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Magic in Christopher Whyte's Novels

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Thesis Abstract

While the Gaelic poetry of Scottish critic, translator, and novelist Christopher Whyte (1952) has received both critical attention and acclaim, his four English-language novels to date are generally less known and studied. All Whyte's novels deal with the themes of gender, queerness, and challenging heteronormativity, with magic also featuring prominently in three of his four works. The focus of this thesis is on the three novels that present magic and fantastic elements as an important part of their plot: *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, *The Warlock of Strathearn* and *The Cloud Machinery*. The objective of this work is to give an overview of the magical elements and their use in each of the novels with focus on the integral topics of identity, gender and sexuality, while also aiming to explore the theme of the *fantastic* in each of them. To examine the element of the *fantastic* in each novel and provide a theoretical framework for the research, this thesis employs the 1975 English edition of Tzvetan Todorov's survey *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre*.

The thesis is structured into three integral chapters, each focusing on one of the chosen novels, exploring the origin, use and limitations of magic in the specific novel. The thesis presents an overview of the magical elements used in each novel and their connection to the themes of identity that are the key point of focus of Whyte's novels. Although magic is presented as a neutral force in all three works, its features and usage vary depending on the characters and themes of each individual novel. While *The Cloud Machinery* and *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* both embody Todorov's concept of *the fantastic*, *The Warlock of Strathearn* comes closest to his definition of *the marvelous* literary genre.

Abstrakt práce

Přestože skotský spisovatel, překladatel a kritik Christopher Whyte (1952, Glasgow) získal mnoho ocenění za svoji poezii ve skotské gaelštině, jeho čtyři anglicky psané romány zůstávají opomíjené. Jeho próza se zabývá tématy queer identity a genderu a zpochybňuje heteronormativitu. Ve třech z jeho čtyřech románů je také významným dějovým prostředkem magie. Tato práce se zaměřuje na tři romány, které používají magii a fantastické prvky jako významnou součást jejich děje: *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, *The Warlock of Strathearn* a *The Cloud Machinery*. Cílem této práce je shrnout použití magických prvků v každém ze tří románů a zaměřit se na ústřední témata identity, genderu a sexuality. Práce zároveň analyzuje element fantastična v každém z vybraných románů. K analýze používá práci *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre* Tzvetana Todorova v anglickém překladu.

Práce je rozdělena do tří hlavních kapitol, z nich každá zkoumá původ, použití a limity magie v každém jednotlivém díle. Přínosem práce je přehled použitých magických prvků a jejich propojení s tématy identity, která jsou hlavním zaměřením Whyteových románů. Magie je prezentována jako neutrální síla ve všech třech dílech, ale její specifické vlastnosti se v každém z vybraných děl liší. Zatímco *The Cloud Machinery* a *Euphemia MacFarrigle* se vyvíjejí v souladu s Todorovým konceptem fantastična, *The Warlock of Strathearn* se nejvíce blíží jeho definici žánru zázračna.

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1. Introduction

While the Gaelic poetry of Scottish critic, translator, and novelist Christopher Whyte / Crisdean MacIlleBhàin (1952, Glasgow) has received both critical attention and acclaim¹, his four novels to date², *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* (1995), *The Warlock of Strathearn* (1997), *The Gay Decameron* (1998) and *Cloud Machinery* (2000), all written in English, are generally less known and studied.

As critic, Whyte helped to introduce gender and queer theory into Scottish literary studies and sought to apply these approaches to canonical Scottish texts, and the dynamics of gender and nationality play a major role in his own writing too. In his introduction to *Gendering the Nation*, a 1995 collection of critical essays focusing on gender and nationality which he edited, he argues:

Just as “to be a woman” may be a very different kind of activity or experience from “to be a man”, so “(choosing) to be Scottish” is not necessarily the same kind of process as “(choosing) to be English”. Scottishness may be structured quite differently from Englishness. There may even be a range of possible ways of “being Scottish”.³

In her essay “Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism”, Fiona Wilson comments on this issue of identity, stating that:

For Whyte, identity is hybrid; accordingly, there may well be ‘a range of possible ways of “being Scottish”’ (Whyte 1995b:xiv). Whyte’s interest is in how these “possible ways” intersect and overlap with each other. If past narratives of Scottish

¹ Whyte both translates poetry into Gaelic, as well as composes in the language himself. His first collection of poetry, *Uirsgeul/Myth*, was published in 1991 in Gaelic with English translations and received a Saltire Award the following year. His second collection, *An Tràth Duilich/The Difficult Time* (2002) was published in Gaelic only, as Whyte strongly argues against self-translation. His sixth collection of Gaelic verse *Ceum air Cheum / Step by Step* (2019) was shortlisted for the Saltire Society Poetry Book of the Year as well as Scotland’s National Book Awards.

² There are currently two novels by Whyte forthcoming – *Beyond the Labyrinth* and *Towards Awakening*, that have not been published yet by the submission of this thesis. <https://christopherwhyte.com/>

³ Christopher Whyte, “Introduction,” in *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), xiii.

identity often rested on unexamined binary constructions, the present task is to recognise, interrogate and possibly rewrite the borders of those narratives.⁴

While all Whyte's novels work with topics of gender and queerness, and challenge heteronormativity, the focus of this thesis will be on only three novels out of the four in particular that present magic and fantastic elements as an important part of their plot. These are *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, and *The Cloud Machinery*.

Whyte's first novel, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* (1995), is set in Glasgow during the late 1980s. It introduces a wide variety of characters⁵, all of whom are influenced by the mysterious figure of Euphemia MacFarrigle, a supposed widow in her fifties, in reality an androgynous supernatural angelic messenger on a mission to disturb the ordinary lives of the other characters. Euphemia's mischievous magic wreaks havoc throughout the entire city, from the West End, where the archbishop is suddenly stricken with a case of chronic flatulence, to working-class Springburn's church of St Pius XXVII, where the statue of the Virgin cannot seem to stop laughing.

The second novel, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, published in 1997, is an autobiography of a 17th century "warlock", born in Strathearn with special powers. The hero is able to heal people and shapeshift into animals; but one of the biggest feats of his magic is the change of his gender to pursue romance with the lesbian witch Lisbet. Throughout his life, the Warlock comes into conflict with the church repeatedly — Fiona Wilson asserts that "to stand outside definitive binary oppositions, to stand outside the official order, can be perilous at the best of times; in seventeenth-century Scotland, it is life-threatening."⁶

Whyte's third published novel and the last one covered in this thesis is *The Cloud Machinery* (2000). Part detective story, part fantastic murder mystery set in eighteenth-century Venice, Italy during the Carnival; it introduces a troupe of artists rehearsing an opera for the night of re-opening the theatre of St. Hyginus. The company's musical director

⁴ Fiona Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. by Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 194.

⁵ Whyte's origin (he was born and raised in Glasgow; his family has Irish Catholic roots) is apparent in the novel. His insight into the people of Glasgow – queer, straight, Catholic or Protestant – is exceptional.

⁶ Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," 197.

Domenico uncovers the secret tenant of the theatre and inadvertently helps free necromancer Goffredo Negri; who unleashes his malevolent magic on the city on his quest to create a singular androgynous human.

Despite Whyte's first novel being published more than two decades ago, the critical reception of his fiction is still surprisingly limited. This thesis draws on the critical works available, namely Fiona Wilson's aforementioned chapter "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism" included in the 2007 *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, Robin M.J. MacKenzie's study "A Swithering of Modes": Realist and Non-Realist Space in the Fiction of Christopher Whyte", which appeared in the collection *Boundless Scotland: Space in Contemporary Scottish Fiction* (2015), and Kirsty Macdonald's 2007 essay "Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men's Fiction", which was published in the *Irish Gothic Journal*.

To examine the element of the fantastic in each novel and provide theoretical framework for the analysis, the thesis employs the 1975 English edition of Tzvetan Todorov's survey *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre*. Originally published in French in 1975, it offers the first concise attempt to characterize the fantastic, examining "both generic theory and a particular genre."⁷ To qualify into the fantastic literary genre according to Todorov, the work has to exhibit three main points: first, it must allow the reader to see the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described.⁸ Second, this hesitation may also be shared by a character⁹ who the reader usually identifies with, and third, "the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regards to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations."¹⁰ The thesis also uses Rosemary Jackson's influential monograph *Fantasy: A Literature of Subversion* (1981), as it offers an important overview of fantasy literature, its sources, and disruptive potential, providing a natural follow-up to Todorov's work, which she comments on extensively in her study.

⁷ Robert Scholes, "Introduction," in *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), ix.

⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 33.

⁹ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre*, 33.

¹⁰ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre*, 33.

Whyte utilizes magic in all three of the novels to develop a narrative that gives prominence to voices that are often excluded or marginalized, presenting queer and gender-ambiguous characters and situations that challenge heteronormativity. In them, magic is a neutral energy; its use and consequences of its use always rest entirely with the characters wielding it. In all three novels, magic emphasizes queerness and the multifaceted nature of identity.

The objective of this work is to give an overview of the magical elements and their use in each of the novels with focus on the integral topics of identity, gender and sexuality, while also aiming to explore the theme of *the fantastic* in each of them. In doing so, this thesis aims to add to the undeservedly limited reception of Whyte's work as a novelist and to contribute to its wider appreciation. It also aims to provide a dedicated initial study of Whyte's fiction through the lens of the fantastic, and to open possible further discourse on the role of the fantastic in his novels.

The thesis is structured into chapters, each focusing on one of the chosen novels, exploring the origin, use and limitations of magic in them. Each chapter also includes an exploration of the fantastic in the given novel with the lens of Todorov's work.

