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Between Worlds: Portal Fantasy as Dialogic in Gaiman and Miéville

Abstract:

Step through the looking-glass and where do you go? Inherently, every text exposes the reader to other worlds. However, the fantastic, like no other mode, not only exposes, but explores, explains, and employs other worlds (and how we enter them) to question what is real and unreal, possible and impossible.

Using Farah Mendelsohn's (2008) examination of portal fantasy, this paper argues that when you step into another world you leave something behind *and* bring something back. This Bakhtinian dialogic will then frame an analysis of Neil Gaiman's *America Gods* (2001) and China Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009) which explore notions of organic subjectivity, reader expectations, and if gaps actually exist between textual and extra-textual, real and unreal.

These atypical, self-reflexive, satirical portal fantasies express how writers position readers (not unlike their protagonists) in alternative conceptual realms, disturbing the everyday, the commonplace realities we often take for granted. As such, both texts and the discursive strategies they use ask: what do we see, or, as may be the case, un-see? Significantly, this paper suggests that, via self-conscious world-building, portal fantasies allow reader and writer the opportunity to inhabit those spaces *between* textual, ideological, generic, metaphorical, irrational, fantastic worlds.

Biographical Note:

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Words Between Worlds: Portal Fantasy as Dialogic in Gaiman and Miéville

> Therefore languages do not *exclude* each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways…
>
> —Mikhail Bakhtin

Farah Mendlesohn suggests that from '1977 onward, quest fantasies […] came to dominate the bookshelves of many bookstores, to the degree that in many minds, it was thought of as the default form of fantasy' (2008: 43). Such a distinction is important on two levels: it testifies to a genre dominated by a single aesthetic strategy, while highlighting portal-quest fantasies as mass-cultural, marketplace objects.

Perhaps, then, any discussion englobing portal-quest fantasy should always be conscious of its existence as entertainment. What doesn't sell doesn't get published; what isn't published doesn't get written. Very simply: conventions crystallise and genres distil. John Cawelti claimed that:

> Standard conventions establish a common ground between writers and audiences. Without at least some form of standardisation, artistic communication would not be possible. But well-established conventional structures are particularly essential to the creation of formula literature and reflect the interests of audiences, creators, and distributors. (1976: 8-9)

This general introduction to formula fiction frames the near-paradigmatic status of portal-quest fantasy as an artefact of social preoccupation. The desire to consume this particular fantasy is interesting insofar as it suggests a predisposition for a set of tropes which fulfil a set of desires. However, what is portal-quest fantasy exactly and what are these desires? Mendlesohn claims that the 'portal fantasy is simply a fantastic world entered through a portal' (2008: xix). Pithy, but suggestive, the form implies a transition from one space to another. Movement and juxtaposition drive the narrative, allowing the reader opportunity to explore the magical and strange against a backdrop of the everyday, the normal.

Figures like Frodo Baggins leave comfortable homes to journey into wider worlds known only in story or legend. Their ambitions are humble, their origins usually unknown to them (but often extraordinary). Accompanied by one or more wise guides, a fantastic world opens, and piecemeal history, magic, knowledge is filtered through a sieve of need-to-know info-dumps, drip fed wonder, inn-tavern-taproom crawls, and parcelled prophecy. Given a world

to navigate the protagonist then needs something to do. A quest (destroy the ring, slay the god, save the world) gives the narrative a goal, dictates branches of plot. Lifted from obscurity, they are jettisoned into the grand events of a fantastic world, accrete a cast of offsiders (often archetypal), jump from one wonder to the next in a series of escalating set-pieces, save said world, and return home.

Inherently, the 'position of the reader […] is one of companion-audience, tied to the protagonist, and dependent upon the protagonist for explanation and decoding' (Mendlesohn 2008: 1). We see, hear, and know what they do. And they know nothing beyond what figures of narrative authority tell them. This is a specific strategy of engagement and world imbibing which leads us 'gradually to the point where the protagonist knows his or her world enough to change it and enter into that world's destiny' (Mendlesohn 2008: xix).

Such 'change' is invariably conceptualised as a moral curative. Series like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), Eddings' *Belgariad* (1982-1984), or Jordan's *Wheel of Time* (1990-2013) labour under the yoke of a fallen world gazing back to a utopian golden age. Here history cannot be accessed by the protagonist/reader—it must be delivered by the authorial wise and accepted. Mendlesohn argues that the 'assumption that "the past" is unarguable, that it just *is*, and that "knowledge" is to be rediscovered rather than generated, has narrative consequences' (2008: 16).

