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**THE PROBLEM OF WORLD-BUILDING
IN GRIMDARK FANTASY.
THE CASE OF MICHAEL R. FLETCHER'S
MANIFEST DELUSIONS TRILOGY**

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the rhetorical aspects of the contemporary grimdark fantasy novel, as understood by Farah Mendlesohn. Michael R. Fletcher's trilogy *Manifest Delusions* is discussed in more detail, which is first characterized as one of the most important works of the modern variety of fantasy referred to as grimdark. When confronted with classic fantasy narratives, such as the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien, Tad Williams and Robert Jordan, Fletcher's novels turn out to be problematic in the context of two basic aspects of classic fantasy – world-building and immersion. This phenomenon is discussed on the example of three specific aspects of the poetics of *The Manifest Delusions*: the use of German proper names, ironic quotations that open individual chapters of the novel, and a significant modification of the strategy of personal point of view narration typical of fantasy. The use of these treatments turns out to be almost completely destructive to the world-building typical of classic fantasy.

Keywords: grimdark fantasy, world-building, immersion, rhetorics in fantasy.

Introduction:

***The Manifest Delusions* as grimdark fantasy**

The basic strategy of fantasy literature, especially contemporary fantasy, is to place a fictional plot in another world. The ways in which such fictions are constructed have been thoroughly described in classic works analyzing the poetics and world-building strategies of fantasy literature, by Kathryn Hume (Hume 1984), Rosemary Jackson (Jackson 1981), Brian Attebery (Attebery 1992), and Brian Stableford (Stableford 2005). However, Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* has proven crucial for con-

temporary understanding of fantasy literature. It synthesizes previous research and introduces clear distinctions between “the portal/quest fantasy”, “the immersive fantasy”, “the intrusion fantasy”, “the liminal fantasy”, and “the irregulars”. Placing a fictional plot in another world as a creative device has its own history (Wolf 2012: 65–152), which, as Farah Mendlesohn has pointed out (Mendlesohn 2008: XVIII–XXIV), has been developing continuously in the context of realistic prose, the most recognizable determinant of which is placing fiction in the reader’s world. The initial period of fantasy literature is characterized primarily by fantastic fictions, which, although they place the action in an imaginary world, at the same time emphasize the connection of this world with the world of the reader. Examples of such a literary strategy, defined by Mendlesohn as “portal/quest fantasy”, are obvious and widely known: from *Conan The Barbarian* by Robert Howard, through *The Chronicles Of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, to *Witch World* by Andre Norton. The end of this approach, and its postmodern deconstruction, was brought about at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s by Stephen Donaldson’s cycle *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. The publication of Donaldson’s series did not in any way result in the cessation of traditional portal or immersive fantasy, but rather enriched the spectrum of literary possibilities of the genre by making the protagonist a contemporary writer and clearly suggesting that his adventures beyond the portal, and consequently the entire fictional world, may be merely a product of his imagination. The dominance of the portal/quest fantasy model in fantasy literature between 1930 and 1980 makes J. R. R. Tolkien’s literary strategy, different from it in many key aspects, extremely important not only for the history of fantasy, but for twentieth-century literature in general – it should be seen as the first conscious fictional world-building (Wolf 2012: 130–134), i.e. placing a fictional plot in a fictional world that has nothing in common with the world of the reader (although, as Mendlesohn claims, *The Lord of the Rings* can still be seen as portal/quest fantasy, and the first truly “immersive” text would be *The Silmarillion*, Mendlesohn 2008: 2–3). We are talking here only and exclusively about the creation of the world; a plot placed in such a world may, of course, have some or other interpretive connotations related to the real world, for example formulated in the spirit of mythopoetic allegory.

The above issue regarding the methods of constructing fantastic worlds is related to a fundamental issue present in almost all attempts to theoretically define fantasy as a literary genre – what function does this type of literature perform? The answers to this question oscillate from traditional accusations of escapism (formulated even with regard to Tolkien’s texts), through subversiveness understood as the antithesis of literary real-

ism (Jackson 1981), to mythopoetic interpretations (Attebery 2014). In each of these theoretical attempts to define the phenomenon of fantasy, referential issues dominate, which in one way or another refer to phenomena of the real world, or cultural artifacts present in this world (e.g. realistic novels).

