Murat Sezi

China Miéville, Terry Pratchett, Kazuo Ishiguro and the Ambivalence of Knowing

An Analytical Model for the Representation of Knowledge in Fantasy Literature

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Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
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E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

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1. INTRODUCTION

The will to know and the human disposition for curiosity are among the oldest literary motifs, of which Odysseus, Oedipus, and Eve are merely the most well-known representatives. To say that our cultural, technological, and social reality has undergone overwhelming changes since the times of Homer and Sophocles would be somewhat of an understatement, and yet questions concerning the role of knowledge in society have never been more pressing. At no point in human history have so many people known so much, and yet governments, groups, and individuals are fighting battles over knowledge and truth wherever one turns to look, whether this concerns gender and identity, climate change and technological disruption, or the contestation of the public sphere with the help of alternative 'facts'. It seems that, after the 20th-century disillusionments about the promises of the Enlightenment following the atrocities committed during World War II and the post-structuralist and postmodern critiques of positivist attitudes to knowledge-producing structures and the theories that sustain them, as well as the calling into question about the very possibility of attaining knowledge itself, humanity finds itself at a crossroads once more. One unassuming place where the negotiation of these conflicts is found is in contemporary fantasy literature.

This study is grounded in the assumption that knowledge represents a significant theme of fantasy literature which is realized at both the narratological and thematic levels. Given that there are many ways through which to approach them, the terms knowledge and fantasy require significant explication, a task which is carried out in the theory chapters that follow. At this juncture it shall suffice to say that, in the context of this study, the word knowledge is understood as an umbrella term which integrates and subsumes several different approaches with which to assess this literary motif. These include genre-specific characteristics, the narratological categories character, plot, and space, as well as concepts such as memory and orality. As such, the study deals with the question of how the theme of knowledge is realized in different texts of the fantasy genre and situates itself within three broader fields of research: literature and knowledge, fantasy and genre studies, and literature and memory/orality.

At the macro-level, the study is comprised of a theory section and an analytical section. The meta-structure of the theory chapters is such that this is where key theoretical concepts and critical terminology are discussed. These chapters also serve to generate questions for the primary texts, from which I occasionally provide examples in order to illustrate the theories and concepts but without going into detailed discussion. These questions are then collated into an analytical schema, which provides a general analytical structure that also leaves space for the specificities of each of the primary texts.

In Chapter 2, "Literature and knowledge", I first formulate several preliminary conditions with regard to how I use the term knowledge. Afterwards, I discuss ways of conceptualizing the relationship between literature and knowledge. Here, I orient my-

self upon Tilmann Köppe's introduction to the edited volume *Literatur und Wissen: Theoretisch-methodische Zugänge*, which provides an excellent overview of this field of research. The chapter concludes by situating knowledge in the specific context of fantasy literature and identifies central thematic and narrative areas where this can be observed.

The examination of the theories and concepts with which I aim to critically assess these begins in Chapter 3, "Fantasy and genre". After an introductory discussion of the question of how fantasy can be defined, I focus on two critical approaches. The first of these is represented by Brian Attebery, who has demonstrated why structuralism is so central to the study of fantasy, particularly with regard to the concept of character. The other is Farah Mendlesohn's differentiation of four types of fantasy developed in her *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, with a particular focus on the so-called portal-quest fantasy, given that all three texts treated within the frame of this study belong to this type.

In Chapter 4, "Narratology", I discuss three key narratological concepts: character, plot/story, and space. These are first assessed generally and then in conjunction with knowledge, as well as with regard to whether they have specific meanings in the context of the narrative conventions of fantasy literature. In the course of this discussion, I mainly draw from articles published in the *Handbook of Narratology*, but also from other texts in order to illustrate specific concepts or ideas, most notably Michel Foucault's assessment of character knowledge in his analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The overarching question for this chapter is how the theme of knowledge is realized in the literary text by means of narratological concepts and story-telling conventions.

Chapter 5, "The literary realization of individual and collective knowledge", identifies memory and orality as carriers of societal knowledge and also deals with how these are transmitted, as well as how this process is realized in the literary text. Here, I draw from the memory concepts developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann, which have been operationalized for literary studies by Ansgar Nünning and Astrid Erll in particular. Meanwhile, the concept of orality is discussed with reference to several texts by Paul Goetsch.

As noted above, the questions developed in the preceding chapters are collected and restated in Chapter 6, "The analytical schema". This concludes the theory part, which is followed by the analytical section comprised of three case studies: China Miéville's *The Scar* (2002), Terry Pratchett's *Nation* (2008), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015). All three novels orchestrate individual and collective bodies of knowledge as well as the social orders which accompany these. In doing so they engage with societal issues concerning knowledge, such as technology and risk, culture and identity, and memory and repression, which are analyzed by means of the critically discussed terminology and previously developed questions. These concept pairs also point to this study's title, specifically to the notion that the texts do not necessarily evaluate the attainment of knowledge as something positive, but rather with a pro-