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# On the Idea of the Secondary World in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*

**Abstract**: The paper seeks to explore the concept of the secondary world as developed in Susanna Clarke's 2020 fantasy novel *Piranesi*. The analysis is conducted in the context of the evolution of the literary motif of fairy abduction between the classic medieval texts and its current incarnations in modern speculative fiction. The argument relates the unique secondary world model found in Clarke's novel to the extensive intertextual relationship *Piranesi* has with the tradition of portal fantasy narratives, and discusses it in the context of the progressive cognitive internalisation of the perception of the fantastic which has taken place between the traditional medieval paradigm and contemporary fantasy fiction.

**Keywords**: fantasy, secondary world, fairy abduction, medieval, C.S. Lewis, Susanna Clarke

## 1. Introduction

It is a widely acknowledged fact that the significance of a newly created literary work may be measured by its influence on the successive generations of authors, whose future contribution to, and perception of, a given literary genre will be determined by their appreciation and response to the new contribution to the canon. It is also, however, becoming increasingly appreciated that the mark of the impact of a text upon its native literary tradition may be discerned in the extent to which the classic works and motifs which have first provided the formative influence in the given work's creation will be redefined by the novel context that the new work bestows on them. Such a perspective on the evolution of literary tradition has become the cornerstone of Brian Attebery's theory for the explanation of the intertextual template behind modern fantasy's reappropriation of myth (2014, 18–42). Also, Attebery's application of the concept of the "fuzzy set," defined in his 1992

study *Strategies of Fantasy*, based on the idea of the literary genre as a constantly evolving body of texts related to one another by their indebtedness to a central core of seminal works (106), seems to point the way towards a new awareness of the role of the intertextual context in the shaping of our appreciation of the literary merits of a particular piece of creative fiction.

The present argument is designed to follow in the footsteps of this mode of critical evaluation and trace the conceptual roots behind the idea for the secondary world which is developed in Susanna Clarke's 2020 fantasy novel titled *Piranesi*. We shall attempt here to examine how the consecutive layers of the novel's intertextual context contribute to the formation of a distinctly original treatment of the concept of the fantastic secondary world that we find in Susanna Clarke's narrative. Clarke's first epochal novel, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, redefined the respective positions of the mode of fantasy and the classic 19th century formal realist fiction and, consequently, extended the scope of historical and cultural reference for the fantasy genre. In *Piranesi*, Clarke develops a new reformulation of the connection between the contemporary understanding of the Tolkienian concept of the secondary world and the notions concerning the metaphysical reality which descend to us from the tradition of classical philosophy, as well as modern psychological models. Another thing which the novel problematises is the nature of the relation of the Tolkienian tradition of subcreated reality[1] to the historically conceived medieval literary tradition of the literary incarnation of the fairyland and the marvellous realm located beyond the ordinary scope of Nature.

## 2. Fairy Abduction: The Medieval Tradition

It seems that the most opportune way to commence a discussion of these aspects of the novel is to look beyond the artfully woven suspense of the narrative which skilfully operates a whole wealth of post-modernist narrative conventions to conjure up a complex interplay of psychological relationships and to follow the basic sequence of the storyline. Here we meet a young writer/intellectual/academic Matthew Rose Sorensen, who applies his customary penchant for analytical scrutiny and acumen for meticulous record-keeping to the task of deciding on an appropriate topic for his next book project. As we follow the protagonist's deliberations which get pinned down in his journal in the form of successive pros and cons, we learn about his idea of writing a book about Laurence Arne-Sayles, a notorious figure of the academic world, famous for his controversial views about the existence of alternative worlds. We also learn that Arne-Sayles has been exerting a strong, and frequently unhealthy, influence over his circle of young followers, indulging, at the same time, in a clandestine lifestyle of violence and promiscuity, which has led him into collision with the law. As the

consecutive entries get recorded in the journal we may learn somewhat about Matthew Rose Sorensen's character and priorities. As incentives to researching the story Sorensen mentions the appeal which such a "sexy subject" involving a "transgressive thinker" may have for gaining a wider interest in his project. As disincentives he mentions difficulties with accessing information and competition from other publications on the topic.

The intertextual context is difficult to overlook here. In the figure of a young, ambitious and egotistic scholar pursuing a methodical deliberation upon the question of finding a research project which would take him beyond the ordinary scope of academic endeavour and win him fame and recognition we easily recognise a trope of Marlowe's incarnation of Dr Faustus. The scene, recorded in the form of an entry in Sorensen's journal, clearly links with the opening scene of Marlowe's play. Sorensen plainly echoes Faustus in his ambition, competitiveness and an analytical cast of mind and, as Faustus before him, he succumbs to the temptation of pursuing a research project where the thrill of redefining barriers and winning renown is inextricably linked with real danger.[2]

Yet the story of Matthew Rose Sorensen will not follow the stage of the initial transgression in the direction of spiritual temptation, but will instead hark back to the motif of entrapment in other worlds as the young, ambitions intellectual ends up being imprisoned against his will in a secondary world where he undergoes a mental transformation caused by his interaction with the alternative reality. This particular theme finds its oldest corresponding incarnation in the fairy abduction motif, which functioned across the various genres of European medieval literature (Wade 9–38; Lewis 122–138). It is in the context of this particular narrative motif that the idea of the fairyland crystallised across the hierarchy of medieval genres, finding its way into the folk ballad, the romance, and the dream allegory. It is to this underlying template that the basic narrative structure of Susanna Clarke's story must be traced. We cannot but notice how the story of a resourceful woman's successful endeavour to win back a man imprisoned in an alternative reality, which is told in the ballad of *Tam Lin*, is traceable through the subtlety of psychological drama that unveils in the course of the novel.

