecraft's opinion is reported in S. T. Joshi, *Lord Dunsany: Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination*, p. 44. For Tolkien, see J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 10-11. Considering Dunsany's experiences during the Irish civil war (including a bullet-wound to the face in the Easter Rising of 1916) and in the course of the First World War where he lost many friends (the poet Francis Ledwidge and his fellow soldiers of the Inniskilling Fusiliers), we would be misled if we were to read his two first novels merely as cynical detachments from fantasy. Rather, the quixotic *The Chronicles of Rodriguez* and *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, which came right after his typically fantastic production of short stories, were a hymn to the power of the ideal to triumph over ugliness and materialism.

in worsted upon her tea-cosy, and in the end never died, but passed away at her residence."[33] Tolkien was to express his overt dislike for this story years later,[34] and one can see why: the reader is abruptly taken back to the reality of the Primary World in all its material and spiritual dullness.

Dunsany's nuanced predilection for irony inevitably affects his role as a reliable narrator. "A Story of Land and Sea", an entirely unrealistic, albeit not supernatural, narrative of piracy and crime that sees Captain Shard and his crew crossing the Sahara on their ship, is an amusing tale which is supposed to act as "a stimulus for younger men,"[35] a tale whose verisimilitude readers are not meant to question. Nonetheless, by way of conclusion Dunsany adds an unexpected and rather superfluous "guarantee to the reader", where he states that despite his own scepticism he has taken every possible means to verify the reliability of his source: he mentions a sailor in some tavern, allegedly provided with enough alcohol so as to prevent him from lying. Dunsany professes in jest that the narrator must necessarily be earnest, serious and reliable, and swears he will have the sailor executed if it is revealed that he did in fact lie:

> if he has been the means of deceiving you [the reader] there are little things about him that I know […], which I will tell at once to every judge of my acquaintance, and it will be a pretty race to see which of them will hang him. Meanwhile, O my reader, believe the story, resting assured that if you are taken in the thing shall be a matter for the hangman.[36]

Dunsany also parodies his own voice and his lavish style when he portrays a poor shepherd who describes to his literary alter ego the phantasmal city which is said to appear on Mallington Moor and whom he unkindly interrupts:

> Why, the place was all of marble, roads, walls and palaces, all pure white marble, and the tops of the tall thin spires were entirely of gold. And they were queer folk in the city even for foreigners. And there were camels, but I cut him short for I thought I could judge for myself, if there was such a place, and, if not, I was wasting my time as well as a pint of good whiskey.[37]

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33 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Book of Wonder*, p. 16.

34 See D. Nelson, *Possible Echoes of Blackwood and Dunsany in Tolkien's Fantasy*, "Tolkien Studies", 2004, n.1, pp. 177-181.

35 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Last Book of Wonder*, p. 150.

36 Ibid., pp. 151-152.

37 E. Plunkett Dunsany, *The Last Book of Wonder*, p. 33.

All the instances presented here concur to suggest that the castle of fantasy is built on the feeble foundations of literary words. But Dunsany, whose irony and playfulness were always part of his narrative strategy as well as his character, is unwilling to spare the real world from the caustic blows of his double-edged sword. His narrator is often found to be in a state of embarrassment for belonging to the real world, as when he has to explain to the bare-footed court of Singanee that his toes are deformed by the use of shoes (and he would make up a fantastic excuse rather than explain the norms of the society to which he has to conform)[38] or when he introduces himself to the crew of the "Bird of the River" that sails on the Yann: "I told how I came from Ireland, which is of Europe, whereat the captain and all the sailors laughed, for they said, 'There are no such places in all the land of dreams.'"[39]

In such passages Dunsany clearly attacks with irony the mediocrity of a conformist society that takes itself all too seriously, to the point that it can no longer enjoy a tale for the sheer pleasure of the tale itself but needs "a guarantee to the reader", a society that prefers a dull but reassuring life in "the English Riviera" – where even dying is turned into a euphemism – instead of the liberating power of storytelling and fantasy.

The final dialogue of "A Shop in Go-by Street" between the narrator and a witch with her black cat places the fantastic and the real on equal grounds:

> "Tell me something," I said, "of this strange land!"
> "How much do you know?" she said. "Do you know that dreams are illusion?"
> "Of course I do," I said. "Every one knows that."
> "Oh no they don't," she said, "the mad don't know it."
> "That is true," I said.
> "And do you know," she said, "that Life is illusion?"
> "Of course it is not," I said. "Life is real, Life is earnest——."
> At that the witch and her cat (who had not moved from her old place by the hearth) burst into laughter. I stayed some time, for there was much that I wished to ask, but when I saw that the laughter would not stop I turned and went away.[40]

Fantastic literature as a whole has always faced accusations of childishness, escapism, disengagement from reality and fact. Dunsany himself was considered by many an aristocratic dilettante who toyed with his fictional worlds as

[38] E. Plunkett Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, pp. 130-131.
[39] E. Plunkett Dunsany, *A Dreamer's Tales*, p. 60.
[40] E. Plunkett Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, pp. 118-119.

a hobby.[41] As a matter of fact, far from just breaking the spell, as Tolkien would have it, irony in Dunsany may be said to voice a clear statement from the author: he consciously acknowledges that he is part of the real world and that an infinite distance divides him and the reader from his creations. Dunsany is not taking distances from his Secondary Worlds merely for the sake of justification: he is openly exposing the inner workings of the fantastic, in a metaliterary invitation to reflect on what is fantasy fiction, on its role and function. The narrator and the reader are well aware that they accepted to play a game with specific rules, but the game may still affect life. Undoubtedly, a passing witty remark on the part of the narrator may take the readers right back to their world. This, however, does not in any way diminish the power of those words that have made the fantastic so vividly present in their experience. In the very words of Tolkien: "creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; a recognition of facts, but not a slavery to it."[42]

Dunsany's approach to fantasy literature is clearly unconventional: its main thrust lies in an attempt to re-shape reality in terms of a story-built world. Instead of temporarily putting aside the Primary World to achieve a self-contained sub-creation, he continuously reminds his readers of their connections with the real world. In doing so, Dunsany invites a reflection on the present we are living, while offering alternative ways of viewing reality itself. He achieves that by a subtly ironical critique of his contemporaries, but also by recovering past modes of storytelling and distant cosmogonies, which he actively reinvents in the light of his own times. In his narration he is witty, "heterodox to his own heterodoxy" as he himself stated,[43] in the sense that he refuses to freeze his own creation into rigid sets of knowledge or crystallize it around a fixed pattern of mythology. Rather, his approach to his readers is based on an open-ended inclusion: he presents them with his fictive worlds that they might inhabit and expand – in an ever-increasing but highly enriching awareness of their nature as fiction. The light that this article has attempted to shed on some captivating facets of Dunsany's fantasy world might hopefully inspire readers and creators of fantasy to rediscover an unjustly neglected writer, whose visionary work has done much to open up before us the vastly creative, exhilarating scope of journeys "beyond the fields we know."

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41 M. Amory, *Biography of Lord Dunsany*, p. 48.
42 J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 55.
43 S. T. Joshi, *Lord Dunsany: Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination*, p. 28.

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