

Delineating Mars: The Geopoetics of the Red Planet in Edgar Rice Burroughs' *A Princess of Mars*

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Abstract: Edgar Rice Burroughs' *A Princess of Mars* is an early example of a Red Planet depiction in science fiction, and also a trailblazing speculative landscape imaginary. As the first novel in the sprawling Barsoom cycle charting the adventures of the earthling John Carter and members of his family on Mars, it depicts the distant planet as not so much a space of utopia, but rather as an ideal setting for adventure and romance. Burroughs' Mars therefore becomes analogous to the American frontier, the edge of civilisation—the novel's narrative departs geographically, but perhaps not ideologically, from the earthly deserts of Arizona, where its Confederate officer protagonist formerly sought gold and fought the aborigines. This article argues that, beyond the frontier theme, the Martian landscape comprises a fictional fairy-tale reflection of Earth, transposed to an

imaginary world which is not quite Mars itself. Ultimately, this is a *dead* landscape, no longer capable of supporting vegetation—and barely capable of supporting any life whatsoever—as Burroughs' depictions of landscape in the novel repeatedly underscore.

Keywords: Red Planet, Mars, Barsoom, gothic, genre history, geocriticism.

It could be argued that, just over a century ago, Edgar Rice Burroughs set the early groundwork for climate fiction by exploring the vicissitudes of a dying landscape in his novel *A Princess of Mars* (first serialised in *All-Story Magazine*, 1911). Burroughs' novel plays upon Percival Lowell's then-contemporary conceptualisation of a dead Mars whereupon ancient civilisations have perished, and

¹ I am grateful for editorial input from Jonathan Hay, who was particularly of assistance during the process of finalising this article at a difficult time. I would subsequently like this scholar to be attributed as my co-author.

once powerful cities have been lost—along with Giovanni Schiaparelli’s contemporary astronomical hypothesis of dried-up Martian canals—in order to outline a stark fantastic landscape comprising deserts, ruins, and dead seas. Specifically, *A Princess of Mars* is set within a dying Martian landscape whose seas have dried, and its atmosphere thinned, generating a terrain wracked by interracial and intertribal conflict resultant from the planet’s endemic resource scarcity. By its close, the novel’s terrestrial hero John Carter will have succeeded in prolonging the planet’s life-carrying capacity by valiantly aiding Martian terraforming efforts, which seek to overcome entropy and keep the planet’s atmosphere breathable.

John Carter is greatly aided throughout his adventures on the planet by his terrestrial musculature, which leads to aerobic prowess in the Red Planet’s “lesser gravitation” (Burroughs, 2011: 15)—accordingly, the hero finds himself endowed with superpowers as a warrior through the planet’s landscape itself.² He becomes not only the typical romance hero, but also the saviour of the planet and its races from destruction. Within the novel’s schema, the image of the Red Planet reflects ideas of colonialism, and the ideological constructs of the colonial novel of the early twentieth century; Carter performs colonial feats in an exotic wild space, exports the Earth’s order, and starts a dynasty with the copper-red skinned (50) Princess of Mars Dejah Thoris. Thus, the landscape in this planetary romance comprises an embodiment of the ideological constructs of that time imposed upon the imaginary world of popular action adventure genres. I proceed

to demonstrate not only that Burroughs established the subgenre of planetary romance through a concatenated patchwork approach to popular genre conventions, but also that *A Princess of Mars* broadly initiated the significance of landscapes within the science fictional mode.

The Martian Context

Throughout thousands of years of human history, the flaming Red Planet known in the Western world as Mars has fascinated and magnetically attracted earthly observers, giving energetic stimulus to astronomers’ quests and artistic fantasies. In Roman mythology, the fiery Mars was associated with the deities of war, struggle, bloodshed and masculinity (as opposed to the feminine Venus). Literary visions of the planet include hundreds of texts spanning various genres, from poetry to utopian novels. Fictional descriptions of Mars have depended on scientific progress in their observations; writers’ imaginations have followed contemporary research vectors, yet have added vivid details, delineating the Martian surface, coloring it with fantastic flora, fauna, lost races, giant cities and buildings. At the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to the bold insights of scientists armed with modernised telescopes such as Giovanni Schiaparelli, Camille Flammarion, and Percival Lowell,³ there was a wave of mass interest in the Red Planet. Their scholarly concepts were popularised by mass media, whilst semi-fictional depictions of Mars presented by scientists contributed to the Martian theme becoming

² Carter is, nevertheless, able to breathe unproblematically on the planet, despite its “very thin atmosphere” (Burroughs, 2011: 31).

³ In 1877 Schiaparelli discovered what he believed to be Martian canals, spurring a flurry of astronomical interest centered upon Mars. Working in Schiaparelli’s stead two decades later, Flammarion and Lowell both hypothesised that the ostensible canals were evidence of ancient civilisations on Mars.

accessible and intriguing to reading publics in the United States and Europe.