Now, the medieval notion of alternative reality was typically conceived of in the context of two cornerstone mental propensities of that age: the notion of the marvellous[3] and the concentric mode of spatial perception.[4] The first idea concerned altering the features and qualities of the natural environment by permanently affecting the elemental structure of its constituent parts. This happened by virtue of the operation of natural, or else black, magic, by means of which it was possible to extract more intensity from the four elements of which every natural creation was composed, or change their internal balance. As the ratio of this marvellous addition to Nature was believed to increase steadily as one moves away for the balanced familiarity of the centre into the peripheral unknown, the concept of the magical fairyland was inextricably linked to the idea of the perilous Outside, first

localised, and then superimposed upon the geographical layout of the known world. As a fragment of Ranulph Higden's chronicle *Polychronicon* from 1342 illustrates:

> Among these wondres and othere take hede fat in the uttermeste endes of the world falle ofte newe meruailles and wondres, as thei kynde pleyde with larger leue priueliche and ther in the endes than openliche and nye in the myddel. Therfore in this ilond beef meny grisliche meruayles and wonders. (*Capitulum XXXIV*, *De incolarum moribus*, n.p.)

The medieval notion of the magical fairyland provided the template for the basic concept of the secondary world which has been such a ubiquitous motif in modern fantasy literature from the work of Tolkien until the present day.[5] However, the idea of the alteration of the character of the natural environment through the operation of magic usually survives there in a more imprecise, conventionalised understanding, its original form being rendered oblique by the advent of the cognitive apparatus of empirical science. The spatial connection of the realm of alternative reality to the primary world is much more transformed here as, from Tolkien onwards, the fantastic secondary worlds do not connect with the primary reality in any form of spatial continuum, but are, instead, organised around conceptual framework of reference expressive of an ideological core.

## 3. The Motif of the Evil Magician / Evil Scientist

This basic motif of entrapment in an alternative reality traverses a long way before it reaches the story of *Piranesi*. Instead of a malicious fairy, or an evil magician, the villain of the piece is the stock literary character of the evil scientist. Although ultimately rooted in the Faustian tradition, this type of character emerges fully in the context of the Gothic novel. The idea of a transgression beyond the natural circuit of knowledge and power allotted to man, which defined the evil scientist's identity, has assumed various incarnations through centuries. First, there was the medieval idea of relying on the help of the damned spirits to strain and twist the elemental structure of Nature to gain control over natural phenomena and the texture of material reality. Then progressively the concept of transgression evolved to denote the wilful venturing beyond the currently ethical norms whereby the obsessive desire to penetrate the mysteries of Nature brought destruction upon the aspiring challenger. In consequence, the protagonists of *Frankenstein* or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* carry enough sympathy to become elevated from mere villains into doomed and tragic heroes. At the same time, the character of the evil scientist makes its way into speculative fiction by virtue of such works as H.G. Wells's *Island of Dr Moreau* and C.S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy*. Here, the idea of transgression consists in the scientist's fanatical commitment to an ideology which

justifies compromising ethics as well as reason and rationality in the pursuit of a goal where the appeasement of personal ego is disguised as a noble effort dedicated to the progress of all humanity.

This is important inasmuch as it is the specific character of the main antagonist(s) of the story that determines the precise conceptualisation of the alternative reality that we find in *Piranesi*. As the persona of C.S. Lewis looms continuously over Clarke's narrative it will come as no surprise that, in the characters of the unscrupulous academics – Laurence Arne-Sayles and Valentine Ketterly, we clearly recognise an echo of the union of the hopelessly misplaced idealism of Lewis's Weston with the cynical pursuit of practical gain represented by Devine – the villains of Lewis's *Space Trilogy*.

Still more immediately, the character of Ketterly is linked to the amateur scientist/magician of Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew.* The two respective characters not only bear an identical surname, but they also share the same desire to gain unprecedented power by virtue of gaining access to a different reality:

> I don't mean another planet, you know; they're part of our world and you could get to them if you went far enough – but a really Other World – another Nature another universe – somewhere you would never reach even if you travelled through the space of this universe for ever and ever – a world that could be reached only by Magic. (2001a, 20–21)

Thus, the Ketterly of *The Magician's Nephew* represents the figure of a supremely unimaginative and mediocre egotist who seeks to find compensation for his congenital low-esteem in gaining access to the magical powers available in an alternative reality where magic is interwoven with the ontological fabric of reality. After finding out that the childhood gift he received from his sinister fairy godmother is a box coming from Atlantis, where the art of commuting between worlds was routinely practised, Uncle Andrew attempts to gain access to the long-lost knowledge of the Atlantean civilisation, and use it to master magical powers, by developing ways to travel between alternative worlds with the help of rings working on the principle of magic.