Problematically, this strategy—usually bolstered by prophecy that creates an inviolate future from the unquestioned past—silences the possibility of dissenting voices. Alternative historical visions are painted only by the 'evil' and must be expunged by the 'good'. Unsurprisingly, nothing is truly gained by the quest's conclusion. If the past is only encountered as a nostalgic dream, then the socio-political limits of success are already established. There is no future beyond the past. Singular and cyclical, the narrative terminates at the status quo.

Taking this description as the popular image of portal fantasy presents a worrying trend. At a time when portal fantasy's 'chosen ones' are invading the mass-cultural constellation, the soporific effect of problems solved by prophecy, of singular historical narratives, and divisive moral categorisation posits an orthodoxy of the impossible conservatively debilitated. That said, the portal—the impossible device making such narratives possible—may serve as an effective emetic because the 'impossible changes everything in the text that contains it' (Attebery 1991: 20).

Now buried under the deluge of portal-quest fantasy it is forgivable (perhaps) to be blind to the portal's discursive potential. Stripping away the itinerant imagery of an established genre in the process of becoming what China Miéville calls a 'cultural vernacular' (2002: 40), the portal is monolithic piece of artifice. Without it many portraits of the unreal and impossible would not be *made* visible.

Acknowledging that the word fantasy 'derives from the Greek for "make visible"' (Watson 2002: 214), (give the Greek word, too please) a doorway to another world is a perceptual device. The sudden imposition of a disturbing (maybe even distorting) lens can offer fresh perspectives. The portal fantasy takes the reader from a well-established familiar setting to an unfamiliar landscape that is constantly being established. It separates the worlds and bridges them simultaneously; it gives them definition while scuffing their boundaries.

Consider the film version of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Part of the film is black and white, and part of it colour. One is drab, realistic; the other bright, dreamlike. They register as different visual languages that shout: This is real! This is a dream! However, Dorothy moves between both, taking one into the other. There may indeed be no place like home, but the interaction forces her to *perceive* home in a different light. Bakhtin writes:

> The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers […] (1981: 276)

Interaction and transformation are hypothesised. When the possible is introduced to the impossible a conversation takes place. This conversation can change how each category is understood. The well-worn exclamation 'This is impossible!', repeated in almost every portal fantasy, registers the initial shock of this friction. Effectively, it translates: this is beyond my experience and cannot be. However, further steeping in fantastical settings transforms sudden denial to gradual acceptance. In other words, when the language of the possible meets the language on the impossible, the protagonist—a conduit communicating both to the reader— must ask: What is real? What is unreal?

Consequently, Miéville's proposal that 'changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real' (2002: 46) rings true insofar as the fantastic text jars its characters' perceptual apparatus to effect a re-examination of the reader's ideological preconceptions. In much the same way that Bakhtin suggests 'languages do not *exclude* each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways' (1981: 291), the portal fantasy merges two discrete, conceptual landscapes via the hero's quest. Interpreting their reactions and revelations, the reader can regard two worlds folded into one, and the very impossibility of this action re-evaluates what was and is possible. As such, fantasy is not 'crucial because it dramatizes the difference between thought and reality' (Watson 2002: 223), but because it suggests that one flows into the other, because there is no difference.

And yet, this dynamic re-evaluation is often obscured. Arguably, we may be so desensitised to such impossible thresholds that we assume the portal-quest formula is a fantastic baseline. Bakhtin argues:

> Certain features of language take on the specific flavour of a given genre: they knit together with specific points of view, specific approaches, forms of thinking [...] (1981: 289)

By recognising portal fantasy's formulaic flavour, writers and readers possess another set of 'norms' (genre tropes) which they can evaluate, dispute, appropriate, and transform. In other words, we may not be able to distinguish what a text intends without the surrounding genre, for these 'voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they "do not sound"' (Bakhtin 1981: 278).

Trusting Wizards

Before Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) even begins the jig is up: 'all of the people living, dead and otherwise in this story are fictional or used in a fictional context. Only the gods are real' (2001). This jest is acid etched into every page. Evoking the fundamental sense that the fantastic spins falsehood to uncover truths, the statement speaks to an interesting re-purposing of divine figures through a literary mode that historically 'begins where deep belief in supernatural values disappears' (Suvin 2000: 217). It may seem strange then that a fantasy would assimilate a mismatched pantheon of divine immigrants into its mythopoeia. However,

what Suvin pre-empts and Gaiman underscores is that gods are, at their core, ideas and ideas are very, very real.