An attempt to free oneself from this, again following Mendlesohn, “rhetorical” explanation of the existence of fantasy literature is creation of fictional worlds that are not the worlds of the reader without traditional “justifications”, or framing devices, explaining why such fictions are created and – more importantly – why contact with such non-referential texts, usually defined as immersion, is a value in itself. As Wolf puts it: “The necessity of linking secondary worlds to the Primary World has lessened over time, however, as audiences have grown accustomed to stranger and more alien worlds. From uncharted islands and underground kingdoms, to planets in outer space, to worlds with no discernable spatiotemporal connection to our own, the range of examples of secondary worlds has grown along with their numbers over time.” (Wolf 2012: 64).

On the other hand, the contemporary fantasy novel is understood as a variety of the postmodernist novel, in the context of Brian McHale’s theory, that is, literature whose basic goal is to create (at the level of creation) and observe (at the level of reception) fictional non-referential worlds, which the author of *Postmodernist Fiction* calls “ontological dominant” (McHale 2004: 6–11). In both cases, the fantastic literary worlds are an end in themselves, they do not perform any social (or, more generally, non-aesthetic) functions, and contact with them does not require any “justification” and does not serve any purposes – apart from variously defined immersion.

In light of this distinction, Michael R. Fletcher’s *Manifest Delusions* appears as an extremely intriguing cycle, which in many ways bursts the framework of the genre, and at the same time shows how great and previously – through rooting in literary convention and contesting this convention – untapped possibilities lie in fantasy literature. Fletcher’s trilogy, consisting of the novels *Beyond Redemption* (2015), *Mirror’s Truth* (2016), and *A War To End All* (2023), is one of the most important and influential examples of the subgenre of fantasy literature called grimdark fantasy. The term grimdark itself is defined rather intuitively and subjectively, because coherent definitions do not currently exist. The term “grimdark” itself is most often associated with the second edition (1993) of Games Workshop’s miniatures game Warhammer 40,000, which featured the famous quote “In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war” on the cover of the box containing the game. However, a decade earlier, the

first volume of a series generally considered pivotal to the worldview and literary strategy of the subgenre now known as grimdark fantasy was published: Glen Cook's *The Black Company* (1984). After 2000, authors who are considered the main representatives of grimdark fantasy made their debuts – R. Scott Bakker (*The Prince of Nothing* first series, 2003–2006), Mark Lawrence (*The Broken Empire* series, 2011–2014) and, above all, Joe Abercrombie, whose ten-volume series *The First Law* (2006–2022) is considered the most influential and at the same time the most representative of grimdark fantasy. Since his debut as a fantasy writer, Michael R. Fletcher, as the author of two series, *Manifest Delusions* (2015–2023) and *The Obsidian Path* (2020–2022), has been seen as one of the key representatives of grimdark literature.

The definitions of grimdark literature formulated on the basis of the aforementioned texts usually oscillate around various associations related to the words that make up this neologism – “grim” and “dark”. Grimdark fantasy is thus defined by aspects of the world (dark, brutal, engulfed by constant war, doomed to destruction, governed by unclear and dangerous laws), the nature of events set in this world, which are paradoxically “realistic”, which is usually understood as the elimination of plots based on the axiological conflict of Good and Evil in favor of a brutal struggle for power and domination sometimes based on real historical events. This is accompanied by the creation of heroes, who are usually shown as anti-heroic characters, or extremely evil and immoral. Such are the heroes of Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law*, Sand dan Glokta and Logen Nine-Fingers, Marith Altrysyr, the main character of Anne Smith Spark's *Empires of Dust*, and Anasûrimbor Kellhus, the protagonist of both R. Scott Bakker's series, *The Prince of Nothing* and *The Aspect-Emperor*. The actions of heroes portrayed in this way, additionally set in such a world, ultimately lead to the negation of the basic functions (immersion, mythopoesis or allegorical commentary on the primary world) usually attributed to fantasy literature. The most intriguing issue, however, which constitutes a significant problem in the case of the main representatives of the grimdark subgenre mentioned above, is the question of the relationship between the fantasy they create and the concept of world-building. In none of the examples mentioned earlier is this relationship more problematic than in the novels of Michael R. Fletcher's *Manifest Delusions* trilogy.

