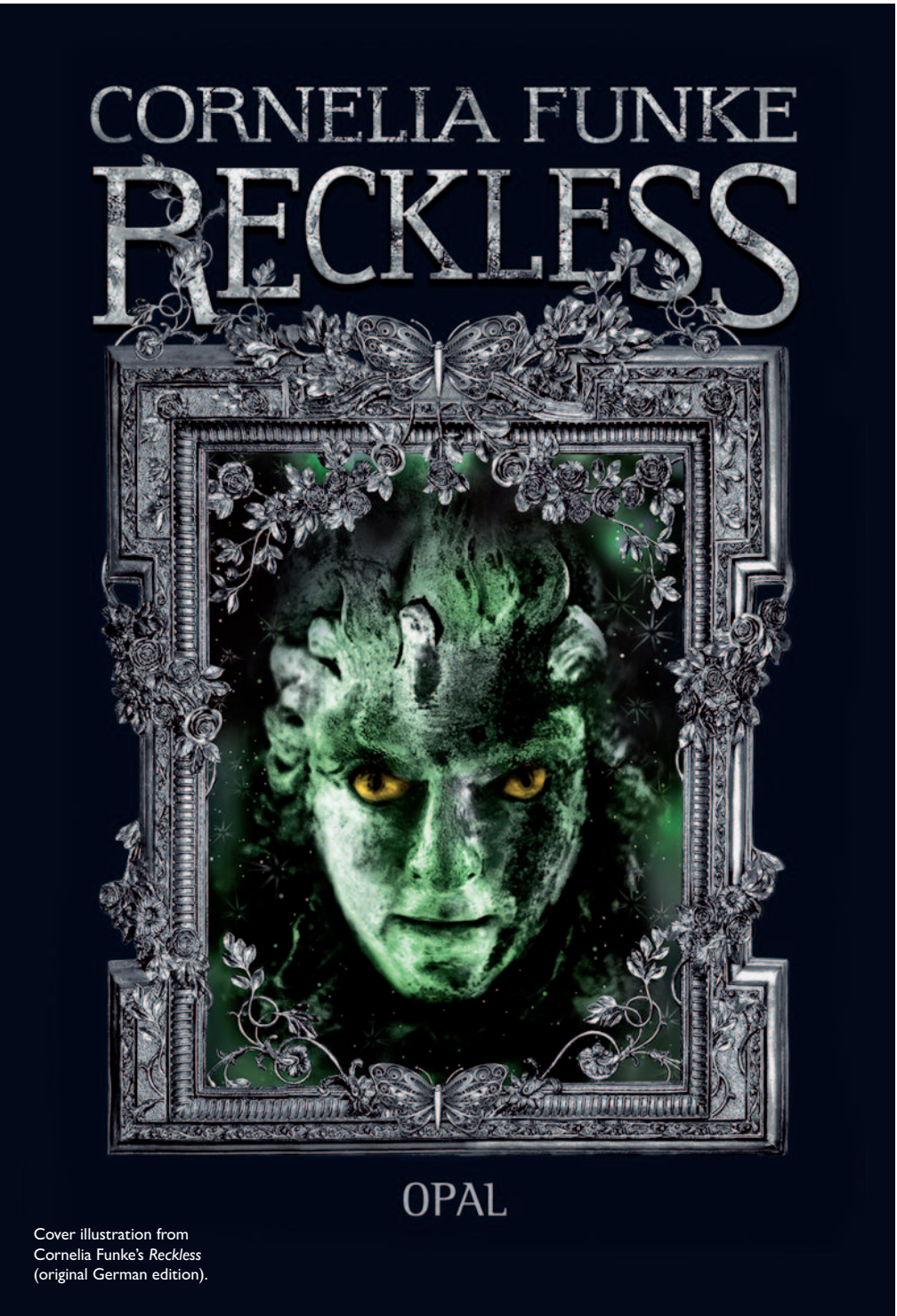

Cover illustration from Cornelia Funke's *Reckless* (original German edition).