Presumably, this thought is nothing new. However, Miéville's suggestion that fantasy 'literalizes its metaphors' (2008: 65), breathes more complex life into Gaiman's participants. The gods are real and they are ideas; they are imaginary, but they can control how people think and act.

Granted an early release from prison on the death of his wife, Shadow encounters Wednesday (the American persona of Odin) who enlists him in a war between old gods and new. Without any ties (emotional or physical), Shadow is effectively uncoupled from his past and free from the claustrophobic confines that define his present. Ostensibly, he is the generic hero jettisoned from the terrestrial into the cosmic. For both Shadow and the reader, Wednesday is a ready guide across this threshold.

Siobhan Carroll, in her study of *American Gods* and national identity, detects that 'the genre reader is primed to trust Wednesday: he appears to be the archetypal wise old man who has taken the confused protagonist under his wing' (2012: 318). Extolling the virtues of the old gods, Wednesday divides into an ethical binary—the old gods are good, the new gods evil. He narrates the world and its history in the form of epic conflicts. He seamlessly takes the lead and expects others to follow. All of this aligns with 'reader's expectations of the genre' (Carroll 2012: 318).

These expectations foreground a cognitive training in the reader and its exploitation by the author. Wednesday, a natural storyteller, is not only Odin's avatar but Gaiman's, and both weave a narrative that their listeners are want to believe. The old gods are underdogs, they have dignity, they have deep roots in America's past. By contrast, the new gods (media, internet, railroads, etc.) are brash, invasive, and conceited. There is something performative at work here, a method of representation generically well-rehearsed. As readers, we sense the quest developing, the proponents arranging themselves appropriately.

Bakhtin suggests such a 'performance' is able to 'infect with its own intention certain aspects of language […] imposing on them specific semantic nuances' (1981: 290). Arguably, the majority of the genre acts as iterative vectors whose tropes infect individual texts and the wider milieu. Incubating this process, the writer/reader/publisher marketplace interaction makes the fantasy audience receptive, accepting, and desirous to reiteration. And while derivative plots with hapless heroes guided by wise wizards to cathartically conservative

conclusions are symptomatic of a literary language co-opted by a cynical idealism, vaccines are often engineered from the disease. Shadow claims:

> I feel […] like I'm in a world with its own sense of logic. Its own rules. Like when you're in a dream and you know there are rules you mustn't break, but you don't know what they are or what they mean. (2001: 100)

This is understandable. Shadow is suddenly in contact with divinities warring with the capitalist America's godheads. Lost in this impossible landscape, he (and the readers on his shoulder) search for a semblance of order. Through Wednesday's narration, the nature of gods and magic and belief are spelled out in a narrowing strategy of 'received truth' (Mendlesohn 2008: 7).

Importantly, this truth is transmitted from the guide to the hero, from the representative of the impossible to the representative of the real. In other words, 'because it is not their world, they [the heroes] are reliant on what they are told' (Mendlesohn 2008: 32). Wednesday *tells* us the old gods are at war with the new. He *tells* us the new gods are winning. He *tells* us we need to fight back. And, at this point, when Wednesday is the only voice making the impossible comprehensible, questioning the transmission is inconceivable. From the moment the impossible threshold was crossed wonder is piled atop wonder, danger on danger. Wednesday organises and cajoles, gathering a who's who of ancient deities, conforming to Gandalf's model of historicising and recruitment. However, diametrically opposed to Tolkien's wizard, he is a liar.

> 'So what are you? A two-bit con artist?'
>
> Wednesday nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'I suppose I am. Among other things.' (Gaiman 2001: 51)

Mendlesohn points out that the success of the guide's explanations depend 'on the extent to which both speakers seal the internal narratives from challenge by a continual reminder that the senior narrators are worthy of trust' (2008: 38). Made repeatedly clear by others and himself, Wednesday is a confidence trickster. He is also a god. He constantly relates stories and dictates the movement of the text's plot. He is the embodiment of an idea people use to relate to the world. The conflation is telling.