Grimdark fantasy is a subgenre of literature still understood intuitively rather than clearly defined. There is no doubt, however, that it is a rhetorical and simultaneously postmodern phenomenon – the distinctive features of texts designated by this term are almost always recognized in opposi-

tion to conventional solutions known from classic fantasy texts. This is not accidental, and in almost every case we are dealing with a consciously subversive literary strategy. A thorough analysis of such devices in the case of Michael R. Fletcher's trilogy should serve to enhance our understanding of the poetics of this, as yet, rather arbitrarily defined literary strategy.

World-building in *Manifest Delusions*

At first glance, Fletcher's trilogy seems like an almost perfect allotopia. Set in a fictional world that is governed by completely different laws than the reality of its potential reader, it is fantasy not only because it is set in a "different place", but also because the main feature of this world is a series of supernatural phenomena, the existence of which has a direct impact on the lives of the characters, determines the scale of values and the way the world functions. The basic mechanism of "otherness" here is the fact that people's delusions can manifest in the world as real entities and have a direct impact on this world. Only those people who are characterized by mental disorders, the most important manifestation of which are the titular delusions, are endowed with this power: the stronger the delusions, the more powerful and dangerous their physical manifestation, which in Fletcher's crazy (literally and figuratively) world replaces traditional magic understood as a supernatural factor that decides about the fantastic nature of the fictional world. This idea is also the basis of the plot of the trilogy: since the most important delusion of man is the existence of God, conscious control of this delusion, i.e. "raising" a god and controlling his ascension, will be the key to power over the world. Therefore, the main antagonist of the first volume, the leader of a marginal religious sect Geborene Damonen, König, decides to "raise" a new God who will be his puppet. The plot quickly gets out of control when a trio of completely amoral antiheroes – Bedeckt, Stehlen and Wichtig – decide to use the controlled ascension of the future god, Morgen, for their own purposes. Fletcher also introduces a number of other laws governing his fantasy world (for example, mirror images that have their own personality and influence reality), which make the novels of *Manifest Delusions* trilogy seem like a nightmarish fantasy fairy tale populated by immoral antiheroes typical of grimdark fantasy.

On the surface, the world of Michael Fletcher's novels seems to be an ideal world of allotopia, a non-referential, fictional world existing only for itself, in which characters operate, whose actions and motivations result

solely from the internal laws of the world in which they are placed. And yet, the author resorts to several intriguing techniques both in the construction of the world and in the literary form of his novels, which almost completely destroy the impression of allotopic illusion.

As Krzysztof M. Maj points out (Maj 2015: 196), one of the key strategies for creating the impression of otherness in allotopia is allonymy, or building the impression of otherness of the fictional world by using names that differ radically from the names of the reader's world. The inventor and master of this strategy is, of course, Tolkien as the author not only of the fictional geography and history of Middle-earth, but also the creator of a fictional language and proper names constructed on the basis of this language. Since the publication of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, this device has been one of the most frequently associated with the fantastic strategy of world-building means of building the impression of otherness (Wolf 2012: 183–189). Meanwhile, Fletcher resorts to a device that probably has no equivalent in the history of fantasy – all proper names in his novels, names, names of places and localities and religious groups, are in modern German. What is more, all these names are significant, they are related to the features of the objects or people they name.

