

A New Way to (Mis)Understand the Power of *Fantasy* in Mark Lawrence's *The Broken Empire Trilogy*

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Focusing on the study of one of the most popular trilogy of our times, in this article we propose an analysis of the manner in which the possibilities of fantasy literature are adapted to the “requirements” of pop culture. The fact that fantasy literature is studied methodically (at the level of academic research), but it is also a subject that belongs to mass culture, is a typical attitude of post-modernism: the dialogue between “high” and “consumer” culture and the introduction of the latter in the sphere of academic research. However, once the common reader becomes a force whose expectations begin to influence the course of literature, it undergoes a progressive devaluation. As for the novels from *The Broken Empire* series, we must emphasize from the very beginning that they are not addressed to the readers who prefer fine ironies or subtle cultural connections – instead the three chosen novels are very good examples of irreversible fusion between literature and pop culture.

In fantasy literature, writing constantly oscillates between convention and innovation. Thus, we notice the appearance of some new paradigms that still retain a common ground with the sources that inspired them. Most often, fantasy prose outlines a world that fits within the boundaries of subjectivity, but which presents itself as objective and even “real”. So, the author constructs a veridical illusion – and the fiction “constructs a personal myth” that resembles “the image and likeness” of the author (Cernăuți-Gorodețchi, 2002: 113). Although a study of a literary phenomenon that is in full creative effervescence is quite risky, in this article we will deal with that subgenre of fantasy literature called *Grimdark Fantasy*¹. Unlike the well-known conflicts between good and evil, present in “High Fantasy” – a (sub)genre explicitly called since 1971 (Stableford, 2005: 198) – the latter proposes a world in which there is no longer a well-defined boundary between “good” and “evil”. Due to its importance in this literary paradigm, but also for methodological reasons, in this article we will focus on *The Broken Empire* trilogy by Mark Lawrence².

¹ It is widely accepted that this subgenre appears around the year 1990 as a reaction to J.R.R. Tolkien's way to understand and write fantasy literature. So, *Grimdark Fantasy* could be called an “anti-Tolkien” approach to fantasy writing.

² American-British writer of fantasy literature, born in 1966. His texts are very popular, being currently translated into more than 20 languages.

The fantasy genre is usually included in the sphere of paraliterature, being included in the category of “children's literature” – this fact causes many researchers of literature to consider it unworthy of a thorough study. However, analyzing it beyond its “label”, we may notice that this type of literature uses profound constructions of the imaginary (utopia, for example) that attract readers of all ages. Although its roots are much older, it is only starting with the twentieth century that it begins to reach a remarkable size, expanding into several environments, the most notable of which are the film and video game industry (Vesa, 2014: 227-264).

Given the magnitude of this genre in recent decades, there are already numerous studies on fantasy literature: Brian Stableford (*The A to Z of Fantasy Literature*); Brian Attebery (*Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*); Margaret Atwood (*In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*); Kathryn Hume (*Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*); Richard Mathews (*Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*) and, last, but not least, an important dictionary of terms related to fantasy literature, coordinated by John Grant and John Clute (Grant & Clute, 1999). Despite the popularity it enjoyed in the space of Western culture, the fantasy genre remained a rather marginal subject in the Romanian culture. Among the first specialized studies published in Romania on this topic we can mention: *Poetica basmului modern* (Cernăuți-Gorodețchi, 2002).

Regarding the historical perspective on fantasy literature, its temporal delimitation can still be open to interpretations. The Cambridge Companion (James & Mendlesohn, 2012) recalls texts that are included in the “classic” fantasy style and were published around 1700. Although the elements considered “fantastic” were an integral part of the stories since the oldest times, the literary texts that use them as pillars of their own world (more precisely, of a world with rules that are separated from those of immediate reality) are rather a peculiarity of modernity. Modern fantasy writings began to appear in the nineteenth century, after a period in which a series of novels and chivalric stories (whose fantastic elements could be placed very close to the border of credibility) were quite popular. In any case, it must be emphasized that this genre is not a particularity of modern times except from the point of view of new forms that cover the old background of the imaginary. From this perspective, fantasy writings are considered “modern fairy tales”, adapted to the expectations of contemporary culture (Carpenter & Pritchard, 1990: s.p.).