Like Gandalf or Belgarath (among others), Wednesday constructs a singular narrative (about history, about the present) to position his listeners (Shadow, the other old gods, the reader) towards willing acceptance. He defines the brewing conflict and how it will play out; he simplifies it, makes its more destructive outcomes palatable. Unlike the genre's wise guides however, the text repeatedly stresses that he is unworthy of trust, that he should be questioned. That he is not, that he is able to manipulate all the text's attests to the seductive pull of singular narratives *and* their inherent danger. Carroll suggests that:

> *American Gods* thus manipulates readers' expectations of the fantasy genre, challenging readers to recognise the problems inherent in easy acquiescence to the premises of the fiction in which they wish to participate, whether the fiction in question is that of a novel or that of a nation. (2012: 318)

Pairing genre strategy with nationalist rhetoric encapsulates the issue. What Gaiman achieves in Wednesday is the romantic image of the wise guide with the historical reality of a xenophobic demagogue. The righteous prompt towards glorious sacrifice in order to defeat all-conquering evil is unmasked as calculating self-aggrandisement. Wednesday's 'con'—the fabrication of the text's central conflict to farm prayer—clarifies the destructive potential of unblinking adherence to a single, limiting ideology[1]. In many ways, this is an effective representation of Bakhtin's claim that language is 'populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others' (1981: 294). The majority of the narrative isn't Shadow's but Wednesday's; everything Shadow sees and knows is regulated by Wednesday. However, Wednesday's control of this linear trajectory is only half the story and *American Gods* accommodates more than one perspective. When Shadow and Wednesday meet other deities at the world's largest carousel in the House on the Rock, Shadow makes a discovery:

> He was looking at Mr Nancy, an old black man with a pencil moustache, in his check sports jacket and his lemon–yellow gloves, riding a carousel lion as it rose and lowered, high in the air; and, at the same time, in the same place, he saw a jewelled spider as high as a horse, its eyes an emerald nebula, strutting, staring down at him; and simultaneously he was looking at an extraordinarily tall man with teak-coloured skin and three sets of arms, wearing a flowing ostrich-feather headdress, his face painted with red stripes, riding an irritated golden lion, two of his six hands holding on tightly to the beast's mane; and he

> was also seeing a young black boy, dressed in rags, his left foot all swollen
> and crawling with black flies; and last of all, and behind all these things,
> Shadow was looking at a tiny brown spider, hiding under a withered ochre leaf.
> Shadow saw all these things, and he knew they were the same thing. (Gaiman
> 2001: 144)

Shadow is brought face-to-face with a multiplicity of meaning in a single being, a single word and 'no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way' (Bakhtin 1981: 276). Anansi is different things for different people in different times and places. Similarly, every god encountered within *American Gods* is the manifestation of a different tribe's system of relating to the world. Each is its own story, its own viewpoint, and its own people. They are ideas. They are shaped by human purpose and experience, but they also shapers. Each can be imagined as a discrete language (even though they may share common roots) that 'may all be taken as particular points of view about the world' (Bakhtin 1981: 291-292).

In this way, the various conflicts peppered through *American Gods* take on further significance. Words like reality, impossibility, god, good, evil, death are both the battleground and the prize. Where generic examples of portal fantasy might seek to close down the conversation, Gaiman uses generic conventions as the provocation for an answering alternative. Thus, there is a real, living dialogue taking place between the possible and impossible within the text *and* between author and reader regarding the genre's function, if not potential.

Shadow begins the story imprisoned by material walls. Stepping over the real/unreal threshold these walls quickly become ideological. Identity, in the text, is defined in terms of adherence to appearance, to constriction to image, to limitation. Loki claims: 'It's about being you, but the you that people believe in. It's about being the concentrated, magnified, essence of you' (Gaiman 2001: 479), that you 'become bigger, cooler, than human. You crystallise' (Gaiman 2001: 479). But the crystallised identity (like the entrenched genre) is stagnant. The crystallised worldview narrows and excludes; it shouts is one voice, drowning out the new, the dissenting. Discovering Wednesday's machinations 'frees him from following the predetermined actions of the quest plot, and grants him, at the end of the novel, a kind of radical freedom' (2012: 324). This freedom manifests as the dialogue allowed by the portal:

> Shadow could not decide whether he was looking at a moon the size of a
> dollar, a foot above his head; or whether he was looking at a moon the size of

the Pacific Ocean, many thousands of miles away. Nor whether there was any difference between the two ideas. Perhaps it was all a matter of perspective. Perhaps it was all a matter of point of view. (Gaiman 2001: 513)

