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World literature and the creation of literary worlds

Martin Puchner

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Abstract Based on the author's work as general editor of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, the essay develops an approach to world literature centered on world creation. The creation of literary worlds can be understood within the framework of possible worlds theory as developed by Thomas Pavel, Lubomir Dolezel and others. Taking its point of departure from possible worlds theory, the essay then focuses on specific genres that foreground the capacity of literature to create whole worlds, including world creation myths and science fiction. Three terms are used to analyze this body of literature: reference; scale; and model. While the category of reference accounts for the status of the worlds to be found within literary works, scale and model capture the particular challenges world creation literature faces.

Keywords World literature · World creation · Possible worlds theory

After having worked for several years on a new edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3rd edition, I think of world literature first and foremost as remains of lost worlds. The very fact that these works have survived is often close to a miracle; many had been lost only to be rediscovered haphazardly. Contemplating what has been irretrievably lost would be a melancholy business were it not for the anticipation of what might still be unearthed in the future.

But what is at least as astonishing as the survival of so many works of world literature are the worlds imagined in these works. Open any page of the anthology, which will be published next year, and you enter a world. The pedagogical recognition that these worlds are strange, that they need all kinds of explanation, does nothing to diminish the fact that they unfold complete universes that we can discover and in which we can begin to orient ourselves. For example, reading Eileen Chang's short story *Sealed Off*, for all its modernity, means entering a world of Shanghai that no longer exists. Indeed, Chang's exquisite

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evocation of this world with her characteristic attention to fabrics, styles, atmosphere, and social interactions registers the knowledge that the Shanghai rendered in this and other works by this author is already lost, if it ever existed (Chang 2007).

Saying that literature, any literature, creates a world to which we can gain access through the act of reading is perhaps something of a banal statement. And yet it helps reorient our standard understanding of what literature, and in particular, world literature, is or can be. Our new edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, for example, begins with a group of texts called "Creation and the Cosmos," i.e. with world creation myths. The idea here is not so much that literature begins with world creation and then moves on to other topics, but that from the beginning, literature has concerned itself with the cosmos, with the world, and has sought to render it in a variety of ways.

One might categorize these texts as mythical and thus as pre-scientific explanations of this, our world. For this line of argument one can draw on the work of Hans Blumenberg, who describes myth as a naming of an originally strange and threatening world, which becomes less threatening once it is thus named (Blumenberg 2006). I would like to extend this line of argument beyond the act of naming to a dimension that myth shares with literature, namely the imagining and literary creation of a world. This extension of Blumenberg means that we can no longer rely on his anthropological conjectures, which are highly speculative and cannot be taken seriously. For example he asks us to imagine a scene in which early humans first emerge from the jungle to take possession of the savannah. Instead of this speculative anthropology, I suggest that we relate myth and literature not to our world and its explanation. Rather, we should see them as creating *a* world, a world whose status remains to be determined. When seen from this perspective, creation myths document a literary imagination that engages and imagines a world on a level of totality. What understanding of literature emerges if we take our point of departure from such works of world creation?

Reference

First we should focus on the function of reference. This is a dimension of literature that has not received much notice recently. What is the status of reference in world creation myths, and other works of literature, for that matter? To the extent that we read these myths as explanations or orientations or acts of naming in the tradition of Blumenberg, they refer to our world. But to the extent that they are works of poetic imagination, they do not seem to refer to our world at all. The usual answer given at this point is to say that they don't refer at all. The alternative answer I will give here is that they refer to manufactured worlds as well as to the act of world making itself. World creation literature does not belong in the history of mimesis as presented by Erich Auerbach, a towering figure in the history of scholarship on world literature (Auerbach 1946). At the same time, this view differs from the understanding propagated by post-structuralism, which has tended to emphasize the purely "self-referential" nature of literature. Reference is there, but only in the defanged form of self-reference. But I want to argue that the worlds created by literary texts belong in a history of making: not mimesis, nor self-referentiality, but *poesis*.

What are these worlds that are made, if not made-up, these worlds of literature? The first question a *poesis* of literature must ask is "What kind of world" does a work create. And indeed, this question is, among other things, one of reference. The branch of literary theory that has tried to deal with reference most successfully is what is called possible worlds theory. Borrowing from logic and analytic philosophy the concept of "possible worlds,"

theorists such as Marie-Laure Ryan, Thomas Pavel, and Lubomir Dolezel argue that literature does indeed refer to a world, however not to our real world, but to possible worlds (Ryan et al. 1991; Pavel 1986; Dolezel 1998). This solution is elegant: it allows us to retain the concept of reference, which is after all a crucial dimension of language. However, there are powerful intellectual traditions militating against this view, favoring instead an understanding of literary language as special, or anomalous. This school of thought has its origins in Russian formalism and the Prague School, both of which emphasized the extraordinary and hence anomalous use of language at work in literature. "Estrangement" and "re-functioning" were some of the terms organizing this view of literature. To my mind, there was always a serious drawback associated with this approach because it presumed that in literature the ordinary workings of language, including reference, were somehow suspended. Having to make a special case for literature puts the burden of proof on those literary theories, though. It is a burden we need not take on. Why not accept that in literature language works quite well? This is where possible worlds theory can come in handy as a way of explaining that in fiction, language still refers to a world, albeit not to our world, but to a possible world.