According to Robert Crossley, the ‘Mars mania’ spread fast, so that “[b]y the beginning of the twentieth century, the public infatuation with Mars had come into full bloom” (Crossley, 2011: 11). “Artificial channels” maps, following Schiaparelli, were printed in popular newspapers and magazines, and the planet’s image was used in advertising and for composing popular melodies (Crossley, 2011: 11-12). This persistent attention produced an array of literary texts wherein Mars appeared as an ideal space for utopia, adventure, romance, or disaster. As authors projected their desires, dreams, prejudices, anxieties, and phobias onto the surface of a distant planet, Mars became a literary mirror of the Earth, in both its past and future. As a result, the literary history of the luminary has profoundly formed its position as a symbol, a cultural myth, and a field for endless speculations. Robert Crossley summarises the semantic diversity of the planet’s literary versions:

Mars has many meanings. Once upon a time, it meant a dying world that served as a grim and cautionary text for our own terrestrial destiny. It often has served as the canvas on which writers could depict their wildest fantasies, their darkest fears, their otherwise most unspeakable critiques, their spiritual aspirations. For some, Mars still represents a reconstituted frontier for a world in which all the frontiers have now vanished. For others, Mars is a laboratory and a playground of the mind, where speculation about alternative realities and alternative futures is sanctioned and where imagination is granted a license to explore ways in which we may save our

own endangered planet (Crossley, 2011: 19).

As one of the pioneers and classics of American popular culture and literature, Edgar Rice Burroughs’ works belong to this “golden age” (Crossley, 2011: 5) of fiction about Mars.

Burroughs is widely considered the founder of the planetary romance subgenre, and the immensely popular bestsellers from his Martian cycle are considered to have been greatly influential in shaping subsequent perceptions of the planet, inspiring both explorers’ investigations and artists’ imaginations. Burroughs had a nonpareil talent for creating fictional worlds; his fantasy extended not only to Mars, but also to Venus (renamed Amtor), Caspak—a lost island near Antarctica—and the hollow terrestrial inner world of Pellucidar. Adventure comprises the universal narrative archetype of all his novels, regardless of whether the action unfolds on Earth, as in the Tarzan stories, or on a distant planet. Whilst scholars today interpret Burroughs’ Martian novels in the frame of science fiction and/or science fantasy, and sf writers such as Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Philip Farmer, Arthur C. Clarke and Robert A. Heinlein have declared him to be their literary father and inspiration, at the beginning of the twentieth century the genre’s coordinates were a long way from being outlined in theory. Therefore, it is important to recall that Burroughs’ writing frequently demonstrates a daring and efficient combination of various generic elements; gothic and western, the love story and fantasy, the travelogue, and the survival narrative.

Burroughs managed to win readers’ hearts by creating detailed pictures of remote exotic worlds, giving cosmic drive to storylines, and portraying active and recognisable heroes. His romance cycles tend to be highly formulaic which, of course, has flavoured

critical evaluations of his oeuvre, his literary reputation, and his status in the general canon. John Taliaferro asserts in *Tarzan Forever: The Life of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the Creator of Tarzan* that “[d]espite his enormous appeal, his work is not taught in schools or welcomed in the American canon [...] One reason for Burroughs’s undeserved ostracism is the stigma attached to pulp fiction” (Taliaferro, 2002: 15). Nevertheless, in the field of popular fiction, his works are widely considered canonical, and still captivate a mass audience, generate a desire to create post-stories and derivative texts, and see their plots adapted into the languages of cinema, television, comics, and video games. Burroughs’ popularity amongst non-genre readers only reaffirms the immense significance of his fictional worlds to speculative fiction. Sharon DeGraw, for instance, rightly points to the fact that Burroughs possesses “a prominent place” in science-fictional histories “because of his tremendous popularity and literary and cultural influence,” and concludes that “[i]n the age of pulps, Burroughs was king” (DeGraw, 2017: 9-10).

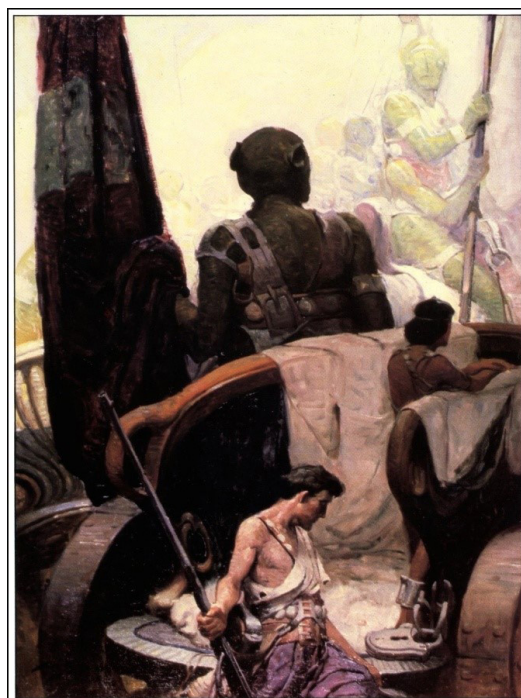
The genesis of *A Princess of Mars*, Burroughs’ first planetary romance, has been widely described by his biographers and critics. Having tried himself in various professions and having suffered numerous failures, Burroughs turned to writing as an entrepreneurial project that would give him the opportunity to earn a certain social status and fortune. As John C. Tibbets describes:

One day in July in 1911, a 35-year-old Chicago pencil sharpener salesman, broke and desperate to feed his growing family, picked up his pen and indulged himself in his favorite pastime, daydreaming. He hastily dashed off a wild tale about a Confederate Army captain who is mysteriously transported

to the planet Mars where he woos a princess and battles bizarre creatures. (Tibbets, 2011: 179)

He sent the new-born manuscript—a draft of forty-three thousand words—to Munsey’s pulp magazine *The All-Story*, under the ‘witty’ pseudonym Normal Bean (a smart fellow) and with the title *Dejah Thoris, Martian Princess*. The editor accepted the text for publication, wrote off the fee of \$400, and altered the pseudonym to the somewhat subtler Norman Bean. The novel was published in serialised form with the title *Under the Moons of Mars*, from February to July of 1912. In September 1917, it was reissued as a hardcover book titled *A Princess of Mars* by the A. C. McClurg publishing house in Chicago, complete with illustrations by Frank Schoonever.

