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# The recognition of the sacred in theories of possible worlds: some hermeneutic orientations

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question of the possibilities for the recognition of the sacred in theories of possible worlds, an area which has not been explicitly developed but that has important consequences based on each author's underlying notion of "world". The study will focus on three representatives of the logical-analytical current (Ryan, Albaladejo and Doležal) and on three other authors who take a phenomenological-existential approach (Eco, Pavel and García-Noblejas). Despite the systematic clarity of the model of analysis applied by the former authors, their fundamental understanding of reality may inhibit the identification of the sacred as "real". Although the existential current is *a priori* more disposed to recognize the sacred, a more systematic approach in their analysis is required for the identification and thematization of the sacred. The present paper examines the theoretical presuppositions of each approach in recognizing the sacred within narrations, as an element in the salvation or perdition of fictional characters, which is essential for a full understanding of both the sapiential value of fiction and the meaning of many works of fiction. To conclude, the paper offers a series of observations to assist in the systematization of the study of the sacred in possible fictional worlds.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 March 2021

Revised 20 June 2021

Accepted 7 July 2021

## KEYWORDS

fiction; possible worlds;  
profane; reality; sacred

## 1. Introduction and methodology

The perspective for study offered by possible worlds has been firmly established in literature for decades. The aim of certain authors was to overcome the limits of formalism and structuralism, promising a greater emphasis on the "world of the text" and the "truths" contained therein, as opposed to the mere structure of the text (Pavel 1986, 1–10; Ryan 2013; Ryan and Bell 2019, 1–2, 9; among others).<sup>1</sup> However, "world" and "truth" can have many meanings, even among the various theorists to whom we can ascribe this young tradition. If some of these authors question the ontology of the fictional world as a distinctive note within different literary genres (realism and fantasy,

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for example), their ontological presuppositions regarding the real world are rarely scrutinized, even though this significantly conditions their approach. Evidently, the identification of what is considered “realistic” in a fictional text depends very much on what is considered “real” in the non-fictional world. This problem is especially pronounced in our world today regarding the question of “the sacred”, given that the notion of the sacred as real is something which receives little regard in the modern mentality, scientific or not. However, the sacred is considered as the fundamental basis of all reality within most of the narratives of our universal cultural tradition.<sup>2</sup>

In this work we will examine the notion of “possible world” which underlies the theoretical approach of each author, revealing that within this field of research there is no single or unified trend. According to their notions of “world” and “possibility”, we have identified at least two broad currents within possible worlds theory: one we call “logical-analytical”, in which we provisionally include Marie-Laure Ryan, Tomás Albaladejo and Lubomír Doležel, among others; and another classified as “phenomenological-existential” where we locate Umberto Eco, Thomas Pavel and Juan José García-Noblejas, principally.<sup>3</sup> This organization of authors is original in relation to previous consideration of these researchers (see Espezúa Salmón 2006; Ryan 2013; Fořt 2016; Ryan and Bell 2019).<sup>4</sup>

The fact that neither of these two currents are entirely homogeneous will require us to make certain distinctions between the authors chosen to illustrate each perspective of this study. By examining the presuppositions on the “real” by these authors we will show the degree to which their theoretical approaches obstruct or facilitate the recognition of the sacred within narratives regarding the possibilities for the vital success or failure of the protagonists. Finally, we will offer some orientation to help systematize the recognition of the sacred in possible worlds of fiction.

## 2. Logical-analytical current

We group within this current of thought narratologists and literary theorists whose notion of “possible worlds” is based on modal logic and analytical philosophy. Although the interest of these authors is in overcoming the prevailing formalism of the past decades in order to speak of “the truth” found in fictional narratives, their approaches run the risk of excessively limiting the type of truth that can be recognized in the texts.

### 2.1. Marie-Laure Ryan

The prominence of Marie-Laure Ryan in the field of possible worlds theory in narratology is due to her popular *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (1991), although this was both preceded and followed by an important body of work on this field. Her aim to encourage this theoretical approach is demonstrated in the collective work coordinated with Alice Bell, which reviews the history and present state of narratology and possible worlds theory: *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* (Ryan and Bell 2019).

Fiction is understood by Ryan as a modal system, that is, a set of Alternative Possible Worlds (APWs), the product of human imagination and situated on the periphery of the Actual World (AW), from which we speak, read and imaginatively project other worlds (1991, 18). The link between the AW and an APW is the performative phrase which creates an imaginary world. When we read, for example, “Once upon a time there was a little prince who lived on a planet hardly any bigger than he was, and who needed a friend”, we read the phrase in the AW and, at the same time, we are introduced into an APW in which an author implicitly leads the reader, telling him something about that APW. Ryan calls this process *recentering*, through which we remain submerged in a work during our aesthetic experience (1991, 22). This duality, proper to the real world, between the AW and APWs is duplicated in the world of the narrative: the Textual Actual World (TAW) projected by the text is the AW for the characters inhabiting it, and who in turn project their own APW, also referred to as private worlds (or “possible world belonging to the domain of a specific character”) (2001, 238).

In order to reveal the underlying ideas of “world” in Ryan’s writings it is first necessary to identify the properties which she ascribes to both AW and APW. This duality found in our own world is the same which the author will use to order fictional universes. This can be done in at least two ways: attending to the relations of accessibility which Ryan identifies as categories of the AW, that can be recognized or not in every APW (1991, 31–47); and by analysing the affirmations Ryan makes throughout her work regarding firstly the AW and secondly the APW projected by the human mind, or the private worlds of the fictional characters. Both exercises produce similar results.