This type of strategy itself is nothing new; German-sounding proper names appear, for example, in the *Warhammer 40,000* universe, but they appear there alongside names stylized to look like Roman or Greek ones; Fletcher consistently limits himself to using only German proper names. Considering the small number of people who know German (according to data from 2025, 134 million out of 8.2 billion of the Earth's population, source: www.census.gov), German-sounding proper names may give the impression of otherness, and thus be an element of building an allotopian strategy. However, it is more likely that even without understanding the meaning of individual names, this procedure will prove destructive to the allotopian illusion – a well-read reader, even one who does not know German, will interpret these names as an element from his world. This impression will be deepened in the case of a reader who knows German, who will additionally notice that most of the proper names used by Fletcher have an ironic or downright humorous tone. It is hard to have a different reaction when observing the actions of characters named Bedeckt Imblut (“bathed in blood”), Stehlen Siealles (roughly “she steals everything”), König Furimmer (“king forever”) or Meineigener Beobachter (“my own guard”) or Wichtig Lügner (“important liar”), whose actions correspond in one way or another with the names they are given in the fictional world. This procedure creates a characteristic rhetorical tension

that forces the reader to constantly oscillate between observing events in the fantastic fictional world and signals that refer him to his realistic world.

Fictional quotes as a rhetorical device

The second important element of the poetics of Fletcher's cycle, which functions on a similar principle, is the placement at the beginning of almost every chapter of the novel (and consistently every chapter from the second volume of the cycle onwards) of quotations from books, letters, and treatises "from the world". This procedure is one of the most important and at the same time the most conventionalized world-building procedures in fantasy, suggesting that the narrative of the novel is only one of the possible manifestations of the linguistic description of the fictional world, apart from which there are other knowable documents. This procedure, in its most original understanding, also derives from J. R. R. Tolkien's literary strategy, in which the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* is only one of the possible aspects of the description of the "world", and its supplement is, among others, *The Silmarillion*. The strategy of providing individual chapters with fragments of writings "from the world" was first consistently applied in Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) (see the entry on *Bene Gesserit Archives* in McNelly 1984: 157–162) and since then has been a permanent element of the literary convention that makes the description of the fantastic world credible.

This convenient world-building device is, however, problematic in several respects in terms of elementary literary categories. If it is treated, following Herbert, as one of the elements of convention and applied on the basis of a kind of literary inertia, it is a useful tool facilitating the solution of the most basic problem of literary fantasy, namely "teaching" the reader the principles and rules of the fantasy world. However, if subjected to critical reflection, this device inevitably gives rise to unresolvable paradoxes, which in turn give rise to questions that are unanswered in the traditionally understood theory of literature. Who is the author of the critical selection of writings "from the world" and who places them at the beginning of each chapter? Is the author of this selection the same person as the narrator? Has the text existing in the form of literary narrative been subjected to some critical analysis and provided with appropriate explanations facilitating the reading? Who did this? The author? The narrator? The editor?

What is more, this technique, soon after it became popular and became an element of convention, was subjected to parodic techniques. The precursor of this strategy is undoubtedly Jack Vance, who uses this type of technique in many of his novels (and also uses footnotes in very surprising places) in a way that exposes the inevitable paradox of this type of technique. In the cycle of novels *The Demon Princes* (1964–1981), this is taken to absurdity, as some of the chapters of these novels are provided with quotes from texts whose connection with the narrative of the novel is difficult to establish, or the quotes placed at the beginning of the chapter contradict each other (Stasiewicz 2017). A related strategy is the postmodern strategy of Andrzej Sapkowski, which fits into the broader context of this author's characteristic compromising of the truthfulness of texts sanctified by tradition. The author of *The Lesser Evil*, who began his literary career with retellings placed in the Witcher world suggesting that the versions of commonly known fairy tales established in culture are lies or at least distortions, transfers a similar strategy to the series of novels about the Witcher Geralt. In several places, the information included at the beginning of the chapter, taken from various writings "from the Witcher world", is in sharp contradiction with the information from the actual plot of this fragment of the novel. Throughout the saga, excerpts from *The Encyclopedia Maxima Mundi* (by Effenberg and Talbot) or the anonymous *Monstrum, or a Description of a Witcher* describe Witchers as unfeeling, machine-like mutants, or worse, as extinct charlatans who create the very monsters they claim to hunt. The entire plot contradicts this. The reader sees Geralt as philosophical, burdened by emotions he claims not to have, and adhering to a strict moral code. While the "scholarly" texts claim Witchers are extinct or evil, the reader spends hundreds of pages with a Witcher who is arguably the most "human" character in the series. Sapkowski also goes a step further, leading to the final collision of the worlds, the fictional fantastic and the empirical real, when in several places in his novel, as quotes providing chapters, there appear quotes from real texts by Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, Thomas Malory or Edgar Allan Poe.