2. The Warlock of Strathearn

Out of the three novels analysed, *The Warlock of Strathearn* is most concerned with magic. It is also the only one of the three works to be realized in first-person narrative, giving it a several distinctive characteristics. The novel works with the established gothic trope of a found manuscript. The manuscript is “discovered” by a high-school professor and scholar Archibald MacCaspin, who provides the foreword of the novel. MacCaspin is engrossed in the work on the manuscript until his passing; the afterword is given by his nephew, Andrew Elliot. The Warlock gives an account of his whole life, from childhood to old age, directly addressing the reader of the manuscript:

This is where my tale becomes difficult. How do you explain to a blind man what it is like to see? How do you help a deaf man understand the delights of hearing? How am I to describe what has always been perfectly natural to me, as if it were an acquired skill, something from which I could be separated? Could you, the reader of these pages, convey to me what it is like for you to live *without* the faculties which I possess?¹¹

The Warlock is born on a nobleman’s estate of Cultechaun as a son of its heir and a village girl. His marginal position at the estate due to his origin and ambiguous class status is further enforced by the manifestation of his magical powers early in his childhood. In the first part of the novel, the Warlock endures abuse at the hands of his grandmother Allison and a priest of the Catholic church, Vincent McAteer, which he escapes by maiming Allison and subsequently shunning his magical powers for several years. The second part relates his adult life, changing his gender to pursue romance with the witch Lisbet, and ultimately the defeat of Allison followed by a short recount of his late years.

The narrative is therefore entirely subjective, full of personal opinions, musings, and emotion, ranging from love to hate, with only the Warlock’s perspective being introduced. As Colin Manlove states in his study of Scottish fantasy literature, most of it is directed inward (protagonist vs. themselves), rather than outward (protagonist vs. the world) as opposed to English fantasy: “English fantasy more often deals with the quest outwards, where Scots fantasy deals with the inwards search.”¹² The Warlock’s introspective position is apparent; he judges the events of his childhood as well as his own decisions.

¹¹ Christopher Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1999), 30.

¹² Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 12.

Throughout his life, the Warlock's "liminal position"¹³ is evident. His powers set him apart from everyone and everything, and "normality" is a state he cannot afford to pursue, even though he tries to. As a child, he is kept away from both the halls of the lord as well as the servants' quarter, and after short-lived attempts to fit in and pass for a normal adolescent, he spends some of his adult life in a different body. This concurs with Manlove's observation that "in Scots fantasy the protagonist is most frequently solitary."¹⁴ Even in his old age, the Warlock seeks out a solitary recluse, helping the inhabitants of the nearest village, but living apart from it.

2.1. The Origin of Magic

Magic in *The Warlock of Strathearn* is part of the tangible, natural world. It is not removed from the real world, opposed to *The Cloud Machinery* or superimposing it, as is the case in *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* – it runs through the matter of earth, rock, rivers, and forests of Warlock's homeland. The power manifests in the Warlock almost instantly upon his birth, and he learns to use it via trial and error while helping the population of Strathearn and Cultechaur as well as by venturing beyond the castle walls into the forests surrounding it. On one of his adventures, he encounters a peculiar white hare:

Imagine, then, my surprise when I came upon a large, entirely white hare, which dawdled across my path in a meditative, tantalizing fashion. I was further disconcerted because I could not gain access to its thoughts. This clue made me wonder if, rather than a hare, it was a superior being which had assumed this form for a purpose hidden to me.¹⁵

Much later in his life, the Warlock discovers that "the white hare revealed itself to those naturally endowed with magical gifts at three crucial turning points in their lives, the last being, of course, the vigil of their death, or as near as made no difference."¹⁶ The creature is a manifestation of the source behind the Warlock's magical powers: "For you must know that is no mere animal but a manifestation of the divinity from which individuals such as yourself

¹³ Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," 197.

¹⁴ Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey*, 10.

¹⁵ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 70.

¹⁶ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 197.

derive your power.”¹⁷ This all-powerful source is almost never discussed in the novel, apart from a conversation the Warlock has with an “artificial” kind of magician, alchemist Andreas Borenius. Borenius performs magic to entertain people and earn money and employs it in his attempts to discover the philosopher’s stone. His magic is acquired, and he respects it as equal to his scientific pursuits: “An understanding of the mechanics of the physical world can only be achieved by combining both approaches, the magical and the scientific.”¹⁸ Peter Penzoldt expresses a similar notion in his study of the supernatural:

Science has made such progress that the greater part of the public understands as little of the work of today’s chemists, physicians and biologists as they do of black magic. It is not surprising that the short story identifies the magician and the scientist, considering that one by slow degrees has developed from the other. Despite its cleanliness a modern laboratory still resembles to a certain degree the hearth of the alchemist.¹⁹

The interconnectedness of magic and science reappears in *The Cloud Machinery*, where both science and magic are shown to be equally worthy pursuits to understand and relate to the natural world.

The connection of magic to earth and land is further underlined in the afterword, where Bessie, wife of Archibald MacCaspin and aunt of Andrew, encounters the hare in her garden: “She did not doubt for an instant that the creature was magical, and felt privileged to be included.”²⁰ It is worth noting the number of times and appearance of the creature; as Colin Manlove remarks, “Scotland has a large and even now still faintly lingering folk- and fairy-tale tradition,”²¹ and the inclusion of these traditions in the novel serve as another way to undermine Scotland’s Calvinist image. The animal is of unusual colour and appears exactly three times. Traditionally, however, “hares were viewed suspiciously as the familiars of witches, or as witches themselves in animal form.”²² There is none of this suspicion present

¹⁷ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 198.

¹⁸ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 197.

¹⁹ Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), 45, Internet Archive.

²⁰ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 251-252.

²¹ Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey*, 1.

²² Rose Sharp, “The Legend of the White Hare (continued),” *Henfield Museum*, accessed January 1, 2023, www.henfieldmuseum.org/uploads/1/3/0/9/130914466/fohm_newsletter_004_winter_2018-19_insert_.pdf.

when Bessie encounter the white hare, but rather “calm acceptance”²³ that she adopt towards the “whole business”²⁴ with the manuscript, her husband’s death, and its connection with the magical hare, as her nephew Andrew comments on in the afterword. The hare’s importance is understood, as it seems, universally.

The source of supernatural power, which is manifested in the white hare, is connected not only to the land, but also to Christianity in its origin:

If Christianity ever had any power, it was as a branch of a larger tree, which alone could supply it with a nourishing sap. When it denied its connection to the source it withered away and died, leaving only a rigid hierarchy of frightened men, hungry for power.²⁵

The Warlock’s animosity towards Christianity is not surprising, given the history of abuse he had suffered underneath the guise of his “education”. It is fear of the unfamiliar, rather than any dogma, that drives the representatives of Christian religion in the novel, and their hate of anything transgressive is only thinly veiled as salvation: “Suddenly a rude crucifix was thrust in front of me. I spat in fury at the image of their fear and cruelty.”²⁶ Christianity in *The Warlock of Strathearn* is presented as a “rigid hierarchy” because it imposes limits and prescribes “correct” ways of being, without accepting any deviation from the self-proclaimed norm. The Warlock is a figure naturally defying limits – as Robin M.J. Mackenzie notes in his ecologically oriented essay, the Warlock is a figure resistant to objectively imposed limits:

In *The Warlock of Strathearn* Christopher Whyte has imagined a figure who embodies a fluid and self-transformative subjectivity, characterised by the free play of desire and a preternatural sensitivity to, and interconnectedness with, the natural environment.²⁷

The Warlock is, comparably to the natural environment, ever-changing and evolving.

²³ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 251.

²⁴ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 251.

²⁵ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 54.

²⁶ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 53.

²⁷ Robin M.J. MacKenzie, “The Hieroglyphic of Raindrops: Reading the Signs of Nature in *The Warlock of Strathearn* by Christopher Whyte,” in *Environmental and Ecological Readings: Nature, Human and Posthuman Dimensions in Scottish Literature & Arts (XVIII-XXI c.)*, ed. by Philippe Laplace, (Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2020), 187–200, OpenEdition Books.

The Warlock's universe is profoundly polytheistic: his native paganism peoples the landscape around Strathearn, and especially the "thin place" (where boundaries between material and spiritual worlds are porous) in the rowan grove and beside the Water of May, with a multitude of deities, or numinous presences, of whom the Shapeshifter, the Trickster and the Lady of Flowers are the most prominent. More unusual still is the strong element of metempsychosis in his belief system – somewhat reminiscent of Hinduism – though one could argue that the transmigration of souls flows easily and naturally from the warlock's experience of bodily transformation and his alchemical attempts at the transmutation of base metals.²⁸

The Warlock's life is that of multitudes.

2.2. The Use of Magic

Early use of Warlock's magic is connected to emotion – it resurfaces when Warlock and his friend discover a nest with eggs while adventuring in the forests: "I was already aware of a creature dimly stirring inside each fragile container, and I insisted we must leave them where we had found them. /.../ He seized the eggs and broke them on the ground next to my cheek. As he strode off, I raised myself on my elbows, and stared at his back with utter hatred."²⁹ Warlock's friend later falls ill, and it is Warlock's duty to lift the illness: Ye're the ane that wrocht the seikness, she said, and ye're the ane can tak it frae him.³⁰ As a young adult, it seems the Warlock still draws on this experience when understanding emotion: "I imagined love consisted of a kind of ray or energy passing between the bodies of the pair involved. If I succeeded in interposing myself I would, I imagined experience this vibration, or at least gain a nearer understanding of its nature."³¹ The two extreme emotions, love and hate, are the two most frequently appearing ones connected to magic. This is demonstrated in the case of Warlock's grandmother Alison, who initially curses Warlock "by the spirits of earth and sky."³² Blaming the new-born for her beloved son's death, Allison focuses her rage at the baby. Even though it is too soon for the Warlock to exhibit any of his powers, the blanket in which he was wrapped supposedly turned entirely red from just two drops of his

²⁸ MacKenzie, "The Hieroglyphic of Raindrops: Reading the Signs of Nature in *The Warlock of Strathearn* by Christopher Whyte," 187–200, OpenEdition Books.

²⁹ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 33.

³⁰ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 34.

³¹ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 122.

³² Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 28.

grandmother's blood: "Such was the baptism I received from Allison Crawford."³³ Allison's hatred is not only manifested during her outbursts and the curse of the Warlock, but is quite literally the power that her alive following Warlock's failed attack: "When the due time had passed, I was to learn the use to which she put her years as a living statue, and the nature of the energy she accumulated in the course of them."³⁴ Her fierce emotion materializes when she passes; transforming into a fluid beast, imposing a multitude of attack on the Warlock. Robin M.J. Mackenzie argues that this is the case of repressed energy: "This comes across very plainly in the case of Alison, the warlock's grandmother, whose demonic and murderous destructiveness is ascribed (or at least linked) to the repression of strong sexual impulses."³⁵

The community of Strathearn is quick to pick up on Warlock's special powers: "Since the incident with the fever, Marion had done everything she could to keep my powers a secret. The boy's arrival was proof that she had failed, that word had spread among peasant folk for miles around. I realized later that the caul³⁶ had been sufficient to alert them. All they needed to do was to bide their time until my faculties developed, as naturally an unremarkably as the ability to stand upright, or run, or grasp a ball."³⁷ The Warlock is called to heal a sick cow, upon which he is asked what payment he requires. Balance must always be kept – if there is need for Warlock's help, he needs to be rewarded accordingly. To make use of Warlock's powers is common sense for the community. As Colin Manlove concludes, "The tales in such northern traditions are created out of a sense of the inhospitability and the omnipresence of the land. Life is hard and wresting it from such unwilling ground generation after generation leads to a unique bond between men and earth."³⁸ As Warlock explain later in his life, "There had always been known healers among us, gifted to a greater or lesser extent. To make use of their skill was a matter of common sense. It had little or nothing to do with the profession of Christian belief, or with attendance at the parish church on Sundays. All of us had the opportunity to witness the efficacy of their art. Who, with a cow,

³³ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 29.

³⁴ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 106.

³⁵ MacKenzie, "The Hieroglyphic of Raindrops: Reading the Signs of Nature in *The Warlock of Strathearn* by Christopher Whyte," 187–200, OpenEdition Books.

³⁶ Warlock's head was enveloped in caul upon his birth, a supposed omen of good fortune and talent for healing.

³⁷ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 35.

³⁸ Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey*, 2.

a goat or a pig on his or her hands, close to dying and which, more than likely, the healer could set to rights, would let scruples stand in their way?”³⁹ Making use of magic needs to be kept at a small scale, for the good of the community, and compensated accordingly. Warlock acknowledges that the power is not his to take, but rather flows through him, and he is able to channel it: “I know now that commanding is a possibility, but also a violence. It is better to listen to the energy of living things, to use it as one uses running water to refresh one’s face or hands, or to redirect it as one might a stream, by shifting stones to guide it into a different bed.”⁴⁰ The Warlock can feel the energy of the universal source even when he himself is not directing it: “In a wood of ash and hawthorn, on the north side of the valley, I experienced an unwonted calm. Tugging wordlessly at her skirt, I led Marion up a path that veered off the one we were following. Soon we came upon a spring bubbling up at the centre of a small clearing.” The spring water subsequently heals Marion’s hands. To ignore his attunement to magic, Warlock has to perform a conscious effort: „In order to live in the day-to-day, to pass for a normal adolescent, I had to blot out an entire field of receptivity.”⁴¹ Warlock’s connection to the natural world is illustrated on a number of occasions; he understands thoughts of living creatures and can assume their form, a skill that he perfects after getting acquainted with the forest spirits.

The forest spirits welcome Warlock into their midst, and he learns their respective quirks and specialties. The two of his most important teachers are The Shapeshifter, an androgynous spirit that shows Warlock how to turn into animals; and the Lady of Flowers – mother-like presence, resembling in some of her qualities a Christian god:

Somehow I knew she was my mother – not my natural, physical mother, the girl who had died in wintertime, wrenched open by my birth – but a mother who had not suffered or travailed to bring me forth, one I could not wound, willingly or unwillingly, and whose fruitfulness went back to the dawn of time. Among all her creatures, I was a single grain of sand on an endless beach, yet she knew every nook and cranny of my being. Her attention to me was unremitting, and her expectations had such solemnity I would measure all my future actions in light of those stern eyes. As I gazed into the pool, she bent over, and my reflected image was enclosed in hers, enfolding me, embracing me. The tears welled up spontaneously, dropping into the

³⁹ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 132.

⁴⁰ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 33.

⁴¹ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 112.

water with the distinctness and the resonance of bells, in homage to her beauty and her power.⁴²

The Lady of Flowers embraces Warlock like his birth mother who he has never met (but still feels guilt over her death), and it is possible his powers were in some sense granted from her: “In Strathearn each individual’s parents were known to us, whether or not they had been married. Powers of an unusual kind did not emerge inexplicably. They were foreshadowed in the character and traits of one or both parents.”⁴³ The connection to the Warlock’s homeland is illustrated not only geographically, but also ethnically; the connection to community is observed by Colin Manlove: “Localism is a part of much Scots fantasy. It is present in the very character of the Scots traditional tale, which occurs in one clan region, where everyone is known to everyone else and where kings live next door to their subjects.”⁴⁴ Everyone is indeed known to everyone, and Warlock already knows the community from an early age before actually participating in it: “At that age, I already knew by hearsay the name and peculiarities of every man and woman living between Dunning and Forgandenny and up the glen of the May, though I had set eyes on few enough of them.”⁴⁵ However accepting of Warlock’s special powers, the community, does not, however, extend the same courtesy to newcomers.

Warlock’s love interest, the witch Lisbet, comes from an Edinburgh family, having no ties to Strathearn and the land to which she moved. When Mistress Murray expresses her dislike of Lisbet, it is not motivated by her use of magic per se: “the distaste with which she spoke of Lisbet’s activities was not, in my opinion, inspired by moral considerations, but by impatience at irresponsible meddlings in matters better left to experienced hands.”⁴⁶ The power is natural both to the Warlock and the world around him:

The reason for Mistress Murray’s disapproval, her disquiet even, was that Lisbet’s activities did not follow old, time-hallowed patters. She was an incomer, a city girl

⁴² Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 76.

⁴³ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 133.

⁴⁴ Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey*, 15.

⁴⁵ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 35.

⁴⁶ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 132.

starved of contact with plants, trees and streams. How could she claim to harness the power contained in them?⁴⁷

When his community asks for his help, The Warlock is always rewarded accordingly, and anyone who would use the power for their own gain “would not have been tolerated in our midst for any length of time.”⁴⁸ The Warlock takes great care to never misuse his power. The only death that the Warlock orders (McAteer) is in exchange for the murder of his love Lisbet; similarly, to defeat Allison, a wren must voluntarily sacrifice its life.⁴⁹ Balance is always kept.

2.3. Limits of Magic

Even though Warlock’s power functions more or less as a sixth sense, it has its limits. One of them is illustrated when Warlock is on the run with his wet nurse Marion: “The change of environment had disturbed the balance of my being, as if my power flowed into me from known ground, through the soles of my feet. I needed time to adjust to the different currents of strange places, before I could mould them to my will.”⁵⁰ To feel and make use of the powers that flow through the land, Warlock needs time – nothing is realized instantly. Time is one of the few restrictions imposed on the Warlock; his existence naturally escapes limits. As such, Warlock often has difficulty to describe his experience to the reader, as Robin M. J. MacKenzie notes:

It is clear, then, that the warlock’s discourse is traversed by a conspicuous tension between a strong sense of the limits (and limitations) of human language – especially when it comes to articulating the warlock’s experience, his modes of knowing and perceiving nature – and a persistent impulse to evoke that experience in linguistic terms.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 133.

⁴⁸ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 133.

⁴⁹ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 239.

⁵⁰ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 40.

⁵¹ MacKenzie, “The Hieroglyphic of Raindrops: Reading the Signs of Nature in *The Warlock of Strathearn* by Christopher Whyte,” 187–200, OpenEdition Books.

The limitations of human language and existence, when compared to the Warlock's own, are some of the reasons for his perceived solitude. His ability to connect to humanity, however, brings the Warlock comfort in times of need:

Suddenly I felt terribly alone. Around me, all four sides of the courtyard were ablaze. For some time I had been conscious of a small, solid object in the pocket of my cloak of gossamer. I took it out. It was a horse, the very wooden horse Marion had bought for me from the tinker on the road to Amulree.⁵²

2.4. Black magic, good vs. evil, emotion

Magic in the imagining of Whyte is a decidedly neutral force; there is no universal "evil" and no universal "good" magic, its use always rests entirely on the individual and their choices. These choices and feelings have real, tangible consequences. When Warlock is imprisoned in the castle and his grandmother Allison is joined by Reverend MacAteer to try to break his spirit and exorcise the magic out of him, the Shapeshifter visits the castle in an attempt to break Warlock out; unsuccessfully: "Whatever the spell McAteer's and my grandmother's piety had bound the house in, it was one my ally could not penetrate."⁵³ As the Warlock remarks much later in his life, "it is belief that shapes reality"⁵⁴, and Vincent MacAteer, responding to his own personal fears that he embedded into his "sacred" calling, was bound to find what he was looking for:

McAteer may well have felt he was doing God's work. **He undoubtedly believed in witchcraft and a devil.** [emphasis mine] Later, when I became privy to the mischief of a coven of misguided women in Auchterarder, I perceived in them a shabby embodiment of his worst fears. My magic and theirs, if theirs is to be dignified with the name of magic, belong to different orders. McAteer could have gone to the length of killing me without diminishing one iota of the power that flowed into my being. Whereas I feel the witches responded to an inner necessity of the minister and those like him, whose terrors are so instrumental in forming their world that they must find living embodiment close by.⁵⁵

During the time McAteer was responsible for the Warlock's education, the at the time young Warlock was hardly a menace to the society; but certainly a threat to the church's

⁵² Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 240.

⁵³ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 100.

⁵⁴ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 508.

⁵⁵ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 98.

power in *Strathearn*. Rosemary Jackson, in her significant study of fantasy literature, argues the following:

The concept of evil, which is usually attached to the other, is relative, transforming with shifts in cultural fear and values. Any social structure tends to exclude as 'evil' anything radically different from itself or which threatens it with destruction, and this conceptualization, this naming of different as evil, is a significant ideological gesture.⁵⁶

While encounter with 'the other' symbolized by the Warlock provokes fear and cruelty in MacAteer, Warlock's own otherness makes him all the more tolerant to hybrid or excluded characters. MacKenzie claims that it was the Warlock's encounter with the forest spirits, especially the Trickster, that heightened his tolerance to excluded characters: "One could argue that the Trickster's sometimes bizarre or grotesque hybridity helps extend the reach of the warlock's sympathy, allowing it to encompass creatures that arouse revulsion in other humans."⁵⁷ This experience helps Warlock during his stay in Edinburgh in his female form.

