

History as Fantasy:
Estranging the Past in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*

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Louis Montrose (1989: 1) suggests that there exists ‘a renewed concern with the historical, social, and political conditions and consequences of literary production and reproduction.’ Other than dissolving the parochial concept of the ‘genius author’ Montrose’s discursive position promotes the interpretation of any literary production as being inherently linked to the socio-political context of the author’s material reality. Informed by this position this article, using Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* as a case study, attempts to uncover the extent to which literary texts have, not only, been subject to historical and political concerns, but have been pivotal in the construction of *certain* histories, *certain* political ideologies.

Necessarily, then, New Historicism has begun a process of *blurring*. Understanding that this conceptual paradigm is concerned with the ‘historicity of texts and the textuality of history’ (Montrose 1989: 5) the boundaries that have existed between a categorical understanding of ‘history’, ‘fact’, and ‘fiction’ have been drastically eroded. What might once have been considered a historical document – an established set of facts – has quickly been transformed into something far more fluid. This article suggests, working with Clarke’s representation of otherness, reflection, and the dialectic of reality and imagination, that history can be written and re-written, marginalised or idealised, becoming a political tool and/or a portal to socio-political investigation. Obviously, the critical impact of New Historicism has been most widely projected onto Renaissance literature – most notably Shakespeare and his contemporaries, highlighting the need for a reading that includes adjacent Renaissance literature, prevailing and surrounding socio-political climates, and important figures and events.

Where the emphasis of history as a locus for ideological analysis becomes progressively interesting is in the production of *contemporary* historical fiction. There exists, here, a distinct shift in the analytical gaze – it is turned towards the now. Using history as a fictional device, contemporary historical fiction creates a doubling effect; it uses a ‘then’ to talk about a ‘then’ and a ‘now’. This is intentional *and* pivotal. Investing the past with the cultural input of the present speaks directly and explicitly to the act of history *creation*. As such, the reading of contemporary historical fiction through a New Historicist lens, while important in underscoring contextual underpinning, may not explore fully the extent of ideological (re)production and subversion working in any given text. Running parallel, if not inherently linked to the New Historicism of Montrose, Greenblatt, and Tennenhouse, theoreticians like Fredric Jameson and Rosemary Jackson, whose primary concern is the political horizon (there ‘is nothing not social and historical’ (Jameson 1986: 20)) will be applied to *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* with the attempt to draw parallels between historical portrayal and fantasy fiction.

This paper’s fundamental meditation is fixed upon the function (implied, explicit, subverted, or otherwise) of historical fiction. What is historical fiction? At once, historical fiction signifies a rupture expressing both a desire for utopian gratification and an impetus to examine the flaws of the past. This rupture takes the form of a temporal dislocation; not simply a portrayal of the past, this dislocation is a superimposing of contemporary facets (events, ideologies, styles, concepts) onto historical surrounds. A distinction is being produced between the past and present. However, the expression of utopian desire in literature *returning* to historical spaces is problematic. For Jameson this problem is one of impossibility of utopian realisation – utopia as a ‘non-place’ (2009: 410) – and that the process of expressing utopian content in literature is, in fact, a deconstructive dialectic between ideology and utopia. Any historical fiction which tries, either as a central or peripheral concern, to express utopia will do so in the form of its opposite: dystopia. Consequently, portraying dystopian content based on contemporary socio-political formation works to point to all the ills and evils of society.

However, this kind of historical fiction, as a genre, would arguably be, for Jameson, a regressive literature whose want to return to older systems and forms is actually a mechanism for denial – a denial of all the historical constraints built into contemporary society. ‘Escape’ becomes a very dangerous term; synonymous with denial, it is seen as a fancy, a wish-fulfilment fantasy. Jameson’s counter to such a system is that most readily found in science

fiction: creative extrapolations of the present, informed by, but not returning to, history. If science fiction is this 'future fiction', then he necessarily designates its historical counter-part (opposition) as 'fantasy'.

The idea of an inherent 'dislocation' required in historical fiction – the labelling demands a move (if only superficially) from present to past – connects it to the fantasy genre. We should be careful to denote here that while fantasy includes the secondary world construction of J.R.R Tolkien (and his 'sword and sorcery' offspring) it is also part of a wider fantastic literature directed at illuminating traces of the 'unsaid and unseen of a culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made "absent"' (Jackson 1981: 4).

Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* moves between historical fiction and the fantastic, merging seen and un-seen, reflection and reality; it navigates a path through the past and the present, examining the nature of recorded history, while exploring the 'world behind the world' and its relationship to the framing of what can be called the 'real'. Indeed, it is this duality of sub-textual application that has made *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* such a hard text to categorize, to stipulate genre, to apply a certainty of reading. In terms of historical fiction, Clarke centres the text in England during the Napoleonic wars; populated with characters like Lord Byron and Wellington there is an effort to pinion the narrative to a 'factual' history. However, the text branches dynamically from historical mimesis into something more subtle, more complex and discursively conscious to such an extent as to link both content and style, explicitly pointing to the very *act* and *function* of writing.

As a pastiche of Austin, Dickens, and (to a lesser degree) Charlotte Brontë, Clarke invests *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* with that particular canon's ideological codes, thematic concerns, tenor, and (to an extent) structure. Nevertheless, as a piece of *contemporary* historical fiction, we must be mindful that she is writing not *as*, but *like* Dickens and Austin. The distinction is important to highlight; it is to call attention to a far more self-reflexive, self-aware literary artefact. If we follow Stephen Greenblatt's fundamental clauses that there 'can be no autonomous artefacts' (1989: 12) and 'no art without social energy' (1989: 12) then, a pastiche, by its very nature, is in a state of oscillation between present and past. It mimics, reproducing all that is familiar about its predecessor, while appropriating, subverting and transforming these 'familiarities' to create something different, something new; it is both representation, appropriation, transformation and commentary on past forms and their continual relationship with contemporary modes.

As a fantasy, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* works to make the familiar unfamiliar. Through an exposition of magic and a secondary or obscured reality— Faerie – the text runs a discourse in parallel, but beneath the nineteenth-century portrayal (primary reality). By illustrating a world, and a way in which desire – desire repressed in the primary reality – is readily expressed and realised, the fantastic elements of the text act as incisive counterpoint and disturbing allegorical vision. Jackson contends that ‘[f]rom a Marxist perspective, such an intrusion of fantastic sequences constitutes an interrogation of the ideals sustained through bourgeois realism’ (1981: 123-124). Such a fantastic intrusion, in this instance, functions to make visible the cultural dominants represented in the text, clearly defining the space in ‘shadows’, the lack, the repressed, before subverting them. And it is in subversion that Jackson (1981: 180) positions the essential function of fantastic literature – in its language, content and structure – to undercut, diffuse and dissolve oppressive cultural orders; orders that create such shadows, such lacks.

The similarities between New Historicism’s discursive framework and a fantastic aesthetic of cultural un-covering are analytically sympathetic; and as the boundaries diffuse between history and fiction, and the act of writing historically becomes more subjective, the stakes in representing fictionalised historical artefacts manifests. Historically oriented study demonstrates the ways in which, as Montrose (1989: 1) discussed, the social is discursively constructed, it also creates a ‘relief’ of what social/cultural areas are being idealised, marginalised, repressed, excised, exalted, and preferred. When Rosemary Jackson (1981: 4) suggests that a fundamental by-product of fantastic literature is a foray into subversion, a sortie only possible with an understanding of the dominant cultural order, fantasy can become the creative expression of the New Historicist approach, if only from a slightly shifted perspective. Where Montrose et al. focus on historical context to illustrate the ideological strategies of a given period, Jackson sinks into the psychological, illuminating cultural norms in the interest of their fragmentation. However, both positions are tethered; as with Jameson, in the intrinsic nature of reading history or writing historically dislocated fantasy, the ultimate analytical horizon is political. Historical fiction is, therefore, a nexus for the past and the present where desire is at once expressed and denied; where fact and fiction merge, separate, and dissolve; a place of utopian wishes and dystopian reality. It is meeting place of appropriation and rupture and interrogation. And, in some cases, where there is fictionalised history, one cannot help but enter the land of fantasy.