This first scientific romance by the American author was extremely popular, and laid the foundation for Burroughs’ successful



literary career; he subsequently adhered to the principle of seriality to continue narrating the adventures of the main character John Carter.

Numerous sequels revealed the fate of this Virginian gentleman, his beloved Martian princess Dejah Thoris, their friends, enemies, and descendants. The novel's direct sequels are *The Gods of Mars* (1913), *The Warlord of Mars* (1913-1914), *Thuvia, Maid of Mars* (1916), *The Chessmen of Mars* (1922), *The Master Mind of Mars* (1927), *The Fighting Men of Mars* (1930), *Swords of Mars* (1934-1935), *Synthetic Men of Mars* (1939), *Llana of Gathol* (1941), and *John Carter of Mars* (1941-1943).⁴ The entire cycle is usually labelled the 'Martian series' or 'Barsoom series'—in line with the name Burroughs chose for Mars. Robert Bob Zeuschner insists that:

The importance of *A Princess of Mars* cannot be overestimated. It was responsible for an entire genre of pulp fiction and an important inspiration for Flash Gordon, George Lucas's films, and James Cameron's *Avatar* [...] It is one of the cornerstones of early American science fiction. Like the great adventure classics by H. G. Wells and Jules Verne, it gave direction and set the parameters for the pulp magazine stories for decades to come. (Tibbetts, 2011: 180-181).

Crossley likewise emphasises that "*A Princess of Mars* became a staple adventure book for male teenagers throughout much of the twentieth century" (Crossley, 2011: 162). The attentions of a vast amount of literary critics have subsequently focused on this book, the firstborn of its author's literary imagination. *Princess* has been studied in detail from various theoretical positions; as a fantasy autobiographical text, as

a reflection of racial and colonial constructs of the early twentieth century, and in the context of pulp fiction magazines. Scholars have laid particular emphasis upon issues of literary and scientific sources, and the genre specificity of the novel (Tibbetts, 181; Taliaferro, 220; Newell & Lamont, 75).

Among the key texts which influenced the ideological undertones of *A Princess of Mars* scholars name American frontier stories and European colonial novels, such as those by James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Rider Haggard, in such novels as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). These authors are united by traits such as subjectifying the motives of relations between different races, exploring lost civilisations, the struggle and courage of hyper-masculine heroes, love for exceptional women, and by their vivid descriptions of the exoticism of distant lands. As Johan Anders Höglund remarks, this specific genre of the early twentieth century "is often an optimistic and adventurous narrative that takes place in a frontier landscape that offers an opportunity for conquest and regenerative violence" (Höglund, 2014: 40), and hence, "American pulp fiction has been recognised as having its roots in the British gothic and sensation novel of the nineteenth century" (Höglund, 2014: 42), whilst making its own significant contribution to the adventure genre.

Planetary Romance

Generic ambiguity was characteristic throughout early American science fiction, and the same is true for Burroughs' romance series. Sharon DeGraw characterises *A Princess of Mars* as "a Martian bricolage of modern and ancient, multi-generic elements" (DeGraw, 2017: 14).

⁴ The texts in this list are sequentially dated according to their respective magazine publications in *All-Story*, *Argosy All-Story Weekly*, *Amazing Stories Annual*, *Blue Book*, *Argosy Weekly* and *Amazing Stories*.

Indeed, the story gradually unfolds—like a scroll—in front of the reader; its beginning couched in the leisurely style of a family novel abruptly leads into episodes in the spirit of westerns, and is next imparted the gothic setting of a mountain cave. There a fantastic force comes into play, which transports the hero to the alien environment of Mars without any perceptible spaceship or means of space travel whatsoever. Scenes on the Red Planet alternate tonally; adventures, romance, battles, and disasters seem carefully sequenced to keep readers in constant tension. The novel's plot concludes with a return to Earth, and a gothic finale in the same Arizona cave.

Scholars have attempted to substantiate the paradoxical temporality of the novel's setting. For Paul A. Carter, "John Carter's Martian adventures [...] take place not in a futuristic setting, but in one of great antiquity. [...] In interplanetary stories, science fiction's bold voyage to the future has often turned into a nostalgia trip to the past" (Carter, 1977: 67). Whereas, for Sharon DeGraw, "[b]y combining the tropics and space in one planet and one narrative, Burroughs combines the past and the future of mankind, man's origins and his destiny" (DeGraw, 2017: 15). By depicting an exotic planet, others have argued that Burroughs balances feelings of reality and unreality: "Mars functioned as a bridge between the known and real and the unknown and fantastic" (Newell & Lamont, 2011: 78). Certainly, to gain a complete understanding of *A Princess of Mars*, it is very important to know the literary tradition on which its author relied, as well as the genre patterns upon which it is oriented.