When Ryan affirms the mimetic character of the texts, she refers to “the production of an equivalent of one of the fundamental, almost Kantian, a priori categories of human experience” (2001, 31; 2015, 42) rather than physical objects. That is, what fiction imitates are: “abstract objects of thought, such as space (through visual arts), time (through music), memory (through narrative), and gesture (through dance)” (2001, 31; 2015, 42). The worlds of relative existence depend on the mental act of the character (1985, 720–722). They are a “set of propositions in the mental life of a character” (2006, 648) which correspond to propositional attitudes (life projects, desires, beliefs, etc.) and, thus, Ryan considers these as possible rather than actual, and not necessarily real (2006, 652). What is ultimately at play in these worlds is “the content of the minds of characters” (2006, 644), cognitive questions, more or less connected with the world projected by the text (TAW).

According to Ryan, AW and TAW have four characteristics: “connected set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members” (2001, 91–92; 2015, 63). Thus, the AW and TAW are understood as the physical and intelligible environment of external subjects. We are not in a world of mental acts and propositions (cognitive) but rather a genuinely material, Euclidian world; that is properly actual and more real. At the same time, Ryan affirms that for the character and the person, respectively, the TAW and AW are perceived as real (1985, 720). Ryan recognizes there is no single, univocal idea of reality, in part because access to the real is partially or entirely impossible for the human mind (2001, 100; 2015, 70–71).<sup>5</sup>

This dualism makes it difficult to recognize the sacred, which either lies within the domain of the APW as a mental or subjective act of the characters or is identified with some element external to the subjects (a sociocultural habit, a religious practice) or occurs as an extraordinary event within the domain of the APW, fracturing a supposed unified, profane and ordinary ontology (Euclidean). Thus, we see that Ryan postulates a “dual ontology” among believers (one ordinary-profane and another sacred-not ordinary), compared to a “unified, profane ontology” of non-believers (1991, 41). However, the experience of the sacred, generally speaking, in the medieval tradition (which is the basis of these observations by Ryan), does not itself recognize this dual ontology but just the opposite (Gilson 1981); and that the experience of the sacred, far from being a transgression of the laws of the profane, is manifested in the profane, without alteration and revealed as its true basis (Eliade 1998, 14–16).

Further to this discrepancy between the points of view of believers and non-believers on whether an APW in which the sacred appears alters or not the rules of the real world, Ryan admits her theoretical approach is historically relative and requires other “explanatory models such a scientific theories and religious revelation” (1991, 41). Following the reasoning of the author, it would seem that retooling Ryan’s theory involves revisiting the philosophical and theological foundations of the AW and APW if this Cartesian dualism (*res extensa*, *res cogitans*) is not an “irresoluble aporia”, as suggested by Martin Heidegger in his critique of modern thought in his seminal work *Being and Time* (2009).

## 2.2. Tomás Albaladejo

Albaladejo’s theory of possible worlds in literature is found primarily in *Teoría de los mundos posibles y macroestructura narrativa* ([1986] 1998) and *Semántica de la narración: la ficción realista* (1992). A further development of these notions is provided by his disciples Javier Rodríguez-Pequeño (2008) and Alfonso Martín Jiménez (2015).

An examination of these texts reveals that in his notion of “world”, Albaladejo is directly indebted to the work of János S. Petöfi and indirectly to that of Gottlob Frege. Regarding his notion of “world”, Albaladejo highlights the following statement by Wittgenstein:

The specification of all true elementary propositions describes the world completely. The world is completely described by the specification of all elementary propositions plus the specification, which of them are true and which false (Wittgenstein 1973, 100–101, in Albaladejo [1986] 1998, 56).<sup>6</sup>

The world is defined by Albaladejo as “a set of beings, states, processes and actions” and in his texts he refers to “sections of the world” (which in turn constitute sets of beings, states, processes and actions which refer to the world). We can observe what this “objective description” of the world consists of when Albaladejo puts his theoretical proposal into practice when analyzing “the organization of worlds in the short novels of Clarín” ([1986] 1998, 169–251). Here Albaladejo offers an analysis of the worlds of the characters, examining their subworlds (effectively real, desired, dreamed, feared, believed, imagined, pretended, recounted, etc.). Thus, the world of the text (“effectively real world of the text” or “articulatory world”) is reduced to a set of propositions, taken

as true or false, in relation to the events suffered by each of the characters, given that “the effectively real world” of the work “is formed of effectively real subworlds of the different characters” ([1986] 1998, 175).

In this way, the sacred can be recognized in the world of the text to the degree the sacred is recognized by any of the characters as effectively real and true *for them*.<sup>7</sup> In the final instance, recognition of the sacred, as with all contents of a *narrated* world, depends on the authority and reliability we give the witness.

However, there are elements which hinder this recognition of the sacred, precisely to the extent the authority of the witness is questioned, being set aside in favor of other verifying criteria, such as that which reduces the world of the text into a series of descriptive propositions with the value of truth or falsehood. To see this more clearly, we look to Albaladejo’s theory of “world-model types” (*tipos de modelos de mundo*).