If by the end of the eighteenth century the possibility of reading literature was still a luxury that most ordinary people could not afford, things changed radically as the common reader became a force whose expectations began to influence the course of (writing) literature. Thus, in the contemporary period, the sensational and the superficial appear to be sufficient to capture the attention of most readers, and fantasy – once inclined towards harmony and symbolic depth (from the Romantic Period) – is seen rather as a bizarre preciousness. So it is not surprising that much of the recent representations of a fantastic world have become the product of negative imagination. Under these conditions, fantasy tends to be associated only with a negative psychic activity – that is situated at the opposite pole of the genuine reverie: “A good active imagination leads to the unexpected and creates insight and a fresh perspective. Fantasy, on the contrary, is repetitive and concerned with the ego. It feels sterile, if enticing, and provides no new information or insight” (Raff, 2000: 61).

With the development of studies on the imaginary and the contribution of researchers such as Gaston Bachelard, Mircea Eliade, Albert Beguin, Gilbert Durand, Jean Burgos or Hugo Friedrich, the distinction between the two types of imagination (positive/negative) has become

somewhat simplistic. However, it is still a fundamental principle and, implicitly, unavoidable when making a presentation of the evolution of the concept of “fantasy”. In addition, it could be exciting to realize a comparative analysis of the two types of imagination with the two types of initiations: into “good” and into “evil”³.

To initiate a short analysis of the two types of imagination we will start from the distinction between the authentic “power of imagination” (from Greek *phantasia*) and inferior fantasy. In the long run, the inferior fantasy proves to be useless and even harmful – all the more so if we agree that “fantastic art remains a way to access the secrets of creation” (Solier, 1978: 239). Also, it is useful to remember that „true imagination possesses a power and depth that fantasy does not possess” (Raff, 2000: 53). This “true imagination” is characterized by a depth that we will not find in later fantasy literature⁴.

Positive imagination (called “active imagination” by C.G. Jung or “reverie” by Gaston Bachelard) is the “true fantasy” that is complemented by inspiration and intuition. In fact, the reverie that is not guided by inspiration and understood (actively) by intuition is just an early stage of positive imagination. It is essential to understand that positive imagination is a generating capacity due to which the writer (and the artist in general) is able to create his work. Before materializing, the project, idea or sketch exists on the mental plane, in the form of representations that need a mediator in order to manifest in an organized form.

Negative imagination, on the other hand, uses creative dynamism for destructive or, at best, derisory purposes. For this reason, we understand that negative attitudes and even destructive actions are direct results of the perversion of the natural capacities of the positive imagination. The main cause of this perversion is the very desire to obtain selfish satisfactions – a factor that also substantiates the character of the anti-hero. Moreover, the negative imagination cannot coexist simultaneously with the positive one, because, in the long run, they are interchangeable. Therefore, it is the same capacity of imagination that has two opposite possibilities of manifestation. The transformation of negative imagination into positive imagination appears as a precondition for the acquisition of authentic knowledge.

If in traditional fairy tales the contouring of a symbolic space is very noticeable, in the case of contemporary fantasy literature the living dynamism of the symbolic language is, most of the times, absent. Although the “literary fairy tale” has as prototype the German romantic fairy tale – *Kunstmärchen* –, in the contemporary period there is a predilection of the most readers for innovative fantasy writings, in which the imaginary specific to “classic” fantasy writings tends to become increasingly distorted (Zipes, 1992: 20-40). Regardless of the form in which it is presented, the modern fairy tale can be studied taking into account (at least) the two models: the one intended for children and the other intended for adults (Shavit, 1986: 68). In addition to an increased complexity, the second model is characterized either by the tendency to develop and “adapt” the first model, or by the desire to parody it. Beyond the various writing techniques or the suite of stylistic ornaments, the basic structure of these modern fairy tales is very similar. Nevertheless, one of the peculiarities of fantasy literature is its popularity both

³ From the old sapiential texts, two major (and diametrically opposed) types of initiations are mentioned: one into “good” and one into “evil”. A suggestive example for the second type of initiation can be found in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s novel, entitled *The Devil’s Elixirs* (*Die Elixiere des Teufels*).