To be sure, there are unresolved internal problems associated with possible worlds theory. The theory emerged after all in a very different field, modal logic and analytical philosophy. The transfer of concepts such as "possible worlds" from these intellectual traditions to literary theory has not always been smooth, and brought with it a thorough reformulation of its key concepts. The work of Ruth Ronan points to several such transformations and pressure points (Ronen 1994). But what counts in the end is not how consistent this transfer really was, but how effective the terms are within the new theory.

While possible worlds theory has solved the problem of reference in literature on a theoretical level, work remains to be done in thinking about how specific genres and types of literature refer, and what kinds of worlds are created through such acts of reference. Immediately, a host of problems arises. Often works of literature refer to places in our world, for example Shanghai, but introduce into it fictional characters, like Lu in Eileen Chang's short story, thus creating confusing layers of our world and a poetic world. Or, to stay with Shanghai for a moment, the surreal geography of Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*, in which a Sherlock Holmes-style detective hunts for his lost parents in the Chapei part of Shanghai, just outside the International Settlement in the 1930s (Ishiguro 2000). Told by an extremely unreliable narrator, the story turns Chapei into a maze in which both narrator and reader soon lose all orientation. Indeed, the entire Shanghai episode of the novel has a fantastic quality to it and has little to do with the real Shanghai of that period. To be sure, Ishiguro did some historical research and certain landmarks are historically precise. But in the end, historical research only served as a material out of which a truly imaginary geography could be formed. Disorientation is in fact the plot of the novel in the course of which the extremely self-assured detective loses his way and fails utterly.

In more extreme cases, literary works claim to refer to places situated in our world, but these places are clearly made-up. A prominent example are the many cities in Italo Calvino's *Imaginary Cities* (Calvino 1993). The imaginary character of these cities is never hidden and in fact the driving force behind this work, which takes the unreliable quality of travel literature and of fictional narrators more generally to an extreme.

At other times, literature suddenly opens doors to s second world within a first one, as for example in the first volume of the *Story of the Stone*, when Jia Bao-yu visits the Land of Illusion, or when Alice, in *Alice in Wonderland*, goes down a rabbit hole (Xuequin 1930; Carroll 1930). How the transition from the first world to the second, fantastic one is

accomplished is much less important than what kind of new world we are entering. What rules and laws govern here, what creatures populate it, and how will we find our way back? Sometimes it will be simply a matter of waking up; at other times, the return journey is full of suspense and struggle.

In yet another set of examples, we find ourselves in our world, but discover within it what I would call “nested worlds,” fictional spaces that compose complete worlds like the mysterious Shangri-La of James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizon*, which is located somewhere in the Himalayas but almost impossible to access (Hilton 1936). The boundary can never be entirely impermeable, of course; after all our protagonists must get to it somehow, but it is a rare event. The nested world must have integrity of its own and hence clear boundaries. Indeed, negotiating the boundaries becomes a central challenge in the plot of *Lost Horizon*.

Finally, literary works can be openly situated in alternative worlds, as is the case with fantasy fiction. For example in Neal Stephenson’s wonderful recent novel *Anathem*, we find ourselves in an alternative universe which is in fact rendered in an alternative form of English, whose rules and meanings we must slowly learn over the course of the first 30 or so pages (Stephenson 2008). Towards the end, we are given to understand that there exist various alternative universes that can in fact be in contact with each other. But this application of quantum mechanics, especially of the famous Schrödinger’s cat thought experiment, cannot conceal the fact that the pleasure here is creating an entire world that is not ours.

While possible worlds theory works as a general theory of literature, it does not help us clear up this muddle of the status of different types of possible worlds. What we need in this situation is a better understanding of the status and nature of literary world creation.