Nevertheless, I contend that it is more significant to emphasise the fact that Burroughs established a new science-fictional subgenre altogether; planetary (or interplanetary) romance. Just as a medieval castle is the central

image of gothic fiction, so a distant exotic planet is at the heart of this subgenre, comprising the main venue of its action. An emphasis on fantasy setting is a common criterion for defining this subgenre. For instance, planetary romance has been defined as "a genre of science fiction that describes an adventure taking place on a planet's surface, *especially in which the description of the planet is integral to the story*" (Prucher, 2007: 146, emphasis mine), and on the terms that "[a]ny sf tale whose *primary venue [...] is a planet*, and whose plot turns to a significant degree *upon the nature of that venue*, can be described as a planetary romance" (Clute & Nicholls, 1995: 934, emphasis mine). Furthermore, for David Pringle:

Tales set on other planets are classed as science fiction, but there has long been one type, the planetary romance, that readers have felt belongs at least partly to fantasy. These are stories of adventure *set almost entirely on the surface of some alien world*, with an emphasis on swordplay (or similar), monsters, telepathy (or other underexplained 'magic'), and near-human alien civilisations that often resemble those of Earth's pre-technological past (featuring royal dynasties, theocracies, and the like). (Pringle, 2000: 38, emphasis mine)

Therefore, we will not be mistaken if we begin to consider planetary romance a primarily landscape-oriented subgenre, since its landscape settings play a prominent role, and carry the main semantic load.

Likewise, the study of the spatial dimensions of the planetary romance is based on the categories of geocriticism and literary cartography. The relevance of geographical humanities increased at the beginning of the new millennium where its increased prominence

was labelled a 'spatial turn' in theory. As Robert Tally has claimed, "[o]ver the past few decades, spatiality has become a key concept for literary and cultural studies." (Tally, 2013: 3). Eric Prieto further emphasises the fruitful interactions of literary research with other scientific fields:

Many of the most exciting recent developments in this burgeoning area of literary studies have involved an interdisciplinary turn toward themes and analytic tools that borrow from fields like cultural and social geography, urban sociology, environmental studies, and the phenomenology of place. Such tools have greatly enriched the study of literary space (Prieto, 2011: 13)

Subsequently, Neal Alexander further develops a focus upon the necessity for the interdisciplinary nature of such research:

Literary geography is an emergent interdisciplinary field of research situated at the interface between human geography and literary studies. It derives much of its energy and dynamism from a specific convergence of thought across otherwise divergent disciplines. [...] Like ecocriticism—with which it has some loose affiliations (as well as important differences)—literary geography is often carried on under other names: imaginative geography, literary cartography, geocriticism, geopoetics, geohumanities. (Alexander, 2015: 3)

Geocriticism, as might be expected, extends to such fields as popular literature and cultural studies. Its genres and formulae are built on the phenomenon of escapism, which involves the reader's immersion in an imaginary world. Therefore, the creation of fictional

worlds is a necessary *modus operandi* for those writers working in the genres such as detective stories, historical adventures, westerns, fantasy, and so forth. Across this range of popular genres there is a clear correspondence between genre and setting, encouraging readers to recognise genres via their dissimilarly stylised descriptions of landscapes; as Lisa Fletcher points out, "geography and genre are mutually constitutive" (2016: 1), and therefore "genre writers are routinely described as experts in world-building for their skill for crafting plausible imaginary geographies and histories" (2016: 3).

For the planetary romance subgenre, there must be a special modification of the term landscape; I favor 'planetscape,' which *The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* defines as "the surface geography of a planet; a pictorial representation of the surface of a planet" (Prucher, 2007: 148). Landscape is of course a broader concept, yet planetscapes comprise a very important portion of the semantic manifestation of landscapes in speculative fiction texts set upon distant alien worlds. Meanwhile, Robert Tally terms genres "mapping machines" and reveals that every genre is a map in a certain sense (2013: 46). Storytelling and plot-pacing provide mapping, and maps tell their stories to readers:

As narrators or writers survey the territory they wish to describe, they weave together disparate elements in order to produce the narrative, and these elements may include scraps of other narratives, descriptions of people or places, images derived from first-hand observation as well as from secondary reports, legends, myths, and inventions of the imagination. In producing this patchwork representation of a world (that is, the narrative itself), the narrator also invents or discovers the world presented in the narrative (Tally, 2013: 49).

These critical engagements constitute a rigorous theoretical framework for the analysis of Burroughs' novel *A Princess of Mars*. The Martian landscape of the novel is not limited to its descriptive setting, but is rather a complex semantic structure that combines scientific discoveries and Burroughs' flights of fancy, ideas about the Earth's past and bold projections into the future, medieval savagery, and futuristic innovations. The landscape of the Red Planet has not only a geographical, but also a sociocultural dimension; hence, it cannot be considered in isolation from the earthly scenery and earthly problems which Burroughs was engaged with.

Martian Landscapes

Among researchers of the Barsoom series, the idea has become established that Mars became a new speculative frontier for Burroughs, during a moment at which the old American frontier had exhausted its possibilities for the adventures of heroes: "Burroughs used the Martian landscape to extend the idealised vision of the American frontier into the future" (Sharp, 2007: 96). Hence, it is no wonder that the action of the novel begins in an Arizona which has recently lost frontier status. There are numerous reasons for Burroughs having chosen this initial setting. The renowned contemporary astronomer Percival Lowell's astronomical observatory was located in Flagstaff, Arizona, from which he watched Mars through a telescope and expressed ideas about the artificial origin of channels on the planet, whilst hypothesising about its deplorable future. In addition, the mountainous desert landscape of Arizona might recall that of Mars, a parallel generally accepted by readers: "Before long, it would become a commonplace in the literature of Mars that no place on Earth looked more like the red planet than northern Arizona" (Crossley, 2011: 153).