Albaladejo distinguishes various “world-model types”, according to the rules which govern the set of referential elements: world-model type I is the “true” and “corresponding to world models whose rules are those of the real, objectively existing world” or the “objective, effective real world”. Examples of world-model type I are those described by newspapers and history books ([1986] 1998, 58). The world-model type II is the “fictional plausible”,

whose rules are not those of the real objective world but are constituted in accordance with them. Based on these models, producers construct a set of referential structures that, if not part of the real objective world, could be so given that they meet the laws by which it is semantically constituted.

This refers to realist fiction. The world-model type III is the “fictional implausible”; the model that includes world “whose rules are not those of the real, objective world nor are they similar to these, implying a transgression of these”. An example of this type of world is fantasy fiction ([1986] 1998, 59).<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, the meaning given to the expression “real, objective world” undermines the entire conceptual architecture of this theory, especially with reference to world-model type III.<sup>9</sup> Albaladejo is not unaware of the problems this poses and deals with the issue by appealing to a certain experience of reality (and of culture), combined with a degree of common sense, which offers a sufficient point of reference to determine what is, in fact, reality (1992, 47–48); that is, objective, factual, effectively realized (1992, 45–46).

In this sense, the recognition of the sacred in a work of fiction, even when expressly recognized as such by the characters and the implicit author, it will only be considered so by the reader if they believe the sacred forms part of the set of “beings, states, processes, actions and ideas” truly present in the objective world (1992, 47). Otherwise, the reader, far from recognizing the specific category of the sacred in a text, whatever their personal beliefs might be in this regard, will confuse the “sacred” with “fantasy”. This is the case of Alfonso Martín Jiménez, disciple of Albaladejo, in analysing the Gospel. According to this author, the evangelists present their work “as belonging to a type of world model that, in proper logic, is different from that to which it corresponds” (Martín Jiménez 2015, 227). The phrase “proper logic” seems to refer to what the majority today understand as the objective, real and effective: that specifically studied by the natural sciences. The evangelists, pretermittting common sense, present “as true something implausible which supposedly occurred, attempting to establish the divine

character of Jesus precisely on the exceptional nature of the events in which he participated” (2015, 228). Martín Jiménez concludes by affirming that, strictly speaking, the world of the Gospel must correspond to world-model type III, to fantasy.

This example illustrates that the recognition of the sacred as a distinct category of the fantastic requires a much richer gnoseology than that which merely describes, by means of propositions of truth, the experience of the characters within the text. An epistemology of testimony<sup>10</sup> is necessary by which, even when we do not accept as true the revelation being communicated, we can at least recognize this as belonging to an order distinct from fantasy fiction.

### 2.3. Lubomír Doležel

The text of reference on the Possible Worlds Theory of Lubomír Doležel is his *Heterocosmica* (1998), although we will also draw on *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History* (2010) and on one of his later texts on the subject which offers a historical retrospective of the development of these categories in the field of Narratology (2019). In *Heterocosmica*, Doležel offers a fairly detailed description of all the elements which make up a “narrative world”, organized and thematized according to the criteria of the positive sciences. Here we shall limit ourselves to analyzing his idea of the “narrative world” articulated in three consecutive phases: the “world of states W(S), constituted by static objects with stationary physical properties and fixed relationships”; the world “where a new entity, N-force or nature force (NF), appears, W (NF, S). The N-force, the effective form of the laws of nature, causes specific changes in the states of the world, called natural events (N-events)”; and finally, “the world is augmented by a new category, the person (P)”, who “possesses, in addition to physical properties, a mental life (mental states, properties, events, acts)” (1998, 31–32). The idea of the world contained herein is pure immanence, which may be identified by the data provided and understood through positive science (1998, 115 and following). From this perspective, the two basic types of possible worlds this author accepts are those which are physically possible and physically impossible. The difference between them is that the former is governed by the natural laws of our real world while the latter is not (2010, 32).

By previously establishing a series of fundamental categories with which to examine, and into which a fictional world must fit, those realities not included in these categories are excluded from analysis. Given that the sacred is not found among the categories established by Doležel, his model will hinder recognition of this reality in any works being analyzed.

A clear example of this is also found in *Heterocosmica* (1998, 37–42) itself, in the analysis of *Robinson Crusoe*, by Daniel Defoe. If we consider the intention of the implicit narrator and the voice of Robinson, Providence is an omnipresent reality throughout the work, from the *Prologue*, which forms part of the fictional account. The intentional Hand of God is expressed in nature as creation, in the recognition of an intentionality behind natural phenomena and in the person and consciousness of Robinson and in his destiny. However, in the epigraph Doležel dedicates to analyzing

Crusoe's relationship with nature, he considers this as an "intentionless" or blind force (1998, 38), thus disavowing the interpretation of the narrator (Crusoe himself). The religious phenomenon appears in the epigraph where the Czech theorist speaks of "Crusoe's mental life", understanding that the religious interpretation of events by the protagonist is due to a "mythologization of the world" (1998, 41). This is not only an omission of the manifestation of the sacred in nature, in that the cosmos and forces of nature may be hierophany or a manifestation of the sacred, but also a case where a religious phenomenon appearing in the mind of the character is regarded by Doležel not as a manifestation of the sacred in the person of the character, but rather a product of his own mind.