Magic Mirrors and Shifting Skin: An Ecocritical Reading of Cornelia Funke's *Reckless*

Joanna Coleman

Cornelia Funke is best known for the *Inkheart* trilogy, her fantastical exploration of reading as enchantment. In 2010, she published *Reckless,* the first novel of her *Mirrorworld* series. *Reckless*, written originally in German and translated into English by Oliver Latsch, tells the story of two brothers, Jacob and Will, who find their way through a mirror into a fairy-tale land beyond. As the brothers' names reflect the historical figures, so Mirrorworld reflects the Brothers Grimm tales – both in mood and motif. It is a land of fluidity, in which magic dissolves both barriers and boundaries. Trees move and bind, and stone soldiers prowl the country. Moths are the thoughts of fairies, and women are also foxes. Mirrorworld is a world where one can become other, a typical fairy-tale novel, perhaps, for as Francisco Vaz da Silva argues, 'the connection between wonder tales and fairy tales and transformations is the essence of the genre'.[1]

Yet Funke is also a very contemporary writer, who delights in investigating the metaphysics of narrative itself. By placing her fantasy world in a mirror, and by naming her central characters after the writers of the tales which form that world, she highlights an uncertainty between fact and fiction, fantasy and truth. As Alice's adventures have been prompting us to wonder ever since they were written, where does the hero/heroine go when he/she goes into the mirror? Inside him/herself, or out? Interestingly, the permeable boundaries of Funke's novel also echo the ideas of much contemporary ecological thought. For eco-philosopher David Abram, for example, 'the human body is not a closed or static object, but an open, unfinished entity utterly entwined with the soils, waters, and winds that move through it',[2] and for Timothy Morton, 'life forms are connected in a mesh without a centre or an edge'.[3] In an ecocritical reading of *Reckless*, Funke has written a fantasy that uses traditional tales to collapse binaries between human and animal, self and other, and even inner and outer, to explore the very meaning of fantasy and how it relates us to the wild.

In order to explore the novel more deeply, I will begin with a summary of the plot. (Although a sequel to *Reckless*, *Fearless*, was published in 2013, this paper will focus predominantly on the first of the series.) Jacob Reckless is twelve years old when, exploring his vanished father's study, he finds a scrawled note hidden in a book on aeroplane propulsion: 'The mirror will open only for he who cannot see himself.'[4] Unriddling the challenge, Jacob puts his hand on the hanging mirror's dark surface, concealing his own

reflection and allowing himself to slip through into a ruined stone tower. Outside the window are 'scorched walls and black hills, with a few lost lights glimmering in the distance'.[5]

Grim and threatening, Mirrorworld is not, as we have come to expect from the fairy tale, untouched by modern culture; in development about two hundred years before its 'sister' through the mirror, it is as full of factories as forests. It is also at war – the stone-skinned Goyl, who have endured centuries of oppression from the 'soft-skinned' humans, are now fighting, and winning, with the help of better weapons. They are assisted by the sinister Dark Fairy, who has laid a curse dictating that anyone injured by the Goyl will themselves grow a skin of stone.

For twelve years, we are told, Jacob has explored this world and become a renowned treasure hunter, collecting glass slippers, golden balls, and pockets of endless gold. He has had a love affair with the Red Fairy – and escaped unscathed – the only human ever to have left the fairy island. But we witness none of this, and the novel proper begins when Jacob is 24 and his brother Will, slipping through the mirror behind him, is attacked and injured by the Goyl. With the help of his companion, the shape-shifting girl/Fox, and Will's girlfriend Clara, it becomes Jacob's quest to save his brother from a skin of stone.

From an ecocritical perspective, although the fantasy of Mirrorworld represents a possibility of communion with the wild, of becoming entirely other, of magical transformations valid and real, Jacob's adventures all take place *through* the mirror, opening the novel up to a psychoanalytical reading suggesting that they are imagined by the central character. Jacob's quest, perhaps, is not a genuine encounter with anything outer, but a journey deeper into the convolutions of the self. The mirror trick, interestingly, recalls the acquisition of 'Ideal-I' via Lacan's Mirror Stage. For Lacan, recognition of the 'I' in the mirror is falsely ideal, providing an inaccurate sense of integrated identity so that 'the sight alone of the whole form of the human body gives the subject an imaginary mastery ... one which is premature in relation to a real mastery',[6] or, as Sanjiv Dugal puts it, 'the I is fixed in a fictive format: our conception of ourselves is necessarily a fiction'.[7] Although Lacan's theories describe infants, we can hear their echo in Jacob's journey. In both seeing and unseeing his reflection, Jacob redraws his identity from an abandoned twelve-year-old to a world-renowned treasure hunter. The very fact that the majority of his adventures happen in the invisible space between prologue and first chapter gives these adventures the quality of a twelve-year-old's fantasy.