Carl Abbott explains Burroughs' paradigmatic speculative but nevertheless earthly landscape in more detail:

Because new planets are often imagined as places of grand vistas and wide-open spaces, the Landscape of the West has provided an easy source for sketching the appearance of new places. Since Burroughs launched John Carter's adventures, readers have come to expect Mars to look a lot like Arizona, or Death Valley, or perhaps an airless North Slope of Alaska, in part because such comparisons simplify the writer's task and make it easy for readers to envision unseen planetscapes. (Abbott, 2006: 20)

At the beginning of the novel, the lands of Arizona appear in daylight, whilst the hero waves goodbye to a friend: "The morning of Powell's departure was, like nearly all Arizona mornings, clear and beautiful" (Burroughs, 2011: 2). From a great distance, Carter surveys the valley, the mountains, and the plateau, looking for traces of danger. Next, the panorama narrows down to a significant detail, an Apache camp, which symbolises a threat to the hero and his friend: "[t]he little stretch of level land was white with Indian tepees" (5). Subsequently, escape and chase scenes unfold across these rocky settings, until they eventually lead the hero to the comparatively claustrophobic environment of a cave.

In the subsequent description of this particular setting, readers see it at night, when Carter magically leaves his body:

I saw stretching far below me the beautiful vista of rocky gorge, and level, cacti-studded flat, wrought by the moonlight into a miracle of soft splendor and wondrous enchantment.

Few western wonders are more inspiring than the beauties of an Arizona moonlit landscape; the silvered mountains in the distance, the strange lights and shadows upon hog back and arroyo, and the grotesque details of the stiff, yet beautiful cacti form a picture at once enchanting and inspiring; as though one were catching for the first time a glimpse of some dead and forgotten world, so different is it from the aspect of any other spot upon our earth. (13)

This description is dominated by the category not so much of the ‘adventurous’ as the Todorovian ‘marvelous as is emphasised by the “strange” moonlight and “grotesque details” that make the scenery analagous to “some dead and forgotten world,” foreshadowing the hero’s transfer to another planet. This feeling of wonder is then repeated when the hero finds himself on Mars: “I opened my eyes upon a strange and weird landscape” (14). Carter once again sees lowlands, distant hills and rocks heated by the sun, and instantly identifies the area with “similar conditions on an Arizona desert” (14).

Hence, based on the genre patterns of frontier and captive narratives, Burroughs directly correlates the images of the Arizona desert, with its ‘wild’ Apaches, and the Martian surface, where John Carter finds himself under the threat of the green Tharks’ aggression. This setting also introduces the theme of the complex relationship between the different Martian

racés.⁵ Nevertheless, since setting and genre are directly related, the Martian planetscape corresponds to various genre components; not only the western—as in the Arizona episodes—but also the tropes of adventure, gothic, love story, fantasy and catastrophe fictions.

The narrative of John Carter’s adventures is enclosed in a double frame. Its initial introductory portion focalises the voice of the narrator, a fictional “Edgar Burroughs.” This Burroughs is the fictional hero’s nephew, and talks about his uncle, a polished Southern gentleman and a brave cavalry officer, with love and respect, reporting on the strange circumstances of his death and funeral—as in sensational novels. The second frame is gothic, expressed in the text through the cave topos. At first, Carter finds himself entering the cave when the Apaches pursue him across the Arizona desert. In this cave, the hero is ostensibly split into two bodies; one body remains inert in the cave, and the other is mystically transported to Mars. This is the same cave that Carter will find himself in when he returns from Mars to Earth following his heroic feats which bring about the novel’s eucatastrophe.

The cave topos is analogous to the “transit into a sphere of rebirth [...] symbolized in the worldwide womb image” otherwise termed ‘The Belly of the Whale’ (Campbell, 2004: 83). Hence, it usually symbolises the hero’s initiation, death, and resurrection, and here, Burroughs utilises gothic elements in its description. At first, the cave is associated with prehistoric times: “I found a large chamber, possibly a

⁵ Whilst Carter is initially captured by one particular tribe of green Martians, he spends most of the remainder of the novel aligned with the red Martians—the other extant race. These two prominent races are descended from ancestral races including yellow and black Martians, as later entries in Burroughs’ series explore. Both races are oviparous, and whereas red Martians are humanoid, physically resemble humans in all but skin-tone, and have many similar social practices, green Martians have “an intermediary pair of limbs [...] used at will either as arms or legs” (15). Besides being hexapods, green Martians are comparatively warlike and uncivilized, and unlike their civilization-building neighbours, are a nomadic race divided into named tribes. For more on this subject, see Burroughs (2011: 71-72), Crossley (2011), Sharp (2007), Höglund (2014), Abbott (2006) and DeGraw (2017).

hundred feet in diameter and thirty or forty feet in height; a smooth and well-worn floor, and many other evidences that the cave had, at some remote period, been inhabited" (7). However, the obscurity in its depth signifies danger: "The back of the cave was so lost in dense shadow that I could not distinguish whether there were openings into other apartments or not" (7). Gothic details of smell and sound complete the picture: "a slight vapor filling the cave", "a faintly pungent odor", "some poisonous gas", "the silence of the dead," "a low but distinct moaning sound," and the specification that "there came again from the black shadows the sound of a moving thing, and a faint rustling as of dead leaves" (9-11). As a first-person narrator, Carter accentuates his own anxious state, instigating the general and intense nervousness which is associated with gothic conventions of suspense: "The shock to my already overstrained nervous system was terrible in the extreme" (11).