## **2.4. Scope and limits of the logical-analytical approach**

The primary achievement of this perspective on narratives of possible worlds is the recovery of notion of "truth" within a text, in the field of the formal study of texts in general and fiction in particular. This will subsequently permit the comparison between what is true in the real world and what is true in the world of fiction (relations of accessibility). This, in the final instance, allows the enlistment of other, extra-literary disciplines, such as Physics, Psychology Sociology, etc., in the consideration of the degree of approximation or distance – Ryan's "principle of minimal departure", Albaladejo's "law of semantic maxims" (ley de máximos semánticos) – each text establishes in relation to what is truly real or not.

This is a fecund consideration in the theoretical development of literary genres, although ultimately, at least in the case of Ryan and Albaladejo, this classification is never formal but is closely intertwined with the idea of reality of each reader.

The limit of these approaches is in the presuppositions regarding what is understood as "real" and what can be affirmed as "true" within the theoretical models developed *a priori* and then applied in the analysis of specific fictional worlds. The articulation of the real world into binary categories of the actual and virtual (or possible), or physical and mental, includes deficiencies which have been well identified both in hermeneutics and twentieth-century existential philosophy. Notions of the "truth" presupposed for both the material world and on the mental or psychological plane lead to what García-Noblejas refers to as "extensional verificationism" (García-Noblejas [1996] 2005, 180). That is, we may speak of objects, states and events presented in fiction, but none of these are sufficient to reach the type of truth that is proper to fiction, which we may call "wisdom".

In order to expand the scope of these theories of world models, other theoretical presuppositions or foundations are required, such as those proposed by Hernández Ruiz (2020) and Villen (2019), disciples of Albaladejo and Ryan, respectively. These models, just as they adopt the categories of the positive sciences, could equally adopt those of human sciences, such as Philosophical Anthropology, Ethics or Theology. Thus, these models would incorporate categories which *a priori* not only do not hinder the recognition of the sacred, but would proactively seek out the sacred, identifying



and distinguishing the phenomenon of the sacred from both the merely ordinary and the strictly impossible.

However, all *a priori* world models may be deficient or unfair when applied to a specific fictional world. Another focus is therefore required and appropriate: that of the authors we have identified as taking a phenomenological-existential approach.

### 3. Phenomenological-existential current

We have grouped within this current three authors, each with a very different intellectual trajectory and whose theories are not easily reconciled in certain fundamental principles. Nevertheless, these authors share a distancing from the intellectual presuppositions of the modal logic and the restricted notions of “reality” and “truth” of the positive sciences. Although this grouping may appear to have less internal consistency than the previous, each of these authors enjoys national and international academic recognition equal to that of the logical-analytical authors.

#### 3.1. Thomas Pavel

*Fictional Worlds* is the great work of Thomas Pavel in this field. This text was preceded by a number of important articles which largely laid the foundations for the application of the notion of logic to “possible worlds” in literary studies (1975). Of particular interest here is the outline Pavel gives of the development of literary theory for “possible worlds” in his “Postface” to a collective work about Possible Worlds Theory. Here Pavel vehemently dissociates himself from the literary dialogue with the logicians, proposing a revision of the notion of “fictional world” based on the cognitive power of metaphors; thus, Pavel’s position parallels, although from a very different tradition, the hermeneutics of Aristotle on metaphor and plot, updated and expanded by Paul Ricoeur in *La métaphore vive* ([1971] 2001) and *Temps et récit* ([1995–1996] 2004–2009). We will also draw on other articles where Pavel’s ideas are more sharply defined.

“Literary works were about something” (Pavel 2019, 316). What interests Pavel is this “something” in the conceptions of reality depicted in fiction. This will be the touchstone of his alternative to the formalists, logicians and philosophers of speech acts principally (Pavel 1986, vii, 6, 9–10).

At the outset, Pavel accepts that our real world, entirely viable given that we live within it, is filled with astounding questions and contradictions which are difficult to fit within a purely logical model; there are many more “impossible” things than those we see (Pavel 1986, 49–50, 53). On the other hand, within specific historical and cultural parameters, a person may accept certain things as being within the realm of possibility in their world while others are not. This has consequences both in the configuration of a work of fiction and in its reception (Pavel 1975, 167; 1983, 87; 1986, 47, 136).

Pavel disputes those points of view which reduce the understanding of the real. Thus, in fiction, he dismisses the distinction between serious and non-serious statements and asks if this dichotomy does not imply the expulsion of phenomena which



do not fit this dualist framework (Pavel 1986, 22–26, 114–115); nor does Pavel accept that all propositions within a text refer strictly to the same world, although he is aware of the ontological commitment of the reader to reach to world presented in the fiction (Pavel 1986, 64–65, 71–73). Pavel considers it necessary to include the non-factual in the experience of common sense, underlining the value of metaphor as the key to the interpretation of fiction (Pavel 1986, 31), but this also permits the recognition of the sacred as effectively real. Although Pavel's theory does not problematize the degree of reality of the sacred in possible worlds, Pavel points to the value of metaphor in the world of fiction, inspired by the relation between metaphor, myth and religious beliefs (1986, 136).

The metaphorical dimension of literature is the source of its truth and not an analysis of propositions of truth or questions of inventory (2019, 316–317). What is important in fiction, according to Pavel, are the vital dynamics of what occurs within the story. He frequently resorts to the term “*wisdom*” to refer to what the reader acquires when engaging with a work of fiction (1986, 24–27, 84, 112). The worlds of fiction are “a *human habitat* in which living human beings pursue projects, struggle against hurdles, reach happiness or are defeated [ ... ] fictional worlds aim at persuading our mind that it engages them as living experience” (2010, 99).