Representing the Past: Social Reality and the Historical Project

Any representations of the past irrevocably become, at least partly, shaped by their current context. Consequently, as a contemporary historical fiction novel Jonathan *Strange and Mr. Norrell* necessarily comments not only on its nineteenth-century subject matter, but on theoretical concerns stemming from a later era. The interplay here does not privilege a particular direction, but acts akin to a conduit, rather than a gateway. As Montrose maintains:

Such an interpretive process historicises the present as well as the past, and historicises the dialectic between them – those reciprocal historical pressures by which the past has shaped the present and the present reshapes the past; it promotes a continuous dialogue between a poetics and a politics of culture. (1991: 16)

We must always remember that *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* is, as an example of contemporary historical fiction, a story. At its most general, pure level then, history can be seen to exist as a narrative. If we ‘can have no access to a full and authentic past’ (Montrose 1986: 6) then that past is, as a requirement, constructed from a series of different sources and traces. What is true and what is fiction is increasingly difficult to separate; we ‘know’ that the battle of Waterloo took place and that Lord Wellington led British forces during that time. However, a magician named Jonathan Strange that brought the dead to life and changed the course of roads is clearly a figment. I would suggest that such a clear demarcation, rendered in the interests of asking ‘what if magic existed?’ acts to a further process of illustrating the nature of historical recording. Using the continual interruptions of scholarly footnotes, Clarke positions the narrator of *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* as an historian. These footnotes introduce a canon of supposed happenings, figures, and – most importantly – texts that frame a British magical history. When the narrator cites ‘Francis Sutton-Grove (1682-1765), theoretical magician who wrote the books *De Generibus Artium Magicarum Anglorum*, 1741, and *Prescriptions and Descriptions*, 1749’ (Clarke 2005: 75), we understand that no such person existed, no such books were published, but this is not the point. Clarke is manipulating a form. *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* appears as history, as statement of fact, rather than a fiction; its ‘alternate history’ takes these footnotes, *which the reader understands are fakes*, as part of its social construction. It is through the texts of this Francis Sutton-Grove that the historical conceptions of Clarke’s characters are informed. While the social milieu in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* continues on the predication that magic and a magical lexicon are ‘real’, the discursive function is one directed at suspicion. This simple insertion of a historiographic device into a fictionalised history highlights a *prima facie* paradigm of the

New Historicist project: we can only access historical material through textual traces. Consequently, there is no certain way to generate an objectively factual historical account. History will always be encountered through a mediatory. The dangerous power implicit in Clarke's use of footnotes is that, delivered in the appropriately designated mode histories of the past are very easy to believe. When Jonathan Strange comments that soldiers he has *raised from the dead* are speaking a *dialect of Hell*, he is met with ambivalence, because this event fits into the accepted magical history. History, recorded history, is seen to shape conceptions of how 'reality' – the world – operates, no matter how bizarre that operation may be. A subtext permeating *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* is one satirising any creation of the historical document and the historical document's ability to shape and, at times, create a social reality. As Montrose maintains:

To speak of the social production of "literature" or of any particular text is to signify not only that it is socially produced but also that it is socially productive – that it is a product of work and that it performs work in the process of being written, enacted, or read. (Montrose 1989: 6)

Montrose's attention to the 'socially productive' aspect of the literary artefact places contemporary historical fiction in a powerful didactic position. To be productive a piece of literature needs to be read and what becomes clear in a *reading* of *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* is that there is more than one text being offered for reading.

Recalling that Clarke is writing a pastiche, we must not only look into her writing, but the writing she is recalling, reviving, and restating. The idea of the pastiche is, in itself, an interesting subject in terms of historical fiction. In placing *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* in the nineteenth century a serious displacement occurs; this is compounded further however when Clarke uses recognisable literary styles from that time. Not only does this stress the way in which Austen and Dickens have dominated the 'canon' of Western literature, but it stresses their importance historically: it is through the literature of these two writers that we (the popular reading public) are most readily able to access their historical period. This brings the discussion to the idea of privileging. Fredric Jameson (1986: 27-28) writes persuasively on the act of privileging a certain single element or a few facets of a given historical period to construct a totalising image of that period – this privileging translates into a communicable ideology or 'master code'.

Such ideological coding is made stark during Clarke's narrative. During the middle of a military campaign against the French the narrative focuses not on any battle, military disposition, or political posturing but on 'four gentlemen' and the 'serious business of eating

and drinking' (Clarke 2005: 412). The emphasis is on luxury and polite company, the implication being that in the middle of war, war appears only as another background. Ideologically this promotes the idea of a civilised war, a glorious war, where food and drink and travel take precedence over conflict and death. Indeed, such concerns are rendered only in the form of breakfast conversation. Furthermore, as the conflict continues and, in fact, becomes more perilous the story moves, quite literally, into the drawing room. Clarke writes:

Ten minutes later Strange found himself in a luxurious apartment filled with people, many of whom he already knew. There were officers; beautiful ladies; fashionable gentlemen; British politicians; and representatives, so it seemed of every rank and degree of British peer. All of them were loudly discussing the war and making jokes. It was quite a new idea to Strange: war was a fashionable amusement. (2005: 554)