Shadow learns that he stands between worlds. As Wednesday's son, he is part human part god—either/and/or/neither. Just as the portal permits him to perceive the moon as tiny and colossal, the reader wrestles with the fact that there is something human in divinities and something divine in humanity. As such, Gaiman ensures that we 'are never fully in the other world' (Mendlesohn 2008:38). The portal, in this case, blurs ideological categories, dissolves distinctions until there is nothing for the portal to separate. While it may be hyperbole to say that *American Gods* makes the real magical and the magical real, it does encourage such dialogue. As Mr. Nancy would say: 'It's all imaginary anyway. That way it's important' (Gaiman 2001: 462).

The Cities Unseen

Picture a city like Melbourne or London. You see the skyscrapers, marble facades, you hear the traffic. The air is ground coffee beans. This is normal. This is the everyday. But it is only half the picture; it is only half the city.   Invariably, there is another city populated by the ignored: overflowing garbage surreptitiously sidestepped, the smell of sewage, the outstretched hand asking for a dollar. These things are glimpses, fleeting and spectral. This is the cognitive space pried open by China Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009):

> In Besźel the area was pretty unpeopled, but not elsewhere across the border, and I had to unseeing dodge many smart young businessmen and—women. Their voices were muted to me, random noise […] we stood together in a near-deserted part of Besźel city, surrounded by a busy, unheard throng. (Miéville 2009: 54)

This passage highlights not only Miéville's discursive intent, but the text's fantastic element. Besźel is an Eastern European city-state languishing under the economic downturn of the post-Soviet vacuum. Its neighbour, Ul Qoma, benefiting from Western investment, is, by comparison, salubrious and modern. Their border is strictly regulated. So far, the set-up is normal enough. However, both city-states occupy the *same* space: they are two cities in one.

Overlapping and inseparable, the two cities are constantly divided by their citizens. Walking in Besźel necessitates the un-seeing of Ul Qoma. You can be surrounded by people but, existing in the other city, they are 'muted', 'across the border', an 'unheard throng'. The fantasy of *The City and the City* is not that Miéville fabricates two cohabitating city-states; the fantasy is that their irrational, cognitive separation is the narrative's norm.

Working as a conceptual baseline, this imposed condition functions as the text's first portal for the reader. Introduced as a police procedural (a murdered woman, police bureaucracy, tip-offs, etc.), the sudden recognition that the world is two *worlds* disturbs. What is internally normal for the inhabitants of the text is jarringly abnormal for the reader. Simply, we infer that the text is interested in making us see what is usually ignored. Consequently, an early description that we are walking 'towards where the grey glare of our lamps was effaced and I was lit by foreign orange light' (Miéville 2009: 24) could be the narrative's universal catechism. This, however, implies an intentionality no different to any other text, perhaps glossing over that 'the utterance arises out of […] dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines' (Bakhtin 1981: 276-277).

Again, Bahktin's desire to encode every utterance with an intention gauged as 'continuation' or 'rejoinder' reinscribes generic devices—their common uses and unconventional appropriations—with an introspective potency. In this case, the two cities and how they are encountered coerce adjustments to the reader's understanding of reality. Lifting Miéville's unsettling interrogation of capitalism's architectural space, *The City and the City* is an appealing vehicle to trace how people, 'as material creatures existing, thinking and reflecting in space, think themselves through that space, and through what they do with it' (1998: 16). Reducing these suppositions, the aesthetic outlook of the text is arguably Althussarian. Assuming an urban subjectivity contains some form of unseeing, the representation of Besźel and Ul Qoma is a snapshot of that process given fantastical life. It follows that the idea of a 'heavily crosshatched street—clutch by clutch of architecture broken by alterity, even in a few spots house by house' (Miéville 2009: 29) carries an ideological charge. There is nothing preventing someone in Besźel seeing Ul Qoma other than the social taboo, the border law, the ingrained ideology as 'a system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group' (Althusser 2008: 33).

This clarifies Bakhtin's position regarding the text as an utterance in dialogue with the reader. In other words, by creating the imaginary cities, Miéville taps into portal fantasy's ability to fold the unfamiliar into the familiar. The subsequent categorical questions—What is reality?

What is impossible?—take place not only in the textual world but 'in the consciousness of the listener […] pregnant with responses and objections' (Bakhtin 1981: 281).