The intellectual aspirations of Uncle Andrew's intertextual twin, Dr Valentine Ketterly of *Piranesi,* are, in practical terms, identical, inasmuch as here also the access to an alternative reality is seen as an opportunity of gaining knowledge which would enable the scientist to achieve the ultimate aim of wielding unrivalled power in the primary reality:

> The Other believes that there is a Great and Secret Knowledge hidden somewhere in the World that will grant us enormous powers once we have discovered it. What this Knowledge consists of he is not entirely sure, but at various times he has suggested that it might include the following:

1.  vanquishing Death and becoming immortal
2.  learning by a process of telepathy what other people are thinking
3.  transforming ourselves into eagles and flying through the Air
4.  transforming ourselves into fish and swimming through the Tides
5.  moving objects using only our thoughts
6.  snuffing out and reigniting the Sun and Stars
7.  dominating lesser intellects and bending them to our will

The Other and I are searching diligently for this Knowledge. (Clarke 8–9)

The other similarity between the two Ketterlys is that, despite their obsessive ambition and obstinate intellectual arrogance, both share the same characteristic of being deeply unimaginative and hopelessly reliant on received ideas and opinions. Just as the egotistic passion of Uncle Andrew is wholly determined by the whimsical fancy of the fairy godmother and cliché notions of a long-lost secret knowledge, so Valentine Ketterly's intellectual aspirations remain completely determined by the scientific discoveries of his initial academic mentor, Laurence Arne-Sayles, who stumbles upon the existence of alternative realities in the wake of a ruthlessly pursued, but also strikingly visionary, intellectual endeavour.

What is important in both cases is that, in the course of the aggressive pursuit of unrestrained self-gratification, both Ketterlys similarly succeed in demeaning the concepts and ideas they initially inherit and vulgarise them out of recognition. However repulsive the character of Arne-Sayles will emerge in the course of the narrative, we cannot deny the sheer intellectual scope of his vision. It is arguable that behind the malice and self-indulgence of the elder scholar lies a true intellectual passion, albeit unrestrained by any considerations of professional propriety or ethical constraints. It may consequently be no particular paradox that it is the weight of Arne-Sayles' momentous discovery that transforms the character into the selfish monstrosity that he finally becomes.

## 4. The Secondary World: The Platonic Tradition

Again, at the root of Arne-Sayles' ideas we find an echo of C.S. Lewis's own philosophy. In his rejection of the stance of arrogant superiority based on superficial ideas of progress, as well as the sensitivity to the uniqueness, sophisticated nature and abiding value of the mental and philosophical models prevalent in bygone civilisations, the character of Arne-Sayles perceptibly takes after views expressed in Lewis's academic writings as well as his fiction (Danielson 43–57).[6] Yet, in Susanna Clarke's fictional world, Arne-Sayles' academic pursuit of the lost reality of mental interaction between the ancient man and the natural world around him takes him beyond mere speculation:

The knowledge we seek isn't something new. It's old. Really old. Once upon a time people possessed it and they used it to do great things, miraculous things. They should have held on to it. They should have respected it. But they didn't. They abandoned it for the sake of something they called progress. And it's up to us to get it back. We're not doing this for ourselves; we're doing it for humanity. To get back something humanity has foolishly lost. (66–67)

Once, men and women were able to turn themselves into eagles and fly immense distances. They communed with rivers and mountains and received wisdom from them. They felt the turning of the stars inside their own minds. My contemporaries did not understand this. They were all enamoured with the idea of progress and believed that whatever was new must be superior to what was old. As if merit was a function of chronology! But it seemed to me that the wisdom of the ancients could not have simply vanished. Nothing simply vanishes. It's not actually possible. I pictured it as a sort of energy flowing out of the world and I thought that this energy must be going somewhere. That was when I realised that there must be other places, other worlds. (88)

The idea of the existence of secondary worlds based on an alternative system of natural interrelations is in itself as old as the medieval concept of the fairyland which has proved so seminal for modern fantasy fiction. However, the concept of a secondary world being a tangible expression of abstracted mental constructs and consequently shaped by a more directly ontological presence of abstract ideas brings this variant concept of the secondary world into a more direct contact with the tradition the Platonic philosophy:

I found this one. This is what I call a Distributary World – it was created by ideas flowing out of another world. This world could not have existed unless that other world had existed first. Whether this world is still dependent on the continued existence of the first one, I don't know. (Clarke 90)

Thus, in the wake of a process of intellectual deduction, Arne-Sayles is able to determine the existence of a parallel world formed by ideas conceived of in the primary reality and, consequently, dependent upon a constant feedback from it, although existing on a distinct ontological plane. The dichotomy between the realm of the superficial material reality and the world of eternal perfect ideas originates, of course, in the context of the Platonic doctrine which separates the physical and metaphysical spheres of existence and which finds its most classical representation in the famous allegory of the cave developed in Plato's *Republic.* Indeed, the most central themes invoked by Plato in his allegorical parable become central topics also in Clarke's narrative. In the course of the novel, Clarke clearly echoes the idea of imprisonment in an alternative, inferior reality, as well as the concept of sensory illusion caused by exposure to the mere reflection of the true forms of the

eternal Ideas. Most crucially, the idea of the mental privation of a self-imposed captivity and the influence of the natural environment on the powers of perception and, consequently, on the intellectual scope of the individual human psyche, which constitute key elements of the Platonic vision, become cornerstone themes around which the conceptual fulcrum of the narrative revolves.