After he leaves the cave, the earthly landscape of the extraordinary Arizona desert opens up into outer space and acquires a new dimension. At this point in the narrative, the gothic mode dissolves into a fantastic one, marking the beginning of the hero's quest on another planet:

I turned my gaze from the landscape to the heavens where the myriad stars formed a gorgeous and fitting canopy for the wonders of the earthly scene. My attention was quickly riveted by a large red star close to the distant horizon. As I gazed upon it I felt a spell of overpowering fascination—it was Mars, the god of war, and for me, the fighting man, it had always held the power of irresistible enchantment. [...] My longing was beyond the power of opposition; I closed my eyes, stretched out my arms toward the god of my vocation and felt

myself drawn with the suddenness of thought through the trackless immensity of space. There was an instant of extreme cold and utter darkness. (13)

This description of the heavenly landscape both reveals Carter's nature—he is a military man to his core—and scales the story to cosmic space. Burroughs was not interested in the technical side of moving between planets—unlike Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) or H. G. Wells in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901)—and hence, his works are not *interplanetary*, but merely *planetary* romances. The only qualities of the passage that signify Carter's abrupt and startling shift in location are its references to "the trackless immensity of space" and the "extreme cold and utter darkness" (13).

The gothic frame within the novel closes after Carter's sudden return from Mars; he discovers himself again in the same cave, and in the same body which has waited for him without ageing for fifteen years. Now he is able to see inside the cave in the dim light and finds the mummified remains of a woman along with human skeletons:

As I approached it I saw that it was the dead and mummified remains of a little old woman with long black hair, and the thing it leaned over was a small charcoal burner upon which rested a round copper vessel containing a small quantity of greenish powder. Behind her, depending from the roof upon rawhide thongs, and stretching entirely across the cave, was a row of human skeletons. From the thong which held them stretched another to the dead hand of the little old woman; as I touched the cord the skeletons swung to the motion with a noise as of the rustling of dry leaves. (202)

This scene suggests mystical rituals associated with an Indian cult of death, evoking both fear and a characteristically gothic anxiety in Carter. The secret of the cave remains like a silent question mark, since Burroughs never provides a rational explanation for what happened to the hero, whether he undertook real adventures on Mars, or whether the majority of the novel's chapters were only a strange dream. In this particular aspect, the cave figured as transitional portal to another reality brings the story rather closer to the genre of fantasy than science fiction.

The Martian visions in Burroughs' romances were influenced by Lowell's planetology, often relying directly upon the scientific ideas expressed in his books *Mars* (1895), *Mars and its Canals* (1906), and *Mars as the Abode of Life* (1908), in addition to their popular retellings in US mass media. Leathem Mehaffey has explored the extent to which Burroughs repeated Lowell's ideas, and concludes that, in general, the geography of his Mars corresponds to the hypotheses of that time. For Mehaffey, it is particularly telling in this regard that Burroughs mentions artificial 'channels' and dried seas, lack of water and other resources for life, polar seas, warm climate, dual moons, Martian measurements and time zones, in addition to "both the lower atmospheric pressure and lesser gravity of Mars" (Mehaffey, 2005). Mehaffey also demonstrates that Burroughs placed imaginary cities near the crossings of the canals or near so-called 'oases,' based on Lowell's Martian maps. However, I would contend that the principal scientific suggestion borrowed by Burroughs was the concept of a dying planet, along with how such a hostile environment can generate a violent struggle for survival and a general atmosphere of ruin and decay.

The particular mode of Burroughs' Mars imagery is particularly reminiscent of the famous last passage from Lowell's work *Mars as the Abode of Life* entitled "Martian life nearing its end":

A sadder interest attaches to such existence: that it is, cosmically speaking, soon to pass away. To our eventual descendants life on Mars will no longer be something to scan and interpret. It will have lapsed beyond the hope of study or recall. Thus to us it takes on an added glamour from the fact that it has not long to last. For the process that brought it to its present pass must go on to the bitter end, until the last spark of Martian life goes out. The drying up of the planet is certain to proceed until its surface can support no life at all. Slowly but surely time will snuff it out. When the last ember is thus extinguished, the planet will roll a dead world through space, its evolutionary career forever ended. (Lowell, 1908: 216)

For Burroughs, the accuracy of scientific facts was not so important as the brightness and eccentricity of Martian scenery, which profoundly motivates his novel's plot development and the actions of its central protagonist. Höglund expresses the idea that "Burroughs's 'Barsoom' clearly was intended as a setting for *adventure*" (Höglund, 2014: 126, emphasis mine). Likewise, Robert Crossley is absolutely right when highlighting that "Mars provided an opportunity for recovering the pleasures of *romance*" (Crossley, 2011, 149, emphasis mine). Hence, genre and landscape mutually determine each other, and from all the variety of then-contemporary planetological ideas, Burroughs selected those fragments that could most impress readers' imaginations,

allowing him to develop the novel's plot around these aspects of landscape. As Crossley continues, "his imagination is exotic, not astronomical; his artistic sensibilities run more to primary colors than to subtle tints [...] Astronomical images are incidental to the hormonal mayhem that runs the battery of Burroughs' plot" (Crossley, 2011: 151-152). His landscapes are akin to a list of alien wonders; natural, technological, and as mystical as telepathy—a typical Martian communication means.

Burroughs visualises the planetscape in rigorous detail, time after time attracting attention to impressive and luxurious Martian materials such as marble, gold, and diamonds, and to the exotic electrical power of Martian rays and radium devices. When Carter asks Dejah Thoris to draw up a Martian map to aid their escape, the princess "taking a great diamond from her hair [...] drew upon the marble floor the first map of Barsoomian territory I had ever seen" (110).