Scale

World creation raises not only the question of reference, but also the question of scale. Thinking on a world scale does not come naturally and in fact requires a unique combination of abstraction and imagination. Indeed, our creation cluster shows a struggle for totality: Akkadian and Sumerian, I gather, originally don’t have words for the “whole world” and their world creation stories therefore divide the universe into constituent parts. And yet, as Emily Wilson, the classics editor of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3rd edition, writes in her headnote, “even in these cultures, there was a developing notion of what the *Enuma elish* calls ‘the entirety of all of everything’”. (See Puchner 2012)

Scale continues to be a challenge for later literatures, but a challenge to which they rise. Let me pick out Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Milton 1904). From the beginning, *Paradise Lost* presents itself not just as a creation story; rather it is a text that revels in the creation not just of one world, but of more and more worlds. Creation stories tend towards the plural: “space may produce new worlds” (p. 650), Milton writes. And indeed, the poem presents us with scenario after scenario of world creation. After the rebellion, Satan recommends that his followers stay in “this deep world” (p. 260). But the existence of this separate world is not the main point here. Rather Satan begins to ponder the prophecy that there is “another world to be created” (p. 345). At the same time, he raises the possibility that out of the mixed chaos of hell one day the “almighty Maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds” (p. 915). The poem then proceeds to show us the creation of yet another world: “newly created, the opacious globe, of this round world” (p. 416), and it is the status of this round world that becomes the central drama of the epic poem, this “new world” as it is also called several times. But this new world has to be re-created several

times. After the fall, for example, its entire geography has to be reordered; and then after the flood, when from the water God "raised another world" (p. 875). Throughout this drama of the creation, and re-creation of our world, the poem keeps track of what it calls "other words," including heaven and hell.

Milton not only re-writes creation myths. He takes the discovery of the New World as the central experience that is now projected onto a galactic scale. Milton has always struck me as a precursor to a certain strand of science fiction and fantasy literature, and my interest in world creation has helped me understand why. The recent success of *His Dark Materials*, for example, bears witness to this connection. A fantasy trilogy by Philip Pullman, it borrows more than just the title from Milton (Pullman 2007). The entire plot revolves around a rebellion against The Maker, casting Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the genre of fantasy. In addition, the novel is premised on the notion that there are infinite numbers of parallel worlds, which the protagonists may enter, though only at great cost.

The example of Milton also shows that literary world creation cannot be divorced from the changing experience of our own world. World literature is, among other things, the literature of discovery, empire, conquest, and travel. Italo Calvino's *Imaginary Cities* would not be possible without Marco Polo's travel; *Paradise Lost*, without travel reports from the New World, and Orhan Pamuk's *White Castle*, without the Ottoman travel writer Evliya Celebi (Pamuk 1991).

And yet, it is not so much a question of grounding literary world creation in actual geography and its principal genre of the travel report. Literary worlds refuse to be thus grounded; they take the ground of our world merely as a point of departure, as a resource to be used, not as a destiny to which they must remain tethered. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a case in point, drawing as it does on the *genre* of the travel report, but using it to create the most extravagant of worlds. For these worlds, scale is the most important dimension. A work devoted to creating a relativizing effect, *Gulliver's Travels* uses the word "world" ironically, for example when it describes how the inhabitants of Liliput leave their native city in order to "see the world"—we know, of course, that what they consider "the world" is only a small, and indeed a miniature part of a much larger whole, whose real dimensions are hard to fathom (Swift 1965).

The genre that combines Milton's frenzied world creation, his inter-world battles between angels and devils with the fictional travel writing of *Gulliver's Travels* is one that plays a surprisingly little role in discussions of world literature: science fiction. I'm not thinking of the science fiction that imagines a future based on particular technological gadgets, but rather of a sub-genre of science fiction that aims at precisely the totalizing imagination of the world.

The writer I want to mention in this connection is the British philosopher and author Olaf Stapledon, writing in the 1930s. I'm not going to recommend his novel *Star Maker* as an overlooked masterpiece of world literature (Stapledon 1968). It is not world literature in this sense. Rather it is an extreme form of world creation and world imagination literature, depicting developments stretching millions of years, reaching all the way back to the creation of the world and forward to its eventual demise. The narrator falls asleep and upon waking finds himself moving upwards through the air as a disembodied eye. Increasingly he can manipulate his speed and direction, thus moving around the universe with increasing ease, looking for alternative life forms, which he soon finds. In a second phase he learns to communicate with these other life forms by telepathically entering their consciousness. This phase of the novel is based on a classical science fiction matrix, devoted as it is to imagining alternative life forms and the particular consciousness they bring with it: we encounter intelligent ships, huge swarm-intelligences and much more.

After some time, the protagonist manages to pass on the ability of disembodied travel and telepathy to other creatures and more and more the task of this group of travelers is to prevent the worst of war and destruction among the different civilizations. What drives this high-speed narration of whole galactic civilizations is a somewhat strange conception of evolutionary theory, which provides Stapledon with a way of imagining huge expanses of time. Shaw and Wells use evolution in just this way. But Stapledon does not leave it at that. The eye-observer now discovers that the stars, even nebulae themselves are alive. Evolution now merges with physics, the master discourse of totality.