Unlike MacAteer, Warlock is not selfish nor too preoccupied with his own importance, at least not after experiencing life in a female body. As previously mentioned, Warlock had quite outlandish views on love before experiencing it. To truly understand this thoroughly human emotion, he must live it; to live it, he must first become a woman, an experience that is difficult and limiting in its own way:

I was impatient to establish contact with Lisbet. Mistress Murray insisted I should first accustom myself to my new role. She gave me what were effectively lessons in dress and deportment. I submitted to them with bad grace. I wished to stride down the street in manly fashion, letting my skirts billow in the wind, and it took me a long time to accept the necessity of mincing along, my legs practically glued to one another, gathering my headscarf about my face and not daring to lift my eyes from the ground. To walk the streets like that was a constant humiliation, yet Mistress Murray sustained it was what all women must learn to do if they are not to be publicly decried, or laid hands upon by the first ruffian they encounter.⁵⁸

The change renders Warlock vulnerable and exposed, which is all the more potentiated by losing his powers. Immediately after his change, the Warlock wonders if he has finally

⁵⁶ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 52.

⁵⁷ MacKenzie, "The Hieroglyphic of Raindrops: Reading the Signs of Nature in *The Warlock of Strathearn* by Christopher Whyte," 187–200, OpenEdition Books.

⁵⁸ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 156-157.

achieved what he longed for during his teenage years: “In changing sex, had I become normal at last? What did normality mean?”⁵⁹ The experience of “normality” and vulnerability further heightens his empathy: “All I wished for was a modicum of my former power so that I could alleviate their suffering.”⁶⁰ In his youth, the Warlock helps because it is expected from him; it is the experience of being truly helpless makes him vow to use his powers for good, were he to regain them:

All I wished for was a modicum of my former power, so I could alleviate their suffering. I did not for a moment believe I could alter the social structure of the city, or banish disease from within its gates, the way legend claims St Patrick banished snakes from Ireland. But I could have healed lives, just one or two. My love for Lisbet had robbed me of even that possibility. If my abilities were ever fully restored, I vowed I would use them to this end.⁶¹

When Warlock does recover his powers, they are the same as before – neutral. It is his conscious effort to “do good” that guides him, as it is the conscious effort of Alison to take revenge for her lost son, love, or power. In his essay “A Swithering of Modes...”, Robin M.J. MacKenzie notes the final confrontation of the Warlock and Allison as the “climactic confrontation between good and evil, white and black magic, that ends with warlock’s triumph.”⁶² This dichotomy might not be entirely suitable. Each of Whyte’s characters is capable of both “good” and “evil”; despite the special powers at work they are still entirely human. The neutrality of magic is a topic is further explored in *The Cloud Machinery*, where it’s evident that magical power is a natural result of curious exploration – both Negri (*The Cloud Machinery*) and Borenus (*The Warlock of Strathearn*) are ambitious scientists. It is the supporting characters of the novels – particularly Andreas, but also Alison and Lisbet – who showcase the emotional background of magical powers the best. While love and hate are decidedly complicated and nuanced emotions, it is precisely the complexity of them that identifies them as ‘normal’ human experiences. However, as MacKenzie argues:

⁵⁹ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 154.

⁶⁰ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 189.

⁶¹ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 189.

⁶² Robin M.J. MacKenzie “‘A Swithering of Modes’: Realist and Non-Realist Space in the Fiction of Christopher Whyte,” in *Boundless Scotland: Space in Contemporary Scottish Fiction*, ed. Monika Szuba. 155–174 (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2015), 168.

More important for us, however, than the definition and construction of normality are the symbolic resonances contained in the Shapeshifter figure, involving notions of fluid identity and polymorphous desire, of self-transformative powers as against the rigidity of fixed identities.⁶³

It is this “self-transformative power” and acceptance of his own “fluid identity” that are Warlock’s greatest strengths, and the reason for his ultimate defeat of Alison. The Warlock’s grandmother is more complex character than the defeated “evil” and “black magic” insinuates, in the same way that Whyte’s novels are more than a simple fantasy, or fantastic historical fiction. As Rosemary Jackson illustrates: “In religious fantasies and in pagan ones, this context of supernaturalism/magic locates good and evil *outside* the merely human, in a different dimension.”⁶⁴ Due to the progress in modern literature evil as “the other” ceased to be realized by another entity, but rather “as a projection of an unconscious part of the self.”⁶⁵ Jackson concludes that “because of this progressive internalization of the demonic, the easy polarization of good and evil which had operated in tales of supernaturalism and magic ceased to be effective.”⁶⁶ Thus Whyte’s antagonists lean more prominently into selfishness and act out of their own motivation, whereas his protagonists are prepared to consciously choose “good”. There is no black and white magic, only neutral energy that can be accumulated from different sources and put to different uses. While the monstrous spirit that Warlock encounters in the finale is the embodiment of the worst in Alison; the materialized hatred that she ultimately became evolved from another essence of humanity, grief – an extension of her love for her son, the Warlock’s father.

2.5. Gender, queer, gothic

While the gory descriptions of Alison’s revenant haunting the Bohemian countryside in the finale of the novel are excessively gothic, it is the themes of queer gothic and gender that take prominence in *The Warlock of Strathearn*. Kate Turner argues in her article “Queer Scottish Gothic” that “Scottish and queer have both turned to the Gothic to explore

⁶³ MacKenzie, “The Hieroglyphic of Raindrops: Reading the Signs of Nature in *The Warlock of Strathearn* by Christopher Whyte,” 187–200, OpenEdition Books.

⁶⁴ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 53.

⁶⁵ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 55.

⁶⁶ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 56.

that which is other, marginal and potentially disturbing to the (hetero)normative centre.”⁶⁷ It is the “potential disturbance to the heteronormative scene” that Kirsty Macdonald comments on in her article “Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men’s Fiction”, published in *Irish Gothic Journal*. Macdonald establishes that “male-dominated society acts as primary monstrous ‘other’, positioned in opposition to the protagonist and narrator of the manuscript, the unnamed warlock himself.”⁶⁸ The Warlock is a “highly transgressive figure”⁶⁹ – having lived in two different bodies (and shapeshifted to countless other forms), he ultimately accepts his own identity that seems to be outside of the gender binary. The reader never learns his name, neither the given one, nor the one that is chosen for him in his female form. The Warlock does not accept the name nor the identity it gives him: “When Hughoc eventually brought news to Edinburgh that (Lisbet) had been hanged, he refused to supply any details except one. Before dying, she had pronounced, clearly and distinctly, so that all close by could hear, my name. Which was not, of course, my name.”⁷⁰

Existing namelessly is another concept that the Warlock has in common with his spirit guides: “I cannot even write the names of my mentors, which were legion, and changed with the time of the day and the weather, as well as with their moods and the bodily forms they assumed. I shall invent pseudonyms for them.”⁷¹ The first spirit Warlock encounters is The Shapeshifter, an entity which is both shape and gender non-conforming: “There was a forest of hair between his belly button and his groin. A tattered loincloth hid whatever sex he was endowed with.”⁷² As Rosemary Jackson notes: “Gender differences of male and female are subverted and generic distinctions between animal, vegetable and mineral are blurred in fantasy’s attempt to ‘turn over’ ‘normal’ perception and undermine ‘realistic’ way of

⁶⁷ Kate Turner, “Queer Scottish Gothic,” in *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 208-221. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474408202-017>.

⁶⁸ Kirsty Macdonald, “Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men’s Fiction,” *Irish Gothic Journal* 3 (Nov 8, 2007): 37-53, <https://irishgothicjournal.net/issue3/>, 45.

⁶⁹ Macdonald, “Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men’s Fiction,” 49.

⁷⁰ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 182.

⁷¹ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 72.

⁷² Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 72.

seeing.”⁷³ This ‘normal’ perception is only further transformed by the sensory input: “I had expected him to stink. Instead he had a rich, earthy smell of old, dry leaves and ferns.”⁷⁴ It is fitting that the Shapeshifter is the first spirit that Warlock encounters, as they share a number of similarities. Firstly, Warlock shares with The Shapeshifter what Robin M.J. MacKenzie identifies as “fluid and self-transformative subjectivity”⁷⁵, even before Warlock changes into a woman: “My sex surprised me. I felt alienated from it, however skilfully it moved within another body to achieve climax and release.”⁷⁶ Warlock also cannot reproduce, neither in male nor female form, even though he longs to do so to “prove that he was truly human”.⁷⁷ During his adolescence, Warlock is trying his hardest to blend in with his peers a become “normal”. Apart from his privileged position, he manages to win the respect of his friends by the “universally” accepted accomplishments of drinking, brawls and sexual conquests. As Kirsty Macdonald notes, “he becomes accepted in this male community by drawing from the values and customs to the society around him, existing for a time /.../ as a Frankensteinian product of his context, within which he has generally felt himself an anomaly.”⁷⁸

However, this adopted persona does not hold for too long. Warlock turns himself into a woman soon after to pursue the witch Lisbet and is faced with an entirely new world of challenges and rules to follow when existing in a female form, the already difficult situation also aggravated by Warlock losing his powers. What he was posing as in becoming a “normal” young adult was as limiting as the newly acquired female form: “Masculinity, as prescribed by patriarchal is as restrictive and limiting as femininity, imposing as many obligations on behaviour and action, and becoming a chamber of horrors for those who struggle against conformity.”⁷⁹

⁷³ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 49.

⁷⁴ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 71.

⁷⁵ MacKenzie, “The Hieroglyphic of Raindrops: Reading the Signs of Nature in *The Warlock of Strathearn* by Christopher Whyte,” 187–200, OpenEdition Books.

⁷⁶ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 113.

⁷⁷ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 113.

⁷⁸ Macdonald, “Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men’s Fiction,” 45.

⁷⁹ Macdonald, “Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men’s Fiction,” 47.