⁴ It is not hard to notice that the contemporary fantasy literature proposes a fictional scenario that is rather based on principles of negative imagination.

among children and adults – sometimes we can see that it is the same novel that manages to attract readers of all ages⁵.

The fantasy genre is recognized as a type of speculative fiction, set in its own universe – built from (and for) the desire to go beyond the boundaries of the possible. Its first and most notable sources of inspiration may be the mythical structures and folkloric elements specific to the nationality of the authors, which merge with elements of everyday reality. In order to adapt to the expectations of the modern readers, but also to increase its own limits, fantasy literature has overcome the characteristics of a single compact literary genre, becoming like a bizarre tree that combines natural elements with artificial ones and which, necessarily, branches into several subgenres.

A fairly recent subgenre of the fantasy literature is *Grimdark Fantasy* – comprising texts that ignore most rules of morality, are full of a sense of gloomy humor, present dystopian societies, violent characters and, implicitly, many bloody scenes and shocking details. In fact, states of tension and fear are deliberately sustained by reading fantasy literature and, in particular, the (sub)genre already mentioned (Caillois, 1975: 175). The trilogy of Mark Lawrence that we will analyze during this study is a possible example of *Grimdark Fantasy*.

When everyday life no longer meets our expectations, there appears a desire to “taste” an “alternative world”. Such an alternative world, which combines themes and characters specific to the S.F. literature with emblematic elements of the pseudo-medieval imaginary is proposed by Mark Lawrence in the trilogy entitled “The Broken Empire”. In this case, we are dealing with a post-apocalyptic “history of the future” that frightens and fascinates us, representing a paradox that sometimes provokes curiosity and sometimes repulsion. Although the novels of *The Broken Empire* series propose certain situations and lines in which a (nearly) philosophical substratum can be intuited, outlining, at the same time, quite complex characters (compared to those that appear in other texts belonging to the same genre), they remain rather in the sphere of interest of the general public. In other words, in terms of the form of the text and its ideational background, we must emphasize that it is not addressed to a very “pretentious” reader. At first glance, subjecting such a trilogy to a thorough hermeneutic approach might seem like an intellectual “fad”. Despite this appearance, the approach proves useful to notice the mechanisms that create and sustain the existence of an alternative history – rooted in both the (still fertile) soil of the medieval imaginary and in the imaginary of S.F. literature.

In contrast with the repression of “inappropriate” instincts and behaviors (which, of course, would negatively influence the readers), specific to the traditional fairy tale – and which reached its peak in the context of the Victorian fairy tale – in these “modern fairy tales” we are dealing with a very vulgar language, extreme violence, ostentatious sexuality, and, of course, with the full representation of an anti-hero. Honorius Jorg Ancrath, the protagonist of the trilogy, becomes, successively, “Prince of Thorns”⁶, “King of Thorns” and “Emperor of Thorns” – transforming any event or being he encounters into a stair whose value is given only by the fact that it can bring him closer to his own goals. Being as consistent as he can be in proving that “the end justifies the means”, Jorg never hesitates to step on any of these “stairs” and leave them without remorse.

Dealing with a novel categorized as *Grimdark Fantasy*, it is not surprising that *Prince of Thorns* begins with a series of robberies, ruthless murders, rapes and all sorts of such acts committed by the band of robbers led by the young Jorg Ancrath. From the very first lines we

⁵ The fictional writings of J.R.R. Tolkien can be such examples.

⁶ Published in 2011, it is Lawrence’s debut novel and, at the same time, the first volume of the series.