Michael R. Fletcher does something similar. In most cases, the quotes that open the chapters are ironic comments on the following part of the narrative in the form of a chapter. Usually, the quote that accompanies the chapter is related to the following narrative sequence, but the nature of this relationship is of a special kind. *Manifest Delusions* is a cycle of grimdark novels, and thus describes events involving burnt-out, desperate, or defeated heroes or heroes whose actions, in the larger scheme of things, turn out to be a greater or lesser failure. This applies to all the heroes who are related to

the main plot without exception – Bedeckt, Stehlen, Wichtig, König, and Morgen. For this reason, the quotes “from the world” at the beginning of each chapter are a brutal commentary to the events that follow them and concern issues of self-deception, delusions, megalomania, misjudgment of reality, and many other issues that are the actual causes of the defeats suffered by the heroes of the novel. At times Fletcher employs a device familiar from Vance’s novels, where quotations are self-contradictory or a source of unintended comic effect, which is usually connected with the “German” name of their author.

My mirror never shows me what I want to see. I can’t possibly be that fat and ugly!

Fett Hässlich, Mirrorist (*Beyond Redemption*, p. 433)

Fletcher also resorts to Sapkowski’s strategy resulting in a postmodern “rupture” of the world, when, amidst the flood of quotes from fictional philosophers and thinkers of the world in *Manifest Delusions*, a quote from Guy de Maupassant unexpectedly appears (*Beyond Redemption*, 325).

Despite apparent similarities to intertextuality in the traditional sense (including, above all, the classical theory and typology of Gerard Genette, 1997) or Bakhtinian polyphony (Bakhtin 1984), the technique has more in common with the more experimental strategy of the postmodern novel, which focuses on exposing the paradoxes of established literary conventions. In this respect, Fletcher’s use of fictional quotations resembles a strategy familiar from the novels of Jack Vance and Andrzej Sapkowski.

A separate issue, apart from observing the constant irony directed at both the characters of the novel and the literary convention, is an attempt to answer the question of whether such procedures are *de facto* a component of the interpretation of Fletcher’s novel. It all depends on whether we consider *Manifest Delusions* as a form of allegorical commentary on human nature, which in a symbolic way is a description of our reality, or merely as an effective but autotelic grimdark narrative, which requires the potential reader to observe only its formal features, especially in the context of the pressure of inevitable habits resulting from contact with literary convention. An example of the first strategy can be one of the founding works of the grimdark trend, *The Prince of Nothing* trilogy by R. Scott Bakker, in which the author uses a similar technique of quotes from the world commenting on the plot. The novels of the author of *The Thousandfold Thought* are, however, a brutal and disillusioning critique of religion as such, its role in the life of humanity in the context of individual freedom

and function in the history of societies, and are undoubtedly a commentary directed beyond the boundaries of a fictional literary text. The quotes from the philosopher Ajencis that accompany individual chapters comment on various aspects of the fictional world of Earwa, and are an allusion and partial parody of Aristotle's philosophy (Stasiewicz 2016: 192–204). It does not seem that Michael R. Fletcher's intentions reached that far, or at least beyond the purely parodic conventions characteristic of literary postmodernism.

The function of point-of-view narrative

The third aspect of fantasy prose that is characteristic of literary strategy and that undergoes significant modification in Michael Fletcher's novels is the narrative technique known as *point of view character narrative*. It is worth noting that Mandlesohn consciously avoids and even protests against the use of the term *focalization*, in the sense of this term introduced by Gerard Genette (Mendlesohn 2008: xviii). The difference, of course, is that Genette described the relationship between the knowledge of the protagonist and the narrator, while Mendlesohn focuses on the relationship between the character's point of view and the reader's knowledge of the fictional world.