Warlock's love Lisbet is also a distinctly non-conforming character, both in her desires and ambitions. Lisbet is able to pursue them more or less freely due to her fortunate position of having been born to a considerable wealth and growing up birth with little to no patriarchal supervision. However, the "monstrous 'other'"⁸⁰ in the form of the suffocating and demanding Church eventually seizes her, as Macdonald observes: "The horrific consequence of this excess is witch burning, and throughout the novel many women who do not share the views of the establishment are singled out, ostracized and publicly executed, their 'unnatural' resistance linked to paranormal power."⁸¹ Even though Lisbet's coven "had access to real power"⁸², it seems that most women joined for the freedom to pursue their own wants and needs. Their requests, although petty and often motivated by revenge, are heard and granted. The coven wasn't inherently evil – nothing in Whyte's fiction usually is – if anything, perhaps oblivious to the damage their gatherings could cause: "I lack patience to describe their rigmaroles in detail.. Imagine what might happen if a group of young children were left unsupervised in the workshop of an instrument-maker. /.../ That is how Thomas, Lisbet and their minions treated the flow of power into which I had been privilege, since memory began, to dip my hands, drawing off a little for the benefit of the community where I belonged."⁸³ Apart from expressing other than heteronormative desires, the coven gatherings also allow the women to speak whatever their minds and heart desire, and be granted their wish, however petty or small-minded: "Lisbet snickered at the request, but did not reject it."⁸⁴ As Peter Penzoldt observes, "The modern witch does not have to be either perfectly innocent or perfectly evil."⁸⁵

2.6. The Fantastic in *The Warlock of Strathearn*

Colin Manlove claims that "In a sense Scots fantasy is inward-looking, concerned to discover something hidden within. It is much more frequently an expression of the psyche

⁸⁰ Macdonald, "Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men's Fiction," 45.

⁸¹ Macdonald, "Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men's Fiction," 45.

⁸² Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 146.

⁸³ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 145.

⁸⁴ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 146.

⁸⁵ Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction*, 44, Internet Archive.

of its central figure than is the case in English fantasy.”⁸⁶ Warlock’s narrative is as much a Bildungsroman as it is an autobiography, enabling the reader to become invested in Warlock’s story. Tzvetan Todorov asserts that “first person narrator most readily permits the reader to identify with the character, since as we know the pronoun ‘I’ belongs to everyone.”⁸⁷ This narrator, however, does not take part in the supernatural actions and therefore the reader can share his hesitation, which is the key to the fantastic genre. Moreover, the narrator should be an “average man” – the Warlock is, as is almost immediately discovered, an above average man. Nevertheless, there are still some key fantastic features realized in the text. First one is the theme/figure of a double, which Warlock encounters when he attempts to force his magical self out:

In the course of time, and by a sheer effort of will, I learned to neutralize half of myself. I had the sensation of being doubled. There was another self constantly at my side, attached to me, perhaps, by the back of a hand, as the two headed child had mirrored itself from the neck up and from the thigh down. This second self was dead. My twin accompanied me everywhere. When I say that he was dead, it is a manner of speaking. Some deaths are irreversible, others are provisional. It was the possibility of reviving him which made his presence so appalling.⁸⁸

Despite the theme of the double’s frequent appearance in the fantastic genre, Todorov specifies that the theme has different meanings in each work: “(the theme of the double) figures in many texts of fantastic literature; but in each particular work the double has a different meaning, which depends upon the relations that this theme sustains with others.”⁸⁹ In *The Warlock of Strathearn*, the theme of the double is tied with the Warlock’s acceptance of his hybrid identity; only through fully accepting himself he is able to confront his grandmother in the finale of the novel. As with all three novels, the use of the magic fully depends on the individual’s acceptance of their own identity. Repressing it can have grave consequences, as is the case with Gerald’s suicide in *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*. As Nicholas Royle mentions in his study of the uncanny, “one may want one’s double dead; but the death of the double will always also be the death of oneself.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey*, 11.

⁸⁷ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 84.

⁸⁸ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 112-113.

⁸⁹ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 143.

⁹⁰ Nicholas Royle, *The uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 190. Internet Archive.

The Warlock of Strathearn is the only work out of three that most closely borders on the genre of *the marvelous*, as established by Todorov. Rosemary Jackson describes the *true marvelous* as “characterized by a minimal functional narrative, whose narrator is omniscient and has absolute authority. It is a form which discourages reader participation, representing events which are in the long distant past, contained and fixed by a long temporal perspective and carrying the implication that their *effects* have long since ceased to disturb.”⁹¹ The Warlock, of course, engages the reader in a dialogue, but the truth of his account is never discredited. There is no space for reader’s hesitation, and therefore neither for the fantastic. The found manuscript trope together with the prologue and epilogue only further secures *the marvelous*. It is irrelevant to wonder whether Warlock’s own account is true or not – as Todorov indicates: “Truth is a relation between words and the things that the words designate; now, in literature, these ‘things’ do not exist.”⁹² The distant past time frame provided by the very first sentence of *The Manuscript*: “The house where I was born has long since become a ruin, and those who inhabited it are all dead now.”⁹³

⁹¹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 33.

⁹² Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 82.

⁹³ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 21.

3. The Cloud Machinery

Christopher Whyte's latest novel to date moves away from his traditional Scotland setting and takes place in Venice, Italy during the Carnival. The novel is, among other things, a detective story, a genre that Todorov characterizes as "close to the fantastic tale"⁹⁴. In the words of Fiona Wilson, "the subject is art, specifically the power of art to transform and create."⁹⁵ While magic in *The Warlock of Strathearn* can be accessed with almost no effort, if one possesses a sufficient talent, in *The Cloud Machinery* it is evident that to understand and master magic is a feat that requires skill and dedicated study, as any form of art would.

3.1. Origin of Magic

Magic in *The Cloud Machinery* is both a phenomenon to be studied by scientific means, as well as an art to be performed, enjoyed, and lived. The central plotline is set in and around the Theatre of St Hyginus, and many of the central characters are artists, most notably the main force of good, the retired performer Angelo Colombani. Similarly as in *The Warlock of Strathearn* magic does not oppose science, but goes hand in hand with it; which is illustrated early in the novel, when Goffredo Negri is being introduced by Andreas not only as a "magician and charlatan" but also as a "scientist and natural philosopher": "The name he went by was Goffredo Negri. He had numerous claims to fame: as natural philosopher, experimental scientist, alchemist, magician, conjuror and charlatan. As well as assisting Calefati in planning of the feast, he had agreed to mount a display of magical arts for the assembled company."⁹⁶ While using magic to entertain during feasts and fairs is another similarity the novel shares with *The Warlock of Strathearn*, its source is different from it.

In *The Warlock of Strathearn*, magic permeates the land, rivers and animals of rural Scotland. *The Cloud Machinery* has a different, distinctly cosmopolitan setting, similar to Warlock's impression of Prague. In Venice, magic seems to be a veil on the physical world, rather than having a natural source. The missing "princess" Eleanora is imprisoned behind such veil, but gradually comes closer to Venice, as her power grows:

⁹⁴ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 49.

⁹⁵ Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," 200.

⁹⁶ Christopher Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery* (London: Phoenix, Orion Books, 2001), 49.

Another voice was heard, a woman's, untrained as far as Domenico could tell. She was singing close by, from behind a barrier he could not define. The syllables were too distinct to be coming from elsewhere in the building, yet too distant to be in the same room. For the first time in that evening's train of strange events, Rodrigo looked alarmed.⁹⁷

Rosemary Jackson proposes that "enclosures are central to modern fantasy;"⁹⁸ presenting a dimension in which "the fantastic has become the norm."⁹⁹ While Eleonora remains in this fantastic dimension for almost the entirety of the novel, the protagonist Domenico momentarily traverses through it as well: "He was living in another dimension as though, rather than providing music for the spectacle, he had become part of it."¹⁰⁰

3.2. Use of Magic

As was established, magic in *The Cloud Machinery* is energy that can be accessed via careful study. Certain characters, like Angelo and Eleonora, possess more natural talent for it than others:

Colombani and Eleonora are of a kind. Nature made them from the same mould. Of all the thousands of wretches who tumble each day into the world of the living, unawares and unprepared, only a handful possess the energy with which creatures such as those are gifted. And even fewer have the skill to turn that energy to higher uses!¹⁰¹

People with magical talent can hone their skills much like musicians, dancers, painters or other artists do to perfect their craft, and use it to whatever means they see fit. Angelo is an immensely gifted singer, as well as talented architect and engineer, who can make models for theatre that are so intricate people believe them to be magical:

"Excellent!" cried Rodrigo. "How do you do it?"
"Ahah!" Said Angelo, emerging from behind his model with a grin of mischief. "What makes you think I have any intention of laying such arcane matters bare?"¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 79.

⁹⁸ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 47.

⁹⁹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 46-47.

¹⁰⁰ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 213.

¹⁰¹ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 118.

¹⁰² Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 77.

Angelo is offended when people accuse his creations as having been put together with magical means:

Do you know what they said of me, the populace of Venice, when my machines reached a sublimity no other city in the world has known? Do you know the calumny with which they soiled my art, the charge they laid upon me? That I used magic! That is what they said! It was alleged that I practiced black arts, and had made a league with the father of all mischief!¹⁰³

While the work on stage machineries was purely his own, Angelo did indeed “make a league” with darkness and mischief; for a time he assisted Negri with his nefarious plot to create “a single, androgynous creature which would dominate the world to come.”¹⁰⁴ Wilson concludes that “it is this monstrous homogeneity that *The Cloud Machinery* resists.”¹⁰⁵ Angelo ultimately sees reason and overpowers Negri, trapping him in a mirror, which is, according to Jackson, a place where “many of the strange worlds of modern fantasy are located in, or through, or beyond.”¹⁰⁶ Mirrors are “spaces behind the visible, behind the image, introducing dark areas from which anything can emerge.”¹⁰⁷

People banished to the dimension of the fantastic seem to exist there in the most elemental form. Negri still retains this form even after his escape, and moves between different stages of matter:

The window that looked towards the convent garden had lozenge-shaped panes. Four of them had been knocked out, leaving an aperture not much larger than a fist. This was the means of escape Goffredo had chosen. At that precise moment it did not disconcert Domenico in the slightest that a grown man should have slipped through a relatively small hole, as if he had been a gust of wind, rather than a creature of flesh and blood.¹⁰⁸

Similarly to *The Warlock of Strathearn*, magic in *The Cloud Machinery* epitomises a surpassing of limits; in the case of Negri’s escape, limits imposed by matter.¹⁰⁹ Jackson

¹⁰³ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 78.