We cannot fail to be reminded here about Plato's concept of the *hyperuranion*, or *topos hyperuranios* – a "place beyond heaven" – an alternative metaphysical realm occupied by the ideal forms which may be glimpsed in the imperfect qualities present in the multifarious entities occupying the physical reality.[7] The Platonic concept clearly differentiates here between the world filled in by material objects existing in physical dimensions and the more ontologically pristine nature of the realm of ideas, which functions on the ultimate, fullest level of existence. This latter reality is subject to no material limitations of time and space, and represents what we came, in the course of history, to identify with the metaphysical:

> The place beyond heaven – none of our earthly poets has ever sung or ever will sing its praises enough! Still, this is the way it is – risky as it may be, you see, I must attempt to speak the truth, especially since the truth is my subject. What is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman. Now a god's mind is nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge, as is the mind of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it, and so it is delighted at last to be seeing what is real and watching what is true, feeding on all this and feeling wonderful, until the circular motion brings it around to where it started. On the way around it has a view of Justice as it is; it has a view of Self-control; it has a view of Knowledge – not the knowledge that is close to change, that becomes different as it knows the different things which we consider real down here. No, it is the knowledge of what really is what it is. And when the soul has seen all the things that are as they are and feasted on them, it sinks back inside heaven and goes home. (Plato 247c–e)

Yet, although there is no doubt that the Tributary World discovered by Arne-Sayles echoes the Platonic tradition, it is also evidently distinct from the *hyperuranion* in many ways. First, it appears that it is the physical, material reality that constitutes here the original template reflected in the character of the Secondary World. The ideal forms which are embodied in its reality are, ultimately, products, of human civilisation and its cultural legacy, within which they function being subjected to the same natural processes of growth and decay which govern the intellectual life of human communities and cultures. The inherent "mutability" of the source reality affects here the nature of the Tributary World by allowing the passage of time to modify and erode its texture in a way corresponding to what we know from the Primary Reality:

> Before I had seen this world, I thought that the knowledge that created it would somehow still be here, lying about, ready to be picked up and claimed. Of course, as soon as I got here, I realised how ridiculous that was. Imagine water flowing underground. It flows through the same cracks year after year and it wears away at the stone. Millennia later you have a cave system. But what you don't have is the water that originally created it. That's long gone. Seeped away into the earth. Same thing here. (Clarke 91)

The dependence of the passage of time on the existence of physical dimension has also been conclusively determined by classical philosophy.[8] It is not surprising therefore that the Tributary World of *Piranesi* is filled in by physical embodiments of abstracted values and concepts located in a physical reality where spatial dimension function on the basis of the aesthetic canons embodied in the classical sense of proportion. Thus, although the Tributary World exists in a more tangible, immediate relation to the realm of metaphysical concepts and ideas, it does in no way protect against change, suffering and death constituting part of its reality.

Yet, it is in the interaction between the physical and metaphysical fabric of this secondary world with the human psyche that the true nature of this particular reality is manifested. In a remarkable conceptual *tour de force*, *Piranesi* conjures up a secondary, quasi-Platonic, half-metaphysical world which functions in an inverted relationship with the world of physical reality. Moreover, the Tributary World embodies a perception of reality of which the cornerstone is a lack of clear distinction between the physical and the metaphysical. Crucially, this particular mode of perception not only predates the conceptualisation of the distinction between the two which is one of most important contributions of Platonism and Aristotelianism to the legacy of classical philosophy, but constitutes an earlier, divergent form of human perception which had been characteristic of the early natural philosophers, and which was effectively obliterated by the advent of the Platonic thought. It is for this reason that the Tributary World allows for the interaction with the physical reality of the natural environment and, consequently, is not exempt from the passage of time and is subject to physical decay.

Consequently, although the mental models, conceptual abstractions and symbolic emblems which are embodied in the statues characterise the secondary world of the House as one functioning on a level closer to the metaphysical dimensions of Plato's *hyperuranion*, it soon becomes evident that it is in the interaction of the environment of the House with human psyche that the true nature of the reality of the Tributary World is manifested. Although a sufficiently profound contact of the human mind with the physical environment of the House can by no means be taken for granted whenever a human being enters the secondary reality, yet it is in that interrelation that the full potential and character of the House is allowed to emerge. This is because the Tributary World of *Piranesi* constitutes in its essence a *hyperuranion*, as it would have been conceived by the early classical philosophers

of Nature. The metaphysical reality is here not the ultimate source of its physical counterpart, but it is rather that both are related in a harmonious continuum whereby the tangibly physical gradually progresses into an ever more finely woven elemental core of Nature. Hence by being able to attune one's perceptive powers and general frame of mind to the underlying texture which pervades the secondary reality, one enters here into a mental state whereby the ancient mode of closer, more intimate and instinctive interaction with the natural environment which once characterised the early human cultures and civilisations is generated in the psyche of whoever is exposed to the influence of the reality of the House.

As the mind of the human resident gradually adapts itself to the new surroundings and is, in turn, shaped by the specific character of the alien habitat, it is gradually ushered in onto different plane of existence where the alternative world is not a reflection of a different ontological layer, but is perceived as a fully autonomous, distinct reality. Thus, as the Beloved Child of the House conceives of the reality of the House as equal, if not superior to the primary world, he articulates his case in terms of the Platonic dualism whereby the more overtly metaphysical character of the environment of the House becomes a proof of its higher ontological status:

> "Yes," said Raphael. "Here you can only see a representation of a river or a mountain, but in our world – the other world – you can see the actual river and the actual mountain."
> This annoyed me. "I do not see why you say I can *only* see a representation in this World," I said with some sharpness. "The word 'only' suggests a relationship of inferiority. You make it sound as if the Statue was somehow inferior to the thing itself. I do not see that that is the case at all. I would argue that the Statue is superior to the thing itself, the Statue being perfect, eternal and not subject to decay." (Clarke 222)