This passage is telling. Firstly, the interval between conflict space (even this has been civilised) to European sitting room is nearly instantaneous, pushing war once again into the background. Actually, the push goes further, transforming the horrors of war into an amusement for the wealthy and well off. The similarity in what the text obscures, in particular, with that of the texts of Austen are obvious. It can be of little surprise that in a period of British imperial expansion and consolidation what would be privileged in literature would be the benefits of colonial land holding. That this colonial project and its imperialist motives are left 'unvoiced' removes the true horror and depravity they brought to foreign soil; removes representations of slavery in the American colonies, the raping of the African continent. These realities are somewhat blotted out from the historical literature landscape. As a pastiche *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* is insinuating a line of counteraction. Jonathan Strange is an outsider, not a member of the elite circle; he is someone used by that circle, familiar with the population of that circle, but an outsider none the less. That the idea of war as 'fashionable amusement' appears new (strange) *instructs* the reader to receive it in the same manner. Here Clarke takes the elements of Austen's imagery and transforms it. In Austen (take, for example *Mansfield Park*) the action takes place *removed* from the by-products of the colonial project, its many relationships predicated upon the barely referenced proceeds from overseas exploitation. This is not to suggest that Austen is complicit (overt- or covertly) in constructing an 'unseen' space, only that the narrative's emphasis on un-covering domestic life and re-covering the silenced voice of women takes precedence. The focus is provincial and the 'distance' between society and the factors that support it appears undefinably vast.

However, in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* the distance between the privileged civilised and the covered barbarism is in direct contact; the distinct is structured as farcical, the fiction and the fact in contact. This is what Jackson (1989: 65) would describe as a 'disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar.' And while this is a tenet for Jackson's analysis for the function of fantastic content, it is equally valid to apply these sentiments to contemporary historical fiction where the *retreading* of the past and the forms of the past allows for interrogation and reflection; and while we should not presume to know an author's intentions, the current conflicts surrounding the Middle East are no doubt troublesome echoes that sound in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*.

We could well label such a discursive tool as the *vulnerability of visibility*, where ideological privileging is pointed to in portrayal, dissecting its inner workings and the strategies of its proclamation. However, Clarke's historiographic process moves from implicit social representation to explicit symbolic subversion. It is at this point that Clarke use of a fantastic mode makes possible the inclusion of a direct symbolic language to enter into the 'realistic' narrative; it allows for previously impossible shifts that could only occur in a metaphorical space, but now exists as visible in 'reality'.

Considering that much Dickensian imagery touches upon the gothic, Clarke's appropriation of this form seems appropriate. Upon numerous occasions Clarke breaks into detailed descriptions of architecture, framing upcoming action and dialogue within specific spaces, symbolic spaces. For example, several characters happen upon a house. This house is fronted by gates of 'fine Castillian wrought iron' (Clarke 2005: 269) that have gone to rust. Repeatedly the gates are referred to as being red and decayed, burnt and disintegrated, and the house itself as a ruin 'built as much of elder-trees and dog roses as of silvery limestone' (Clarke 2005: 269). Simplistically, such symbols can be read traditionally as metaphor – the decaying, bloody symbology of the rust over the artifice of humanity and the reclamation of human space by the natural world representing degradation in society and a need for change or rebirth. Indeed, this is exactly what this passage hints at; however it also takes the role of a cipher, being a direct comment aimed at the reader generating a framework for a particular motif. Immediately following this descriptive turn is the observation that it 'is like the Other lands' (Clarke 2005: 269) before the author sends her characters into uncanny dream-states. Repeatedly using this distinct imagery to illustrate the symbolism associated with fantastic dislocations is reminiscent of a musical theme, the use of which places signposts for the

reader to observe how the fantastic 'Other land' is pointing to a troubling degradation in the protagonists' social reality.