¹⁰⁴ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 195.

¹⁰⁵ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 201.

¹⁰⁶ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 44.

¹⁰⁷ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 43.

¹⁰⁸ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 191.

¹⁰⁹ Magic in Whyte’s work is closely connected to alchemy; magnum opus of metal transmutation is also concerned with overcoming limits posed by various forms and states.

maintains that “fantasy is preoccupied with limits, with limiting categories, and with their projected dissolution.”¹¹⁰ Eleonora, who “departed this world on the first Saturday in December,”¹¹¹ is able to pass through Venice occasionally; unlike Negri retaining her form while she does so.

3.3. Limits of Magic

The magical veil can hide as well as protect:

I cannot reach the fellow. He is beyond my influence, for the power that protects him is hostile to mine. And do you know who his guardian is? That stinking cow of a flower-seller who crossed my path the day you and I first met! Unbelievable! It was outside the theatre, do you remember? Even then I sensed a force in her opposed to me. Didn't I tell you how I swooned when I came close and caught her fetid stench?¹¹²

Regardless of magic's intended use, it requires faith and confidence both in the power and in one's own abilities to master it. As Hedwiga proclaims while scolding lawyer Capri: “I, at least, have no fear of the world's knowing me for what I am.”¹¹³ It seem that the greatest limit is doubt; it is once again Hedwiga who informs Andreas that his restraint to truly believe in any higher power is his greatest setback: “Your scepticism is like a leather harness which cruelly binds the wings sprouting on your back. They are no use to you for flying, either to Heaven or Hell.”¹¹⁴

3.4. Magical entryways

As Colin Manlove notes, “in Scottish fantasy the fantastic experience and the world from which it emanates are very close to ours—into which they can come at any time.”¹¹⁵ The dimension of magic is not fully severed from the physical world, but it can at times come close to the reality at hand. This is always through the means of a portal:

¹¹⁰ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 48.

¹¹¹ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 47.

¹¹² Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 204.

¹¹³ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 84.

¹¹⁴ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 121.

¹¹⁵ Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey*, 13.

When she reached the magician's side and turned to face them, she was consumed by fire. Some people say the flames were like a veil she danced behind, others that she began to run within them and vanished into the far distance. Others still, who were watching her eyes, said she seemed to perceive a doorway and walk through it.¹¹⁶

Leading up to Negri's escape, Eleonora "comes closer" to the real world: "I don't know where he has imprisoned her, but she is impatient to break free. She has been coming closer and closer all through the winter, frightening the nuns in Mother Hilary's convent, and those poor comic actors too, by popping up where she is not supposed to be."¹¹⁷

Eleonora appears repeatedly in the attic window of St Hyginus theatre, and crashes the performance at St Hyginus several times: "The last few times, I was one of a group of people standing or sitting behind an enormous arch. A sea of faces was observing us. I could not tell if I was visible to them or not."¹¹⁸ Rosemary Jackson takes the view that "the spectral region of the fantastic"¹¹⁹ is an "imaginary world is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two."¹²⁰ While trapped, Eleonora exists in the natural and supernatural plane at the same time, embodying the concept of the fantastic as described by Jackson: "Like the ghost which is neither dead nor alive, the fantastic is a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness."¹²¹ The company director, Ansaldo Limentani, is quick to identify Elenora as such:

"And are you sure she is a ghost?"

"What other explanation can you think of? No one in the audience noticed anything untoward, though there was a gasp of admiration when she got up from her chair and strode to the front of the stage, before withdrawing. Instead of coming backstage, she literally disappeared."¹²²

¹¹⁶ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 52.

¹¹⁷ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 191.

¹¹⁸ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 224.

¹¹⁹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 19.

¹²⁰ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 19.

¹²¹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 20.

¹²² Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 171.

After disappearing, Eleonora immerses back into “the realm of shadows”¹²³, which she later describes to Domenico as a world “where everything was in different colours of grey”¹²⁴: “To tell the truth, there was neither day nor night, but merely an unending twilight.”¹²⁵ Jackson describes the world of the fantastic in a similar fashion:

Unlike marvellous secondary worlds, which construct alternative realities, the shady worlds of the fantastic construct nothing. They are empty, emptying, dissolving. Their emptiness vitiates a full, rounded, three-dimensional visible world, by tracing in absences, shadows without objects. Far from fulfilling desire, these spaces perpetuate desire by insisting upon *absence*, lack, the non-seen, the unseeable.¹²⁶

Eleonora did not belong to the shadow realm and was eventually permitted to leave: “If I was patient enough and worked diligently, I would be able to leave the realm of shadows and return to the daylight world.”¹²⁷ Hedwiga, on the other hand, was resurrected through Negri’s necromancy, and retains her shadow quality in “the daylight world” as well: “A terrifying creature in her heyday, though now she is, in more senses than one, a shadow of her former self.”¹²⁸

3.5. Senses, light vs darkness, good vs. evil

Whyte’s characters in *The Cloud Machinery*, as in the other two novels in question, remain entirely human. Even the necromancer Negri and his resurrected shadow pupil Hedwiga, both of whom are entirely consumed by their own dark agenda, keep some of their human qualities:

“Who was your teacher in these matters? Where did you learn about such things?”
“From Negri, naturally. Even at this stage, the man is not entirely evil. When our paths crossed, there was much good in him, but of a kind which it exceeded the capacity of ordinary men and women to appreciate or understand.”¹²⁹

¹²³Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 226.

¹²⁴Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 226.

¹²⁵Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 227.

¹²⁶Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 45.

¹²⁷Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 226.

¹²⁸Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 194.

¹²⁹Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 192.

Both Hedwiga and Negri are primarily selfish and ambitious, but could still learn to understand goodness again:

Hedwiga sucked her cheeks in meditatively, as if ruminating her answer, or as if the word she was about to pronounce were so abhorrent to her she had to gather her forces before ruminating it.

“Goodness,” she said. “Do you know what goodness is? I have long since forgotten, though I could learn again. It is a banal thing, that infiltrates and foils the greatest schemes of human and more than human minds. The most grandiose construction can be almost completed, when the meddling of goodness brings it tumbling down about one’s ears.”¹³⁰

Each character has a complex identity, with dreams, ambitions, and fears. The ‘good’ characters in the *Cloud Machinery* (especially Domenico, Rodrigo, Angelo) can be selfless, ready to sacrifice personal gain to help others (Domenico and Rodrigo especially, as they show extraordinary bravery in caring for each other). Whyte’s antagonists, on the other hand, lean more prominently into selfishness. Andreas, a herald of the church and figure of supposed moral authority, shows absolutely no remorse in using women for his own gain and is extremely drawn to power: “Raising his eyes inch by inch till they settled oh Hedwiga face, engrossed in the perusal of the documents he had persuaded Gabriela to steal on her behalf, he could not help speculating, whether the emotion he experienced at that precise moment might be love.”¹³¹ As usual, there are no entirely evil nor entirely good characters.

A topic of interest in *The Cloud Machinery* is the importance of a sense of smell. Angelo, a “good” character, cannot stand the smell of the “evil” Hedwiga:

“My nose tells me,” said Angelo, tapping it with his index finger and making a grimace of disgust. “That nauseous being spreads an odour of putrefaction around her that would reach my nostrils even if she were in Parma! Sad to say, she is a great deal closer. Is it possible that neither of you notices? What dull creatures you are!”¹³²

In the finale of the novel, Eleonora gives Domenico her account of the events of her disappearance: “The last thing I remember from this world, the real one, where we find

¹³⁰ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 120.

¹³¹ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 165.

¹³² Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 210.

ourselves now, is the enchanter's eyes. A fire came next. How painfully it burned me! And yet my body gave off a fragrance as it was consumed."¹³³

3.6. The Fantastic in *The Cloud Machinery*

Unlike in *The Warlock of Strathearn*, where the reader is thrust into the genre of *the marvelous* at the very start of the manuscript, *The Cloud Machinery* is purely fantastic in its early chapters, where Andreas recollects his pivotal childhood memory; an image of a golden bird coming to life during the Christmas Eve fair. Andreas is separated from his group, which proves a crucial fact later on, when his brothers cannot attest to his story: "The chill wind was so cutting he had the sensation of constantly being roused from sleep to wakefulness. He grew light-headed and was separated from the others."¹³⁴ The reader at this point may hesitate whether the event was true or not; and the hesitation is encouraged by the fact that Andreas was quite young at the time. Even though in Andreas' adulthood his hesitation had already subsided ("He stopped trying to deny what he had always known. The golden bird had flown into the sky."¹³⁵), the reader is still undecided. As was briefly mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Tzvetan Todorov asserts that both the detective story and the murder mystery closely relate to the fantastic: "The murder mystery approaches the fantastic, but it is also the contrary of the fantastic: in fantastic texts, we tend to prefer the supernatural explanation; the detective story, once it is over, leaves no doubt as to the absence of supernatural event."¹³⁶ Even though Andreas claims that magic is real at the beginning of the novel ("Envious tongues claimed that hidden enemies were responsible for the tragedy. It is a hypothesis I am inclined to discount. Powers of a different order were at work."¹³⁷), he is still unsure. After spending time Venice, however, he starts to favour the supernatural:

The air of Venice had transformed him beyond recognition. As little as two months earlier, he would have drawn the natural conclusion, that the woman was an

¹³³ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 224.

¹³⁴ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 18.

¹³⁵ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 20.

¹³⁶ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 49-50.

¹³⁷ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 48.

impostor. Since meeting Hedwiga, however, and seeing Gottfried Schwarz's face shimmer on the surface of a bowl of water in her home, his concept of the possible had altered to such an extent that, rather than excluding the alternative explanation, he found himself favouring it.¹³⁸

The air of Venice is indeed transformative, but treacherous at the same time. As Robin M.J. MacKenzie observes:

The Cloud Machinery is permeated by the fantastic: indeed, it is not always easy to tease apart a realist from a non-realist dimension in the diegetic world of the text, set as it is in an eighteenth-century Venice of masks and masquerades, between carnival and the Court of Darkness where the villains perpetrate their diabolical ploys and plots.¹³⁹

The masks and the mists only further underline *the fantastic* in the novel. It is well into the half of the novel before Negri's face appears in a porcelain basin at Hedwiga's behest and magic is confirmed, the narrative ultimately shifting into *the marvelous*.