## 5. The Fairyland of the Mind

Thus, the ultimate reality of the secondary world created in *Piranesi* is only fully existent inside the mind of a human inhabitant if he is able to survive a prolonged exposure to the environment of the House without suffering mental collapse trying to hold on to the sense of reality one recalls from the Primary World (as seems to happen in the novel to the unfortunate James Ritter). In the case of Matthew Rose Sorensen, the traumatically harsh disintegration of personality he undergoes ends in the birth of a new identity. As Sorensen becomes the Beloved Child of the House, the ambitious and cynical investigative author becomes a figure whose inner calm, serene tranquillity and quiet mental resilience are most fully incarnated in his organic link and devotion to his new environment. Because the Tributary World is here in itself a reality abstracted from the model of mental awareness and operation

which once characterised the traditional human civilisations, the half-metaphysical environment of the House comes to full ontological fruition as it forcefully imposes itself upon the psyche of its sole inhabitant.

It is this feature of the Tributary World that prevents both Arne-Sayles and Ketterly from ever penetrating its mystery and finding out about its true character. Both scholars persistently treat the seemingly lifeless and monotonous spatial environment of the House as a pathetic relict of once vibrant mental construct, a "Labyrinth" full of potential physical danger and the ever-present threat of "amnesia and mental collapse." The obsessively egotistic Arne-Sayles finds the derelict state of the physical environment of the House to be evidence of the disintegration of whatever the Tributary World once embodied and thus a personal insult to the visionary scope of his genius. Ketterly, on the other hand, is fully absorbed in balancing his high-minded disgust towards the House against his obsession to wrench the supposed secrets from the perilous environment without endangering his physical and mental safety. In either case it is the overblown personal ego of the two scientists that prevents them from gaining mental access to what the secondary world truly represents. This is despite being in possession of all the necessary theoretical knowledge about what kind of worldview the Tributary World would have to embody and how some form of existential humility and self-surrender would have to precede any form of interaction with the mental orientation which once characterised the "Ancient Man." Thus, a persistent aura of subtle, bitter comedy pervades the scenes when the two academics fail to notice how all the character and potential of the House is incarnated in the figure born from the remnants of Sorensen's disintegrated personality and the new awareness brought about by the contact with the new reality. Hence, it is only the Beloved Child who is able to come to the realisation that the core powers resident within the reality of the House cannot be extracted, or isolated, from their native environment:

> I realised that the search for the Knowledge has encouraged us to think of the House as if it were a sort of riddle to be unravelled, a text to be interpreted, and that if ever we discover the Knowledge, then it will be as if the Value has been wrested from the House and all that remains will be mere scenery. (Clarke 60)

This particular aspect is indeed of crucial importance in determining the character of the secondary world as developed in Clarke's novel. As we have already observed, the traditional medieval concept of the fairyland as an alternative reality was transformed in modern fantasy literature. Instead of a world located at the edge of the familiar primary reality of Nature where the concentration of the marvellous has had the effect of altering the native propensities of the four elements, the modern idea of the secondary world introduces a wholly autonomous parallel universe with no common spatial template underlying its relationship with the primary reality other than a portal point where a penetration into the alternative

reality could be made.[9] What takes place in *Piranesi* is that the secondary world, in its ultimate shape, becomes the property of the individual mind. This happens despite the fact that the individual mind in which the secondary world is incarnated does not exert control over the reality it becomes submerged in.

Now, the idea of psychological transformation taking place in a person spending more than the proscribed, limited time in the magical world is a common motif in the medieval narratives about the fairyland, as well as the modern fairy-tale tradition which trails behind it. Its most common incarnation is the stock motif of avoiding food and drink while staying inside the fairyland, which may be, for instance, found in the romance of *Thomas of Eclerdoune* and its ballad sibling – *Thomas the Rhymer*, where the idea of the harmful "ferlie fude"[10] is prominent.[11] Yet, is it in the context of the narrative motif of fairy abduction that the idea of losing memory of the primary reality and, with it, a vital part of one's personality, comes to the fore as an element characterising the impact of a prolonged sojourn in an alternative reality. Arguably, the most poignant example of such a treatment of the motif appears in the romance of *Sir Orfeo*, where the fairy enchantment transforms the human inmates of the King of Fairies into lifeless effigies:

> Than he gan bihold about al,
> And seighe liggeand within the wal
> Of folk that were thider y-brought
> And thought dede, and nare nought.
> Sum stode withouten hade,
> And sum non armes nade,
> And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde,
> And sum lay wode, y-bounde,
> And sum armed on hors sete,
> And sum astrangled as thai ete;
> And sum were in water adreynt,
> And sum with fire al forschreynt.
> Wives ther lay on childe bedde,
> Sum ded and sum awedde,
> And wonder fele ther lay bisides
> Right as thai slepe her undertides;
> Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,
> With fairi thider y-come. (*Sir Orfeo* 387–404)

It seems indeed easy to discern an obvious parallel between the sorry state of the Fairy King's unfortunate victims and the condition of James Ritter, or indeed the other thirteen "dwellers" of the House. Yet, it is in the description of the mental condition of Orfeo's beloved wife that we may appreciate the full extent of the

psychological trauma that Lady Eurydice must have undergone if the effects cause her facial expressions to become unrecognisable:

> Ther he seighe his owhen wiif,
> Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,
> Slepe under an ympe-tre –
> Bi her clothes he knewe that it was she. (*Sir Orfeo* 405–408)

It thus takes no particular stretch of imagination to discern the clear intertextual relation linking the passage describing Eurydice's former self-struggling to reassert control over her current psychological inertia caused by the enchantment, and the remnants of Matthew Rose Sorensen's disintegrated personality emerging from under the benevolent custody of the Beloved Child of the House:

> To a levedi he was y-come,
> Biheld, and hath wele undernome,
> And seth bi al thing that it is
> His owhen quen, Dam Heurodis.
> Yern he biheld hir, and sche him eke,
> Ac noither to other a word no speke;
> For messais that sche on him seighe,
> That had ben so riche and so heighe,
> The teres fel out of her eighe. (*Sir Orfeo* 319–327)

> Instantly, and to my huge embarrassment, I started crying. Great creaking sobs rose up in my chest and tears sprouted from my eyes. I did not think that it was me who was crying; it was Matthew Rose Sorensen crying through my eyes. It lasted for a long time until it tailed off into braying, hiccupping gulps for Air. (Clarke 215)

Needless to say, the idea of the loss of memory and consequently the ability to recognise the people and places which defined one's existence in the primary reality has continuously been one of the most characteristic effects of fairy enchantment in the fairy tale tradition as well as various forms of modern fantasy.

Most immediately, it functions as an important element in *The Magician's Nephew*, where it affects both children as soon as they find themselves in the "Wood between Worlds" – the residual space located in between the various parallel universes:

> The strangest thing was that, almost before he had looked about him, Digory had half forgotten how he had come there. At any rate, he was certainly not thinking about Polly, or Uncle Andrew, or even his Mother. He was not in the least frightened, or excited, or curious. If anyone had asked him "Where did you come from?" he would

probably have said, "I've always been here." That was what it felt like – as if one had always been in that place and never been bored although nothing had ever happened. (Lewis 2001a, 25–26)

Thus, the motif of the disintegration of personality incumbent on staying in an alternative reality and being exposed to an interaction with its environment has been a staple motif in fantasy narratives regardless of whether they located the secondary world on the outskirts of Nature, or in parallel spatial dimensions. Indeed, if we again turn our attention to work of C.S. Lewis we shall find an intertextual trail leading us from *Piranesi* into *The Silver Chair.* There we find the character of Prince Rilian, the rightful heir to the kingdom of Narnia spending years of captivity in the underground domain of the Queen of Underland. The parallel resides here primarily in the theme of magic-induced amnesia, which renders the character unable to reclaim a proper grasp on his natural mental powers and, consequently, puts him at the mercy of his captor, towards whom he consequently develops an unhealthy psychological attachment and dependence.

This toxic relationship between the captor and his victim constitutes the most articulate expression of the mental collapse and destruction of personality which characterises Rilian's imprisonment in the underworld, where a routine of placid existence under the enchantment is punctuated by violent spells where the Prince's former self struggles violently and desperately to reassert control over his personality:

> You must understand, friends, that I know nothing of who I was and whence I came into this Dark World. I remember no time when I was not dwelling, as now, at the court of this all but heavenly Queen; but my thought is that she saved me from some evil enchantment and brought me hither of her exceeding bounty. (Honest Frog-foot, your cup is empty. Suffer me to refill it.) And this seems to me the likelier because even now I am bound by a spell, from which my Lady alone can free me. Every night there comes an hour when my mind is most horribly changed, and, after my mind, my body. For first I become furious and wild and would rush upon my dearest friends to kill them, if I were not bound. (Lewis 2001b, 621)

The pattern of the traumatic coexistence of the disintegrated remnants of the captive's original personality and the newly emergent self which came into being in the wake of his interaction with the new environment and conditions of life is obviously replicated in *Piranesi*, where its function is as much to hark back to literary tradition as to herald a new textual context:

> I was sitting cross-legged with my Journal in my lap and the fragments in front of me. I turned away slightly, not wanting to soil any of them, and vomited on the Pavement. I was shaking. (187)

It is evident that both narratives draw directly upon Plato's allegory of the cave, but the uniqueness of Clarke's vision in this respect consists in a number of new departures. The narrative presents not only a process of mental breakdown caused by years of captivity in a secondary world where the exposure to the harshness of physical conditions is coupled with being subject to the impact of daily contact with a different form of reality. It also traces the formation of a new personality which develops through the prolonged interaction with the alternative reality. While the new personality differs from any psychological profile that could have formed in any human being living currently in the primary world, it is, nevertheless, wholly consistent, surprisingly resilient and, most importantly, it allows the individual to live a life of tranquillity and quiet confidence, making the most of the existential possibilities of the secondary world the character is confined to. This circumstance creates a novel context for the motif of magic-induced amnesia, as it is the act of self-surrender involved in the process of forgetting one's former existence that allows for the new, cohesive personality to emerge.