Montrose (1991: 104) posits a similar process taking place on the Renaissance theatre where theatricality itself becomes the source of the theatre's subversive power. By its very nature the theatre questions the construction of any society and how the manner in which that society's rules are manipulated; actors take up multiple roles, culturally powerful 'costumes' are appropriate for popular use, gender is in flux, and history rewritten. Literature can work in much the same manner. Using familiar imagery to indicate an upcoming shift in the representation of 'reality' and direct our attention to a specific attack on an ideological position (in the case above – the everlasting power of western economic dominance), Clarke is demonstrating the narrative process of framing social reality, exposing it as 'a category, as something articulated by and constructed through the literary or artistic text' (Jackson 1981: 84). Making visible the underlying system in this way, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, much like the theatre, displays how experience is shaped by narrative, by text. It is by using elements of the fantastic that such an uncovering is achieved. It is the 'Other Land' that makes visible the invisible of the 'real land', not by creating an entirely new place, a new system, with new rules, but rather as a space of "alterity", this world re-placed and dis-located' (Jackson 1981: 19). This is the crux of contemporary historical fiction in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* – an active discussion addressing the ways in which a *certain* version of history is privileged and, in turn, represented.

This idea of ideological representation heightened and made visible through the fantastic is most stark when the 'real' and the 'fantastic' meet. Upon crossing paths with an English gentleman on a dark street, Stephen, an African servant, is set upon. Automatically, the gentleman feels threatened and regardless of Stephen's immaculate and expensive attire moves to strike him. Stephen's immediate belief is that the police will be called and it will be him that is hauled before the law for a *perceived* infraction founded solely on his ethnicity. In this moment, where the underlying social sentiment towards the 'Other' is brought violently to the surface, Stephen can perceive himself only through the social eye, the ideological premise: a 'black man' is known to lie and steal, a 'black man' is not respectable. Up to this point the function of the realisation is basically stated, however the scene pivots dramatically as the fantastic intrudes. Clarke writes:

He opened his mouth wide to begin accusing Stephen but in that moment he began to change. His body became the trunk of a tree; he suddenly sprouted arms in all directions and all the arms became

branches; his face became a bole and he shot up twenty feet; where his hat and umbrella had been there was a thick crown of ivy. (Clarke 2005: 201)

Stark in its imaginary and disturbing in its explosive abruptness, this transformation is supremely instructive as to the potent force the fantastic can deliver. The tree can be read, in the context of the scene's implicit ideological focus; specifically it can be translated into and understood through Deleuzian discourse. The ideology of fearing the 'Other', of using the 'Other' as a locus for difference and therefore evil is arborescent in its structure; like a great tree seeking to replicate itself the ideological coding is systemic, sending out roots that permeate all levels of society, producing a strict and ordered hierarchy. This fantastic transfiguration of man into tree is not so much symbolic as it is a making real the ideological coding at work within the individual. Stephen's reaction to this sudden tree is ambivalence, ambivalence as the gentleman's transformation provokes the city street to become a wood 'very dark and quiet' (Clarke 2005: 202). Stephen has been displaced, relocated into Faerie, where his enslavement becomes all the more insidious, confining, and alarming, his chains all the more binding in their invisibility. It is in Faerie that Stephen is lauded as a king; it is in Faerie, where desires are acted upon without repression, that Stephen is enchanted with a 'thick grey misery and stupidity' (Clarke 2005: 202) when he is allowed to leave.

As contemporary historical fiction can be witnessed as a dislocation, using the motifs and structures of past literary forms to expose the effacement or 'blindness' that the historical project can produce, so too does fantasy strive to unearth those things that society buries. In both cases there exists a potential range for subversion and examination, undermining and questioning those things taken to be the 'norm', discovering and rediscovering those dark areas of history unwritten and self unseen.

The Mirrors of Faerie: Where Reflection and Shadows Meet

We have seen how *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* uses pastiche to explore the ways a history is written, hidden and (at times) uncovered, thus investigating how ideologies or cultural dominants are constructed and promoted. Furthermore, we have suggested that as a historical *fiction*, history, as a process, is one akin to narrative. Shifting perspective slightly, Clarke's use of fantasy can be seen to focus, not so much on representations of the past but on interventions from the present. In effect, it is through the fantastic elements of *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* that a reflection *and* analysis of the contemporary social reality is most profitably measured. Here the psychological aspects of ideological forces are stressed,

portraying the effects of an oppressive cultural dominant upon the individual. Not only then does *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* work to create an image of the past but it serves as a *contemporary* historical document in its own right. A reflection of the 'now' dislocated in a 'past'; a mirror that creates and warps, making 'reality' (that state we call solid, unchangeable, concrete and quantifiable) un-real and the everyday extraordinary.