Carter elsewhere finds himself enchanted by the wild beauty of the Tharkian caravan heading through the desert, which he automatically associates with the lavishness of Eastern cavalcades back on Earth:

The gleaming metal and jewels of the gorgeous ornaments of the men and women, duplicated in the trappings of the zitidars and thoats, and interspersed with the flashing colors of magnificent silks and furs and feathers, lent a barbaric splendor to the caravan which would have turned an East Indian potentate green with envy. (98)

In this picturesque description, a parallel between oriental and extraterrestrial exoticism takes prominence, inviting then-contemporary readers to analogise the Martian landscape in a similarly proprietorial manner.

Dead Cities

Burroughs utilises the Lost World and Lost Race formulae to model his Martian world, and this outlandish trend is especially evident in the cityscapes of Korad, Thark, Zodanga, and Helium. The first two are transitory habitats of the green Martians, and the second pair are the city-states of the red Martians. Korad and Thark are featured as ruins abandoned by ancient white inhabitants: "the buildings were deserted, and while not greatly decayed had the appearance of not having been tenanted for years, possibly for ages" (22); likewise, "the evidences of extreme antiquity which showed



all around me indicated that these buildings might have belonged to some long-extinct and forgotten race in the dim antiquity of Mars" (24). Thus, as Robert Markley points out,

Burroughs' Mars is perpetually "haunted by its past" (2005: 188).

The models of Korad and Thark are constructed essentially as city-palimpsests wherein layers of an ancient, developed culture are hidden under the cover of the newest savagery. Carter seems to sense the invisible presence of the former inhabitants:

the fair-haired, laughing people whom stern and unalterable cosmic laws had driven not only from their homes, but from all except the vague legends of their descendants [...] the graceful figures of the beautiful women, the straight and handsome men; the happy frolicking children—all sunlight, happiness and peace. It was difficult to realize that they had gone; down through ages of darkness, cruelty, and ignorance, until their hereditary instincts of culture and humanitarianism had risen ascendant once more in the final composite race which now is dominant upon Mars. (76-77)

Carter is surprised by the architectural wonders, the grandeur of the buildings and the richness of their decorations: "The building was low, but covered an enormous area. It was constructed of gleaming white marble inlaid with gold and brilliant stones which sparkled and scintillated in the sunlight" (24). Mural paintings in these lost cities act like windows into the distant past of Mars. At first, the hero sees echoes of a formerly blooming nature within these walls: "The mural painting depicted scenes of rare and wonderful beauty; mountains, rivers, lake, ocean, meadow, trees and flowers, winding roadways, sun-kissed gardens—scenes which might have portrayed earthly views but for the different colorings of the vegetation" (29). Carter praises the

technical excellence and "master hand" (29) of the ancient artists, and for readers too, such descriptions underscore the contrast between a flourishing nature confined to the past, and the planet's present thirsty territories; between the former high civilisation of the white Martians, and the Tkarkian brutality and insensitivity. Burroughs emphasises proportions to emphasise the difference between the two cultures; Tharks look "entirely out of proportion to the desks, chairs, and other furnishings" (24), a fact which allows the hero to guess that the size of the extinct Martian race was similar to the size of an ordinary terrestrial human.

Later, in another building of "real sleeping apartments with ancient beds of highly wrought metal swinging from enormous gold chains depending from the marble ceilings" (67), Carter observes more rich furnishings and mural paintings, wherein representatives of the white race are depicted directly:

The decoration of the walls was most elaborate, and, unlike the frescoes in the other buildings I had examined, portrayed many human figures in the compositions. These were of people like myself, and of a much lighter color than Dejah Thoris. They were clad in graceful, flowing robes, highly ornamented with metal and jewels, and their luxuriant hair was of a beautiful golden and reddish bronze. The men were beardless and only a few wore arms. The scenes depicted for the most part, a fair-skinned, fair-haired people at play. (67)

Contemplation of these frescoes unites Carter and the Martian princess in delight, the latter of whom pays tribute to the craftsmanship of the white race. These urban cityscape fragments paradoxically mix two-time planes; the medieval past and far future of our own

Earth projected onto the Martian planetscape. Its cityscape acts as a map that guides the hero through space and time, and this map comes to life through the history of the planet, as it is related to Carter by the Martian princess. Hence, Carter navigates the Martian landscape through representations which remain akin to Earth's own past and future.

Burroughs' colourful descriptions of the exotic environment correspond not only to the adventure genre but also to travelogues; in these moments, Carter learns the way of life on another planet. For Höglund, "Carter's description of the alien biologies and customs of the Martians reads like nineteenth-century anthropology or travel writing" (Höglund, 2014: 44). Other critics have also theorised that the density and integrity of Burroughs' fictional world of Mars allows readers to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of a distant planet: "Barsoom was fully equipped [...] with geography, history, mythology, flora and fauna, human and unhuman inhabitants, science, politics, religion, architecture, law, and every other institution to be expected in a fully developed world" (Lupoff, 2005: 11).