An essential aspect shared by the world of fiction and the real world, which Pavel recognizes and which for him exemplifies the type of truth that can be traced in works of fiction, are ethical structures. Pavel identifies five steps in the ethical architecture of a fictional world: (1) the specific decisions of a character appear to respond to challenges, (2) according to a set of maxims, (3) governed by a number of hypergoods, (4) which are derived from a cosmovision, (5) ordered according to a higher order, the Supreme Good (Pavel 2010, 104–109). The correspondence between ethical dimensions of reality and fiction certainly is one of the most eminent aspects of the economy of the imaginary.

The ability of a text to impact the practical life of the reader is resolved in two fundamental principles in fiction. The first is the principle of symbolic distance, which places the fictional world on a higher plane, facilitating contemplation and understanding. As with myth, fiction is inaccessible while also being familiar and visible as it speaks to the intimate truths of our life. The second is the principle of relevance, which is also tied to reality given that fictional characters with whom the reader empathizes seem to the reader that they could have been himself (Pavel 1983, 85–87; 2010, 103; 1986, 79, 144–146). If the world of fiction has something to contribute to the real world it is due to its ontological autonomy from the real world. Myth is measured within its own categories but is also a model of the intelligibility of everyday reality (Pavel 1975, 174–175; 1986, 79–80, 132; 2010, 100–101). Objective distance or “*optimal departure*” is to return the reader to the real world (imitated by the world of fiction) with a new vision of what they recognize and evaluate (Pavel 1986, 88–93; 2019, 317, 321; 2010, 99).

Although it is difficult to find in Pavel an explicit ontological commitment to his presuppositions regarding the notion of “world”, the connections he establishes between fiction and primitive religious myths offer an approach which *a priori* may favour the recognition of the sacred. Pavel's recognition of the cognitive value of metaphor, a form of analogy, opens the door to a dialogue between works of fiction and

disciplines such as Metaphysics and Theology, which, as opposed to the natural sciences, consider analogy as a relevant form of knowledge. His identification of universal ethical structures, recognizable in the immanence of all fictional narratives, stands in contrast to authors in the logical-analytic current. Pavel incorporates a new type of “truth”, recognizable in fiction, that is, the wisdom in terms of the theoretical-practical knowledge essential to leading a fulfilling life. Within our own cultural tradition, a great deal of such wisdom is incorporated into the recognition of the sacred.

### 3.2. *Umberto Eco*

The fundamental text in which Umberto Eco discusses the incorporation of “possible worlds” in literary studies is *Lector in fabula* ([1979] 1993), while some of the questions raised in this text are dealt with more extensively in other writings that must also be taken into consideration (1984, [1990] 1994). In *Lector in fabula*, Eco expressly distances himself from the logical conception of the world both in terms of things and in the abstract types of possible worlds, announcing his intention to address the question directly from the semiotics of the narrative texts. The possible world theorized by Eco is not empty, that is, not an abstract general model, but full ([1979] 1993, 173–177; [1990] 1994, 65).

According to Eco, we should not study a text from a naturalist perspective; that is, that its semiotics do not present a geometric or photographic reproduction of our material world. This does not imply the autonomy of possible worlds from the real world, since the world of the text is largely superimposed on the real world as we understand it, the “encyclopaedias” of author and reader. Eco also makes note of two literary impossibilities: the undertaking to establish a complete alternative world, and the complete description of the real world ([1979] 1993, 179, 183).

For Eco, the real world is that which we know through epistemic worlds, that is, images of the world (from *Encyclopedia Britannica* or *Time* magazine) which are habitually incompatible. Eco uses the terms “encyclopaedia” to refer to this set of images, an incoherent compendium taken as a totality. This is the equivalent of stating the real world is the set of perceptions about it ([1990] 1994, 67). That our manner of describing reality is a cultural construct does not imply that reality itself, apart from this construct, does not exist ([1979] 1993, 186; 1984, 220–222; [1990] 1994, 67). “In order to compare worlds, one must take even the real or actual world as a cultural construct” ([1990] 1994, 67). Why compare worlds, even the real world, treating them as cultural constructs? Not to distance oneself from reality but the contrary. According to Eco “We explore the plurality of *possibilia* to find a suitable model for *realia*” ([1990] 1994, 68). Theorizing about possible worlds demands the reduction of the real world to a formula that expresses its structure, permitting comparison to narrative worlds whose mode of existence is conjured by the meaning of a word ([1979] 1993, 178, 188–190; [1990] 1994, 66).

The reader, in accordance with the encyclopaedia of the textual world, foresees the development of the narrative, develops a hypothesis. The foreseen states of things are possible worlds that we can identify with propositions in agreement with the encyclopaedic experience of the reader, except where the text indicates otherwise. The end of

the story confirms the anticipations of the reader ([1979] 1993, 160, 163, 172, 184, 216–220; 1984, 219; [1990] 1994, 74–75). The story itself is a possible world. Eco does not speak of the structure of the world, but rather says that worlds have structure and that these are hypothesized by the reader and verified or not by the end of the text.