In its primary function, the *point of view character narrative* is another element of the world-building convention and its general goal is an effective narrative strategy of presenting the reader with elements of the fictional world. It is used primarily to avoid the greatest problem of narrative world-building, i.e. the meticulous presentation of the elements that make up the fictional fantasy world most often referred to as *infodumping*. The narrative technique, thanks to which the potential reader learns simultaneously with the protagonist what laws govern the world they are learning about and whose fate they are observing, operates according to the golden rule of effective storytelling of fictional worlds, referred to as *show don't tell*. The *point-of-view character* strategy is crucial to the functioning of immersive fantasy. As Farah Mendlesohn puts it: "Yet what I shall argue here is that the author seeks to control these choices, even while understanding the polysemous and proactive position of the reader. For many authors the task is to anticipate readers' strategies as part of their own poetics. The core rhetorical strategy of fantasy remains the same: fantasy is constructed with precision through point of view. Like a perspective puzzle, if the reader stands in "the wrong place," the image/experience will not resolve." (Mendlesohn 2008: xviii). Ultimately, it serves to expand knowledge

of the fictional world from the reader's perspective, which, as Mendlesohn emphasizes, is crucial to the application of this narrative strategy (Mendlesohn 2008: xviii).

The *point of view character* strategy is used in *Manifest Delusions* in a completely different way. In each of the three volumes, the narrative of the individual chapters is conducted alternately from the point of view of the main characters, in the first two there are primarily Stehlen, Wichtig, Bedeckt, Aufschlag, Morgen. In practice, however, each character taking part in the plot can become a hero from whose point of view the narrative is conducted. Fletcher significantly modifies the function in which this device is used. Instead of fulfilling traditional world-building functions, the constantly changing points of view are used to provide an expanded psychological motivation for the individual characters, and this is basically the only purpose for which they are used. In terms of cognition, all the characters are static, the plot in no way expands their knowledge of the world. The key element determining their behavior in the fictional world is their psychological structure, previous experiences, and – in accordance with the main idea of the novel – the degree of madness. On the one hand, this is an element of the reduction of world-building characteristic of these novels, on the other hand, this element of the novel's technique is also used to deepen the irony that permeates Fletcher's novel. Instead of reserving a specific fragment of the plot presented in the narrative for one point of view, which is a constant practice in conventional world-building oriented fantasy novels, the author of *Beyond Redemption* often presents the same scene viewed from different points of view. In practice, this serves to strengthen the basic device of the novel – to deepen the impression of defeat and hopelessness of the protagonists' actions, who, intertwined in a crazy psychological conflict, constantly plot against each other, motivated by their obsessions and madness, causing the plans of all of the characters to end in more or less spectacular defeats.

Fletcher also uses the above-described technique for a kind of world-building reduction, which is one of the most striking features of his trilogy, features that are basically contrary to the basic assumptions of epic fantasy. In the traditionally understood model of world-building narrative, of which classic examples are Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* and Tad Williams' *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*, and in modern times the most effective implementation is Brandon Sanderson's *The Stormlight Archive*, all the characters are entangled in a conflict that far exceeds their particular interests and mostly concerns the ultimate fate of the world. All the heroes of the above literary cycles sooner or later realize that they are participating in events that far exceed the significance of an individual's life and have

a smaller or larger role to play in them. The narrative conflict in which they become involved will ultimately decide their fate through its significance in a broader historical, mythical or ontological perspective.

However, a similar expansion of perspective never occurs in *Manifest Delusions*. Although the starting point of the novel's plot – an intrigue of a group of priests aiming to take over the world by controlling an artificially created god – suggests that its consequences should concern the entire world, this never happens. The aforementioned intrigue develops on the basis of an unceasing series of defeats, disasters and consequences unforeseen for all the characters involved in the plot. This applies even to the god acting in the second and third volumes, who instead of shaping the world according to his obsession with perfection and purity, becomes a source of madness, destruction and chaos. Morgen, the self-proclaimed god of purity and perfection, loses control of his reality. His own doubts and the betrayals of those closest to him undermine his divinity, and his empire begins to fall apart. In the final scenes of *A War To End All*, he stands on the battlefield, observing the world immersed in chaos, realizing that he will never achieve perfection. In an interpretive sense, *Manifest Delusions* brings the quintessence of the vision of the world proper to grimdark fantasy: the reader observes burnt-out and defeated characters whose primary motivations are their obsessions and fears, which ultimately leads to inevitable disaster both in their personal lives and in the broader perspective.