Interestingly, however, the red Martian cityscapes of Zodanga and Helium are depicted more schematically, and without the decadent glamour of the Tharks' ruins. Despite their technological superiority, these cities still resemble fortified paramilitary fortresses, ready to fight each other, regardless of the high scientific discoveries they boast (such as special solar rays that make it possible to produce oxygen in factories, and to pilot flying boats). Burroughs delves further into medieval-futuristic detail to describe the lifestyle of this technologically-advanced race. First, he specifies that their houses are raised high up on metal support columns at night so that outsiders cannot get inside, this measure being motivated

by the high level of aggression in the Red Planet's society. Secondly, he paints pictures of a busy urban space, where catering establishments are automated:

Kantos Kan led me to one of these gorgeous eating places where we were served entirely by mechanical apparatus. No hand touched the food from the time it entered the building in its raw state until it emerged hot and delicious upon the tables before the guests, in response to the touching of tiny buttons to indicate their desires. (150-151)

This marvel of technology is a projection of the American technical innovations of that time, which in a similar manner speculated about the possibility of artificial food which might be produced without direct human input (Bowler, 2017: 16).

Zodanga and Helium are constructed primarily as settings for territorial combat, a landscape-mediated decision which additionally aligns the novel with the action-adventure genre. During his time in these cities, John Carter is no longer a prisoner, but a recognised warrior, and is even more visually similar to his hosts now that his body is painted red. Here, he liberates Dejah Thoris from an unwanted marriage, takes part in ground and air confrontations, conquers Zodanga together with the Tharks, and later struggles for the victory of Helium. The increasing pace of the novel's action in these chapters does not leave, however, time for detailed descriptions of these further exotic cities.

(Non-Planetary) Romance

In addition to the conventions of western, gothic and adventure genres, the landscape of *A Princess of Mars* also obeys the rules of the

romance genre. The interspecies love story of John Carter and Dejah Thoris is deeply integrated into the novel's overarching survival plot about an earthling on Mars and his progress to the heights of power. Thus, the planet is adapted symbolically not only for battles and travel, but also for concerns pertaining to dating. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is chapter XIII, "Love-Making on Mars." Walking with the princess through the streets of Korad at night, Carter is acutely aware of the vast distance separating the two of them, given that they are representatives of different worlds, despite their natural empathic connection: "There seemed bonds of mutual interest between us as powerful as though we had been born under the same roof rather than upon different planets, hurtling through space some forty-eight million miles apart" (82). Such an awareness typifies the traditional image of a barrier separating the loving couple in a romance. In Burroughs' text, the different planets of the heroes engender not just a hyperbolised astro-geographical distance, but also the different cultures and even the different biological nature of the two lovers:

[I]t had remained for me to fall furiously and hopelessly in love with a creature from another world, of a species similar possibly, yet not identical with mine. A woman who was hatched from an egg, and whose span of life might cover a thousand years; whose people had strange customs and ideas; a woman whose hopes, whose pleasures, whose standards of virtue and of right and wrong might vary as greatly from mine as did those of the green Martians. (87)

In this way, the cosmic landscape models the psychological dimensions of the work and its development of a romantic storyline. The romantic entourage of a Martian date likewise

conforms to the genre norms: "Day had now given away to night and as we wandered along the great avenue lighted by the two moons of Barsoom, and with Earth looking down upon us out of her luminous green eye, it seemed that we were alone in the universe, and I, at least, was content that it should be so" (84-85). The Moon is a traditional witness to courtship and love-making, and here, the cosmic scale of Burroughs' scenery emphasises the immensity, strength and eternity of the heroes' feelings. However, its author has not forgotten about the future catastrophic fate of Mars, and hence, the date is shrouded in a gloomy decadent glamour: "we walked the surface of a dying world" (85).

Throughout the novel's storyline, the couple act as universal and ideal He and She, the symbolic representatives of their respective planets: Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium, true daughter of Mars, the God of War, and John Carter, Gentleman of Virginia, a couple whose love can cross the expanses of space. Hence, it remains very important for both of them to know where each other's homeland is located. Carter, aware of his feelings for the princess, recalls the earthly home of his relatives:

By nature a wanderer, I had never known the true meaning of the word home, but the great hall of the Carters had always stood for all that the word did mean to me, and now my heart turned toward it from the cold and unfriendly peoples I had been thrown amongst. (91)

Thus, the image of the native home is gradually transferred from Earth to Mars, and the protagonist, having become the leader of the Martians and found a mate, already thinks of the Red Planet as an appropriated territory created just for him, an earthling.

Conclusion

In *A Princess of Mars*, Burroughs constructs a colourful and exotic landscape for the Red Planet, basing his ideas on contemporary scientific and fictional texts. His imaginary world is carefully curated to have an absolute effect on the imagination of his readers, so that the novel's landscape is maximally sharpened with impressive details. The landscapes of Burroughs' *Princess* paradoxically combine the atmosphere of the ancient medieval past, the American frontier, and the speculative future. The planet likewise acts as a projection of the future of the Earth, and as an object of colonial conquest for the hero, who becomes its ruler by the close of the narrative. The generic enigma of the romance is similarly superimposed on the variability of the landscape, which is presented variously as a field for battle, travel, love, and disaster.

Burroughs skilfully blends and switches generic modes, and each time does so by opening new dimensions of the Martian setting. He outlines the general background of the planetscape and the local places, cities, dry seas, canals, and oxygen factories that structure its surface like an imaginary semantic grid. The paradigm of the exotic background combines scientific components based on facts and the discoveries of scholars, alongside mystical revelations about the dying planet Mars. The novel's landscape therefore comprises the key image of Burroughs' planetary romance; it determines the characters, the plot lines and their development, along with the ideological messages of the work. The original double vision from Earth and Mars/Barsoom, even before the era of spaceflight, allows Burroughs to reveal the mutual dependence of both planets, theorise the interconnection of their climactic predestination, and to project it onto the fortune of the main heroes, whose love is

able to overcome insurmountable boundaries between planets and cultures.

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