The mirror as object and symbol and metaphor is a thing that allows, if not imposes a shift in perspective; a reversed copy that appears, by its very nature, as otherworldly. Jackson (1981: 43) writes that 'many of the strange worlds of modern fantasy are located in, or through, or beyond, the mirror. They are spaces behind the visible, behind the image.' Here the mirror becomes more than reflection, it becomes a locus for distortion, a window looking both outwards and inwards, a gateway opening out into the un-knowable. Indeed, it is this notion of mirror as conduit that makes the fantastic, as used by Clarke, such a potent discursive mode. The emphasis here is on movement or exchange that flows both ways, between the imaginary and the real, affecting changes in the ways both categories operate and are expressed or represented.

While many fantasies have been predicated upon the creation of a secondary world that appears as a separate totality, current trends in the 'genre' (here used in its marketing context) have produced texts that navigate junctions between 'realistic' representations and 'imaginary' (purely psychical, potently creative, often violently repressed) or 'fantastic' (supposedly impossible) landscapes. The pattern of these contemporary fantasy texts (*Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* being an exemplar) is to first establish that these two 'places' are separate and inviolate – in the 'real world' characters have no knowledge of what lies 'beyond' in the realms of the imagination – before having someone cross the threshold, weakening the conception before collapsing the distinction entirely. Jackson (1981: 35) suggests, as a consequence, that the fantasy text acts as a fulcrum balancing between what is 'real' and what is 'imagined', it is a bridge that changes both sides by allowing exchange.

It is through (and behind) the 'mirror' that *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* makes one of its first, major, transitions between the 'real world' and Faerie. Encountering the 'gentleman with thistle-down hair' (a Faerie creature) in the halls of his master, Stephen, an African servant, stands before a mirror. Here, they both appear as the 'perfect example of a particular masculine beauty' (Clarke 2005: 187) and the gentleman perceives Stephen not as a servant but as a noble. At once the reflection appears metaphorical; Stephen could well be of noble lineage *in an African context* and the mirror a means of paring away the 'image' of

Stephen as slave projected on him by social forces. However, a sudden shift occurs in the parameters of the scene's material 'reality'. Instantly after looking at his reflection Stephen stands in Faerie (the fantastic 'other' world). Importantly this shift does not seem to be a case of taking Stephen up and putting him somewhere else; the shift is more akin to a replacement of the landscape around Stephen. Here everybody acts as nobility, dresses as nobility – they *are* the nobility of this fantastic realm and Stephen is asked to dance. It is as if the reflection of Stephen, where he is identified to be of 'kingly birth' (Clarke 2005: 187), has expanded to encompass and settle over the 'real world'. In this regard the unimaginable of the 'imaginary' is given a frame of reference through the interlocution of an agent from the 'real'. Not once do we, as readers, experience Faerie through a denizen of Faerie; our experience is always mediated by a 'real world' character's perception. Stephen *sees* that 'everyone was dressed in the very height of fashion' (Clarke 2005: 190), an idea that can only be voiced via an understanding of 'real world' fashion. Simply, this imprinting of the 'real' on the 'imaginary' can be read as the exposition of an individual's innermost desires. Unconsciously, it could be argued, that all slaves, all servants, desire to escape their current predicament. That Stephen is seen as nobility, and that he sees nobility as 'fine clothes and gaiety' (Clarke 2005: 190) is a projection of a desire to have what has been denied.

However Clarke's portrayal is more complex. Underlying all this extravagant finery there are signs of decay and depression; the hall has people 'dancing to sad music' and the house is not 'so prosperous as it once had been' (Clarke 2005: 190). This is a heightened distortion of the social reality and as Jameson (2005: xiii) argues 'this means that our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production (and perhaps to whatever remnants of the past one it has preserved)'. Here women are *claimed* by men, otherness is recognised as evil, violence is arbitrary, and enslavement second nature. These are the social facets that are obscured in the text's historical setting, buried by the historiographic process, that are brought to the surface by fantastic intervention and description. When Stephen enters a simulation of a cultural dominant (a hierarchal society that accumulates wealth through exploitation) he finds it at once, desirable and decaying. Emptiness pervades the tableau, everything feels hollow and forced precisely because 'simulations are undertaken in full awareness of the absence of the life they continue to represent' (Greenblatt 1989: 1). This initial meeting of the 'real' and the 'imaginary' constructs a framework for identification, distortion and subversion where the fantastic becomes a site for psychological investigation *through* manifestation, and a place to make the 'real' super-real, disclosing the faults of

subscribing to the ideological codes of society. In a very literal sense *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, as a fantasy, is devoted to the identification and restoration of the repressed (historically, politically, psychologically) that, as Jameson (1986: 20) maintains, is the need for and function of a political unconscious. It is only through his immersion in the fantastic, through the triggering of the fairy gentleman, that Stephen is able to dredge up the repressed memories of his past. Clarke describes:

Suddenly in his fancy he saw a dark place – a terrible place – a place full of horror – a hot, rank, closed-in place. There were shadows in the darkness and the slither and clank of heavy iron chains. (Clarke 2005: 220)

This dark place is, at once, the hold of a transport ship full of slaves and the dark gap in history; the individual experience recalling the forgotten (denied) cultural memory. That such horrifying traces are only re-covered via the fantastic conveys the extreme scope for fantasy's ability to use dislocation, estrangement, and radical otherness for historio-political interrogation. Ultimately this introduces the text's subtext of dystopian imagery, pulling the narrative into a complete political examination. Before this can be discussed however, there is a need for to scrutinise language and its association with the fantastic.

While this method of representation works while the characters are in Faerie, Clarke blocks the expression of the 'imaginary' when inhabiting the 'real'. Tied to this is the intrinsic invisibility of the fantastic world when one has not crossed its threshold. Jackson credits the distinction of visible/invincible as being of utmost importance when considering the fantastic as a methodological apparatus.

An emphasis upon invisibility points to one of the central thematic concerns of the fantastic: problems of visions. In a culture which equates the 'real' with the 'visible' [...] the un-real is that which is invisible. (Jackson 1981: 45)

In many ways it has been the thrust of this paper to equate this aspiration to make the invisible visible in the fantastic aesthetic with the New Historicist aim to uncover the covered in historical traces. The problem however, and this is true in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, is that if the invisible is thought of as unreal, then any expression of the invisible will be met with scepticism. Stylistically, Clarke characterises this problem through a breakdown in language and madness.

Under a 'spell' Stephen cannot communicate his journeys into the fantastic world of Faerie – 'when Stephen began to speak, he found to his own astonishment that it was upon

quite a different matter' (Clarke 2005: 316). Similarly, those women (Lady Pole and Arabella) that are taken into this same fantasy realm are equally unable to communicate their predicament; that is any communication taken to be rational by those around them. Returning from Faerie, Arabella claims she has been 'In the dark woods' and 'Under the grey sky through the dreams and murmurs of my brothers and sisters yet to come' (Clarke 2005: 631). For those around Arabella these are signifiers without the signified, utterances taken for madness – it is a language shift from the realities of human society into the fantastic that others cannot perceive or comprehend. Furthermore, the King, kept guard by madhouse attendants, continually declares he can see into Faerie, to see the invisible, only to be met with further discussion of his mental affliction.

While Jackson (1981: 90) posits that the imaginary has 'no "human" discourse – that the representations of the imaginary exist beyond language – the loss of 'voice' (Stephen) and the perception of madness (the women and the king) carries implicit historical concerns. Communication is impossible because, historically speaking, these people have had their voices silenced, their narratives removed. Traditionally it has been the slave, the woman, and the clinically insane that have been effaced from the historical text; considered in terms of 'radical otherness' they cannot fit into any idealisation without spreading ripples of unease. In *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* the attempt to discuss the movement into the 'imaginary' falls upon the deaf ears of the master, the husband and the doctor (all facets of a dominant, hierarchical, patriarchal order) and it is only via the juxtaposition of the fantastic with the 'real' that this ideological transparency is rendered visible. Here too it is a case where the 'fantastic art draws explicit attention to the *process* of representation' (Jackson 1981: 84), where the reflection in the mirror shows more than the 'reality' appears to contain.

Once again Clarke is seemingly layering the meaning of *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*. While it can be seen that the inability to voice or discuss the experience of the fantastic as a marginalisation on minority groups in the historical text, as a contemporary historical fiction the text is, arguably, commenting on the fantastic as a historical 'genre'. Often marginalised as 'idealistic' (Jameson 2005), escapist or, as a relative of fairy tale, as 'committing creative suicide' (Suvin 1980: 8) fantasy has been effectively silenced as a non-progressive literature; a vessel (unwitting or otherwise) for the pronouncement of ideological codes and a construction of rhetoric encouraging conformity to authoritative culture (nationalism, patriotism, demonisation and fear of difference). Understanding this as ideologically indicative, Jackson (1981: 173) sees this as parallel to stripping the voice from

the articulation of unreason, of the imaginary. It is precisely from such an articulation that the invisible is made visible, indeed made venerable, and the fantastic made demonstrably subversive.