Funke also leaves the text open to the possibility that behind all Jacob's journeys in the Mirrorworld is the search for his own father. It is the search for him which motivates Jacob's original exploration of the study:

> "Come back!" Jacob wrote it with his finger on the fogged-up window, on the dusty desk, and on the glass panels of the cabinet that still held the old pistols his father had collected. "Come back!"[8]

It is the search for him which continues implicitly behind all his adventures. Later in his quests, he dreams that:

> He ran and ran. He had no feet any more, but he stumbled on … through a forest … Always following the man who he knew was his father, even though that man never turned around. Sometime he just wanted to catch up with him; sometimes he wanted to kill him.[9]

Jacob's search – not just to find but to emulate his father – is writ wide across the fairy world. It is, in fact, the figure of the father who has allowed the intrusion of time itself. This is not a world safely placed between once upon a time and happily ever after. This is a world that is changing, and growing up:

> Nowhere did the Mirrorworld emulate the other side as eagerly as in Schwanstein, and Jacob had of course asked himself many times how much of it all had come through the mirror that hung in his father's study.[10]

When Jacob reaches the centre of the Goyl's underground city, he is recognised not as himself but as his father's son. Here he learns the truth of both the Goyl's military success and the Mirrorworld's rapid industrial advances – that it was all learnt from John Reckless. As they travel out of the fortress, they find the only dragons left in the Mirrorworld – wood and metal bi-planes: 'Engineered Magic. John Reckless had brought metal Dragons through the mirror.'[11] John Reckless's childish hobby, model aeroplanes, becomes, in the Mirrorworld, a symbol of adulthood that ruptures the fairy tale's timelessness. Jacob's impulse to follow him and become a man is inscribed across the landscape in the metaphor of industrialisation:

> All the cities of the Mirrorworld were spreading like fungi … With every year Jacob spent in it, the world behind the mirror seemed more desperate to catch up with its sister on the other side.[12]

In many ways, then, the Mirrorworld is Jacob's internal world, writ large, a complex fantasy which represents both the desires and fears of a twelve-year-old boy.

Is it possible, though, that this inner journey is *also* an outward encounter? In considering this, we are drawn back to concepts of ecocritical thinking. Kate Rigby, in *Topographies of the Sacred*, cites Carl Gustav Carus, who, in contrast to Freud, believed that our unconscious was not limited to our own interior world. As Rigby puts it, Carus follows Schelling in 'recognizing that our inner nature is intimately interconnected with that outer nature to which our existence as embodied beings is indebted'.[13] Thus, according to Carus, the deeper inwards we journey, the further outwards we encounter. As Rigby writes, 'this implies that

our psychic life is steered not only by internal impulses and interpersonal relations, but it is influenced also by our physical environment as this impinges on our corporeal'.[14] Susan Rowland has recently taken up a similar point in her argument for Jung as an ecocritical writer. Rowland emphasises Jung's insistence 'that the unconscious is where human nature is intrinsically embedded in non-human nature'.[15] She contrasts Lacan's thinking, that we must extricate ourselves from nature and the body, to Jung's theory that nature and the body creatively form and sustain us.[16]

Could Jacob's story, then, be a story not just of a dreaming, but also of a meeting? Is it a novel which explores, through the imagination, an encounter with the natural world? In order to consider this, we must explore more deeply how the more-than-human other is represented in Funke's texts. For many critics, exploration of the encounter with that which is not us is crucial in defining a contemporary, and/or ecocritical, text. Stephen Benson, in his exploration of contemporary fairy tales, writes that contemporary literature is interested in 'the collapsing of barriers', the 'admittance of otherness, or at least the uncovering of an otherness already working within'.[17] For Karla Armbruster, ecocriticism and ecocritical writing offers 'a perspective that complicates cultural conceptions of identity and human relationships with non human nature rather than relying on unproblematized visions of continuity or difference'.[18] To what extent do these concerns apply to Funke's writing?

Like fairy tales, nature in Funke is inextricable from our own personal dreams and nightmares. Forests are sites of pure terror. The first place Jacob seeks a cure for his brother's stone skin is in the Hungry Forest. There is no harmony here between trees and travellers: trees cannot be touched. For one thing, they are crawling with Barkbiters, of whom, Jacob explains, 'his first bite will make you drowsy. A second one, and you'll be completely paralysed. But you will still be fully conscious while his entire clan starts to gorge itself on your blood.'[19]

As they push deeper into the forest they are pursued by the Tailor – a figure with hands of scissors who kills you and makes clothes of your skin. As they approach the witch's house, 'hawthorn took the place of ash and oak. Pines sucked up the scant light with their black-green needles.'[20] Later, Clara is nearly killed by sitting beside a bird-tree – a tree whose roots grab hold of you, and allow the birds in its branches to peck you to death.