¹³⁸ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 164.

¹³⁹ Robin M.J. MacKenzie "A Swithering of Modes': Realist and Non-Realist Space in the Fiction of Christopher Whyte," 171.

4. Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin

Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin is, by many characteristics, quite different from the previous two novels. It is set in the Glasgow in the late 80's, revolving around the peculiar figure of Euphemia MacFarrigle, a supposed middle-aged religious widow who disturbs the lives of many characters in the novel. While the two previous novels featured either one or several 'main' characters, in *Euphemia* "no single character dominates the action, which unfolds from many different points of view."¹⁴⁰

4.1. Origin of Magic

As far as the reader is able to gather, Euphemia was sent to Glasgow 'from above'.

Robin M.J. MacKenzie suggests that:

Euphemia frequently acts as *angelus ex machina* (as it were), not exactly a supernatural puppeteer who has complete control over the actions of the human but certainly a figure with gifts of foresight and an ability to bend the sequence of events towards the denouement devoutly to be wished. /.../ Most of the time, however, Euphemia's supernatural powers manifest themselves in more interventionist (and more purely comic) ways.

In *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, the origin of Euphemia's powers is never actually discussed. Whyte introduces Glasgow as a hybrid place, the intersection of many different religions and characters. Consequently, Euphemia and her magic belongs to everyone – Irish Catholics, Calvinists, other Protestants and agnostics alike. To name the source of Euphemia's power would be to limit her.

4.2. Use of Magic

Both previously discussed novels had a variety of magicians appear in the plot. *Euphemia MacFarrigle* is unique, as the novel's namesake is the only one wielding magic (apart from her elf-like minions, who nevertheless only do things at her behest). For most of the novel, Euphemia simply puts things in motion and observes the outcome:

The fairy cakes had pleated paper cup cases. Each had a splurge of white icing at its crown. The one she was pressing on Mother Genevieve undoubtedly had the most

¹⁴⁰ Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," 195.

tasteless decoration. Two rows of little blue globules formed a Greek cross, with a surprisingly large red globule at the point where the arms intersected. /.../ Euphemia, who had shown considerable anxiety that Mother Genevieve should consume that particular cake, adjusted her hat contentedly and shook the crumbs from her lap. The talk could now begin.¹⁴¹

Euphemia's "suitably shrunken"¹⁴² helpers are positioned in the globule of the "not inappropriately named"¹⁴³ fairy cake set on a quest to re-awaken desire in Mother Genevieve, Brenda MacCafferty. Desire is the "thematic dominant of the novel"¹⁴⁴, always present in various forms in all the characters. It can be suppressed, but not erased or forgotten. As Fiona Wilson asserts: "Desire – like comedy, like Euphemia's angelic crew – flows through the characters just as the River Kelvin does beneath the streets of the West End, no more hostile to the characters than the river is to the human world above."¹⁴⁵

River Kelvin is one of the transitional, hybrid spaces in the novel: "The river valley was a different world. It should have been a silvan paradise disrupting the monotonous symmetries of the prosperous West End. The flotsam and jetsam riding the grimy waters and the sour effluents that swirled in livid eddies belied the illusion."¹⁴⁶ Fraser ventures to the river at night to fulfil his homosexual desires repressed by daylight; the river, however, is a place where all kinds of sexual trysts take place: "At that time Mother Genevieve was simple Brenda MacCafferty, notorious among her schoolmates for allowing boys to feel her up in a shack at a murky spot along the banks of the River Kelvin."¹⁴⁷ Being caught during this act ultimately leads Brenda on her career path in the church, where she clearly doesn't belong, as she is smart, passionate and empathetic, unlike most of the clergy in the novel (Wilson states that "Whyte's immediate goal is revenge for a strict Catholic upbringing"¹⁴⁸, subjective that is apparent both in *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* and *The Warlock of Strathearn*).

¹⁴¹ Christopher Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1995), 9-10.

¹⁴² Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 19.

¹⁴³ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Robin M.J. MacKenzie "'A Swithering of Modes': Realist and Non-Realist Space in the Fiction of Christopher Whyte," in *Boundless Scotland: Space in Contemporary Scottish Fiction*, ed. Monika Szuba. 155-174 (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2015), 160.

¹⁴⁵ Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," 195.

¹⁴⁶ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 118.

¹⁴⁷ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 9.

¹⁴⁸ Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," 195.

Euphemia's flat is another irregular space in the novel. The headquarters at 98 Otago Street are "liminal and negotiable"¹⁴⁹, hybrid like Euphemia herself. It disappears and reappears, being both a welcoming safe space for those invited, and an inhospitable gap site for intruders. As Fiona Wilson comments, "For some, such as the detective Mick McFall, this liminality marks it as a place of danger; for others, the same qualities identify it as a place of refuge and possibility."¹⁵⁰ When Mick sneaks into the apartment because "he could put off penetrating Euphemia's mysteries no longer,"¹⁵¹ Euphemia captures him and makes him immediately regret trespassing: "She was absolutely terrifying. Not old at all. I'd have put her in her thirties at most. /.../ She was livid. She stood there glaring at me, and as she glared, I shrank. I just got smaller and smaller until she bent down, picked me up and put me in a bottle..."¹⁵² Changes in size are a "recurring trope in Whyte's fiction"¹⁵³ :

My grandmother had begun to grow, noiselessly and unstoppably. She was expanding with the force of her anger, turning into a colossus like that which straddles the harbour in Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, which I have seen in old engravings.¹⁵⁴

Euphemia's friend Cissie notices this peculiarity when she is first invited to 98 Otago Street and observing the postcards of angels that Euphemia endearingly calls her "family photo album:"¹⁵⁵ "From what Cissie could make out, angels could be as big or as small as they wanted."¹⁵⁶ In the epic finale, the postcard angels grow in size to join Euphemia as she ascends and returns into her angelic form:

For a while now Cissie had been conscious of strange noises coming from behind her shoulders. Her curiosity got the better of her and she broke off to look around. The postcards in Euphemia's collection were coming unstuck and fluttering to the ground. As each fell, the angels on it struggled to free themselves and took form in the air of the room. The movement of their wings ruffled the remaining cards, shaking them down more quickly. The angels grew alarmingly in size as they

¹⁴⁹ Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," 195

¹⁵⁰ Wilson, "Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism," 195

¹⁵¹ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 83.

¹⁵² Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 101.

¹⁵³ Robin M.J. MacKenzie "A Swithering of Modes': Realist and Non-Realist Space in the Fiction of Christopher Whyte," 162.

¹⁵⁴ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 238-239.

¹⁵⁵ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 129.

¹⁵⁶ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 128.

emerged. They might have been hurtling towards Cissie from the bottom of a deep, dark cone, or magnified by a zoom lens whose focus span round with unbelievable rapidity. Now she knew the smell of angel's wings. It recalled at one moment orange blossoms in hot sun, at another almonds toasting gently beneath a grill. The soft plumes brushed her face and tickled her nostrils. She let go of the book and covered her eyes with her hands, so blinding was the brightness that emanated from them.¹⁵⁷

Growing and shrinking are further extensions of Whyte's topic of fluid identities. There is no limit to them, thus angels can be as big or as small as they want¹⁵⁸, necromancer Negri can escape through "an aperture not much larger than a fist"¹⁵⁹ and Warlock's childhood wooden toy horse grows "to the size of a normal horse, but one with wings"¹⁶⁰ to carry his master to safety.

4.3. Limits of Magic

The ascension is realized at the end of Euphemia's awarded time in Glasgow. She can only stay in human form for about a year, "rarely longer"¹⁶¹, and it seems that time is the greatest limit imposed on her magic. While she had predicted Gerald's birth on the night that Alfred Coutts visited her ("He's been conceived /.../ The one I have to help. Or one of the ones. He'll be born this autumn."¹⁶²), she was unsuccessful in preventing his suicide: "What bothers me is the waste and the trouble I am likely to get into. I was too late, you see. If I had got there in time things would have been different."¹⁶³ As Euphemia explains before the birth of Gerald, "I don't have unlimited powers, you know. There are rules that limit even my freedom of action. Quite soon I'm going to have to go and I won't get back for a long time. It could be as much as twenty years."¹⁶⁴ The fact that her time spent in human form is limited proves to be the most restrictive aspect of her angelic job, and although she may return repeatedly, she rarely sees her plans come to fruition. As an angelic presence, she cannot die

¹⁵⁷ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 206.

¹⁵⁸ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 128.

¹⁵⁹ Cloud machinery 191

¹⁶⁰ Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn*, 240.

¹⁶¹ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 206.

¹⁶² Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 80.

¹⁶³ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 155.

¹⁶⁴ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 81.

(“Die?” Euphemia was contemptuous. “I don’t even know the meaning of the word.”¹⁶⁵), but her job is none the easier for it. “Obsessed with the idea that Gerald had written, or wanted to write, poetry”¹⁶⁶, she can inspire and support, but not force immediate solutions:

“I’m very sorry, I’m sure,” he said, “but I can’t transform myself into a genius overnight just to suit you.”

For a moment he thought she was going to get angry. He had the distinct impression that the pink wings adorning her spectacles quivered. Then the cloud passed from her face and she smiled.¹⁶⁷

Daniel ultimately embarks on his poetic vocation, after Euphemia helps him in the form of Edwin McFarlane, a therapist, and even serves as a literal wingwoman to introduce him to his public transport crush, Tom.

While the magic is to be lived, witnessed, and enjoyed it cannot be captured by secular means: “That part of the film was burnt. Over exposed. Far too much light getting into the lens. It’s totally unusable.”¹⁶⁸ The only option left, then, is to experience and marvel.