The 'consciousness of the listener' is tantamount to the expectations of the reader. Like *American Gods*, *The City and the City* uses a generic blueprint. With detective fiction beats, Miéville accomplishes the world construction synonymous with portal fantasy. Investigating the death of Mahalia Geary, Inspector Borlú acts as our guide into the cities. Through him—meeting informants, scouring the streets, dealing with superiors—the text is gradually decoded: the unfamiliarity of unseeing is made familiar.

This follows Mendlesohn's assertion that 'quest fantasy works by familiarisation, creating a world through the layering of detail, and making that detail comprehensible' (2008: 9). However, Miéville goes beyond simple world-building. Considering that the cities are Eastern Bloc simulacra, their image, their essence pre-exists. As such, the familiarity the text requires is *how to think the cities*.

Borlú's investigation uncovers that Geary may have been killed in Ul Qoma and dumped in Besźel. In response to Besź-wide posters, Borlú is contacted by an informer. The problem: the caller is in Ul Qoma, responding to a poster he *should not* have seen. Miéville's strategy is to equate this with violence: 'The information was allergen in Besźel—the mere fact of it in my head was a kind of trauma. I was complicit' (2009: 45). It is wrong. The illegal crossing of a cognitive threshold crystallises the rules for the reader as clearly (if not more so) as the explanations of wizard analogues.

Recalling that 'all words and forms are populated by intentions' (Bakhtin 1981: 293), Borlú's complicity directs the narrative along lines the reader expects: after this transgression Borlú stumbles into a shadowy conspiracy. Paranoid confessions relate the existence of Orciny, the third city, responsible for Geary's murder. Its description is pure thriller: 'Orciny's the third city. It's between the other two […] Orciny's the secret city. It runs things' (Miéville 2009: 61). Having accepted the mental conditions splitting two gross-topically aligned cities, the insinuation of a clandestine city between them is a short stretch.

Geary was an archaeology student studying at a precursor (before the cities split) dig. Artefacts discovered possess strange powers; history discussed is rumour and legend. One plus one equalling two—the reader assumes that Orciny is real, that it is tied to the powers of the past, and that Miéville, a self-labelled writer of Weird Fiction, is want to include the weird. Like Gaiman, Miéville is conscious of the conventions that define his medium and how readers respond to them. In almost a direct address to the reader Borlú thinks: 'That

stink of insinuation and mystery—however cynical or uninterested you thought yourself it stuck to you' (Miéville 2009: 65). Borlú is the reader. He begins to accept Orciny because its story seemingly fits the evidence; we begin to accept Orciny because the well sloshing with Illuminati and Knights Templar is deep and seductive. But, like all good detective fictions, there is a twist: Orciny is a lie.

The fiction of a disgruntled scholar (Bowden), Orciny is a fabrication used by an American multinational to exploit archaeological resources. Like history, Orciny is constructed from 'fragments' and 'misunderstood documents'; it is a false image used to achieve particular ends. Like Shadow in Wednesday's con, Borlú is led into believing a story—a way of perceiving the world—that doesn't exist, that is generated by greed and self-interest. Like Gaiman, Miéville sets up genre expectations then rips them away. In this, *American Gods* and *The City and the City* share a similar orientation 'toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener' (Bakhtin 1981: 282). Both are engaged with dramatising ingrained reading habits to attack the lived subjectivity of extra-textual reality. However, they achieve very different results.

Mendlesohn suggests that in most 'portal fantasies, the process of the novel requires the protagonist to become ever more comfortable with the fantasy land that she has entered' (2008: 55). *The City and the City* suggests that this is inherently naïve, if not dangerous. Orciny works by leveraging this process. It exercises the signifying practices of its genre, while foregrounding the manipulation of such practices. As such, it serves as an example of Suvin's desire for fantasy 'as a general epistemological subversion of encrusted habits of thinking and perceiving' (Suvin 2000: 233).

While characterising the accretion of generic tropes (and their consumption) as 'encrusted habits' may be extreme, Suvin's comment calls for a resuscitation of fantasy as a subversive, transgressive, even progressive literary mode. Similarly, Rosemary Jackson adorns the fantastic with revelatory potential:

> That which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes 'I see' synonymous with 'I understand'. (Jackson 1981: 45)

Miéville's intercession into the cognitive process of seeing one thing and unseeing another is this hypothesis' artistic corollary. The text's fantastic conceit (unseeing as social practice) and its subversion of reader expectations interrogate the ideological structures usually taken

for granted—it makes these invisible things visible. Ultimately, this is a very refreshing affectation. *The City and the City* is a text that invites us to think about thinking—to consider how our thinking is governed, regulated, limited, and manipulated.