The world of Eco includes, on one hand, the “collection of *individuals* with *properties*”; on the other, the unfolding of events, since some of these properties are actions. The development of actions is initially possible, not effective, and thus depends on propositional attitudes ([1979] 1993, 179). “To construct a world means to attribute certain properties to a certain individual” ([1979] 1993, 191). Some properties are logically necessary and others accidental. The distinction between one and the other is inseparable from the intimate nucleus of the story ([1979] 1993, 183–184, 193, 196). To differentiate between necessary and accidental properties we must consider the phenomenon of inclusion: “the first produces a second that entails a third” ([1979] 1993; 194). Thanks to this inclusion, a “process of entailment” is set in motion which enunciates exclusively those properties which identify the essentials of the fictional individual for the subject of the text, what Eco calls the textual topic ([1979] 1993, 194–195, 198, 201–205, 210). The discursive topic determines the minimum structure of the world. The structure is a perspective of the world in question. It is the foreshortening useful for the interpretation of the text ([1979] 1993, 194).

Eco does not propose a typology of world models, nor does he theorize on world structures, precisely because each text has its own world structure. “A fictional text has an ontology of its own which must be respected” ([1990] 1994, 72). Eco also distinguishes a hierarchy of worlds: there are worlds whose matrix or structure enables the reader to understand or infer other worlds with similar or poorer matrixes. The matrix of a world enables (to varying degrees) or inhibits the understanding of other worlds. The real world also has its matrix, although not necessarily intellectually or existentially understood by all, since it is possible for example to live in the world while understanding a poorer matrix than the reality that actually exists. If the image of the real world of the reader (the encyclopaedia) includes notions appropriate for the recognition of the sacred, Eco’s doctrine of possible worlds in no way hinders this recognition.

### 3.3. Juan José García-Noblejas

Juan José García-Noblejas also explicitly distances himself from the authors within the logical-analytical current, although his doctrine is above all a continuation of the works of Paul Ricoeur, mentioned above, which updates and extends Aristotelian poetics. While Eco and Pavel fall within the field of what may be called literary studies, the perspective of this Spanish author is that of philosophical poetics. His position is the most explicit in terms of the interpretation of the sacred within possible worlds. In *Comunicación y mundos posibles* ([1996] 2005), García-Noblejas examines several works in which he applies the notion to the area of the media, public communications and fiction. We will limit our analysis to this work and others where García-Noblejas develops and applies the notion of “poetic possible worlds”<sup>11</sup> (*mundos posibles poéticos*).

What ultimately constitutes reality for García-Noblejas is more than the sensory data or the limits of subjective perception ([1996] 2005, 16, 166). His starting point in considering reality does not rule out the sacred as transcendent; that is, as something more than a humanly constructed institution or the projection of the subject's mind. García-Noblejas proposes a poetic perception in approaching fictional worlds "in which the relationship with God makes rational sense" (2017, 42). He is aware, firstly, that the ethical perspective of the creator of fiction is crucial to the design of the characters and their way of life; and, thus, much current fiction curtails the naturally transcendental aspects of the person (2017, 42).

García-Noblejas defends the continuation of Aristotelian poetics from a Christian cosmovision, where the freedom that embraces the possibilities of the world is capable of *agape*. This form of loving action, giving action, is a response to tragedy, orienting life towards the horizon of happiness characters are in search of, and is founded on the true certainty of God. It is not that *agape* gains new force through Christian revelation but rather it is Christianity which fuses with this free form of assuming human destiny through giving (García-Noblejas 2017, 54–56). It is this poetic doctrine of God that offers the possibility of this type of action: as a possible response to human tragedy and evoking nostalgia when it is absent. It is not a question of putting each work of fiction to the "God test", but that the hermeneutic does not lose sight of this possibility.

One of the first definitions García-Noblejas offers of possible worlds is the following: "theoretical enunciations that present narrative and dramatic forms" (1984, 147). Later, he will describe possible worlds as "small worlds, little cosmoses, willing to cooperate in the configuration of personal identity, and to provide a background for the orientation of our everyday decisions in our world" ([1996] 2005, 17). Possible worlds provide images of our "socially and culturally memorable actions" ([1996] 2005, 21).

Poetic possible worlds "have more to do with ourselves as inhabitants of the cosmos, than with the cosmos we inhabit. Possible worlds are more anthropological than cosmological" ([1996] 2005, 180). García-Noblejas questions the ways in which first principles are applicable in possible worlds as microcosmoses. He also points out that these are not derived from logic or scientific reason but are innate to human beings. He recognizes the principles of: non-contradiction, identity, excluded other, sufficient reason, finality and the first principle of practical reason ([1996] 2005, 217, 234, 248, 254–255).

Possible worlds are parasitical, that is, dependent on our experience of the real world ([1996] 2005, 207). The differences between the primary ontological entity (our real world) and its secondary ontological treatment (poetic possible world) are measured not in distances but using the analogical criteria of adequation or non-adequation ([1996] 2005, 212–213). "And this is now a certain novelty compared to an inherited mentality which abusively exaggerates extensional verificationism of communication" ([1996] 2005, 180). García-Noblejas turns his attention primarily towards the image of human life in fictional worlds and the truth and falsity of expressions of everyday experience. Possible worlds, "by unifying organically issues which may be apparently incompatible, give poetic reason to vital themes which appear to be highly complex" ([1996] 2005, 226). These are aspects which, viewed solely through a rationalist lens, appear "paradoxical, inconsistent or incoherent" ([1996] 2005, 227).