A number of classics of modern fantasy envision trees as perfect representations of 'benign' nature, which, becoming animated, break through nightmares of human power and restore natural balance (Tolkien's Ents, for example; C.S. Lewis' Living Wood in *Prince Caspian*; and, more recently, the trees at the end of Jo Walton's *Among Others*, who come alive from ripped pages of *The Lord of the Rings* and turn factory into forest). The trees in *Reckless* are similarly animate – but contrastingly horrific. Instead of acting as a sublime counterpart to human nightmare, they *are* nightmare. Like the pines which 'suck up light',

they seem to 'suck up' human motion, as their speciality is causing their victims' paralysis or immobility; logically, perhaps, a cause of human nightmare, a compensation for the fact that humans 'suck' activity from the wild world, making it a purely passive object. Thus we can see here that Funke breaks down binary oppositions of active/passive, yet at the same time leaves open a reading where trees in the Mirrorworld are nothing more than projections of human terror.

Trees, as I have said, cannot be touched. But this is not to say that in Funke's fairy land non-human nature is safely separate from the human: precisely, in fact, the opposite. Three transformations take place in the skin of Funke's central characters. Fox regularly switches between skin and fur; the novel narrates a battle against the transformation of Will's skin to stone; and Jacob's skin becomes the site of invasion as he is both saved and damned by a fairy-moth embedded above his heart.

Jeana Jorgensen, in her paper on Catherynne Valente, explores the importance of skin in fairy tale as 'the main barrier between the body's inside and outside … a highly charged marker, an intense site of exchange'.[21] Valente, argues Jorgensen, challenges the interior/exterior binary by having skin *complicate* – rather than reflect – the relationship between value and appearance.[22] Funke, we might similarly argue, uses the symbol of skin to challenge the human/non-human binary. In this way she echoes the ideas of contemporary theorists who reject the certainty of this boundary. For Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, for example, 'there is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single, indivisible limit'.[23] Timothy Morton, taking up Derrida's attack on our assumed discontinuity, challenges not just the difference between man and animal, but also the clear zones dividing any organisms:

> Since all life forms coexist … we cannot draw a line around them, a horizon, and construct a 'within' (where life lives) and a 'without' where it doesn't.[24]

Will, as I have said, turns into stone. What could be more passive, and more lifeless? We know what happens when creatures turn to stone – just as in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* – frozen into inactivity, and awaiting the animating breath of the divine. Yet Funke's concept of stone skin seems to echo Morton's argument that the difference between living and non-living is not – and can never be – made clear, 'since there is no such thing as "species" (just read Darwin), the life/nonlife distinction is untenable'.[25]

The Goyl are neither passive nor inanimate. They are strong, swift, and angry:

> "You want to know what they're like?" Will plucked a rose leaf from the princess' straw-like hair. "They're angry. Their rage bursts inside you like a flame. But they are also stone. They can feel it in the ground, breathing beneath them."[26]

By translating the concept of stone-which-does-move (lava) into an emotion (rage), Funke challenges (and rejects) the idea of the inanimate statue. While making this statement, Will is standing by a Sleeping Beauty whom nobody has remembered to wake. His proximity – and sympathy – with the princess here makes us more aware of the sleeping/waking distinction. Sleeping Beauty is the fairy-tale assumption that she who sleeps needs animating force to awaken her – the Goyl are the living statement that that which we call inanimate is already awake. Indeed, the more stone Will becomes, the more he can hear:

> Will heard the stone. He heard it as clearly as his own breathing. The sounds came from the cave walls, from the jagged ground beneath his feet, from the rocky ceiling above … vibrations to which his body responded as if it were made of them.[27]

We might recall David Abram's challenge, in arguing for an animist viewpoint:

> How could we ever have become so deaf to these other voices that non-human nature seems to stand mute and dumb, devoid of any meaning besides that which we chose to give it?[28]

Will's petrification here is in fact, the opposite of freezing – he opens up his skin and his senses to the non-human world.

Funke does more than interrogate the difference between animate/inanimate. She also interrogates the values traditionally assigned to human skin. For the Goyl, human skin is, in fact, disgusting in its weakness. It is described as 'pale and soft as a snail's',[29] and Will, when the transformation has come so far that he no longer recognises his brother, compares him to a sneaking rat, and is disturbed by his weakness:

> Will couldn't forget his face, the grey eyes, goldless eyes, the hair as fine as cobwebs, and the soft skin that betrayed his frailty. Will ran his fingers reassuringly over his own smooth jade skin.[30]

Those animals that human skin is compared to are precisely the animals we would assign most rapidly to the category of *other* – the rat of the sewers, the slimy slug. Skin, which should protect us from the strangeness of the other, becomes the site of strangeness itself.