However, we should be careful attributing this visibility with revolutionary impact. The puppet may see the strings but it doesn't follow that he or she can cut them. Those that move illegally between Ul Qoma and Besźel are in Breach (an agency policing the invisible border). Effectively, they exist in the interstice, which is to say a place beyond and, therefore, outside the jurisdiction of either state. As such, they are *erased* from both societies, never seen again, made non-existent—the system doesn't tolerate outsiders.

Having *seen* the cities' inner workings Borlú isn't freed, but ensnared. Enlisted by Breach, he now polices and maintains the invisible border. Geary's murder sparks an investigation whose conclusion *closes* any prospective porosity in the cities' protective membrane, implying that 'transgressions, presupposing the laws or norms or taboos against which they function, thereby end up precisely reconfirming such laws' (Jameson 1986: 68).

Ideology is lived. You are born into it. It infuses every choice, every action. Ultimately, the unseeing system functions because Breach is seldom needed. People police themselves each 'minute, every day' (Miéville 2009: 370). Liberation is not possible, only illumination. The cities and their ideology are not objectively malicious, only those that seek to manipulate them for avaricious ends. Unlike *American Gods*, there is no opening towards an emancipated future. Therefore, while Shadow might conclude that we're not in both (real and unreal) worlds, we're in neither, *The City and the City* claims: 'You're not in neither: you're in both' (Miéville 2009: 304).

There and Here and Back Again

By connecting two (or more) worlds, the portal acts as both reflection and alterity, a duality offering commentary on actuality and its alternatives, not divided but in conversation—a conversation transforming both categories.

Perhaps this conversation has been largely hijacked by a single, loud, repetitive voice whose language of ring-bearers, wizard-guides, dark lords, and orc hordes has co-opted significant fantastical territory. The popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, Harry Potter, not to mention the ever-expanding young adult (re)iterations, not only speak to the potency and appeal of the genre's trappings. That portal fantasy is so easily populated by conservative intentionality is not an indictment of the form, but an illustration of its dynamic applications.

Weaving possible into impossible, the portal can be *used* to escape reality as readily as interrogate it. By mapping confluences of mythological and mundane, seen and unseen, both Gaiman and Miéville examine the boundaries of the possible, revealing and estranging the ideological nature of perceived reality.

Shadow moves from the real to the unreal, discovering that these words are just *words*. However, they are words that define worlds. Categories dependent on and framing perspective, they impose boundaries. Wednesday is a god, but he is also a criminal. Shadow is a man, but he is also divine. The portal embraces these contradictions, reconstituting their opposing values into a coherent whole. Allegorically, we might infer that gods are ideas and ideas are real. However, we can also suggest the everyday life—our lives, our histories, our potentialities—is truly impossible if not magical.

Conversely, *The City and the City* portal is itself. By foregrounding the act of unseeing, it focusses on how we perceive and ignore the world around us. In other words, it makes the act of experiencing reality a strange, fantastical process. Placing the reader *within* this process, turns the portal into a lens through which the structures which create and support ideology are made visible.

Using genre as a familiar language, both texts explore the seductive pull of well-worn narrative pathways. Convention becomes the crutch that Gaiman and Miéville kick out from under the reader. In the resulting shock a space is opened to consider imbedded reading habits, our desires and how they are met by certain structures of narrative, and the extent to which our subjective experience of reality is fundamentally a created phenomenon. This space is the potential power of the portal.

By piercing the membrane, opening the threshold, these fantasies navigate the paradox of dissolving everyday subjectivity while making concrete the structures that support it. Herein, the portal is both hole and frame, rejection, connection, chasm and bridge.

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Endnote:

1. In no place is this clearer than in the town of Lakeside. Apparently unaffected by economic downturn, the small town is the epitome of wholesome, small town America. However, we learn that this is only made possible because Hinzelmann (a kobold) has been 'sacrificing' young girls (virgins). Reaping the benefits from this protection, the town turns a blind-eye to the disappearances. Thus, we see the terrible price of unquestioning acceptance—ignoring murder for a little prosperity.