4.4. Carnival

In all three novels, carnival is an event where the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ mix and mingle. In *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, magic and miracles are witnessed, discussed and enjoyed in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “the complete liberation from the seriousness of life”¹⁶⁹:

The shrill tones of a hymn to Mary could be heard coming from inside the church. The doors were jammed with people trying to get in and out. Two booths had been set up, selling holy postcards, rosaries and plastic models of the Sacred Heart and the Infant of Prague. With unbelievable alacrity, someone had devised miniature statues of the Madonna which laughed when you turned them upside down. They were selling like hot cakes. Families were milling around, eating candy floss and toffee apples, picking up and putting down babies, jostling prams and exchanging news excitedly.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 205.

¹⁶⁶ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 155.

¹⁶⁷ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 156.

¹⁶⁸ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 162.

¹⁶⁹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 247. Internet Archive.

¹⁷⁰ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 104.

Carnival transcends the everyday mundane reality, allowing everyone to participate on the divine, turning the elusive and sacred mystique into earthly souvenirs and snacks to be enjoyed. As Fiona Wilson observes, “Carnival, as usual, upstages essentialist dogma; moreover, it exposes the queerness of the normative.”¹⁷¹ Robin Mackenzie comments that Whyte is “drawing on a variety of often carnivalesque motifs in its distortion of conventionally real.”¹⁷² This is the case both in *The Warlock of Strathearn* (where magic is employed by the alchemist Borenius to entertain the masses during a fair in Edinburgh), and *The Cloud Machinery* as well, where an escape from “claustrophobic pressure of binary thinking”¹⁷³ that Wilson identifies in *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* appears in the form of distorted gender binary: “Looking more closely, Domenico got a shock. The double circle of pearls around the nursemaid’s neck emphasized, rather than concealed the Adam’s apple.”¹⁷⁴

The carnivalesque “depicts the de-stabilization or reversal of power structures,”¹⁷⁵ and the necromancer Goffredo Negri benefits from this reversal, as Angelo mentions that during Carnival Negri is “extremely powerful.”¹⁷⁶ “If it had been Lent, that would be less of a risk. And were Easter within sight, we would have absolutely nothing to worry about.”¹⁷⁷

4.5. Religion, gender, sexuality, hybridity

The goal of the “practical joke”¹⁷⁸ that Euphemia plays on the archdiocese is an “acceptance of hybridity.”¹⁷⁹ As Fiona Wilson notes, “problems arise only when people perceive desire as hostile confusing real dangers (such as AIDS) with mythical ones (like the alleged infectiousness of homosexuality).”¹⁸⁰ Hostility towards and erasure of “the other” is

¹⁷¹ Wilson, “Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism,” 196.

¹⁷² Robin M.J. MacKenzie “‘A Swithering of Modes’: Realist and Non-Realist Space in the Fiction of Christopher Whyte,” in *Boundless Scotland: Space in Contemporary Scottish Fiction*, ed. Monika Szuba. 155–174 (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2015), 163.

¹⁷³ Wilson, “Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism,” 196.

¹⁷⁴ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 59.

¹⁷⁵ Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 76. Internet Archive.

¹⁷⁶ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 190.

¹⁷⁷ Whyte, *The Cloud Machinery*, 190.

¹⁷⁸ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 12.

¹⁷⁹ Wilson, “Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism,” 196.

¹⁸⁰ Wilson, “Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism,” 195-196.

the enemy; and characters who repress their own desire, such as the closeted and hypocritical Mr. Beeper from *Euphemia MacFarrigle and The Laughing Virgin* or lawyer Capri from *The Cloud Machinery*, are dangerous both to themselves and to the other characters: “Do you realize the gravity of that sin? Do you know that you are defiled? That he has used you as a man uses woman?”¹⁸¹

Obsession with purity reappears when the headmaster of St Ignatius assembles a flock of “four schoolmasters and six prefects”¹⁸² accompanied by the archbishop in a bizarre attempt to carry out an exorcism of Euphemia, armed with “the sacred relics of the Blessed Williamina MacLeod, virgin and a traffic warden.”¹⁸³ The procession agrees that “it would be unwise to involve females in this work, /.../ susceptible as they are to the arts of the evil one.”¹⁸⁴ Since the only women the church respects are dead virgins, Euphemia, naturally, welcomes the inquisition in the form of Edwin MacFarlane, “a middle-aged man, small and rather hunched, with very thick spectacles.”¹⁸⁵

Euphemia is the most non-conforming character of the novel, both in shape and beliefs. Not only she does not care about the questions religious dogma imposes on the characters; exists, but it not limited to both genders, but also has a unique personality with many specific quirks – for example her love for horse racing, or the great care she takes of her appearance:

Alarmed, he asked her what she knew, and how, but she merely looked smug and patted her bulky handbag. She was holding it on her knees having just taken out her lipstick and powder puff to check on her appearance. Daniel found it incongruously vain in an ageing widow.¹⁸⁶

In Whyte’s fiction, even an entirely otherworldly presence like Euphemia exhibits human traits, passions, and emotions. Thanks to Euphemia, Daniel, as Fiona Wilson asserts, “encounters, and learns to be hospitable to, the strangeness of others, which is also, of course,

¹⁸¹ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 112.

¹⁸² Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 189.

¹⁸³ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 189.

¹⁸⁴ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 189.

¹⁸⁵ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 199.

¹⁸⁶ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 155.

the strangeness of himself.”¹⁸⁷ Her function in the novel resembles that of the spirit guides of *The Warlock of Strathearn*, in a more modern, urban setting.

4.6. The fantastic in Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin

Tzvetan Todorov asserts his theory of *the fantastic* in use as follows:

The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions. Either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings – with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently.¹⁸⁸

No reason the devil – or in our case, an angel – couldn’t be “dressed as respectable married women in their fifties are expected to do,”¹⁸⁹ complete with a thick winged spectacles, fashionable hat and a giant handbag. Whyte’s implication is that things may or may not be as they seem, but most importantly that they not have to be. In a story which Fiona Wilson calls “a hymn to hybridity from a distinctly Scottish angle”¹⁹⁰; there is no one “correct” way to exist. Thus, when Daniel is exiled to the countryside to stay with Aunt Maeve, he discovers that she had a lesbian lover in her youth, and the feared envoy of the Black Pope turns out to be a rather good-humoured gay priest, “shaped like a snowman.”¹⁹¹ Whyte centres this subversion of expectation in the figure of Euphemia herself, whose motivations often seem mysterious, bizarre and comical:

“What’s this woman like?”

“She’s a spinster. I think she’s quite well off. She works in hospital administration or the social work department, or something. She lives on her own in a big terraced house.”

“And is she religious?”

“I presume she is. I haven’t the faintest idea.”

¹⁸⁷ Wilson, “Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism,” 196.

¹⁸⁸ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 25.

¹⁸⁹ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 7.

¹⁹⁰ Wilson, “Radical Hospitality: Christopher Whyte and Cosmopolitanism,” 195.

¹⁹¹ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 85.

Daniel sniggered. It struck him as comical that Euphemia should worry about whether Aunt Maeve went to mass or not.¹⁹²

It is several pages later that it is revealed Euphemia was only making sure she could access Maeve's dream and continue to serve as Daniel's part-time guardian angel:

Daniel had been staying with Maeve for over a week when she woke up with a start in the middle of the night. A woman's voice had been calling her in a dream. She had the impression that something was urgently wrong. /.../ When she went in, he was sitting at the other side of the table. The shards of a broken wine goblet were scattered across it. Both his sleeves were rolled up. He had stretched his left arm out on the table so as to expose the wrist.¹⁹³

Despite the serious topics of self-harm and suicide, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin* ends on an uplifting note. Having found love and support, Daniel eventually starts writing poetry, as Euphemia predicted:

It was a gloriously sunny afternoon in May. /.../ In that light the contours were so sharp he could have sworn they had already been shaded in with a pencil. /.../ He paused to look at the words written to one side and along the bottom of the page he was at work on. More and more now, as he painted, phrases and sentences would come into his head, and the only way to get rid of them was to jot them down next to his sketches in this way. He read over what he had written that morning. It sounded like the beginning of a poem. Maybe Euphemia had been right after all."¹⁹⁴

Euphemia was correct – to limit one's identity, be it in terms of creativity, faith, gender, self-expression, or sexuality is indeed "not right all."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 176.

¹⁹³ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 183.

¹⁹⁴ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 208.

¹⁹⁵ Whyte, *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, 156.

5. Conclusion

The thesis expands critical reception of Christopher Whyte's work as a novelist and presents a focused initial study of his use of magic. As it attempted to illustrate, Whyte in his fiction presents magic as a neutral force, utilizing it to further emphasize themes of queerness, sexuality, identity and gender that are specific to each work. In each chapter, the thesis explores the origin, use and limitations of magic in the novels, as well as commenting on each work in relation to Todorov's concept of *the fantastic*.

In *The Warlock of Strathearn*, magic originates in nature, having one universal source. Its purpose is to highlight the importance of hybridity and fluid identity which transcends the limits of the binary. *The Warlock* is a distinctly marvellous novel, close to the genre of pure *marvelous*, as outlined by Todorov. In *The Cloud Machinery*, the use of magic is a form of art; it spotlights the importance of creativity as opposed to universal absolutes and homogeneity. In *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, magic unleashes desire, stressing the fact that the only "sinful" and harmful desire is the one repressed.

The main body of the thesis is structured into three chapters which cover one novel each, however, a different structure in which chapters would be divided by thematic concepts, such as identity or sexuality, might have been more beneficial, if more challenging to uphold and navigate. This applies especially to *Euphemia MacFarrigle and the Laughing Virgin*, in which the origin and use of magic is used differently to the other novels and it thus deviates from the other chapters to an extent.

There are two main limitations of this thesis, the first being the lack of critical studies of Whyte's novelist work this analysis could draw on and enter into discussion with. Additionally, in terms of the theoretical frameworks employed, Todorov's study of the fantastic mostly uses the works of the 18th and 19th century to illustrate its points, and thus may not always be suitable to explore Whyte's much later fiction.

To further develop this research, it would be fruitful to compare Whyte's work to other contemporary authors, especially Scottish ones who combine fantastic elements and concern with gender and national identity. Further research can also include Whyte's forthcoming novels, as they will be separated from his first four by more than two decades, as well as including *The Gay Decameron* to encompass his more realist work, which

nonetheless exhibits the same interest in marginalized voices, transgression, and queer experience.

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