To complicate things further, skin is not just a site of fear because it is soft, it is also fearful because it is particularly susceptible to *need*. As Will loses his skin he loses his capacity/need to love:

> Too much pain. Too much love. He didn't want all that any more. He wanted the stone, cool and firm, so different from all the softness, the yielding, the vulnerability and the lachrymose flesh …[31]

Fox, similarly, is comfortable in her fox fur, and protected from human emotions of vulnerability. When she scents Clara's misery:

> Clara's scent was the same one Fox smelled on herself whenever she lost her fur. Girl. Woman. So much more vulnerable. Strong and yet weak. A heart that knew no armour. The scent told Fox about all the things she feared and from which the fur protected her.[32]

This is not to say that Will and Fox are isolated. When they are non-human, they are at one with the world in a way that humanity is not; Will, as I have said, can hear and feel the stones, and Fox's fur dress is described as the dress of the wild world itself: 'Her fur was as red as if autumn itself had lent her its colours.'[33] Thus by making the softness of human skin stand *both* for the human capacity to love and for human isolation in a larger world, Funke brings complexity and profundity to the question of what divides us from the outer world.

The invasion of Jacob's skin by a fairy moth complicates the human/other division. To explain this I must again return to the plot. To save his brother, Jacob is tricked by the Red Fairy, his former lover, into speaking the Dark Fairy's name, and thus breaking her curse. What she does not tell him is that anyone speaking the name of a fairy will die within the year. His encounter leaves him with a moth embedded in his chest, a moth that will come to life and tear out its body from his skin, thus returning the spoken name to the fairy and taking Jacob's life with it:

> Jacob grabbed its swollen body, but its claws were sunk so deep into his flesh that it felt as if he were tearing out his own heart.[34]

In this fairy land, fairies are power itself, the source, it is suggested, of wonder and horror:

> Fairy. Just a word. Five letters which contained all the magic and all the terror of this world.
>
> "Nobody just goes to see a fairy … They come and get you."[35]

While the Goyl are associated with solid, physical matter, Funke follows tradition in drawing her fairies from the ethereal – nature experienced as dream. Immortal, their skin is lily-pale, their eyes willow-green; they are born from the lakes, and sleep in tents of cobweb. Yet Funke's fairies are also creatures of nightmare. They are constantly surrounded by moths,

relating, perhaps, to the linguistic association of moth with the *mare* of nightmare.[36] Funke describes them as 'like an imprint of the night'[37] and, perhaps, like consciousness within the dark, 'the wings of her moths tinged the night air red',[38] putting us in mind not of the dark out there, but the colour of closed eyelids.

The first time we meet the Dark Fairy, she brushes her hair:

> Without another word, she undid the pearl clasp with which she pinned her hair like a human woman, and brushed her hand through it. Black moths fluttered out between her fingers; the pale spots on their wings looked like skulls.[39]

'Like a human woman' here highlights the very fact that the Dark Fairy is not human. Fairy, like fairy land, is humanity destabilised. A fairy may look like a human woman, but her hair, rather than confirming her as an expected beauty, is the assurance of her instability, flowing with moths, lives that remind us of death.

Fairies are dream – and their moths relate them to dream. But the moth that invades Jacob's skin is very real. If we view Jacob as the dreamer, the one in whose mind all this is taking place, his naming of the fairy could be – should be – the sign that he is the narrator of the tale, worthy of his name. Yet the act of naming pronounces not the fairy's death – but his own.

Derrida draws a correlation between our supposed discontinuity from the non-human other and our use of naming:

> Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give … They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept.[40]

He draws on Walter Benjamin's concept of name conferring the idea of death itself:

> It seems to me that every case of naming involves announcing a death to come in the surviving of a ghost, the longevity of a name that survives whoever carries that name.[41]

In *Reckless,* however, the naming of a fairy announces not her death, but the death of the namer. The embedded moth seems to be the very other, the strange stranger,[42] which appears in Jacob's skin as an assertion of the power of dreaming – and, consequently of fairy land, that very power of connectivity, in which everything is potentially something else, that the act of naming attempts to deny.

In Funke's fairy land, everything is permeable; as in a dream forms shift, stones speak. And it is skin which acts as the very site by which the outer world may enter. In this way, an association is drawn between skin and fairy land, for both are the sites of transition, translation, which allow for a world of continuity, as Morton puts it: 'a pre-ontological level of "existence" … which is co-existence.'[43] What Jacob is living is both inside him and outside him, for this is a world in which reflection has, partly, vanished, and seeing, dreaming and meeting have become, to some extent, indistinguishable; an un/natural nightmare in which we meet the other that is also us. There is no certainty, at the close of the novel, whether we have witnessed a human dream of nature, or nature's presence in a human dream, and that very uncertainty, I would argue, classifies Funke's novel as a fascinating piece of ecocritical writing.

Joanna Coleman

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