No doubt, the successful nature of this transformation is possible due to the fact that the environment of the House is ultimately made up of the accumulated weight of the concepts and impulses which once defined the core of humanity. Despite the process of steady degradation and alienation from its ontological source which the subsidiary world has in recent centuries been subject to, it appears that its foundations are way more wholesome for the human mind that the unpremeditated contempt for humanity which is implicit in the fairy glamour. In this context it becomes crucial that the environment of the House was, in fact, destined to realise its full potential in the interaction with the human mind. Although the statues filling its space exist in an objectively definable "outside" space, their ultimate reference to the abstract model existing in the human world of the primary reality, which originally inspired their existence is ultimately negotiable within the human intellect. This circumstance becomes clear as the protagonist reflects on the relation between the identity of his rescuer and the relevant emblematic image which would have represented her in the quasi-metaphysical environment of the House:

> I think of Raphael and an image – no, two images rise up in my mind.
> In Piranesi's mind Raphael is represented by a statue in the fortyfourth western hall. It shows a queen in a chariot, the protector of her people. She is all goodness, all gentleness, all wisdom, all motherhood. That is Piranesi's view of Raphael, because Raphael saved him.
> But I choose a different statue. In my mind Raphael is better represented by a statue in an antechamber that lies between the forty-fifth and the sixty-second northern halls. This statue shows a figure walking forward, holding a lantern. It is hard to determine with any certainty the gender of the figure; it is androgynous in appearance. From the way she (or he) holds up the lantern and peers at whatever is ahead, one gets the sense of a huge darkness surrounding her; above all I get the sense that she is alone,

perhaps by choice or perhaps because no one else was courageous enough to follow her into the darkness. (Clarke 242)

It is thus in the human mind that the ultimate reality of what the House represents emerges in its ontological fullness, though what the various statues may potentially represent will inevitably exceed the cognitive capacity of one particular individual. The House thus essentially conserves the collective understanding of humanity in the form of a metaphysical potentiality ready to be incarnated in the individual intellect according to its capacity. It is, consequently, important that the cruelty involved in forcing the psychological transformation upon the unfortunate Matthew Rose Sorensen was more the result of the twisted mentality of Valentine Ketterly and not, in any way, a "conscious design" of the House. Thus what essentially happens in *Piranesi* is that the evil magician imprisons his victim in a fairyland full of hidden benevolence which he neither discerns nor controls.

It is the focus on the internal psychological perspective that constitutes another vital element which the novel brings to the literary tradition represented in the motif of fairy abduction. In the standard form of the medieval narratives, the ubiquitously pursued external focalisation allowed to convey the importance of the psychological impact of captivity in the fairyland in the form of the powerful understatement of desultorily reported psychosomatic phenomena. A poignant example of this may be seen in the passages describing the condition of Lady Eurydice in *Sir Orfeo*.

## 6. The Context of the Modern Narrative Techniques

Yet, the juxtaposition of the respective passages from *Sir Orfeo* and *Piranesi* describing the corresponding mental condition of the fairyland inmate would also serve as a vivid illustration of the difference which the evolution in narrative techniques has made to the presentation of the motif. One of the earliest examples of a literary text where this new perspective forms a vital dimension of the narrative would be found, again, in the Narnia narratives of C.S. Lewis, where the psychological focus gradually develops out of the tradition of Christian *psychomachia*, as we find it developed in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.* Most crucially, however, it is the episode in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* that combines the traditional motif of captivity in a land on the verge of the primary reality with the idea of being entrapped in a mental dysfunction. There we find the account of the psychological trauma of the unfortunate Lord Rhoop resulting from his prolonged sojourn on the Dark Island where "dreams come true." Here we find a vision of a magical entrapment where both the character of the alternative reality and the impact upon the victim undergoing the captivity are first and foremost, psychological. It is also this episode that is very directly recalled in *Piranesi* in the intertextual link centring on the figure of the albatross heralding a release from the

long confinement, in accordance with the bird's traditional symbolic connotation of freedom and purity.

Indeed, in recent history of the modern fantasy genre we find a number of significant examples of texts which transcend the relatively traditional narrative and stylistic conventions pursued by C.S. Lewis and which make more extensive use of the stylistic apparatus developed in the modernist and post-modernist novel in order to present the consequences of entrapment in a secondary world from the perspective of the internal psychology of the character. The most notable examples of this new form of the fairy abduction narrative would be, for instance, Terry Pratchett's *Wee Free Men* and Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*. Although both novels make extensive use of the motif of *psychomachia*, it is the second novel that *Piranesi* most resembles in its denouement. In both narratives, the idea that a prolonged stay in the alternative reality inflicts a mental transformation upon the protagonist which is profound enough to render him unable to return to his former lifestyle and identity is a key element in both cases, but it is only in Susanna Clarke's novel that we end up with the identity of the central character of the story being split up into three distinct personalities each reflecting on the others in a typically post-modernist collage/polyphony of narrative voices.

In consequence, we find the story narrated by three different characters. Matthew Rose Sorensen relates to us the event prior to his imprisonment in the alternative reality through the journals read by the Beloved Child of the House, on whom the nickname "Piranesi" is bestowed by his captor. It is through his narration that we learn of the events happening in the Tributary World, which becomes his natural habitat. The third, nameless narrator relates to us the events which take place after the creature born and shaped in the half-metaphysical reality of the House chooses to follow the memory of Matthew Rose Sorensen into the primary reality. Although, upon leaving, the Beloved Child takes with him the memory and understanding of the secondary world where his personality was forged, his identity does not survive contact with the very different reality of the primary world and the withdrawn, though kind, and even altruistic, persona which emerges at the end of the narrative is as distinct from the enthusiastic nobility of the inhabitant of the House as he is from the vigorous self-confidence and ambition of Sorensen.