As *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* concludes, bringing together all the disparate elements of the narrative's psychological and historical purview, the subversion intent of the fantastic inclusion is made convincingly clear. As the text winds to its dramatic finale the gentleman with thistle-down hair becomes the personification of the total and unmediated gratification of desire. Recalling that the gentleman's Faerie domain is a magnification of a civilisation built on domination, destruction, and war, his murder of Vinculus, a defenceless beggar is disturbing in its sudden violence and ambivalence. Clarke writes:

The gentleman danced round and sang to himself, as a child will when something has pleased it particularly; and when he was done he said in a conversational tone, "Well that was disappointing!" (Clarke 2005: 950-951)

Violence has become arbitrary and its results prosaic and, like a child, the gentleman is completely removed from the implications of murder. Clarke, inflating the inherent violence in the text to extremely disturbing proportions, is creating a dystopian landscape drawn up by colonial aggression, marginalisation, enslavement, greed, consumption, and denial; this social totality (predominantly one of Western capitalism) manifests as the epitome of destructive potential. The gentleman, and Faerie in general, consequently becomes the definitive 'other'. Originally viewed as 'evil' it 'has been categorized as a negative black area [...] until its recognition [...] as culture's "unseen".' (Jackson 1981: 173) This transition (portrayed in the narrative) requires explanation. 'Evil' in its ideological position of 'other' begins as a pejorative function, rounding up all that is different, all that is alien, and placing outside the normative society. It is this process, ascribed to fantasy, that has led to the genre being labelled an ideological vessel. However, as this 'other' in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* is the fantastic expansion of the destructive social totality, its representation ceases to be a case of 'good versus evil' transforming into the projection of the cultural 'unseen'.

Stylistically, Clarke describes this projection of the cultural unseen as a 'Black Pillar of Night' (Clarke 2005: 815), a darkness that settles over Strange. In being a party to the desires of society, Strange has let these desires dominate his life; they are the dark parts of his psyche manifested as a prison of impenetrable shadow. This darkness and Strange are inseparable, in fact they are one, just as the ideological forces of society, the false consciousness inscribed upon each individual actually takes part in creating that individual.

That this 'darkness' is made concrete and Strange placed in its centre moves towards a goal of Jackson's (1981: 52) fantastic mode: a fundamental resistance directed against difference and separation that ultimately attempts to 're-discover a unity of self and other.' For Strange, the amalgamation of the fantastic and 'real' has made obvious the 'dark areas from which nothing can emerge' (Jackson 1981: 43); however knowing of its existence the function of these 'dark areas' changes. Unseen they are exponentially destructive leading to dystopian ends, but in their recognition the powers that create them can be identified and deconstructed. When Strange *elects* to use his knowledge of his 'Black Pillar' prison to one day 'find the right spell to banish the Darkness' (Clarke 2005: 1006) Clarke's ending is not 'happy' as such, but speculative. It leaves open the possibility for a radical shift from the historical social reality. *This* shift was never the praxis of *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*; at its core Clarke's text becomes, as Jameson (2009: 434) would describe, a 'contribution to the reawakening of the imagination of possible and alternate futures, a reawakening of that historicity which our system [...] necessarily represses and paralyses.'

Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell occupies the space between the present and the past, the real and the imaginary. With the breakthrough of the fantastic into the discourse of the normal, the everyday becomes unfamiliar and uncanny – it renders the text into the discourse of estrangement. What we comprehend as reality and reason quickly transform into 'arbitrary, shifting constructs' (Jackson 1981: 21), a construct built by text, by narrative. By demonstrating that the dialectic of the real and the unreal as based upon, manipulated by, and exposed through *human* artifice, Clarke takes part in a process of subversion. By suggesting that such fundamental, binary categories as self/other or invisible/visible are, if not false, then inherently fluid *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, as a historical fiction, calls into question the very notion of a History. History is seen to be a collection of textual traces that takes the form of a narrative, of a story; some parts are enlarged and some parts are true, elements are fictionalised and facets are buried or forgotten. What a contemporary historical fiction has the potential to voice is that the buried can (and should) resurface. If we consider, as *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* allows us to, that history appears as kind of fantasy, as something filled with danger and shadows, something idealised and shaped, something repressed that inevitably breaks through, then all those dark areas of ourselves and our society can be brought into the light. And as Montrose (1989: 6) would propose, it is here that 'versions of the Real, of History, are instantiated, deployed, reproduced; and by such means, they may also be appropriated, contested, transformed.'

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