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are introduced, without any explanation (which increases the effect that the descriptions have), in the world of the main character:

Ravens! Always the ravens. They settled on the gables of the church even before the injured became the dead. Even before Rike had finished taking fingers from hands, and rings from fingers. I leaned back against the gallowspost and nodded to the birds (...) Thetown-square ran red. Blood in the gutters, blood on the flag-stone, blood in the fountain. The corpses posed as corpses do. Some comical, reaching for the sky with missing fingers, some peaceful, coiled about their wounds. Flies rose above the wounded as they struggled. (...) And this was Mabberton. Two hundred dead farmers lying with their scythes and axes. (...) War, my friends, is a thing of beauty. Those as says otherwise are losing?. (Lawrence, 2011: 10)

Even from these first lines, one can see the relaxed attitude with which the protagonist narrates everything that happens around him. In fact, he is the very reason for the destruction of villages. The descriptions will continue, becoming more and more striking, and the narrator's attitude will remain just as natural – a clear sign that such events represented for him something as trivial as possible. What may be most surprising is that Jorg, the dreaded leader of the gang, is only 13 years old. The surprise of the reader is permanently provoked by the deeds of the main character, who commits most of the horrors imaginable – either out of a desire for revenge, or just out of boredom. The plot begins to take shape gradually, establishing a certain order of events in the general chaos that dominates the world in which we are introduced. To understand how the text is structured, we must remember that events are not presented chronologically, and the chapters of the present alternate with the description of past events – thus, combining two narrative threads.

Throughout the chapters focused on the character's past, we learn that prince Jorg survives the unfortunate event in which his mother and brother, William, were killed. Subsequently, the protagonist frees several dangerous detainees, accompanies them and even earns their respect, becoming their leader. The purpose of the prince's gang was to plunder the regions ruled by King Ancrath's opponents and to remove their heirs – in addition to the small “immediate benefits”.

At the age of 15, Jorg returns to his father's castle and claims his right to inherit the throne. But while he is traveling with the robbers, his father remarries and expects a son. Trying to get rid of Jorg, the king sends him on a nearly impossible mission: the conquest of the Red Castle. For the fulfillment of the mission, the king provides him with an insignificant army, which the young man adds to the several dozen robbers led by him. Despite the initial expectations, the prince completes this task. Remembering some old parchments he had studied, he discovers that beneath the mountain on which the Red Castle is built is buried a kind of weapon designed by the Builders (name given in this alternative history to the ancient masters of the Earth). The weapon turns out to be a radioactive charge that Jorg manages to activate, triggering a huge explosion.

Although the prince returns home victorious, his father does not recognize his right as a pretender to the throne and stabs him right in the throne room⁷. Following this incident, Jorg

⁷ We are no longer surprised by this reaction when we learn that the assassination attempt on Jorg's mother and brother was largely due to his father.

is between life and death, entering a kind of antechamber of the World Beyond. In those moments, he meets the spirits who rule the world from the “unseen spheres”. With the support of such a spirit, he comes back to life and decides to establish his own kingdom. We notice that in this particular context, as in the case of fantasy literature in general, “the supernatural no longer fits in schemes and structures, but enters the natural world and corrupts it” (Cernăuți-Gorodețchi, 2002: 123). This would be the framework in which the conquest of the Broken Empire begins. At the end of the first novel of the trilogy, the protagonist carries out his plan and proclaims himself king over the domain of Count Renar, one of those who was directly involved in the attack in which his mother and brother lost their lives.

In short, from the desolation of some villages unable to defend themselves against the thieves who attack them, the first part of the trilogy continues with a series of actions meant to turn Jorg into a king and, at the same time, to prepare his revenge. The next two books (*King of Thorns* and *Emperor of Thorns*), continue with an action (made up of some predictable details) that ends in a rather unexpected way. In the second novel of the trilogy, we are dealing with a consolidation of Jorg’s power. The third novel of the series, *Emperor of Thorns*, is a little more subtle about the way Jorg arms himself – doing so philosophically rather than literally and embarking on a journey to clarify his destiny. In fact, compared to the first two novels, there are more inner monologues that aim to put order in the inner and outer disorder of the world. Thus, the selfish and nihilistic protagonist (at the beginning of the trilogy) gains a little more depth in how he solves his existential problems, traveling to Africa in search of answers. Of course, the choice of the desert setting (in which he follows a kind of initiatic path) has a special significance. However, unlike the classical representations of the path of initiation, the protagonist’s journey continues to be atypical – and even absurd – in many ways. An example is that one of the main (re)sources from which Jorg extracts his “wisdom” is Fexler, a creature (“animated” with artificial intelligence) that is slightly flawed.