Fiction impacts the practical affairs of the life of the spectator, whose status “implies prudential and ethical, as well as rhetorical and aesthetic criteria, because all aspects of practical life are solidary” ([1996] 2005, 109; 2017, 42). Fully achieved poetic possible worlds provide life skills, that is, in the best of cases, what the spectator gains is of a sapiential and vital nature rather than scientific or logical (1984, 154; [1996] 2005, 244–245, 256, 260). If we agree that the theories of Pavel and Eco do not pose an obstacle to the attentive reader in recognizing the sacred, we can say that the approach of García-Noblejas offers orientation for the recognition of the sacred, specifically in terms of a Christian cosmovision.

### **3.4. Scope and limits of the phenomenological-existential approach**

In the propositions of Eco, Pavel and García-Noblejas we recognize an image of the world which extends the horizons of naturalist reason. In turn, their approaches resist being pinned down to easily applied analytical models; this was pointed out by Bettetini in the case of the theory of García-Noblejas (1982, 14) and Vilar regarding the hermeneutics of possible worlds (2012, 23). This second limitation, if it is such, is deliberate, in that there is no *a priori* limitation of the recognition of realities which exceed the limits of formal models. That is, these are perspectives which are concerned not only with criteria for the verification of fact but also the acquisition of wisdom.

It seems evident that if what fiction provides is information about life, this cannot be understood other than through an examination of life itself, the subject proper to the human sciences and the knowledge offered by logic and the natural sciences. Anyone can do science if they apply the proper method, especially in fiction in terms of its material object, but the formal object of fiction moves on a terrain other than that of logical-mathematical positivism. This consideration continues Aristotle’s apparent *aporia* of goodness adapted to the world of fiction: what we find within poetic possible worlds is, in a certain way, what we already have. These “little cosmoses” help to expand what already lies within ourselves.

The notion of possibility offered by these authors is less logical than existential, the unfolding of dramatic action in terms of vital success or failure, which brings us towards the sapiential meaning of literature. The notions of reality of these authors do not exclude, *a priori*, the sphere of the sacred; and in the case of García-Noblejas, he has proposed the possibility of finding a perspective in narrative representations in which the relation in freedom of the person with God makes perfect sense from a rational point of view. In this, García-Noblejas underscores that the Aristotelian search for happiness found in poetic myth has a particularly interesting orientation in terms of love, in terms of Christian *agape*.

## **4. Proposal for the analysis of the sacred in possible worlds**

It would appear reasonable to approach fiction from a hermeneutic perspective, sensitive to the intentions of each specific text. Thus, we do not aim to propose a model but merely certain an orientation in order to: (a) recognize the possibility of the sacred in each work of fiction, (b) where this is the case, understand the sacred in keeping with

the spirit of the text, and (c) draw practical conclusions for life through recognition and comprehension.

Firstly, it is necessary to identify the pretensions to truth proposed by the author of the text. This will require an understanding of the hermeneutics appropriate to the text suggested, fundamentally, by the text itself and the literary tradition of which it is a part as well as historical and philological studies. This would avoid misplaced and biased affirmations and facilitate subsequent stages of analysis. For specifically fictional texts, it is also important that we adopt a “willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (Coleridge 2010, 388). Understanding the meaning of a fictional text and gaining the wisdom it has to offer “demands we submit to the words of the narrator, giving them a subtle form of basic credit [...] in order for the narration [...] to conjure an image of a world” (Martínez Bonati 1972, 66). Failing to recognize the mimetic value of fictional phenomena, including fantasy literature, and the relation between its fictional images and the real, hinders our ability to perceive the invisible truths the text aims to communicate (Abellán-García Barrio 2020).

Hierophany or manifestations of the sacred do not imply a rupture of profane or naturalist ontology but reside as a powerful but invisible presence in the “inventory” of the world of the profane. Thus, it is also necessary, both prior and during textual analysis, to update one’s own encyclopaedia or referential framework or knowledge of the phenomenology of religion, or the cultural heritage of the tradition within the text. These efforts provide training for the recognition of the presence of the sacred in the profane, the imprint of God on the cosmos, the Word in the conscience of human beings, the references to sacred tales within profane tales and the echo of religious ritual in social practices, among many other signs. Apart from their personal beliefs, the scholar of the religious phenomenon must engage is “as if” it were true in order to perceive the structure of meaning being proposed.

Furthermore, in texts where the sacred or religious is explicitly present, it is helpful to recognize how it is presented. There are a number of ways to identify this, including but not limited to:

- Both the socio-religious and the sacred appear as real in the text.
- The socio-religious is present in the text but not explicitly the sacred.
- The sacred is manifest in the text although there are no established socio-religious practices.
- The sacred is not explicitly expressed as real, nor are there institutionalized socio-religious practices.

With this done, we can evaluate the consistency of the metaphysical image of the world in the text. Here poetic skill comes into play, as well as the metaphysics of which poetics is capable.

Finally, the sacred can be present in a text without any explicit reference; it may be present in the text as it is in real life: a powerful but subtle force, unnoticed by the inattentive eye. Only thus can we understand the place of the sacred in the world



created by the text; that is, in its system of real possibilities for vital success or failure of those residing within it.

## 5. Conclusion

At the outset of this paper, we noted that although possible worlds theory is generally presented as a more or less unified methodology, we identify at least two broad currents: logical-analytical and phenomenological-existential. The interest in making such a distinction lies in revealing the different theories of possible worlds according to notions of the “world” and “possibility”. This raises many possible implications, although here we have focused on only one: the possibility of recognizing the sacred within each of these perspectives.