What is remarkable about this novel is the quality of Stapledon's prose. Throughout, it is unapologetically abstract and synthetic. Like its companion novel *First and Last Men*, *Star Maker* seeks to capture, often within a few paragraphs or even sentences, developments spanning millions of years. But even this is not enough, and Stapledon often hurries along, telling the reader that he is still spending too much time on details and must now rush on to the next, say, 20 million years. In order to capture such large-scale developments, Stapledon avails himself of yet another language to complement that of evolutionary theory and physics, namely the language of world history, such as can be found in works like Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. Stapledon uses this language and pushes it to such an extreme as would have surely shocked Spengler, not a shy man when it came to making large pronouncements about the world and its civilizations (Spenger 1980).

Besides evolution, physics, and world history, Stapledon has one more mode in store for us, which he uses towards the end: creation myths. Now we learn that the eye-observer will encounter the Star Maker himself, in a scene that is reminiscent of the Hebrew Bible: the encounter does not quite come about since the narrator feels compelled to avert his eyes. But what matters more than this non-encounter is the fact that he is suddenly able to go back in time and witness the very creation of the cosmos, again reminiscent of Genesis: he reports that the Star Maker "saw that it was good," after the deed is done. In any case, Olaf Stapledon uses, seeks to compete with, and outdo creation myths. His is a novel that hopes to cover, at the height of scientific knowledge, both time and space of an increasingly huge universe. In his preface to *First and Last Men*, Stapledon calls his novel an "essay in myth creation."

A good portion of science fiction succumbs to what one might call the lure of scale, reveling in unimaginable dimensions of space and time, a kind of space-age sublime in the sense of Edmund Burke's mathematical sublime. But whatever else may be the merits or demerits of his creation, Olaf Stapledon, and many of his fellow science fiction writers, can be said to have taken up the challenge of scale.

Models

After reference and scale, a third category can be introduced, perhaps a subcategory of scale: the model. If the attempt to capture, through literature, totality leads to such madness as Stapledon's super-abstract prose, perhaps the way to create worlds is by acknowledging limitations, that is, to create smaller versions of worlds: model worlds. The worlds presented in *Gulliver's Travels* can be considered such model worlds, nested worlds, that capture totality precisely by being smaller, perhaps simpler, in any case easier to handle in every way, including in terms of literary technique. The various island plays and novels, and of course the assorted utopias belong to these model worlds as well.

If Stapledon pushed the totality and world-creation type of literature to an extreme, there is an author who can be said to have done the same with model worlds: I am talking

about Edwin Abbott Abbott and his novel *Flatland* (Abbott 1993). *Flatland*, of course, belongs to the pre-history of science fiction in the sense defined by Darko Suvin, the best critic of science fiction, who describes the genre as aiming at a cognitive dissonance (Suvin 1979). *Flatland* describes life in a two-dimensional world, giving us an account of how everyday life, including procreation and the rest, proceeds in two-dimensional houses. Flatland is a simple world, to be sure, but Abbott gives it enough texture so that it may count as a complete world, at least as a complete model world.

The complexity of an alternative world is among other things a matter of literary economy, but also of the purpose of the whole exercise. Models usually have a purpose, and in the case of *Flatland* the purpose is to drive home the point that our own three-dimensional perception is not the only and natural one. The model world functions by analogy, and this technique is thematized when the flatlanders are incredulous at the thought of one-dimensional worlds and creatures. This is how we should now think of four dimensions, or Spaceland, Abbott suggests. Indeed, if we go back to *Gulliver's Travels* one more time, we can see a similar ambition in having the land of Liliput be followed by Brobdingnag.

Model world creation seems to be the more promising path for world-creation literature, and perhaps Stapledon knew this; in any case, he included an explicit reference to *Flatland* in his novel *First and Last Men*, which, in contrast to the totality aimed at in *Star Maker*, strikes one now as positively modest; after all, we cover only a few billion years, not the totality of the cosmos. Once again, one encounters here the question of feasibility, which in literature is one of technique. This technical side of world creation deserves to be examined in detail. Such an examination would include reconsidering the various genres, from creation myths to science fiction, but also questions of narrative perspective and finally, of style. They all play a vital role in how literature takes up the project of creating worlds, be they complete or partial, complex or simple, set in the future or an alternative past.

World literature, or world creation literature, as I understand it, thrives on the relation between the two words of which this term is composed: world; and literature. It invites us to reconsider the dimension of reference, asking what world or worlds this literature refers to; the dimension of scale through which some type of totality is aimed at; and, by contrast, the decision to use the model as a way of making that totality manageable.

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