Discussing the end of the trilogy, we notice that one of the key moments is Jorg’s realization that his son will never be safe in that world – an achievement that is also a strong motivation for the final sacrifice of the protagonist. Finally, Jorg dies to reunite with William (his murdered brother, who had become “The Dead King”). Thus, certain passages from Fexler’s “prophecy” are fulfilled. The major purpose of the reunion of the two brothers is to bring reality back to normal – so, to transform the alternative history of the book into the real history outside the book.

Summarizing the subject of the trilogy as much as possible, we can notice that it begins with the presentation of Jorg’s feats in Mabberton and ends with the transformation of the killer and rapist into a “martyr” who will save the world. Between these two moments, an atypical journey can be found, stained with a lot of blood and tears (which are, of course, of Jorg’s victims). It is quite difficult to imagine how it would be possible for a child who grows up nurturing his hatred and thirst for power – being able to commit most of the cruelties imaginable – to become a “martyr”. Of course, like all his actions, the decision to sacrifice his life to “save the whole world” has a selfish motivation: Jorg wants to impose his own will even against predestination – because someone else was meant to sacrifice his life.

As we can easily see, the protagonist of the trilogy is an anti-hero par excellence. Also, Jorg Ancrath is a kind of atypical wandering knight. On the one hand, the ideal knight is (or should be) both a saint and a hero; on the other hand, Jorg contradicts, point by point, the defining elements of the representation of the ideal knight. The destinies of the two types of characters go, however, through a series of stages that are under the sign of initiation and sacrifice.

Paradoxically, Jorg even ends up as a “martyr” who is able to sacrifice everything to fulfill his own will. If, in the case of the hero, the fulfillment of his condition is achieved *from, through and for good*, in the case of the anti-hero, the “fulfillment” is achieved *in and through evil* and for a selfish “good” – his purpose being limited, each time, to the narrow sphere of one’s own perspective. In this context, we could mention the difference between positive imagination and negative imagination – understood as a fantasy that does not go beyond ego-centrism: fantasy, on the other hand, never transcends the ego. While imagination contains information about the other parts of the psyche and discloses the path to be followed, fantasy is about the ego’s needs, desires, and quest for aggrandizement” (Raff, 2000: 56).

Paradoxically attached to the traumas of the past, the main character transforms them into the engine of his will to power. Thus, his first motive for revenge starts from the tragic event (which he experiences at the age of nine) of a plot in which his mother and brother are killed, and he is saved by a thorn bush that will leave deep and painful marks both in his body and in his memory.

We might ask ourselves why in the contemporary period the anti-hero became so appreciated and admired compared to the ideal – or idealized – hero from the period of Romanticism, the literature of the Middle Ages or the texts of Antiquity? Does the (post)modern reader resonate more with the way of being of the antihero than with that of the hero? Is the antihero more (in)credible or more “human” and closer to the taste and condition of modern man than the “dusty” hero of ancient myths or medieval legends? And, finally, is the appreciation of the anti-heroes in the contemporary period an effect of the moral degradation of society or just the cause of a “harmless distraction”? Going over these questions for which each of us has already prepared (at least) one answer and many arguments, we highlight only the idea of “distraction”, because it helps us to understand the desired and assumed fascination of an alternative history.