The positivist and schematic vision of reality animates the logical-analytical approach, constructing well-defined and manageable models of analysis which, however, reduce reality to the parameters of the merely profane, that is, the exclusively empirical or verifiable by all within the confines of the natural sciences. This *forma mentis* obstructs or gravely hinders the possibility of recognizing the sacred, cataloguing the supernatural as part of genres which are neither mimetic nor plausible, and ultimately untrue in relation with our world.

The phenomenological-existential current does problematize the consideration of the sacred as truth, that is, it does not offer a priori valuations regarding the inclusion of transcendental elements in the world of fiction. Here the notion of possibility is not logical but existential (success and failure), allowing for a more sapiential meaning to literature.

Both currents recognize the need for *a priori* and extra-literary knowledge for an understanding of the fictional world, and an appropriate methodology and conceptual framework to identify the different aspects of the world within the text or understand the image of the world expressed therein. Thus, we have proposed some hermeneutic orientations for the recognition of the sacred in fictional texts, and so expanding on the works of García-Noblejas, specifically fitted to a Christian cosmovision.

The revision proposed in this work has been limited to notions of the “world” and “possibility” of the authors analysed; but within this analysis, raising other fundamental notions, such as “mimesis” and the distinction between the literary genres of realism and fantasy, was unavoidable. It is important to note that for authors within the logical-analytical current, “mimesis” fundamentally refers to issues of inventory and its properties, often leading them to consider the fantasy genre as non-mimetic. In the phenomenological-existential current, mimesis essentially refers to the development of human action in terms of *praxis*, as defined by Aristotle, to the degree it is oriented towards vital success or failure and thus, rendering the distinction between the genres of realism and fantasy secondary.

However, “mimesis of action” and “mimesis of the world” are terms which cannot be artificially separated without obstructing the understanding of the world projected in the text. All dramatic action takes place in a world. Thus, the notion of “mimesis of the world”, the aptness of the reflection of the real world in a fictional world, always in relation to the possibilities of the success or failure of the protagonist, is highly



relevant. It may be that the inventory of a fantasy world which finds no correlation to that of the real world can provide a much richer image of our real world. Thus, the genre of modern fantasy may greatly contribute to our wisdom regarding the real world, just as early myths illuminated human life in earlier times.

## Notes

1. As Goldiş (2015) has shown in his comparative study, authors such as Pavel or Doležel come from structuralism and have evolved, as has literary theory in recent decades, to positions more focused on the question of “the referent”.
2. Given the characteristics of this work, both brief and markedly interdisciplinary, we must take as given many considerations on the relation between the sacred and the profane (Eliade 1998) and myth and reality (Eliade 2009), as well as some notes on the morphology and dialectic of the sacred (Eliade 2011); we will limit ourselves to the essentials of the doctrine developed by the renowned historian and phenomenologist of religions Mircea Eliade. However, we will attempt to specify the fundamentals of our proposal.
3. Goldiş (2015) does not agree: “Despite the different accents in *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Doležel does not polemicize with Pavel precisely because their arguments for a theory of fiction are complementary” (57).
4. Although Fort’s presentation essentially develops a logical-analytical perspective, the fact is that, like Ronen (1994), he is aware of the epistemological problems of this current and, not infrequently, he is explicitly closer to the approaches of Pavel (1986).
5. This notion of the real appears to differ from that indicated by Ryan on other occasions: “the idea that reality – now conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists – is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds” (2006, 644).
6. The English translation of the Spanish sources is ours.
7. According to Hernández Ruiz, continuing and expanding on the works of Albadalejo, recognizing the ethical, aesthetic and religious structures in *Brideshead Revisited* (2020).
8. We should note that ‘plausible’ and ‘implausible’ here differs from that indicated by Aristotle (1974) (internal plausibility), but should be understood as “it is plausible that implausible events take place as being improbable rather than transgressing the laws of the real effective, objective world” (Rodríguez Pequeño 1993, 142). Understood thus, the plausible becomes a category of ontological correlation between the real world and the fictional world.
9. This debate, apart from the approach of the Albaladejo school, has not been entirely overlooked by theorists of the modern “fantasy” genre. Given that “fantasy” is often defined as transgressing the rules of the real, the question arises among specialists about what is “the real” (Roas, 2001). An alternative interpretation, which views fantasy as a deeper exploration of the real, may apply to authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien (2002; 2008) and G. K. Chesterton (2009, Cf. “The Ethics of Elflands”, 1909).
10. On the epistemology of testimony in the recognition of the sacred, we turn to the exhaustive historical and systemic study by Prades (2015). On testimony as a requirement in recognizing invisible truths in a literary work, including those belonging to the fantasy genre, see the work of Abellán-García Barrio on the epistemology of Saint-Exupéry in *The Little Prince* (2020).
11. Unless we state otherwise, this section of the text uses the term “possible worlds” as a synonym for “poetic possible-worlds”.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Acknowledgments

The present article is part of the Research Project El valor especulativo de los mundos ficcionales: Patria (el pueblo, la novela, la serie), of the 2020 Call for Research Projects funded by the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Madrid. Ref. UFV2020-39, conducted by the Stable Research Group “Imagination and possible worlds” of the Faculty of Communication of the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria.

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