The third narrator's most distinguishing trait is his unique insight into the deeper fabric of the primary reality, and it becomes evident that this specific shape that his identity takes is the result of the fact that the secondary reality of the House, with its more direct recourse to the metaphysical dimension, remains part of his consciousness:

> In my mind are all the tides, their seasons, their ebbs and their flows. In my mind are all the halls, the endless procession of them, the intricate pathways. When this world becomes too much for me, when I grow tired of the noise and the dirt and the people, I close my eyes and I name a particular vestibule to myself; then I name a hall.

> I imagine I am walking the path from the vestibule to the hall. I note with precision the doors I must pass through, the rights and lefts that I must take, the statues on the walls that I must pass. (243)

Thus, the primary reality, as experienced by the third narrator, differs from the consensual outlook of its average dweller who has never experienced contact with the alternative reality of the House. It is then visible that it is the ultimately internal, psychological character of the reality which Tributary World can potentially engender in the mind of its human inhabitants, that has the potential of being carried on outside the physical boundaries of the secondary reality, allowing greater insight into, and understanding of, the more profound texture of the metaphysical dimension of the primary reality:

> I thought that in this new (old) world the statues would be irrelevant. I did not imagine that they would continue to help me. But I was wrong. When faced with a person or situation I do not understand, my first impulse is still to look for a statue that will enlighten me. (241)

Yet, the outcome of the situation is that the uniqueness of the vision that the third narrator inherits from the Beloved Child has the inevitable result of distancing him from other inhabitants of the primary reality, while his constant awareness of the personalities of Matthew Rose Sorensen and the Beloved Child causes his own personality to remain fragmented, if not actually schizophrenic. All this has the effect of enveloping the nameless persona in a detached environment of wistful loneliness and social disconnection:

> People were walking up and down on the path. An old man passed me. He looked sad and tired. He had broken veins on his cheeks and a bristly white beard. As he screwed up his eyes against the falling snow, I realised I knew him. He is depicted on the northern wall of the forty-eighth western hall. He is shown as a king with a little model of a walled city in one hand while the other hand he raises in blessing. I wanted to seize hold of him and say to him: *In another world you are a king, noble and good! I have seen it!* But I hesitated a moment too long and he disappeared into the crowd. (244)

This circumstance is all the more paradoxical if we realise that it was the fear of loneliness and lack of human contact that motivated the Beloved Child to leave the reality of the House in search of a new life in the world once inhabited by Matthew Rose Sorensen. As it turns out, the decision resulted in the emergence of yet another psychological identity – one destined to a lifetime of balancing on the verge of two complimentary, yet also incompatible realities, never fully belonging to either of them.

## 7. Conclusion

It seems, therefore, that the redefinition of the motif of fairy abduction which takes place in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* resulted in the development of a conception of secondary reality which is, in its essence, an autonomously mental construct, although it emerges through contact with a physical reality. As the ultimate reality of the Tributary World of the House becomes incarnated inside the human mind, the person bearing its mental imprint will never be truly free of its impact and, consequently, will never be truly able to abandon it, no matter what manner of rescue will release him from inhabiting the physical dimensions of the tangible reality which originally engendered it. However benevolent and mind-broadening the sojourn inside the reality of the House may still have been for the persona that emerges at the end of the narrative, there is no denying the fact that the fairyland which becomes a state of mind is significantly harder to conclusively abandon than would be the case with any form of physical incarceration which has been conjured up in the traditional literary incarnations of this type of motif where the fairyland is merely a physical place.

Thus, the concept of the secondary world we find in *Piranesi* emerges from a creative redefinition of some of the cornerstone motifs of speculative fiction which are bestowed a new vitality and relevance by reflecting a new context upon their resident textual tradition. In this sense, the distancing of the concept of the secondary world from the context of physical reality seems to constitute a natural departure which brings it into a closer contact with the modern sense of psychological realism, yet it also constitutes a revaluation of the ontological duality implicit in the classic Tolkienian model of the secondary world reaching back to the earlier manifestations of the idea of the fairyland. It is in this context that Susanna Clarke's narrative marks a significant new reference point in the long history of the imaginative conceptualisation of the idea of the secondary world in modern literary tradition.

## Notes

1   For more background see James 2012, 62–78; Mendlesohn/James 2012, 43–60.
2   Given the importance of intertextual relations of a variety of the novel's motifs to the work of C.S. Lewis is also significant that the character of Matthew Rosen Sorensen finds his close counterpart in Mark Studdock of *That Hideous Strength.*
3   For more background on the medieval understanding of the marvellous, see Saunders 2010, 1–116; Gurevich 52–56.

4  For an in-depth treatment of the issue of medieval space perception, see Zumthor 1–47; 51–55; Martin 154; Gurevich 37. The relation of medieval space perception to the contemporaneous notion of the marvellous is extensively discussed in Erickson 6–8; 27–38 and Saunders 2010, 207–233, Saunders 1993, 1–24, 141.
5  On the modern concept of the secondary world see Wolf 20–60.
6  As a character, though, Arne-Sayles is probably more traceable to Timothy Leary.
7  For a more extensive discussion of this aspect of Platonic philosophy, see Reale 37–116.
8  As in the classic Aristotelian definition, "time is the measure of motion" (*Physics*, Book IV, part 10–13).
9  For more on portal fantasy, see Mendlesohn 2008, 1–58.
10  The Romance of *Thomas of Eclerdoune*, l.145
11  On the motif of tabooed gifts in fairy abduction narratives, see Wade 109–146.

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