From the perspective of its manifestation, any distraction (or entertainment) is “offensive” in relation to the psyche of the reader. Thus, if the distraction – understood as an acceptance of fantasy – does not meet a defensive attitude, it enters undisturbed into the inner universe of the receiver, enchants and “steals” not only time but also the energy that gives vitality to the alternative history. In fact, the “offensive of the distraction” meets wide open the gates of acceptance and offers the reader the opportunity to “escape” from reality into another (unconventional) reality that allows him to live the alternative present and, at the same time, to be “absent in front of the self”. This attitude represents, as Mircea Eliade observes, a “defense against Time” (Eliade, 2010: 28-29).

Since antiquity, there have been storytellers who helped people to “escape” from everyday life. So, the imaginary worlds have exercised a constant fascination throughout each historical epoch, yet the technological means of the contemporary period contributes in a special way to the expansion of this phenomenon. Representing a modern expression of the fantastic, the fantasy genre “feeds” the imagination of readers, fully satisfying the need for storytelling (Jackson, 1981: 32). The success of this literary genre is based, first of all, precisely on this “need for story”. In an immediate and rigorously systematized existence, fantasy literature proposes a world without well-defined boundaries, where repressed desires can be satisfied and where there is even the impossible.

In the fantasy genre – and in Mark Lawrence’s trilogy, in particular – there is an apparent reversal between the literal meaning of events and the allegorical meaning. The reversal results in a very visible “display” of the literal meaning that bears the “costume” of allegorical events.

This is not necessarily a gain, because (at least) one of the levels of interpretation of the text is lost – a fact that is sometimes knowingly pursued even by the author⁸. Thus, fantasy literature appears as a *literal allegory*. In other words, the literal interpretation is clothed in the “garment” of allegory that becomes, in time, the “skin layer” of the text and, finally, its very “body”. All this time, the allegory disappears ashamed, banished and unwanted. So, the literal and the allegorical interpretation merge into an indissoluble unity that results (most of the times) in the disappearance of the allegorical meaning itself.

The “story for the sake of the story” that proposes a secondary world sufficient for itself – and does not contain hidden meanings or complicated interpretations – is one of the defining limits of contemporary fantasy literature. Authors who choose to write their text in the form of a *literal allegory* are also encouraged by the expectations of readers who want to be impressed and entertained in a way that is as efficient and easy to digest. If, in the “traditional way”, the allegorical meaning is *not immediately accessible* to the reader, in postmodern fantasy prose it is *simply not present*⁹ – and if a reader tries hard to find it, he often invents it. Fortunately, few fans of this genre have such a speculative appetite.

In order to deepen our understanding of the previous idea, we could remember the theory presented by J.R.R. Tolkien in the essay “On Fairy Stories” (Tolkien, 1964: s.p.). He calls the work of the divine Creator “Primary World” and the work of the writer “Secondary World” – which bases its existence on a “literary belief”. As long as there is a consciousness that perceives them and knows their meaning and rules of organization, both of these two worlds are *real*. In addition, the “Secondary World” functions as an autonomous space, and a visible interference of the laws specific to the “Primary World” alters – or even cancels – its existence. Of course, the fact mentioned above is also valid, temporarily, when the secondary universe of the work eclipses (through the reality with which the reader invests it) the primary universe.

In conclusion, Mark Lawrence’s trilogy tells us, directly, about the alternative history represented in (and through) the destiny of an anti-hero and, indirectly, about the “offensive of the distraction” of a secondary reality and its ability to conquer us. The fantasy imagination moves with sure steps from convention to innovation, witnessing a clear challenge to literary traditions and the transformation of the “chivalric code” – which leads to a new meaning that the protagonist’s journey acquires. We are dealing, therefore, with a pseudo-medieval imaginary in which the “knights” no longer fight for “honor and truth” (but for an interest based, as a rule, on selfishness, fear and manipulation), no longer save ladies that are in danger, but treat them in the most degrading way possible, and, of course, we no longer witness the confrontation between the “good knight” and the “monstrous beast”, because the two antagonists have merged into a single anti-hero.

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⁸ The example of J.R.R. Tolkien is very relevant in this case.

⁹ There are, as in any circumstance, certain exceptions to this rule.

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