The broader perspective – concerning, as the convention of epic fantasy would dictate, the “world” – never appears in Fletcher's novels, primarily because the world itself remains a mystery to all the characters. This is best illustrated by the dialogue between Wichtig and Zukunft at the end of the second volume:

“I am Wichtig Lügner, the Greatest Swordsman in the World.”
She stared at him, searching. “I believe you.” She laughed, eyes dancing.
“Actually”, said Wichtig, “I lied.”
“You're not the Greatest Swordsman in the World?”
“No. I'm the Greatest Swordsman in the city-states.”
“That *is* the world,” she said, confused. “The Basamortuan's don't have Swordsmen, and there is nothing else.”
“I think there is. I think there is something beyond the mountains.”
“But everyone knows this is all the world. Belief defines reality.”
“What if there are people on the other side of the mountains who know differently?”

Zukunft nodded, looking contemplative. “Imagine what they might believe. Imagine what their reality might be like. What if they think the sky is green or all believe people are basically good?” (*Mirror's Truth*, p. 348)

Conclusions

Michael R. Fletcher's *The Manifest Delusions* is therefore an almost model example of grimdark fantasy, which in its essence is a negation and undermining of the traditional model of fantasy literature written by Jordan, Williams and Sanderson. In terms of meaning, it is an allotopian equivalent of a noir novel, aiming to present a fictional fantasy world in the darkest possible colours. In Fletcher's novels, this world is cruel, and war makes no sense apart from chaos and destruction. There is no room here for the classic concept of good – all the characters are broken to some extent and are driven by selfishness, obsessions or madness. There are also no characters who unequivocally represent good. Each character is flawed, full of contradictions and selfish motives. Even characters who seemingly strive for order, like Morgen, turn out to be tyrants, and those who want freedom, like Nacht, are manipulators. Despite grand plans and ambitions, most of the heroes end up broken or dead. Those who survive are physically and mentally devastated, and the world remains chaotic and brutal. Ultimately, *Manifest Delusions* questions the meaning of war, religion, and belief in a higher order. Power is a tool for control, and gods and ideas are created by humans and their illusions, leading to even greater suffering.

This nihilistic message is accompanied by significant modifications of conventional strategies for telling fictional fantasy worlds. One might even venture to say that a constant tendency noticeable in these novels is the desire to break the impression of fantasy, rather than to create a hermetic allotopian fantasy world. The methods consistently used by Fletcher – German-language names, citing fictional texts from the world, and a character-driven narrative using the point of view characters technique – are saturated with irony that is destructive to the basic goal of fantasy, i.e. the immersive description of an “other” world. One might venture to say that the methods described here are in the deepest sense opposed to the basic goal of epic fantasy – world-building. Here, perhaps, the postmodern aspect of Fletcher's writing is revealed most strongly: the ironic transformation of literary convention, on the one hand, destroys the impression of the “otherness” of the world and constantly sends the potential reader to confront individual aspects of *Manifest Delusions* with other fantasy texts. On the other hand, this brutal irony is also used for the purposes of building meanings in the spirit of grimdark: ironic allonymy, quotations sarcastically commenting on fragments of the plot, and inflated psychologism permeating the narrative serve to present the protagonists in the most gloomy and pessimistic way, all of whose efforts will come to nothing. The most characteristic ele-

ment of epic fantasy, i.e. personal narrative, which in its original function serves world-building, in *Manifest Delusions* works exactly the opposite way – towards a kind of world-building reduction. Focused on their fears, obsessions and delusions, the characters never become a source, either for themselves or for the reader, of a broader perspective on the fictional world, which, as a result of their constantly clashing particular interests, will sink into greater and greater chaos.

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